CHAPTER 1

On Arendt

Events

In the spring of 1933 Arendt was arrested and jailed by the Nazis, who suspected her of actively opposing National Socialism. Their suspicion was in fact correct: she had offered her apartment as a safe house for dissidents fleeing Germany, and she was secretly working to document and publicize Nazi anti-Semitism.[1]

For most of her life Arendt had been profoundly apolitical – by her own account it was hard to convey how deeply she did not care about politics. "I was interested neither in history nor in politics when I was young," she wrote later.[2] "I found the so-called Jewish question boring."[3] Later in life she saw her early political apathy as in part a matter of personal temperament – she freely admitted that she was not a doer but a thinker.[4] But she also saw her early political apathy as part of a social milieu that was largely apolitical. Her family was culturally assimilated but politically passive. The Jewish community to which she belonged could be called political "only with great reservations."[5] The German middle classes were governed by an ethos that valued private life over public life, and that

[1] My account of Arendt's life is indebted to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*.

[2] *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 466. Her words are from a 1964 letter to Gershom Scholem.

[3] Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 197. Her words are from a 1952 letter to Jaspers.

[4] At a conference on her work she said, "Now I will admit one thing. I will admit that I am, of course, primarily interested in understanding. This is absolutely true. And I will admit that there are other people who are primarily interested in doing something. I am not. I can very well live without doing anything. But I cannot live without trying at least to understand whatever happens . . . I have acted in my life, a few times, because I couldn't help it. But that is not where my primary impulse is": *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 303–304.

[5] EU, 17.

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"prevented the growth of a citizenry that felt individually and personally responsible for the rule of the country."[6] In Germany as a whole there was also a widespread cynicism toward politics, which both the left and right regarded as ultimately a struggle for power devoid of any dignity of its own. And this cynicism was supported by political philosophies that "always assumed the identity of politics, economics and society" – philosophies that lacked a pure concept of the political.[7]

Instead of politics she was interested in poetry, theology, and philosophy. At twelve she started learning poems by heart. At fourteen she began to read Jaspers, Kant, and Kierkegaard. At fifteen she led a boycott of a teacher's classes, and was glad to be expelled from school and allowed to prepare for the university entrance exams on her own. Her mother arranged for her to audit courses at the University of Berlin, where she studied Classics and attended lectures by the existentialist theologian Romano Guardini. It was at Berlin that she first heard of a young philosopher who was already famous despite having published almost nothing, and whose reputation alone was enough to draw students from around Germany to the University of Marburg. His name was Martin Heidegger.

Fifty years later Arendt described what drew her to Heidegger's thought. He saw philosophy not as an academic field but as an engagement with basic questions of human existence. His thinking had broken through old debates and reached a new level of understanding. And this breakthrough let him open a real dialogue with the greatest works of the philosophical tradition. Rather than reduce the works to doctrines, he would question them and let them speak.

> There was something strange about this early fame . . . There was nothing tangible on which this fame could be based. There was nothing written, except for notes taken on his lectures, which were passed around among students. These lectures dealt with texts that were generally familiar; they contained no doctrine that could be reproduced or transmitted. There was hardly anything more than a name, but the name travelled through Germany like the rumor of a secret king . . . The rumor said quite simply: Thinking has come alive again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are made to speak, and it turns out that they produce things altogether different than it had been presumed they said. There is a teacher; one can perhaps learn thinking.[8]

[6] OT, 314. [7] OT, 336.
[8] Hannah Arendt, "For Martin Heidegger's Eightieth Birthday," in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 207–209.

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In 1924 she enrolled in the University of Marburg and studied closely with Heidegger in the years when he was writing *Being and Time*. What she learned from him, she wrote later, was not doctrines or dogmas but questions and ways of thought.

> He probes the depths, not to discover, let alone bring to light, an ultimate, secure foundation in a dimension of depth that could be said to have been previously undiscovered. Rather, he remains in the depths in order to lay down paths and to set up "pathmarks."[9]

During her time in Marburg she fell in love with Heidegger and they had a secret affair. After the end of their affair, Arendt moved to Freiburg to study with Husserl, and then to Heidelberg to study with Jaspers, under whose aegis she wrote a dissertation on the concept of love in Saint Augustine. Unable to work at a university because of sexism and anti-Semitism, she moved to Berlin in 1929 and married a leftist Jewish philosopher named Günther Stern. She was twenty-three and had devoted her life to the life of the mind.

But in the early 1930s Arendt could not stay above politics. With the collapse of the German economy, the electoral success of the Nazis, and the spreading plague of anti-Semitism, the Jewish question no longer seemed boring. She began work on a biography of an eighteenth-century Jewish intellectual named Rahel Varnhagen, a book that was in part an attempt to understand her own situation. "I wrote it with the idea, 'I want to understand.' I wasn't discussing my personal problems as a Jew. But now, belonging to Judaism had become my own problem, and my own problem was political. Purely political!"[10] Still, even as she turned her attention to politics, she did so as a thinker rather than an activist.

The move from thought to action came in 1933: Hitler came to power in January; her husband fled Berlin for Paris in March, several days after the burning of the Reichstag and the Nazi crackdown on leftists; Heidegger was elected Rector of Freiburg University in April and joined the Nazi Party in May; Jaspers was singled out for his opposition to the Nazis and was later banned from teaching. Arendt stayed in Berlin and did what she could to fight the new regime. She was "delighted" when Kurt Blumenfeld asked her to illegally collect evidence of anti-Semitism in order to publicize the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany, and she worked on Blumenfeld's project until she was arrested by the Nazis and jailed in the police Presidium in Berlin. After eight days of interrogation she was released for

[9] Arendt, in Neske and Kettering, *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, 210. [10] EU, 12.

