

# **Reconsidering *The Human Condition***

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## Abstract

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This thesis is a reconsideration of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. It suggests that the complex narrative structure of the book presents problems for our ability to understand its meaning, as Arendt presents us with a story rather than a systematic political theory. In response, this thesis thinks *with* Arendt, appropriating her techniques to offer a re-reading of *The Human Condition* that attempts to provide a genuinely Arendtian approach to her thought. This thesis begins by approaching *The Human Condition* via the concept general human capacities, the activities that grow out of the human condition and give depth to human life. It does this by way of a comparison of Arendt's view of these capacities, with that of three key political thinkers that share similar political concerns: Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau. The juxtaposition of these thinkers allows us to pinpoint just what it is that makes Arendt's consideration of the human condition so unique, namely, that the distinctiveness of *The Human Condition* lies in Arendt's particular manner of thinking. The second half of the thesis thus explores Arendt's conceptions of both thinking and thoughtlessness, and argues that her understanding of thinking precludes her from developing a systematic conceptual framework, or a set of generally applicable 'truths'. By reflecting directly on the modern world and its effect on the constellation of general human capacities, Arendt instead provides a *demonstration* of the very process of thinking. By presenting us with an open-ended and narrative account of general human capacities, Arendt calls on us to think *for ourselves*.

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*What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears...What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.*

HANNAH ARENDT  
*The Human Condition*  
(1998:5)

# INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a reconsideration of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. It seeks to look beyond existing approaches to Arendt's work and shed new light on unexplored and hidden elements which "run like red threads through the whole" (Arendt 1994:403). While *The Human Condition* has been variously received and understood since its original publication over fifty years ago, common interpretations read it as Arendt's critique of modern society and her call to reinstate the ancient Greek understanding of politics and the public realm.<sup>1</sup> Interpretations of this nature appear to be misled by the design of the book which is explicitly structured around an examination of the conditions of the modern world and an "historical analysis" of its origins in ancient Greece. Arendt herself sows the seeds for this kind of reading in the opening sentences of the book and throughout the 'Prologue' with her striking presentation of a series of modern events – including the beginning of space exploration, advances in science and medicine, and the imminent automation of labouring – which she juxtaposes with an examination of the strict Greek division between public and private realms. Arendt makes it clear that she fears the consequences modern developments may have for the human condition and these early comments appear to be the beginning of a critique of modern society in light of the Greek model.

However, this thesis argues that *The Human Condition* is less a critique of modern society than an examination of our understanding of the human condition in the context of modern society. In other words, what troubles Arendt is not so much the advances in science and technology as the ways in which modern men<sup>2</sup> understand

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<sup>1</sup> In a clear articulation of this kind of interpretation, Benhabib states that "the standard view maintains that Arendt is a political philosopher of nostalgia, an anti-modernist for whom the Greek "polis" remained the quintessential political experience" (2003:x). Benhabib, however, believes "that this view is wrong and one-sided", and she seeks to "decenter the place of *The Human Condition* in our reading of Hannah Arendt" (2003:xxxix). Other notable examples of this kind of discussion include Tsao (2002) and Euben (2000).

<sup>2</sup> This thesis follows Arendt in using the terms 'men', 'man', and 'mankind' rather than the more gender neutral, and perhaps more acceptable, terms 'human', 'humans', or 'humankind'. The choice to adhere to this now outdated convention is an attempt to avoid the tendency to complicate or cloud our discussion of the *human* condition by switching between Arendt's terminology and more universal referents. For this reason, this thesis deliberately overlooks contemporary rejections of these descriptors, using them not with the intention of referring to the male sex in isolation or to denigrate or deny the place of women in politics, but *in place of* more gender neutral terms. It is more than likely that Arendt herself "considered "man" a generic term for humankind, rather than a specifically masculine referent" (Moruzzi 2000:7), and all uses of these terms in this thesis are used in this same spirit to refer to *all humans* regardless of sex.

themselves and their fundamental human capacities. According to Arendt, in deference to the modern scientific ideal and in line with the circumstances of the modern world, men have re-imagined the human condition in such a way as to limit the range of potential human experiences, including the fundamental political experience of freedom. As such, *The Human Condition* is Arendt's attempt to reclaim, re-understand, and reinvigorate man's understanding and experience of his general human capacities in the face of the modern world and its threats to their existence.

This thesis therefore suggests that we take the key to *The Human Condition* not from Arendt's appraisal of modern society, but from some remarks made towards the end of the 'Prologue':

To these preoccupations and perplexities, this book does not offer an answer. Such answers are given every day, and they are matters of practical politics, subject to the agreement of many; they can never lie in theoretical considerations or the opinion of one person, as though we dealt here with problems for which only one solution is possible. What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. This, obviously, is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness – the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty – seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing (Arendt 1998:5).

Here, Arendt makes it very clear that she does not seek to solve the modern “preoccupations and perplexities” that she has just presented, and she distances herself from “matters of practical politics” which are “subject to the agreement of the many”. Unlike practical politics, considerations of the human condition are not “problems for which only one solution is possible”. Far from providing a prescription for the organisation of government or a solution to the problems of the modern world, Arendt intends *The Human Condition* be read as “the opinion of one person”, a “theoretical consideration” of the human condition in the context of “our newest experiences and our most recent fears”. As such, Arendt's proposition for the central theme of the book is “very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing”. In other words, Arendt herself seeks to *think* about the human condition in the context of the modern world to contrast the overwhelming thoughtlessness that she believes characterises modern life.

By couching the central proposition in this deliberately “simple” way, Arendt does not make explicit the underlying argument of the book, leaving it open to a variety of interpretations. Nevertheless, she does clearly direct the book in two important ways. Most explicitly, she “confines” herself to “an analysis of those *general human capacities* which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed” (1998:6, my emphasis). What *are* general human capacities? And why does Arendt confine her consideration of the human condition to them in this way? Secondly, Arendt’s proposition “to think what we are doing” (1998:5) implicitly directs her consideration insofar as she must “think”. This appears to be consistent with her assertion that her consideration of the human condition is “obviously...a matter of thought” (1998:5). At the same time, however, Arendt claims that thoughtlessness is “among the outstanding characteristics of our time” (1998:5), thus implying that modern men *do not think*. At first sight, this conflicts with her opening description of modern advances in science and technology which presumably result from man’s ability to think and apply knowledge. Given the achievements of modern science, how can Arendt claim that modern men are thoughtless? Or, to put it another way, if modern men are thoughtless, then what does Arendt mean by *thinking*? And, in what sense is a reconsideration of the human condition obviously a matter of thought? To find answers to these questions, it is evident that we must understand what Arendt means by thinking. Further to this, we must understand *how Arendt herself thinks* so as to understand the way in which she thinks about general human capacities.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis attempts to answer these questions by thinking about Arendt’s appraisal of modern understandings of the human condition. According to Arendt, man’s longstanding adherence to tradition as a guiding thread has perverted his understanding of the human condition, so much so that he is no longer aware of the meaning and potential of his own capacities. Advances in science and technology compound this lack of awareness, pushing men to the point where they threaten their fundamental capacities by attempting to exchange them for something they have made themselves (Arendt 1998:3). In response to these events, *The Human*

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<sup>3</sup> This approach takes its lead from Arendt herself who “recognized that if you wanted to understand *what* a person thought you also had to understand *how* that person thought” (Young-Bruehl 2006:33). This circularity between the concept and practice of thinking is a key element of much of Arendt’s work and as we will see, forms the foundation of *The Human Condition* itself.

*Condition* is Arendt's story about general human capacities, and she presents and combines fragments from history in order both to examine exactly what man's capacities are and how they manifest, and to "arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age" (Arendt 1998:6). In other words, Arendt's story seeks both to re-distinguish man's inherent capacities from one another and understand the factors leading up to his modern inability to comprehend them for himself. This thesis therefore argues that Arendt's aim in writing *The Human Condition* was to reinvigorate man's understanding of the human condition by thinking about the general human capacities that comprise it, that is, to *demonstrate the capacity to think* by thinking about man's other capacities. As such, the key interpretive claim of this thesis is that *The Human Condition* is actually a work about thinking which presents the *activity* of thinking as a creative, open endeavour congruous with the activity of storytelling, and Arendt provides a sketch of the human condition without attempting to define it.

This implies that Arendt's attempt to "think what we are doing" takes a more creative and interpretive narrative approach, and thus resists attempts to categorise it in terms of a rigid or systematic political theory. This, in turn, complicates attempts to reconsider Arendt's work in traditional ways, suggesting instead that it might be more appropriate to follow Arendt herself and combine multiple fragments in narrative form. As a consequence, this thesis tells its own story about Arendt and *The Human Condition*, seeking not to offer a rigid or systematic interpretation of a complex work, but to think *through* it to find its meaning. Readers that approach this thesis looking for it to resolve "the preoccupations and perplexities" of *The Human Condition* misunderstand its purpose. This thesis does not seek to close down the space for thinking about the book by offering a definitive appraisal, but only to offer a "theoretical consideration" of a book that is itself a problem for which more than one solution is possible (see Arendt 1998:5). While it appears that this will be inconclusive and open-ended, as we will see, this resistance to closed systematic categories is necessary if we are to be faithful to Arendt's own understanding and practice of thinking.

Although the approach of this thesis may be somewhat unconventional, it attempts to appropriate Arendt's own techniques, and thus provide a genuinely Arendtian approach to her thought. In other words, it seeks to think in the same style as Arendt, which, according to Minnich, is typified in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen (1997):

Arendt wanted to understand from within, not to know about. She stood within the centre of the circle with her subject, rejecting all the viewing points around the perimeter from where the experts might have claimed to speak knowingly about the gazed-on subject. Arendt sought some act of mind that could move her both in and out of Varnhagen's life in a way that neither Rahel, caught within her own story, nor others, standing outside of it, could achieve. She decided to think *with* Rahel Varnhagen, and neither *as nor about* her (Minnich 1989:135).

By thinking *with* Arendt rather than against the grain of her thinking, we are better able to "grasp what lies beneath" the surface of her work, finding new significance and meaning in its incongruities without trying to dissolve their conceptual complexity or Arendt's original intention (see Arendt 1996:7). With this in mind, this thesis seeks both to uncover Arendt's understanding and practice of thinking in *The Human Condition* and mirror its approach. Following Arendt, it tells a story about Arendt's story, *The Human Condition*, narratively recombining fragments of her broader corpus. Like Arendt, it tries to maintain its own conceptual openness and fluidity, attempting to explore the overall meaning and significance of *The Human Condition* but avoiding moves to reduce the richness and open-endedness of the work to a single "correct" interpretation. To do otherwise would be contra-Arendt and we would risk missing the underlying treasure of the book.

This thesis takes two distinct approaches in its reconsideration of *The Human Condition*, and these are arranged in two parts. These approaches emerge in response to the two sources of direction Arendt provides for the book. Part I responds to Arendt's decision to confine her consideration of the human condition to the "general human capacities" that grow out of it (1998:5). Despite her clear rejection of both traditional and modern understandings of the human condition, she makes a puzzling decision to further limit her discussion to the most "elementary" capacities, dealing only "with those activities that traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of every human being" (1998:5). As such, Part I considers Arendt's understanding of the general human capacities of the *vita activa*

as they are embedded in the story Arendt tells about its “various constellations” (1998:6). In this way, Part I considers *The Human Condition* at the textual level rather than at the conceptual level, deliberately avoiding any attempt to abstract a coherent or unified system. Hoping to better understand the significance of Arendt’s story about general human capacities, Part I also appropriates the Arendtian techniques of fragmentary historiography and storytelling to consider the work of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, weaving together a series of insights from each of these thinkers to re-think Arendt’s motivation for framing *The Human Condition* in this way. As a consequence, Part I considers *The Human Condition* by arranging elements of Arendt’s work alongside the work of others, using this juxtaposition in an attempt to pinpoint just what it is that makes Arendt’s consideration of the human condition so unique.

Part II responds to the findings of Part I which relate to Arendt’s manner of thinking. It situates itself in relation to Arendt’s early claims that her consideration of the modern human condition is “obviously...a matter of thought”, and that thoughtlessness is “among the outstanding characteristics of our time” (1998:5). As remarked above, these claims sit uneasily beside images of man’s scientific prowess and Arendt’s exclusion of thinking from “these present considerations” (1998:5). Part II is structured, in echo of Arendt’s own narrative method, around two *exemplars*: Eichmann, the exemplar of thoughtlessness, and Socrates, the exemplar of thoughtfulness. This gives us an appreciation of Arendt’s particular understanding of thinking, enabling us to return to Arendt’s proposition “to think what we are doing” (1998:5) with new clarity. Given that this statement frames the direction of *The Human Condition*, Part II makes explicit the terms of Arendt’s understanding of thinking and its relationship to politics, ultimately suggesting it can best be understood as ‘thinking politically’, a crystallisation of Arendt’s thoughts that reflects a unique understanding of thinking that is faithful to the experiential ground of politics.

In light of this, Part II returns to re-consider *The Human Condition*, re-reading it as an implicit work on thinking. Arendt *demonstrates* her understanding of thinking by reflecting directly on the modern world and its effect on the constellation of general human capacities. In doing so, she highlights the thoughtlessness of modern men and the deficiencies in modern understandings of the human condition. This

emphasises the central role Arendt's understanding and practice of thinking plays in her political theory. Arendt therefore not only provides a new way of interacting with general human capacities by telling a story about them, but *by thinking* she demonstrates the way in which we might reclaim the freedom of that activity. By presenting us with a range of "preoccupations and perplexities" (see 1998:5), Arendt calls on us to think about them for ourselves. In this way, this thesis argues that *The Human Condition* is really an *exercise* in thinking that reinvigorates the distinctions between general human capacities, demonstrating for us not *what* we should think, but how we might approach an understanding of the human condition *for ourselves*.



PART ONE:

# GENERAL HUMAN CAPACITIES

*I confine myself, on the one hand, to an analysis of those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed.*

HANNAH ARENDT  
*The Human Condition*  
(1998:6)



This Part considers *The Human Condition* via the concept 'general human capacities'. It takes as its point of departure Arendt's early move to "confine" her analysis to "those *general human capacities* which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed" (1998:6, my emphasis). At the same time, Arendt proposes to reconsider "the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears" (1998:5), suggesting that advances in science and technology, most notably space exploration, put fundamental aspects of the human condition at stake. Given this threat to the human condition by the sweeping changes of the modern world, it would appear that general human capacities are at risk of being irretrievably lost. But what *are* general human capacities? How are they at stake? And, why does Arendt confine her consideration of the human condition to them in this way?

Arendt herself does not explicitly define the concept 'general human capacities', which in itself is not especially unusual given her tendency to introduce and use terms and concepts without expressly identifying them (Canovan 1992:3). However, in her single use of this phrase, when she states she will confine herself "to an analysis of those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent" (1998:6),<sup>4</sup> Arendt gives us an important lead. Here, Arendt not only establishes a clear link between general human capacities and the human condition, but she suggests that general human capacities *emerge* from the human condition as distinct elements. This sits well with her earlier statement that the book "deals with the most elementary articulations of the human condition" (1998:5), which implies multiple elements. Arendt goes on to define these "articulations" as "activities that...are within the range of every human being", that is, activities "of which men are capable" (1998:5). This suggests that general human capacities refer to the essential activities, faculties or abilities that men are able to exercise, call on or perform by virtue of being human.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While Arendt only uses the specific phrase "general human capacities" once (1998:6), she regularly refers to "human capacities" or "capacities of man".

<sup>5</sup> The word 'capacity' itself relates to activity, that is, the active power, ability or faculty *to do* something. In this way, a general human capacity exists as a possibility to undertake certain activities that are inherent to the human condition itself. This makes clear Arendt's concern with activity, that is, *doing* things. However, Arendt's comment regarding "the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition" (1998:10), suggests that she acknowledges that the human

While general human capacities, understood as activities, may be components of the human condition, the human condition itself is considerably more complex than their combination. According to Arendt, the human condition describes the fact that “human existence is conditioned existence” (1998:9): “Men are conditioned beings because everything they come into contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence” (Arendt 1998:9).<sup>6</sup> In other words, anything that “enters into a sustained relationship with human life” is felt and received by men as a “conditioning force” (1998:9). For Arendt, the human condition therefore comprehends both “the conditions under which life has been given to man” and the conditions which he creates for himself, as both *condition* human existence (1998:9). This responsiveness to the conditions of the world gives the human condition a dynamic quality in the sense that it adapts to the changes man himself makes to the world. This has important implications in the context of the modern world as it means that science and technology have become part of the modern human condition.

This understanding of the human condition as dynamic appears to be at odds with Arendt’s description of general human capacities as “permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed” (1998:6). Given the changing nature of the human condition, how can Arendt suggest that general human capacities are permanent? Elsewhere, Arendt provides an answer to this question, suggesting that general human capacities themselves do not change, however, the relationships *between* capacities change to reflect changes in the world:

Not the capabilities of man, but the constellation which orders their mutual relationships can and does change historically. Such changes can best be observed in the changing self-interpretations of man throughout history, which, though they may be quite irrelevant for the ultimate “what” of human nature, are still the briefest and most succinct witnesses to the spirit of whole epochs (Arendt 1977:62).

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condition is more than activity, as ‘capability’ does not have the same connotation of doing, but rather, suggests something more static.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt makes a clear distinction between the human condition, the conditions of human existence that *condition* men, and human nature, the nature or essence of man that *defines* his humanity (1998:10-11). According to Arendt, the question “who is man?” is unanswerable “in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense” (1998:10). Even the most “meticulous enumeration” of all of the “human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature...[the] essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human” (1998:10).

Although the *human condition* changes with response to the conditions of man, that is, with reference to the changes in the world, man's general human capacities remain permanent. This permanence notwithstanding, the *relationships* between these capacities and the ways in which men understand and interpret them "can and does change historically" (Arendt 1977:62).

Yet, Arendt's description of general human capacities as permanent "so long as the human condition itself is not changed" (1998:6) clearly carries with it the suggestion that they *can* be "irretrievably lost" if the human condition itself *is* changed. This is more substantial than the mere re-ordering of their constellation that occurs when the human condition responds to changes in the world. Arendt expresses concern for this kind of loss in the 'Prologue' when she describes the "new and yet unknown age" that had overcome society (1998:6), bringing with it a corresponding series of events which threaten fundamental features of the human condition. In this new age – the modern world – circumstances have been radically altered, and through scientific endeavour men actively seek to liberate themselves from the human condition as given (1998:2). By realising and affirming "what men anticipated in dreams" (Arendt 1998:2), science has enabled man to re-imagine the human condition in terms of things he has made himself, in the process leaving unfulfilled many inherent human capacities and demonstrating a misunderstanding of the potential and depth of the human condition. It is *this* that provides the impetus for Arendt's reconsideration of the human condition "from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears", that is, her attempt "to think what we are doing" at the dawn of the modern world (1998:5).

Keeping in mind Arendt's underlying concern with the implications of the events of the modern world, Part I argues that Arendt's aim in *The Human Condition* is to reinvigorate modern man's understanding of the human condition and his general human capacities. Seeking to overcome the limitations imposed by the conditions of modern society, Arendt tells a story about man's capacities of labour, work and action that reveals their original and forgotten meanings. Through "historical analysis" (1998:6), Arendt explores the ways in which general human capacities have been understood, both in relation to each other and in relation to the human condition itself, at multiple points throughout history. In other words, Arendt explores "the

various constellations within the hierarchy of activities as we know them from Western history” (1998:6). Arendt’s story about general human capacities therefore calls on and combines fragments from history, not in a linear sense that demonstrates progression or cause and effect, nor in a way that suggests a passive return to the past. Rather, Arendt’s “historical analysis” is a means to appropriate various “pearls” from history, prying loose “the rich and strange” (Arendt 1968a:205-206) so as to uncover a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of abiding human capacities in contemporary times.

This preliminary attempt to articulate the role of general human capacities in *The Human Condition* has highlighted the centrality of this concept to Arendt’s consideration of the human condition in the context of the modern world. In fact, this concept is so fundamental to *The Human Condition* that the three “most elementary” general human capacities – labour, work and action – form its central chapters (Arendt 1998:5). This, in itself, suggests that there is considerable meaning behind Arendt’s decision to “confine” her analysis to general human capacities (1998:5). But just what is it about general human capacities that makes them so fundamental for Arendt? Why does she frame *The Human Condition* in this way? What exactly does her story about general human capacities tell us about the human condition? And, what is it about Arendt’s particular consideration of general human capacities that makes it so significant?

To find answers to these questions, Part I thinks *with* Arendt, appropriating the Arendtian techniques of fragmentary historiography and storytelling to tell a story about general human capacities of its own. Like Arendt, it draws on thought fragments from both the past and other thinkers in order to gain a deeper understanding through narrative exploration. Like *The Human Condition*, Part I seeks to explore “the various constellations” of general human capacities “as we know them from Western history” (see 1998:6). To do so, Part I “confines” itself to particular expressions and articulations of the human condition and man’s fundamental capacities as found in the work of four particular thinkers. Systematically, therefore,

Part I is limited to a discussion of general human capacities in the work of Arendt, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, which forms its four central chapters.<sup>7</sup>

These three additional thinkers were chosen as they are key figures in the history of political thought of particular relevance to Arendt's project. In varying degrees, all four belong to the tradition of civic republicanism (Canovan 1992:2), and they share a concern for the *life of activity* on the basis that man's ability to actualise a range of human experiences stems from his nature as an active being. This is captured by Arendt's emphasis on "what we are doing", Aristotle's notion of the good life as one based in activity, Machiavelli's call to do whatever is necessary to maintain political rule, and Rousseau's conception of perfectibility as enabling the growth in human activities and experiences. More importantly, all four hold that specifically human activities can only be actualised in a particular context, the political realm or a life of political association. This highlights the presence of shared political themes. For these reasons, Part I looks to these additional thinkers to augment our understanding of general human capacities and to make clearer their significance to investigations of the human condition. By juxtaposing Arendt with a range of other thinkers that share common concerns, Part I hopes to illuminate by contrast just what it is about Arendt's consideration of the human condition that is so unique.

It is important to emphasise here that this Part *does not* seek to trace the historical genealogy of Arendt's influences through the thoughts of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, nor does it seek to map the progression of Western philosophical thought. To adapt remarks made by Cobban about Rousseau:

My intention is not to relate [Arendt] to individual thinkers who preceded or followed [her]; or to trace generally [her] origins and influences. The danger inherent in this line of approach is the tendency to stress unduly those aspects in which the influence of the past is shown, and by linking a theorist too closely with [her] predecessors to obscure [her] real originality (Cobban 1964:15).

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<sup>7</sup> This deliberately parallels Arendt's own move to "confine" her consideration of general human capacities to the three activities of labour, work and action: "Systematically, therefore, the book is limited to a discussion of labor, work, and action, which forms its three central chapters" (Arendt 1998:5).

In other words, Part I does not make causal claims about Arendt's influences, nor does it trace intersecting political concepts. Instead, this Part seeks only to investigate what we can learn from juxtaposing Arendt with thinkers that share similar political concerns. By doing so, Part I hopes to reconsider both the significance of general human capacities and Arendt's turn to them to examine the human condition.

Part I tells a story about general human capacities over four chapters. Chapter 1 considers Arendt's understanding of general human capacities and its context in *The Human Condition*. It unpacks her narrative exploration of the differences in men's understandings of their place in the human condition throughout history. However, in distinction from readings that seek to abstract from the book a systematic and unified political theory, this chapter reads Arendt's investigation of the human condition in the context of *the story* she tells about general human capacities. By doing so, it acknowledges that Arendt's exploration of the changing constellation of human activities is not meant to answer "the preoccupations and perplexities" of general human capacities once and for all (see 1998:5), but to reclaim, re-understand and reinvigorate our understanding of general human capacities in the face of the modern world and its threats to their existence. In this way, Arendt provides a sketch of the human condition without attempting to define it.

Chapter 2 begins our appraisal of general human capacities in a broader context, hoping to illuminate the significance of Arendt's work by contrasting it with the work of others. It explores Aristotle's understanding of the human condition as it emerges from his discussion of the good life, uncovering Aristotle's understanding of general human capacities and the relationships between them implied in his examination of the virtues. As a result, this chapter examines the significance of general human capacities in terms of the pursuit of happiness. Chapter 3 investigates Machiavelli's understanding of general human capacities, finding it implied in his examination of the qualities required to be successful in politics. It discusses the implications of Machiavelli's particular understanding of general human capacities, including their transformation from inherent potentials or abilities into pragmatic tools to be utilised by statesmen. Chapter 4 moves to Rousseau, exploring the very explicit consideration of general human capacities that forms the basis of his understanding of human nature. It discusses Rousseau's construction of a theoretical 'state of

nature' to uncover man's natural capacities, his subsequent diagnosis of the deficiencies of society and prescription for a political solution based in the social contract.

Finally, the conclusion of Part I tries to weave these understandings of general human capacities together, drawing together insights from each chapter to discuss the significance of general human capacities for an understanding of the human condition. As a result, it considers the ways in which the juxtaposition of Arendt with Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau enables us to better appreciate the overall purpose of *The Human Condition*. It ultimately suggests that while such a narrative sheds new light on the place of general human capacities to investigations of the human condition, the fundamental differences between Arendt and these other thinkers in terms of their approach, imply that there is something lurking below the surface that warrants further investigation.



## CHAPTER ONE:

# Hannah Arendt

This chapter begins our consideration of *The Human Condition* via the concept of general human capacities. As noted in the introduction to Part I, Arendt very early announces her intention to “confine” her analysis of the human condition to the “general human capacities which grow out of” it (1998:5). As such, the three central chapters of *The Human Condition* are an examination of three particular general human capacities – labour, work and action – designated as the *vita activa* (1998:7). Arendt’s investigation of these general human capacities is framed by a concern for their loss in a world where men seek to exchange the human condition as given for something they have made themselves (1998:2-3). This, coupled with a misunderstanding of general human capacities and the distinctions between them, mean that a range of human capacities go unfulfilled in modern life. According to Arendt, this speaks to the thoughtlessness of our time (1998:5), which leaves men incapable of comprehending the potential of the human condition and the consequences of any move to exchange it. As such, Arendt contends that the conditions of the modern world present an unprecedented threat to the human condition itself, and this demands a consideration of “what we are doing” (1998:5).

This chapter argues that in the face of modern conditions, Arendt attempts to reclaim, re-understand and reinvigorate modern man’s understanding of the human condition

and general human capacities. It suggests that we can best read *The Human Condition* as a kind of storytelling (Benhabib 1990; Disch 1993; Luban 1994; Young-Bruehl 1977), as it is a “creative act of rethinking and reappropriating the past” (Benhabib 2003:x) in an attempt to give depth to the present.<sup>8</sup> By combining multiple examples from history, Arendt is able to find new meaning in contemporary events, offering reconciliation to the world “without committing the error of defining it” (Arendt 1968a:105). In this way, this chapter reads *The Human Condition* as Arendt’s story about general human capacities in the context of the modern world, and in it, she seeks to re-distinguish the fundamental activities of labour, work and action from one another by weaving together a series of historical insights into their nature and political significance.

In light of this, the purpose of this chapter is to lay out the narrative arc of *The Human Condition*. It does not give a full account of the text, nor does it test the validity of Arendt’s claims. It simply seeks to set down the narrative structure of the book in terms of its exploration of the concept ‘general human capacities’. This chapter therefore presents a selective reading of *The Human Condition*, and it does not try to find analytical definitions of key terms. As will become clearer, this is not a fruitful approach to the text. Instead, this chapter “confines” itself to an exploration of the narrative constructed by Arendt to reveal differences in historical understandings of general human capacities and their place in human life. It also attempts to clarify the political focus of Arendt’s work, offering some preliminary insights into her understanding of politics and her position within political theory.

By considering the narrative structure of the book, this chapter suggests that Arendt’s underlying intention for *The Human Condition* was to bring to light the deficiencies in modern understandings of the human condition by discussing the ways in which circumstances influence our appraisal. However, the book’s structure presents

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<sup>8</sup> While commentators such as Buckler (2007) and Pitkin (1998) suggest that it is “implausible” to identify storytelling as “the defining characteristic of [Arendt’s] approach” (Buckler 2007:461), this thesis uses this notion of storytelling to capture the literary style of *The Human Condition*, attempting to account for its inconsistencies and Arendt’s complex writing style (Canovan 1998:viii). However, this thesis does not seek to explore arguments surrounding conceptions of Arendt’s method as storytelling in all their detail, nor to make general claims regarding the validity of Arendt’s methodology. It simply suggests that we can read *The Human Condition* as a narrative investigation of the human condition. It contends that by doing so, we approach the book on more Arendtian terms and can draw from it new meaning.

problems for our ability to understand its meaning, as Arendt provides us with a story rather than an answer to the “preoccupations and perplexities” of the human condition in the modern world (see Arendt 1998:5). As such, this chapter lays the foundation for our exploration of general human capacities in the work of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau in the following chapters, in the hope that by juxtaposing Arendt with thinkers that share similar concerns, we can make new sense of her approach.

## **1. Beginnings**

Arendt was born in Hanover in 1906. She studied at the universities of Marburg and Freiburg before completing her doctoral dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine* (1996) under Karl Jaspers at Heidelberg in 1929 (Young-Bruehl 2004). The unexpected events of the world fundamentally altered the course of her life, however, and she was forced to flee Germany in 1933, spending several years in France before finally emigrating to the United States. Marked by statelessness and change, Arendt’s life was, in many ways, “a parable of the twentieth century” (Benhabib 2003:221), and her experiences as a German Jew distinctly influenced “both the choice of issues and the tone of her work” (Dossa 1989:6). Her first major political work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968b) (first published in 1951), “was above all an attempt to come to terms with and make sense of the Nazi massacre of the Jews” (Canovan 1974:vii). Indeed, Arendt’s experience of totalitarianism was a recurring theme throughout her life and work, so much so that it is “impossible to understand her work, much less to understand its relevance to contemporary concerns, without situating it historically” (Isaac 1993:539).

In the wake of her own experience, Arendt’s political understanding emerged from the “most basic of all questions, what is politics and what does it mean for men, in the face of the horror of totalitarianism and the inability of the tradition to provide convincing answers?” (Dossa 1989:41). According to Arendt, totalitarianism exposed the inability of the tradition to deal with the unprecedented, and as a result, she looked *beyond* this tradition, searching for the meaning of modern events by narratively combining fragments of the past (Redhead 2002:811). Arendt turned

firstly to the *polis* life of ancient Greece, as in her estimation, “men have never, either before or after, thought so highly of political activity and bestowed so much dignity upon its realm” (1977:154). According to Arendt, the Greek *polis* was a political space in which men interacted with one another to create a reality founded on a plurality of perspectives, providing an arena for excellence, remembrance and individuality. For Arendt, the ancient Greek example provides a valuable contrast to the experience of the modern world, revealing the now lost, but original meaning of politics (Redhead 2002:813; Tsao 2002:105). Far from advocating a return to ancient Greek life, however, Arendt simply uses its example to illuminate “an alternative means of understanding politics” (Redhead 2002:813).

Arendt’s understanding of politics as dialogue, persuasion and contestation gleaned from the ancient Greeks, is starkly different to modern politics based on interests, strategy and efficiency (Villa 1992:274). Arendt understands politics as a *relational* space, “contextual, contingent, and groundless – that opens everywhere for everyone” (Cavarero 2004:69). Politics enables men to relate to one another through reciprocal communication with words and deeds (Cavarero 2004:62), and in doing so, men create a political space ‘in-between’ that both relates and separates them (Arendt 1998:52). In this way, Arendt understands politics as providing an opportunity for men to relate to the world by fostering contestation between a plurality of perspectives, which together, disclose what is held in common (Schaap 2007:69-70). These things combined suggest that Arendt understands politics as an end in itself, in the sense that it is meaningful on its own terms:

In Arendt’s theory, the purpose of politics is internal to itself; it requires no justification beyond itself because the practice of politics in her sense allows men to be free, lay claim to human status, and achieve unique personal identities (Dossa 1989:73; also Canovan 1982:464).

