CHAPTER 5

Classical Political Philosophy

The Greeks originally understood politics in light of their active engagement in the life of the polis, according to Arendt, but this original understanding was distorted by the philosophical tradition begun by Plato and Aristotle and passed down by Roman and Christian thinkers: "the original Greek understanding of politics [has] been lost."[1] Philosophers in this tradition have seen philosophy and politics as mutually exclusive ways of life, and they have theorized politics in light of philosophical interests rather than working out their concepts on the basis of actual political experiences.

> Our tradition of political thought . . . far from comprehending and conceptualizing all the political experiences of Western mankind, grew out of a specific historical constellation: the trial of Socrates and the conflict between the philosopher and the polis. It eliminated many experiences of an earlier past that were irrelevant to its immediate political purposes and proceeded until its end . . . in a highly selective manner.[2]

Both Plato and Aristotle considered the philosophical life superior to political life. Both saw political thought and discourse as inferior to the kind of thought and discourse proper to philosophy. Both claimed to have reached a wisdom superior to the political opinions of their fellow citizens. Arendt argued that they founded a tradition of political theory that is implicitly hostile to democratic politics – a tradition in which the task of a political theorist is to withdraw from political life, to find philosophical answers to political questions, and to return to the political sphere not as a citizen among citizens but as a teacher, umpire, judge, or ruler. The role of political philosophy for them is to transcend rather than participate in political discourse.

But Arendt saw in Socrates a different relation between philosophy and politics. Socrates did not aim to rule the polis, but neither did he simply

[1] HC, 23. [2] HC, 12.

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withdraw from political life altogether. Instead he brought into the life of the polis an endless dialogue on essential questions, by speaking as a citizen to his fellow citizens in the agora. In her view, this dialogical style of thought is more hospitable to democratic politics, in that it aims not to transcend but to refine political discourse.

So her stance toward philosophy was complex. She tried to critically dismantle the tradition inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle. But she also looked back to Socrates for the model of a politically engaged thinker.[3] To understand her critique of classical political philosophy we have to understand her interpretations of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Socrates

Arendt distinguished Socratic from Platonic thought. Her distinction is obviously uncertain; Socrates did not write, and we have access to his thought primarily through the testimony of Plato. But Plato's work is divided against itself. The way of thought articulated in the later works is different from, even inimical to, the way of thought implicit in the works written close to the death of Socrates. Arendt explained this division by assuming Plato's early works were influenced by Socrates, while in his later works Plato worked out a way of thought more fully his own.[4] "There exists a sharp dividing line between what is authentically Socratic and the philosophy taught by Plato. The stumbling block here is the fact that Plato used Socrates as the philosopher, not only in the early and clearly 'Socratic' dialogues but also later, when he often made him the spokesman for theories and doctrines that were entirely un-Socratic."[5] The difference between Socrates and Plato was not that they held different theories. It was that Plato eventually founded a school and taught a kind of doctrine, while Socrates had no school and claimed he never taught anything, but only asked questions and engaged in dialogue. Socrates and Plato differed not just in what they thought but in their ways of thinking.

Socratic thought starts with the experience of wonder, according to Arendt. It was said that Socrates would sometimes stop and think for hours, struck with wonder and lost in thought. This is a recognizable

[3] LMT, 167–169.

[4] The distinction between Socratic and Platonic thought goes back at least to Diogenes Laertes, who wrote that "Plato ... treats for his own part themes which Socrates disowned, although he puts everything in the mouth of Socrates." Diogenes Laertes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 1, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 175.

[5] LMT, 168.

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experience – it sometimes happens that we find ourselves in the presence of something obscure, and this obscurity is not simply a region of the unknown but the depth of the incomprehensible. It is not that we encounter something unfamiliar, but that within what is familiar we sense a side of things that is turned away from us and beyond our grasp. We may still recognize each thing for what it is, but this "what it is" no longer seems entirely clear. If we attend to this obscurity something happens – the strangeness of things becomes apparent and, if we let this strangeness overwhelm us, we are struck by a sense of wonder. To wonder is to be open to the mystery of things.

Socrates is an exemplary thinker for Arendt because of his aptitude for wonder, because he did not claim to know anything noble and good, and because he did not present his opinion (*doxa*) as doctrine or dogma. What set Socrates apart from other thinkers was his ability to endure perplexity and his willingness to acknowledge his lack of understanding: "His distinction from his fellow citizens is not that he possesses any special truth from which the multitude is excluded, but that he remains always ready to endure the pathos of wonder and thereby avoids the dogmatism of mere opinion holders."[6] Socrates' profession of ignorance, his claim that he had nothing to teach, was based on this experience of wonder. Instead of imparting knowledge to others, Socrates imparted his perplexity.[7]

This perplexity is speechless, according to Arendt – words fail us when we are overcome with wonder, and when we do begin to speak we articulate our wonder in the form of questions.

> As soon as the speechless state of wonder translates itself into words, it will not begin with statements but will formulate in unending variations what we call the ultimate questions – What is being? Who is man? What meaning has life? What is death . . .? It is from the actual experience of not-knowing, in which one of the basic aspects of the human condition on earth reveals itself, that the ultimate questions arise.[8]

The ultimate questions emerge from the experience of wonder, and they remain genuine questions as long as they are rooted in that experience.

These questions ask of each being what it is: "What is X?" This "what it is" we traditionally call an "essence." Socrates saw that, to be able to see things for what they are, we have to already have some prior understanding of their essence. His questions aim to explicate, clarify, and refine this prior understanding. Essential questions require a kind of inner conversion – to

[6] Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," in *Social Research* 57, 1 (1990), 101. [7] RJ, 173.
[8] Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 98.

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respond to them we have to suspend our usual relation to the world and turn our attention away from particular beings towards the mystery of their nature. The attempt to answer such questions requires a kind of withdrawal from the world, a movement in thought away from beings back towards what allows us to recognize them as such. This effort to grasp and illuminate the essence of things is what Arendt called "thinking."

> Thinking always deals with absences and removes itself from what is present and close at hand. This, of course, does not prove the existence of a world other than the one we are part of in ordinary life, but it means that reality and existence ... can be temporarily suspended, lose their weight and, together with this weight, their meaning for the thinking ego. What now, during the thinking activity, become meaningful are distillations, products of de-sensing, and such distillations are not mere abstract concepts; they were once called "essences."[9]

In her view, the essences of things never stand fully revealed – it is never entirely clear to us what things are.

> Whenever we talk of the "nature" or the "essence" of a thing, we actually mean this innermost kernel of whose existence we can never be so sure as we are of darkness and density. True understanding does not tire of interminable dialogue and "vicious circles" because it trusts that imagination eventually will catch at least a glimpse of the always frightening light of truth.[10]

We tend to grasp the essence of things most readily through language, by putting our thoughts into words. The activity of thinking is for the most part a kind of inner speech, a silent dialogue with myself. As long as thinking is rooted in wonder – as long as it is attuned to the essential obscurity of things and is aware of its own limitations – it constantly renews itself and so remains interminable.

Arendt explained the nature of thinking with a simple example. A meditation on housing and dwelling can help us to clarify the meaning of the word "house," she argued, and this clarification can help us to better understand what a house is. (Plato and Aristotle also used the example of a house to illustrate their concepts of essence.) Her discussion is worth quoting at length.

[9] LMT, 199. Arendt's thought has been distorted by debates over "essentialism" and "anti-essentialism." Arendt asked essential questions, but she critically dismantled the inherited concepts of essence such questions have traditionally presupposed.

[10] EU, 322.

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> The house in and by itself, *auto kath'auto*, that which makes us use the word for all these particular and very different buildings, is never seen, neither by the eyes of the body nor by the eyes of the mind; every imagined house, be it ever so abstract, having the bare minimum to make it recognizable, is already a particular house. This house as such, of which we must have a notion in order to recognize particular buildings as houses, has been explained in different ways and called by different names in the history of philosophy . . . The point here is that it implies something considerably less tangible than the structure perceived by our eyes. It implies "housing somebody" and being "dwelt in" as no tent could house or serve as a dwelling place which is put up today and taken down tomorrow. The word "house" is the "unseen measure," "holds the limits of all things" pertaining to dwelling; it is a word that could not exist unless one presupposes thinking about being housed, dwelling, having a home. As a word, "house" is shorthand for all these things, the kind of shorthand without which thinking . . . would not be possible at all. The word "house" is something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze whenever it wants to find out the original meaning. In medieval philosophy, this kind of thinking was called "meditation," and the word should be heard as different from, even opposed to, contemplation. At all events, this kind of pondering reflection does not produce definitions and in that sense is entirely without results, though someone who had pondered the meaning of "house" might make his own look better.[11]

A few points. First, Arendt retained the traditional commitment to essential questions, but interpreted the meaning of essence in an untraditional way. The essence of house is not an ideal form seen with the eyes of the mind as the physical house is seen with the eyes of the body. Nor can a house be defined by isolating a core set of objective properties or functional predicates common to all houses. The essence of house becomes clearer to us only when we clarify the meaning of housing, dwelling, being at home. Arendt implies this understanding of essence is implicit in Socratic thought. Socratic thought does not fix a general definition against which particular houses can be measured; it has instead the effect of dissolving every fixed definition and measure. For Arendt it is in the nature of thought "to undo, unfreeze, as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought-words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines) . . . The consequence is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of

[11] LMT, 71. RJ, 172–173.

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in morals and ethics."[12] Because Socratic thought calls into question the concepts and standards that usually guide our approach to things, Arendt called it "thinking without a bannister."[13]

Arendt also tried to clarify the nature of Socratic thought by contrasting it with what it is not. It is not cognition, since it does not subsume particular beings under general concepts. It is not representative thinking, since it is not a matter of seeing beings from many different points of view. It is not a matter of deliberation, since it does not aim at a decision to act.[14] It is not a matter of judgment, since it deals with the nature of things in general rather than with singularities.[15]

But she insisted Socratic thinking can help other modes of thought. Socratic thought can initially paralyze cognition, since it tends to undo the concepts that we usually take for granted; but it can ultimately strengthen our powers of cognition, since it allows us to transform and refine the terms in which we think. The critical power of Socratic thought can also strengthen our capacity for representative thought, since it attunes us to the limitations of our own views and so helps us to be open to the views of others. Socratic thinking can also paralyze deliberation, since it calls into question the values and criteria that usually guide our decisions; and yet it also allows us to reflect on these criteria and to consider our decisions more carefully. To make this point she returned to the example of housing and dwelling.

> If your action consisted of applying general rules of conduct to particular cases as they arise in ordinary life, then you will find yourself paralyzed because no such rules can withstand the winds of thought. To use once more the example of the frozen thought inherent in the word "house," once you have thought about its implied meaning – dwelling, having a home, being housed – you are no longer likely to accept for your own home whatever the fashion of the time may prescribe; but this by no means guarantees that you will be able to come up with an acceptable solution for your own housing problems.[16]

Finally, Socratic thought can strengthen our powers of judgment. Thinking gives us a critical distance from the terms in which we usually recognize and evaluate things, and so it helps us see each thing for what it is rather than thoughtlessly measuring it against a general standard.

[12] LMT, 75.
[13] HA, 336. For a deep discussion of this point, see Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 325–369.
[14] RJ, 173. [15] RJ, 189. [16] RJ, 176.

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> The faculty of judging particulars (as Kant discovered it); the ability to say, "This is wrong," "This is beautiful," etc., 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 in a way similar to the way consciousness and conscience are interconnected. If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its byproduct, then judging, the byproduct of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always much too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.[17]

Socratic thinking is not the same as cognition, representative thought, deliberation, or judgment, and yet indirectly it has the power to refine these other modes of thought.

Socratic thinking has its dangers, according to Arendt. One danger is paralysis: since thinking tends to "unfreeze" the assumptions "frozen" into concepts and doctrines, it "inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil."[18] If we are used to following rules and applying set standards, rather than relying on our own judgment, the destructive effect of thinking may leave us paralyzed. Another danger is a kind of nihilism, a rejection of all standards and the unthinking refusal to judge. Arendt thought this danger was exemplified by certain followers of Socrates, who "changed the nonresults of Socratic thinking into negative results," who mistook the endless questioning of doctrines and standards for a doctrine that rejected all standards, and who concluded that without definitive standards it was impossible to make meaningful judgments. These followers turned out to be a very real threat to the polis, according to Arendt, but that threat did not come from their thinking but from their desire for a doctrine that would relieve them of the need to think.[19]

But if Socratic thought is dangerous, Arendt argued, thoughtlessness is worse. Evil is often the result not of wickedness but of thoughtlessness, not of the deliberate transgression of common values but of thoughtless adherence to them. (The most significant characteristic of Adolf Eichmann, in her view, was "not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic

[17] LMT, 93. RJ, 189. [18] RJ, 176. [19] RJ, 177–178.

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inability to think.")[20] Whenever we simply apply inherited concepts and fulfill conventional responsibilities, we abdicate a deeper responsibility to see things for what they are and to decide on our own what to do. This abdication of responsibility allows us to do evil with a good conscience, since we are secure in the knowledge that our intentions are good and that we are doing what everyone does. Thinking disturbs this good conscience when it calls all values into question and confronts us with the responsibility to judge for ourselves. But the destructive effect of thinking is not simply negative since it allows us to refine our powers of cognition, deliberation, and judgment. "Socrates . . . seems indeed to have held that talking and thinking about piety, justice, courage, and the rest were liable to make men more pious, more just, more courageous, even though they were not given either definitions or further 'values' to direct their further conduct."[21]

Arendt's reflections on thinking and judging are incomplete. She never explained precisely how thinking liberates the faculty of judgment; nor did she explain what it means to judge something right or wrong; nor did she explain how or why it is that, in moments of crisis, some people are able to judge right from wrong even in that absence of unequivocal standards of conduct.[22] But this incompleteness is less a flaw in her work than a reticence that leaves open essential questions: What was the connection between Eichmann's evil and his thoughtlessness? Was there a connection between Socrates' thoughtfulness and his refusal to obey the dictates of the Thirty Tyrants? What do these examples show about the connection of thought to judgment?

