Preface

Near the end of her life, Hannah Arendt praised Socrates as a philosopher who thought at the highest level and yet spoke in a way that was open to all. He was

> A thinker who was not a professional . . . a man who counted himself neither among the many nor among the few . . . who had no aspiration to be a ruler of men, no claim even to be particularly well fitted by his superior wisdom to act in an advisory capacity to those in power, but not a man who submitted meekly to being ruled either; in brief, a thinker who always remained a man among men, who did not shun the marketplace, who was a citizen among citizens . . .[1]

Socrates taught no doctrine, charged no fee, established no school of thought, she said, because his role as a philosopher in politics was not to teach esoteric truths, but to introduce serious thinking into the public sphere through dialogues open to citizens and strangers alike. "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."[2]

In her praise of Socrates we glimpse an ideal Arendt set for herself. She aimed to think at the highest level, but she wanted to be more than a professional thinker, a bureaucrat of the intellect, an expert who spoke only to other experts in the esoteric language of a tiny elite. She wanted her thinking to shed light on human existence in a way that was open to all. Her books were written for other political thinkers, of course, but also for the widest possible audience.

In this book I have tried to follow her example. My aim has been to think at her level, and yet to write as simply and clearly as possible. One task of the book is to lay out a reading of Arendt that will offer new

[1] *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1: *Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 167.
[2] *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 15.

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insights to scholars and theorists. But another task is simply to make her work accessible to citizens and strangers alike. Whether I have succeeded is not for me to say. But my hope is the book will speak to several audiences at once: experts on Arendt; political thinkers in general; and anyone who cares about politics and the question of the political.

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