However, Arendt was struck by the tendency of modern political theory to view politics as a means to achieve certain goals or predetermined ends such as welfare or social justice (Knauer 1983:451-452). Arendt was critical of the temptation to subordinate politics to the service of some pre-defined ‘good’ as this is not its inherent function (Hinchman and Hinchman 1994:xxiv). Rather, politics creates a space where men can experience freedom and in which they can disclose who they uniquely are (Arendt 1998:179).

Within the field of political theory more generally, these elements make the political writings of Hannah Arendt difficult to categorise as they “lay outside the norm” (Kristeva 2001:xix). Arendt rejected the perception that political theory should offer practical advice or solutions for governance. She herself had little interest in providing answers to the “preoccupations and perplexities” of practical politics (Arendt 1998:5), preferring instead to seek understanding: “What is important for me is to understand. For me writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding” (Arendt 1994:3).<sup>9</sup> Complicating matters further, Arendt did not build a coherent system or structure of ideas, nor did she try to gather disciples or found a school of thought. What she did do, however, was open “her readers’ eyes to new ways of looking at the world and at human affairs” (Canovan 1998:vii). As such, by thinking about the events of the world, Arendt not only found her own understanding, but in doing so, illuminated the ways in which we might find understanding for ourselves.

## ***2. The Human Condition***

*The Human Condition* is often considered “the most theoretically notorious of Hannah Arendt’s books” (Moruzzi 2000:5), and it contains many independent concepts and ideas on a range of human experiences and activities. Like much of Arendt’s work, it is unconventional in its approach and avoids a traditional philosophical methodology of progressive argument to establish a connected system of propositions (a ‘theory’). Instead, *The Human Condition* appears as a tangled web of ideas and discussions interwoven and laid over the top of one another, conforming “to no established pattern” (Canovan 1998:viii). This forms part of the suggested interpretation in this thesis that we can reclassify *The Human Condition* in terms of its *genre* as narrative rather than a philosophical treatise. Nevertheless, Arendt wrote the book with a single intention: to reconsider the human condition in the context of the modern world. Although not explicitly a critique of modern society, Arendt’s insights into the

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<sup>9</sup> This does not suggest that Arendt did not write about matters of practical politics, as indeed she often did, including her analysis of totalitarianism, *Reflections on Little Rock* (1994), her coverage of the Eichmann trial (1964), and numerous other pieces on events such as the Hungarian Revolution and the student uprisings. However, although she often offered her *views* on political matters, she “emphatically denied that her role as a political thinker was to propose a blueprint for the future or to tell anyone what to do” (Canovan 1998:viii). In other words, she did not seek to propose *solutions* to perplexities of government or practical politics, despite often offering her perspective of them.

changes in the understanding of human activities from a historical perspective bring to light the ways in which modern men deny themselves a range of fundamental experiences as they do not understand the depth of distinct capabilities inherent in the human condition.

While *The Human Condition* is filled with Arendt's discussion of various concepts, expressed most vividly in her delineation of the activities of labour, work and action, and their locations in public, private and social realms, this chapter does not seek to outline them in terms of conceptual definitions that represent a systematic political theory. There have been many attempts to make clear Arendt's distinctions between human activities and spaces in such terms, and many criticisms have emerged regarding the precise boundaries of each category.<sup>10</sup> However, this thesis suggests that readings which attempt to abstract generalisations of this nature misrepresent the fundamental character of the book as a *narrative* about various understandings of general human capacities. As explained by Canovan, while Arendt is doing "a great many things at once" in the book, "one thing she is clearly *not* doing is writing political philosophy as conventionally understood: that is to say, offering political prescriptions backed up by philosophical arguments" (1998:viii). Arendt herself points us in the direction of this kind of interpretation when she emphatically states that the book "does not offer an answer" to modern "preoccupations and perplexities" (1998:5).

Instead, what Arendt offers us in *The Human Condition* is a *story* about general human capacities that is embedded in particular historical contexts, from ancient Greece throughout the modern age and up to the modern world. As such, this chapter explores the dimensions of *The Human Condition* in the context of Arendt's storytelling, rather than trying to extract a series of analytical definitions from the narrative.<sup>11</sup> This sits well with Arendt's understanding of storytelling, in which the meaning of the story is embedded in the story itself:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> We can capture some of these in a series of indicative questions: "But, then, what *does* she imagine as the *content* of political speech and action? And why is this question so difficult to answer from her text?" (Pitkin 1981:337). "What else but speech (and luminous gesture) could political action be, once violence is excluded as nonpolitical, and such physical activities as labor and craft (and play, too) are conceptually opposed to political action?" (Kateb 1977:155). "What is it that properly belongs to the public sphere?" (Bernstein 1986:251).

<sup>11</sup> Like Redhead, "my intention is not to defend the messages of the stories Arendt actually tells" (2002:814), but simply to retain them in their original form, as stories, to see what lies beneath.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt's understanding of storytelling is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

There is no meaning to these stories that is entirely separable from them...No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness with a properly narrated story (Arendt 1968a:22).

In light of this, this section unpacks the chapters of Arendt's story about the changing constellation of the *vita activa*, exploring key themes and examples, but resisting the temptation to push Arendt's distinctions into a definitive and generalisable political theory that can be transposed onto other political contexts. Rather, it attempts to make clear the context of Arendt's story, the backdrop against which she writes and the factors which frame her activity of storytelling. As such, this reading of *The Human Condition* is not meant to offer any universalisable insights into Arendt's broader corpus. It simply seeks to outline key components of a complex narrative that illuminate Arendt's understanding of general human capacities and her appraisal of the modern human condition.

## **CHAPTER I: THE HUMAN CONDITION**

In the first chapter of the book, Arendt explains that she uses the term 'human condition' to refer to the conditions of man's existence, both the conditions under which life has been given and everything that men come into contact with which is "felt and received as a conditioning force" (Arendt 1998:9).<sup>13</sup> In this way, the human condition responds to changes in the circumstances of the world. At its core, however, the human condition corresponds to a range of "human activities and capabilities" (1998:10). These 'general human capacities' remain permanent features of man's existence so long as the human condition itself goes unchanged (1998:6).<sup>14</sup> However, the unprecedented events and circumstances of the modern world, such as space exploration, scientific discovery and technological development, represent a fundamental desire to escape the human condition as it has been given (Arendt

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<sup>13</sup> As already noted, Arendt makes a very clear distinction between the concepts of the human condition and human nature. Arendt argues that human nature is a singular statement of the "essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human" (1998:10). Despite even radical changes in the *human condition* such as "an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet" (Arendt 1998:10), humans would still be *human*, and we would be no closer to any definitive insight into human nature except that it is "now self-made to a considerable extent" (Arendt 1998:10).

<sup>14</sup> As we have seen, however, the *constellation* of general human capacities "can and does change historically" (Arendt 1977:62).

1998:2-3). These events therefore constitute a threat to the permanence of general human capacities.

While this should be of paramount concern to modern men, Arendt argues that a variety of historical factors have impeded men's ability to accurately perceive this threat as they no longer have a full understanding of the range and significance of their capacities. As such, it is likely that men are largely unaware of the consequences of modern developments. *The Human Condition* is therefore Arendt's attempt to illuminate general human capacities by telling a story about them, both to "arrive at an understanding" of modern society (1998:6) and to comprehend why modern men no longer understand the intricacies of either the human condition or the general human capacities which grow from it. To this end, Arendt contrasts modern experiences with those of a range of historical political communities, examining the differences in men's appreciation of general human capacities and the factors which influence their appraisal.

Although she implies that men possess many general human capacities, Arendt deliberately narrows the range of her investigation to the "most elementary articulations of the human condition" that are "within the range of every human being" (1998:5). As a result, Arendt limits *The Human Condition* to an analysis of the "three fundamental human activities" of labour, work and action, which she designates as the *vita activa* (1998:17).<sup>15</sup> She justifies her description of them as "fundamental" because "each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life has been given to man" (1998:7). The activity of labour corresponds to the human condition of life, the natural biological process of the human body, and it is bound to vital necessity (1998:7). The activity of work corresponds to the human condition of worldliness, the unnaturalness of human existence, and it creates an artificial world of things that transcends the lifespan of individual men. Action corresponds to the human condition of plurality and is the "only activity that goes on between men" (Arendt 1998:7). Action holds particular significance for Arendt as plurality is the

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<sup>15</sup> Arendt uses the Latin term *vita activa* in deference to the ancient dichotomy between it and the *vita contemplativa*. However, "it is important to note that she defines the former term as embracing 'labor', 'work', and 'action' on the basis of her own explicit stipulation, not on the authority of any historical practice or understanding" (Tsao 2002:120). In other words, this is a particularly Arendtian definition of the *vita activa*.

condition of all political life, making action “the political activity par excellence” (1998:9). As such, *The Human Condition* is not an exhaustive appraisal of the human condition, but is a narrative exploration of selected activities *fundamental* to it.<sup>16</sup>

Arendt argues that modern men have “extraordinary difficulty” understanding these distinctions (1998:28) and they no longer discriminate between activities. This has implications for modern understandings of the human condition as it limits an awareness of the full range of man’s capacities. However, Arendt argues that this inability to understand the distinctions of the *vita activa* stems not from the events of the modern world, but from the Platonic tradition of political thought. As a result, Arendt very early examines the foundations of this tradition in order to delineate the terms of her investigation. While suggesting that the original meaning of the *vita activa* was “a life devoted to public-political affairs” (1998:12), Arendt contends that “with the disappearance of the ancient city-state”, the term “lost its specifically political meaning and denoted all kinds of active engagement in the things of this world” (1998:14). As a result, “action was now also reckoned among the necessities of earthly life, so that contemplation (...the *vita contemplativa*) was left as the only truly free way of life” (1998:14).

According to Arendt, the “discovery” by the philosophers of the Socratic school that there was a *higher* faculty – contemplation – which could replace the principle that ruled the *polis* (1998:18), led to “the enormous superiority of contemplation over activity of any kind” (1998:14). Arendt argues that contemplation is marked by “complete human stillness”, the “surcease from political activity”, and the conviction that the truth of changeless eternity “discloses itself to mortal eyes only when all human movements and activities are at perfect rest” (1998:15). Guided by the ideal of eternal truth, the *vita activa*, now describing *all* human activities, was re-defined from the viewpoint of the absolute quiet of contemplation:

Compared with this attitude of quiet, all distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* disappear. Seen from the viewpoint of contemplation, it does not matter what disturbs the necessary quiet, as long as it is disturbed (Arendt 1998:15-16).

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<sup>16</sup> Arendt planned to use the more modest, and perhaps more accurate, title “The Vita Activa” until her publisher “wisely” renamed the work *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1978:6).

In other words, Arendt argues that at the hands of the tradition, the distinctions between activities of the *vita activa* disappeared. As a result, all activities were equally directed at satisfying necessity to “make possible the philosopher’s way of life” (Arendt 1998:14). According to Arendt, the tradition therefore established a hierarchy where the *vita contemplativa* was seen as the unmistakably superior way of life (Dossa 1989:23), and politics, the *vita activa*, came to be regarded as “the field in which the elementary necessities of human life are taken care of and to which absolute philosophical standards are applied” (Arendt 2005:37). This hierarchy of contemplation over activity is evident in Aristotle’s articulation of the best life as that characterised by contemplation (*theoria*). However, as we will see in Chapter 2, tensions between the life of contemplation and the life of politics plague Aristotle’s work.

For Arendt, these events determine entirely the way in which we understand the activities of the human condition:

Traditionally, therefore, the term *vita activa* receives its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*; its very restricted dignity is bestowed upon it because it serves the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body (Arendt 1998:16).

Although “all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics” (Arendt 1998:7), Arendt argues that the Platonic tradition omits any reference to its political nature, proceeding “in a highly selective manner” (1998:12). As a result, while Arendt does not doubt “the validity of the experience underlying the distinction” between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, that is, that they describe fundamentally different modes of life, she does dispute the construction of the hierarchy that *privileges* contemplation over politics:

This assumption is not a matter of course, and my use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa* (Arendt 1998:17).

Not only does such a hierarchy deny the dignity of the *vita activa* and its fundamental activities, but “the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself” (Arendt 1998:17). As a consequence, Arendt acknowledges that her use of the term *vita activa* “is in

manifest contradiction to the tradition” (1998:17), but by rejecting traditional methods of understanding, she hopes to move beyond its traditional inferiority to re-distinguish man’s fundamental capacities and reassert the political nature of the human condition. In this way, Arendt’s rejection of the Platonic tradition frames her approach to an investigation of general human capacities in *The Human Condition*.

At the same time, Arendt proposes to reconsider the human condition “*from the vantage point* of our newest experiences and most recent fears” (1998:5, my emphasis). This means that although she argues that modern understandings of general human capacities are founded on the misleading account of the Platonic tradition, Arendt’s concern lies with the *consequences* of the tradition, that is, modern understandings of the human condition. This is situated against Arendt’s claim that general human capacities are permanent, that they “cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed” (1998:6). According to Arendt, however, the events of the modern world stem from men’s desire to exchange the human condition as it has been given for something man-made (1998:2-3), and they therefore constitute a threat to the permanence of general human capacities.

Of greatest concern to Arendt was the progress being made in the fields of science and technology that was not only urging, but actually enabling, men to escape the human condition of the earth through space exploration (1998:1-2). Science was also beginning to manipulate birth and creation through experiment and design, therefore threatening “the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality” (Arendt 1998:8). Technological progress, born of the economic drive for productivity and efficiency, offers liberation from “the burden of laboring and the bondage to necessity” (Arendt 1998:4), challenging the human condition of life itself. In this context, *The Human Condition* is Arendt’s attempt to explore the human condition outside the constraints imposed by both the Platonic tradition and the modern world, re-distinguishing through narrative the fundamental activities of the *vita activa*.

## CHAPTERS II-V: THE *VITA ACTIVA*

As we have seen, Arendt herself explains that the “three central chapters” of *The Human Condition* are devoted to a discussion of “labor, work, and action” (1998:5). However, Arendt begins her story not with the activities themselves but with their “proper locations” in human life (1998:73), that is, the public and private realms. According to Arendt, the *vita activa* “is always rooted in a world of men and of man-made things which it never leaves or altogether transcends” (1998:22).<sup>17</sup> In fact, these activities “would be pointless without such a location” (Arendt 1998:22). This implies that for Arendt, the locations of “human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something” (1998:22) are integral to human activities themselves. With this in mind, Arendt suggests that “the historical judgments of political communities”, by which each determined *where in the world* each activity is located, “may have their correspondence *in the nature of these activities* themselves” (1998:78, my emphasis). For this reason, Arendt embarks on her examination of the *vita activa* with a detailed discussion of the *location* of each of its activities at various points in history with the intention of illuminating their nature, not in the sense of an exhaustive analysis, but “to try to determine with some measure of assurance their political significance” (1998:78).<sup>18</sup>

Arendt begins her “historical analysis” of the *vita activa* with the political example of ancient Greece, where she finds a clear distinction between the public realm of political organisation and the private realm of the home (1998:28).<sup>19</sup> The public realm of the *polis* is the realm of freedom, and it is the common world that both relates and separates men, while the driving force of the private household is life itself, and it is

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<sup>17</sup> This is in contrast to the *vita contemplativa*, which transcends both the world and worldly things.

<sup>18</sup> This intention is a direct consequence of Arendt’s belief that the activities of the *vita activa* “have been curiously neglected by a tradition which considered it chiefly from the standpoint of the *vita contemplativa*” (Arendt 1998:78). In other words, Arendt’s understanding of the dominance of the tradition which privileges the *vita contemplativa* at the expense of man’s political capacities, leads her to consider the *vita activa* from the previously neglected standpoint of politics.

<sup>19</sup> Many reject Arendt’s interpretation of the Greek division between public and private on the grounds that it has no basis in historical evidence or fact. For example, Mulgan (1990) disputes Arendt’s fundamental claim that there was a clear division between public and private, arguing that all social life in ancient Greece can be considered political since it took place in the *polis*. In contrast to Arendt, Mulgan suggests that the public realm was neither solely reserved for speech and action nor aimed in the pursuit of immortality, and he suggests that Arendt’s portrayal is a “crude oversimplification” (1990:214). However, it is important to remember that Arendt is not attempting a systematic historical account of ancient Greece. Instead, her interpretation of it forms part of her narrative investigation into general human capacities in the modern world.

dominated by necessity. According to Arendt, this distinction between a private and public sphere of life, which corresponds to the household and political realms, was “a division upon which all ancient political thought rested as self-evident and axiomatic” (1998:28). Not only are public and private realms distinct, but they stand in direct opposition to one another (Arendt 1998:24). Yet men cannot live in one realm exclusively, and although separate realms, public and private “exist only in the form of coexistence” (Arendt 1998:59).

Returning to her examination of the modern world, Arendt argues that modern men are unfamiliar with such a “decisive division between the public and private realms...between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life”, and in the modern world it is “impossible to perceive any serious gulf between the two realms” (1998:33). Instead, “the two realms...constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself” (Arendt 1998:33). In the place of two distinct realms, Arendt contends that modern men are surrounded by ‘the social’, a single all-encompassing realm where “all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become a “collective” concern” (Arendt 1998:33):

In our understanding, the dividing line is entirely blurred, because we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping...the collective of families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-human family is what we call “society,” and its political form of organization is called “nation” (Arendt 1998:28-29).

By overcoming the division between public and private realms and replacing it with ‘the social’, the modern age effectively dismantled the “proper locations” of men’s activities, on which they depend “if they are to exist at all” (Arendt 1998:73). Arendt therefore argues that by restricting the location of men’s activities to a single realm, modern society has fundamentally altered both the nature of these activities and men’s ability to engage in them. This has corresponding implications for the human condition as it compounds man’s inability to understand the full range of his abilities and their political significance.

By discussing the importance of location to general human capacities, Arendt therefore offers some preliminary insights into the nature of these activities and their relationship to politics. By subsequently exploring the ways in which the modern age has dislocated men's activities, Arendt also offers some insight into her argument that modern men have "extraordinary difficulty" understanding fundamental distinctions within his condition. With these things in mind, Arendt moves on to her specific analysis of the three human capacities of the *vita activa* – labour, work and action – the "most elementary articulations of the human condition" (1998:5), in narrative form. Against what she sees as a traditional misrepresentation and the modern loss of distinction, Arendt attempts to unearth the original meanings and locations of these three activities, tracing various understandings throughout history and their shifting constellations with a view to comprehending the situation of the modern world.

Arendt's examination of the activities of labour, work and action is again oriented by a return to ancient Greece to consider both the nature of each activity and its political significance. There, each of the activities of the *vita activa* properly belonged in either public or private space (Betz 1992:386). Of the three activities, both labour and work properly belong in the private realm, leaving action as the only activity at home in the public realm. In addition to uncovering the depth of meaning and possibility of each activity by returning to ancient Greece, Arendt also narrates the "various constellations" of the activities of the *vita activa* "as we know them from Western history" (1998:6), that is, the changing understandings of these activities and their relationships to one another. In doing so, Arendt demonstrates the conditioning forces of particular historical circumstances with a view to arriving at an understanding of the nature of the modern world (1998:6). As such, Arendt not only attempts to illuminate the meaning and significance of general human capacities by specifically examining the activities of the *vita activa* as they manifest at various points throughout history, but by doing so, she seeks to draw to our attention the inadequacies of modern understandings of the human condition which blur its fundamental distinctions.

Arendt argues that the real danger of the modern world is not that it denies men the opportunity to engage in the fundamental activities of labour, work and action by

arranging their constellation in a particular way, but that it *puts them at stake* by threatening to change the human condition itself (1998:3). Modern man's inability to comprehend the range of distinct capacities he possesses as a result of modern thoughtlessness, suggests that the magnitude of this threat goes unnoticed. In this way, the events of the modern world form the impetus for *The Human Condition*, and by challenging modern understandings of the human condition, Arendt highlights both the diversity of general human capacities and their significance to human life, suggesting that their conflation results in a denial of fundamental human experience, including the experience of freedom.

## **CHAPTER VI: THE *VITA ACTIVA* AND THE MODERN AGE**

In this, the final chapter of the book, Arendt "deals" specifically with the modern age (see 1998:5-6). This forms the explicit "historical analysis" that Arendt proposed in the 'Prologue', and its purpose "is to trace back modern world alienation...in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome" by the modern world (1998:6).<sup>20</sup> This complements Arendt's decision to "confine" her analysis to general human capacities (1998:6), and together they enable her to consider the nature of modern man's understanding of the human condition, and assess the political consequences of modern moves to abandon it. Arendt therefore narrates the different understandings of the activities of the *vita activa* and their constellations "as we know them from Western history" (1998:6) in an attempt both to understand "the nature of these activities themselves" (1998:78) and to "arrive at an understanding of the nature of [modern] society" (1998:6).

Arendt's discussion of life in ancient Greece in the previous chapters forms the foundation of this "historical analysis". In those central chapters, Arendt attempted to uncover the original nature of the distinctions between the activities of the *vita activa*

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<sup>20</sup> Arendt 'defines' the *modern age* "scientifically", suggesting that it "began in the seventeenth century [and] came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century" (1998:6). She contrasts this with the political emergence of the *modern world*, "in which we live today", which "was born with the first atomic explosions" (1998:6). However, she explicitly declines to discuss the modern world, despite the fact that it forms the background against which *The Human Condition* was written (1998:6). This is perhaps due to its status as a beginning, meaning that it has only just been set in motion. In contrast, the *end* of the modern age means that its story can be told and its full meaning can reveal itself (Arendt 1998:192).

and their “proper” locations (1998:73). In this way, the Greek separation of labour, work and action and their corresponding locations in either public or private realms constitutes the original constellation of the activities of the *vita activa* in Arendt’s story. As we have seen, however, Arendt contends that this constellation was effected by changes in the human condition. Following the disappearance of the Greek city-state, Arendt argues that the tradition re-oriented man’s understanding of his capacities in deference to the ideal of contemplation, and the *vita activa* lost its specifically political meaning (1998:14). The assertion by the philosophers of the Socratic school that “they had found a higher principle to replace the principle of the *polis*” (Arendt 1998:18), meant that contemplation became privileged as the philosopher’s way of life. According to Arendt, this ultimately led to the “abasement of the *vita activa* to its derivative, secondary position” (1998:16). As a consequence, Arendt argues that “the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa*”, limiting our understanding of our full range of abilities (1998:17).

However, Arendt contends that the emergence of the modern age in the seventeenth century led to a break with this tradition,<sup>21</sup> eventually causing a *reversal* of the traditional hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, and a subsequent re-ordering of the internal constellation of the *vita activa*. According to Arendt, “three great events stand at the threshold of the modern age and determine its character” (1998:248), but most significant of these was the invention of the telescope.<sup>22</sup> Arendt describes this as an event of unrivalled proportions as it ended the speculation regarding the nature of the universe, delivering its secrets “to human cognition “with the certainty of sense-perception”” (1998:260). Arendt contends that in this way, the telescope, and *not* the speculation of philosophy, delivered the long sought after Archimedean point outside the earth from which to “unhinge the world” (1998:262). Arendt therefore describes Galileo’s invention as both a cause for triumph and despair (1998:262), as even though it revealed the secrets of the universe, putting

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<sup>21</sup> Significantly, this break with tradition also marked the end of the ancient distinction between public and private realms as the modern age brought with it the birth of the social realm (Arendt 1998:28).

<sup>22</sup> Arendt specifies the three “great events” that mark the beginning of the modern age as “the discovery of America and the ensuing exploration of the whole earth; the Reformation...; the invention of the telescope and the development of a new science that considers the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the universe” (1998:248). However, she pays particular attention to Galileo’s invention of the telescope, considering it a turning point in history as it spelled “the beginning of something so unexpectedly and unpredictably new that neither hope nor fear could have anticipated it” (1998:257).

within the grasp of earth-bound man “what had seemed forever beyond his reach” (Arendt 1998:260), in doing so, it challenged the adequacy of reason and the senses to reveal reality:

It was not reason but a man-made instrument, the telescope, which actually changed the physical world view; it was not contemplation, observation, and speculation which led to the new knowledge, but the active stepping in of *homo faber*, of making and fabricating (Arendt 1998:274).

According to Arendt, this made true the ancient fear that “our senses, our very organs for the reception of reality, might betray us” (1998:262). In Arendt’s re-telling of this story,<sup>23</sup> the telescope therefore led modern philosophy to turn away from the tradition (1998:276). Arendt suggests that “perhaps the most momentous of the spiritual consequences” of the discovery of the Archimedean point was the *reversal* of the hierarchical order of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* (Arendt 1998:289):

...the fundamental experience behind the reversal of contemplation and action was precisely that man’s thirst for knowledge could be assuaged only after he had put his trust into the ingenuity of his hands. The point was not that truth and knowledge were no longer important, but that they could be won only by “action” and not by contemplation (Arendt 1998:290).<sup>24</sup>

The revelations yielded by the telescope, the “secrets of the universe”, were at odds with men’s speculation, and Arendt argues that this led to the conclusion that “nothing indeed could be *less* trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching truth than passive observation or mere contemplation” (Arendt 1998:290, my emphasis). In other words, Arendt suggests that in response to the event of the advent of the telescope, men learned that certainty was dependent on activity rather than the stillness of contemplation.

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<sup>23</sup> It is important, here, to re-emphasise the *story* that Arendt tells about these events, which moves beyond a factual recount to a creative and literary interpretation that re-combines and re-imagines particular elements suited to *Arendt’s* story and her activity of storytelling. It is clear that some of these elements of Arendt’s story are over-inflated or metaphoric, but she pieces them together in this way in order to conceptualise the changing constellation of general human capacities, not to offer a systematic historic appraisal of key events of the modern age.

<sup>24</sup> By “action”, Arendt refers here to the *vita activa*, a life of activity, in distinction from the *vita contemplativa*.

Far from being a simple reversal of “the established traditional order between contemplation and doing”,<sup>25</sup> however, Arendt argues that the change was “more radical”, as it “concerned only the relationship between *thinking* and doing, whereas contemplation, in the original sense of beholding the truth, was altogether eliminated” (Arendt 1998:291, my emphasis).<sup>26</sup> To explain, Arendt contends that doing (the *vita activa*) was not simply elevated to the rank occupied by contemplating (the *vita contemplativa*), “as though henceforth doing was the ultimate meaning for the sake of which contemplation was to be performed” (1998:291). Instead, the reversal affected *only thinking*, and “contemplation itself became altogether meaningless” (Arendt 1998:292). According to Arendt, thinking had traditionally served contemplation, but following the loss of certainty, contemplation was lost from “the range of ordinary human experience” (1998:304), leaving thinking to become “the handmaiden of doing as it had been...the handmaiden of contemplating divine truth in medieval philosophy and the handmaiden of contemplating the truth of Being in ancient philosophy” (1998:292).

In light of the decline of the *vita contemplativa*, and in the absence of the traditional hierarchy, Arendt contends that the distinctions between the activities of the *vita activa* re-appeared and their constellation was re-configured. According to Arendt, “first among the activities within the *vita activa* to rise to the position formerly occupied by contemplation were the activities of making and fabricating – the prerogatives of *homo faber*” (1998:294). Arendt argues that this was “natural enough” as it was the fabrication of a tool, the telescope, and “man in so far as he is a toolmaker”, which had led to “the modern revolution” (1998:295). As a result, the modern age quickly became characterised by the “typical attitudes” of *homo faber*, including instrumentalisation, confidence in tools and productivity, the principle of utility, and trust in ingenuity (Arendt 1998:305). At the same time, however, there was a significant shift in the way in which the activity of work was understood, and the very understanding of making changed from *what* a thing is to *how* and through *what process* it was produced. The modern conception of work emphasised the *means* as

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<sup>25</sup> Again, by ‘doing’, Arendt refers here to *activity*, that is, the *vita activa*.

<sup>26</sup> This point hinges on the fact that “thought and contemplation are not the same” (Arendt 1998:291). While contemplation is a passivity, “the complete stillness in which truth is revealed to man”, thinking is a “highly active state” even though it “lacks all outward manifestation and even requires a more or less complete cessation of all other activities” (Arendt 1998:291). We will discuss this distinction in more detail in Chapter 6.

opposed to the end, and *homo faber* was denied the permanence that precedes and outlasts the fabrication process. Arendt argues that this, coupled with the modern development of commercial society and the triumph of exchange value over value for use, meant that the esteem of *homo faber* was short-lived and it was “quickly followed by the elevation of laboring to the highest position in the hierarchical order of the *vita activa*” (Arendt 1998:306). In this way, the central human concern shifted from the world to the biological life process and the forces of nature.

Arendt argues that this change in the constellation of the *vita activa*, in which labour was elevated to the peak of the internal hierarchy, had significant consequences for *all* of man’s activities as it brought labour out of the private realm, resulting in an “unnatural growth of the natural” (1998:47). According to Arendt, the new-found publicity of labour transformed it from a “circular, monotonous recurrence” (1998:47) to the *only human concern*, that is, individual life and the survival of mankind began to overrule all other considerations and undermine all other human capacities. As a result, Arendt argues that modern men came to be confined to the life process, and once again, the ancient distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* disappeared as all activities became equally subject to the necessities of life (1998:316):

None of the higher capacities of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process, and to labor, to assure the continuity of one’s own life and the life of his family, was all that was needed (Arendt 1998:321).

It is this understanding of the nature of modern life that Arendt’s story had been hoping to uncover. By elevating labour to the pinnacle of human activities, the modern age re-conceived action in terms of making and fabricating, while work itself was conflated with labour and reduced to a function of the life process. Workmanship was replaced with the mass production of products to be consumed rather than used (Arendt 1998:322), and instead of building a permanent human artifice, *homo faber* was confined to the endless reproduction of consumables.<sup>27</sup> As such, Arendt contends that “the ideals of *homo faber*, the fabricator of the world, which are permanence, stability, and durability, have been sacrificed to abundance,

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<sup>27</sup> In Arendt’s appraisal, the modern labouring mentality declares that anything that is produced must either be consumed or fed back into the system in an endless cycle of consumption and repetition.

the ideal of the *animal laborans*" (Arendt 1998:126). This series of shifts has a significant impact on modern men's ability to understand the range of general human capacities which grow out of the human condition. As a consequence, many of man's capacities go unrealised in modern life.

For Arendt, this reduction in the depth of general human capacities and new focus on necessity and consumption also have political significance in the sense that men are no longer able to relate to one another in their plurality. Instead, modern society is characterised by the futility of labour, and individuals are imprisoned in their own subjective singular experience of the life process. Rather than being reserved for action and politics, the public realm is dominated by necessity, and the life process, the most privative element of existence, has been given public significance. For Arendt, this loss of the public realm, strictly speaking,<sup>28</sup> means the *loss of politics*, and men are trapped in a cycle of necessity and conformity, deprived of the fundamental experience of freedom. Arendt argues that in its place, contemporary politics has become a tool for utilitarian ends rather than a common space for action and remembrance, that is, we have lost sight of the original idea of politics as an end in itself:

We no longer believe that there are great words and deeds that stand out as single events that disrupt the endless circularity of daily life. In the worldless view of mass society, where the sole criterion is the natural, the biological, all events are merely parts of processes (Topf 1978:359).<sup>29</sup>

As a result, the corresponding opportunities for greatness, individuality, performance and immortality that arise from public speech and action have disappeared.

For Arendt, the significance of the modern constellation of the *vita activa* is not so much that it admitted labourers to the public realm, but that labour became the criterion against which all other activities were *understood*: "The emancipation of labor has not resulted in an equality of this activity with the other activities of the *vita activa*, but in its almost *undisputed predominance*" (Arendt 1998:128, my emphasis).

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<sup>28</sup> According to Arendt, "as long as the *animal laborans* remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open" (1998:134).

<sup>29</sup> This, in fact, is Arendt's definition of dark times: "periods...in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than that it show due consideration for their vital interests and personal liberty" (Arendt 1968a:11).