Since deliberation and judgment are central to politics, Arendt argued, Socratic thought has a certain relevance to political life. Socrates himself highlighted this relevance at his trial when he claimed that his public philosophizing was the greatest boon ever bestowed on the city of Athens. He saw himself not as an architect, umpire, or teacher, but as a midwife and a gadfly. His political role as a thinker was neither to design the city, nor to rule it, nor to teach his fellow citizens, but to wake his fellow citizens from the slumber of thoughtlessness.[23]

[20] RJ, 159. [21] RJ, 173.

[22] Here I am indebted to Richard Bernstein's essay, "'The Banality of Evil' Reconsidered," in Craig Calhoun and John McGowan, *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 297–322.

[23] RJ, 174–176.

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> The role of the philosopher, then, is not to rule the city but to be its "gadfly," not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful . . . Socrates did not want to educate the citizens so much as he wanted to improve their *doxai* [opinions], which constituted the political life in which he too took part.[24]

Socrates played this role through dialogue. Dialogue was a way to infect his fellow citizens with wonder, to bring to light the truths and errors implicit in their opinions, and so to rouse them into thoughtfulness. The aim of dialogue was not to introduce into the polis truths that would supersede political debate; in Arendt's view, Socrates "probably did not look upon [dialectic] as the opposite or even the counterpart to persuasion, and it is certain that he did not oppose the results of this dialectic to *doxa*, opinion."[25] His aim was to introduce into political life the art of thinking–the "interminable dialogue between [the mind] and the essence of everything that is."[26]

Arendt saw Socrates not as a potential ruler who claimed to have returned to the cave of public life from the heights of solitary contemplation, but as a thinker who introduced pure thinking into public life by speaking informally as a citizen to other citizens on essential questions relevant to matters of public concern:

> A man who counted himself neither among the many nor among the few; who did not aspire to being a ruler of cities or claim to know how to improve and take care of the citizens' souls; who did not believe that men could be wise and did not envy the gods their divine wisdom in case they should possess it; and who therefore had never even tried his hand at formulating a doctrine that could be taught and learned.[27]

Socrates showed that it is possible to be a politically engaged thinker who reflects on the nature of political things in light of experiences proper to the political realm. Arendt returned to Socrates to retrieve a possible way of doing of political theory – a possibility largely implicit and unrealized in the tradition of Western philosophy.

Plato

For Arendt, the Western tradition of political philosophy began with Plato. The trial of Socrates led Plato to think of the relation of politics and philosophy in a deeply unsocratic way. "Our tradition of political

[24] Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 81. [25] Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 80.
[26] EU, 322. [27] RJ, 168–169.

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thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings."[28] How did Plato depart from Socrates's way of thought?

Socrates had tried to introduce dialectic into the political discourse of Athens, and his fellow citizens had responded by putting him to death. Plato in turn proposed to use philosophy to transcend political discourse altogether, Arendt argued, and this proposal eventually led him to abandon Socrates' stance towards politics. But Plato misunderstood the nature of political thought, she argued, so that his political philosophy covered over the original Greek understanding of politics.

The trial of Socrates revealed the weakness of philosophy in the political realm. It showed that in the public realm philosophical truth becomes simply one opinion among others;[29] that truth could be less persuasive than idle talk and slander; and that credulous and ignorant citizens could be persuaded to do terrible injustices. Plato saw that politics is a matter of appearances, that things appear differently to people in different situations, that differences of opinion can never be definitively resolved through persuasion, and that in politics there is never a firm basis for making reliable decisions. He apparently concluded that a just and thriving city could not be reached through political means–through public debate and common deliberation among citizens. In his *Seventh Letter* he wrote:

> I was driven to assert, in praise of true philosophy, that nothing else can enable one to see what is right for states and for individuals, and that the troubles of mankind will never cease until either true and genuine philosophers attain political power or the rulers of states by some dispensation of providence become genuine philosophers.[30]

Politics was ruled by persuasion, but persuasion had failed to prevent injustice. There had to be a better way.

Arendt thought that Plato was guided by the experience not of thought but of measure. Measure is a way to transcend the distortions of appearance. We know things do not appear to our senses as they really are, but that their appearance depends on the perspective from which we see them, so that what is far from us seems small while what is close to us looms large. These distortions of perspective generate differences of opinion. But it is possible to move beyond appearances and to resolve differences of opinion through the use of measure. The size of an object may seem

[28] Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 73. [29] BPF, 238.
[30] Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII,* trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin, 1985), 114.

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different to us depending on the points of view from which we see it, but we can know its size for sure by measuring it against a constant standard such as a yardstick. Or we might have different opinions about the mass of a piece of gold, but we can resolve those differences by weighing it against a standard unit. Measure lets us transcend the distortions of appearance and to definitively resolve certain differences of opinion.[31]

Plato transposed the notion of measure into the realm of thought. This transposition was based on an analogy: just as appearances can mislead our perceptions of particular beings, so too can appearances mislead our understanding of what beings are. And just as we can resolve different opinions about the size or weight of things by measuring them against a fixed standard, so too can we resolve differences of opinions about what things are by measuring them against their essence. If we want to know the relative purity of a piece of gold, for example, it may be impossible to tell on the basis of mere appearance. But since we know that gold in general has certain objective traits, we can test the genuineness of any piece of gold by measuring it against a fixed standard. If we can define the general nature of gold, we can use this general definition as an absolute standard against which we can measure the purity of any particular piece of gold. Essence can be a kind of measure.

Plato extended this notion of measure to all things. Just as we distinguish between genuine gold and fool's gold, so we also distinguish true friends from false friends, real science from pseudoscience, real virtue from the semblance of virtue, genuine justice from travesties of justice. People have different opinions about what is genuine and what is not – my actions tend to seem especially virtuous to me, while the actions of my enemies tend to seem especially vile and disgraceful. Plato saw that if we could truly define what justice is in essence, we could use this definition as an absolute standard against which to measure the relative justice of any particular act.

Plato introduced this notion of measure into the sphere of politics. The problem of political thought, in Arendt's words, is that it "relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which [there is] *no common measure*."[32] Without definite measures, we can deliberate endlessly without really knowing what we are talking about. As long as we don't know what justice really is, we have no certain criteria by which to make political

[31] See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 602c–d.

[32] HC, 57 (italics added).

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decisions. But if we could grasp the essence of political things, we could devise general definitions that would enable us to definitively resolve political differences and to build a just community. Rather than dealing with political differences through the endless exchange of opinions, we could definitively resolve political differences by transcending opinions altogether. If philosophy could find measures grounded in the essence of things – standards that transcend the political realm – then politics itself would be superfluous. The endless debates essential to political life could be replaced by philosophical understanding.

In a lecture course in 1927, Heidegger tried to critically dismantle the Platonic notion that essences can serve as a kind of measure. He argued that this notion depends on interpreting essences as ideal forms on which actual beings are more or less perfectly modeled, and that this interpretation of essence is not based in the experience of thinking but in the experience of making.

> The potter forms a vase out of clay. All forming of shaped products is effected by using an image, in the sense of a model, as a guide or standard. The thing is produced by looking to the anticipated look of what is to be produced by shaping, forming. It is this anticipated look of the thing, sighted beforehand, that the Greeks mean ontologically by *eidos*, *idea*.[33]

Heidegger argued that Plato conceived of essence as measure through a threefold operation: first he abstracted the words *eidos* and *idea* from the sphere of production; then he transposed the words to a philosophical level of thought, so that they named not an aspect of particular beings but their essential nature; and then he applied this expanded sense of *eidos* and *idea* to all beings. So Plato conceived of essence in terms derived not from the experience of thinking but from the experience of making: "the chief ancient determinations for the thingness or reality of a being originate in productive activity, the comprehension of being by way of production."[34] By tracing the lineage of Plato's concept of essence back to the experiences from which it was born, Heidegger tried to deprive it of its seeming self-evidence, to clarify its original sense, and to alert us to the ways in which it both guides and misguides thought. This way of thinking – which tries to free thought of inherited prejudices by tracing metaphysical concepts back to the experiences from which they

[33] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 106.
[34] Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 105.

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were derived – he called the phenomenological "*Destruktion*" or "critical dismantling" of the metaphysical tradition.

Arendt appropriated this form of phenomenology in her critique of Plato's philosophy of politics. She argued that Plato's interpretation of essence as measure was not grounded in the experience of thought but in the experience of making or *poiesis*. Plato often used examples drawn from the experience of making to explain the notion of ideas. Implicit in these examples is a simple analogy. Craftsmen understand what their products are, and this understanding guides the design of their products and determines how they will look. Before an architect starts to make a house, for example, she will foresee its final look, and this foresight will guide the actual construction of the house, so that the actual house itself will in some sense be merely the imitation of the foreseen look. In Greek, the word for "look" is *idea* (ἰδέα or εἶδος). Since the essence of a product (what it is) is manifest in its general *idea* (look), Plato used the word to name the essence of products in general. An ideal house, in this sense, is one that perfectly embodies what a house really is. The task of the architect is to understand what houses are in essence, to imagine a house that instantiates this ideal, and to use this ideal image as a model to guide the construction of an actual house. The task of the philosopher is simply to make explicit and to refine the kind of knowledge possessed by craftsmen. The ideal is the measure of the actual.

Arendt concluded that a key part of Plato's conception of thought – the interpretation of essence as *idea* – is not actually grounded in the experience of thinking, but is derived from the experience of measure and making.

> This quality of permanence in the model or image, of being there before fabrication starts and remaining after it has come to an end, surviving all the possible use objects it continues to help into existence, had a powerful influence on Plato's doctrine of eternal ideas. Insofar as his teaching was inspired by the word idea or *eidos* ("shape" or "form"), which he used for the first time in a philosophical context, it rested on experiences in *poiesis* or fabrication, and although Plato used his theory to express quite different and perhaps much more "philosophical" experiences, he never failed to draw his examples from the field of making when he wanted to demonstrate the plausibility of what he was saying. The one eternal idea presiding over a multitude of perishable things derives its plausibility in Plato's teachings from the permanence and oneness of the model according to which many and perishable objects can be made.[35]

[35] HC, 142–143.

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In this argument Arendt followed Heidegger's attempt to critically dismantle the metaphysical tradition.

But Arendt saw what Heidegger failed to see: the implications for political theory of this *Destruktion* of the Platonic notion of essence. The interpretation of essence as idea sets the task of the political philosopher, which Plato laid out most clearly in the allegory of the cave. The philosopher should not waste time in the darkness of the political realm arguing with fellow citizens over what is singular, ephemeral, and contingent. He should turn away from the world of becoming and turn towards the realm of Being. Only by leaving the ephemera of political life and ascending in thought to the ideas will he be able to see what things really are. Once he has seen what political things are – once he knows what justice is, what man is, what the polis is – he has to return to the cave, not in order to engage in political debate with his fellow citizens, but to educate them through reasoned argument; that is, to turn them away from worldly things, to guide them up out of the cave, and to let them see the ideas for themselves.

The task of the political philosopher is analogous to the task of the architect: to understand what a city is; to design an ideal city on the basis of this understanding; to measure the actual polis against this ideal; and to use this ideal as a model to guide the remaking of the polis. Political philosophy is a matter of finding absolute standards grounded in the essences of things, and translating these standards into principles, laws, and blueprints for institutions that could ensure justice in the polis. Arendt argued that this view has influenced the whole tradition of political philosophy.

> To the philosopher, politics – if he did not regard this whole realm as beneath his dignity – became the field in which the elementary necessities of human life are taken care of and to which absolute philosophical standards are applied . . . Because Plato in a sense deformed philosophy for political purposes, philosophy continued to provide standards and rules, yardsticks and measurements with which the human mind could at least attempt to understand what was happening in the realm of human affairs.[36]

The task of the political philosopher for Plato is not to be a gadfly, like Socrates, but to be the teacher, umpire, architect, or even ruler of the polity.

[36] Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 102.

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The notion of essence as idea led Plato to mistake the nature of political thought, according to Arendt. If we interpret essences simply as what beings are, we can look for the essences of things in the flux of the political realm – a politician grasps the essential when he understands the nature of a singular and ephemeral event, just as the philosopher grasps the essential when he understands the nature of a general phenomenon. But if we interpret essences in Platonic terms as eternal and general ideas, then political thought only touches on the essential to the extent that it discovers the eternal and the necessary beneath the ephemeral contingencies of politics. To focus on the ephemera of political life, for Plato, is to focus on the inessential.

The interpretation of essence as idea also distorted Plato's view of truth. On this point Arendt acknowledged a debt to Heidegger, who argued that Plato's thought had obscured an authentic understanding of truth implicit in the Greek word *aletheia.* In his view, *aletheia* meant not just a correspondence of thought to reality, but in a deeper sense meant the illumination of beings that first makes such correspondence possible. But since Plato thought of essences as ideal forms, to which particular beings corresponded and against which they could be measured, Plato foregrounded the sense of truth as correspondence and obscured the more basic sense of truth as illumination. Arendt noted her debt to Heidegger in an essay on political authority:

> This presentation is indebted to Martin Heidegger's great interpretation of the cave parable in *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit,* Bern 1947. Heidegger demonstrates how Plato transformed the concept of truth (*aletheia*) until it became identical with correct statements (*orthotes*). Correctness indeed, and not truth, would be required if the philosopher's knowledge is the ability to measure.[37]

But Arendt again saw what Heidegger failed to see: the implications of Plato's notion of truth for political philosophy. If truth is a matter of illumination or unconcealment (ἀλήθεια), the nontheoretical insights of political thought can lay claim to truth. One can look for truth in the ephemera of human affairs, since there is truth in an opinion that sheds light on a specific situation, or a judgment that illuminates the nature of a singular act, just as there is truth in a definition that clarifies the nature of a general phenomenon. But if truth is a matter of correspondence, and if beings are true only insofar as they correspond to their ideal form, then

[37] BPF, 291.