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lack of evidence, and a few days later she left Germany illegally, crossing the Czech border at night and settling first in Prague, then in Geneva, and finally in Paris. She was stateless and without citizenship for the next eighteen years.

The year 1933 was for her a time of shattering disillusion. The shock was not that the Nazis took power legally and with widespread support: "We didn't need Hitler's assumption of power to know that the Nazis were our enemies. That had been completely evident for at least four years to everyone who wasn't an idiot."[11] The shock was that her friends failed to see clearly the nature of the Nazi regime or to offer any real resistance. "The problem, the personal problem, was not what our enemies did but what our friends did."[12] In addition to being disillusioned with her intellectual friends – above all with Heidegger – she was also disillusioned with intellectual life itself: it was precisely their disengagement from political realities, their sovereign disdain for the ephemera of public life, she thought, that kept her friends from seeing the emergence of totalitarianism for what it was.

> I lived in an intellectual milieu, but I also knew other people. And among intellectuals accommodation [to the Nazi regime] was the rule, so to speak. But not among the others. And I never forgot that. I left Germany dominated by the idea – of course somewhat exaggerated: Never again! I will never again get involved in any kind of intellectual business.[13]

Arendt turned from theory to practice. "I wanted to go into practical work, exclusively and only Jewish work. With this in mind I then looked for work in France."[14]

In Paris she spent five years working for a Zionist group that helped Jewish teenagers emigrate to Palestine. At first she lived with her husband, but their marriage had ended, and they were divorced in 1936. She became friends with a number of thinkers, including Walter Benjamin, Raymond Aron, Alexander Koyré, and Heinrich Blücher. In January 1940, Arendt and Blücher were married, and four months later they were rounded up with the other refugees in Paris and shipped to concentration camps in the south of France. She spent several weeks in a camp at Gurs near the Pyrenees, while her husband was sent to a separate camp. After the defeat of France, Arendt was able to get liberation papers and leave the camp, and by chance she found Blücher in the town of Montauban. In Marseille they met Walter Benjamin, who entrusted Arendt with a suitcase full of his

[11] EU, 10 [translation modified]. [12] EU, 10–11. [13] EU, 11. [14] EU, 12.

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manuscripts. That fall she and her husband were able to get American emergency visas, and in 1941 they took a train to Lisbon and then sailed to America. Later she learned that Benjamin had killed himself to escape capture by the Nazis. She also learned that most of the prisoners who stayed behind at Gurs had been shipped to Auschwitz.

American political culture was unlike any Arendt had known. In a letter to Jaspers she wrote, "There really is such a thing as freedom here and a strong feeling among many people that one cannot live without freedom. The republic is not a vapid illusion ... Then, too, people here feel themselves responsible for public life to an extent I have never seen in any European country."[15] Ten years after her arrival she became an American citizen, and she remained an American for the rest of her life.

In America Arendt returned warily to the life of the mind. At first she found work as a columnist for a German-language newspaper, then as an editor at Schocken Books. In New York she became part of a circle of intellectuals that included W. H. Auden, Randall Jarrell, Mary McCarthy, and Hans Morgenthau. And after the war she reestablished friendships with Jaspers and Heidegger.

Experiences

Arendt rarely spoke of her experience of action, but her few words are revealing. Asked in 1964 if there was a definite event that marked her turn to politics, she said:

> I would say February 27, 1933, the burning of the Reichstag, and the illegal arrests that followed during the same night. The so-called protective custody. As you know, people were taken to Gestapo cellars or to concentration camps. What happened then was monstrous, but it has now been overshadowed by things that happened later. This was an immediate shock for me, and from that moment on I felt responsible. That is, I was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander. I tried to help in many ways.[16]

In these words we recognize something essential to the experience of political action. There comes a time when, in the face of public events, we can no longer stand by and do nothing. A situation calls for action, and we ourselves feel called upon to act. If we hear this call and make action our vocation, our lives are transformed. Our center of gravity shifts from

[15] Arendt, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926–1969*, 30. [16] EU, 4–5.

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private to public life. We have to renounce solitude in order to work with others, and to exchange the inwardness of thought for an active engagement in the world. In the urgency of the moment we must act without fully knowing what we are doing; intellectual work at such times seems at best an idle luxury, at worst an excuse for doing nothing. One senses something of this experience in Arendt's disillusionment with intellectual life in 1933. When a political situation demands action, the demands of thought seem trivial and weak.

But Arendt later returned to the life of the mind. After the war, her need to act gave way to a need to think, to understand what had happened, and to shed light on dark times. In her first book, she summarized the task of understanding as follows:

> Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us – neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be.[17]

In these words, we recognize something essential to the experience of thought. In practical life we tend to rely on common sense, and for practical purposes common sense is usually enough. But it sometimes happens that events reveal how far reality exceeds our powers of comprehension: either we find ourselves faced with something new and unfamiliar, or else within what is familiar we sense a side of things we can neither see nor grasp. We feel the limits of common sense – not that common forms of thought are useless, but that they fail to get at the essential and to illuminate what really matters. We find ourselves exposed to something real, whose obscurity is veiled by the false clarity of common sense, and whose impact is blunted by the mass of received ideas. It is this experience that provokes us to stop what we are doing, to suspend our trust in familiar concepts, to stray from the commonplaces of shared understanding and the beaten paths of old ways of thought, to pose new questions, to attend to what resists or eludes understanding, and to refine inherited forms of thought in order to grasp and bring to light what had struck us as obscure and unthinkable. The experience of the real itself calls us to the task of thinking.

[17] OT, viii.