In modern society, according to Arendt, all human activities have been levelled to the common denominator of making a living, and “every activity unconnected with labor becomes a “hobby”” (1998:128): “The playfulness of the artist is felt to fulfil the same function in the laboring life process of society as the playing of tennis or the pursuit of a hobby fulfils in the life of the individual” (Arendt 1998:128). Arendt’s concern, therefore, is not with labour *itself*, but with the range of consequences she saw “in the fact that modern society is organized *around labor*” (Tsao 2002:117, my emphasis) at the expense of all other activities. This represents a fundamental loss of both politics and depth to the range of human experience. In this way, Arendt’s examination of the domination of labour in the modern age attempts to draw our attention to the inability of men in the modern world to experience the range of general human capacities inherent in the human condition.

Arendt’s story therefore suggests that while various constellations of the *vita activa* have existed throughout history, the modern age culminated in a particular constellation that elevated labour and necessity to the peak of its hierarchy. As such, she argues that modern life has been saturated by the biological life process, and all human activities have lost their distinction in the sense that they are all equally subject to the necessities of life and re-understood in light of its concerns. In this way, the modern constellation of the *vita activa* both reduces the range of ordinary human experience and limits men’s awareness of capacities that are fundamental to their condition by defining them from the standpoint of a single human concern: labour and the necessities of human life. For Arendt, this leaves men in no better position than the traditional hierarchy which privileged the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*, defining all activities from the viewpoint of the stillness of contemplation. Like contemplation, the superiority of labour blurs the distinctions between work and action and denies men the opportunity to engage in these activities or understand their significance. Worse than the traditional hierarchy, however, Arendt contends that contemplation itself has been lost from “the range of ordinary experience” (1998:304), limiting the depth of potential human existence even further.

By juxtaposing the modern constellation of the *vita activa* with the ancient Greek understanding of the nature and location of these same activities, Arendt’s story attempts to draw to our attention both lost experiences and “an alternative means of

understanding politics” (Redhead 2002:813). However, Arendt’s return to ancient Greece is not meant as a call to revive its practices, rather, it provides a means for her to illuminate what she sees as deficiencies in modern understandings of the human condition. In contrast to the Greek division between public and private realms, the modern birth of ‘the social’ has destroyed the “proper locations” of the activities of the *vita activa* (1998:73). Without a distinction between things to be shown in public and those to be hidden in private (Arendt 1998:73), everything is equally permitted for public presentation. As a result, Arendt contends that the life process overshadows all other concerns and modern men lose sight of anything outside the public display of necessity. It is *this* that forms the impetus for *The Human Condition*, motivating Arendt to reinvigorate modern understandings of the human condition by re-distinguishing a range of general human capacities and reasserting their political nature. In the face of overwhelming necessity, Arendt’s story about general human capacities attempts to remind us of the magnitude of just what is at stake in the modern desire to abandon human existence “as it has been given” (Arendt 1998:2). Without a full understanding of the range of general human capacities that remain permanent features of the human condition, modern men themselves are unaware of what is really at stake.

### **3. General Human Capacities**

As this chapter has attempted to explain, *The Human Condition* takes the form of a narrative exploration of general human capacities in an attempt to rectify what Arendt sees as deficiencies in modern understandings of the human condition. According to Arendt, we can best discover the lost meanings of terms and concepts through “the art of distinction” (Benhabib 2003:123):

By exploring distinctions Arendt reminds us of the various implications of the ways in which we talk, of what our words once meant, and of the forms of life and ways of looking at the world to which these words once referred (Biskowski 1993:872).

This notion of distinguishing between activities and their locations is central to *The Human Condition* as, according to Arendt, both tradition and the modern age have blurred and conflated the *particularity* of both. It is *because* these distinctions were

unfamiliar in the modern world that Arendt pursued them, and she hoped to reinvigorate an understanding of the differences within the human condition to reclaim its depth and meaning. As such, Arendt's story about the various constellations of the activities of the *vita activa* throughout Western history narrates the different ways in which they have been understood in order to discover why such distinctions are *no longer* "self-evident and axiomatic" (Arendt 1998:28). Arendt's historical analysis therefore serves the dual purpose of uncovering the distinct and hidden meanings and potentialities of men's capacities and highlighting the contrasting meaning and significance of those same capacities in contemporary times.

Arendt's narrative about the *vita activa* leads her to conclude that the modern world is marked by a striking loss of human experience:

If we compare the modern world with that of the past, the loss of human experience involved in this development is extraordinarily striking. It is not only and not even primarily contemplation which has become an entirely meaningless experience. Thought itself, when it became "reckoning with consequences," became a function of the brain, with the result that electronic instruments are found to fulfil these functions much better than we ever could. Action was soon and still is almost exclusively understood in terms of making and fabricating, only that making, because of its worldliness and inherent indifference to life, was now regarded as but another form of laboring, a more complicated but not a more mysterious function of the life process (Arendt 1998:321-322).

To put this another way, the rise of society since the modern age has seen a "striking" decline in men's *activity*:

The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing...disappeared. What was left was a "natural force," the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted (Arendt 1998:321).

Here, Arendt suggests that *all* capacities have become redundant at the hands of the "victory of the *animal laborans*" (Arendt 1998:320). This is a significant blow to the human condition as men lose depth from the range of human experience, being singularly subjected to the forces of life rather than actively creating the world and actualising their full potential.

In an interesting twist, Arendt argues that modern men also seek liberation from labour, the last activity left to them (1998:5). Advances in technology and automation mean that the “elimination of labor from the range of human activities can no longer be regarded as utopian” (Arendt 1998:322).<sup>30</sup> Following the final “liberation” from labour, labouring society will be transformed into “a society of jobholders”, characterised by “sheer automatic functioning” (Arendt 1998:322). When this happens it will be:

...as though individual life had actually been submerged in the overall life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, “tranquilized,” functional type of behavior (Arendt 1998:322).

Arendt contends that this threatens the status of the *vita activa* even further as it means that men will no longer participate in *any activity* at all:

It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile *passivity* history has ever known (Arendt 1998:322, my emphasis).

In other words, Arendt argues that the modern age *began* by abandoning the tradition and overcoming the ideal of contemplation, which has its basis in stillness and quiet, the “complete surcease from political activity” (1998:14). As we have seen, for Arendt, this meant that all human activities were dominated by a single concern – the pursuit of eternal truth. Despite reclaiming activity at its beginning, however, Arendt argues that by the *end* of the modern age, men had again become dominated by a single concern, not by contemplation and eternal truth, but by labour and the necessities of biological life.

Despite its historical dimension, Arendt’s reconsideration of the human condition is situated firmly in the modern world and it is framed against a series of modern events, including space exploration, scientific discovery and the creation of artificial life. As such, while Arendt frames her discussion in terms of “those general human

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<sup>30</sup> Arendt argues that “even now, laboring is too lofty, too ambitious a word for what we are doing, or think we are doing, in the world we have come to live in” (1998:322). Although confined to the life process, men no longer really *labour*, as the earth and the private realm in which it belongs have been fundamentally transformed.

capacities which...are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed" (1998:6), she does so in the context of modern events and developments which *do* seek to change the human condition and therefore threaten the "irretrievable loss" of general human capacities. Faced with such a loss, Arendt's narrative about general human capacities and their role and meaning in human life takes on new significance. Unlike the various periods in history which have *obscured* men's understanding of the range of general human capacities by re-defining them all in relation to a superior standard – be it contemplation or labour – modern events threaten the permanent *loss* of these capacities from the human condition. Indeed, many of these events themselves are the result of human efforts to exchange the human condition as given for something men have made themselves (Arendt 1998:2-3). As such, it appears that the implications of our obscured understanding of general human capacities are that, in the absence of understanding the depth of the human condition and the range of potential human experience, men choose to abandon it without comprehending just what is at stake.

While advances in science and technology give men the *ability* to overcome both the human condition and general human capacities, Arendt argues that the capacities of the *vita activa* have *not yet* been irretrievably lost:

Needless to say, this does not mean that modern man has lost his capacities or is on the point of losing them. No matter what sociology, psychology, and anthropology will tell us about the "social animal," men persist in making, fabricating, and building, although these faculties are more and more restricted to the abilities of the artist, so that the concomitant experiences of worldliness escape more and more the range of ordinary human experience. Similarly, the capacity for action, at least in the sense of the releasing of processes, is still with us, although it has become the exclusive prerogative of the scientists, who have enlarged the realm of human affairs to the point of extinguishing the time-honoured protective dividing line between nature and the human world (Arendt 1998:323-324).

In the final pages of the book, Arendt suggests that the fact that artists and scientists still perform the activities of work and action respectively, is evidence that the capacities of the *vita activa* have not been completely lost. However, artists and scientists *qua* artists and scientists, do not participate in the web of human relationships, and the revelatory aspect of action is no longer among the activities of

any section of society. As such, the *political* components of work and action have disappeared as neither appears in public or makes reference to a plurality of men who together constitute the world. Further to this, these activities are no longer *general* human capacities, strictly speaking, as they “escape more and more the range of ordinary human experience”, being confined to the experience of the very few (Arendt 1998:323). In this way, although the exchange of human existence as it has been given, for something man has made himself, “still may lie in a distant future”, the “first boomerang effects” of the events of the modern world “have made themselves felt” in the loss of *activity itself* from “the range of ordinary human experience” (1998:3). This suggests that in the absence of any real change in men’s perception of the human condition, general human capacities will no longer be general in the sense that they will be widely lost at the hands of modern events.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In light of this discussion, it is apparent that general human capacities are not only central to the content of *The Human Condition*, but an understanding of them more generally forms Arendt’s motivation for writing it. As we have seen, Arendt understands general human capacities as key components of the human condition that describe a range of experiences available to men which give depth to human life. These general human capacities are permanent possibilities so long as the human condition itself does not change. However, our ability to exercise these capacities is impeded by particular circumstances, and these, in turn, compound our inability to understand the range of general human capacities and their significance to the human condition. The circumstances of the modern world, including “our newest experiences and most recent fears” (Arendt 1998:5), are such that modern men have “extraordinary difficulty” understanding general human capacities, and as a consequence, they wish to exchange the human condition as given for something they have made themselves (Arendt 1998:2-3). For Arendt, this is highly problematic as it not only means that men are unaware of their fundamental abilities, the range of experiences available to them, and their political dimensions, but it implies that modern men seek to alter the human condition unaware of the significance of this

decision. This speaks more generally to Arendt's contention that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics" of the modern world (1998:5).

It is to highlight these shortcomings in modern understandings of the human condition – founded on the dual misconceptions of the Platonic tradition which idolised contemplation, and a series of modern events including the birth of 'the social' – that Arendt embarks on a narrative exploration of general human capacities. Both the tradition and modern circumstances limit the range of men's experiences as they impact his ability to understand the human condition. By illuminating the capabilities inherent in the human condition in terms of the distinct activities of labour, work and action as they appear in a variety of historical contexts, including ancient Greece, Arendt reminds us of "lost experiences and atrophied capacities" (Buckler 2007:473), the permanent potentialities of the human condition that go unrealised in contemporary times. In doing so, Arendt both challenges and inspires modern men to think in new ways about the human condition and the activities fundamental to human life against modern inclinations.

However, this challenge itself is thwarted by the complexity of Arendt's story, as her presentation of general human capacities is embedded in a narrative that comprehends multiple historical contexts. Arendt does not simply present us with a series of conceptual definitions by which we can re-orient our lives, nor does she answer the "preoccupations and perplexities" of modern life (see 1998:5). Instead, what she presents us with is a rich and interesting story that weaves together particular fragments of historical experience. While we can appreciate the story for what it is, a narrative exploration of general human capacities against the backdrop of the modern world, how are we to make sense of Arendt's claims about modern life in the absence of any real instruction from her? How exactly does this story about general human capacities help us to better understand the modern human condition? And, what exactly are we meant to take from it? This lack of clear direction from Arendt regarding the book's meaning for its readers is a real problem in terms of any attempt to reconsider it. What exactly are we meant to *do* with Arendt's story?

In an attempt to find answers to these questions and deal with this problem of making sense of Arendt's storytelling, the remainder of Part I situates *The Human Condition*

in a broader context. By considering the way in which some other key thinkers have tackled an investigation of the human condition and general human capacities, Part I hopes to be able to reveal by contrast just what it is about *The Human Condition* that is so original and how we might make sense of it. As such, the remainder of Part I juxtaposes Arendt's work with that of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau. These particular thinkers were chosen as they share Arendt's concern for politics and the range of human activities that enable men to live a full and flourishing life characterised by a depth of human experience. This story about general human capacities therefore continues by appropriating the Arendtian techniques of fragmentary historiography and storytelling in order to draw on thought fragments from both the past and other thinkers to gain a deeper understanding. By weaving together a series of insights about general human capacities, Part I hopes to find new meaning, not only in the story itself, but in Arendt's decision to "confine" her analysis to "those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed" (1998:5).

## CHAPTER TWO:

# Aristotle

The previous chapter outlined Arendt's understanding of general human capacities as it appears in *The Human Condition*. By unpacking her complex narrative, we were able to see that, according to Arendt, the problem with the modern world is that men no longer have an adequate understanding of the human condition or the general human capacities that grow out of it, leaving them incapable of comprehending the consequences of modern developments. By illuminating the capabilities inherent in the human condition as they appear in a variety of contexts, most notably ancient Greece, Arendt reminds us of permanent potentialities of the human condition that go unrealised in modern times. However, as we noted in the conclusion of the previous chapter, Arendt's move to tell a story about general human capacities, in which she narratively combines seemingly disparate examples and fragments of history, presents us with a series of problems in terms of interpretation. Most immediately, how are we to make sense of *The Human Condition*? How does Arendt's story about general human capacities help us to better understand the modern human condition? And, why does she frame the book in this way?

The remainder of Part I hopes to find answers to these questions by considering Arendt's story in the broader context of political theory. In doing so, it hopes to discover through contrast just what it is about *The Human Condition* that makes it so

significant. With this in mind, Part I appropriates the Arendtian techniques of fragmentary historiography and storytelling to weave together a series of insights about general human capacities. This parallels *The Human Condition* in the sense that it deals with the “various constellations” of general human capacities as they present themselves in key chapters of the history of political thought (see 1998:6), in Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau. This chapter begins this consideration of general human capacities in a broader context by exploring the work of Aristotle. It does not assess Aristotle’s work in all its detail, nor does it test the validity of his key claims. Instead, its purpose is to examine Aristotle’s understanding of general human capacities with a view to assessing how it differs from Arendt’s. It argues that Aristotle’s constellation of general human capacities is implied in his hierarchy of virtues. However, Aristotle shifts the emphasis from the capacities themselves to a judgement of the proficiency of their performance.

This chapter begins its exploration of Aristotle’s understanding of general human capacities by examining the political context of Aristotle’s work, his background and motivations, and his explicit focus on practical application rather than theoretical understanding. Although Aristotle’s work is extensive and broad in scope, this chapter focuses on his notion of the good life in the *Ethics*, and its relationship to the *Politics*. The complementary elements of politics and “activity in accordance with virtue” explicated in these works not only constitute a practical guide to the good life, they also implicitly reveal Aristotle’s constellation of general human capacities, that is, the range of activities and capacities that Aristotle sees as inherent human potentials. By providing an account of Aristotle’s notions of life, politics and the capacities of man, this chapter discusses the ways in which this understanding leads us to an Aristotelian view of the human condition. By doing so, this chapter hopes to provide a new way to interpret *The Human Condition*.

## **1. Framework**

Aristotle occupies a position of dominance in the canon of political philosophy (Sherman 1999:vii), and his profound influence on many fields of thought continues until this day. Born in Stagira, ancient Greece, in 384BC, Aristotle was sent to study

at Plato's Academy at the age of eighteen and remained there until Plato's death in 347BC. Aristotle's life in the Academy "served as a kind of model for him, of how human life should ideally be lived", as there he was free from everyday concerns to engage "in a common and even competitive search for the truth" (Pakaluk 2005:18). This search for truth extended across a wide range of subjects, from philosophy to ethics, politics, biology, logic, aesthetics, rhetoric, mathematics and metaphysics.

Aristotle's philosophy is marked by a distinctive method underpinned by the basic assumption that human beings are built by nature to discover the truth (Pakaluk 2005:25). As a result, Aristotle holds considered opinion in high esteem and he relies on *endoxa*, widespread or reliable opinions, to provide data for theorising (Pakaluk 2005:26). Aristotle thus begins his philosophical investigations by canvassing *endoxa*, including those of his philosophical predecessors, in order to consider the contradictions or perplexities, the *aporiai*, that arise from disparate opinions, resolve them, and ultimately arrive at a satisfactory account (Pakaluk 2005:29). As Aristotle puts it in the *Ethics*:

Here, as in all our other discussions we must first set out the evidence, and then, after calling attention to the difficulties, proceed to establish, if possible, all the received opinions about these affections, or failing that, as many as we can of those that are best supported. For if the discrepancies are resolved and received opinions left validated, the truth will be sufficiently demonstrated (Aristotle 2004:168).

In this way, Aristotle is often considered "a systematic philosopher" (Irwin 1980:50),<sup>31</sup> and his conclusions more measured than revolutionary (Pakaluk 2005:27).

While much of Aristotle's work was based in *theoria*, the observation and contemplation of truth, both the *Ethics* and the *Politics* belong to the separate branch of knowledge which is based in practice. As Sinclair puts it:

...these sciences have a practical aim and the students were expected to become in some measure practitioners. In *Ethics* and *Politics*, for example, it does not suffice to learn what things are; they must find out also *what can be done* about them (Sinclair 1992:15, my emphasis).

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<sup>31</sup> For this reason, we are able to lay out Aristotle's philosophy in terms of a concrete system with clear conceptual boundaries. This is a clear contrast to Arendt's narrative style which does not easily lend itself to systematisation in this way.

In other words, Aristotle's political and moral philosophy has a focus on political and moral *activity* or *practice*, rather than passive theoretical understanding. As explained by Taylor, "the principle object of his lectures on conduct [*Ethics*] is not to tell his hearers what goodness is, but to make them good, and similarly it is quite plain that *Politics* was intended as a text-book for legislators" (1955:88). As a consequence, Aristotle warns against universality in practical philosophy as the diversity of individuals and circumstances makes finding general truths virtually impossible (Taylor 1955:89). Instead, Aristotle hopes to develop conclusions that hold "for the most part", suggesting that "we must be satisfied with a broad outline of the truth" when considering politics or morality as this is the extent of clarity that "the subject-matter allows" (Aristotle 2004:5).

## **2. The Good Life: Activity in Accordance with Virtue**

A central and recurring theme in Aristotle's work is the idea of the good life. This is significant to our investigation of general human capacities as it is here that Aristotle discusses the function of man in terms of his innate capabilities. Aristotle begins his investigation of the good life in the *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>32</sup> with the suggestion that "every action and pursuit is considered to aim at some good" (2004:3). If there is some activity that "we want for its own sake, and for the sake of which we want all the other ends" then this end must be "the supreme good", that is, this must be the object of life (Aristotle 2004:4). Aristotle deduces that a knowledge of this good is "of great importance to us for the conduct of our lives" as we are "more likely to achieve our aim if we have a target" (2004:4). But just what is this "supreme good"? By Aristotle's account, there is "pretty general agreement" that the highest of all goods is happiness (2004:7; compare 1992:391-393),<sup>33</sup> because unlike other good qualities

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<sup>32</sup> Debate continues over the difference, overlap and even origins of this work in comparison to *The Eudemian Ethics*, however, the uncertainty regarding the relationship of these two works may never be resolved (Pakaluk 2005; Warne 2006; Hardie 1968).

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle himself uses the Greek word *eudaimonia*, literally meaning blessed by a spirit or god and suggestive of prosperity and good fortune (Pakaluk 2005:48; Ross 1949:190). *Eudaimonia* is unlike anything else, and it "must be final, something that is chosen always for its own sake, never as a means to anything else. And it must be self-sufficient, something which by itself makes life worthy of being chosen" (Ross 1949:191). *Eudaimonia* is most commonly translated into English as 'happiness', and although this carries a different set of emotional connotations, Pakaluk suggests that this translation "will do well enough, so long as we keep in mind some basic differences between how Aristotle...understood *eudaimonia*, and how we tend to think of happiness" (2005:48). However, Arendt rejects this simplistic translation on the grounds that *eudaimonia* is *not* happiness. Unlike

such as honour, pleasure or intelligence which we choose *for the sake of* happiness, “in the belief that they will be instrumental in promoting it” (2004:14), we always choose happiness for itself “and never for any other reason” (2004:14). For Aristotle, happiness is therefore “the supreme good”, the object of life, and the good life is one that is happy: “Happiness, then, is found to be something perfect and self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed” (Aristotle 2004:15).<sup>34</sup>

Aristotle acknowledges that “to say that happiness is the supreme good seems a platitude, and some more distinctive account of it is still required” (2004:15). By considering particular men and their specific functions, that is, the particular activities of particular men, Aristotle suggests that goodness lies in the *performance of function*. While men have many functions in the sense that they are capable of many activities (Aristotle gives the examples here of flute-playing, sculpting, shoe-making and joinery), Aristotle argues that “a human being has a function over and above these particular functions” that describes the highest and best kind of life (2004:15). For Aristotle, goodness implies performing this function “well and rightly”, or in accordance with its “distinctive excellence” (2004:16). Piecing these elements together, he ultimately concludes that “the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” (2004:16), where virtue means any sort of excellence or distinctive power (Pakaluk 2005:5).<sup>35</sup>

In order to better understand the nature of “the supreme good”, Aristotle proceeds in the *Ethics*, to examine the nature of virtue, the distinctive characteristics of excellence that relate to man’s function, that is, the things that men can *do*:

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happiness which is a passing mood that might come and go, *eudaimonia*, “like life itself, is a lasting state of being which is neither subject to change nor capable of being changed” (Arendt 1998:193). Despite these difficulties, however, this chapter follows the revised translation by Tredennick (2004) which translates *eudaimonia* exclusively as ‘happiness’.

<sup>34</sup> Although Aristotle has no doubt that the supreme good of life is happiness, he acknowledges that views of happiness differ (2004:6), and he systematically considers many such views in order to better understand the notion of happiness and confirm its status as the supreme good for man.

<sup>35</sup> Assuming that everything has an inherent function, a virtue is a trait which makes something achieve its function well. For example, the function of a knife is to cut. So a *good* knife is one that achieves its function, that is, cutting, well. This is demonstrated by the phrase, “the knife cuts in virtue of its sharpness” (Pakaluk 2005:5). This means that if a knife possesses the virtue of sharpness it will be a *good* knife, whereas a knife without this virtue will be a *bad* knife (Pakaluk 2005:5). In other words, a virtue describes an accomplishment, an achievement of a task or a show of strength (Armstrong 1958:260), making virtue itself an “independent end” (Collins 2004:47).

Since happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue we must examine the nature of virtue, for perhaps in this way we shall be better able to form a view about happiness too (Aristotle 2004:27).

At the same time, Aristotle argues that the science that studies the supreme good is politics, “the most authoritative and directive science” (2004:4). This emphasis on politics and practical affairs means, as remarked above, that the *Ethics* is a prescription *for practice* rather than an exercise in theoretical understanding. As such, by examining the character of man and outlining the virtues that constitute the good life, Aristotle aims to help men actually *be good* and do what is right (Pakaluk 2005:15), for “the object of [these lectures] is not knowledge but action” (Aristotle 2004:6). In other words, Aristotle aims to provide instruction on the good life, or a life of happiness, by describing the kinds of activities and their standards of excellence that constitute it.<sup>36</sup> This well-defined purpose is a key difference from Arendt’s narrative exploration, which, as we have seen, does not give such clear direction. The further consequences of this difference in aim will become clearer below.

We have already seen that Aristotle has defined happiness as an *activity of the soul* (2004:28). He defers to already established results to explain that the soul “is part rational and part irrational” (2004:28).<sup>37</sup> As a consequence, Aristotle argues that virtue can also be divided into two classes “in accordance with this differentiation of the soul” (2004:30), namely, intellectual and moral virtue: “Some virtues are called intellectual and others moral; wisdom and understanding and prudence are intellectual, liberality and temperance are moral virtues” (Aristotle 2004:30). By considering each category of virtue and separating its various examples, Aristotle provides a comprehensive list of man’s activities and a description of their standards of excellence. However, these same standards remain open to the particularity of

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<sup>36</sup> Aristotle assumes that his audience will have a certain level of experience of action (Burnyeat 1980:72) and are already familiar with the virtues instilled in them by a good upbringing (Burnyeat 1980:78). He is therefore in a sense ‘preaching to the converted’ rather than trying to persuade everyone to be virtuous. As explained by Burnyeat, “he is giving a course in practical thinking to enable someone who already wants to be virtuous to understand better what he should do and why” (1980:81).

<sup>37</sup> “Some aspects of psychology are adequately treated in discourses elsewhere, and we should make use of the results: e.g. that the soul is part rational and part irrational” (Aristotle 2004:28). The translator’s note offers no clarification as to which “discourses” Aristotle is referring to here, stating only that “whether the reference is to Aristotle’s own popular courses or to views expressed by others (e.g. at the Academy) is uncertain” (Tredennick in Aristotle 2004:28, translator’s note).

men in the sense that for Aristotle, politics is not an exact science and our account of it can only achieve “such clarity as the subject-matter allows” (2004:5).

## **MORAL VIRTUE**

The moral virtues relate to character. According to Aristotle, while we are born with the capacity for the moral virtues, they are only *acquired* through practice and habituation (Aristotle 2004:31; Taylor 1955:93):

But the virtues we do acquire by first exercising them, just as happens in the arts. Anything that we have to learn to do we learn in the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones (Aristotle 2004:32).

In other words, nature does not endow us with the virtues themselves, but rather, with the potential for them, and we “effect their actualization” *through activity* (Aristotle 2004:31; also Kosman 1980:103). For example, we actualise our potential for courage by performing courageous acts, and in this way, eventually establish courage as part of our *character*.

However, the exercise of virtue alone is not enough to be virtuous, and we must match it to the correct disposition when acting:

It is *the way* that we behave in our dealings with other people that makes us just or unjust, and the way that we behave in the face of danger, accustoming ourselves to be timid or confident, that makes us brave or cowardly (Aristotle 2004:32, my emphasis).

According to Aristotle, moral virtue “disposes us to act in the best way with regard to pleasures and pains” and good conduct consists in a “proper attitude” towards both (2004:36):

A man who abstains from bodily pleasures and enjoys the very fact of doing so is temperate; if he finds it irksome he is licentious. Again, the man who faces danger gladly, or at least without distress, is brave; the one who feels distressed is a coward (Aristotle 2004:35).

This means that a person is not good merely because they perform good acts. Rather, they must perform such acts as a matter of character (Kosman 1980:103; Sullivan 1977:165).<sup>38</sup> In other words, inclination and morality must work together.

In his preliminary explanation of how we become virtuous, Aristotle uses several of the moral virtues as examples, including the ones mentioned here: courage, justice and temperance. As already noted, however, his emphasis on particularity precludes universally binding descriptions, and his explicit account of the moral virtues takes the form of a “diagram” (2004:43) which shows the *general form* that advice involving character related virtue needs to take (Pakaluk 2005:109).<sup>39</sup> According to Aristotle, “it is in the nature of moral qualities that they are destroyed by deficiency and excess” (2004:34), and as a consequence, he understood moral virtue as a state that lies on a continuum “in a mean or middle point between two extremes” (Guthrie 1950:154). This is Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the mean’. For example:

The man who shuns and fears everything and stands up to nothing becomes a coward; the man who is afraid of nothing at all, but marches up to every danger, becomes foolhardy. Similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none becomes licentious; but if a man behaves like a boor and turns his back on every pleasure, he is a case of insensibility. Thus temperance and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency and preserved by the mean (Aristotle 2004:34).

In deference to the particularity of circumstances, this mean is not in relation to the virtue itself, that is, “equidistant from the extremes, which is one and the same for everybody”, rather, it is a mean in relation to *us*, “that which is neither excessive nor deficient, and this is *not* one and the same for all” (Aristotle 2004:40). In other words, virtue is dependent upon the agent, and the intermediate state is relative to the particular qualities of the individual (Pakaluk 2005:112). Aristotle offers the following clarification:

Supposing that ten pounds of food is a large and two pounds a small allowance for an athlete, it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six

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<sup>38</sup> However, we cannot perform good acts to *become* good in character as virtue must be chosen for its own sake and cannot be chosen as a means to another end (Sorabji 1980:202; also Hutchinson 1995:201).

<sup>39</sup> While Aristotle attempts to present a systematic vision of how life should be lived (Kraut 1999:97), he simultaneously argues that his vision will not be universally applicable as “too much depends upon the ways in which individual persons differ and the ways in which circumstances and situations vary” (Sullivan 1977:11).

pounds; for even this is perhaps too much or too little for the person who is to receive it – too little for Milo but too much for one who is only beginning to train (Aristotle 2004:40).

This means that although moral virtue has a general form, it will take on particular characteristics that “will be different for persons of different constitutions and in different conditions” (Taylor 1955:95).

In light of this, Aristotle’s “diagram” outlines an exhaustive list of the moral virtues which lie relative to an excess and a deficiency in every field of action (2004:43-46). First is the virtue of *courage* which “is a mean state in relation to feelings of fear and confidence” (Aristotle 2004:66). As explained by Ross, “this is not to say that the courageous man does not feel fear. Rather, he is able to control it” (1949:204). According to Aristotle, “in the strict sense of the word the courageous man will be one who is fearless in the face of an honourable death, or of some sudden threat of death; and it is in war that such situations chiefly occur” (2004:67). However, given the relative quality of virtue, an action could be deemed courageous if done for the right reasons outside the sphere of war. The virtue of *temperance* “connotes sobriety and chasteness; a certain humility; a tranquillity, ease and serenity that comes of self possession” (Pakaluk 2005:167). It is concerned primarily with the operation of the body, and specifically to bodily pleasures such as food and sex, which Aristotle refers to as “low and brutish” as they are shared by animals (2004:77). As such, temperance suggests “a certain clarity and self-possession in reason, which a person maintains even while enjoying the satisfaction of bodily appetites” (Pakaluk 2005:167).

The virtue of *liberality* “seems to be the intermediate disposition with regard to money” (Aristotle 2004:82), and it suggests that men should neither be driven by, nor beholden to, the things they own. The virtue of *magnificence* also relates to money “but unlike liberality it does not extend to all financial transactions but only to such as involve expenditure”, and as its name implies, “it is befitting expenditure on a large scale” (Aristotle 2004:89). Magnificence therefore requires wealth, and although a “man who spends duly in small or moderate transactions” is liberal, he is not magnificent as this belongs only to the man who spends “on a grand scale” (Aristotle 2004:89). As such, the relationship between liberality and magnificence is not

reciprocal, as “although the magnificent man is liberal, the liberal man is not necessarily magnificent” (Aristotle 2004:89). The virtue of *magnanimity* relates to “greatness of soul” (Aristotle 2004:93) and belongs to the field of honour and dishonour. According to Aristotle:

...a person is considered to be magnanimous if he thinks he is worthy of great things, provided that he is worthy of them; because anyone who esteems his own worth unduly is foolish, and nobody who acts virtuously is foolish or stupid (2004:93).

Magnanimity demands respect and honour on a grand scale, and “the only way to deserve such things is to have the other virtues as well, so this virtue is “a sort of crown of the virtues”” (Hutchinson 1995:227). Further to this, “in contrast to the courageous man, who still distinguishes virtue as an end from his own “greatest goods”, the magnanimous man now wholly identifies virtue as the greatest of his goods” (Collins 2004:51). On a more moderate scale, the virtue of *proper ambition* also relates to honour and dishonour and lies in a mean between ambition and unambitiousness. In the field of anger the virtue of *patience* is a mean which lies between irascibility and lack of spirit:

The man who gets angry at the right things and with the right people, and also in the right way and at the right time and for the right length of time, is commended; so this person will be patient, inasmuch as patience is commendable, because a patient person tends to be unperturbed and not carried away by his feelings, but indignant only in the way and on the grounds and for the length of time that his principle prescribes (Aristotle 2004:101).