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only theory can lay claim to truth. Theory is true insofar as it is informed by and corresponds to these eternal forms, while political thought is concerned with semblances of the forms rather than the forms themselves. In Platonic terms, political thought is true only to the extent that it recognizes in the ephemera of politics the generality and eternity of the ideas.

Arendt's critique of Plato implies a stark conclusion: Plato's interpretation of essence, and his notion of truth, led him to systematically distort the phenomena of political life and the faculties of political thought. Four distortions stand out:

1. The notion of truth as correctness entailed a simplified notion of *appearance*. In the allegory of the cave, essences do not appear in the outward look of particular beings; beings are merely semblances of the ideas. So appearance is interpreted not as the self-showing of beings themselves, but as mere semblance or illusion.

2. This Platonic notion of appearance implied a demotion of *opinion*. Opinion is seen not as a faculty of reason but as an inferior form of philosophical theory. Just as the craftsman uses weights and measures to move beyond appearance to an objective knowledge of the mass and size of things, so the philosopher should use the ideas to move beyond opinions about things to an objective knowledge of what they are. The task of the political philosopher is to replace opinion with knowledge.

3. The demotion of opinion goes with a simplified notion of *judgment*. Judgment is interpreted not as the ability to see and evaluate beings as singularities, but as the ability to apply the general to the particular, or to subsume the particular under the general (determinant or reflective judgment). Plato assumed all judgment requires a reference to a general standard, without which judgment becomes either arbitrary guesswork or subjective preference. To judge correctly one must know the true standards, and the true standards are those grounded in the essence of things. To judge is to measure the actual against the ideal, so that the ability to judge is ultimately based on a knowledge of the ideas.[38] In this way Plato confused impartial judgment with objective knowledge. Objectivity for

[38] This view of judgment was articulated by Leo Strauss: "To judge soundly one must know the true standards. If political philosophy wishes to do justice to its subject matter, it must strive for genuine knowledge of these standards. Political philosophy is the attempt to truly know the nature of political things and the right, or good, political order" Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 11–12. Arendt agreed that political theory aims to understand the essences of political phenomena, but she questioned the Platonic interpretation of essence as a kind of standard or measure.

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him was not a matter of seeing things from many perspectives, but of moving beyond the distortions of perspective to a comprehensive grasp of reality, a view from nowhere. Judgments should be based not on weighing many opinions, but on a knowledge that transcends the realm of opinion altogether.

4. The attempt to replace opinion with philosophical knowledge also entailed a demotion of *deliberation*. For Plato, the ends of communal life are not a matter of incommensurable perspectives and opinions; they are a matter of definite philosophical knowledge. Deliberation is no longer understood as debate over the ends of communal life, but merely as debate over the best way to achieve the ends that can be known through philosophical contemplation. The most basic level of political debate is largely superfluous. The polity should ultimately be ruled not by the opinions of citizens but by the wisdom of philosophers.

In short, Plato interpreted political thought as a defective form of philosophy. His philosophy of politics aimed to replace opinion with truth, judgment with knowledge, rhetoric with dialectic. It aimed to transcend the public debate that is the essence of politics, and to replace the plurality of opinions with single truth that is valid for all. The ultimate aim of his political philosophy was to replace politics with philosophy.

For Arendt this is the decisive point: Plato founded a tradition of political philosophy that is basically anti-political.[39] He derived basic concepts from nonpolitical experiences; he interpreted political phenomena in nonpolitical terms; and he sketched a form of government that dispensed with politics altogether. So Plato's view of politics distorted and concealed the original Greek understanding of the political.

The key to this distortion for Arendt was the concept of rule. Politics in the original sense excluded any form of rule; the polis "was understood as a form of political organization in which the citizens lived together under conditions of no-rule, without a division between ruler and ruled."[40] Plato assumed politics was a matter of rule, and this assumption obscured the absence of rulership essential to political life.

> The greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether. The hallmark of such escapes is the

[39] Alan Ryan made this point in his book *On Politics*: "Plato's political thought is antipolitical . . . The founder of European political thought is the founder of antipolitical thinking." Alan Ryan, *On Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 111.

[40] OR, 30.

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> concept of rule, that is, the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and others forced to obey.[41]

The assumption that politics is a matter of rule (*archein*) is still implicit in common definitions of different forms of government: monarchy (rule by one), oligarchy (rule by a few), theocracy (rule by God) and democracy (defined as the rule of the people).

Arendt argued that for the Greeks rulership was prepolitical and belonged to the private sphere of the household or *oikos* rather than to the public sphere of the polis. "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 slaves gave to their masters."[42] To introduce the concept of rule into political thought was thus to confuse the polis and the *oikos*:

> It is the decisive contention of the Statesman that no difference existed between the constitution of a large household and that of the polis . . . so that the same science would cover political and 'economic' or household matters.[43]

This confusion effaced the differences between leadership and rulership, and obscured the distinction between political and nonpolitical forms of power: "According to Greek understanding, the relationship between ruling and being ruled, between command and obedience, was by definition identical with the relationship between master and slaves."[44] So the introduction of the concept of rule into political thought had the effect of effacing the specificity of the polis in particular and the political realm as such.

While Plato took the concept of rule from the realm of the household, Arendt argued, he generalized it to encompass any relation of power.

> Historically, the concept of rule, though originating in the household and family realm, has played its most decisive part in the organization of public matters and is for us invariably connected with politics. This should not make us overlook the fact that for Plato it was a much more general category. He saw in it the chief device for ordering and judging human affairs in every respect.[45]

What Plato wanted for the polis was a form of rule that relied on free obedience rather than on persuasion or threats of violence. He saw that

[41] HC, 222. [42] HC, 32. [43] HC, 223. [44] HC, 224. [45] HC, 224.

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free obedience was proper to any power relation in which followers recognize that a leader has superior expertise. Patients freely obey doctors, just as sailors freely obey a captain in whom they recognize superior seamanship, and as apprentices freely obey the orders of a master-craftsman. In the ideal city, Plato thought, the citizens would recognize the political expertise of the philosopher-king and would freely obey his laws:

> Plato was originally guided by a great number of models of existing relations, such as that between the shepherd and his sheep, between the helmsman of a ship and the passengers, between the physician and the patient, or between the master and the slave. In all these instances either expert knowledge commands confidence so that neither force nor persuasion are necessary to obtain compliance, or the ruler and the ruled belong to two altogether different categories of beings, one of which is already by implication subject to the other ... Although it is obvious that Plato himself was not satisfied with these models, for his purpose, to establish the 'authority' of the philosopher over the polis, he returned to them time and again, because only in these instances of glaring inequality could rule be exerted without seizure of power and the possession of the means of violence.[46]

The argument that philosophers were naturally fit to rule the polis derived its plausibility especially from the analogy between the philosopher and the craftsman.

Arendt argued this analogy took its plausibility from the interpretation of essence as idea, which itself was derived from the experience of making. Once the wisdom of the philosopher-king was interpreted as analogous to the technical expertise of the craftsman, the relation of ruler to citizens could be likened to the relation between a master craftsmen who gives commands and the workers who carry them out. The interpretation of essence as idea thus supported the analogy between governing and making, and this analogy reinforced the interpretation of politics as a matter of rule.

> By sheer force of conceptualization and philosophical clarification, the Platonic identification of knowledge with command and rulership, and of action with obedience and execution, overruled all earlier experiences and articulations in the political realm and became authoritative for the whole tradition of political thought, even after the roots of experience from which Plato derived his concepts had long been forgotten. Apart from the unique Platonic mixture of depth and beauty, whose weight was bound to carry his

[46] BPF, 108–109.

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> thoughts through the centuries, the reason for the longevity of this particular part of his work is that he strengthened his substitution of rulership for action through an even more plausible interpretation in terms of making and fabrication. It is indeed true . . . that the division between knowing and doing, so alien to the realm of action, whose validity and meaningfulness are destroyed the moment thought and action part company, is an everyday experience in fabrication, whose processes obviously fall into two parts: first, perceiving the image or shape (*eidos*) of the product-to-be, and then organizing the means and starting the execution.[47]

To equate politics and rule, and to understand the ruler as a master craftsman, is to see politics as a matter of technical expertise and management rather than of considered opinion and common deliberation.

The analogy of the philosopher and the craftsman distorted the nature of political action, according to Arendt. Since Plato thought of the essence of the polis as an ideal city of which actual cities were merely imperfect copies, this ideal could serve as a model to guide the philosopher's effort to remake the city, just as the idea of the house guides the architect's effort to build any particular home.

> In the *Republic*, the philosopher-king applies the ideas as the craftsman applies his rules and standards; he "makes" his City as the sculptor makes a statue; and in the final Platonic work these same ideas have even become laws which need only be executed . . . The point is that Plato and, to a lesser degree, Aristotle, who thought craftsmen not even worthy of full-fledged citizenship, were the first to propose handling political matters and ruling political bodies in the mode of fabrication.[48]

The analogy between philosopher and craftsman led Plato to confuse action with making, and to think of political action on the model of production.

The confusion of action with making degraded politics into a means to higher ends. Making is usually merely a means to an end, while action is an end in itself. This is an essential difference between political action (debating what to do and how to live together) and production (working to realize ends given in advance), between the deliberation essential to politics and the instrumental reasoning essential to production. With Plato, however, political action was understood not as the act of deliberation over final ends, but as the attempt to realize an end discovered in advance by philosophical knowledge. Arendt argued this

[47] HC, 225. [48] HC, 227 and 230.

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instrumental conception of political action has dominated the whole tradition of political philosophy.

> The substitution of making for acting and the concomitant degradation of politics into a means to obtain an allegedly "higher" end . . . is as old as the tradition of political philosophy . . . How persistent and successful the transformation of action into a mode of making has been is easily attested by the whole terminology of political theory and political thought, which indeed makes it almost impossible to discuss these matters without using the categories of means and end and thinking in terms of instrumentality.[49]

In Plato, political life was no longer an end in itself, but simply a means to an end.[50]

The confusion of acting and making also made it possible to justify violence in politics, according to Arendt. Plato himself never condoned violence, but once politics is subordinated to a higher end it is always possible to justify violence as a means to that end. "Violence, without which no fabrication could ever come to pass, has always played an important role in political schemes and thinking based upon an interpretation of action in terms of making."[51] The interpretation of politics as a means to an end outlived Plato, and this interpretation made it possible for later thinkers to justify and glorify violence. "Only the modern age . . . brought forth the much older implications of violence inherent in all interpretations of human affairs as a sphere of making . . . As long as we believe that we deal with ends and means in the political realm, we shall not be able to prevent anybody's using all means to pursue recognized ends."[52] Justifications for violence in the political realm today still rely on the confusion of acting and making ("If you want to make an omelet, you have to break some eggs.").

The confusion of acting with making, Arendt argued, also separated knowing from doing. In the act of deliberation, thought and action are indissociable. But in the process of making something, there is an obvious gap between formulating a project and carrying it out. The one who knows what to do does not have to do it herself, and the ones who follow her instructions do not have to know what they are doing.

[49] HC, 229.
[50] Leo Strauss held this view: "Political life derives its dignity from something which transcends political life." Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 161.
[51] HC, 228. [52] HC, 228–229.

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> Plato was the first to introduce the division between those who know and do not act and those who act and do not know, instead of the old articulation of action into beginning and achieving, so that knowing what to do and doing it became two altogether different performances.[53]

The separation of knowing and doing makes plausible a hierarchy between ruler and ruled. Once insight into political matters is understood as analogous to technical expertise, it follows that experts should direct the actions of the others. The dissociation of knowing and doing thus undermines the principle of political equality. The equality of citizens is replaced by a hierarchy in which those who are capable of philosophical insight are naturally fit to rule, and those who are incapable of rational discourse are naturally fit to be ruled.

Arendt concluded that Plato's political philosophy was essentially anti-political. Plato's aim was not to introduce essential questions into political discourse, as Socrates had done, but to replace political discourse with philosophical knowledge. Plato thought of politics in terms of experiences proper to nonpolitical spheres of life. The effect of his thought was to efface the original understanding of politics, and the result of this effacement was that politics was reduced to a matter of rule, so that the basic question of political philosophy became "Who rules whom?" This question is central to the *Republic*: "τὸ δὴ μετὰ τοῦτο τί ἂν ἡμῖν διαιρετέον εἴη; ἆρ᾽οὐκ αὐτῶν τούτων οἵτινες ἄρξοθσί τε καὶ ἄρξονται; What would it be that we must determine? Isn't it who among these men will rule and who will be ruled?"[54] This tradition of political philosophy still persists today, most clearly in the work of Leo Strauss:

> All political conflicts that arise within the community are at least related to, if they do not proceed from, the most fundamental political controversy: the controversy as to what type of man should rule the community.[55]

Arendt suggests that this question is not a fundamental problem of political life, that it does not belong to a "permanent" and "natural horizon of human thought," but that it belongs to a specific tradition of political philosophy, and that this tradition has misunderstood the nature of politics from the ground up.

[53] HC, 223. [54] Plato, *The Republic*, 412b. [55] Strauss, *Classical Political Rationalism*, 54.

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Aristotle

Arendt's relation to Aristotle was complex. In her view, Aristotle's political philosophy is internally divided: he was guided in part by the nontheoretical understanding of politics implicit in the language of Athens; but he was misguided by the metaphysical concepts with which he tried to grasp political phenomena. There is a tension in Aristotle's work between an authentic understanding of politics, and the metaphysical framework in which he worked out his practical philosophy. This tension is the source of blind spots, incongruities, and contradictions in his thought.[56] Arendt's work on Aristotle is thus guided by a few key questions: What are the terms in which Aristotle conceives the nature of politics? What was the original provenance of these terms? How do his concepts illuminate or obscure the nature of political action? How well do they capture the essence of politics?