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Arendt lived both the active life and the life of the mind. There is a hint of autobiography in her remark that the typical thinker of her era had "been forced to turn full circle not once but twice, first when he escaped from thought into action, and then again when action, or rather having acted, forced him back into thought."[18] Part of the allure of her thought is that she recognized the claims of both thought and action. Her commitment to understanding totalitarianism after 1945 was as strong as her earlier commitment to resisting it. One senses that she brought to the task of thinking the same passion that she once brought to political action. And one senses, too, in her work a deep and abiding outrage – an outrage that did not cloud her vision but that fueled a cold and unflinching lucidity.

While she acknowledged the claims of both action and thought, she sensed an essential tension between them.

The active life, in her view, is not conducive to the life of the mind. To devote oneself to action is to renounce two things that make possible serious thought: solitude and free time. Action requires work with others: "Action . . . is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act."[19] And the urgency of the active life precludes the leisure or *schole* required for sustained reflection: "The very urgency, the a-scholia, of human affairs demands provisional judgments, the reliance on custom and habit, that is, on prejudices."[20] Thinking appears pointless in light of the concern to get things done that governs the active life. From the perspective of the active life, to devote oneself to thinking is to devote oneself to doing nothing.

The life of the mind is similarly inimical to the life of action. Thinking requires inaction: "It interrupts any doing, any ordinary activities, no matter what they happen to be. All thinking demands a stop-and-think."[21] To think we have to suspend any concern for usefulness and for results, because thought is useless and without end: "Thinking is out of order because the quest for meaning produces no end result that will survive the activity, that will make sense after the activity has come to its end."[22] Thinking also requires solitude – withdrawal not just from the company of others but from the common sense that we share with them: "For while, for whatever reason, a man indulges in sheer thinking, and no matter on what subject, he lives completely in the singular, that is, in complete

[18] BPF, 9. [19] HC, 188. [20] LMT, 71. [21] LMT, 78. [22] LMT, 123.

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solitude, as though not men but Man inhabited the earth."[23] Thinking requires us to turn away from particular realities toward what was traditionally called their nature or essence: "For thinking . . . withdrawal from the world of appearances is the only essential precondition."[24] For those who devote themselves to the search for truth, action seems to have value only insofar as it makes the life of the mind possible. In light of the concern for truth that governs the life of the mind, the active life seems like mindless busyness.

Arendt did not think action and thought were antithetical. While thinking does not effect anything, she thought, the illuminating power of thought makes effective action possible. And while practical experience does not necessarily lead to insight, insight is only possible when thought adheres to reality as revealed in experience: "All thought arises out of experience, but no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagination and thinking."[25]

But she saw a tension between the claims of thought and action. Thinking and acting require different stances toward the world, different kinds of attention, a different sense of what matters, and ultimately different ways of seeing. Things appear differently to us depending on whether we approach them from the perspective of thinking or doing. This difference of perspective helps to explain the limitations of both thinkers and doers – both the theoretical naïveté of "men of action" and the notorious myopia of philosophers in the realm of human affairs. It makes sense of the disdain with which philosophers have traditionally regarded the worldly life and with which "men of action" have regarded philosophy: "Seen from the perspective of thinking, life in its sheer thereness is meaningless; seen from the perspective of the immediacy of life and the world given to the senses, thinking is . . . a living death."[26]

One of Arendt's strengths as a thinker was her ability to "invert perspectives" – to see philosophy from the viewpoint of the active life, and to see politics with the eyes of a thinker. What was decisive for her was not the experience of thought itself, nor the experience of action, but the experience of moving from one to the other and back again. These experiences – of thought, action, and the movement between them – underlie all her work.

[23] LMT, 47. [24] LMT, 78. [25] LMT, 87. [26] LMT, 87.

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Traditions

When Arendt spoke of "tradition," the word had several senses. In the most common sense, it simply meant inherited ways of doing and thinking. Tradition in this sense is a basic trait of human existence. She also used the word as a proper name for "the" tradition ("the Western Tradition") – the forms of thought and practice that Europe inherited from antiquity. In this sense "tradition" named the canon of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts in which she had been educated and in whose terms she had learned to think.[27] But Arendt often used the word in the Roman sense of *traditio* – a relation to history that interprets the present in terms of concepts and examples handed down from the past. For the Romans, she thought, the words and the deeds of the ancestors had unquestionable authority, and it was only natural and right to see the past and the present in light of this inheritance: "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."[28] Tradition in this sense named a stance toward the past – not just inherited forms of thinking and doing, but the conservation of this inheritance as an authoritative guide to thought and action.

Despite her traditional education, Arendt emphasized the limitations of traditional political theory. In her view, many inherited concepts failed to fully grasp the nature of political phenomena. Theories of civil disobedience failed "to come to terms with and to understand the true character of the phenomenon."[29] The realities of revolution were obscured rather than illuminated by the inherited concepts of political theory, and "the gap between theory and reality is perhaps best illustrated by the phenomenon of revolution" itself.[30] And totalitarianism eluded the terms of traditional political theory: "Not only are all our political concepts and definitions insufficient for an understanding of totalitarian phenomena, but also all our categories of thought and standards for judgment seem to explode in our hands the instant we try to apply them here."[31]

Arendt explained these limitations in two ways.

First, she argued that traditional concepts were based on premodern political institutions and experiences, and so were simply not suited to the

[27] Arendt stressed that this tradition is riven with internal differences. In her book *On Violence* she suggests that "the Western Tradition" is a unity in name only, and that in fact this name covers a plurality of heterogeneous traditions. Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace: 1969), 40.
[28] BPF, 124. [29] *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 55. [30] OV, 47.
[31] EU, 302.