Aristotle also identifies the virtues of *truthfulness*, *wittiness*, *friendliness*, *modesty* and *righteous indignation* that apply in the field of social intercourse.

Aristotle deals with the moral virtue of *justice* separately. Justice relates to both lawfulness and fairness (Aristotle 2004:113), and its emphasis on our dealings with other people makes it “a complete virtue in the fullest sense, because it is the active exercise of complete virtue; and it is complete because its possessor can exercise it in relation to another person, and not only by himself” (Aristotle 2004:115). However, Aristotle turns his concern from this universal form of justice to particular justice as “what we are looking for is justice as a *part* of virtue” (Aristotle 2004:116). With this in mind, Aristotle identifies three main forms of justice – distributive, commutative and

corrective (Pakaluk 2005:196) – and, because each consists essentially in equality, justice involves an intermediate in a different way to the other virtues. Equality *itself* is a mean, and as such, justice *is* the pursuit of the mean whereas injustice aims at the extremes, that is, too much or too little of a good (Aristotle 2004:127).<sup>40</sup> In this way, justice is measured in terms of outcomes rather than intentions, meaning that the virtue of justice “modulates only action not emotion at all” (Pakaluk 2005:198). This marks it as separate from the other moral virtues which are related to, and motivated by, emotion.

## INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE

While Aristotle describes moral virtue as an intermediate state between deficiency and excess, he argues that this in itself “is not at all explicit” as it relies on the precept that “the mean is as the right principle dictates” (2004:144). But what is the “right principle”? According to Aristotle, both the right principle and the standard by which it is established are determined by the intellectual virtues. Unlike the moral virtues, the intellectual virtues owe both their inception and growth “chiefly to instruction, and for this very reason need time and experience” rather than habit or practice (Aristotle 2004:31). The intellectual virtues correspond to the rational part of the soul which itself consists of two parts, the scientific “with which we contemplate those things whose first principles are invariable”, and the calculative “with which we contemplate things that are variable” (Aristotle 2004:145). This distinction notwithstanding, both the intellectual parts of the soul aim at the attainment of truth, and since “the virtue of a thing is related to its proper function” (Aristotle 2004:146), the virtues of the scientific and calculative intellects “are the states that will best enable them to arrive at the truth” (Aristotle 2004:147; see Hutchinson 1995:206).

Aristotle proceeds under the assumption that “there are five ways in which the soul arrives at truth by affirmation or denial, namely art, science, prudence, wisdom and

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<sup>40</sup> “Both the unjust man and the unjust act are unfair or unequal, and clearly in each case of inequality there is something intermediate, namely, that which is equal; because in any action that admits degrees of more and less there is also an equal. Then if what is unjust is unequal, what is just is equal; as is universally accepted even without the support of argument. And since what is equal is a mean, what is just will be a sort of mean” (Aristotle 2004:118-119). However, as explained by Urmson, “in the end he admits that justice is not a mean in the same way as the other excellences of character but only insofar as it aims at a mean between two evils consisting in people getting more and less than their fair entitlement” (1980:165).

intuition” (2004:147). These five modes of thought therefore constitute the intellectual virtues, that is, the standards of excellence relating to the activity of thinking. According to Aristotle, the intellectual virtue of *science* or *scientific knowledge* (*epistemē*) consists in knowing what is universal and necessary, namely, “what we know cannot be otherwise than what it is” (2004:148). Scientific knowledge is eternal in the sense that what is necessary “cannot come into being or cease to be” (Aristotle 2004:148). Further to this, it is a “demonstrative state” as it is capable of being taught and learnt and it “proceeds either by induction or by deduction” (Aristotle 2004:148). The virtue of *art* or *technical skill* (*technē*) relates to craftsmanship and production and operates “in the sphere of the variable” (Aristotle 2004:149). Aristotle describes art as:

...a productive state that is truly reasoned. Every art is concerned with bringing something into being, and the practice of an art is the study of how to bring into being something that is capable either of being or of not being, and the cause of which is in the producer and not in the product (Aristotle 2004:149).

In other words, art consists in the deliberate fashioning or producing of things. The virtue of *prudence* or *practical wisdom* (*phronēsis*) corresponds to the capacity to deliberate, and it helps us to act appropriately by giving us an appreciation of what is good and bad for us at the highest level (Hutchinson 1995:207):

Well, it is thought to be the mark of prudent man to be able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous for himself; not in particular respects, e.g. what is good for health or physical strength, but what is conducive to the good life generally (Aristotle 2004:150).

As such, prudence informs action by enabling men to successfully calculate what is good. This suggests that the more prudent a man, the better life he will lead (Wilkes 1980:354). Prudence belongs to the calculative part of the soul and its deliberative quality places its concern with the variable as “nobody deliberates about things that are invariable, or about things that he cannot do himself” (Aristotle 2004:150). Aristotle’s understanding of action informed by prudence is distinctly different to Arendt’s, for whom “there is no *telos*, no virtuous end, that impels her political actor: his end is excellence in word and deed, in the performance, that recognizes no moral obligations” (Dossa 1989:2).

The virtue of *intuition* or *intelligence (nous)* is “the state of mind that apprehends first principles” (Aristotle 2004:152). These cannot be grasped by either science, art or prudence, although “demonstrable truths, and every kind of scientific knowledge...depend on first principles” (Aristotle 2004:152) as the basis for induction.<sup>41</sup> As such, the virtue of science is *dependent on* the virtue of intuition. In contrast to the other virtues, the virtue of *wisdom (sophia)* exists without qualification, that is, we can consider men wise in a general sense rather than confining wisdom to a particular field such as art (Aristotle 2004:152). For this reason, Aristotle argues that “wisdom must be the most finished form of knowledge” (2004:152):

The wise man, then, must not only know all that follows from the first principles, but must also have a true understanding of those principles. Therefore wisdom must be intuition and scientific knowledge: knowledge ‘complete with head’ (as it were) of the most precious truths (Aristotle 2004:152-153).

In this way, Aristotle argues that wisdom concerns *universal* truths, and he implies that it belongs to the “higher part of the soul”, (2004:166), namely the contemplative part, as opposed to the calculative or deliberative part, as it comprehends all truths that cannot be otherwise. Most importantly, of all the virtues, wisdom *itself* produces happiness, “not as medical science produces health, but as health does. For wisdom is a part of virtue as a whole, and makes a person happy by his possession and exercise of it” (Aristotle 2004:163).

This suggests that wisdom is the *highest* virtue, making contemplation the activity which leads to happiness. This appears to be confirmed by Aristotle’s assertion that “it is extraordinary that anyone should regard political science or prudence as most important, unless man is the highest being in the world” (2004:153). For Aristotle, contemplation is the pinnacle of human activity because it is “the only activity that is appreciated for its own sake; because nothing is gained from it except the act of contemplation” (Aristotle 2004:271). Contemplation therefore satisfies more completely than any other virtue Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* as it aims at nothing beyond itself (Hutchinson 1995:205). In this way, contemplation is “the self-

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<sup>41</sup> In his discussion of science, Aristotle noted that the teaching of scientific knowledge starts from what is known and proceeds by either induction or deduction: “Induction introduces us to first principles and universals, while deduction starts from universals. Therefore there are principles from which deduction starts which are not deducible; therefore they are reached by induction” (2004:148). However, the first principles necessary for induction are obtained by intuition.

contained activity par excellence...It is fully and perfectly achieved in the very act” (Rorty 1980:378). This makes the philosopher almost self-sufficient, as to participate in the best activity – contemplation – the philosopher needs nothing except the bare essentials to sustain life (Chance 1968:168; Kraut 1999:88). As such, the life of philosophical contemplation is the best life, a life of happiness or *eudaimonia*, making wisdom the best of the virtues.

As the above discussion indicates, Aristotle’s account is structured throughout by a notion of *hierarchy*, that is, the *supreme* good or the *best* life.<sup>42</sup> However, the hierarchy of intellectual virtues is not so easily resolved, and there is a conflict between those virtues that belong to the contemplative intellect and those that belong to the calculative intellect, more specifically, between wisdom and prudence. While he suggests that the contemplative virtue of wisdom is the highest, Aristotle places particular emphasis on the calculative virtue of prudence which is concerned with human goods and deliberation about particulars as they relate to conduct, that is, *what we should do* (2004:154). This focus on practice means that the science that coordinates prudence is politics (Aristotle 2004:154), making it particularly important as political science is also the science which studies the supreme good for man (Aristotle 2004:4). Unlike prudence, wisdom is incompatible with political science as it is concerned with universals, with things that cannot be otherwise, rather than the variable nature of human conduct:

It is evident also that wisdom cannot be the same as political science. For if people are to give the name of wisdom to the knowledge of what is beneficial to themselves, there will be more than one wisdom (Aristotle 2004:153).

In this way, Aristotle’s suggestion that the supreme good for man corresponds to the activity which yields wisdom undermines the notion that political science studies this supreme good, as wisdom and politics are fundamentally incompatible.

Aristotle’s hierarchy is further complicated by the central role of prudence in “virtue proper”, that is, man’s essential function (Aristotle 2004:164). According to Aristotle,

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<sup>42</sup> As we will see in Chapter 6, Arendt takes issue with this ranking of human activities, arguing that while men have contrasting experiences, they are equally central components of the human condition.

“the full performance of man’s function depends upon a combination of prudence and moral virtue; virtue ensures the correctness of the end at which we aim, and prudence that of the means towards it” (2004:163). In other words, while virtue makes us choose the right end to aim at, it is prudence that makes us choose the right means (Ross 1949:220). As a consequence, Aristotle suggests that *all* the virtues *imply* prudence. He demonstrates this point by explaining that virtue is always defined as ‘in accordance with the right principle’, but “the right principle is that which accords with prudence” (Aristotle 2004:165).<sup>43</sup> As such, “virtue is not merely a state in conformity with the right principle, but one that implies the right principle; and the right principle in moral conduct is prudence” (Aristotle 2004:165-166). Aristotle therefore comes to the conclusion that “it is not possible to be good in the true sense of the word without prudence, or to be prudent without moral goodness” (2004:166). This implies that prudence may be the key to all the virtues, “for the possession of the single virtue of prudence will carry with it the possession of them all” (Aristotle 2004:166).

This creates a tension in Aristotle’s work between the virtues of wisdom and prudence and the corresponding lives of contemplation and politics. On one hand, Aristotle appears to give a definite direction about how to live a happy life, suggesting that men should “aim to live a life which gives the greatest scope to the exercise of the virtue of philosophical wisdom” (Pakaluk 2005:324). On the other, Aristotle suggests that the science which studies the supreme good for man is politics (2004:4), and he suggests that prudence enables us to act in accordance with the right principle, that is, to act with virtue. In this way, prudence is the key to all the virtues. In an interesting twist, however, Aristotle acknowledges that not all men are capable of wisdom, arguing that a life of philosophical contemplation “will be too high for human attainment, for any man who lives it will not do so as a human being but in virtue of something divine within him” (2004:272). In other words, in order to contemplate, that is, to realise his perfect form, man must connect himself to the part of him which is divine (Chance 1968:177). This means that for Aristotle, the activity that yields the highest possible happiness for man “consists in the exercise of the

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<sup>43</sup> The translator’s note suggests that this points to the conclusion that “moral and intellectual goodness are complementary and in their highest form inseparable” (Tredennick in Aristotle 2004:165, translator’s note).

noblest faculty of the soul in virtue of which he is *more than mortal*" (Chance 1968:169-170, my emphasis).

Despite suggesting that contemplation leads to happiness in the most complete sense, Aristotle also allows that men who lack the capacity or ability to contemplate can still be happy (Kraut 1999:90). Life "in conformity with the other kind of virtue", namely, *practical virtue*,<sup>44</sup> "will be happy in a secondary degree", because unlike contemplation, "activities in accordance with it are human" (Aristotle 2004:273). Despite the inferiority implied by this statement, Aristotle clearly states that "the goodness that we have to consider is human goodness, obviously; for it was the good *for man* or happiness *for man* that we set out to discover" (2004:28). Human happiness comes from "obviously *human* experiences" (Aristotle 2004:273) such as activity in accordance with moral virtue. As such, Aristotle emphasises the role of the practical virtues in the good life, as it pertains to men as *human* (2004:273). This suggests that divinity aside, *human* happiness comes from proper political conduct and strength of character (Aristotle 2004:273).

We are not in a position here to attempt to resolve this tension between the relative position of wisdom and prudence, or the life of the philosopher and the life of the statesman in Aristotle's work, nor is such a resolution necessary to our present purposes. What interests us is the notion that for Aristotle, both politics and contemplation are key human activities, and like all the virtues, they emerge from capabilities inherent in the human condition as a result of either habituation or instruction. These issues, and the conflict between philosophy and politics more generally, will re-emerge, however, in our discussion of the Platonic tradition in Chapter 6, where we will examine Arendt's understanding of the relationship between contemplating, thinking and acting.

## **FROM *ETHICS* TO *POLITICS***

As we have seen, although Aristotle theorises the nature of the good life, he does so with a view to practice, explicitly stating that "it is not enough to know about

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<sup>44</sup> The practical virtues are distinct from the theoretical virtues of wisdom, knowledge, and intuition which all deal with universals. The practical virtues include the intellectual virtues of prudence and craftsmanship which belong to the calculative part of the intellect, and the moral virtues, as all are concerned with particulars, that is, the variable nature of human conduct.

goodness; we must endeavour to *possess and use it*, or adopt any other means to become good ourselves” (2004:277, my emphasis). The nature of the good life is such that a life can only be considered good in virtue of its goodness, not in virtue of its *understanding* of goodness. This sits well with Aristotle’s emphasis on the activities of man, and it implies that the *Ethics* is not only a study of striving for the good life, it is also a doctrine of political practice (Sullivan 1977:8). The *Ethics* focuses on the qualities that citizens *should* have and tries to “find a theory of great generality” (Kraut 2005:3) that applies to all members of the human species, helping them as individuals to realise the good life for themselves (Wilkes 1980:355). In this way, many argue that we can consider the *Ethics* “a political treatise” (Hardie 1968:17), that is, politics “conceived in ethical terms” (Schofield 2005:305).

Aristotle’s emphasis on politics stems from his fundamental belief that “one cannot be a human being except in the context of a *polis*” (Taylor 1995:239). According to Aristotle, man is “by nature a political animal” (1992:59), and he is therefore able to develop and exercise his capacities only by sharing in the life of a community (Taylor 1955:100). This suggests that, for Aristotle, the proper goal of politics is to “support a rich “plurality of human life-activities” that are each valuable in their own right” (Nussbaum 2000:106), including those that correspond to the virtues. In other words, political life provides a *context* in which men can exercise their specifically human activities. For these reasons, Aristotle “never contemplates a study of the individual’s good apart from politics, the study of the good of the society” (Taylor 1955:90), and Aristotle emphasises the good in terms of a plurality of men rather than an individual *man*:

For even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, it is clearly a greater and more perfect thing to achieve and preserve that of a community; for while it is desirable to secure what is good in the case of an individual, to do so in the case of a people or state is something finer and more sublime (Aristotle 2004:4-5).

As such, Aristotle makes a clear reference to the *Politics* in the final sentences of the *Ethics*:

For after examining these questions we shall perhaps see more comprehensively what kind of constitution is the best, and what is the best

organization for each kind and the best system of laws and customs for it to use. Let us, then, begin our account (Aristotle 2004:284).<sup>45</sup>

Aristotle's *Politics* therefore has the central aim of assessing the best kind of state, that is, the state which achieves the best purpose and aims at the good of the community:

Observation tells us that every state is an association, and that every association is formed with a view to some good purpose...Clearly then, as all associations aim at some good, that association which is the most sovereign among them all and embraces all others will aim highest, i.e. at the most sovereign of all goods (Aristotle 1992:54).

However, this implies that the *polis* is not an end in itself, existing not only for the sake of the community, but as a means to the good life (Taylor 1995:237; Chance 1968:161). Here, Aristotle differs from Arendt who argues that while politics provides us with many experiences and opportunities, including the fundamental experience of freedom, we engage in it not as a means to these ends, but only ever as an end in itself.

### **3. General Human Capacities**

Aristotle's broad assertion that happiness is an "activity in accordance with virtue" (2004:16) stems from his appraisal of the function of man, that is, the activities of which men are capable. According to Aristotle, man's *proper* function consists in "a practical life" based on rational principles (2004:15). This suggests that, for Aristotle, the object of life can be discerned by looking at man's activities and assessing his performance of them against their characteristic and distinctive standards of excellence. In other words, the purpose of life is activity and a *good life* implies doing these activities *well*, or in such a way that they conform with virtue, that is, their proper excellence. This means that the good life consists in activities that demonstrate the qualities of excellence, or virtues, of man, such as courage, temperance, prudence or knowledge.

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<sup>45</sup> The translator notes that this passage was "obviously written to connect the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the *Politics*", but he questions the source of the comments, suggesting that they may have been written by an "editor" rather than Aristotle himself, although, there is no way to know (Tredennick in Aristotle 2004:283, translator's note). This same passage appears as a Preface to Book I of the *Politics* (1992).

Aristotle's notion of virtue implies that activities set an internal standard, a demanding notion of excellence in achievement. To understand how "requires attending not simply to activity but also *what gives rise to activity* in the first place, the conditions of its possibility" (Frank 2004:99, my emphasis). In his examination of moral virtue, Aristotle suggested that "nature endows us" with certain potentialities, which are inherent *capabilities* that are only actually *acquired* by exercising them, that is, by the doing of their activity, *energeia* (2004:32). This implies an interdependence between activity and capability: "There can be no activity without capability, but there can also be no capability without activity. Each is dependent on the other" (Frank 2004:100). In this way, Aristotle's potentialities are congruous with Arendt's notion of general human capacities, which "grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed" (1998:6).

Aristotle's list of virtues therefore implicitly reveals his constellation of general human capacities, that is, the range of activities and capacities that Aristotle sees as inherent human potentials in terms of their corresponding standards of excellence. However, this emphasis on particular standards of excellence is a key site of difference between Aristotle and Arendt. Unlike Aristotle, Arendt seeks only to outline and explore man's general human capacities, limited to labour, work and action in *The Human Condition*, and she imposes no limits or standards on what constitutes 'good' labour or 'good' action. In fact, it would appear that this notion of ranking various forms of labour, work or action according to their excellence is counter-intuitive to Arendt's understanding of general human capacities in terms of the activities themselves, rather than the particular qualities of particular activities. While Arendt, like Aristotle, might distinguish good craftsmanship from bad, this is a function of judgement, rather than an inherent feature of the activity itself. As such, where Arendt seeks to outline and distinguish *different* activities from one another, Aristotle seeks to distinguish *between activities of the same kind* on the basis of their virtue, that is, to judge particular instances as virtuous or otherwise.

While outlining a long list of general human capacities, Aristotle's concern for their corresponding standards of excellence in achievement, the virtues, and their relative positions in terms of "the best and most perfect kind" (2004:16), means that he shifts

the emphasis from general human capacities themselves to a judgement of the “goodness and proficiency” of their performance (2004:15). In other words, Aristotle’s is not so much a constellation of *general human capacities* as a constellation of the best ways in which general human capacities, understood as activities, can be performed. This is consistent with the Aristotelian conception of the human condition as one based on the realisation of a particular kind of life. However, Aristotle’s investigation of the human condition in terms of providing a practical guide to living the good life is markedly different to the open-endedness of Arendt’s storytelling. This suggests that despite shared concerns and overlapping fields of consideration in terms of general human capacities, there are key differences in the way in which Aristotle and Arendt construct their investigations, and these might provide a clue to making new sense of Arendt’s meaning and approach.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Aristotle’s political philosophy is based on the teleological assumption that “every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good” (2004:3). Although men direct their attention to many different activities and pursuits, Aristotle believes that “we still all share the same basic potentialities and the same kinds of general fulfilments” (Sullivan 1977:160). This implies that men have a common goal, that “our activities have some end which we want for its own sake” rather than for the sake of something else, which according to Aristotle, must be “the supreme good” (2004:4). Aristotle argues that this supreme good is happiness, making the good life a life of happiness and fulfilment, or *eudaimonia*. As such, both the *Ethics* and *Politics* are Aristotle’s investigations into happiness and together they work at “defining the conduct of man insofar as he was a citizen” (Arendt 2003:64). By setting out the theoretical ideal of the good life and the virtuous conduct necessary to attain it in the context of man’s political nature, Aristotle provides a practical guide to living the good life for both state and citizen.

Aristotle’s understanding of the virtues offers us some important insights into the human condition in terms of the activities of men and the pursuit of the most desirable end, happiness. However, Aristotle emphasises the significance of the

*manner* in which men pursue this end, arguing that only if men act in a manner characteristic of excellence, in accordance with virtue, can they achieve it. What has interested us here, however, is not the particularity of these virtues themselves, but what lies *beneath* them. As we have seen, the virtues stem from fundamental capacities that are naturally possessed by men as potentialities, and they are acquired either through activity or instruction. In this way, Aristotle's virtues are congruous with Arendt's notion of general human capacities, which are activities or capabilities that grow out of the human condition. We can therefore understand Aristotle's hierarchy of virtues as a *constellation of general human capacities* that ranks the proficiency of their performance. Like Arendt, Aristotle's underlying conception of man as "a political animal" (1992:59) suggests that the constellation of general human capacities implied in his hierarchy of virtues is grounded in a political context.

This commonality in terms of general human capacities suggests that we can juxtapose Arendt's work with Aristotle's to gain new insight into the nature of Arendt's investigation. While Arendt sought to understand general human capacities in order to comprehend the modern human condition, "to think what we are doing" (1998:5), Aristotle sought an understanding of the range of men's activities as a means both to theorise the good life and provide instruction on how to live it. As such, general human capacities form an important foundation for two very different investigations into the human condition. Interestingly, however, Aristotle offers a constellation of general human capacities not only different to Arendt's, but with shifted emphasis. In addition, where Arendt leaves the meaning of *The Human Condition* open to interpretation, Aristotle provides definitive direction on the purpose of both the *Ethics* and the *Politics*: to help men become good and to arrange political organisations accordingly. In this way, Aristotle's theoretical considerations are a means to an end, that is, the practical realisation of the good life. This is very different to Arendt's explicit refusal to provide an answer to the "preoccupations and perplexities" of modern life, or to bridge the divide between her "theoretical considerations" and "matters of practical politics" (1998:5).

These differences between Aristotle and Arendt in terms of motivation and emphasis suggest that, differences in content aside, there is something significant in the

manner of Arendt's approach that is more than a matter of mere 'style'. By this, we mean that it appears that it is not just that Arendt's is a *narrative* exploration of general human capacities, but that narrative *in itself* has significance as it orients us in a particular way. However, we are not yet ready to say with any certainty just what this significance is, or what it will reveal about *The Human Condition*. By juxtaposing Arendt with additional thinkers, Part I hopes to shed more light on these ideas, and illuminate by contrast the uniqueness of Arendt's consideration of the human condition. With this in mind, our story about general human capacities continues in the next chapter to examine the work of Machiavelli. By considering the way in which Machiavelli understands general human capacities, and synthesising his understanding with Aristotle and then Rousseau, Part I hopes to make new sense of Arendt's narrative, and find in it new meaning.

## CHAPTER THREE:

# Niccolò Machiavelli

Our examination of *The Human Condition* in Chapter 1 focused on the centrality of general human capacities to Arendt's attempt to reconsider the human condition. There, we suggested that the narrative form of *The Human Condition* presents us with a problem in terms of reconsidering its meaning. What exactly does Arendt's story about general human capacities tell us about the human condition? And, what are we meant to *do* with it? With these questions in mind, the previous chapter explored the conception of general human capacities in the work of Aristotle to gain a contrasting perspective. However, we cannot yet say with any certainty what it is about Arendt's consideration of the human condition that is so unique. As such, this chapter continues on from Chapter 2 to consider Arendt's story about general human capacities in the broader context of political theory.

Following on from our consideration of Aristotle, this chapter explores the concept of general human capacities in the work of Machiavelli. It argues that Machiavelli presents a pragmatic understanding of general human capacities that shifts the emphasis from the capacities themselves to the use of them as a means to preserve political power. By combining Machiavelli's ideas with those of Aristotle, and in the next chapter, Rousseau, Part I aims to weave together multiple understandings of general human capacities that illuminate by contrast the originality of Arendt's

approach. By doing so, Part I hopes to make new sense of Arendt's narrative reconsideration of the human condition.

This chapter begins by situating Machiavelli's political work in the context of his political experience, exploring his motivations and approach to political theory and his abiding concern for the art of statesmanship. It explores Machiavelli's focus on politics and political leadership, finding it marked by a regard for necessity and fortune. In this way, Machiavelli's work is a unique mix of theory and practice, and he hopes to inspire real political action and protect state legitimacy. Unlike Aristotle, Machiavelli argues that the contingencies of political life necessitate actions which serve to maintain power and security rather than aim at goodness alone. While acknowledging the desirability of virtue, Machiavelli's examination of the qualities required to be successful in political life transforms virtue into *virtù*, the capacity to bend virtue as necessity dictates. This chapter explores Machiavelli's unique conception of the political human condition and the nexus between action, necessity and political pragmatism with a view to gaining a deeper appreciation of general human capacities and investigations of the human condition.

## **1. Foundations**

In the history of Western political thought, Machiavelli has been, and continues to be, the subject of much controversy (Ingersoll 1968:588; Walsh 2007). His name has been immortalised in both fame and infamy, so much so that "no other writer, apart from Plato, has made a greater impact upon the English vocabulary" (Anglo 1969:271). While widely regarded as a central figure in political history, there is much debate surrounding the reason for Machiavelli's prominence (Jensen 1960:vii), and conflicting opinions regarding his rightful status. On one hand, Machiavelli is seen as the corruptor of the true Aristotelian idea of politics, transforming the noble art of statesmanship into "the art of tyrannical rule" (see Viroli 1990:143). At the more extreme end of this position, Machiavelli is considered a teacher of evil (Strauss 1958; Maritain 1960), "an evil man" (Strauss 1958:9) giving instruction on ruthless

strategies for power based on violence and brutality.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, Machiavelli is considered a devoted patriot and republican (Pitkin 1984), the creator of a unique theory of politics based on the reality of political necessity. This contestation regarding his character notwithstanding, Machiavelli's work has had a profound influence on political thinking, and he continues to present a challenge to traditional notions of politics, statecraft, and the nature of human life.

Born in Florence in 1469, Machiavelli was an accomplished civil servant. He was confirmed as the Second Chancellor of the Florentine republic at the age of 29 (Skinner 1981:3), making him a "first-hand observer and assessor of contemporary statecraft" (Skinner 1981:9). Despite being one of the centres of Renaissance humanism and "one of the two great republics that still flourished" (Grafton 2003:xvii), in 1511 the republican government collapsed and the Medici retook control of the city. Machiavelli was dismissed from the Chancery and sentenced to a year's confinement within Florentine territory (Machiavelli 2003a:x). In 1513 he was mistakenly implicated in a plot to overthrow the Medici and was imprisoned and tortured for several months. Upon his release, Machiavelli retired to his small country farm, spending the rest of his days in a state of exile from power. Longing for a return to civic life, Machiavelli transformed his political experiences and observations into a series of treatises,<sup>47</sup> finding solace and respite from the harsh reality of his exclusion in his engagement with classic literature and historical reflection.<sup>48</sup>

Machiavelli's political thinking was very much informed by these experiences, and he took a uniquely "pragmatic approach" (Skinner 1981:63) that moved beyond utopian

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<sup>46</sup> Those holding this view commonly turn to *The Prince* for evidence of Machiavelli's evil or immoral character. There, Machiavelli advocates a particular style of leadership that serves to secure power and preserve the state. However, Cassirer argues that "*The Prince* is neither a moral nor an immoral book; it is simply a technical book", written as a 'manual' for rulers to maintain their power, and contrary to popular belief, it "contains no moral prescripts for the ruler nor does it invite him to commit crimes and villainies" (1960:65). Despite this, debate continues as to the true meaning and motivation of Machiavelli's most infamous work.

<sup>47</sup> Like Aristotle, but unlike Arendt, Machiavelli's method enables us to lay out his political theory in terms of a series of concepts and conceptual understandings. This contrasts Arendt's presentation of a complex narrative in which meaning is embedded in the story itself.

<sup>48</sup> Machiavelli used his knowledge of the classics and the power of eloquence to try "to win him back a position in which he could lead the active political life he craved more than anything else" (Grafton 2003:xxii). Much of his work, including *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, was dedicated to influential and powerful men in an attempt to demonstrate his expertise and loyalty and return to active political duty. For this reason, his work is often considered "a piece of political activity" in itself, "responding to and seeking to affect the conditions and the problems of contemporary political life" (Hornqvist 2004:16; also Hariman 1989:3), both his own, and that of Florence more generally.

idealism to examine the conditions of human life “as they were opposed to ‘as they should be’” (Viroli 1998:2, my emphasis). In other words, Machiavelli sought to understand political reality not by beginning with general ethical principles, but by treating politics “as it really is” (Grafton 2003:xxii). This stems from the fact that Machiavelli was “a characteristic product of Florence” (Grafton 2003:xvi), a “committed, lifelong republican and Florentine patriot” (Pitkin 1984:4) with a deep sense of duty to his state. Given the demise of his beloved republic, it is not surprising that Machiavelli was critical of the status quo of Florentine politics and he held a passionate desire to change it for the better (Wood 1972:48).

Although his paramount concern lay in the practical affairs of politics, Machiavelli’s ongoing dialogue with the classics meant that his was also a position of philosophical enquiry, and he made general claims about the nature of men and society based on a combination of observations from his own experience and his interpretation of historical political events.<sup>49</sup> As such, Machiavelli’s “science of statecraft” hoped to find practical remedies for political problems by learning the lessons of history, combining ancient wisdom with “examples of the noble and great” (Butterfield 1960:58). However, Machiavelli’s was a highly selective view of historical political practice aimed at formulating general rules based on particular interpretations. In other words, “what he really used to criticize the political ideas and practices of the moderns was the authority of history as narrated by the ancient historians and interpreted by himself” (Viroli 1998:4). In many ways, this approach is similar to Arendt’s method of fragmentary historiography in which various fragments of the past are brought to the surface to illuminate the present and to discover new and hidden meaning. Like Machiavelli, Arendt’s method is interpretive and selective. However, while Machiavelli aimed at influencing the practical affairs of politics, Arendt was solely concerned with finding meaning, not to dictate practice, but to find understanding.

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<sup>49</sup> Machiavelli himself explains this combination of observation and philosophical reflection in the Letter of Dedication to Lorenzo de Medici in the beginning of *The Prince*: “I have not found in my belongings anything as dear to me or that I value as much as my understanding of the deeds of great men, won by me from a long acquaintance with contemporary affairs and a continuous study of the ancient world; these matters I have very diligently analysed and pondered for a long time” (Machiavelli 2003a:3).

## 2. The Art and Practice of Politics

Politics was Machiavelli's "deep vocation" (Viroli 1998:35) and he devoted his life to its practice. Following his exclusion from civil service, Machiavelli offered instruction to others on the practical affairs and necessities of political life through his political writings, most notably, *The Prince* (2003a) and *The Discourses* (2003b).<sup>50</sup> These works represented "a revolution in political thinking" (Lerner 1960:9) as they were grounded in Machiavelli's assertion that political practice differed from generally-accepted political theory (Anglo 1969:188). Machiavelli studied things as he thought they were, not as they should be, rejecting "purely imaginary projections" (Anglo 1969:190) and focusing on "real polities, not on imagined or ideal ones" (Viroli 1998:9). As such, Machiavelli interpreted actual political events from which he made generalisations and recommendations based on observation and experience.

Seeing himself as "an expert on the art of the state" (Viroli 1998:43) rather than as a political thinker, Machiavelli was focused on inspiring real political action and furthering the interests of the state. For Machiavelli, "politics is action, not contemplation, and political theory must be action-oriented" (Parel 1972:9). As a result, Machiavelli combined the Aristotelian "ideal of the political or civil man, understood as an upright citizen who serves the common good with justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance" (Viroli 1998:43), with a regard for the realities of necessity and fortune to provide a *practical model of political man*, who could actively change or protect the conditions of the state by exercising *virtù*, the capacity to do whatever is required. In doing so, Machiavelli forged a new path into political realism that moved beyond traditional notions of virtue to account for the harsh realities of political necessity.