Aristotle divided knowledge into three branches: productive, practical, and theoretical. Productive knowledge deals with making; practical knowledge deals with ethics and politics; theoretical knowledge deals with math, physics, and metaphysics. In his metaphysics Aristotle laid out his understanding of essence, and tried to define in precise and definite terms what we are asking for when we ask of something what it is. Metaphysics in this sense has a certain priority over the other sciences, since our approach to beings is always guided in advance by a prior understanding of what they are, and any attempt to grasp what beings are is always guided in advance by a prior interpretation of the meaning of essence. To study democracies, for example, we have to have some prior understanding of what democracy is; and any attempt to say what democracy is will be guided by a prior understanding of this essential "what-it-is." Questions of political philosophy are in this way implicated in questions of metaphysics. What then are the basic concepts of Aristotle's metaphysics?

Metaphysics for Aristotle is the science that contemplates Being as Being (ἐπιστήμη τις ἣ θεωρεῖ τὸ ὂν ἢ ὄν).[57] In his view, every being is essentially a substance (οὐσία) with essential and accidental properties (συμβεβηκός).[58] The word "substance" has four meanings: (a) the essence of a thing, "the what it is" (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι); (b) the universal, what belongs to all such things

[56] BPF, 118.
[57] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 147 (1003a).
[58] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 313 (1028b4).

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(τὸ καθόλου); (c) the genus to which such things belong (τὸ γένος); and (d) the underlying ground that precedes the appearance and survives the destruction of actual beings (τὸ ὑποκείμενον).[59] These four meanings converge not on the *idea* (εἶδος) of things, but on their principles and causes (ἡ οὐσία ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία τις ἐστίν).[60] The word "principle" or *arche* (ἀρχή) comes from the verb *archein* (ἄρχειν), which means "to begin," "to lead," and "to rule." Aristotle combined these meanings in his concept of *arche*: the *arche* of something is both the origin from which it begins and the underlying ground that governs the way it is. The *arche* of philosophy is wonder, for example, since wonder is both the origin of questioning and the underlying pathos that grounds and guides philosophical thought. The word "cause" (αἰτία) means what is responsible for something being the way it is; for Aristotle every being has four causes: its form (τὸ εἶδος καὶ παράδειγμα); its matter (ἡ ὕλη); its source of motion (ὅθεν ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς μεταβολῆς); and its end or *telos* (τὸ τέλος).[61] The telos of a being is that for whose sake it exists, the work or *ergon* (ἔργον) towards which it moves or is moved. When things reach their *telos* – when they achieve their end (ὃις ὑπάρχει τὸ τέλος) – they are perfect or *teleion* (τέλειον).[62] As long as something has not reached its *telos* it exists in the mode of potentiality or *dunamis* (δύναμις); when it reaches its end and performs its proper work or activity, it exists in the mode of working, actuality or *energeia* (ἐνέργεια).[63]

Aristotle often used two kinds of examples to explain these basic concepts.

The first example is building a house.[64] To truly know what a house is we must know not only its form but also its matter, its source of motion,

[59] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 315–317 (1028b33–6).
[60] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 395 (1041a10).
[61] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 211 (1013a24–1013b).
[62] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 267 (1021b23).
[63] Aristotle explicitly derived his concept of actuality (ἐνέργεια) from work or activity (ἔργον): "The term 'actuality'(ἐνέργεια), with its implications of 'complete reality,' has been extended from motions, to which it properly belongs, to other things" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 439 (1047a30)). "For the activity (*ergon*) is the end (*telos*), and the actuality (*energeia*) is the activity (*ergon*). Hence the term 'actuality' is derived from 'activity' and tends to mean 'perfection'" (τὸ γὰρ ἔργον τέλος, ἡ δὲ ἐνέργεια τὸ ἔργον. διὸ καὶ τοὔνομα ἐνέργεια λέγεται κατὰ τὸ ἔργον, καὶ συντείνει πρὸς τὴν ἐντελέχειαν.) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 459) (1050a23).
[64] Aristotle often used examples of houses and architecture to illustrate his basic metaphysical concepts:
(a) The concept of principle (ἀρχή) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 209) (1013a5 and 1013a14).
(b) The concept of cause (αἰτία) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 215 and 217) (1014a9 and 1014a25).
(c) The concept of potentiality (δύναμις) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 251) (1019a16).
(d) The concept of coming from something (τὸ ἔκ τινος εἶναι) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 277) (1023a34).
(e) The concept of accident (κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 299) (1026b8).
(f) The concept of form (εἶδος) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 339) (1032b14).
(g) The relation of matter to form (ὕλη and εἶδος) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 347) (1033b21).

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its end, and its principle. The principle of a house is the human need for dwelling; its matter is the stuff from which it is made; its source of motion is the architects and the builders; and its *telos* is the house's work or function. When the house is being designed and constructed it is merely potential, in the sense that it is moving towards its final form. It becomes actual when it reaches its final form and fulfills its function. A perfect (*teleion*) house is one that fully achieves its end (*telos*).

Aristotle also explained these concepts using the example of living beings. What is essential to an acorn, for example, is not its properties but its underlying causes: the matter of which it is made; the form of the mature tree it contains; the source of its growth; and the end towards which it grows. The oak exists potentially in the acorn, and it exists actually when the movement of growth has reached its end.

Where do these concepts come from? To what region of beings did they originally belong? In light of what experience does Aristotle understand all beings in these terms?

Arendt argued that Aristotle's examples point to the provenance of his concepts. The examples of living things suggest that Aristotle worked out his metaphysics by generalizing concepts that originally belonged to the sphere of animal and plant life. In *The Life of the Mind*, she claimed the concepts of actuality and potentiality were derived from the experience of living things and then transposed into the sphere of production:

> The human product, this "compound of matter and form" – for instance, a house made of wood according to a form preexisting in the craftsman's mind (*nous*) – clearly was not made out of nothing, and so was understood by Aristotle to preexist "potentially" before it was actualized by human hands. This notion was derived from the mode of being peculiar to living things, where everything that appears grows out of something that contains the finished product potentially, as the oak exists potentially in the acorn and the animal in the semen.[65]

It would seem Aristotle derived his categories from the experience of living things.

But this derivation is incomplete. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argued that the word "form" or *eidos* originally belonged to the sphere of making, and this implies that Aristotle conceived of living beings

(h) The difference of natural and artificial generation (γίγνεται) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 349) (1034a12).
(i) The concept of substance (οὐσία) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 385) (1039b26).
(j) The concept of essence (τὸ τι ἦν εἶναι) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 397) (1041a27 and 1041b7).

[65] LMW, 15.

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themselves in terms that are ultimately derived from the experience of production.[66] The development of living beings is understood in terms of the making of products. This analogy is explicit in the *Metaphysics*: "It is the same with natural formations as it is with the products of art. For the seed produces [ποιεῖ] just as those things that come from art [τὰ ἀπο τέχνης]. It contains the form potentially [ἔχει γὰρ δυνάμει τὸ εἶδος]."[67] Both natural and artificial things are products; the difference between the natural and the artificial is simply that what is natural has its *eidos* and its source of motion within itself, while the *eidos* and source of motion of artificial things lie outside themselves in the one who makes them.

The basic terms of Aristotle's metaphysics ultimately come from the experience of making, Arendt argued. His concepts are derived from terms most appropriate to one sphere of beings – products. Although Aristotle carefully distinguishes between nature and art, his basic concepts lead him to conceive all beings on the model of products.

How did Aristotle use these metaphysical concepts in his practical philosophy?

The concepts of the *Metaphysics* provide the framework of Aristotle's ethics, since he understood human existence in the same terms with which he understood everything else. To grasp what it is to be human is to grasp the substance of "man" – his form, his matter, his source of motion, and above all his *telos*.[68] The *telos* of human life is happiness, and the highest happiness depends on the highest work of human beings.[69] Since Aristotle articulated his metaphysical concepts in terms derived from the sphere of making, the basic terms of his metaphysics led him to think of "man" on the model of the artist and craftsman. This model is explicit in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> Perhaps we shall find the best good if we first find the work of man [τὸ ἔργον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου]. For just as the good, i.e. doing well, for a flautist, a sculptor, and every craftsman, and in general, for everything that has a work and action, seems to depend on its work, the same seems to be true of man, if there is a work proper to him. So then do the carpenter and leatherworker have their proper work and action, while man has none and is by nature without any work [ἀργον]?[70]

[66] HC, 142. [67] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 351 (1034a34).
[68] I translate ἀνθρώπος as "man" to capture the masculine singular form of the word in Aristotle's Greek.
[69] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 31 (1097b20–1). See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 607 and 613 (1176a31–32 and 1177a12–21).
[70] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 31 (1097b25).

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The work of man turns out to be a way of life (ζωήν τινα) in which, through the practice of the virtues, he actualizes his nature as man.[71] Man becomes what he is by doing the work proper to man.

The concepts of the *Metaphysics* also provided the framework for Aristotle's political thought. In the *Politics*, Aristotle conceived the polis in the same metaphysical terms. The material of the polis is its population and its territory.[72] The form of the polis is its constitution. Its sources of motion are the statesman and the natural impulse of human beings to live together.[73] And the *telos* of the polis is living well, the happiness of its citizens.[74] In other words, the *telos* of the polis is to allow men to reach their *telos*, to become what they are, to live the best life, to achieve the highest happiness.

Aristotle's most basic ethical and political question is the question of human nature: What is man? What is his *telos*? What is his proper work? What is the best life?

Aristotle answered these questions in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In his view, the highest work of man is philosophical contemplation, since contemplation provides the highest happiness available to man. So the best life is the life devoted to philosophy. Ethics and politics have their *raison d'être* in something that transcends the ethical and political sphere. The political life ultimately aims at something beyond politics – the contemplative life of the philosopher.[75]

How did Aristotle's metaphysical thought guide or misguide his view of politics?

Arendt objected not just to Aristotle's answer to the question of human nature, but to the terms in which the question was framed: What are the *eidos* and *telos* of man? In her view, these concepts fail to grasp what is distinctive to human beings. She did not say Aristotle misunderstood human nature, or that man has no distinctive way of being. Her argument was that Aristotle's concept of essence cannot fully grasp what is proper to human beings. While his concepts may allow us to grasp the essence of nonhuman beings, they can only distort our understanding of ourselves when they are applied to human existence.

[71] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 33 (1098a-13-19).
[72] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 553 (1326a1–5).
[73] Aristotle, *Politics*, 9 (1253a). [74] Aristotle, *Politics*, 218 and 571 (1280b39–40 and 1328a).
[75] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 615 and 623 (1177b1–4 and 1178a22–26).

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> It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves . . . Nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence *in the same sense* as other things . . . The perplexity is that the modes of human cognition applicable to things with "natural" qualities, including ourselves to the limited extent that we are specimens of the most highly developed species of organic life, fail us when we raise the question: And who are we?[76]

Arendt did not deny there are universal and necessary structures of human existence. She only doubted we have an essence "in the same sense as other things." We cannot assume that humans can be understood with concepts proper to nonhuman beings. Nor can we assume that humans have a specific work and *telos* in the same sense that other things do. Aristotle's teleological view of man does *to some extent* illuminate the basic structures of human existence, but it distorts our existence by interpreting it in terms of concepts derived from other kinds of beings. It is not that Aristotle has the wrong answer to the question of human nature, but that the question itself implies a misconception of human being. To ask about the natural ends of human life, Arendt thought, is "to speak about a 'who' as though it were a 'what.'"[77]

Aristotle's teleology thus led him to misconceive the nature of political action, Arendt argued. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle drew a clear distinction between action and production, doing and making, *praxis* and *poiesis*. *Poiesis* is any activity that is not done for its own sake, but that has its end beyond itself in the product to be made. *Praxis* is any activity that has its end in itself in the sense that it is done for its own sake.[78] *Poiesis* is a means to an end, whereas *praxis* is beyond the means/end schema in the sense that acting well (εὐπραχία) is its own end. For most of the *Nicomachean Ethics* it seems that the work of man is to excel in politics and ethics, since excellence in the political and ethical spheres is an end in itself.[79] But at the end of the book it turns out that the happiness of the

[76] HC, 10–11 (italics added).

[77] HC, 10. Giorgio Agamben followed Arendt in arguing that we cannot understand the political in terms of Aristotle's metaphysics. Agamben actually defined the political in terms of our lack of any proper work or *telos*: "Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. There is politics because human beings are *argos* – beings who cannot be defined by any proper operation – that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust." Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 140.

[78] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 337 (1140b4).

[79] HC, 206. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 609 (1176b6–9).

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political life is only a second-rate happiness, and that the highest happiness is achievable only in the philosophical life. The *telos* of man can only be reached outside the ethical and political sphere. Philosophical contemplation is the only activity loved wholly for its own sake, whereas all *praxis* aims at something beyond the action itself.[80] So political action can no longer be understood as having its end in itself; it has to be understood as ultimately a means to a higher end.

Aristotle's metaphysical concepts led him to think of political action on the model of production, and to think of the polis as a kind of product: politicians are like manual workmen (χειροτέχναι) who do the labor of forming the polis;[81] while the philosopher is like the architect (ἀρχιτέκτων) who understands the essence of the city and who is therefore fit to design its form.[82] This technical analogy is explicit in the *Politics*:

> Just as a weaver or a shipbuilder or any other craftsman must have the material proper to their craft . . . so too the statesman or legislator must have the materials proper to him.[83]

Just as, for the architect, the form of a house follows from its work, which is to shelter and sustain the way of life proper to its inhabitants, so too, for the political theorist, the form of best city will follow from its work, which is to make possible for its citizens the best way of life – the life of contemplation.[84]

Aristotle's metaphysics reinforced the confusion of *praxis* and *poiesis* already implicit in Plato, Arendt thought, and this confusion led him to accept some of the assumptions underlying Plato's philosophy of politics. Like Plato, Aristotle saw politics as a means to an end. Like Plato, he separated knowing and doing. And this separation of knowing and doing led him, like Plato, to think of politics as a matter of rule.