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new political phenomena that emerged in the modern age. The realities of modern politics exceed the concepts and models handed down from other times. We are living through a crisis in the Western tradition, she thought, not because modern thinkers have questioned the tradition, but because events have shown it is no longer possible to rely uncritically on inherited forms of thought. The decisive event in this respect is the emergence of totalitarianism:

> Totalitarian domination as an established fact, which in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought, and whose "crimes" cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization, has broken the continuity of Occidental history. The break in our tradition is now an accomplished fact. It is neither the result of anyone's deliberate choice nor subject to further decision.[32]

Modern thinkers did not create this crisis, she argued, but only responded to it. They called into question the authority of traditional theories not because they were nihilists or relativists, but because "they perceived their world as one invaded by new problems and perplexities which our tradition of thought was unable to cope with."[33] Their questions were a response to the failures of traditional ways of thought: "Elementary and direct questions [such] as What is authority? What is freedom? can arise only if no answers, handed down by tradition, are available and valid any longer."[34]

Second, Arendt argued that traditional political philosophy has always had certain limitations, and that these limitations have to be understood in light of the inherent tension between politics and philosophy. Political philosophy has approached politics from the perspective of philosophers, and philosophers have rightly found the demands of political life inimical to the conditions of philosophical contemplation. So the stance of philosophers towards politics has generally ranged from active indifference to outright hostility. The traditional task of political philosophy has been to discover truths that transcend the political sphere, and to use those truths as ideal standards by which actual communities can be measured and according to which they can be remade. "Political philosophy necessarily implies the attitude of the philosopher towards politics; its tradition began with the philosopher's turning away from politics and then returning in order to impose his standards on human affairs."[35]

[32] BPF, 26. [33] BPF, 27. [34] BPF, 15. [35] BPF, 17–18.

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The decisive point for Arendt is that philosophers typically have not understood politics from the inside as active participants, but have contemplated politics from the outside as spectators and judges. They have not worked out their political theories on the basis of experiences proper to the sphere of politics, but have viewed politics in light of nonpolitical concerns, and have interpreted political phenomena in terms taken from nonpolitical spheres of life. Philosophers have conceived of politics in terms abstracted from the sphere of the family, the sphere of the household, the sphere of the workshop, and in architectural terms, in military terms, in nautical terms, and in terms of psychology, biology, economics, morality, and religion. This process of abstraction – in which words are borrowed from nonpolitical spheres and applied to political matters – has prevented philosophers from rigorously and precisely distinguishing the political realm from other spheres of life. The attempt to conceive of political phenomena in nonpolitical terms has led philosophers to misconceive the basic realities of political life.

If traditional forms of thought limit our thinking, Arendt argued, we cannot get free of them simply by ignoring the tradition. It is not possible to suspend all preconceptions and invent new concepts from scratch. Thinking is always guided in advance by inherited preconceptions, even when we are unaware of them: "The strength of this tradition, its hold on Western man's thought, has never depended on his consciousness of it."[36] We may transcend the limits of traditional thought only by first seeing how deeply we are indebted to tradition.

The crisis in the Western tradition is not simply negative for Arendt. There is the danger of disinheritance – as inherited forms of thought lose their authority, thinkers may lose sight of the traditions whose deepest assumptions continue to guide or misguide their thinking. But the crisis also has a positive side.

> With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past. It could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things that no one as yet has had ears to hear.[37]

The break in tradition offers "the great chance to look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition, with a directness which has disappeared

[36] BPF, 25. [37] BPF, 94.

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from Occidental reading and hearing ever since Roman civilization submitted to the authority of Greek thought."[38]

This concept of tradition framed her view of her own situation. Arendt was indebted to tradition for the concepts in which she thought, but these concepts seemed inadequate to the events through which she had lived. This situation oriented the aims of her thought. Thought must be aware that it works with concepts that it has inherited rather than produced, that both guide and limit its powers of comprehension, and which it cannot simply renounce or discard without losing its powers: "the human mind stands in need of concepts if it is to function at all."[39] Thinking must constantly turn towards what exceeds the grasp of inherited concepts and, through a reflection on experience and the study of actual events, must refine these concepts in order to bring to light what has been obscure or invisible within the tradition. Hence the specific virtues of Arendt's thought: her vast knowledge of political theory; her distrust of theorizing; her attentiveness towards actual events; the tentative character of her thought; and above all the extreme care with which she handles basic concepts. So too the task she set herself as a political thinker: to free political theory from the distortions inherited from the philosophical tradition: "I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy."[40]

Works

Arendt devoted her first published book to "the questions with which my generation had been forced to live for the better part of its adult life: What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened?"[41] As she studied Nazism and Bolshevism, she came to think they were without precedent in human history: "Totalitarianism differs essentially from other forms of political oppression known to us such as despotism, tyranny, and dictatorship."[42] To grasp what had happened, it was necessary to bring together historical research and theoretical refinement – to trace the origins of totalitarianism out of familiar phenomena (racism, imperialism, etc.), and to distinguish in totalitarian regimes what was essentially new. The aim of her book was not to trace the history of totalitarianism, but to grasp what it is in essence.

But what is essential to totalitarian movements?

[38] BPF, 27–28. [39] *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1962), 220. [40] EU, 2.
[41] OT, xxiv. [42] OT, 465.