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<sup>50</sup> The differences in emphasis and content of these two works have been the source of much of the contestation surrounding Machiavelli's true legacy. While "many scholars have tried, with varying degrees of success, to reconcile the two works, to explain the differences between them by the development of Machiavelli's thought, or to prove that only one of them reflected his true opinion" (Grafton 2003:xxvii), all such efforts have remained inconclusive. However, Crick describes the relationship between the two works as "the greatest and most unnecessary mystery of all" (2003:19): "He begins with a generalization, not a value judgement: that there are only two types of government. And in *The Prince*, he writes almost exclusively about the one, and in *The Discourses* predominantly about the other" (Crick 2003:21).

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Although essentially a theory of political practice, a series of philosophical assumptions underpin Machiavelli's work. Most significantly, Machiavelli relies on a particular understanding of human nature that stems from his belief that history tends to repeat itself, "to fall into repeating patterns" (Butterfield 1960:54):

...it seems to me that the world has always been in essentially the same condition, and that in it there has been just as much good as there is evil, but that this evil and this good has varied from province to province. This may be seen from the knowledge we have of ancient kingdoms, in which the balance of good and evil changed from one to the other owing to changes in their customs, whereas the world as a whole remained the same (Machiavelli 2003b:266-267).

As history is comprised of the deeds of men, the repetitive nature of history suggests that no matter what the era, men will essentially act in the same manner and political society will be relatively unchanging (Gooch 1960:90). This notion that the world remains the same throughout history implies that Machiavelli understands human nature as relatively static.<sup>51</sup>

In regards to the particularities of human nature, Machiavelli believed that "men are more prone to evil than to good; they are ambitious, suspicious, and unable to gauge the limits of their own fortune...always desiring what cannot be obtained, and discontented with what is already possessed" (Anglo 1969:203; also Ingersoll 1968:591). This pessimistic view of human nature as self-interested and predisposed to vice convinced Machiavelli that men have to be guided to do the right thing against their own inclinations. Interestingly, Machiavelli argues that such guidance is best found in the study of history.<sup>52</sup> According to Machiavelli, men, in general, lack a "proper appreciation of history", and while they often rely on the "decisions laid down by the ancients" for instruction on "civic disputes which arise between citizens and in the diseases men get", in matters of politics "one finds neither prince nor republic

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<sup>51</sup> Machiavelli's assertion that "the world has always been in essentially the same condition" (2003b:266), is especially significant for our discussion as it suggests that the *human condition* is relatively unchanging. From this we can infer that the capacities or components that comprise the human condition might also remain static in Machiavelli's appraisal. Whether Machiavelli might understand human nature and the human condition as discrete or interrelated concepts is unclear, although this distinction is not especially important here.

<sup>52</sup> This is "interesting" as it means that the study of history both illuminates human nature, that is, enables us to see it, and provides the remedy for its shortcomings.

who repairs to antiquity for examples” (Machiavelli 2003b:98). In an effort to “get men out of this wrong way of thinking”, Machiavelli himself studies history, comparing ancient and modern events “so that those who read what I have to say may the more easily draw those practical lessons which one should seek to obtain from the study of history” (2003b:99).<sup>53</sup>

Machiavelli argued that by interpreting key historical events he could find concrete ways to guide men’s political actions and overcome the complacency of human nature and the repetition of history. In other words, Machiavelli believed that “in the study of history one could discover not only the causes but also the cure of the ills of the time” (Butterfield 1960:53-54), that had relevance for both the present and the future. In this way, Machiavelli broadens the political knowledge gained from his own experience with a “return to beginnings” (Pitkin 1984:319), the keen observation and interpretation of key historical events, in order to shed light on both the contemporary state of politics and its future. Machiavelli is not simply advocating that we retread the paths of our ancestors, but rather, he suggests that we learn from them, emulate their successes and modify the actions that led them to failure. This makes Machiavelli a ‘practical historian’, convinced that “we can learn rules for modern political conduct from the juxtaposition of ancient and modern exempla” (Anglo 1969:240). It also means that Machiavelli sees *himself* as the proper guide for complacent men, able to “rouse men to action” (Pitkin 1984:293) in the right kinds of ways, actions that they are unable to comprehend without his skilled interference.

### **POLITICAL ACTION: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS**

As we have seen, Machiavelli’s understanding of politics is underpinned by a static view of human nature and the world. Yet, while Machiavelli’s theory of history led him to believe that “human nature is the same always and everywhere” (Parel 1972:7; also Prezzolini 1968:31), he also acknowledged that *individual men* are unique as

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<sup>53</sup> In *The Discourses* Machiavelli makes his intention to educate others very clear: “I shall make so bold as to declare plainly what I think of those days and of our own, so that the minds of young men who read what I have written may turn from the one and prepare to imitate the other whenever fortune provides them with occasion for so doing. For it is the duty of a good man to point out to others what is well done, even though the malignity of the times or of fortune has not permitted you to do it for yourself, to the end that, of the many that have the capacity, some one, more beloved of heaven, may be able to do it” (2003b:268-269). This is also a clear expression of Machiavelli’s frustration that he himself was excluded from political action by “the malignity of the times”.

“each individual has his own passions and temperament and acts accordingly” (Viroli 1998:64). This variation between men is the key driver for action, and combined with the lessons learned from history, can lead men to exploit opportunities for political change. By its very nature, Machiavelli understands action as self directed and purposeful, aiming at “the accomplishment of the goals upon which the actor has deliberated” (Wood 1972:34). By acting, “men can purposefully make history instead of becoming the helpless victims of mere circumstance” (Wood 1972:34). For Machiavelli, it is only through inaction, or action devoid of purpose, that men are doomed to repeat the same history over and over (Wood 1972:57).<sup>54</sup>

Machiavelli’s emphasis on civic duty means that he points us towards a particular *kind* of action, that is, “public action for higher goals” (Pitkin 1984:327), such as improving the conditions and problems of contemporary political life. Here, Machiavelli exhibits some similarities with Aristotle by suggesting that actions must be of the right kind and for the right reasons (Viroli 1998:97). However, this is entirely consistent with Machiavelli’s critique of Florentine politics and his desire to influence practical politics in a particularly republican manner. It is also consistent with Arendt’s understanding of action as belonging to the public realm. However, for Arendt, it is the action *itself* which is significant rather than any goal external to it. Machiavelli therefore shares with Aristotle and Arendt a concern for *human activity*, arguing that action is the most significant capacity of men as it represents freedom and acts as an emancipatory force.

Despite the possibilities inherent in action, Machiavelli argues that the reality of human life is such that men are always engaged in an ongoing struggle between free and autonomous action and forces outside their control. The most overwhelming of these forces is necessity. Men are “always subject to countless necessities” (Pitkin 1984:293), which, by their very nature, take priority over all other considerations. However, the relationship between necessity and action is complicated in the sense

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<sup>54</sup> This means that Machiavelli is simultaneously suggesting that “what men do must and does reveal what is permanent, eternally valid, and immutable in them, hence a fixed concept of human nature” (Kontos 1972:100), *and* that individuals have the capacity to act outside human nature to reshape history and reveal their own uniqueness. This is problematic as it appears to suggest that men’s actions fall into predefined categories that enable us to see historical patterns which then enable us to direct future actions, but that future actions themselves have the ability to change circumstances in line with specific goals or outcomes.

that necessity is both a limitation to free action and a motivator of particular actions. On one hand, necessity limits the kinds of actions men are able to take, constraining and confining the possibilities for free and deliberate action. That is, men are precluded from certain actions out of necessity. On the other hand, necessity often compels men to *re-act* in particular ways in response to particular circumstances. For example, while human nature generally leads men to be selfish and evil, committed to their own private interests, at times necessity counteracts these natural inclinations, forcing men to act in the public interest: “most people remain more committed to their own ambitions than to the public interest, and ‘never do anything good except by necessity’” (Skinner 1981:67). This makes necessity the principle driving force in Machiavelli’s understanding of political activity *as it really is*: “people only do good through necessity; they only obey the laws and work together through necessity; princes only observe treaties through necessity and...they break them through necessity too” (Anglo 1969:235). In other words, necessity *manipulates* action, both positively and negatively, demanding particular action (or inaction) in particular circumstances.

Compounding the unpredictable influences of necessity are the powerful forces of fortune. Related to chance or fate, fortune inhibits man’s ability to control his own actions. For Machiavelli, *fortuna* “represents that part of human affairs where men’s own efforts prove either of little or no avail” (Anglo 1969:226).<sup>55</sup> While necessity dictates the terms of action, fortune provides an additional obstruction to men’s autonomy by changing the very conditions under which he operates. In this way, “man is not at all the master of the universe, but the victim of nature first and of Fortune afterwards” (Viroli 1998:16). Despite the inconsistent and unknowable nature of fortune, Machiavelli suggests that action itself can work “against Fortune’s malignity” (Viroli 1998:40), and by acting, men can overcome unfortunate circumstances. As such, Machiavelli argues that men should not restrict their actions out of fear or deference to fortune as “those who place themselves in thralldom to *fortuna* by ceasing to act lose their freedom, and in a very significant way endanger their manhood and their humanity” (Wood 1972:47). Instead, men should act in spite

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<sup>55</sup> In common mythology, Fortune is represented by a woman sitting blindfolded on a ball that “turns hither and thither without reason” (Gilbert 1938:i), and she may limit, favour or change the direction of the actions of men at any time, providing a limit to “man’s infinite powers” (Prezzolini 1968:33).

of, and in reaction to, the unpredictable whims of fortune, that is, they should act as circumstances dictate.

### **FROM VIRTUE TO *VIRTÙ***

Although very different forces, necessity and fortune both limit and demand action, calling on particular responses, but at the same time, presenting unforeseen obstacles that inhibit men's ability to act freely and effectively. In fact, necessity may even lead men to do things which would, in other circumstances, be ill-advised or unacceptable. Far from advising against such actions, however, Machiavelli suggests that this is an intrinsic feature of *political reality*, and he describes the ability to act against the unpredictable forces of nature and fortune as *virtù*, that is, the political capacity to act as circumstances require. In the face of any situation, *virtù* "makes the best of it" (Plamenatz 1972:160), helping men to skilfully turn "in whatever direction the winds of Fortune and variations of affairs require" (McCoy 1943:635), enabling them to be one thing at one time and another entirely different thing as required. In this way, Machiavelli understands *virtù* as an opposing force to "*fortuna*, to chance, to the unforeseen, to the external and the hostile" (Plamenatz 1972:177). This suggests that *virtù* is an action-provoking quality "associated most prominently with the capacity to act boldly at critical moments" (Leonard 1984:492).

The precise meaning of Machiavelli's *virtù* has proven to be most elusive, however, and it is subject to a variety of interpretations (Gilbert 1951:53) as there is no exact English substitution (Ball 1984:525). Some translators simply replace *virtù* with 'virtue', while others try to highlight its complexity by using 'ability', 'power', 'conduct', or 'valour' (Prezzolini 1968:33). While these nuances in meaning remain unresolved, it is apparent from this discussion so far that "*virtù* is not the same thing as virtue" (Leonard 1984:492), understood in the Aristotelian sense. Machiavelli believed that the Aristotelian notion of virtue was too idealistic to form part of a practical guide for political power (Ward 2001:71), arguing not that virtue was unimportant or undesirable, but rather, that necessity dictated that sometimes virtue would bring political ruin rather than political success. As a result, Machiavellian *virtù* "does not consist in having a virtuous character, as for Aristotle" (Mansfield 1996:45), and in contrast, it enables an individual to take the action that will result in the best outcome

for the state. Unlike the Aristotelian virtues, specific character or intellectual traits that relate to various spheres of human activity, Machiavelli's *virtù* refers specifically to politics, making it a particular capacity required by men in order to maintain political power. In this way, *virtù* is not necessarily related to character at all, but rather, it is characteristic of good leadership and shrewd judgement.

Machiavelli's clearest discussion of *virtù* can be found in *The Prince*. Despite rejecting the virtues as the sole basis for political leadership in deference to the harsh realities of necessity, Machiavelli does recognise their desirability *under ideal circumstances*. In light of this, Machiavelli examines many of the Aristotelian virtues, including courage, temperance, generosity, friendship, and honesty (Leonard 1984:493). However, he argues that it is necessary that a prince know how to abandon these capacities if circumstances so require:

I know everyone will agree that it would be most laudable if a prince possessed all the qualities deemed to be good among those I have enumerated. But, because of conditions in the world, princes cannot have those qualities, or observe them completely (Machiavelli 2003a: 50-51).

According to Machiavelli, the preservation of the state cannot be guaranteed by virtue or sacred authority alone, and instead, it requires the prince to exercise specific skills and techniques suited to political leadership (Henaff and Strong 2001:17). With these things in mind, Machiavelli proposes to "draw up an original set of rules" for princely conduct, including the appropriate use of the virtues, as his overriding intention is to provide practical instruction on the art of statesmanship (2003a:50). As such, while he acknowledges that princes *should* have certain qualities, he tempers this with an eye to the brutal reality of politics, to "things as they are in a real truth, rather than as they are imagined" (Machiavelli 2003a:50). In this way, "Machiavelli puts his own interpretation on ancient virtue so that it becomes Machiavellian *virtù*" (Mansfield 1981:295).

Machiavellian *virtù* bends virtue as necessity dictates on the basis that "qualities traditionally considered as 'virtuous', in the Christian or feudal senses, were not virtuous at all in a prince" (Grafton 2003:xxiii):

This is because, taking everything into account, he will find that some of the things that appear to be virtues will, if he practises them, ruin him, and some of the things that appear to be vices will bring him security and prosperity (Machiavelli 2003a:51).

According to Machiavelli, the reality of political life is such that circumstances sometimes dictate that men must abandon the idealism of the virtues and act in accordance with vice, doing what *needs* to be done to maintain political stability. As such, Machiavelli argues that the prince must learn *how not to be good*:

The gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done moves towards self-destruction rather than self-preservation. The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must be prepared not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need (Machiavelli 2003a:50).

The defining quality of the prince, his *virtù*, is therefore “a willingness to do whatever may be necessary for the attainment of civic glory and greatness, whether the actions involved happen to be intrinsically good or evil in character” (Skinner 1981:54). In other words, Machiavelli calls on men to exercise whichever of their capacities is most suited to the particularity of circumstance, regardless of whether this capacity is traditionally associated with virtue or vice.

Despite instructing men on *virtù*, that is, advocating that princes learn how not to be good in order to maintain their position, Machiavelli argues that men should never deviate from the good unnecessarily: “As I said above, he should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary” (Machiavelli 2003a:57-58). This exemplifies the practice of *virtù*, the capacity to make appropriate political judgements regarding necessary action. In many ways, therefore, *virtù* represents Aristotelian prudence, the capacity to “deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous for [one]self”, the ability to reason and act accordingly “with regard for things that are good or bad for man” (Aristotle 2004:150). However, unlike Aristotle’s conception of prudence, *virtù* involves the discretionary use of virtue in response to unpredictable political conditions:

You must realize this: that a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things which give men a reputation for virtue, because in order to maintain his state he is often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion. And so he should have a flexible disposition, varying as fortune and circumstances dictate (Machiavelli 2003a:57).

This “flexible disposition”, or the ability to abandon virtue as necessity demands, is very different to Aristotle’s assertion that we must act with the correct disposition, performing good acts as a matter of character. For Machiavelli, however, this flexibility is the defining feature of *virtù*, and “Machiavelli’s *virtuoso* prince displays his *virtù* in doing whatever his role and the necessity of his situation (*necessita*) require” (Ball 1984:528). This implies that Machiavellian *virtù* itself is neither a virtue nor a vice, but a political necessity that looks beyond both to do what is in the best interests of the state.

## **POLITICAL REALISM**

Attempting to “say something that will prove of practical use to the inquirer” (Machiavelli 2003a:50), Machiavelli grounded himself firmly in the lived events of the world, focusing on how men *actually* live and the reality of political affairs. At the same time, however, Machiavelli relied on philosophical generalisations about the nature of men and the world. Despite his desire to deal with concrete political realities, Machiavelli’s concept of *virtù* encompasses the traditional Aristotelian understanding of virtue in the sense that he acknowledges that the virtues are the qualities on which princes are either praised or condemned (2003a:50). This means that in the interests of political stability, the prince must ensure that the *illusion* of his virtue is always intact (Viroli 1998:93). As such, Machiavelli very clearly states that the prince should “*appear* a man of compassion, a man of good faith, a man of integrity, a kind and a religious man” (2003a:58, my emphasis), although he should always act with *virtù*. In this way, *virtù* tempers the rigidity of the virtues with a regard for the realities of political necessity. For Machiavelli, it is this ability to do what is necessary to preserve the state that is the most important *political* attribute of men.

By redefining the traditional concept of virtue to take into consideration the particularity of circumstance and the unpredictable forces of necessity and fortune, Machiavelli’s political realism takes the bold stance of separating public from private

morality. While he believed that morality can be one's guide in private affairs, Machiavelli argued that the same guide is unsuitable in politics (Mansfield 1981:295). In its place, Machiavelli suggests that public life demands a particular kind of action, guided by *virtù*, which is specific to the affairs of politics and acts in the common interest. This separation of politics and morality does not mean that Machiavelli rejects, or even ignores, moral ideals entirely, but rather, he simply rejects their place in *politics*. Contrary to popular opinion, it was never his intention to propose widespread immorality, and far from attacking the principles of morality, Machiavelli "could find no use for these principles when engrossed in problems of political life" (Cassirer 1960:64). Machiavelli's distinction between politics and ethics is therefore based on the belief that "a person would not dream of doing as a private individual what he is obliged to do as head of a government" (Prezzolini 1968:29). In other words, political necessity demands particular actions, and while morality may be a suitable guide for private affairs, according to Machiavelli, rigid adherence to it will result in political ruin.<sup>56</sup>

Machiavelli believed that politics was unlike all other human activities as it has the ability to work against the forces of nature and fortune to create conditions "which would enable men to fulfil their basic desires of self-preservation, security, and happiness" (Wood 1972:38). On one hand, this makes Machiavelli "thoroughly Aristotelian" (Prezzolini 1968:93) in the sense that "Machiavelli's best understanding of politics is importantly reminiscent of Aristotle's teaching that man is a political animal...[and] engaging in [politics] is necessary to the full realization of our potential as humans" (Pitkin 1984:286; also Dossa 1989:92). On the other hand, unlike Aristotle, "there is to be found in [Machiavelli's] writings no conception of a good or best life for man, and therefore no attempt to justify the state on the ground that it makes possible that kind of life" (Plamenatz 1972:172). Machiavelli believed that "the distinction that Aristotle drew between mere life and the good life cannot be

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<sup>56</sup> It is therefore misleading to call Machiavelli's politics immoral as he separated private morality from politics altogether (Jensen 1960:x). In fact, "Machiavelli never espouses or condones *personal immorality*" (Wood 1972:35, my emphasis), and "immoral means are to be used only for the maintenance of the state, and then, not always, but *only when necessary*. Neither does Machiavelli grant open license to the prince to act immorally, nor does he state that it is preferable to deceive, be cruel, or employ violence. Machiavelli's preference always is for a prince who combines *virtù* with moral goodness" (Wood 1972:52, my emphasis). In light of this, Ball interprets Machiavelli as suggesting that there are "at least two different concepts of virtue: one for private citizens, another for princes" (1984:521).

sustained” as the forces of necessity and fortune cannot be permanently overcome (Mansfield 1996:14). This means that while there are key areas of overlap between Aristotle and Machiavelli, Machiavelli was interested in politics insofar as it was a means to preserve the state, irrespective of the good life or moral conduct. This is an important site of difference between the two thinkers in terms of the specific end being sought.

In summary, Machiavelli’s desire to provide instruction on successful political practice infused his theoretical generalisations with a unique and unflinching regard for the realities of politics, including fortune, necessity, power and corruption. According to Anglo, he was the first to recognise “the total discrepancy between the imaginary politics of the system-builders and the way states really function; and between the ethics enjoined by political moralists and the cynical opportunism of practising politicians” (1969:269). By showing “a willingness to subordinate our private interests to the public good” (Skinner 1981:4), Machiavelli abandoned ancient notions of virtue as essential characteristics of leadership in favour of a pragmatic and strategic approach to maintaining power. This was informed by both his first-hand experience of losing power and his observations and interpretation of political events throughout history. Machiavelli hoped that by instructing others in statecraft he could “find for himself a path to that world of greatness from which he had been banned” (Viroli 1998:15). In this way, Machiavelli’s life and work simultaneously aimed at the common good and the personal pursuit of excellence, that is, the restoration of the Florentine republic and his inclusion in its ranks. Further to this, his work aimed to assist both those in his present and men of the future by providing rules and precepts learned from the past that could stand the test of time.

### **3. General Human Capacities**

Machiavelli made a unique contribution to political thinking by studying politics as it was, rather than as it *should* be, believing that “a man who neglects what is done for what should be done works towards self-destruction rather than self-preservation” (2003a:50). His fundamental aim was to provide tangible practical solutions to modern problems, and as a devoted patriot, Machiavelli believed that he could

inspire positive political change. Together, these things make Machiavelli a political realist, concerned with the strategies necessary to maintain political power. Combining his first-hand experience of politics with his extensive knowledge and interpretation of history, Machiavelli hoped to instruct young men in the art of statecraft so that they could do what “the malignity of the times or of fortune” had not permitted him to do, that is, preserve the state (Machiavelli 2003b:269). As such, Machiavelli’s legacy is his pragmatic approach to the realities of politics.

For Machiavelli, politics is man’s highest pursuit. This concern for politics and the affairs of the state suggest that for Machiavelli, individual concerns are inferior to the common good (McCoy 1943:627). This has important implications for any potential interpretation of Machiavelli’s work in terms of the human condition or general human capacities. Given his distinctly political perspective, it is clear that Machiavelli never intended to “give a *comprehensive* view of man and his environment”, but rather, he limits his attention to “those characteristics of man which are *relevant for politics*” (Ingersoll 1968:591, my emphasis). Despite this deliberate narrowing of concerns, Machiavelli’s examination of the characteristics of political life can be viewed as an appraisal of the human condition *in strictly political terms*, and as a result, we can find Machiavelli’s understanding of general human capacities implied in his examination of the qualities required to be successful in politics.

As we have seen, for Machiavelli the most fundamental of these is the capacity for action, which, by its very nature, leads to infinite opportunities for political life. Machiavelli held that action was the most significant capacity of mankind, as “men are great not because of what they are, but because of what they do” (Ingersoll 1968:596). According to Machiavelli, the capacity for action, coupled with the desire for change, enables men to act anew, breaking established patterns and re-establishing new political foundations in freedom and stability. Further to this, action has the potential to work against the forces of necessity and fortune, transforming men from subject to citizen. In different ways, therefore, Machiavelli shares with both Arendt and Aristotle a concern for the *activities of men* and the specific events that arise from actions in the public realm.

As already noted, Machiavelli begins from the Aristotelian assumption that men are political animals, and he readily acknowledges Aristotle's list of virtues as fundamental capacities of man, agreeing that "it would be most laudable if a prince possessed all the qualities deemed to be good" (2003a:51). However, given his intention "to say something that will prove of practical use to the inquirer", Machiavelli abandons idealistic understandings of the virtues to "draw up an original set of rules" that "represent things as they are in a real truth, rather than as they are imagined" (Machiavelli 2003a:50). As such, Machiavelli individually examines many of the traditional virtues *as they manifest in practice*, including generosity, compassion and honesty, suggesting that rigid adherence to these qualities will necessarily bring a prince to grief. For example, a generous prince will "soon squander all his resources", making him "vulnerable to the first minor setback" (Machiavelli 2003a:51). Similarly, while it is "praiseworthy...for a prince to honour his word and to be straightforward rather than crafty in his dealings", according to Machiavelli, "a prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist" (2003a:57). In other words, while the virtues may be desirable *in theory*, in practice it is necessary to forgo virtue in response to circumstances so as to maintain political power.

This concern for necessity forms the basis of Machiavelli's political theory. For Machiavelli, necessity is the fundamental condition of politics and human life more generally, and both men's actions and their ability to be virtuous are limited by its demands. As such, Machiavelli re-thinks conventional understandings of virtue in such a way as to overcome the rigidity and idealism of the virtues, encouraging men to abandon them when required. As a result, Machiavelli emphasises the specifically political capacity of *virtù*, which enables men to act in whichever manner results in the best possible outcome, leaving them unconstrained by conventional considerations of morality and virtue. In this way, *virtù* may or may not be comprised of the traditional virtues as it is always relative to circumstance. For Machiavelli, *virtù* is the most significant general human capacity in terms of politics as it is the *only* capacity that can maintain and preserve the state always, directing men's capacity for action by taking into account the necessity of his political circumstances.

Although Machiavelli's understanding of human nature and history suggests that both are "unchanging throughout the ages" (Butterfield 1960:54), *virtù* enables men to act to change the conditions of life, both in the present and in the future. Machiavelli's *virtù* therefore implies that men have the potential to *adapt* both their activities and capacities in accordance with circumstances prescribed by necessity, enabling men to use and modify their various capacities as required, and freeing them to take whatever action is necessary to preserve and protect the state.<sup>57</sup> In other words, *virtù* is man's capacity to exercise, or not exercise, any of his other capacities as circumstances require. Machiavelli therefore presents a pragmatic understanding of general human capacities that suggests that while men have many political capacities, including those related to virtue or character, they must know when they are appropriate, making use of them, or not, according to need. This choice is governed by *virtù*, the capacity to make a considered political judgement about the kind of action required in particular political circumstances. As a consequence, Machiavelli does not present a constellation of general human capacities *strictly speaking*, as any such constellation will be completely contingent on circumstances.

Machiavelli's *virtù* is characterised by the ability to do *whatever is necessary*, and it possesses characteristics of direction and guidance in the sense that it *directs* the quality of action that men take, be it virtuous or otherwise. In this way, *virtù* appears to be a reconfiguration of Aristotle's virtue of prudence, so as to allow for any action necessary to preserve political power, virtuous or otherwise. However, by making *virtù* the most significant capacity of men, Machiavelli implies that general human capacities themselves are useful only in terms of *what they can achieve*, that is, their strategic use in order to achieve particular political ends. In other words, Machiavelli shifts the emphasis from general human capacities themselves to the *use of them* as a means to preserve political power. As we saw in the previous chapter, Aristotle also shifts the emphasis from general human capacities themselves, but while Aristotle suggested that the capacities, understood as virtues, are constitutive of the good life, he is more concerned with a judgement of the *proficiency* of their performance than with their use as a political strategy.

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, by doing so, men will unravel the constancy of both human nature and history, therefore undermining the theoretical basis of Machiavelli's understanding of politics.

Machiavelli therefore has a particular understanding of general human capacities that focuses on how men direct these capacities to ensure political success. Under the overarching capacity of *virtù*, Machiavelli implicitly reveals a constellation of general human capacities of sorts, defined only in the very general sense that men will order their own capacities as necessity dictates. While Machiavelli emphasises the general human capacity of action, he moves away from the Aristotelian notion of defining its proper qualities to a less prescriptive account of action that focuses on its *activity* regardless of its moral or immoral quality. Further to this, Machiavelli transforms the rigidity of the Aristotelian virtues into the single capacity of *virtù* that directs the quality of action in response to circumstance. Necessity therefore plays such a central role in Machiavelli's politics that it alone determines the order of things, dictating the terms under which men are able to exercise their general human capacities and which capacities might be appropriate. As a result, a Machiavellian conception of the human condition focuses its attention on the political capacity of *virtù*, a counterforce to both necessity and fortune that enhances the general human capacity for action by combining it with a regard for political reality.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Machiavelli's specific contribution to political thinking was a unique approach that distinguished between "man as he ought to be and man as he actually is – between the ideal form of institutions and the pragmatic conditions under which they operate" (Lerner 1960:9). While Machiavelli was primarily devoted to finding practical solutions to political problems, our concern here has been with the underlying appraisal of human activities that informs his approach. As we have seen, Machiavelli begins from the Aristotelian assumption that men are political animals, and he acknowledges Aristotle's list of virtues as fundamentally desirable qualities of political leaders. In contrast to Aristotle, however, Machiavelli's work is grounded in a concern for the realities of necessity and fortune, which, far from ideal, inhibit the realisation of normative theoretical conceptions of virtue, making virtue inappropriate as a political tool. Separating himself from more traditional conceptions of virtue, Machiavelli therefore introduces the pragmatic capacity of *virtù*, which frees men from the constraints of morality and enables them to act according to need. This capacity for

*virtù* both stems from, and reacts to, the underlying condition of necessity, which, in terms of Machiavelli's approach to the practical affairs of politics, is the most fundamental and inescapable human concern.

This chapter has therefore gained some key insights into Machiavelli's understanding of general human capacities, more specifically, those that relate to the life of politics. The ability of men to act to protect the state as circumstances require, stems from the general human capacity of *virtù*, which directs action in response to the unpredictable forces of necessity. As such, Machiavelli's regard for both necessity and fortune and his unwavering focus on political practice, leads him to re-configure traditional conceptions of action in accordance with virtue by separating politics and morality. As a result, Machiavelli holds *virtù* as the most significant in the constellation of general human capacities as it enables men to choose the course of action most appropriate to particular circumstances, allowing them to call on whichever general human capacity can overcome unfavourable conditions. In this way, Machiavelli offers us an insight into the realities of the political human condition that distances itself from any ideal notion of general human capacities to acknowledge that *all* capacities can be politically useful.

This certainly contrasts with the understanding of general human capacities uncovered in the previous chapter where we saw that Aristotle theorises a hierarchy of virtues that correspond to the good life. While there are considerable areas of overlap between Aristotle and Machiavelli, they offer us fundamentally different appraisals of general human capacities and their political nature which correspond to different understandings of the human condition. Much of this appears to stem from Machiavelli's move away from general ethical principles to treat politics as it *really is*. While the differences between Aristotle and Machiavelli are largely irreconcilable, we are not so much concerned with synthesising an *overall* understanding of general human capacities here, as with investigating the ways in which some other considerations of the human condition by key thinkers can illuminate *The Human Condition*. In other words, what we are attempting to do here is to show by contrast just what it is about *Arendt's* consideration of general human capacities that is so unique.

Reconsidering Aristotle and Machiavelli's understandings of general human capacities in this light, we can see that, particular differences notwithstanding, there are some key similarities in their approach and motivation. Both Aristotle and Machiavelli explicitly aim at some external goal – one to help men become good, and the other to teach young men how to be successful leaders. In this way, both thinkers share a concern for political practice, and their theoretical considerations are a means to a particular end – the practical realisation of their ideas. This is distinctly different to Arendt's attempt "to think what we are doing" in *The Human Condition*, which distances itself from "matters of practical politics" altogether (1998:5). The magnitude of these differences in motivation between Arendt on one hand, and Aristotle and Machiavelli on the other, far outweigh their overlapping concerns in terms of general human capacities and the political dimensions of human existence. This investigation into Machiavelli's work therefore appears to confirm the suggestion that emerged at the conclusion of our discussion of Aristotle, that the significance of *The Human Condition* lies not in the *content* of Arendt's consideration of general human capacities, but in the unusual manner of her approach. When juxtaposed with Aristotle and Machiavelli, Arendt's narrative exploration, which does not give such clear direction in terms of how we are to make sense of it, is striking.

Hoping to shed further light on these ideas and answer our fundamental question regarding the meaning of Arendt's consideration of general human capacities, the following chapter carries on our story about general human capacities by investigating the work of Rousseau. This will be the last in our exploration of "the various constellations" of general human capacities as they have presented themselves in a selected history of Western political thought (see Arendt 1998:6). In the concluding chapter of Part I, we will attempt to weave together the insights gained as a result of this narrative exploration to reconsider both general human capacities themselves and Arendt's decision to confine her discussion to them. By doing so, that final chapter hopes to fulfil the aim of Part I to illuminate just what it is that makes *The Human Condition* so unique, and to find new meaning in its pages as a result.