But the attempt to understand politics in terms of his metaphysics had several other consequences for his political philosophy, according to Arendt.

1. Aristotle reduced deliberation to instrumental thinking. Arendt noted that for Aristotle, "we deliberate only about means to an end that we take

[80] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 615–617 (1177b1–18).
[81] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 347 (1141b27).
[82] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 429 (1152b1–4).
[83] Aristotle, *Politics*, 553 (1325b41–1326a6). (I have modified the translation.)
[84] LMW, 62. This analogy – between the statesman and the architect – was central to the work of Leo Strauss: "The legislative skill is, therefore, the most 'architectonic' political skill that is known to political life." (Strauss, *Classical Political Rationalism*, 53.)

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for granted, that we cannot choose . . . ends are inherent in human nature and the same for all."[85] The ends of political life should not be endlessly debated but determined once and for all by philosophical knowledge; political deliberation should only concern the best way to achieve ends given in advance by philosophy.

2. Aristotle dissociated political action from happiness, and located the highest happiness outside the sphere of politics: "From practical pursuits we look to secure some advantage, greater or smaller, beyond the action itself . . . The activity of the politician is unleisured, and aims at securing something beyond the mere participation in politics – positions of authority and honor, or, if the happiness of the politician himself and of his fellow-citizens, this happiness is conceived as something distinct from political activity."[86] Even when philosophers discarded Aristotle's teleology, Arendt argued, they generally retained the assumption that we engage in politics only to secure happiness outside political life.

3. Aristotle's metaphysics obscured the specific temporality of human existence. Arendt argued that the concepts of actuality and potentiality were drawn from the sphere of organic growth rather than from the experience of action. "When Aristotle holds that 'coming-into-being necessarily implies the pre-existence of something which is potentially but not actually,' he is applying the cyclical movement in which everything that is alive swings . . . to the realm of human affairs."[87] But the concepts of actuality and potentiality fail to grasp the radical openness of free action. What exists "potentially" always moves towards an end given in advance, so that the future it aims at is in some sense already present, according to Arendt: "The view that everything real must be preceded by a potentiality as one of its causes implicitly denies the future as an authentic tense: the future is nothing but a consequence of the past."[88] Aristotle's metaphysics effaces the possibility of radical novelty – of actions or events that bring about something unprecedented, something that was not foreseen or even imagined.[89]

4. Aristotle's philosophy devalues the whole realm of action, since his understanding of essence consigns all action to the realm of the inessential. For Aristotle, what is essential is what is necessarily the way it is – the unchanging and underlying ground (ὑποκείμενον). Whatever could be

[85] See Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1226b10, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112b12.
[86] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 615 (1177b3–15). [87] LMW, 16. [88] LMW, 15.
[89] Agamben extended Arendt's critique of Aristotle's concept of potentiality. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 39–48.

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otherwise is not essential but accidental or contingent (συμβηβεκός). Arendt noted that since any free action is something that could be other than it is, the whole sphere of action is not essential.

> In the framework of these categories, everything that happens in the realm of human affairs is accidental or contingent ("πρακτὸν δ'ἐστὶ τὸ ἐνδεξόμενον καὶ ἄλλος ἔχειν" "what is brought into being by action is that which could also be otherwise"): Aristotle's very words already indicate the realm's low ontological status.[90]

This is why poetry is more serious than history for Aristotle: poetry deals with the universal (τὰ καθόλου) – what is likely or necessary (τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον) – while history deals only with particulars (τὰ καθ'ἕκαστον).[91]

5. This devaluation of the sphere of action entails a demotion of political thought. Since deliberation and judgment deal with what is contingent and therefore inessential, they occupy the lowest rung in the hierarchy of different kinds of thought, Arendt argued: "Thus Aristotle, in a discussion of the different kinds of cognition in his *Metaphysics*, places *dianoia* and *episteme praktike*, practical insight and political science, at the lowest rank of his order, and puts above them the sciences of fabrication, *episteme poietike*, which immediately precedes and leads to *theoria*, the contemplation of truth."[92]

In short, Aristotle's political philosophy distorts and debases political life, according to Arendt. The decisive point is not that Aristotle valued the contemplative life above the active life; nor that he tried to understand politics in teleological terms. What is decisive for Arendt is the task that Aristotle set for political philosophy: to derive the goals and standards of political life from a knowledge of human nature. This task outlasted Aristotle's teleological approach to politics and his evaluation of the contemplative life. Any attempt to derive the aims and standards of political life from a knowledge of human nature is ultimately an attempt to replace politics with philosophy. It assumes that the question of how to live together is not a matter of opinion but of knowledge; it is not to be addressed through the endless deliberation of politics, but to be answered

[90] Arendt quotes from *De Anima*, 433a30. LMW, 15.
[91] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 59 (1451b5–8).
[92] HC, 301.

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through philosophical argument. Aristotle's political philosophy is ultimately an attempt to replace politics with philosophy.[93]

Later Political Theory

Classical political theory is silent on matters that now seem essential to politics, according to Arendt. While the first philosophers spoke of freedom, for example, they never really asked what it is: "There is no preoccupation with freedom in the whole history of great philosophy from the pre-Socratics up to Plotinus."[94] Nor did they ask about the nature of authority: "Neither the Greek language nor the varied political experiences of Greek history shows any knowledge of authority and the kind of rule it implies."[95] Nor did they look for a transcendent source to sanction human law: "Neither the Greek *nomos* nor the Roman *lex* was of divine origin, [and] neither the Greek nor the Roman concept of legislation needed divine inspiration."[96] Why were these questions ignored by the first philosophers? How were they introduced into political theory?

The answer for Arendt lies in the distance between ancient philosophy and politics. The citizens who led a political life didn't need a theory of politics, and so never fully articulated their understanding in theoretical terms. The philosophers, who had withdrawn from politics, tried to grasp the nature of the polis in theory, not by working out concepts on the basis of their own political experience, but by drawing on terms and models from other spheres of life. Classical political philosophy thus obscured the nature of politics in two ways: it transposed into political theory models and concepts foreign to politics, which could grasp political realities in only a crude and misleading way; and it ignored political phenomena that resisted its concepts and that were foreign to its concerns.

In her approach to ancient political philosophy, Arendt set herself three tasks: to explicate the nontheoretical understanding of political phenomena neglected by philosophers; to show how this understanding was distorted by later concepts; and to trace these concepts back to the original experiences from which they emerged.

[93] Here I am indebted to Dana Villa's discussion of Arendt and Aristotle in *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[94] BPF, 145. In *The Life of the Mind* she cites a number of scholars who agree on this point: Thomas Hobbes; Etienne Gilson; and Henry Herbert Williams. Williams, for example, writes that it cannot be "seriously maintained that the problem of freedom ever became a subject of debate in the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle" (LMW, 16).

[95] BPF, 104. [96] OR, 186.

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Freedom

Arendt's approach to the question of freedom was guided by a few assumptions: that we already have a nontheoretical understanding of freedom rooted in lived experience; that we primarily experience freedom in action; that the point of politics is to make free action possible; and that "the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom." If traditional concepts of freedom are grounded in nonpolitical experiences, these concepts can only distort our understanding of political freedom.

These assumptions underlie three arguments.

First, Arendt argued we cannot understand freedom in the prevailing terms of modern political theory. Modern theory has been dominated by two concepts of freedom, which Isaiah Berlin has called "positive" and "negative" freedom. Positive freedom is the right to take part in democratic self-government, "to participate in the process by which my life is to be controlled."[97] Negative freedom is the right to be free from control, to have an inviolable space of private life "within which a man can act unobstructed by others."[98] While these two concepts are often opposed, modern philosophers conceive both kinds of freedom in terms of sovereignty and will. Positive freedom is understood in terms of the sovereignty of the people and the popular will. Negative freedom is understood in terms of the sovereignty of the individual and personal autonomy. Arendt argued the concepts of sovereignty and will are not derived from the experience of politics, and that to think of political freedom in terms of sovereignty and will is to think of politics in nonpolitical terms. She began her reflections on freedom by suspending trust in modern concepts of freedom.

Second, she argued that we cannot understand freedom by returning to classical political philosophy: "It does not follow that we need only revert to older, pre-modern traditions and theories. Indeed, the greatest difficulty in reaching an understanding of what freedom is arises from the fact that a simple return to tradition, and especially to what we are wont to call the great tradition, does not help us."[99] The limits of ancient political philosophy are ultimately based on the withdrawal of philosophers from politics and the traditional opposition between the active and the contemplative life.

[97] Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 131.
[98] Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, 122. [99] BPF, 156–157.

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> Our philosophical tradition of political thought, beginning with Parmenides and Plato, was founded explicitly in opposition to this polis and its citizenship. The way of life chosen by the philosopher was understood in opposition to the *bios politikos*, the political way of life. Freedom, therefore, the very center of politics as the Greeks understood it, was an idea which almost by definition could not enter the framework of Greek philosophy.[100]

For Arendt, human freedom first appears in the experience of action rather than thought. But since philosophers valued the life of thought over the life of action, they were not concerned with freedom as it actually appeared in the political realm. Since they were intensely concerned with the virtue of self-control, they abstracted the word "freedom" from the worldly sphere and interpreted it in light of the inner experience of self-mastery. This abstraction has obscured and distorted the essence of freedom.

> It is the contention of the following considerations that the reason for this obscurity is that the phenomenon of freedom does not appear in the realm of thought at all, that neither freedom nor its opposite is experienced in the dialogue between me and myself in the course of which the great philosophic and metaphysical questions arise, and that the philosophical tradition ... had distorted, instead of clarifying, the very idea of freedom such as it is given in human experience by transposing it from its original field, the realm of politics and human affairs in general, to an inward domain, the will, where it would be open to self-inspection.[101]

By transposing the question of freedom from a worldly to an inner realm, philosophers detached the word from the original experiences from which it was born.

Third, Arendt argued that while the Greeks never worked out an explicit concept of freedom, in their political life they understood freedom in an exceptionally clear way. To grasp the essence of freedom it helps to go back and retrieve the original understanding of freedom that is implicit in the non-philosophical writings of the Greeks.

> Let us therefore go back once more to antiquity, i.e., to its political and *prephilosophical* traditions, certainly not for the sake of erudition and not even because of the continuity of our tradition, but merely because a freedom experienced in the process of acting and nothing else – though, of course, mankind never lost this experience altogether – has never again been articulated with the same classical clarity.[102]

[100] BPF, 157–158. [101] BPF, 145. [102] BPF, 165 (italics added).

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This does not mean that to grasp what freedom is we only have to explicate the Greek understanding of freedom; it means that in our own attempts to think through the nature of freedom it would help to be guided initially by the testimony of the Greeks.

How then did the Greeks originally understand freedom?

The Greeks assumed we are not free if we are subject to the will of another, Arendt noted, and they delimited a private sphere within which each citizen was supposed to be sovereign. A male citizen was sovereign within his household in the sense that he had absolute power in his own domain. And a male citizen had sovereignty over his body in the sense that it was legally inviolable. In Athens after Solon, citizens could not be enslaved for debt or tortured in a court of law, and it was a crime to manhandle or even touch a citizen without his consent.[103] For the Greeks it was essential for a polis to ensure that each citizen was sovereign in the private sphere.

The Greeks also assumed we are not free if we are subject to the necessities of life. Arendt noted that, for Aristotle, freedom required liberation from the activities and relationships necessary for survival and prosperity: "This prerequisite of freedom ruled out all ways of life chiefly devoted to keeping one's self alive – not only labor, which was the way of life of the slave, but also the working life of the free craftsman and the acquisitive life of the merchant. In short, it excluded everybody who involuntarily or voluntarily, for his whole life or temporarily, had lost the free disposition of his movements and activities."[104] It was generally assumed that to master the necessities of life one had to master others, to rule over family and slaves as the head of a household. Liberation from necessity required sovereign rule in domestic life, it was thought, so the freedom of citizens in the polis required the domination of slaves in the household.

But the sovereignty of a master is not the political freedom of a citizen. Arendt pointed out that in the *Politics* Aristotle took for granted the difference between freedom and sovereignty: "the life of a free man is better than the life like that of a master of slaves."[105] The distinction between freedom and sovereignty applies not only to the difference between the citizen of the polis and the master of the house, but also to the difference between the citizen of the polis and the ruler of a kingdom.

[103] Arendt noted that at his execution Socrates was expected to drink hemlock by himself, since to force him to drink it would have violated his status as a citizen (OR, 12).
[104] HC, 12. [105] Aristotle, *Politics*, 549 (1325a24).

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On this point Arendt referred to the story of Otanes, the Persian who refused the chance to be king, who said he was "willing neither to rule nor to be ruled," and who was the only free man in the Persian Empire, according to Herodotus.[106] She concluded that, for the Greeks, sovereignty and freedom were not just different but incompatible: "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."[107] The sovereign ruler is not yet free as long as he remains in a realm dominated by the concern for survival and prosperity, whether that realm is a household or an empire.

Finally, freedom required overcoming the love of life and the fear of death. This is explicit in Seneca's maxim that "life is slavery without the virtue that knows how to die."[108] For Arendt this elevation of freedom over life was essential to the Greek elevation of the city over the household, citizenship over rulership, the polis over the *oikos*, politics over economics, the world over bare life: "To leave the household, originally in order to embark upon some adventure and glorious enterprise and later simply to devote one's life to the affairs of the city, demanded courage because only in the household was one primarily concerned with one's own life and survival. Whoever entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life, and too great love for life obstructed freedom, was a sure sign of slavishness."[109]

In short, freedom required liberation – not just from the necessities of life, but from the realm dominated by the care for life; not just from the rule of masters and tyrants, but from the realm of rulership itself.