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The Origins of Totalitarianism approached this question in three ways. One approach focused on political ideology – the origins of Nazi racism and anti-Semitism. But the limits of this focus became evident as her study expanded to include Bolshevism, whose political ideology centered not on race but on class. A second approach focused on the objective traits shared by both Nazi and Bolshevik regimes: an ideology that precludes open debate; a single party in control of an all-powerful bureaucracy; techniques of terror that eliminate plurality and opposition; and the "politicization" of all spheres of life. But the limits of this focus were also evident: the objective traits of totalitarian regimes are unintelligible if they are abstracted from the political culture in which they seem to make sense. A third approach looked past the objective traits of totalitarian regimes and focused on their underlying political culture. A political culture is not just a matter of explicit theories or doctrines. Nor is it the practical know-how that guides collective behavior. It is the mostly unthought and inarticulate background understanding that makes political life meaningful. It includes an understanding of the political; a sense of what unites members of a community; a view of what distinguishes them from others; a stance toward political conflict; a story of what has made the community what it is; an ideal the community seeks to realize; the ethos necessary to realize that ideal; and a basic concept of the realities of political life. What is essential to totalitarianism, on this level, is a culture that sees politics as ultimately a struggle for dominance; that divides humanity into a movement destined to lead the world and a surrounding mass of implacable enemies, and that blames these enemies for current failures and humiliations; that explains all of history in terms of this conflict; that locates political differences in deep natural or social sources beyond individual control and impervious to reasoned resolution; that aspires to a uniform community under the rule of one leader; that understands government, power, and law in terms of command and obedience; and that therefore demands uncritical loyalty, submission, and self-sacrifice. This culture is distinct from the political doctrines proper to various totalitarian movements, whether of the left (Bolshevism) or the right (Nazism). But it is integral to the practices and institutions essential to totalitarianism: the forms of organization, structures of power, techniques of terror, and styles of thought and discourse.

For Arendt, "totalitarian politics" is actually an oxymoron. Since totalitarians claim an ideology whose truth is beyond question, they eliminate or monopolize all institutions of public life. And since they aim to remake human society, they subject all aspects of private life to the control of the regime. Their ultimate aim is total domination of both public and private

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spheres. Hence the strange status of "politics" under totalitarian rule: on the one hand everything is "politicized" in the sense that everything is subject to state power; on the other hand, there is no place for politics in the original sense, since public debate and common deliberation are replaced by ideological dogma and bureaucratic administration. Totalitarianism is less a kind of politics than the death of politics.

Once her first book was published in English, Arendt was invited to teach at Princeton, Berkeley, Chicago, and the New School for Social Research. But she "never really wanted to be a professor," and always managed to reserve half of each year to travel to Europe and to work full time on her books.[43]

The Origins left open a question. Arendt thought Nazi ideology was crude and racist pseudoscience. But Bolshevism was inspired by the work of one of the greatest political philosophers of the Western tradition, Karl Marx. Marx was guided by Enlightenment ideals of liberation, brotherhood, equality, and reason. How could his work become a source of a totalitarian ideology? Was Bolshevism merely a perversion of Marx? Or was there something in Marxism that lent itself to totalitarian thought?

In 1951 Arendt began work on "The Totalitarian Elements in Marxism," a project she never finished. She carefully distinguished Marx's thought from Marxist doctrine and Bolshevik ideology: "Marx cannot stand accused of having brought forth the specifically totalitarian aspects of Bolshevik domination."[44] But she argued that elements of Marxism could be used to support a totalitarian ideology. In particular she criticized two basic concepts. On the one hand, she was critical of the Marxist concept of theory, which Marx conceived on the model of natural science. This scientistic conception of theory supported the notion that Marx had discovered the laws of history, and that Marxist doctrine was not a matter of opinion but of knowledge. This concept of theory could be used to support totalitarian ideologies that claimed to transcend mere opinion, and so dispensed with the public deliberation essential to politics. On the other hand, Arendt was critical of the Marxist concept of political action, which Marx conceived on the model of production, as a means to an end discovered in advance by political theory. This instrumental concept of action could be used by totalitarian regimes to justify any means to achieve the right ends. In a

[43] Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 296.

[44] Hannah Arendt, "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought," in *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953–75*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 5.

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1953 essay she argued that "Marxism could be developed into a totalitarian ideology because of its perversion, or misunderstanding, of political action as the making of history."[45] The totalitarian elements in Marxism lay not on the surface level of theses, but in its underlying stratum of basic concepts or misconceptions. These misconceptions left Marxism open to be appropriated by regimes that did away with politics and replaced open debate and rule of law with ideology and terror.

This conclusion raised more questions. Marx did not invent his language; he articulated his concepts in traditional terms. To ask about the totalitarian elements of Marxism raised questions about that tradition: Was there an anti-political bias in some of the basic terms of traditional political theory, a bias that informed elements of Marx's thinking and that allowed Marxism to support a totalitarian ideology? To what extent were the anti-political elements of Marx's thought part of the tradition?

In a series of lectures on "Karl Marx and the Great Tradition" (1953), Arendt argued that elements of Marx's work could already be found at the very start of the tradition, in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Both Plato and Aristotle considered political action merely a means to a higher end: "In Aristotelian terms, politics is a means to an end; it has no end in and by itself."[46] Both conceived of action on the model of production; Aristotle explicitly likened statesmen to craftsmen, and compared the population and territory of the polis to the raw material from which they make their products.[47] Plato and Aristotle both conceived of political theory as a science whose truth transcended the play of opinions in the political sphere. Plato claimed to have discovered the idea of the polis, an ideal form against which actual polities could be measured and according to which they could be remade. Aristotle claimed to have discovered the origin and end of political life: politics originates in the activities necessary for survival and prosperity, and has its end in making possible the highest human happiness, the life of contemplation:

> Politics, in other words, is derivative in a twofold sense: it has its origin in the pre-political data of biological life, and it has its end in the post-political, highest possibility of human destiny . . . Politics is supposed to watch and manage the livelihood and the base necessities of labor on the one hand, and to take its orders from the apolitical *theoria* of philosophy on the other.[48]

[45] EU, 396. [46] PP, 82.
[47] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 553 (1326a1–5).
[48] PP, 83–84.