## CHAPTER FOUR:

# Jean-Jacques Rousseau

This chapter is the last of our exploration of “the various constellations” of general human capacities as they have presented themselves in a very selective history of Western political thought (see Arendt 1998:6). It continues on with the aims of Chapters 2 and 3: to consider Arendt’s story about general human capacities in a broader context so as to discover through contrast just what it is about *The Human Condition* that makes it both significant and distinctive. By exploring Rousseau’s conception of general human capacities, this chapter hopes to further augment our understanding of this concept and its role in investigations of the human condition. It argues that Rousseau understood general human capacities as a combination of natural qualities and potentialities that could change and develop in response to the conditions of life.

This chapter begins by examining Rousseau’s critique of modern society and his suggestion that modern men live a life of social dependence and inequality. It traces Rousseau’s investigation into the origins of modern misery by means of a theoretical ‘state of nature’, which enables him to contrast the dependence of social man with the freedom of natural man. By doing so, Rousseau charts the changes in man’s conditions and abilities, suggesting that these stem from the “various chance happenings that were able to perfect human reason while deteriorating the species” (1987b:59). To remedy the conditions of modern life, Rousseau prescribes a political

system based on the social contract that enables men to re-found society on elements natural to his condition. With these things in mind, this chapter contends that Rousseau's unique conception of human nature, developed through an examination of 'natural man', offers us an explicit understanding of general human capacities and their reflexive relationship with the conditions of human existence. By considering the political context of this relationship, this chapter uncovers Rousseau's conception of a dynamic constellation of general human capacities, responsive to changes in the human condition whilst still grounded in man's natural state.

## 1. Origins

Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712. After a series of unsatisfying occupations, he moved to Paris in 1742 to pursue fame and fortune in music, his first great passion. Fame finally came in 1750, not with music,<sup>58</sup> but with the prize winning essay, *A Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences (First Discourse)* (1987a), where Rousseau argued that advances in the arts and sciences had corrupted morals (Strauss 1972).<sup>59</sup> In 1754, he unsuccessfully attempted to win the Academy prize for a second time with his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse)* (1987b). After a series of publications, including a best-selling novel, Rousseau was forced to flee to France following widespread condemnation of *The Social Contract* (1968) and *Émile* (1964). Many of his later works were explicitly autobiographical, expressing his inner sentiments and continued mental distress.

These details of Rousseau's life are especially noteworthy as Rousseau "thought of his life and his work as a complete whole" (Bertram 2003:5). He saw his "public philosophy as an expression of his feelings and thoughts", and his "interior life as a public document of the most general social significance" (Shklar 1969:219). However, Rousseau's public confrontations of personal feelings and frank discussions of his personal experiences have led some to "exploit the curiosity-value

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<sup>58</sup> A short time later, however, in 1752, Rousseau did achieve musical acclaim with the widespread success of his opera *Le Devin du Village*.

<sup>59</sup> Rousseau later told the story of the 'illumination' that had overcome him in response to the question posed by the Academy of Dijon, providing him with the inspiration for his essay. He spent the next ten years trying to express all that had been revealed to him by this experience (Dent 1992:9).

of his life” (Broome 1963:v). This includes dismissing many of his autobiographical works as confessions of a mentally unstable and obsessed man. Yet, while “his life is, in many ways, fascinating and strange in its own right” (Dent 1992:4), Rousseau believed that by exposing both the public and private sides of his character, his work, and conversely, his life, would have more meaning, as he could dispel misconceptions “to prove himself a man who, with all his imperfections, was nevertheless fundamentally honest and good” (Cohen 1953:8).

This “intensely personal approach” (Cobban 1964:19) was grounded in Rousseau’s belief that the laws of virtue were contained in every human heart, and to know them, one needed only to withdraw into himself:

O virtue! Sublime science of simple souls, are there so many difficulties and so much preparation necessary in order to know you? Are your principles not engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough, in order to learn your laws, to commune with oneself and, in the silence of the passions, to listen to the voice of one’s conscience? (Rousseau 1987a:21).

In light of this, Rousseau believed that his own search for self-realisation would yield truths about human nature that he could generalise to the experience of others. It is worth noting here that this notion that a singular and unique portrait could become an example of universal truth (Grimsley 1973:136) is rejected by Arendt on the grounds that the cultivation of the inner life is a symptom of world alienation, and therefore an inadequate means to understand the intricacies of the affairs of men (Arendt 1998:38-39).

Rousseau’s withdrawal into himself, coupled with the “peculiarities of his character and circumstances”, meant that he “was detached from society as perhaps no civilized man had ever been” (Melzer 1983:308). However, Rousseau argued that this position outside society provided him with an impartial vantage point from which only *he* could see the truth. As this suggests, Rousseau saw himself in stark contrast to the *philosophes* of his time, arguing that unlike him, they were corrupted by society and possessed insincere motives. As a consequence, he argued that the *philosophes* were unable to find truth as they “do not wish to do so; they prefer to make intellectual activity an expression of their own selfish or perverse feelings” (Grimsley 1973:10). Rousseau therefore saw it as his responsibility to expose the

sources of error of his contemporaries, making them aware of their own corruption and the inadequacy of their thinking (Grimsley 1973:17). In this way, Rousseau believed that his alienation from society was both the origin and the unfortunate consequence of knowing and being able to speak the truth (Melzer 1983:308).

## **2. A Radical Critique of Society**

Rousseau was highly critical of his society and the conditions of deprivation and deficiency in which modern men lived. In an attempt to understand this state of affairs, Rousseau enquired into the origins of society, ultimately suggesting that this required an understanding of human nature: “For how can the source of the inequality among men be known unless one begins by knowing men themselves?” (Rousseau 1987b:33). To answer this question, Rousseau constructed a theoretical ‘state of nature’ to discover the truth of human nature and trace the developments that had led men “to the point where we see them now” (1987b:59). However, he acknowledged that this kind of investigation is “difficult to carry out” (Rousseau 1987b:34) as it requires us to “clear our minds of a modern, scientifically-influenced, conception of nature” (Bertram 2003:30),<sup>60</sup> so as to see it not from our current vantage point, where science and society have corrupted our perspective, but as it really was, in its original form:

For it is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to have a proper understanding of a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and yet about which it is necessary to have accurate notions in order to judge properly our own present state (1987b:34).

Given the difficulties of seeing “what appears to me to be so difficult to see” (Rousseau 1987b:33), Rousseau did not attempt an empirical historical enquiry. Rather, his method relies on “intuitively perceived principles” (Grimsley 1973:30) and hypothetical exploration:

Let us therefore begin by putting aside all the facts, for they have no bearing on the question. The investigations that may be undertaken concerning this subject should not be taken for historical truths, but only for

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<sup>60</sup> Rousseau himself asks us to leave aside “all the scientific books which teach us only to see men as they have made themselves” (1987b:35).

hypothetical and conditional reasonings, better suited to shedding light on the nature of things than on pointing out their true origin (Rousseau 1987b:38-39).

According to Rousseau, this kind of conjecture is “the only means we have left of removing the multitude of difficulties that conceal from us the knowledge of the real foundations of human society” (1987b:34).<sup>61</sup> He also contends that by understanding these foundations, we not only uncover man’s “natural faculties and their successive developments” (1987b:36), but we are better able to understand “the present constitution of things” (1987b:36) in the hope of finding a solution.

### **NATURAL MAN IN THE ‘STATE OF NATURE’**

The key assumption underlying Rousseau’s conception of natural man is that he possessed natural equality with all others, that is, men are naturally “equal among themselves” (1987b:33). Rousseau makes a crucial distinction between physical inequality, established by nature, and moral or political inequality which “depends on a kind of convention and is established, or at least authorized, by the consent of men” (1987b:38). Like modern man, natural man had physical inequalities such as “the difference of age, health, bodily strength, and qualities of mind or soul” (Rousseau 1987b:37-38), but in terms of *power*, Rousseau argued that the original condition of men was one of equality (Charvet 1974:5; Salkever 1977:223; Strong 1994:105). According to Rousseau, natural moral and political equality stem from the simple fact that in the state of nature, men live in isolation rather than in a community. As such, natural men “have among themselves no type of moral relations or acknowledged duties” (Rousseau 1987b:52). In this way, Rousseau understood natural man as possessing freedom in the sense of individual independence (Cullen 1993:4). This implies that the state of nature is such that no man is subject to the will

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<sup>61</sup> Rousseau’s method of hypothetical exploration and conjecture exhibits some similarities to storytelling. By constructing a theoretical state of nature “which perhaps never existed” (1987b:34), Rousseau combines the imagination and reasoned principles in the hope of uncovering the origins of moral and social inequality and the truth of human nature. This is inherently problematic in the sense that Rousseau hopes to derive truth through conjecture. However, for Rousseau, thinking about the truth of things is entirely non-systematic, and may, in fact, be paradoxical (Salkever 1977:217). This means that Rousseau’s method is not entirely like Arendt’s, which resists conceptual abstraction, but it is also distinct from the more systematic methodologies of Aristotle and Machiavelli. As such, in terms of an appraisal of Rousseau’s work, we can tread a middle ground between the two, discussing the conceptual “truths” Rousseau discovers while keeping a close eye on the context in which he discovered them.

of another: “For whatever else may be absent from man’s pre-social constitution and circumstances, subjugated domination by another unquestionably is” (Dent 1989:17).

According to Rousseau, natural man’s primitive state means that he possessed neither reason nor morality. However, in his consideration of the “most simple operations of the human soul”, Rousseau perceived two basic human principles, “of which one makes us ardently interested in our well-being and our self-preservation, and the other inspires in us a natural repugnance to seeing any sentient being, especially our fellow man, perish or suffer” (1987b:35). Rousseau refers to this first pre-rational quality of self-preservation as *amour de soi*, and it is the “drive to take care of our own needs: our basic wants and interests” (Bertram 2003:21). Unlike liberal theorists such as Hobbes, Rousseau’s understanding of self-preservation does not result in humans being “led into endemic conflict with their fellows” (Bertram 2003:20; also Winch 1972:238), and in contrast, *amour de soi* “finds expression not only in the desire to care for our physical needs but also in a regard for our standing among other persons like ourselves” (Bertram 2003:19).

This care for others is explained by the second of man’s natural qualities, pity, which “tempers the ardor he has for his own well-being by an innate repugnance to seeing his fellow men suffer (Rousseau 1987b:53).<sup>62</sup> As a result, Rousseau contends that natural man will never harm another man, except when his own preservation is at stake (1987b:35). Pity is therefore a pre-moral drive which satisfies the goals of morality in the absence of reasoning, and “by moderating in each individual the activity of the love of oneself, contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species” (Rousseau 1987b:55). While men possess the faculty of pity, they lack morality, strictly speaking, as they are unable to reason or self-reflect. However, Rousseau argues that this *absence of goodness* does not in itself equate to evil: “Above all, let us not conclude with Hobbes that because man has no idea of goodness he is naturally evil; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue” (Rousseau 1987b:53). Instead, he suggests that “it would seem that men in that state, having among themselves no type of moral relations or acknowledged duties,

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<sup>62</sup> This suggests that pity is a development or extension of our *amour de soi*, as it is “a projection of our own care for self onto the suffering other, forming the basis for a recognition that it, too, is a creature like ourselves endowed with feeling and a viewpoint on the world” (Bertram 2003:23).

could be neither good nor evil, and had neither vices nor virtues” (Rousseau 1987b:52). According to Rousseau, natural man does not have the need to satisfy the “multitude of passions which are the product of society” (1987b:53), and he therefore has no motive for selfishness or vice. As such, Rousseau argues that it is not *natural* for men to be wicked or vicious, rather it is society that forces them to be so (Grimsley 1973:33).

In addition to these qualities, Rousseau contends that natural man had a range of “other faculties”, received “in a state of potentiality” (1987b:59), including perfectibility. For Rousseau, “the very specific quality” of perfectibility is an “almost unlimited faculty” which distinguishes men most clearly from animals and “about which there can be no argument” (1987b:45). Rousseau describes “the faculty of self-perfection” as “a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual” (1987b:45). Perfectibility therefore describes the inherent capability of men to develop a range of additional qualities internal to human nature with the aid of particular circumstances (Charvet 1974:8). Interestingly, perfectibility itself was received “in a state of potentiality”, meaning that it too required the assistance of circumstances to develop into a functioning faculty. Rousseau explains that the development of the human mind, made possible by the actualisation of perfectibility, required “the chance coming together of several unconnected causes that might never have come into being and without which [man] would have remained eternally in his primitive constitution” (1987b:59). These “various chance happenings” included conditions that led men to associate with one another in the form of societies.

## **SOCIETY AND THE DEGRADATION OF NATURAL MAN**

As we have seen, Rousseau argues that in the state of nature, natural man lived in a condition of extreme individualism and had little or no association with other men. However, he speculates that a series of chance events led to changes in natural man’s lifestyle. Most significantly, natural changes in the environment forced men into social life, forging both community and communication:

Great floods or earthquakes surrounded the inhabited areas with water or precipices. Upheavals of the globe detached parts of the mainland and broke them up into islands. Clearly among men thus brought together and

forced to live together, a common idiom must have formed (Rousseau 1987b:63).<sup>63</sup>

As a consequence, the state of nature began “to take on a new appearance” (Rousseau 1987b:63), and natural man was transformed into social man, living together with other men in society.

Under new conditions conducive to social interaction, Rousseau argues that the individual mind underwent a series of radical transformations which allowed natural man to foster his inherent capacities (Dent 1989:11). Most fundamentally, society enabled natural man to develop and actualise his capacity for perfectibility, thereby developing a host of other capacities (Rousseau 1987b:45), including language, differentiation, personal identity and reason. According to Rousseau, the combination of language and reason enabled men to perceive meaningful relations between themselves and their environment (Grimsley 1973:15). This, in turn, fostered the development of morality as men desired to legitimise their relationships with others, substituting justice for instinct (Powers 1962:453). In Rousseau’s understanding, man’s inherent perfectibility therefore transformed him from natural man into a moral being capable of reasoning, his potentialities “brought into action as a result of life in society” (Cobban 1951:278). For Rousseau, this represented a significant progression of natural man, and he suggests that “the period of the development of human faculties...must have been the happiest and most durable epoch” (1987b:65).

Rousseau argues that this period of development did not last, however, and men were unable to maintain “a middle path between the indolence of our primitive state and the petulant activity of our egocentrism” (1987b:65). According to Rousseau, society took a change for the worse when men were no longer content with their natural independence:

...as soon as one man needed the help of another, as soon as one man realized that it was useful for a single individual to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property came into existence, labor became necessary (Rousseau 1987b:65).

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<sup>63</sup> This marks the shift from singular *man* to a plurality of *men*. Before language there were no ‘men’ in the sense that man did not possess the conscious ability to recognise either himself or others (Ellenburg 1976:98).

In other words, Rousseau argues that as society progressed, men grew dependent on one another and established conventions based on inequality and greed. As a consequence, Rousseau argues that while the beginning of social life was “the best for men...all the subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decay of the species” (1987b:65).

Rousseau contends that the progression of society had significant consequences for man’s natural qualities. Natural man’s *amour de soi* degenerated into *amour propre*, the natural quality of self-preservation transforming into selfishness or pride. Where natural man was concerned with his self-preservation in a way that did not impinge on others, Rousseau argues that in society this concern was reduced to a corrupt form of self-interest. Unlike *amour se soi*, *amour propre* relies on comparison and the ranking of preference, and it describes “the concern to achieve human presence, significant considerable standing, for yourself as your inviolable title in your transactions and relations with others” (Dent 1989:24). In other words, social man began to seek confirmation of his standing within society, defining his value on the basis of the opinions and the regard in which he was held by others. In this way, according to Rousseau, society denied men authentic relationships, as the desire for dominance and favour become features of man’s association:

As soon as men had begun mutually to value one another, and the idea of esteem was formed in their minds, each one claimed to have a right to it, and it was no longer possible for anyone to be lacking it with impunity (Rousseau 1987b:64).

In Rousseau’s appraisal, society therefore made men dependent on others for their sense of self worth, making the social individual “an artificial creation out of the opinions of others” (Charvet 1974:2).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> This produces the “inauthentic self” (Grant 1994:434), who is “unable to live except in the opinions of others” (Powers 1962:465). In society, appearance is privileged over reality and “external circumstances no longer correspond to what people really are” (Grimsley 1973:19). This serves to further conceal man’s original nature and makes it “impossible for us to know man’s true being” (Grimsley 1973:20). Interestingly, this inadvertently affirms the validity of Rousseau’s personal method: “since all values – moral, spiritual, and intellectual – have been perverted by the social process, the authentic thinker has no starting point outside himself” (Grimsley 1973:17).

This irreversible dependence of men on other men spelled the end for Rousseau's pre-political state of nature as it represented a fundamental corruption of man's original condition of freedom (Grant 1994:435; Gourevitch 1997:xxii). According to Rousseau, the psychological dependence on status and recognition, coupled with the growing dependence of men on other men for material survival, led to the deprivation and perversion of natural man, ultimately putting him in chains:<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, although man had previously been free and independent, we find him, so to speak, subject, by virtue of a multitude of fresh needs, to all of nature and particularly to his fellowmen (Rousseau 1987b:67).

This dependence results in profound inequality, which for Rousseau, is the greatest social evil (Gay 1963:28). According to Rousseau, society is characterised by social inequality, which is fostered by both *amour propre* and economics, as pride and wealth create imbalances between individuals. It is also characterised by moral inequality, "that is, an inequality in the status individuals enjoy in the eyes of the community" (Viroli 1988:4), which distances men further from their natural qualities of freedom and independence.

For Rousseau, society is therefore a double-edged sword, as although it opened up "great potentialities of a positive nature", it also held "dangers and evils of equal greatness in store" (Powers 1962:456). More specifically, while it presented the opportunity for men to develop the capacities of perfectibility, and subsequently, language, morality, and reason, it also came to oppress men through dependence, inequality and the corruption of self-preservation into pride. As a result, Rousseau argues that social man was alienated from the qualities of goodness, pity and self-preservation that were natural to his condition:

It is enough for me to have proved that this is not the original state of man, and that this is only the spirit of society, and the inequality that society engenders, which thus change and alter all our natural inclinations (Rousseau 1987b:81).

In theorising natural man, Rousseau has not only come to a detailed understanding of human nature, "man's natural faculties and their successive developments"

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<sup>65</sup> This is a reference to the famous first line of Rousseau's *The Social Contract*: "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains" (1968:49).

(Rousseau 1987b:36), but in doing so, he has been able to diagnose the problems of social man, taking the radical position that society itself is the cause of man's inequality and oppression. As a result, Rousseau attempts to force us to re-evaluate not only the state of social man, but also the overall effects of society on both our present and future lives. This is important in this context as it highlights the similarities between Arendt's examination of general human capacities and their imminent loss in the modern social realm, and Rousseau's examination of society and its effects on man's natural capabilities. Both Rousseau and Arendt specifically respond to contemporary events, including the rise of society, which re-configure the conditions of human life. The difference is that where Rousseau relies on the theoretical device of the 'state of nature' as the basis for a connected series of propositions, Arendt's discussion takes the form of a complex narrative that is grounded in experience and example.

By considering men in the state of nature, before the corrupting effects of society, Rousseau is also able to speculate about what man *might* have become, "if he were allowed to follow his own innate capacities and the impulse of nature, rather than the dictates of society and opinion" (Grimsley 1973:44). With this in mind, Rousseau argues for a 'return to nature', not in the sense of a return to the life of the solitary savage "prowling shelterless about the woods and living on acorns" (Cobban 1964:153), but re-connecting with those elements of man's natural condition that have been lost due to the corrupting forces of society, such as freedom, equality and independence. According to Rousseau, this is a possibility inherent in man's natural capacity for perfectibility. As explained by Grimsley:

...man is constantly moving forward to new and more complex modes of being; the fact that at one moment in his history he chose to follow the wrong path in no way affects his essential nature as a being capable of harmonious development in propitious circumstances (Grimsley 1973:43).

With man's faculty of perfectibility in mind, Rousseau tries to conceive of a new way to arrange social and political relations so as to "import the independence of the solitary, natural condition into the social, civil condition" (Cullen 1993:7). In other words, Rousseau hoped to *re-orient* man's perfectibility so as to enable human nature to develop in a way that society had precluded, fulfilling his natural potential in a way compatible with freedom and autonomy.

## **A POLITICAL REMEDY: REFORMING SOCIETY**

Rousseau's examination of the state of nature led him to believe that natural man possessed the qualities of pity and self-preservation and that freedom is essential to his happiness (Hall 1973:138). He also suggested that natural man possessed the faculty of perfectibility, the capacity to develop a range of natural attributes bestowed on him in a "state of potentiality", including reason, morality and the social virtues (Rousseau 1987b:59). However, under the influence of social conditions, this same faculty led men to dependence, inequality, vice, and ultimately modern misery. Not content with this state of affairs, Rousseau "called on men to reject the degrading lesson the world now offered them every day, the lesson that they are slaves and worthy of being so" (Melzer 1983:318). He argued that social man must undergo a radical transformation in order to reclaim the freedom and equality natural to his condition, harnessing perfectibility to better develop his natural potentialities, that is, in line with the qualities he naturally possesses.

Despite advocating a 'return to nature' of sorts, Rousseau recognised that the social association of men was an irreversible fact of modern life. However, he argued that the *form* that this association took in modern society was far from ideal as social man lived in a condition of misery and deprivation, dependent on other men and plagued by inequality. According to Rousseau, the solution lay in politics, and he argued that the establishment of political society would facilitate a "remarkable change in man" (1968:64). In contrast to the depravity of modern society, in *civil society*, as Rousseau envisaged it:

...[man's] faculties are so exercised and developed, his sentiments so ennobled and his whole spirit so elevated that...he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him for ever from the state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal made a creature of intelligence and a man (Rousseau 1968:65).

Rousseau's politics therefore takes on the difficult problem of forging and protecting a form of association that counters the deficiencies of society and reclaims fundamental components of human nature. In other words, Rousseau does not want to abolish society, but rather, to *re-form* it *politically*, transforming it from a social association based on dependence and inequality, to a structured and contractual

political association based on legitimate political institutions that restores the freedom and dignity of natural man.

Rousseau's most explicit statement of his vision for this political society can be found in *The Social Contract*. There, Rousseau aims to counter the "inequality occasioned by social institutions" (1987b:74) by finding a way to reconcile the preservation of the autonomy of the individual with the exercise of political authority:

This difficulty in terms of my present subject, may be expressed in these words: 'How to find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before' (Rousseau 1968:60).

As we have seen, Rousseau argues that modern society does not satisfy these requirements as men are subject to dependence and inequality. According to Rousseau, the solution to these problems lies in the social contract (1968:60).<sup>66</sup> In this way, *The Social Contract* is an emancipatory political project (Bertram 2003:33) that seeks to liberate modern man from the oppressive forces of society and restore freedom to human life.

Rousseau's emphasis on reclaiming man's natural freedom has important implications in terms of the form his political institutions take, and he condemns every authoritarian arrangement of government (Ellenburg 1976:13). For Rousseau, a body politic must be founded on a common good that unites individuals in such a way that "their powers are directed by a single motive and act in concert", but "without putting himself in peril and neglecting the care he owes to himself" (Rousseau 1968:60).<sup>67</sup> As such, Rousseau proposes a political system based on extreme equality and the complete alienation of individual rights to the whole community. According to Rousseau, "as every individual gives himself absolutely, the conditions are the same

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<sup>66</sup> While this chapter focuses on Rousseau's solution to the problems of modern society being active participation in a free political community as outlined in *The Social Contract*, in *Émile* (1964), Rousseau pursues an entirely different path. Far from advocating a political solution, the tutor's education of Émile forces him to return to nature by re-establishing natural conditions. Émile is taught to keep to himself and is discouraged from real interaction or attachment to others in order to maintain his independence. As such, Émile is pushed out of the social realm, not into the political realm, but into the *private realm* where he can depend on his own self rather than on other men, making him less susceptible to changes in society. In this way, Émile's is a more *literal* 'return to nature'.

<sup>67</sup> In this way, Rousseau hopes to balance the common good with man's natural quality of self-preservation.

for all, and precisely because they are the same for all, it is in no one's interest to make the conditions onerous for others" (1968:60). In addition:

...since every man gives himself to all, he gives himself to no one; and since there is no associate over whom he does not gain the same rights as others gain over him, each man recovers the equivalent of everything he loses, and in the bargain he acquires more power to preserve what he has (Rousseau 1968:61).

This suggests that the social contract is a "reciprocal commitment between society and the individual, so that each person...finds himself doubly committed, first, as a member of the sovereign body in relation to individuals, and secondly, as a member of the state in relation to the sovereign" (Rousseau 1968:62). For Rousseau, the social contract therefore implies mutual responsibility and obligation. Although such a system makes men free by ensuring both the independence and equality of men, this political form of freedom is not the natural liberty of the state of nature which is forever lost, but is instead "civil liberty", which has its basis in consent (Levine 2002:70).<sup>68</sup>

According to Rousseau, a social contract conceived in these terms provides a legitimate basis for political society. When individuals freely consent to such a contract, this "act of association creates an artificial and corporate body composed of as many members as there are voters in the assembly" (Rousseau 1968:61). This unification of a multitude into a single body establishes the life and will of the state (Rousseau 1987b:63), referred to by Rousseau as the 'general will': "Each one of us puts into the community his person and all his powers under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body, we incorporate every member as an indivisible part of the whole" (Rousseau 1968:61).<sup>69</sup> The general will aims at general interests, "at what is best for persons viewed as integral parts of collective entities" (Levine 2002:72), directing the power of the sovereign in the interests of the common good. For Rousseau, political freedom "requires subordinating the private to the public good...finding one's private good in the public or common good" (Gourevitch 1997:xiv). In this way, private interests become public interests, making the divide

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<sup>68</sup> Natural liberty "has no limit but the physical power of the individual concerned", however civil liberty is limited by sovereignty and the state's pursuit of the common good (Rousseau 1968:65).

<sup>69</sup> In its most extreme interpretation, Rousseau's political state is seen as a form of totalitarianism as the general will suppresses individuality and establishes "complete submission to the totally integrated community" (Crocker 1968:46).

between public and private indistinct. This is a clear contrast to Arendt's contention that each realm contains fundamentally different human concerns (1998:28).

Rousseau argues that the social contract not only re-establishes the natural conditions of freedom and equality, but it also restores the natural goodness of man.<sup>70</sup> Unlike Machiavelli, who argued for the separation of politics and morality altogether, Rousseau believed that politics gave life the order it required to *facilitate* morality, as "political institutions seem to stand midway between the primitive conditions of the state of nature and the eternal order of the universe" (Grimsley 1973:119). For Rousseau, restoring ethics to politics, and therefore virtue to individuals, was entirely necessary as a means to combat the corruption of society. As such, he attempted to design a system of political institutions that could best serve morality:

In other words, that great question, as to which is the best possible form of government seemed to me to come down in the end to this one: what is the nature of the government most likely to produce the most virtuous, the most enlightened, the wisest, and in short, taking this word in the widest sense, the best people? (Rousseau 2008:395).

This marks Rousseau's political theory with an Aristotelian tone in terms of the close relationship between virtue and politics and theory and practice. It also suggests that like Aristotle, Rousseau's state political institutions are not ends in themselves but a means to the *good society* and "the moral and material well-being and happiness of the individuals who compose it" (Cobban 1964:8). Unlike Aristotle, however, Rousseau intended to "devise political institutions which favour behavioural control", while simultaneously maintaining a form of political liberty (Crocker 1968:17) and incorporating elements of the state of nature to foster man's potentialities. By doing so, Rousseau believed that man could achieve moral freedom and therefore realise his potential for happiness. This contrasts Aristotle's contention that men develop the virtues through instruction and habituation.

Rousseau's conception of the social contract therefore sets out a society based on legitimate and structured institutions, and it has the central aim of counteracting the

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<sup>70</sup> Although Rousseau argues that natural man "could be neither good nor evil, and had neither vices nor virtues" (1987b:52), the absence of motive for selfishness and vice *itself* equates to a kind of 'natural goodness' in the sense that it is *not natural* for men to be wicked or vicious.

corrupting effects of society which result in inequality and dependence. By re-founding society on these terms, Rousseau hopes to re-orient men to their natural qualities of goodness, equality and freedom, not as they were in the state of nature, but in new forms appropriate to men living in social conditions. In place of social man, characterised by the miseries of inequality, dependence and vice, Rousseau offers a vision of political man, a perfection of natural man and his original qualities. Unlike social man, political man is authentic, has a sense of self identity and purpose and associates with others freely and equally through speech and action.<sup>71</sup> As such, unlike modern society which engenders inequality and alters “all our natural inclinations” (Rousseau 1987b:81), Rousseau’s civil society *develops* the natural potentialities of man in a manner consistent with his natural qualities. As a result, Rousseau’s political society enables men to overcome the perversion and corruption of modern society.

### **3. General Human Capacities**

Rousseau’s work emerged as a response to what he perceived as the misery and oppression of modern men. Unsatisfied with the modern human condition, Rousseau undertook an examination of human nature in order to understand what had precipitated this state of affairs: “For how can the source of the inequality among men be known unless one begins by knowing men themselves?” (Rousseau 1987b:33). By exploring the theoretical ‘state of nature’, Rousseau argued that natural man was essentially good and free, and possessed the qualities of pity, self-preservation and perfectibility, along with a host of “other faculties” that he “had received in a state of potentiality” (Rousseau 1987b:59). With the birth of society, man developed many of these potentialities, including reason, social virtue, morality and language.<sup>72</sup> Rousseau argues that as society progressed, however, men became dependent and

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<sup>71</sup> The separation of reality and appearance established in society is deconstructed by the liberation and security of the social contract. As a result, when individuals establish connections with others in political society, both can be assured of the other’s authenticity and feel empowered as equal possessors of value (Bertram 2003:3).

<sup>72</sup> This transformation from potentiality to actuality (or capacity) is reminiscent of Aristotle’s understanding of moral virtue. According to Aristotle, “nature endows us” with certain potentialities, which are inherent capabilities that are only actually acquired by exercising them, that is, by the doing of their activity, *energeia*. In contrast, Rousseau suggests that the natural qualities given to man are developed (and therefore fully acquired) by the combination of perfectibility and a series of chance happenings.

corrupt, shifting away from their natural qualities and entrenching modern society in inequality and vice.

By tracing the changes in both man's conditions and his attributes, Rousseau reduced the cause of modern misery to the corrupting effects of society itself. In other words, Rousseau believed that society altered man's natural course and the natural development of his potentialities, substituting others in their place, including vice. As a result, Rousseau argued that men must re-order society so as to eliminate corruption and dependence, reclaiming the freedom and equality that are natural to his condition in new forms appropriate to a life of social association. In this way, like Arendt, Rousseau placed a "constant emphasis upon the possibility of making a new beginning" (Grimsley 1973:165). Although hindered by the corrupting forces of society, under the right kind of conditions, free from dependence and corruption, perfectibility could lead men in new directions. The capacity for growth and development therefore means that "man's perfection, in the contemporary world, remains a mere possibility of his existence" (Grimsley 1973:160).<sup>73</sup>

Rousseau's political solution was not to return to the state of nature – "the forbidden fruit had been tasted...and we can never return to nature" (Powers 1962:465) – but rather, to *re-found* society on terms compatible with man's natural qualities and potentialities. By establishing political society, Rousseau hoped to move beyond the vice and depravity of social man towards a new political version of man, a perfected version of natural man living in social conditions and therefore concerned with the common good. In this way, Rousseau's political man appears to be an extension of early social man, who had developed many additional faculties in line with his natural potentialities, including reason, morality and language, but who had not yet been corrupted by dependence and inequality. In fact, by placing him in a political context, governed by rigid political institutions and covenants, Rousseau appears to put early social man on a different path to the one he chose for himself, one that does not lead to perversion, but rather, leads to further development along original lines.