But liberation is not yet freedom. There were clear differences in ancient Greece between the liberty of an emancipated slave and the freedom of an enfranchised citizen. So the Greeks, Arendt argued, took for granted a set of "truisms" that modern political theory has neglected: "that liberation and freedom are not the same; that liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it; that the notion of liberty implied in liberation can only be negative, and hence, that even the intention of liberating is not identical with the desire for freedom."[110]

Freedom was first of all a political matter, according to Arendt. A polis was free if its citizens had a certain equal status and equal rights: equality under the law (*isonomia*); the right to speak openly in public (*parrhesia*); and the right to address the assembly (*isegoria*). These rights were not

[106] Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 250.
[107] HC, 32. [108] HC, 36. [109] HC, 36. [110] OR, 29.

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meant to circumscribe a private realm in which citizens were not subject to the power of the government; they were meant to ensure that all citizens had an equal share of power. To be free was to be able to participate in governing the city. This understanding of freedom was implicit in Greek literature. Its clearest expression is perhaps in *The Suppliant Women* by Euripides, where a foreigner asks who is king in Athens, and Theseus explains that there is no king:

> [Athens] is not ruled by one man, but is a free city. Here the people rule, and power is held yearly by turns. They do not give the most to the rich; the poor also have an equal share . . . Freedom is this: "Who has good counsel to offer the polis?" He who does so wins fame; he who does not is silent. Where could greater equality be found?[111]

Freedom here is a matter not of private liberty but of public power. It is tied to equality among citizens and the right to engage in the deliberations of the assembly.[112] True freedom appears in the experience of action.

Arendt thought this understanding of freedom was obscured when philosophers transposed the question of freedom from the political realm to the psychic realm, where freedom is not a matter of action but of choice and will. This transposition is especially clear in the philosophy of the Stoics. Arendt focused on the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who was not a citizen but a former slave, and who, understandably, was not concerned with politics but deeply concerned with questions of sovereignty and liberty. According to Epictetus, we are wrong to think that a good and happy life depends on our worldly situation. Worldly things are simply external impressions; what matters is not things themselves but our judgments about them. Our judgments are usually dominated by our passions; our desires make things seem desirable, and our fears make them seem fearful. But if we abandon our worldly cares and master our passions, we find that our power to judge and to choose is absolutely sovereign. If we give up trying to control what is beyond our control (the world), and focus only on controlling what can be controlled (the self), then nothing can make us unhappy and no one can force us to do what is wrong.

[111] This citation is of two passages: lines 405–408 and 437–441. The translation is partly my own, partly that of David Kovacs (ed. and trans.), Euripides, *Suppliant Women; Electra; Heracles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), and partly that of David Grene and Richmond Lattimore in *Euripides: The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[112] This passage is cited both by Finley and Foucault: M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 136; Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 60–61.

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Stoic philosophy teaches us how to live an invincibly serene and virtuous life. The task of philosophy is to turn our cares away from the world towards the mastery of the self. The man who has mastered himself liberates himself from all compulsion and achieves an unworldly but absolute liberty. Epictetus declares that in his inner life man is sovereign: "man . . . has nothing more sovereign [κυριότερος] than his power to choose [προαίρεσις] . . . all else is subject to this, and the power to choose itself is free from slavery and subjection."[113] In the world we may be enslaved by men and subject to fate, but in his inner life the philosopher is invincible: "I must die. I must be imprisoned. I must suffer exile. But must I die groaning? Must I whine as well? Can anyone prevent me from going into exile with a smile? . . . Chain me? My leg you will chain–yes, but not my power to choose – no, not even Zeus can conquer that."[114]

Epictetus altered the question of freedom in three ways, according to Arendt. First, he displaced the notion of freedom from the political to the psychic realm; freedom was understood in light of the inner experience of choice rather than the worldly experience of action. Second, Epictetus conceived freedom in terms of the power to choose between alternatives (*liberum arbitrium*) rather than in terms of the power to do. Third, he interpreted this inner experience in terms of the experiences of mastery and slavery, sovereignty and liberation: "Epictetus transposed these worldly relationships into relationships within man's own self."[115] This transposition led Epictetus to conceive of the self in terms of the household. The independence of the psyche was understood in terms of sovereign power, and freedom was understood in terms of liberation from compulsion. So the ideal of freedom changed. The exemplar of freedom was no longer the citizen but the sovereign:

> 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 . . . became sovereignty, the ideal of a free will, independent from others and eventually prevailing against them.[116]

Freedom was conceived as sovereignty of the inner man.

This Stoic concept of freedom was altered by Christian thinkers, according to Arendt, and this alteration was based on the differences between Stoic and Christian views of virtue. As long as virtue consists of mastering our passions and choosing the best course of action, a good life is

[113] Epictetus, cited by Arendt, LMW, 78. [114] Epictetus, cited by Arendt, LMW, 79.
[115] BPF, 148. [116] BPF, 163.

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entirely within our power. But if virtue consists in not simply doing but being good – once anger is equated with murder and lust with adultery – then a good life is no longer entirely in our power. Our inner self is not sovereign. I can choose to control my lust, but I cannot choose not to lust. I can force myself to restrain my anger, but I cannot force myself to love my enemies. With Christianity, Arendt argued, "The chief task of the spirit is not just to rule over the appetites and to make the flesh obey but to bring about its mortification – to crucify it 'with its passions and desires' (Galatians 5:24), which in fact is beyond human power."[117] For Arendt it was St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, who first described the weakness of the will and pointed to the gap between what I will and what I can do. Paul wrote:

> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me [ἡ οἰκοῦσα ἐν ἐμοι ἁμαρτία].[118]

Paul transformed the Stoic image of the self as a house ruled by a sovereign. If lust, anger, and pride are sins, then sin dwells within me and dominates my life. I am no longer the master of my house. Sin rules, and I am its slave: "With my mind I am a servant to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin."[119] How to be free of sin? We cannot free ourselves, but can only be liberated by the grace of God. And this grace does not depend on human will or exertion, but comes to those who from the heart obey God as their sovereign Lord.

> Thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become servants of righteousness.[120]

Paul refigured the nature of freedom. Like Epictetus, he understood freedom as liberation from slavery. But freedom was no longer the self-liberation of the inner man from subjection to the external world. Freedom was liberation from the powers of sin that dominate us, and this liberation

[117] LMW, 70.
[118] *New Greek–English Interlinear New Testament,* The New Revised Standard Version, ed. J. D. Douglas, trans. Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), 550. (Romans 7:15–20.)
[119] *New Greek–English Interlinear New Testament*, 550. (Romans 7:25.)
[120] *New Greek–English Interlinear New Testament*, 547. (Romans 6:17–18.)

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comes through divine redemption and through absolute obedience to the will of the Lord. True freedom demands total submission.

In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul transposed this demand for inward obedience into the realm of worldly power. We should faithfully serve rulers who are themselves servants of God.

> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities [ἐξουσίαις], for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever opposes the authority opposes the ordinance of God, and those who oppose will incur judgment. For the rulers are not fearsome to good conduct but to evil. Do you want not to fear the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its praise; for the authority is God's servant for your good.[121]

This transposition altered the concept of freedom by subordinating worldly freedom to spiritual freedom. Freedom of action, speech, and belief could be restricted by the worldly authorities in order to make possible the spiritual liberation of Christian life. It was this Christian liberty that the Puritans sought in America: in the words of the Puritan Jonathan Boucher, "true liberty" was not "a right to do everything that we please," but "a liberty to do every thing that is right, and being restrained from doing any thing that is wrong."[122] This Christian concept of freedom was perfectly compatible with the abolition of what for the Greeks were two essential conditions of freedom: the sovereignty of the citizens in their private life, and their right to engage in politics.

What mattered to Arendt was that both Stoic and Christian thinkers understood freedom in terms of liberation, sovereignty, and will, and that these terms were not based on specifically political experiences but were derived from the experience of slavery, mastery, and willpower.

When modern theorists ask about the nature of freedom, Arendt argued, they tend to understand political freedom in this inherited vocabulary. Proponents of positive freedom understand freedom as the collective sovereignty of the general will. Rousseau, she pointed out, explicitly conceived of "political power in the strict image of individual will-power," and derived his theory of popular sovereignty directly from his concept of the will.[123] Whenever we speak of the "sovereignty" of a nation, or the "will" of a people, we still think of political freedom in these terms. On the

[121] *New Greek–English Interlinear New Testament*, 567. (Romans 13:1–4.)
[122] Jonathan Boucher, cited in Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 5.
[123] BPF, 163.

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other hand, proponents of negative freedom understand freedom as individual sovereignty and personal autonomy. In the words of John Stuart Mill, "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign."[124] Yet this negative concept of freedom seems narrow and hollow since it does not entail either the economic independence or the right to self-government that for the Greeks was essential to political freedom.

The interpretation of freedom as sovereignty obscures the essence of freedom, in Arendt's view. But the traditional questions of free will and popular sovereignty seem so basic and self-evident that we can scarcely conceive of a freedom that has nothing to do with sovereignty, will, or liberation.

> Within the conceptual framework of traditional philosophy, it is indeed very difficult to understand how freedom and non-sovereignty can exist together or, to put it another way, how freedom could have been given to men under the condition of non-sovereignty.[125]

To understand what freedom is, she thought, we have to detach the concept of freedom from notions of sovereignty and will.

> Freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously. Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the "general will" of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.[126]

One task of her phenomenology was to bring to light and grasp in concepts an experience of freedom that cannot be understood in terms of willpower or sovereignty. We will follow how she did this in Chapter 6.

Authority

We tend to think of authority as essential to politics. It seems some form of authority is an irreducible part of any political system. Arendt began her reflections on the subject by contesting this basic point.

> Authority as the one, if not the decisive, factor in human communities did not always exist, though it can look back on a long history, and the

[124] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 69. [125] BPF, 164.
[126] BPF, 164–165.

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> experiences on which this concept is based are not necessarily present in all bodies politic.[127]

This sounds strange. What would be a politics without authority?

This question is not just academic. In her view, the history of modern politics is the story of the ever-widening erosion of all traditional authorities: "In the modern world authority has disappeared almost to the vanishing point."[128] If authority is essential to political community, then the loss of authority in the modern world looks like a catastrophe.

Arendt argued that the modern crisis of authority began with the emergence of secular politics. In medieval political theory, the authority of worldly powers was unquestionably grounded in the authority of the Church. It was the separation of politics and religion in the modern age that raised questions about the source of political authority: "Secularization, the emancipation of the secular realm from the tutelage of the Church, inevitably posed the problem of how to found and constitute a new authority."[129] In her view, the task of thinking is not to find or recover a transcendent source of political authority (divine or natural), but to conceive of political authority independent of extra-political or extra-human sources.

Her thinking was guided by a few questions: What is authority? Where did our inherited concepts of authority come from? How was the notion of authority introduced into the political realm? What were the political experiences from which it was born? How has it been displaced and transformed over time? How does it belong or not belong to the sphere of politics?

Arendt thought the concept of authority was foreign to Greek politics: "Neither the Greek language nor the varied political experiences of Greek history shows any knowledge of authority and the kind of rule it implies."[130] She cited the historian Dio Cassius who, in his history of Rome, noted that there was no word for authority in Greek, and that the Latin word *auctoritas* "is altogether impossible to Hellenize."[131]

The lack of authority in Greek politics was tied to the centrality of persuasion. Persuasion was central to Greek thought because politics implies equality. To try to persuade other citizens is to speak to them as equals who have the right to make their own decisions. Authority by contrast implies a hierarchy. To acknowledge others as authorities is to

[127] BPF, 104. [128] BPF, 103–104. [129] OR, 160. [130] BPF, 104.
[131] BPF, 289. Arendt quoted Dio Cassius without translating the Greek: ἑλληνίσαι αὐτο καθάπαξ ἀδύνατον ἔστι. The English is my translation.

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recognize their superior status, character, or knowledge: "Authority . . . is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical."[132] Since life in the polis was based on the principle that all citizens were equal, and that differences were resolved through debate and persuasion, there was little room in Greek politics for official authorities.

For Arendt, it was Plato who first tried to introduce something like authority into political life.[133] The execution of Socrates showed that neither truth nor justice were safe in a polis governed through persuasion. In his search for an alternative to persuasion, Plato was guided by a number of models drawn from outside the political realm: the relation between a ship's captain and his crew; between a general and his soldiers; between a doctor and his patients; between an architect and his workers. In each of these models there is a free obedience based on neither persuasion nor violence but on the recognition of superior expertise. Plato argued there should be a similar relationship between the philosophers and citizens of a polis. The polis should be ruled by kings who are also philosophers, since philosophers have left the cave of opinion and gone up to the realm of truth – they have seen what a city is, what man is, what justice is, and this knowledge makes them best able to organize and rule the city. The philosopher's authority would come from his expertise in statecraft and statesmanship: "Here the concept of the expert enters the realm of political action for the first time, and the statesman is understood to be competent to deal with human affairs in the same sense as the carpenter is competent to make furniture or the physician to heal the sick."[134] The philosopher's claim to rule is based on his superior wisdom. Just as a doctor should not have to threaten patients to enlist their obedience, so the philosopher-king should not have to force citizens to obey. The compelling force should come not from the power of the ruler but from the self-evident truth of the ideas: "Very early in his search [Plato] must have discovered that truth, namely, the truths we call self-evident, compels the mind, and that this coercion, though it needs not violence to be effective, is stronger than persuasion and argument."[135] The ideal polis is not governed through persuasion but ruled by reason.

Plato interpreted ideas as absolute standards of right, Arendt argued, so that knowledge of the ideas could serve as the source of authority for the

[132] BPF, 93. [133] BPF, 67. [134] BPF, 111. [135] BPF, 107.