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Arendt began to think both Plato and Aristotle had failed to grasp the meaning of politics. Their theories had distorted the nature of political life, and their legacy had dominated political philosophy up to Marx. Perhaps philosophers had never fully understood the essence of politics. To Karl Jaspers she wrote, "Western philosophy has never had a pure concept of the political [*einen reinen Begriff des Politischen*]."[49]

The question of totalitarianism led her to the question of the political. In 1955, she began *Introduction into Politics* (*Einfürung in die Politik*), another book she never finished.[50] Arendt argued that politics was first seen as such in the classical Greek polis, but that the original Greek understanding of politics had been distorted by ancient philosophers and buried by modern prejudices about the political. Her book tried to clarify the meaning of politics and to work out a pure concept of the political by retrieving the understanding of politics implicit in the non-philosophical writings of the Greeks. The book was never completed, but the question of the political remained a central focus of her work.

At the same time, her reading of the classics led her to question the relations between politics and philosophy. Arendt noted that politics and philosophy have traditionally been seen as ways of life – the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* – and that philosophers have seen these ways of life as opposed. This opposition was articulated by Plato in the *Gorgias*:

> The subject we are discussing is one about which even a man of small intelligence should be seriously concerned; it is nothing less than how a person should live. Is he to adopt the life to which you invite me, doing what you call manly activities, speaking in the Assembly and practicing oratory and engaging in politics on the principles at present in fashion among you politicians? Or should he lead this life – that of a philosopher? And how does the latter life differ from the former?[51]

In a later work, she cited a passage from Hugh of St. Victor that lays out the terms of the opposition:

> There are two lives, the active and the contemplative. The active is laborious, the contemplative is sheer quietness. The active life goes on in public,

[49] Arendt, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926–1969,* 166. The original German is quoted by Ernst Vollrath in "Hannah Arendt: A German-American Jewess Views the United States–and Looks Back to Germany," *in Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought after World War II*, ed. Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elizabeth Glaser-Schmidt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47.

[50] The German version of this text was published in 1993 under the title *Was ist Politik?* Arendt, *Was ist Politik?* , ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1993).

[51] Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton and Chris Emlyn-Jones (New York: Penguin, 1960), 95 (500c).

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> the contemplative life in the desert. The active one is devoted to the necessity of one's neighbor, the contemplative one to the vision of God.[52]

Politics belongs to the active life, and so it has been a philosophical cliché that the philosopher has to renounce politics in order to devote himself to the life of the mind. The political realm has been commonly viewed by philosophers as a kind of cave or a madhouse from which thinkers must withdraw in order to reach the realm of truth.

A hostility towards politics runs through the philosophical tradition like a red thread, according to Arendt. Plato dismissed "the littlenesses and nothingnesses of human things."[53] Epicurus said that "We must free ourselves from the prison of everyday affairs and politics."[54] Pascal argued that "if [Plato and Aristotle] wrote on politics, it was as if laying down rules for a lunatic asylum."[55] Nietzsche wrote that to live as a philosopher "one must be skilled in living on mountains – seeing the wretched ephemeral babble of politics and national self-seeking beneath oneself."[56] Arendt thought that Nietzsche had revealed what "most philosophers before him had carefully hidden from the multitude" – the sense that (in Nietzsche's own words) "politics should be arranged in such a way that mediocre minds are sufficient for it and not everyone needs to be aware of it every day."[57] When philosophers have turned their attention to politics, she thought, it has typically been not to reflect on the nature of political phenomena in light of their own experience of politics, but rather to contemplate the political realm from the outside and to lay down the standards that ought to govern human affairs. Drawing on her own experience of thought and action, Arendt came to think this tension between philosophy and politics was not just a matter of temperament. It is based in an intrinsic tension between action and thought:

> There is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being, there is a tension that does not exist in natural philosophy, for example . . . There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers, with very few exceptions.

[52] LMT, 6.
[53] Plato, *Theaetetus,* trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 121 [173e].
[54] Epicurus, *The Essential Epicurus,* trans. Eugene O'Connor (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 83.
[55] EU, 429.
[56] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The AntiChrist*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1990), 124.
[57] EU, 429.

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> Kant is an exception. This enmity is extremely important for the whole problem, because it is not a personal question. It lies in the nature of the subject itself.[58]

Action requires engagement in human affairs, while thought requires withdrawal from the world. Those who devote their lives to politics typically have neither the time nor the inclination to philosophize about the political. And those who devote themselves to philosophy typically have no firsthand experience of political life. Thinking "is always paid for by a withdrawal from the world of human affairs; this is even true, and is, indeed, especially true, when thinking, in its own isolated stillness, reflects on just these affairs."[59]

Introduction into Politics approached politics through the phenomenology Arendt had learned from Heidegger, but it diverged sharply from Heidegger's view of politics. If anyone had "paid for" his thinking "by a withdrawal from the world of human affairs," it was Heidegger. Arendt both extended Heidegger's thinking and turned it against him. She used his way of thought to reach a non-Heideggerian concept of the political.

This tension between politics and philosophy raised questions about political philosophy itself. If philosophers since Plato have renounced politics and stood outside the political realm, how has this outside perspective framed their views of political life? What experiences underlie their political theories? How has their lack of political experience guided or misguided their understanding of politics? In what ways has a philosophical perspective limited or distorted their understanding of action? How has the general notion of the *vita activa* blurred the specific differences between various kinds of activity, such as labor, work, and political action?

Arendt dealt with these questions in her second book, *The Human Condition*, whose original title was *Vita Activa*. Later she summarized her concerns:

> I had been concerned with the problem of Action, the oldest concern of political theory, and what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter, namely, *vita activa*, was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective.[60]

The book argued that philosophers have failed to fully distinguish action from labor and work, and that this failure has obscured the specificity of the political sphere. Its aim was to refine these distinctions in order to

[58] EU, 2. [59] Arendt, "For Martin Heidegger's Eightieth Birthday," 215. [60] LMT, 6.