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<sup>73</sup> While this appears to be idealistic, perfectibility itself is not the same as the pursuit of perfection. Rather, it is a faculty that enables men to develop through action or movement. In this way, Rousseau understands perfectibility as a *means* to develop, that is, the *activity* of perfectibility rather than the end of perfection.

Rousseau's examination of human nature and his attempts to understand modern inequality therefore have a very explicit focus on man's inherent faculties. By all accounts, these seem to be consistent with Arendt's notion of general human capacities (i.e., the activities, faculties or abilities that men are able to exercise, call on or perform by virtue of being human). As we have seen, Rousseau argues that natural man possessed various qualities such as goodness, pity, freedom and self-interest. He was also endowed with a range of "other faculties...in a state of potentiality" (Rousseau 1987b:59) that develop with reference to circumstances and the faculty of perfectibility:

It is thus that Nature, which always acts for the best, constitutes us at birth. At first she gives us only such desires as are necessary for our preservation and the faculties necessary to satisfy them. All the rest she keeps, as it were, in reserve in the storehouse of the soul, to develop as they are needed (Rousseau 1964:90).

This suggests that Rousseau understood general human capacities as a combination of natural qualities and potentialities, that is, qualities endowed by nature that could change and develop in response to the conditions of life by means of man's capacity of perfectibility. This understanding of general human capacities as dynamic is evidenced by Rousseau's assertion that the capacities of natural man differ in kind from those of social man.

The role of perfectibility in developing a range of other faculties makes it central to Rousseau's understanding of general human capacities. Rousseau describes perfectibility as the "very specific quality" possessed by natural man that enables him to develop new skills and abilities and evolve with reference to changing circumstances (1987b:45). It is an unlimited source of potential in the sense that it "successively develops" all the other potentialities possessed by man (Rousseau 1987b:45). According to Rousseau, in the early stages of society, perfectibility facilitated a remarkable "development of human capacities", and this period "must have been the happiest and most durable epoch" (1987b:65). As society progressed, however, men developed vice and dependence, meaning that "all the subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact, toward the decay of the species" (Rousseau 1987b:65). The capacity for perfectibility was therefore responsible for both the growth *and* the

degeneration of natural man, developing his faculties but corrupting society, leading him away from his natural qualities, and finally bringing “man and the world to the point where we see them now” (Rousseau 1987b:59):

It would be sad for us to be forced to agree that this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty is the source of all man’s misfortunes; that this is what, by dint of time, draws him out of that original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days; that this is what, through centuries of giving rise to his enlightenment and his errors, his vices and his virtues, eventually makes him a tyrant over himself and nature (Rousseau 1987b:45).

While perfectibility set men on a course of development, circumstances ultimately took them down a path to vice and oppression. Without perfectibility, man’s general human capacities might remain in a state of potentiality, but at least he would “pass tranquil and innocent days” (Rousseau 1987b:45), free from depravity and corruption. At the same time, however, his life would be devoid of the depth of human experience that comes from association with others, and he would be incapable of reason, language, morality or imagination.

Although perfectibility itself therefore does not guarantee man’s development, Rousseau argues that it does offer a possibility for men to escape current conditions. By its very nature, perfectibility develops the various capacities men hold as potentialities “with the aid of circumstances” (Rousseau 1987b:45). Despite the current state of social man, Rousseau argues that “the faculties that natural man had received in a state of potentiality” (Rousseau 1987b:59) have not been lost but merely corrupted:

It is, as it were, the life of your species that I am about to describe to you according to the qualities you have received, which your education and your habits have been able to corrupt *but have been unable to destroy* (Rousseau 1987b:39, my emphasis).

This is similar to Arendt’s contention that although the range of ordinary human experience has been limited in the modern world, “this does not mean that modern man has lost his capacities or is on the point of losing them” (1998:323). In this way, like Arendt, Rousseau holds that the general human capacities bestowed on natural man as potentialities are *permanent*. However, the differences in natural man and social man suggest that the *constellation* of these capacities changes with reference

to historical location and the conditions of life. Again, this is consistent with Arendt's understanding of the changing constellation of human activities throughout Western history (1998:6). In Rousseau's understanding, general human capacities are therefore not only *permanent* potentialities, but *dynamic*, responding to and creating changes in the human condition.

Rousseau's understanding of the dynamic nature of general human capacities suggests that man's natural capacity for perfectibility has the potential to re-orient human life. As we have seen, however, perfectibility requires the aid of circumstances to facilitate its activity. With this in mind, Rousseau's political solution to modern misery can be read as the attempt to *establish* particular circumstances that enable perfectibility to work in particular ways, steering men from their present course and re-orienting them towards the development of human capacities to their fullest and most natural potential. While this enables man to reclaim qualities natural to his condition, such as goodness, equality and freedom, Rousseau's rigid direction of man's development abolishes the plurality and spontaneity of individuals by forcing them to adhere to the general will. As a consequence, the distinctively moral tone of Rousseau's proposal, driven by his overwhelming desire to reclaim man's natural goodness, takes general human capacities in a new direction aimed at Rousseau's ideal of perfection, that is, political man, a moralised version of natural man who lives under conditions of social association created by Rousseau himself.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Both Rousseau's conception of human nature and his remedy for the oppression of social man are grounded in an understanding of general human capacities, the faculties and capabilities that natural men possess by virtue of being human. However, what makes Rousseau's understanding so interesting is his return to nature to comprehend men and their capacities in their original state, before they were subjected to the conditioning and corrupting forces of society. By considering men in the state of nature, Rousseau contends that the fundamental perversion of general human capacities led to modern man's misery. In this way, Rousseau's consideration of natural man to uncover the deficiencies of modern man offers further

insight into the impact of changing historical circumstances on the constellation of general human capacities and the human condition more generally. By moving away from their natural capacities, Rousseau argues that men led themselves down a path to social misery. This resonates with Arendt's fears that modern men face an uncertain future and the irretrievable loss of their general human capacities if they decide to exchange the human condition as given for something man has made himself (1998:2-3).

At first glance, Arendt and Rousseau appear to have a number of similarities in their understanding of general human capacities and their approach and motivation for considering them (Canovan 1983:287). Most strikingly, both see the social conditions of their time as a threat to the permanence of general human capacities. As we saw in Chapter 1, Arendt believed that society impeded men's understanding of general human capacities and that modern events constituted a threat to their permanence. Similarly, Rousseau lamented the state of his own society, arguing that it corrupted man's natural attributes and led him to misery and dependence. In addition, Rousseau's construction of an imagined 'state of nature' bears some resemblance to Arendt's method of political theory as storytelling (Benhabib 1990) as it involves a creative interpretation of historical events. Unlike Arendt, however, Rousseau contends that truth will emerge from such an endeavour, while Arendt has no interest in providing definitive answers (1998:5). Further to this, where Rousseau seeks to counteract social corruption by proposing a new form of political association based on the social contract, Arendt makes no such attempt, explicitly distancing herself from "matters of practical politics" (1998:5). In terms of motivation, Rousseau therefore exhibits more of a similarity to Aristotle and Machiavelli in the sense that he aims at a particular external goal: to end social misery by reclaiming men's natural qualities. In this respect, Rousseau's project thus parallels Aristotle's aim to provide practical guidance on how to become 'good', and Machiavelli's pragmatic advice regarding the principles of successful political leadership.

Our consideration of the concept 'general human capacities' in the work of Rousseau has yielded some important insights. As we saw in our examination of Aristotle and Machiavelli, the presence of general human capacities in Rousseau's work suggests that an understanding of general human capacities has key significance to

considerations of the human condition. In fact, the relationship between general human capacities and the human condition was made explicit by Rousseau's suggestion that his consideration of the modern human condition required an understanding of man himself, including his fundamental attributes (1987b:33). This runs along similar lines to Arendt's decision to confine her consideration of the human condition to the general human capacities that grow out of it (1998:6). However, the similarities between Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau in terms of their pursuit of the practical realisation of their ideas, ending in explicit political and social change, provides a striking contrast to Arendt's narrative exploration of the human condition and her contention that politics is an end in itself. As such, this investigation of Rousseau's work further strengthens our suggestion that the significance of *The Human Condition* appears to lie not in its *content*, but in the specific and unusual manner of Arendt's approach.

With these things in mind, the following chapter comes full circle to the central aim of Part I: to consider *The Human Condition* in terms of general human capacities. Attempting to synthesise the insights gained throughout this narrative investigation of general human capacities, the next chapter reconsiders both general human capacities themselves and Arendt's decision to confine her discussion to them. It also considers the way in which our exploration of a range of other investigations of the human condition illuminates by contrast just what it is about *The Human Condition* that is so unique. By doing so, it reconsiders Arendt's approach in *The Human Condition*, hoping to find a new way to interpret the lack of direction given by her regarding what sense we should make of a complex book.

# Considering *The Human Condition*

Part I has told a story about general human capacities over four chapters. It began as a response to Arendt's decision in the opening pages of *The Human Condition* to "confine" her consideration to "those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed" (1998:6). In order to better appreciate the significance of both this decision and this concept, Part I embarked on an exploration of general human capacities, ultimately hoping to find new meaning in *The Human Condition*. However, in our attempt to articulate general human capacities at the beginning of Part I, a series of key questions emerged: What *are* general human capacities? What is it about general human capacities that makes them so significant for Arendt? What exactly does her story about general human capacities tell us about the human condition? And, what is it about Arendt's particular consideration of general human capacities that makes it so unique?

To find answers to these questions, Part I considered general human capacities by thinking *with* Arendt. In the first instance, it unpacked Arendt's complex narrative about general human capacities and the differences in men's understanding of them

throughout Western history. However, it continued along different lines, appropriating the Arendtian techniques of fragmentary historiography and storytelling to “pry loose” (Arendt 1968a:205) a series of insights about general human capacities from the work of other thinkers. Following Arendt’s lead, the story this Part told dealt with “various constellations” of general human capacities as they have presented themselves in Western history (see Arendt 1998:6) and manifested in the work of three particular thinkers: Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau.<sup>74</sup> These particular thinkers were chosen as they share Arendt’s belief that specifically human activities can only be actualised in a particular context, the political realm or a life of political association, and they all, to varying degrees, belong to the tradition of civic republicanism. By considering conceptions of general human capacities in the work of thinkers who share similar concerns, this Part hoped to be illuminated by contrast just what it is that makes Arendt’s consideration of the human condition so unique.

As we saw in the introduction to Part I, Arendt herself never offers a precise definition of general human capacities, and she refers to the concept explicitly only once, when she declares her intention to “confine” her reconsideration of the human condition to “those general human capacities that grow out of” it (1998:6). By considering this statement in its immediate context, we were able to establish that for Arendt, general human capacities refer to the essential activities, faculties or abilities that men are able to exercise, call on or perform by virtue of being human. Arendt does not attempt an exhaustive appraisal of general human capacities, however, limiting herself to just the “most elementary articulations of the human condition” (1998:5), that is, the activities of labour, work and action, designated as the *vita activa* (1998:7). Arendt examines the reflexivity of the relationship between the activities of the *vita activa* and the human condition, and the changes in men’s understanding of, and emphasis on, their fundamental abilities in light of the modern world.

Although their constellation changes, Arendt argues that the activities of the *vita activa* are permanent and they cannot be “irretrievably lost so long as the human

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<sup>74</sup> This loosely parallels *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s story about general human capacities, as there she combines fragments from history in order to understand just what general human capacities are and how they manifest in different contexts: “Historically, I deal in a last chapter with the modern age, and throughout the book with the various constellations within the hierarchy of activities as we know them from Western history” (Arendt 1998:5-6).

condition itself is not changed” (Arendt 1998:6). According to Arendt, however, the scientific endeavours of the modern world stem from men’s underlying desire to “escape the human condition”, and the “new scientific and technical knowledge” gained in such pursuits gives men the very real ability to exchange “human existence as it has been given...for something he has made himself” (1998:2-3). As such, Chapter 1 argued that *The Human Condition* is Arendt’s attempt to reinvigorate modern understandings of the human condition by highlighting the political significance of general human capacities in the face of modern events.

However, part of the suggested interpretation in this thesis is that we can reclassify *The Human Condition* in terms of its genre as narrative rather than a philosophical treatise. As such, Chapter 1 suggested that we can best read *The Human Condition* as a kind of storytelling, as Arendt creatively reappropriates fragments of the past to give depth to the present. We therefore explored *The Human Condition* in terms of Arendt’s storytelling, rather than trying to extract a series of analytical definitions from the narrative. In other words, we did not outline the specific dimensions of labour, work and action, but instead, Chapter 1 provided an overall appraisal of Arendt’s narrative about general human capacities in the context of the modern world. In the conclusion to that chapter, however, we noted a particular problem. The complexity of Arendt’s story and the lack of direction given by her regarding just what we should take from it, presents difficulties in terms of reconsidering its meaning. How can we make sense of it? And, what exactly are we meant to *do* with it? Looking to find answers to these questions, the remainder of Part I considered Arendt’s story in a broader context, hoping to discover through contrast just what it is about *The Human Condition* that makes it so unique.

Our exploration of the work of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau found that while they had very different intentions for an investigation of the human condition, they each discussed general human capacities in terms of the fundamental abilities, activities or attributes of men. For example, Aristotle’s consideration of the good life necessitated an exploration of the fundamental activities of men. Corresponding to each sphere of human activity, Aristotle outlined a comprehensive list of the virtues, both moral and intellectual – including wisdom, prudence, temperance, and justice – which describe the best ways in which men can act. According to Aristotle, men are

endowed with the virtues by nature as potentialities, and we “effect their actualization” by habituation or instruction (2004:31). In other words, we acquire the virtues “by first exercising them” (Aristotle 2004:32), by doing their activity in the right kind of way. As such, Aristotle’s assertion that the object of life is determined by activity implicitly relies on the potentialities with which nature endows us, that is, our *general human capacities*, or more specifically, the way in which we actualise our general human capacities. However, Aristotle’s emphasis on virtue, and his ranking of these virtues in relation to “the best and most perfect kind” (2004:16), places his concern not with general human capacities themselves, but with a judgement of the “goodness and proficiency” of their performance.

In contrast, Machiavelli’s times led him to be solely concerned with the strategies necessary to maintain political power. As a consequence, Machiavelli’s understanding of general human capacities is implied in his examination of the qualities required to be a successful political leader. According to Machiavelli, the most significant of these is action, as “men are great not because of what they are, but because of what they do” (Ingersoll 1968:596). While acknowledging the desirability of the Aristotelian virtues in theory, Machiavelli’s examination of the ways in which they manifest in practice led him to suggest that the virtues do not always result in the best outcome. As a result, Machiavelli combined the fundamental general human capacity of action with a regard for political necessity, outlining the political capacity of *virtù*, the ability to do whatever is required to maintain rule. For Machiavelli, *virtù* is the most significant general human capacity in terms of politics as it is the *only* capacity that can maintain and preserve the state always. Interestingly, this means that Machiavelli also shifts the emphasis from general human capacities themselves to a more pragmatic emphasis on their use as a means to preserve political power.

Under different historical conditions entirely, Rousseau specifically went in search of an understanding of human nature to better understand the state of modern society and what he considered the misery and dependence of his fellow men. To this end, Rousseau constructed a theoretical ‘state of nature’ that enabled him to consider men in their original state, unencumbered by the corrupting forces of society. According to Rousseau, natural man was essentially good, lived a life of freedom,

and possessed the natural qualities of pity, self-preservation and a range of “other faculties” in a state of potentiality (1987b:59) that could “develop as needed” (1964:90) with the “aid of circumstances” (1987b:45). Changes in natural conditions led to the birth of society, and as a result, natural man developed many of these potentialities. Most importantly, he acquired the faculty of perfectibility, the ability to successively develop all the other faculties held as potentials, including reason, morality and language. As such, Rousseau had a very explicit focus on the fundamental abilities and attributes of men, understanding general human capacities as a combination of natural qualities and potentialities that could grow and develop in response to the conditions of life. General human capacities, as Rousseau understands them, have a reflexive relationship with the human condition, as although men develop with reference to their conditions, the transformation of man’s potentialities into faculties subsequently re-shapes the direction and purpose of human life.

Drawing together the insights gained from our examination of general human capacities in the work of these thinkers, we see that in one way or another, this concept forms the foundation of four very different considerations of the human condition: Arendt’s historical consideration of the *vita activa* in the context of the modern world; Aristotle’s investigation of the good life in terms of man’s proper function; Machiavelli’s consideration of the traits and abilities of men most suitable for political leadership; and Rousseau’s attempt to understand the inequality of his society. While each thinker has a different understanding of just what these abilities are, why they are important, and the order of their constellation, it would appear that considerations of the human condition, whether they be directed at understanding the good life, particular social conditions, the nature of man’s understanding of himself, or the practicalities of politics and power, require an understanding of men’s capacities, namely, an understanding of what men are able to do. This highlights the concern shared by all four thinkers for *activity* and action, that is, the doing of particular activities that exist as possibilities inherent in the human condition. This corresponds to an understanding of general human capacities, the essential activities, faculties or abilities of men that condition their existence.

Of particular interest to us here, the political nature of each thinker's approach results in a shared understanding that the constellation of general human capacities changes in response to the particular circumstances of the world. In fact, the changing nature of the constellation of general human capacities forms the explicit backdrop for Arendt's "reconsideration of the human condition" (1998:5), and it is through her investigation of the circumstances surrounding these changes and their implications for the human condition that Arendt is able to reach an understanding of the nature of modern society. By exploring these "various constellations" (1998:6), Arendt demonstrates that our understanding of each fundamental activity and its location in human life responds to changes in the human condition, that is, the conditions of human existence. In this way, there is a reflexive relationship between what men do and the world, as our understanding of general human capacities influences our ability to exercise them, and this, in turn, is influenced by the conditions of the world.

Along these same lines, Rousseau's work is grounded in the belief that human nature is dynamic as men develop the many potentialities bestowed on him by nature "as needed" (1964:90), facilitated by the faculty of perfectibility and "the aid of circumstances" (1987b:45). In this way, the constellation of general human capacities of natural man is very different to that of modern social man, and these differences reflect the changes in historical location and the conditions of life. Less explicitly, Machiavelli's insistence that necessity is the fundamental condition of both politics and human life leads him to re-negotiate the boundaries of general human capacities altogether, making their constellation both contingent on, and particular to, specific circumstances. As such, Machiavelli leaves open the particularities of the constellation of general human capacities, defining it only insofar as it responds to necessity in a way governed by the overarching capacity of *virtù*. However, Aristotle's position in this regard is less clear, for, by declining to provide a specific definition of each of the virtues in favour of making a more general statement regarding their nature, Aristotle's virtues are marked by a degree of open-endedness. As such, although Aristotle's constellation of general human capacities appears to be rigid in the sense that he argues that there must be a *best* virtue, the precise boundaries of the virtues themselves are, "for the most part", open, as Aristotle acknowledges that they are relative to the particularities of circumstance (2004:5).

By arranging these various understandings of the changing constellation of general human capacities beside one another, we can therefore gain a deeper insight into their nature, their historical location and particularity in relation to circumstances. Further to this, in the work of these four thinkers, general human capacities, variously understood as potentialities, abilities, qualities or faculties, form the basis of political understandings of the human condition, and their significance appears to stem from their depiction of man's fundamental *activities*, that is, the things that men are able to *do*. However, the changing conditions of the world, coupled with the particularity of individual men, mean that general human capacities are difficult to define, both in themselves and with regard to their constellation, the relative positions of each capacity that shed light on their role in human life. The differences between these thinkers demonstrate that the ways in which we understand general human capacities are influenced by our own conditions, and different understandings emphasise different capacities.

While these findings work to confirm the significance of general human capacities more generally, it is not so much an overall appraisal of general human capacities that we are concerned with here, as the way in which other considerations of the human condition can illuminate Arendt's. In other words, what interests us are the ways in which the juxtaposition of Arendt with Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau enables us to show by contrast just what it is about Arendt's consideration of general human capacities that is so unique. This sits well with Arendt's own method of making distinctions: "I always start anything – I don't like to know too well what I am doing – I always start anything by saying, "A and B are not the same."" (Arendt 1979:338). This is evident in Arendt's careful, and sometimes "unusual", distinctions between activities in *The Human Condition*.<sup>75</sup> As such, notwithstanding the shared concerns and points of intersection between Arendt, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, it is the *differences* between Arendt and these other thinkers that concern us here insofar as they might provide new ways of interpreting the meaning of *The Human Condition*.

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<sup>75</sup> Arendt herself calls the distinction between labour and work that she proposes in Chapter 3 of *The Human Condition* "unusual" (1998:79).

Perhaps the most striking difference between Arendt's consideration of the human condition, and that of the other thinkers we have examined, is the end being pursued, that is, the motivation or intention of their investigations. Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau all explicitly aim at some external goal: to provide practical instruction on the good life; to teach young men how to be successful and pragmatic political leaders; or to end social misery by reforming society in terms of the social contract. In other words, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau share a desire for the practical realisation of their ideas, making their work a means to a particular end. In contrast to these three thinkers, "Arendt felt great skepticism toward the project of practical philosophy" and her theoretical considerations "were meant to be *more than* practical philosophy" (Nordmann 2007:785, my emphasis). This stems from Arendt's contention that political questions such as those surrounding the human condition are not "problems for which only one solution is possible" (1998:5). Further to this, "theoretical considerations or the opinion of one person" *cannot* provide concrete prescriptions for political practice as the very nature of politics is such that it is dependent on a plurality of men (Arendt 1998:7). This means that answers to political questions are "subject to the agreement of many" (Arendt 1998:5).

While Arendt is deeply concerned with contemporary social conditions, she does not articulate general human capacities, nor seek to understand their political significance, in order to effect any practical change. Instead, the proposition underlying *The Human Condition* is "very simple: it is nothing more than to *think* what we are doing" (Arendt 1998:5, my emphasis). Arendt's rejection of practical affairs is striking when contrasted with the concern for practice shared by Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, and it speaks to the unique nature of her approach to understanding general human capacities. Unlike these other thinkers, Arendt's sole concern is with finding *understanding* (1994:3), rather than with solving the "preoccupations and perplexities" of practical politics (1998:5). This implies that it is not so much the content of *The Human Condition* that is significant as Arendt's *process of finding understanding*, as it is this that distinguishes her from other thinkers that share similar concerns.

But where does this leave our consideration of *The Human Condition* via the concept general human capacities? As this chapter has attempted to make clear, by

juxtaposing *The Human Condition* with the work of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, Part I has drawn to our attention the significance of general human capacities to any political consideration of the human condition. General human capacities describe the fundamental activities of men, and considerations of them allow us to gauge the full extent of our human potential. They also give us an appreciation of what men *can* do, enabling us to compare them at different moments in history or apply this understanding to a variety of human pursuits. In this way, general human capacities serve as a fundamental reference point for a variety of investigations into human life, be they ideal, pragmatic or historical. This goes some way to explaining Arendt's decision to approach her consideration of the human condition in this way, especially given that she incorporates multiple understandings of general human capacities into her story about the human condition in the modern world.

Although the insights into general human capacities that we have gathered throughout Part I have given us more clarity in regards to the *concept* 'general human capacities', making clear its significance to considerations of the human condition and reinforcing the particularity of any understanding of general human capacities to historical location, we have not been concerned here with synthesising a broad understanding of this concept itself. Instead, what has interested us is the way in which we might better appreciate the unique nature of Arendt's approach. By juxtaposing Arendt's work with that of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, we have been able to see some striking differences in the way Arendt frames her understanding. Arendt's turn to general human capacities is unique in the sense that she "simply" seeks to reinvigorate an understanding of the distinctions within the human condition, rather than inspire a change in men's actions or political and social conditions more generally (1998:5).

Unlike Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, who each explored general human capacities in order to suggest how men might best use them to alter their conditions, Arendt undertakes a "theoretical consideration" only to "think what we are doing" (1998:5), looking for the *meaning* of our actions rather than practical results. These things combined imply that there is something significant not in the *concept* 'general human capacities', nor in Arendt's decision to "confine" herself to it, but in *the way in*

*which she considers it.* As noted earlier, this is more than a matter of mere 'style'. Rather, it speaks to the significance of the narrative *itself* in terms of the way in which it orients Arendt's motivations for an investigation of the human condition.

Returning to Arendt's explicit purpose for the book, "to think what we are doing" (1998:5), this idea begins to make more sense. By thinking "what we are doing" (or *not doing*, as the case may be), Arendt highlights the diversity hidden in the human condition, reinvigorating the distinctions between human activities that remain permanent possibilities of men's existence. In doing so, she also thinks about the political nature of general human capacities and their relationship to the human condition in the context of modern events. However, the differences between Arendt, and Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau in terms of the pursuit of practical realisation, demonstrate that Arendt has a very different conception of the role of thinking in human life. Where Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau see thinking or theoretical considerations as a means to an end, the creation of a theory or model of human life to be applied in practice, Arendt's turn to storytelling shifts our attention from a concrete and generalisable political theory to *the story itself*. In this way, Arendt's approach implicitly refocuses us on the *activity* of thinking rather than its results. This means that despite Arendt's explicit move to leave thinking "out of these present considerations" (1998:5), its activity *frames* her consideration of the human condition. This, in turn, suggests that the significance of *The Human Condition* lies not in an understanding of general human capacities, but in Arendt's thinking, that is, the *way in which* she considers general human capacities by storytelling. The key to making sense of *The Human Condition* therefore appears to lie in thinking. It is to this we will now turn in Part II.

PART TWO:

# THINKING

*This obviously, is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness – the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty – seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time.*

HANNAH ARENDT  
*The Human Condition*  
(1998:5)



This Part re-considers *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking. It responds to the findings of Part I that the key to making sense of the book appears to lie in *the way in which* Arendt considers general human capacities. Part II begins by situating itself in relation to some puzzling comments on thinking and thoughtlessness that Arendt makes in the 'Prologue'. On one hand, Arendt's assertion that her consideration of the human condition is "obviously...a matter of thought" (1998:5) sits neatly alongside her proposition to "think what we are doing" (1998:5). At the same time, however, Arendt deliberately leaves thinking out of "these present considerations", despite also stating that thinking is "the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable" (1998:5). If thinking is so integral to Arendt's consideration, and indeed, if it is the highest of man's capacities, why does she leave it out? On the other hand entirely, Arendt suggests that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (1998:5). This appears to be inconsistent with her description of modern society as making real the dreams of science fiction (1998:2), captured by her striking presentation of various modern images, including space exploration, the artificial creation of life in test tubes, and the liberating advent of automation. Common opinion<sup>76</sup> would most certainly suggest that this list of accomplishments is evidence of *thinking* that demonstrates men's abilities to apply their thought processes to advance human knowledge and progress human life. So how can Arendt suggest that modern men are *thoughtless*?

This attempt to extricate Arendt's claims about thinking and thoughtlessness presents us with some immediate and puzzling difficulties. What does Arendt mean by *thinking*? Why does she think that modern men are *thoughtless*? If thinking is man's highest activity, why does Arendt explicitly refuse to consider it? And, if a reconsideration of the human condition is *obviously* a matter of thought, what role does thinking play in *The Human Condition*? Part II seeks to find answers to these questions, suggesting that the contradictions and inconsistencies surrounding thinking "lead into the very centre" of *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1977:25).<sup>77</sup> By

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<sup>76</sup> This appeal to "common opinion" is consistent with Arendt's own appeal to "current opinion" to delimit the terms of her investigation of general human capacities (1998:5).

<sup>77</sup> Arendt herself said of inconsistencies of this nature: "Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers, in whom they can be discounted. In the work of great authors they lead into the very centre of their work and are the most important clue to a true understanding of their problems and new insights" (Arendt 1977:25). While she made these comments in relation to Marx, it seems they could apply equally to Arendt herself.

unravelling Arendt's statements regarding thinking and thoughtlessness, and understanding both their meaning and significance, this Part re-considers *The Human Condition* from a new perspective, hoping to untangle its complexities and provide a re-reading that makes sense of Arendt's complex narrative. While neither Arendt's understanding of thinking nor her understanding of thoughtlessness are immediately apparent, what *is* clear is that her understanding of both must differ somewhat from convention for her claims to really make sense. For example, Arendt's contention that modern men are characteristically thoughtless is counter-intuitive to common understandings of man's decision-making and cognitive prowess, and the modern reverence of men's intellectual and investigative capabilities. So what exactly does Arendt mean by *thoughtlessness*?

We find the beginnings of an answer to this question in Arendt's description of thoughtlessness as "the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty" (1998:5). By emphasising the word "truths" in this way, Arendt implies that truth is no longer an accurate description of itself, not in the ironic sense of truths which are not true, but in the sense that the meaning of truths has changed, that they have *become* "trivial and empty". In other words, here Arendt does not dismiss the notion of truth in itself,<sup>78</sup> but she draws to our attention the way in which truths have come to be used. By complacently repeating truths, men are heedless and reckless in their use of them. As a consequence, "truths" themselves are taken for granted and therefore trivialised. This implies that for Arendt, it is the complacent use and re-use of truths that have *made* them "trivial and empty".

As we have seen in our consideration of *The Human Condition* so far, Arendt's own thinking avoids seeking "truths" in the sense that she does not provide a systematic political theory along traditional lines. Instead, Arendt's "theoretical considerations" search for *meaning* by gathering thought fragments from disparate historical sources in order to deepen her own understanding of particular components of the human condition and their political significance (see 1998:5). This kind of thinking resembles

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<sup>78</sup> Later, Arendt makes this more clear: "This does not mean that I wish to contest or even to discuss, for that matter, the traditional concept of truth as revelation and therefore something essentially given to man, or that I prefer the modern age's pragmatic assertion that man can know only what he makes himself" (1998:17).

Arendt's notion of "thinking poetically", a thinking that "delves into the depths of the past" like a "pearl diver", bringing to the surface the "rich and strange" to find illumination (1968a:205-206):

And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the "thought fragments" it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as "thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene* (Arendt 1968a:205-206).

Arendt's description of the pearl diver "prying loose" and "wresting free", suggests that her own thought fragments do not simply *present* themselves for our consideration. Instead, they require an approach that actively and creatively twists and tugs them free. Approaching Arendt's work in terms of thinking is therefore best done by thinking *with* Arendt, that is, by becoming pearl divers ourselves, diving in the depths of Arendt's work so as to "pry loose the rich and the strange" and carry it to the surface. In this way, thinking about *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking involves grasping what lies beneath its story about general human capacities.

Looking more closely at Arendt's narrative exploration of general human capacities, in which she appropriates fragments from disparate and sometimes conflicting sources, we see that Arendt's thinking works to reciprocally illuminate ideas and concepts by separating and re-combining them. A pearl diver herself (Euben 2000:163), Arendt separates "the pearls and the coral" from the bottom of the sea, but at the same time, she also notes the way in which some things have "suffered a sea change", that is, the ways in which they survive in new crystallised forms. In this way, Arendt's thinking brings the art of distinction, with which she begins all thinking (1979:338), together with a regard for the contingency of time and space to consider things at the hands of "ruin of time", not only in terms of their decay, but also their

crystallisation into “new forms and shapes” in which only fragments of the originals survive. By re-combining these fragments in narrative form, Arendt’s own thinking is a process of crystallisation in itself, and it re-works multiple elements to create “new forms and shapes” that contain “rich and strange” meaning of their own. The opposing motions of separation and crystallisation in Arendt’s thinking suggest that the meaning of Arendt’s work lies “not only in the repetition and reworking of themes, concepts and images, but *also in the manner of their connection*” (Nordmann 2007:778, my emphasis). As such, while we can approach Arendt’s work by diving for the “rich and strange” thought fragments within it, we must be careful to consider them in their broader context, as it is the “manner of their connection” which provides reciprocal illumination.<sup>79</sup>

With this in mind, Part II begins by separating Arendt’s thoughts on thinking, pulling loose the individual fragments of thinking, thoughtlessness, judging and storytelling. However, it also investigates the connections between these thought fragments, suggesting that Arendt’s thoughts on thinking are reciprocally illuminated by her thoughts on politics, and it is only when considered in this context that we can bring to light the depth of meaning in Arendt’s work. For this reason, this Part argues that while we can separate thought fragments from Arendt’s work, these same fragments exist in a crystallised form that we can describe as ‘thinking politically’. This “rich and strange” shape, drawn from beneath the surface of Arendt’s work, has a fidelity to the political elements of experience, plurality, dialogue and the world *and* the activity of thinking, and it enables us to see new meaning in Arendt’s work without reducing its complexity. By thinking *with* Arendt to “pry loose the rich and the strange”, this Part considers the way in which Arendt’s thinking itself is like a “sea-change”, reconfiguring and dissolving particular elements and leaving them hidden at the bottom of her work, waiting to be brought “into the world of the living”. Part II

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<sup>79</sup> Nordmann provides further insight here, explaining that Arendt “does not enter into the depth of a text in order to follow its various dendritic pathways as closely as possible, but rather in order to choose and detach from it fragments of thought in finely measured intervals, which she then interpolates into a thought-structure that is assembled like a multitextured surface...Not a single note may be dropped from this polyphony lest its complex message be reduced to simplistic mappings” (2007:778). In other words, Nordmann suggests that the fragments of Arendt’s thought must be considered in the context of her thinking, that is, in relation to the other fragments with which they are arranged, as this arrangement itself is part of the meaning. To consider fragments outside their context is to lose something of their original meaning.

therefore dives below the surface of *The Human Condition* in the hope of shedding new light on it in a way that remains faithful to Arendt's own manner of thinking.