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laws of the city. He assumed political power is legitimate only if guided and checked by laws based in a transcendent source of authority. Arendt thought this assumption is still with us:

> This aspect of Plato's doctrine of ideas had the greatest influence on the Western tradition . . . The essential characteristic of specifically authoritarian forms of government – that the source of their authority, which legitimates the exercise of power, must be beyond the sphere of power and, like the law of nature or the commands of God, must not be man-made – goes back to this applicability of the ideas in Plato's political philosophy.[136]

The interpretation of essence as idea lent a certain plausibility to Plato's analogy between technical experts and political leaders. This analogy let Plato introduce into the political sphere the concept of rule, "the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey."[137]

> For our purposes it is essential to remember that the element of rule, as reflected in our present concept of authority so tremendously influenced by Platonic thinking, can be traced to a conflict between philosophy and politics, but not to specifically political experiences, that is, experiences immediately derived from the realm of human affairs.[138]

Plato's attempt to introduce a transcendent source of authority into the polis was based on the assumption that politics is ultimately a matter of rule.

Aristotle also tried to introduce into the polis a kind of authority that would legitimate the division of citizens into rulers and ruled, Arendt argued, and this led him to think of politics in nonpolitical terms.

> There can be no question that Aristotle, like Plato before him, meant to introduce a kind of authority into the handling of public affairs and the life of the polis, and no doubt for very good political reasons. Yet he too had to resort to a kind of makeshift solution in order to make plausible the introduction into the political realm of a distinction between rulers and ruled, between those who command and those who obey. And he too could take his examples and models only from a pre-political sphere, from the private realm of the household and the experiences of a slave economy. This leads him into glaringly contradictory statements, insofar as he superimposes on the actions and life in the polis those standards which, as he explains elsewhere, are valid only for the behavior and life in the household community.[139]

[136] BPF, 111. [137] HC, 222. [138] BPF, 113. [139] BPF, 118.

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While Plato thought of political authority in terms of the hierarchy between expert and layman, Aristotle thought political authority should be based on the natural hierarchy of the young and the old. How should we distinguish between those who should rule and those who should be ruled? Aristotle wrote: "Nature has given the distinction by making those of the same race partly younger and partly older, for whom it is proper that the former are ruled and the latter rule."[140] For Arendt, the hierarchy between young and old belongs to the sphere of education, and this hierarchy is incompatible with the equality essential to political life:

> The relation between old and young is educational in essence . . . Then, as well as now, nothing is more questionable than the political relevance of examples drawn from the field of education. In the political realm we deal always with adults who are past the age of education, properly speaking, and politics or the right to participate in the management of public affairs begins precisely where education has come to an end.[141]

In her view, Aristotle's idea of a gerontocracy based on the natural hierarchy between the old and the young conflicts directly with his own definition of the polis as a community of equals united for the sake of the best life possible.[142]

When Plato and Aristotle tried to introduce a kind of authority into political life, Arendt concluded, they had to rely on nonpolitical models and examples precisely because the experience of authority was foreign to Greek politics.

> The grandiose attempts of Greek philosophy to find a concept of authority which would prevent deterioration of the polis and safeguard the life of the philosopher foundered on the fact that in the realm of Greek political life there was no awareness of authority based on immediate political experience. Hence all prototypes by which subsequent generations understood the content of authority were drawn from specifically unpolitical experiences.[143]

In Greek politics there were magistrates with official powers, but no apolitical source of political authority.

To recover the original sense of authority, Arendt returned to the Romans. In her view, the Roman understanding of authority rested on several basic assumptions: that Rome owed its glory to the founders who had fathered the city; that the founding fathers were owed the deference

[140] Aristotle, *Politics*, 603 (1332b35).
[141] BPF, 118–119.
[142] Aristotle, *Politics*, 571 (1328a35).
[143] BPF, 119.

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and obedience of later generations; that their wisdom and deeds were examples of greatness that all citizens were bound to follow; and that the first duty of citizens was to venerate the ancestors and to preserve their patrimony. To found a city was to lay down the sacred principles that would govern a people's way of life: "At the heart of Roman politics . . . stands the conviction of the sacredness of the foundation, in the sense that once something has been founded it remains binding for all future generations. To be engaged in politics meant first and foremost to preserve the founding of the city of Rome."[144] The preservation of the ancestors' patrimony was accomplished through tradition, the handing-down (*tradere*) of their words and deeds: "Tradition preserved the past by handing down from one generation to the next the testimony of the ancestors, who had first witnessed and created the sacred founding."[145] The veneration of the ancestors was essential to Roman religion since, Arendt noted, the Romans understood religion as being bound to the beginning: "Here religion literally meant *re-ligare*: to be tied back, obligated, to the enormous, almost superhuman and hence always legendary effort to lay the foundations, to build the cornerstone, to found for eternity. To be religious meant to be tied to the past."[146] Political authority in Rome was understood in terms of these interwoven notions of foundation, tradition, and religion.

Authority was also understood in terms of the etymology of the word *auctoritas*. This meant the specific status proper to an *auctor* – an author or founder. The *auctor* of a building was distinguished from its *artifices*, the men who actually built it: "The author in this case is not the builder but the one who inspired the whole enterprise and whose spirit, therefore, much more than the spirit of the actual builder, is represented in the building itself. In distinction to the *artifex*, who only made it, he is the actual 'author' of the building, namely its founder."[147] In this sense, Aeneas was thought to be the founder rather than the builder of Rome. In *The Aeneid*, the act of foundation consisted not simply in the victory of the Trojans over the Latins, but in the mutual promises exchanged by Aeneas and Latinus. Aeneas promised the Latins "I will not make the Italians underlings to Trojans. For myself I ask no kingdom. Let both nations, both unconquered, both subject to equal laws, commit themselves to an eternal union."[148] *The Aeneid* here laid out the principle that war should end not with conquest for the victors and slavery for the

[144] BPF, 120. [145] BPF, 124. [146] BPF, 121. [147] BPF, 122.
[148] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1981), 374.

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vanquished, but with a new alliance of old enemies, who would become allies under the auspices of Roman law. Arendt noted:

> Since Rome was founded on this treaty-law between two different and naturally hostile people, it could become Rome's mission eventually 'to lay all the world beneath laws – *totem sub leges mitteret orbem*. The genius of Roman politics – not only according to Virgil but, generally, according to Roman self-interpretation – lay in the very *principles* which attend the legendary foundation of the city.[149]

Aeneas was the *auctor* of the Roman people not just because he defeated the Latins but because he established the principle of alliance that would govern Roman politics. His status as *auctor* – his authority – not only made his promise binding for all future generations, but also made his act a precedent that was to govern all acts of war and peace. The founders of Rome were authorities, Arendt argued, in the sense that their words and deeds were taken as guiding precedents for their descendants.

> Thus precedents, the deeds of the ancestors and the usage that grew out of them, were always binding. Anything that happened was transformed into an example, and the *auctoritas maiorum* became identical with authoritative models for actual behavior, with the moral political standard as such.[150]

The authority of the founders was handed down through tradition, and it was by following tradition that Roman leaders acquired their authority: "As long as this tradition was uninterrupted, authority was inviolate; and to act without authority and tradition, without accepted, time-honored standards and models, without the help of the wisdom of the founding fathers, was inconceivable."[151] There was a strict intrication of the concepts of foundation, tradition, religion, and authority – Romans derived their authority from their religious fidelity to the founding traditions of the city.

Arendt emphasized that in Latin *auctoritas* is not *potestas* – authority is not power. Cicero clearly distinguished the two in his treatise on the laws: "*Cum potestas in populo auctoritas in senatu sit*" – "while power resides in the people, authority rests with the Senate."[152] The Senate did not have the power to make political decisions, but the right to give advice and to approve or disapprove of whatever decisions were made. Arendt used the example of building to clarify this distinction: while the builder has the right to command the obedience of his workers, he does not necessarily have the authority of the founder or his heirs; his rule is

[149] OR, 210 (italics added). [150] BPF, 123. [151] BPF, 124. [152] BPF, 122.

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authoritative only if he follows the founding precedents and principles. The difference with Plato is clear: while the philosopher king derives authority from knowledge of the ideas (just as the architect derives his authority from his knowledge of houses), the Roman senator derives authority from fidelity to tradition. To have authority is to speak and act with the weight of tradition.

While the concept of authority originated in the sphere of politics, Arendt argued, the Romans abstracted it from political life and transposed it into the life of the mind: "The Romans felt they needed founding fathers and authoritative examples in matters of thought and ideas as well, and accepted the great 'ancestors' in Greece as their authorities for theory, philosophy, and poetry. The great Greek authors became authorities in the hands of the Romans, not of the Greeks."[153] In this way the concept of authority was uprooted from the experience of Roman politics and used in a derivative sense: "The notion of a spiritual tradition and of authority in matters of thought and ideas is here derived from the political realm and therefore essentially derivative – just as Plato's conception of the role of reason and ideas in politics was derived from the philosophical realm and became derivative in the realm of human affairs."[154]

The concept of authority was further displaced, Arendt argued, when Christians came to understand their Church in Roman terms: "The Apostles could become the 'founding fathers' of the Church, from whom she would derive her own testimony by way of tradition from generation to generation. Only when this had happened, one is tempted to say, had the Christian faith become a 'religion'."[155] Two aspects of this displacement were decisive for the genealogy of authority.

First, Christian thinkers retained the Roman distinction between power and authority. When the Roman Empire declined and the Church became involved in politics, Arendt argued, the Church did not pursue power so much as authority.

> The Church, when she embarked upon her great political career in the fifth century, at once adopted the Roman distinction between authority and power, claiming for herself the old authority of the Senate and leaving the power . . . to the princes of the world. Thus at the close of the fifth century, Pope Gelasius I could write to Emperor Anastaius I: "Two are the things by which the world is chiefly ruled: the sacred authority of the Popes and the royal power."[156]

[153] BPF, 124. [154] BPF, 124. [155] BPF, 126. [156] BPF, 126–127.

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As Roman emperors needed approval from the Senate to give authority to their rule, so medieval kings needed the authority conferred by the investiture of the Pope. The preeminence of spiritual authority over worldly power was demonstrated in 1077 when Emperor Henry IV unsuccessfully challenged the authority of the Church, and had to stand barefoot in the snow to beg the Pope's forgiveness. Royal power needed the authority of divine sanction.

A second mutation in the genealogy of authority, for Arendt, came when Christian thinkers tried to understand their experience of faith in terms of Greek philosophy. Long after the Academy and Lyceum were closed, Christian thinkers formulated Church doctrine in Neoplatonic and Aristotelean terms. Plato's doctrine of ideas and Aristotle's notion of natural law came to dominate political theory.

> It is only in the Christian era that Plato's invisible spiritual yardsticks, by which the visible, concrete affairs of men were to be measured and judged, have unfolded their full political effectiveness. Precisely those parts of Christian doctrine which would have had great difficulty in fitting in and being assimilated to the Roman political structure – namely, the revealed commandments and truths of a genuinely transcendent authority . . . – could be integrated into the Roman foundation legend via Plato. God's revelation could now be interpreted politically as if the standards for human conduct and the principle of political communities, intuitively anticipated by Plato, had been finally revealed directly. . .[157]

One irony of history, for Arendt, is that Plato's political philosophy was first taken seriously not by the Athenians but by Christians, who interpreted the revelations of the Bible in terms of the Roman concept of authority and the Platonic doctrine of ideas.

Christian thinkers laid down an assumption that still underlies much political philosophy: that political institutions are authoritative only if they are sanctioned by a source of authority that transcends the political realm. Arendt summarized her argument in a few dense sentences:

> To the extent that the Catholic Church incorporated Greek philosophy into the structure of its doctrines and dogmatic beliefs, it amalgamated the Roman political concept of authority, which inevitably was based on a beginning, a founding in the past, with the Greek [Platonic] notion of transcending measurements and rules. General and transcendent standards under which the particular and immanent could be subsumed were now

[157] BPF, 127.

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> required for any political order, moral rules for all interhuman behavior, and rational measurements for the guidance of all individual judgment.[158]

This amalgamation of notions underlies the assumption that political power, to have authority, must be restrained and guided by laws grounded in standards that transcend the realm of politics.

In light of this assumption, the modern crisis of authority looks like a catastrophe. In the absence of authoritative standards against which political power can be checked and measured, it seems, governments can only be based on the principle that might makes right. But Arendt raised another possibility – that authority is not essential to political life, and that political authority does not have to be derived from extra-political sources, whether natural or divine.

> To live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together.[159]

We now confront the basic questions of political life without the false security of traditional authorities. The task of thinking is not to ground political authority on apolitical standards of right, but to understand how authority can be established within the political sphere itself. We will see in Chapter 6 how Arendt took on this task.

Law

What is the genealogy of the concept of law? How did the Greeks and Romans understand the nature of law? How was that understanding inherited and transformed by Christian thinkers? How did this heritage guide or misguide the thinking of the American revolutionaries? What understanding of law is implicit in the founding documents of the United States?

The American revolutionaries inherited the assumption that laws must be grounded on an apolitical source of authority, according to Arendt. They could not conceive of laws that did not rest on such grounds. In her book *On Revolution* she noted that John Adams insisted that "it was the general opinion of ancient nations that the Divinity alone was adequate to

[158] BPF, 128. [159] BPF, 141.