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clarify the meaning of politics. Arendt both followed and deviated from the way of thought she had learned from Heidegger. In a letter sent to him when *The Human Condition* was published in Germany, she wrote that the book "came directly out of the first Freiburg days and hence owes practically everything to you in every respect."[61] But in public she was discreet about what she owed to his work.

Arendt came to think that the failure to grasp the specificity of politics had led philosophers to misconceive the realities of political life. Over the next fourteen years she wrote a series of essays devoted to essential questions of political theory: What is freedom? What is authority? What is action? What is history? What is power? What is government? What is law? What is civil disobedience? What is the role of truth in politics? These essays were collected in her third and seventh books, *Between Past and Future* (1961) and *Crises of the Republic* (1972).

Along with these essays, Arendt also published *On Revolution* (1963), an interpretation of the American and French Revolutions. The book was inspired by her experience of American politics and her readings of the American revolutionaries, but also by two recent events. The first was the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, when mass protests unexpectedly led to a collapse of the communist regime, and when the rule of the Communist party was briefly replaced by citizen councils that were quickly crushed by Russian troops. The events of 1956 exposed in the starkest way a contest between different concepts of revolution, since the revolution in Hungary was destroyed by a regime that claimed to be the true heir of the revolutionary tradition. The second event was the Cuban revolution, in which leftist guerillas seized control of the Cuban state through a violent coup. The overarching question of the book was the question of revolution: What is a revolution? But the book also dealt with a number of subordinate questions: What is the genealogy of concepts of revolution? How did the meaning of revolution change from 1688 through 1776, 1789, 1848, 1917, 1949, 1956, and 1959? Why was the American Revolution the only one to establish a stable republic? What is the distinctive character of American politics, and what does it owe to the American revolutionaries?

At the same time, events led Arendt beyond political questions. In 1960, when she learned that Israel had kidnapped Adolf Eichmann to put him on trial in Jerusalem, she persuaded New Yorker editor William Shawn to send her to the trial as a reporter. In the background of her work on

[61] Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, *Letters 1925–1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz, trans. Andrew Shields (New York: Harcourt Inc., 2004), 124.

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Eichmann were the questions that had inspired her book on totalitarianism: What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened? But in the foreground was another question: Who was Adolf Eichmann? What kind of person had organized the murder of millions of innocent people? Arendt went to the courthouse expecting Eichmann to be a terrible but extraordinary man – a malevolent genius, a sadist, a monster. Instead she found him shockingly ordinary. After attending the trial and reading the transcripts of his police interrogations, she concluded that his most notable traits were not wickedness and malevolence, but shallowness and thoughtlessness. Eichmann's thoughtlessness was not just the mindless obedience of a bureaucrat who was "just following orders." Arendt stressed that he "sabotaged" orders from Himmler, and "had not obeyed" orders from Nikolaus von Horthy to stop the deportations of Jews from Hungary.[62] Instead, his thoughtlessness was the blind commitment of a true believer. His view of the world derived from Nazi slogans rather than from any authentic reflection on his own experience, or any real engagement with other perspectives. He did not lack a conscience in the common sense of the term, but his conscience only told him to do what Hitler ordered and what the Nazi movement demanded: "He would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered [by Hitler] to do."[63] Eichmann thought he was acting in the service of a higher good. He had done his job in good conscience because he was "perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong."[64] In her view, the trial made visible the limitations of inherited moral and legal thinking, and it did so by revealing a form of evil that was neither malevolent, nor wicked, nor monstrous, nor demonic: an evil that was appallingly banal.

Eichmann in Jerusalem was widely misunderstood. Arendt was criticized for portraying Eichmann as a bureaucrat who was just doing his job, as if he were the same as the Nazi soldiers at Nuremberg who invoked the defense of superior orders. But Arendt said explicitly Eichmann was different: "The case of the conscience of Adolf Eichmann . . . is scarcely comparable to the case of the German generals . . . at Nuremberg."[65] In her view, Eichmann was not just a cog in a bureaucratic machine, but a zealot who acted on his own initiative and actually *disobeyed* orders that would have interfered with the Final Solution. He was thoughtless not because he was just following orders, but because he was fanatically

[62] *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 145, 201. [63] EJ, 25. [64] EJ, 26.
[65] EJ, 149.

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committed to Nazism, and had no capacity to see the world on his own rather than in terms of Nazi clichés.[66]

Eichmann led Arendt to focus on questions of thinking, conscience, and judgment. In a 1971 essay, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," she explained her idea of the banality of evil, and laid out the questions raised by Eichmann's trial:

> Some years ago, reporting on the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of "the banality of evil" and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual: the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think . . . This total absence of thinking attracted my interest. Is evil-doing, not just the sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely "base motives" (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness . . . not a condition for evildoing? Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide? The question that imposed itself was, could the activity of thinking, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it "conditions" men against evildoing?[67]

Arendt came to think the case of Eichmann showed the general collapse of morality in Nazi Germany had three sides. First, the true believers among the Nazis had rejected traditional moral standards and proclaimed a murderous new set of values. Second, and more importantly, those who faithfully adhered to traditional moral concepts and standards were ill-prepared to understand and respond effectively to the new situation: "All those who were fully qualified in matters of morality and held them in the highest esteem . . . demonstrated through their application of traditional concepts and yardsticks during and after the fact, how inadequate these had become, how little, as we shall see, they had been framed or

[66] I am indebted here to Roger Berkowitz, "Misreading 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'" *New York Times*, July 7, 2013.

[67] *Responsibility and Judgment,* ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 159–160.