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the important office of giving laws to men," and that human laws had to be based on "rights antecedent to all earthly government . . . derived from the great Legislator of the universe."[160]

Arendt thought Adams was simply wrong: "neither the Greek *nomos* nor the Roman *lex* was of divine origin, [and] neither the Greek nor the Roman concept of legislation needed divine inspiration."[161] The Greeks thought laws were essentially artificial, and this artificiality was implicit both in the conceptual opposition of law and nature (νόμος vs. φύσις), and in the etymology of the word itself (which derived from νέμω, to allot, to divide up pasture, to dwell):

> The very word νόμος, which, apart from its etymological significance, receives its full meaning as the opposite of φύσις or things that are natural, stresses the 'artificial', conventional, man-made nature of the laws . . . Obviously, no idea of a "higher law" could possibly make sense with respect to this νόμος, and even Plato's laws are not derived from a "higher law" which would not only determine their usefulness but constitute their very legality and validity.[162]

The Latin etymology of the word *lex* also implied that, unlike the customs given to a people by the gods, laws are human institutions that need no higher source of authority: "The original meaning of the word *lex* is 'intimate connection' or relationship, namely something which connects two things or two partners whom external circumstances have brought together. Therefore, the existence of a people in the sense of an ethnic, tribal, organic unity is quite independent of all laws."[163]

Other thinkers confirm that Greek and Roman legislators did not justify their laws by appealing to natural law or divine sanction. M. I. Finley wrote: "Neither Greek nor Roman religion had the substantive doctrines or the ecclesiastical machinery to sanction (or legitimate) a particular ruler, regime or system. Lawgivers, rhetoricians and ideologists all spoke in the name of justice, but I am unaware of a single claim to divine sanction for a particular measure, regime, reform or revolution."[164] This view of law is foreign to modern thinkers, who have been baffled by the absence in Greek and Roman thought of the problem of legitimacy – the question of how to ground and validate human laws. Finley candidly admitted he was baffled by "the absence of any need to grapple with the problem of legitimacy, which today 'figures at the very heart of our concern with

[160] OR, 186. [161] OR, 186. [162] OR, 186–187. [163] OR, 187.
[164] Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, 132.

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the nature and value of modern society' as 'a main dimension of political culture.'" For Finley this absence is inexplicable: "It is not at all obvious why a problem that came to the fore in the Middle Ages and has been important ever since should not have arisen in antiquity, and I have no explanation to offer."[165] Why was the question of legitimacy absent from classical political thought? How did that question come to seem fundamental to political theory?

Arendt hinted at an answer in her reading of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Paul understood sin and freedom in terms of law: "With my mind I am a servant to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin."[166] And Paul understood law in terms of servitude and sovereignty, Arendt argued: "Law itself is understood as the voice of a master demanding obedience; the Thou shalt of the law demands and expects a voluntary act of submission, an I-will of agreement."[167] Paul understood law in these terms, Arendt thought, because the model of law was no longer the *nomoi* of the Greek lawgivers or the treaties of the Romans, but the commandments of the Hebrew Bible. In Christian thought, the Ten Commandments provided both a model for political laws and an apolitical standard against which they could be measured.

> The model in whose image Western Mankind had construed the quintessence of all laws, even of those whose Roman origin was beyond doubt, and even in juridical interpretation that used all the terms of Roman jurisdiction – this model was itself not Roman at all; it was Hebrew in origin and represented by the divine Commandments of the Decalogue.[168]

Secular law was understood as a kind of commandment, an imperative expressing the will of a sovereign, and the will of a sovereign was legitimate only if it was sanctioned by divine will. Human laws had to be grounded in divine law, and the contract between subjects and their ruler had to be grounded in the covenant between men and their Creator. This concept of law rests on several assumptions: that law is an imperative that expresses the will of a sovereign; that the validity of a law rests on the authority of the lawgiver; and that human law is authoritative only if it conforms to divine law.

This concept of law was inherited by modern political thinkers, according to Arendt, and it guided their thinking even when they replaced

[165] Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, 131.
[166] *New Greek–English Interlinear New Testament*, 550. (Romans 7:25.)
[167] LMW, 68.
[168] OR, 189.

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the sovereignty of the king with the sovereignty of the people, when they tried to ground human laws on natural laws, and when they sought to discover divine law through the light of reason rather than through the voice of conscience or the revelation of the scriptures:

> And the model itself did not change when in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries natural law stepped into the place of divinity–into the place, that is, which once had been held by the Hebrew God who was a lawmaker because he was the Maker of the Universe, a place which then had been occupied by Christ, the visible representative and bodily incarnation of God on earth, from whom then the vicars of Christ, the Roman popes and bishops as well as the kings who followed them, had derived their authority … The point of the matter has always been that natural law itself needed divine sanction to become binding for men.[169]

If laws are commands, Arendt noted, their validity depends on the authority of the lawgiver, and human lawgivers have authority only insofar as they do the will of God. The question of legitimacy – the quest for a source of authority outside the political sphere that could validate human laws – appeared only after laws were understood as imperatives.

> These historical reminiscences and reflections are to suggest that the whole problem of an absolute which would bestow validity upon positive, man-made laws was partly an inheritance of absolutism, which in turn had fallen heir to those long centuries when no secular realm existed in the Occident that was not ultimately rooted in the sanction given to it by the Church, and when therefore secular laws were understood as the mundane expression of a divinely ordained law. This, however, is only part of the story. It was of even greater importance and impact that the very word 'law' had assumed an altogether different meaning throughout these centuries. What mattered was that … the laws themselves were understood to be commandments, that they were construed in accordance with the voice of God, who tells men: *Thou shalt not.* Such commandments obviously could not be binding without a higher, religious sanction.[170]

It was this concept of law as imperative that the American revolutionaries inherited, and that led them to believe that the basic principles of the United States had to be grounded on the laws of nature and nature's God. We will see in Chapter 6 how Arendt tried to critically dismantle this inherited concept of law.

[169] OR, 189–190. [170] OR, 189.

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Principle

What is a principle? Arendt argued that political authority, in the original sense of the word, was for the Romans derived from religious fidelity to the principles that had governed the foundation of Rome and had been handed down through tradition: "The genius of Roman politics – not only according to Virgil but, generally, according to Roman self-interpretation – lay in the very principles which attend the legendary foundation of the city."[171] But this reference to "principles" is ambiguous since the word has several senses. To understand these different senses we have to briefly trace the lineage of the concept of principle. What did the word "principle" originally mean? How has that original meaning changed over time? How have modern thinkers conceived of principles? How might modern concepts distort our understanding of principles?

The Latin *principium* translates the Greek verb *archein* (ἄρχειν): to begin, to come first, to lead. *Archein* is what the best warriors did in Homer – they did not command others but initiated action and led the way, as when Odysseus led other warriors to and from the camp of Achilles.[172] An *archon* (ἄρχων) in this sense was first among equals, the leader of peers rather than the ruler of subordinates.[173] Arendt argued it was only after Homer, in Herodotus and Pindar, that *archein* came to mean primarily to rule or dominate, and an *archon* became primarily not a leader but a ruler: "Thus the role of the beginner and leader, who was a *primus inter pares* (in the case of Homer, a king among kings), changed into that of a ruler."[174]

Aristotle in his metaphysics brought together these two senses of *archein* (to begin and to rule). The principle or *arche* of an action is both what begins the action and what governs its performance. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the word "*arche*" has several senses. In the most general sense, the *arche* of an action is the man who performs it; more precisely, it is our power to decide what to do and how to do it. But ultimately the *arche* of an action is the end towards which the act is directed and for whose sake it

[171] OR, 210.
[172] See Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 89 (Book IX, Line 657). Homer, *Homeri Opera: Iliadis I–XII*, ed. David B. Monro and Thomas W. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 197.
[173] Here I am indebted to Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). See especially chapter 6.
[174] HC, 189. See also "Ruling and Being Ruled" in TWB, 56–68.

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is done.[175] Aristotle gave several examples of this kind of principle: the principle that initiates and governs production is the product to be made; the principle of exercise is health; the principle of virtuous action is simply virtue, since virtue is an end in itself.[176] In each case, the principle of action is an end that arouses our desire (*orexis*) and that we perceive with our reason (*logos*).[177] This concept of action could be called teleocratic, in that action is always initiated and governed (*kratein*) by an already existing end (*telos*).

But in Aristotle the word *arche* is ambiguous. On the one hand, the *arche* of a being is its innermost core. Principles inhere in things themselves, apart from the mind that perceives them. On the other hand, in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle also uses the word to name the axioms laid down by the mind itself – the basic propositions from which demonstrations begin and from which later conclusions are deduced.[178]

In modern thought, this second sense of "principle" became the primary sense of the term. This shift is explicit in Descartes, who rejected the Aristotelean concept of *telos* in his *Principles of Philosophy.* While natural things may have an inherent *telos*, Descartes wrote, we should not be so arrogant as to suppose that we can know them with certainty. The search for final causes should be banished from philosophy.

> When dealing with natural things we will, then, never derive any explanations from the purposes which God or nature may have had in view when creating them and we shall entirely banish from our philosophy the search for final causes.[179]

The word "principle" for Descartes does not mean "final cause" but rather "basic proposition". Instead of looking for the natural ends that initiate and govern the motion of things, we should look for truths that are absolutely indubitable, fundamental propositions on which all knowledge

[175] In general, each man is the principle of his action: ἄνθρωπος εἶναι ἀρχὴ τῶν πράξεων. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 138–139) (1112b32). But, more precisely, every practical principle has two sides. The principle of action (in the sense of its source of motion or "efficient cause") is *prohairesis*, the faculty of choice: πράξεως μὲν οὖν ἀρχὴ προαίρεσις. (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 329) (1139a32). The principle of action (in the sense of its *telos* or "final cause") is the end towards which it is directed: αἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀρχαὶ τῶν πρακτῶν τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα τὰ πρακτά (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 338–339) (1140b18).

[176] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 337 (1040b6).

[177] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 329 (1039a34).

[178] Aristotle laid out his concept of *arche* at the start of Book Five. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 209–211 (1012b34–1013a24).

[179] René Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 169.

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may be based. Principles for Descartes are not the essential grounds of things, but are self-evident truths.

This modern concept of principle was brought into political philosophy by Locke, who wanted political theorists to think like mathematicians. In Locke's view, the task of the political philosopher is to find the fundamental principles of government and to deduce from them the natural rights and duties of citizens.

> I doubt not but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out, to any one that will apply himself with the same indifferency and attention to the one as he does to the other of these sciences.[180]

Locke gave several examples of such self-evident propositions:

> "Where there is no property there is not injustice," is a proposition as certain as any demonstration in Euclid: for the idea of property being a right to anything, and the idea to which the name "injustice" is given being the invasion or violation of that right, it is evident that these ideas, being thus established, and these names annexed to them, I can as certainly know this proposition to be true, as that a triangle has three angles equal to two right ones. Again: "No government allows absolute liberty." The idea of government being the establishment of society upon certain rules or laws which require conformity to them; and the idea of absolute liberty being for any one to do whatever he pleases; I am as capable of being certain of the truth of this proposition as of any in the mathematics.[181]

This approach to political philosophy was deeply indebted to Plato. In Arendt's view, Plato "discovered that truth, namely, the truths we call self-evident, compels the mind, and that this coercion, though it needs not violence to be effective, is stronger than persuasion and argument."[182] Locke renewed the Platonic attempt to limit or eliminate politics by finding absolute measures from which codes of conduct could be derived. And he conceived these measures as essentially the same as the axioms of mathematics. Principles for Locke are not the grounds of action; they are self-evident truths.

The original sense of the word "principle" did not wholly disappear. It was retained and refined most notably by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Montesquieu asked two questions: What are the different forms of

[180] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Oxford University Press, 1904), 208.
[181] Locke, *Human Understanding*, 208. [182] BPF, 107.

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government? What makes governments act as they do? Montesquieu's answers to the first question are traditional: a republic is a lawful government ruled by the people; a monarchy is a lawful government ruled by a king; and a tyranny is a lawless government under the will of one man. But in Arendt's view, Montesquieu's second question is "entirely original," and his answer is original as well: in each form of government the actions of both rulers and ruled are inspired and guided by a basic principle, a "spirit of the laws," that gives sense and force to specific codes of conduct. The principle of action in a republic is virtue; the principle of action in a monarchy is honor; and the principle of action in a tyranny is fear.[183] Arendt stressed that these principles of government are not goals of action; they do not direct action as the idea of the final product directs the process of production. Nor are these principles the same as motives; it is the principles themselves that determine the typical motives of public action: the principle of virtue underlies the "love of equality" that motivates action in a republic, just as the principle of honor underlies the "passion for distinction" that motivates action in a monarchy.[184] These principles of government are the underlying grounds on which goals and motives are based, "the very criteria according to which all public life is led and judged."[185]

These various concepts of principle were inherited by the American revolutionaries. When Jefferson spoke of "principles" of government he was using a concept of principle derived primarily from Locke; the principles set down in the Declaration are supposed to be self-evident truths from which the right to revolution can be deduced. But this concept of principle grasps only part of the Declaration. In Chapter 6 we will see how Arendt tried to critically dismantle the concept of principle foregrounded in the Declaration of Independence, and to bring to light a deeper understanding of principle implicit in the Declaration as an act of revolution.

One task of political theory, for Arendt, is to trace the genealogy of basic concepts. Through her genealogies she tried to demonstrate the provenance of inherited concepts by bringing to light the basic experiences from

[183] EU, 329.
[184] EU, 336. The classic example of an aristocracy governed by the principle of honor, for Arendt, was the society of the Homeric heroes. Twice she cites the principle that governs the actions of all the warriors: αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων – "Always to be best, and to stand out above others". Homer, *The Iliad*, 158 and 255. Homer, *Iliadis*, 126 and 247. See HC, 41 and BPF, 152.
[185] EU, 332.

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which they were derived. But this demonstration is only a first step – its point is to undermine trust in these concepts and to deprive them of their seeming self-evidence. The next step is to rethink them on the basis of the way political phenomena actually appear in experience – to mark the limits of inherited concepts, to sense what eludes their grasp, and to revise and refine them in order to grasp and illuminate what they have distorted or obscured.

How then did Arendt rethink these basic concepts of political theory?

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