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intended to be applied to conditions as they actually arose."[68] And third, the most important side of this collapse, for Arendt, was that so many ordinary citizens were able to adjust to the new values by supporting Nazi laws and obeying Nazi orders. The problem had not been amorality, but the appalling ease with which people exchanged one set of mores for another:

> The total moral collapse of respectable society during the Hitler regime may teach us that under such circumstances those who cherish values and hold fast to moral norms and standards are not reliable; we now know that moral norms and standards can be changed overnight, and that all that will be left is the mere habit of holding fast to something.[69]

The moral collapse raised questions about the limits of traditional moral concepts and standards. But it also raised questions about the traditional view of morality as a set of concepts and standards. Arendt called into question the assumption that moral life is a matter of applying concepts and obeying laws. But what could moral thinking be except a search for general concepts and standards? "How can you think, and even more important in our context, how can you judge without holding on to preconceived standards, norms, and general rules under which the particular cases and instances can be subsumed?"[70] The questions raised by the Eichmann trial led Arendt to mistrust inherited forms of moral thought, and her reflections on morality led her to questions about the nature of thought itself. What does it mean to think? What does it mean to judge? What is the relation between theoretical and practical thought? What is the relation between judgment, thought, and action?

Arendt turned to these questions in her final book, *The Life of the Mind* (1978). She argued that philosophers had failed to clearly distinguish the different powers of the mind, and had failed to adequately conceive of these powers on the basis of their own inner experiences. There had been a systematic confusion of the faculties of thought: understanding had been confused with knowing; thinking had been confused with willing; and judgment had been confused with cognition. The aim of the book was to distinguish and clarify the powers of the mind through a meditation on inner experience. From 1973 to 1975 she wrote two series of lectures that became the first two volumes of the book, "Thinking" and "Willing." She planned to turn lectures on Kant's Third Critique into a volume on

[68] RJ, 25. [69] RJ, 45. [70] RJ, 26.

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"Judging," but fate called her before she could begin to write. Arendt died of heart failure in December 1975.

Basic Questions

Underlying Arendt's work are two basic questions – implicit in her concerns but not explicit on the page – that exerted a constant pull on her attention. These questions were the points around which her thought turned and returned – the hidden foci of her work.

1. The question of *thinking*. Arendt wanted to avoid the kind of intellectual life and the ways of thought that had led her friends to misjudge the Nazi regime. Her approach to political theory was guided by three rejections: (a) She rejected the disengagement of theory from action – the separation of intellectual life from political life, and the claim of theory to stand outside and above the realm of politics. (b) She rejected the priority of theory over action – the claim that effective action needs the guidance of theory, and that theory can and should tell us what to do. In her view, political action does not need theory as much as it needs experience and knowledge: "Many people say that one cannot fight totalitarianism without understanding it. Fortunately this is not true; if it were, our case would be hopeless."[71] (c) She rejected the assimilation of theory to action – the claim that thinking itself can be a kind of political action, and that the role of theory is to fight wars of ideas. Arendt knew that ideas can be used as weapons, but she saw this as a matter not of thinking but of indoctrination, and indoctrination could not further understanding in the fight against totalitarianism, but "can only further the totalitarian fight against understanding."[72] In her later work she returned to theory and reaffirmed the dignity of pure thought. But in her work there is a constant engagement with questions of theory: What is theory? What is the relation of theory to politics? How is thought related to action? How to think?

2. The question of the *political*. Her experience in Germany and America raised other questions: Why was political life in America different from politics in Germany? What exactly was different? The difference was not just a matter of institutions, since Germany had been a republic after World War I, and the Nazis had taken power by democratic means. Nor was it a matter of political theories, since the question was precisely why specific theories thrived or failed to thrive in different places. The difference was rooted in

[71] EU, 307. [72] EU, 309.

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what we could call "political culture" – the mostly inarticulate and unthought background understanding on whose basis inherited forms of political thought and practice make sense. This background understanding includes practical know-how (how to vote, how to protest, how to deliberate), concepts of basic political realities (power, law, government, freedom), a self-understanding (who we are as a polity, where we have come from, what unifies us as a people), and a shared ethos (a sense of the way things should be, the goods for which we live together, the ideals we share, and the virtues needed to make them real). Political life is guided by this level of understanding, not in the sense that it determines what people think and do, but in the sense that it makes some forms of thought and action seem sensible and natural, and makes others seem impossible or absurd. At the heart of any politics is an understanding of the political.

This starting point entailed a distinctive approach to political theory. To work out an adequate account of totalitarianism, Arendt first had to understand it from within – to explicate and clarify the understanding of politics within which totalitarian doctrines and practices seem to make sense. But it was not enough to understand what she was fighting against; she had to understand what she was fighting for. To work out an adequate account of democratic politics she had to understand democratic politics from within – to explicate and clarify the understanding of politics within which democratic doctrines and practices make sense. The fight against totalitarianism required both factual knowledge and pure theory. Theory was necessary not to direct but to illuminate the struggle:

> Understanding, while it cannot be expected to provide results which are specifically helpful or inspiring in the fight against totalitarianism, must accompany this fight if it is to be more than a fight for survival. Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world . . . the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding. For, although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for . . . In this sense the activity of understanding is necessary; while it can never directly inspire the fight or provide otherwise missing objectives, it alone can make it meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart . . .[73]

Her work was an effort to understand the deepest differences between democratic politics and the anti-politics of totalitarianism.

[73] EU, 310.

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This effort did not lead Arendt to a liberal understanding of politics.[74] Liberal concepts of politics seemed inadequate to her in several ways. They failed to distinguish rigorously between politics and other spheres of existence. They interpreted political history in ahistorical terms. They simplified the actual history of politics from the Greeks to the present. They supported superficial concepts of basic political realities. They failed to adequately grasp the actual practice of democratic politics. Another concept of the political was necessary, not only to fight totalitarianism but also to clarify and renew the practice of democratic politics.

But how to answer this question? What way of thought could lead her to another concept of the political?

[74] The core of her critique was that liberalism lacked a pure concept of the political since "it always assumed an identity of politics, economics, and society" (OT, 336).

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