Like Part I, Part II appropriates the Arendtian techniques of fragmentary historiography and storytelling to construct a narrative about Arendt's understanding of thinking and its role in her political theory. Part II tells a story about thinking over two chapters.<sup>80</sup> Chapter 5 uncovers Arendt's understanding of thinking by beginning with her striking claim that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (1998:5). It examines Arendt's motivations for this assertion by considering her understanding of thoughtlessness as it emerges from her work on Eichmann. By contrast, this chapter reveals Arendt's understanding of thinking as endless and resultless activity, the performance of which is exemplified by Socrates. Arendt's understanding of thinking is reciprocally illuminated by her understanding of judging and storytelling which augment thinking by forging a relationship with particularity and the world. This chapter separates each of these "thought fragments", considering the ways in which they inform and illuminate one another in the hope of making sense of Arendt's apparently contradictory comments on thinking and thoughtlessness in the opening pages of *The Human Condition*.

Chapter 6 explores the significance of Arendt's understanding of thinking and situates it more firmly in the context of her understanding of politics. It begins by examining Arendt's rejection of the Platonic tradition on the grounds that it is intrinsically hostile to politics, and that it attempts to impose rigid philosophic standards on the haphazard and spontaneous affairs of men. When juxtaposed with the Platonic tradition like this, Arendt's understanding of thinking is striking as it disentangles thinking from philosophy, re-asserting its political dimensions and re-configuring it with elements of judging, storytelling, experience and the world. In this

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<sup>80</sup> Both chapters are directly informed by Arendt's metaphor of the pearl diver (1968a:205-206). Chapter 5 is a diving for pearls, an attempt to pry loose several "thought fragments" of Arendt's work, trying its luck at what Arendt refers to as "this technique of dismantling" (1978:212). Chapter 6 moves in the opposite direction, examining the way in which the thought fragments discussed in Chapter 5, along with others that we have gathered throughout this thesis, can be re-combined, ultimately suggesting that the relationships between fragments, their "crystallisation", is home to the "rich and strange" meaning of Arendt's work. In this way, Part II contends that the "crystallized forms and shapes" of *The Human Condition* have been hidden deep below its surface, "as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as "thought fragments"" (Arendt 1968a:205-206). Part II attempts to be such a pearl diver itself.

way, Arendt re-thinks the relationship between thinking and politics, thinking beyond the Platonic tradition of political philosophy in such a way as to reclaim the depth of the human condition in terms of men's fundamental, but incommensurable activities. As a result, this chapter argues that Arendt's understanding of thinking can best be understood as 'thinking politically', a crystallisation of Arendt's thought fragments that combines elements of thinking, judging and storytelling in a way that remains faithful to the spontaneous activity of politics and the fundamental human experience of freedom.

Finally, this Part returns to re-consider *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking. Re-reading it in light of Arendt's unique understanding of thinking, designated as 'thinking politically', it argues that *The Human Condition* is really a work about thinking in which Arendt demonstrates her understanding by example. Readings which do not take Arendt's understanding of thinking into account mistakenly search for a concrete set of conceptual guidelines or a coherent and generalisable political theory in its pages. However, Arendt's very understanding of thinking precludes her from developing a systematic or rigid conceptual framework that can be applied in any context as this would be akin to producing "trivial and empty "truths"" (see 1998:5). Rather, we can best read *The Human Condition* as a demonstration of 'thinking politically' in which Arendt attempts to avoid conceptual closure, providing a sketch of the human condition without trying to define it.

By considering general human capacities, that is, by thinking about them, Arendt implicitly recovers genuine thinking, *distinguishing* it from modern conceptions of thinking based on scientific knowledge or progress and philosophical understandings that aim at contemplation, and *demonstrating* it by thinking about the general human capacities of labour, work and action. Indeed, this is well-captured by Arendt's explicit proposition to "think what we are doing" (1998:5) which highlights a connection between thinking and the activities of human life. However, the "simplicity" of this statement,<sup>81</sup> combined with the centrality of the concept 'general human capacities' and Arendt's explicit refusal to consider the activity of thinking, left the significance of thinking to *The Human Condition* hidden below its surface. Arendt's "reconsideration

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<sup>81</sup> Recall, Arendt herself described her proposition for the book as "very simple" (1998:5).

of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears” (1998:5), therefore not only offers a political consideration of the question facing men regarding the future of the human condition (1998:3), but in doing so, it presents us with a range of “preoccupations and perplexities” of its own that call on us to think. In this way, Arendt reinvigorates our *understanding* of the human condition, providing us with an example of thinking that shows us how we might reclaim its activity *for ourselves*.



## CHAPTER FIVE:

# Thought Fragments

If some of my listeners or readers should be tempted to try their luck at the technique of dismantling, let them be careful not to destroy the “rich and strange,” the “coral” and the “pearls” which can probably be saved only as fragments.

Hannah Arendt  
*The Life of the Mind*  
(1978: 212)

This chapter is an investigation into Arendt’s understanding of thinking. As noted in the introduction to Part II, although Arendt explicitly declined to analyse the activity of thinking, our examination of general human capacities in Part I suggested that the significance of *The Human Condition* lies in the way in which Arendt considers the human condition, that is, in thinking. This appears to be consistent with Arendt’s statement that her consideration is “obviously...a matter of thought”, and her proposal “to think what we are doing” (1998:5). At the same time, however, Arendt claims that thoughtlessness is “among the outstanding characteristics of our time” (1998:5). In other words, in Arendt’s estimation, modern life is marked by the absence of “the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable” (1998:5). As a result, modern men are unable to understand either the human condition or the circumstances of the modern world, and they put fundamental elements of the human condition at stake without realising the implications (Arendt 1998:3). These things combined suggest that Arendt frames her reconsideration of the human condition as a response to modern thoughtlessness, attempting to reinvigorate our

understanding of general human capacities by *thinking* about their political significance and role in human life.

The purpose of this chapter is to uncover Arendt's understanding of thinking so as to make sense of her comments regarding thinking and thoughtlessness in the opening pages of *The Human Condition*. This lays the foundations for our re-consideration of the book in terms of thinking. However, this chapter begins not with Arendt's understanding of thinking, but with thoughtlessness, and Arendt's claim early in *The Human Condition* that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (1998:5). This is at odds with her description of advances in modern science and technology which presumably stem from men's ability to think and apply knowledge in new directions. However, Arendt does not explicitly discuss either thinking or thoughtlessness in *The Human Condition* and we must look elsewhere for illumination. As such, this chapter explores Arendt's understanding of thoughtlessness as it emerges from her description of Eichmann in the aftermath of totalitarianism. There, it becomes apparent that Arendt understands thoughtlessness as the complacent adherence to rules and guidelines that restrict and deny men's capacity to think freely and for themselves.

By way of contrast, this chapter is able to reveal the basis of Arendt's understanding of thinking in the absence of restrictive guidelines, making thinking an activity characterised by freedom, a restless back and forth that never settles on a final or precise conclusion. For Arendt, the activity of thinking is exemplified by Socrates, who unsettled the thoughts of others without thinking for them, calling on men to think *with* him, but *for* themselves. To better understand the nature of this kind of thinking, this chapter explores the interconnected concepts of judging and storytelling, considering the ways in which they augment Arendt's understanding of thinking by providing it with a home in the world and retaining a focus on particularity. In doing so, this chapter begins to make some important conceptual connections between thinking and politics that will help us, in the next chapter, to find meaning hidden beneath the surface of Arendt's work by re-imagining their points of intersection.

## 1. Thoughts on Thinking and Thoughtlessness

In the opening pages of *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes the modern world in terms of a series of technological innovations and scientific discoveries, including space exploration, the creation of artificial life and the imminent automation of labouring. At the same time, she clearly states that thoughtlessness is “among the outstanding characteristics of our time” (1998:5). This claim seems puzzling as scientists presumably rely on their ability to think in order to solve the riddles of the universe, advance human knowledge and enhance human life. In addition, thoughtlessness is counter-intuitive to common conceptions of ordinary human life which include thinking as the basis of decision-making or problem-solving, and it is widely assumed that most of us engage in thinking every day. If common opinion suggests that we all think, and modern inventions demonstrate the results of thinking done by scientists, how can Arendt say that thoughtlessness is “among the outstanding characteristics” of the modern world?

For Arendt’s claim to make sense, her understanding of thinking must differ from conventional or common understandings. However, Arendt’s understanding of thinking is not immediately apparent. She explicitly declines to articulate the activity of thinking in *The Human Condition*, omitting it from “these present considerations” (1998:5). Nevertheless, if Arendt’s understanding of thinking sits outside conventional definitions, then by inference, her understanding of thoughtlessness must also be unconventional. Arendt provides us with greater assistance here, offering a clear description of thoughtlessness as “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty” (1998:5). By doing so, Arendt offers us a means of approaching her understanding of thinking by way of opposition and contrast, that is, in understanding thoughtlessness, we understand what thinking *is not*. This method of “determination by negation” is supported by Arendt’s own belief that a unity “binds together all opposites – day and night, light and darkness, coldness and warmth – each of which is inconceivable in separation, unthinkable unless mysteriously related to its antithesis” (Arendt 1978:108). Seen in this light, Arendt’s understanding of thinking is “inconceivable” without her understanding of thoughtlessness, and thinking itself is “unthinkable” unless “mysteriously related” to thoughtlessness. With this in mind, we might ask

Arendt, what is thoughtlessness? Or, perhaps more usefully, when Arendt suggests that modern men are thoughtless what does she mean?

## **THOUGHTLESSNESS, EICHMANN AND THE MODERN WORLD**

As we have seen, Arendt offers a seemingly clear appraisal of thoughtlessness as “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty” (1998:5). While “heedless recklessness” appears to be consistent with the “simple sense” of thoughtlessness as “the quality of being thoughtless, want of thought or consideration; carelessness, or inconsiderateness” found in the Oxford dictionary,<sup>82</sup> the additional descriptors suggest that Arendt sees thoughtlessness as something more. Indeed, Arendt seems to be describing an absence in the *quality* of thinking, a shortcoming in the internal characteristics of the thinking activity in distinction from the products of thought which have “become trivial and empty” (1998:5). This interpretation stems from Arendt’s choice of the terms “confusion” and “repetition”, which in themselves seem to imply thinking, as commonly understood, but a thinking that lacks precision or creativity in its execution. Similarly, Arendt’s use of “complacent” and “hopeless” imply a deficiency in the quality of thought rather than an abstention from mental activity altogether.

This concern with the quality of thinking is consistent with Arendt’s early proposition in *The Human Condition* “to think what we are doing” (1998:5). This move to “think what we are doing” rather than to think *about* what we are doing suggests that Arendt seeks to move away from thinking understood primarily as a means to some particular end, in favour of a focus on its *activity*, that is, the internal dynamics of thinking. This goes some way to explaining Arendt’s apparent disdain for the complacent repetition of “truths”, as the simple repetition of truth shifts our attention to the *results* of thinking and away from the activity of thinking itself. In this way, Arendt’s description of thoughtlessness implies that the reiteration or “reckless” application of “truths” is not the same as thinking. Again, this is a stark departure from scientific conceptions of thinking which rely on schemas, truths and rules in

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<sup>82</sup> This assertion takes its cue from Arendt, who, in an attempt to understand ‘metaphor’, quotes “the simple sense of the Oxford dictionary” (1978:102).

order to frame the thinking process and guide its results. Arendt's brief and somewhat incidental description of thoughtlessness therefore suggests that her understanding of thinking has its basis in activity rather than in any end product.

Although Arendt offered these preliminary insights into the nature of thoughtlessness in her early remarks in *The Human Condition*, she immediately declined to discuss thinking (and by inference, thoughtlessness) any further: "...the activity of thinking, is left out of these present considerations" (1998:5). As such, we must look further afield to augment our understanding. Elsewhere, Arendt argued that "what we need for common-sense thinking are *examples* to illustrate our concepts" (1978:103), as examples are the only means by which conceptual abstractions can manifest themselves. In other words, examples transform the invisibility of thoughts into lived expressions. In her own writing, Arendt often makes use of examples that both illustrate concepts and exemplify their practice. As a consequence, it seems fitting that we should turn here to an example of thoughtlessness in order to better illuminate Arendt's meaning. For Arendt, the exemplar for thoughtlessness was Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi war criminal dubbed 'the architect' of the Holocaust, and it was her coverage of Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961 that brought thoughtlessness to the forefront of her attention.

Faced with the task of comprehending Eichmann's actions, Arendt acknowledged that "it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster" (1964:276). However, when presented with him in the flesh, Arendt was confronted with the fact that he was "neither perverted nor sadistic", but rather, "terribly and terrifyingly normal" (Arendt 1964:276).<sup>83</sup> Arendt was struck by what she considered Eichmann's thoughtlessness, his inability to really "stop and think" about what he was doing: "it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*...It was this absence of thinking – which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to *stop* and think – that awakened my interest" (Arendt 1978:4). Although Eichmann played a key role in the horror of the

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<sup>83</sup> Arendt attempted to capture this contradiction with the phrase "the banality of evil", hoping to highlight the commonplace character of evil by referring to Eichmann's ordinariness: "when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain"" (Arendt 1964:287).

Holocaust, Arendt argued that his actions stemmed not from evil motives, but from “no motives at all...He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*” (1964:287). However, this absence of motive does not equate to an absence of cognitive process, and we can reasonably assume that Eichmann had some awareness of what he was doing as he orchestrated the transportation and genocide of the Jews at the highest level. Common opinion might suggest that this is a demonstration of thinking by drawing attention to Eichmann’s calculated and elaborate plans and his ability to put them into action, both of which relied on his decision-making and problem-solving capabilities. As such, it appears that Arendt’s turn to Eichmann does not *in itself* offer us any further insight into her understanding of thoughtlessness. If Eichmann was capable of high level decision-making and the orchestration of genocide, what makes Eichmann an exemplar for thoughtlessness? Why is the *kind* of thinking done by Eichmann considered thoughtless by Arendt?

A clue to these questions comes from our initial appraisal of Arendt’s understanding of thoughtlessness in which we suggested that Arendt showed a concern for the *quality* of thinking as distinct from the products of thought. Could it be that Eichmann’s particular manner of thinking demonstrates some kind of deficiency that Arendt considers thoughtless? By all accounts, Eichmann’s thought processes were orderly and efficient and he was a highly competent bureaucrat, demonstrating a clear capacity to follow rules and guidelines with unwavering obedience. However, Arendt suggested that Eichmann did more than merely carry out orders, arguing that he acted in accordance with the law which was always his overriding concern:

This was the way things were, this was the new law of the land, based on the Fuhrer’s order; whatever he did he did, as far as he could see, as a law-abiding citizen. He did his *duty*, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he had not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law* (Arendt 1964:135).

Interestingly, Eichmann himself drew attention to this distinction and his overwhelming sense of duty to the law when, during his examination by police, “he suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty” (Arendt 1964:135-136). While this claim immediately appeared both outrageous and incomprehensible, when pressed by one of the judges, and “to the surprise of

everybody, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: “I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws” (Arendt 1964:136). At the face of it, this is perplexing as Eichmann clearly demonstrates an understanding of Kant’s philosophical guidelines for practical reason, yet at the same time, he was a key architect of the genocide of millions of innocent people. How could this be? How could Eichmann reconcile genocide with “the principle of general laws”?

Eichmann attempted to explain this inconsistency by telling the court that “from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles, [and] that he had known it” (Arendt 1964:136). In other words, despite possessing a knowledge of Kantian duty, he had declined it in favour of his duty to the Fuhrer. However, Arendt argued that Eichmann had not dismissed the Kantian formula at all, but that he had *distorted* it to read:

Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land – or, in Hans Frank’s formulation of “the categorical imperative in the Third Reich,” which Eichmann might have known: “Act in such a way that the Fuhrer, if he knew your action, would approve it” (Arendt 1964:136).

While this is clearly a deviation from the exact spirit of Kant’s imperative, it retains the “demand that a man do more than obey the law, that he go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify his own will with the principle behind the law – the source from which the law sprang” (Arendt 1964:136-137). According to Kant, the source from which the law sprang was practical reason, however in Eichmann’s “household use of the little man”, the source of all law was the will of the Fuhrer (Arendt 1964:137).

Based on his own description, it is apparent that Eichmann’s thought processes were guided by a misshapen form of Kant’s philosophy. But apart from this obvious deformation of Kant, what makes this process of thinking *deficient*? To put it another way, what was it about identifying his will with the principle behind the law that made Eichmann thoughtless? Arendt’s answer to this question stems from Eichmann’s admission to have followed *guidelines*, however distorted, out of a sense of duty.

What interested Arendt were not the particular guidelines Eichmann followed, that is, the distortion of Kant's categorical imperative to accommodate the will of the Fuhrer, but the notion of external guidelines themselves. Arendt argued that rather than providing a valid framework for thinking, such guidelines *inhibit* man's capacity to *think for himself*. Eichmann's reliance on Hitler's guidelines despite his understanding of Kantian morality demonstrates that men apply whichever set of rules is dominant at the time, with no regard for their consequences or how they were established.<sup>84</sup> As such, rules and guidelines, including Kant's, become nothing more than habits and customs that determine the form all decisions must take, and duty demands we adhere to and apply the rules rather than actively engaging in thinking for ourselves.

Eichmann's sense of duty dictated that he unthinkingly follow the guidelines provided to him by the Fuhrer. By doing so, however, Eichmann became an *exemplar for thoughtlessness*, as he relied on Hitler to think in his place and therefore "never realized what he was doing" (Arendt 1964:287). In short, Eichmann himself did not think at all. Although this in no way justifies Eichmann's actions, nor does it erase the fact that he "carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder" (Arendt 1964:279), it complicates our attempts to judge both the man and his actions as modern legal systems are founded on the assumption that "intent to do wrong is necessary for the commission of a crime...Where this intent is absent...we feel no crime has been committed" (Arendt 1964:277). Eichmann's only intention was to obey the will of the Fuhrer, and it was Hitler, rather than Eichmann, that had distorted the moral framework by replacing the temptation for evil with the *expectation* and demand that men carry out evil acts:

And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody "Thou shall not kill," even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: "Thou shalt kill," although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people (Arendt 1964:150).

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<sup>84</sup> According to Arendt, Eichmann had an awareness of Hitler's distortion of morality as he spoke of the "reevaluation of values prescribed by the [Nazi] government" (Arendt 1964:287). While this demonstrates that Eichmann "was not stupid" (Arendt 1964:287), he clearly did not understand the consequences of this exchange, nor could he overcome his sense of duty.

Under these circumstances, Arendt argues that we are forced to acknowledge that Eichmann acted fully within the boundaries of the kind of thinking required of him, as his duty dictated that he follow the will of the Fuhrer by deferring to the moral frameworks he legislated (Arendt 1964:293). Hitler's corruption of the moral framework, that is, its exchange for a new code built on evil, had no effect on Eichmann's sense of duty to adhere to the moral law *regardless of the content of that law*. Eichmann applied the same thought processes in his role as Nazi bureaucrat as he did in ordinary life. It is this that makes him "terrifyingly normal" as this kind of adherence to moral frameworks forms a legitimate basis of shared culture and customs. However, unthinking adherence to the guidelines legislated by Hitler in which standard moral frameworks had been turned upside-down also meant that Eichmann was *unable* to "realise what he was doing" as his rigid adherence to rules precluded him from thinking. In other words, Arendt held that it was Eichmann's continued reliance on external guidelines that made him thoughtless, as he became dependent on external frames of reference which restricted his ability to think for himself.

Arendt's understanding of thoughtlessness is therefore firmly grounded in the reliance on guidelines and external frameworks as exemplified by Eichmann. She likened the application of rules and guidelines to "holding onto a banister" (1979:336), and in her appraisal, this is *not the same* as thinking. While men might be confined to particular banisters by historical circumstances or conventions, these banisters dictate all outcomes, denying men both agency and freedom of thought.<sup>85</sup> By depending on banisters to frame or determine patterns of thinking, that is, to dictate the ways in which decisions must be made, men *do not think*. Instead, they replace the freedom and autonomy of the thinking activity with an unthinking adherence to external guidelines. According to Arendt, continued adherence to banisters of this nature serves to annihilate men's capacity to think altogether, as they become completely dependent on external structures to think in their place:

By shielding people against the dangers of examination, it teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society. What people then get used to is not so much the

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<sup>85</sup> Redhead explains that "banisters provided people with safe guiding lines, a set of values that provided a durable context for thought" (2002:811). In this way, banisters are guide-rails for thinking, pushing it in particular directions and constraining men's ability to think outside such rigid frameworks.

content of the rules, a close examination of which would always lead them into perplexity, as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. In other words, they get used to never having to make up their minds (Arendt 2003:178).

This state where men are “used to never having to make up their minds” lulls them into a false sense of security that is governed by the “possession of rules”. This, in turn, makes men “complacent”, and rather than thinking for themselves, they are satisfied to repeat and apply these “truths” which have, by their repetition and thoughtless application, become “trivial and empty”. This is Arendt’s definition of thoughtlessness (see 1998:5). Arendt therefore rejects banisters and guidelines on the basis that they constitute a threat to the general human capacity of thinking. Further to this, they have the potential to result in unthinking evil, as men are able to act in such a way as to avoid personal responsibility, merely applying processes and rules with no personal stake or sense of commitment.

Although initiated by her consideration of Eichmann, Arendt’s rejection of banisters was compounded by her reflections on totalitarianism more generally, and her repeated attempts to understand just what had happened. What struck Arendt most about totalitarianism was not so much its ideological content as the unprecedented nature of its *event*, the likes of which the world had never before experienced (1994:405). Arendt argued that banisters were inadequate to comprehend events such as totalitarianism, as by their very nature, banisters and guidelines subsume individual incidents under predetermined and universal categories that assume that everything that happens is related to something that came before. When something *new* occurs, such as totalitarianism or Eichmann, banisters are incapable of offering guidance for the simple fact that no universals exist for categories that have not yet been established.<sup>86</sup> As a result, Arendt argued that the event of totalitarianism constituted a *break with tradition*, as in their attempts to deal with it, men had no tradition on which to rely:

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<sup>86</sup> Despite this, many attempts have been made to interpret both the Eichmann trial and the overarching experience of totalitarianism under *existing* categories. Although both Eichmann’s crimes and the surrounding circumstances were unprecedented, according to Arendt, the court proceeded under the illusion that “the altogether unprecedented could be judged according to precedents and the standards that went with them” (Arendt 1964:135), stretching previous findings and examples beyond reasonable limits. However, Arendt argued that neither totalitarianism nor Eichmann’s actions could be explained by already existing categories or terms of reference as they differed “in essence” from anything that had come before (1964:267).

The originality of totalitarianism is horrible, not because some new “idea” came into the world, but because its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment. In other words, the very event, the phenomenon, which we try – and must try – to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding (Arendt 1994:309-310).

Arendt argued that in the wake of totalitarianism, traditional banisters were no longer relevant as “traditional forms of explanation no longer explain anything” (Luban 1994:81). This means that thinking no longer has a ground (Draenos 1979:210) and “one has got to start thinking as though nobody had thought before” (Arendt 1979:337).

For Arendt, this break with tradition represented a radical break from constraint as it liberated men from conditions of thoughtlessness, providing new opportunities for men to think freely and creatively:

...the possible advantage of our situation...it would permit us to look on the past with new eyes, unburdened and unguided by any traditions, and thus to dispose of a tremendous wealth of raw experiences without being bound by any prescriptions as to how to deal with these treasures (Arendt 1978:12).

This thinking beyond the ground of tradition is therefore a kind of ‘*thinking without banisters*’:

You said “groundless thinking.” I have a metaphor which is not quite that cruel, and which I have never published but kept for myself. I call it thinking without a bannister...That is, as you go up and down the stairs you can always hold onto the bannister so that you don’t fall down. But we have lost this bannister. That is the way I tell it to myself. And this is indeed what I try to do (Arendt 1979:336-337).<sup>87</sup>

Thinking without banisters implies thinking freely and without constraint, independent of rules and frameworks that guide our direction and other men who think in our place.

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<sup>87</sup> In an essay on Lessing, Arendt argues that in the modern world “we are inclined to regard entirely free thinking, which employs neither history nor coercive logic as crutches, as having no authority over us” (1968a:8). There, the image of the crutches plays a similar role to that of the banister, providing something rigid to hold onto “so that you don’t fall down” (1979:336).

To summarise, thoughtlessness, as Arendt understands it, is an absence of thinking, but more than that, it is a recklessness, an inability to realise what we are doing. Thoughtlessness results from the unthinking adherence to guidelines and frames of reference, which dictate the form our thinking must take and prescribe particular outcomes. Such 'banisters' lead men to become accustomed to "never having to make up their minds", and continued reliance on them "teaches [men] to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be" without regard for *what* these rules might be or *where* they came from (Arendt 2003:178). Banisters compound men's thoughtlessness by making thinking for themselves an unfamiliar enterprise. Thoughtlessness, conceived in these terms, is exemplified by Eichmann as his dutiful adherence to the rules prescribed by Hitler led him to participate in evil without realising what he was doing, merely *applying* given rules and guidelines rather than thinking for himself. While this appraisal of Arendt's understanding of thoughtlessness is significant in its own right, it also enables us to reveal Arendt's understanding of thinking *by contrast*. If thoughtlessness is the reliance on banisters, then we can infer that thinking, as Arendt understands it, must be free from all external frameworks. In other words, 'thinking without banisters' lies at the heart of Arendt's understanding of thinking.

### **THINKING (IN CONTRAST TO THOUGHTLESSNESS)**

Thinking without banisters suggests a thinking that is free from the restriction of rules or guidelines. More than this, however, Arendt argues that such thinking actually works to *dissolve* such rules and guidelines by undermining all claims to certainty, including the sureness of reality itself:

...it is precisely the thinking activity – the experiences of the thinking ego – that gives rise to doubt of the world's reality and of my own. Thinking can seize upon and get hold of everything real – event, object, its own thoughts; their realness is the only property that remains stubbornly beyond its reach (Arendt 1978:49).

In this way, Arendt understands thinking as not only free from banisters, but as *working against them* by questioning the validity and boundaries of whatever is being thought about, including guidelines and frameworks themselves. In other words, it is *through* thinking that such banisters can be dismantled and their inadequacies

brought to light.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly then, the results of thinking are not frameworks or boundaries, nor does thinking produce fixed or final conclusions. Thinking, as Arendt understands it, *opposes* the realisation of linearly defined results and is best characterised by ““motion in a circle” – the only movement, that is, that never reaches an end or results in an end product” (Arendt 1978:124).<sup>89</sup> Thinking therefore defies ultimate findings, is provocative rather than conclusive (Krieger 1976:684), fleeting rather than permanent (Arendt 1978:43).<sup>90</sup> The thinker does not think to find results and the only “goal” of thinking is to keep thinking (Young-Bruehl 2006:188). This is similar to Socrates’ conviction that an unexamined life is not worth living. As we will see later in this chapter, this is significant as Arendt holds Socrates as the *exemplar* for thinking.

According to Arendt, we think not to find an answer or to find a binding solution to a perplexity, but because we have a *need* to think: “Reason itself, the thinking ability which we have, has a need to actualize itself...we have forgotten that every human being has a need to think” (Arendt 1979:303; also Arendt 2003:163; Arendt 1978:69).<sup>91</sup> This stems from “the sheer fact that man is a thinking being”, (Arendt 2003:163). However, thinking leaves nothing tangible behind, and our “need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew” (Arendt 2003:163). This circular motion of thinking is reminiscent of Penelope’s weaving: “it seems to follow that the business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before” (Arendt 2003:166). Like Penelope’s veil, which is woven and unwoven, thinking “constantly unravels by night

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<sup>88</sup> This implies a reciprocity between thinking and banisters or frameworks. Thinking dismantles or undermines banisters, but banisters “dismantle” thinking, or at least undermine man’s capacity to practice thinking at all.

<sup>89</sup> According to Arendt, this understanding of thinking is unfamiliar to men conditioned by banisters to value processes and outcomes.

<sup>90</sup> Thinking is unable to establish fixed results or boundaries due to the speed with which we move from one thought to another: “Psychologically speaking, one of the outstanding characteristics of thought is its incomparable *swiftness*...Thought is swift, clearly, because it is immaterial” (Arendt 1978:44).

<sup>91</sup> This notion of *need* carries connotations of necessity, which links it to the life process. However, it would appear that Arendt emphasises our need to think not in order to suggest it is necessary for *survival*, but necessary to make us fully human: “Thinking accompanies life and is itself the dematerialized quintessence of being alive...A life without thinking is quite possible; it then fails to develop its own essence – it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive. Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers” (Arendt 1978:191).

the conclusions to which it has come by day” (Hill 1979a:xiii), and all that has been thought must be re-thought once more.

This suggests that thinking “harbors within itself a highly self-destructive tendency” (Arendt 1978:56), as it cancels out any conclusions or results by re-subjecting them to the thinking process and thinking them all over again.<sup>92</sup> For this reason, Arendt describes thinking as “out of order” because it “produces no end result that will survive the activity, that will make sense after the activity has come to its end” (1978:123). Arendt therefore emphasises “the thinking *activity*, the performance itself” (2003:167, my emphasis),<sup>93</sup> and her understanding of thinking “proceeds from the assumption that the thinking activity belongs among those *energeiai* which, like flute-playing, have their ends within themselves and leave no tangible outside end product in the world we inhabit” (Arendt 1978:129). Complicating matters further, the activity of thinking is incompatible with any other activity, and thinking interrupts all other doing: “The idiomatic “*stop* and think” is indeed entirely right. Whenever we think, we stop whatever else we may have been doing” (Arendt 2003:105). In other words, not only does thinking *not* serve knowledge or practical needs, but as long as we think we are unable to do anything else.

So far, our examination of Arendt’s understanding of thinking has found that its basis lies in ‘thinking without banisters’, by which Arendt means a thinking free of external guides and frameworks. Thinking under these conditions implies the inability (or perhaps, disinclination) of thinking to provide settled or fixed results or conclusions as these would only serve to limit or bind the possibilities for future thinking. As such, Arendt’s version of thinking emphasises its activity rather than its results, and like all performances, thinking leaves nothing tangible behind. This contrasts the passive repetition and adherence to rules which are the hallmarks of thoughtlessness.

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<sup>92</sup> This is consistent with Arendt’s description of thinking as “motion in a circle” (1978:124), as thinking returns us to the point from which we began so that we might go around again, not following the same precise arc, but continually curving back upon ourselves until we are back where we started, leaving nothing behind but its movement. As such, while thinking may go some way to illuminating a concept, it never precisely grasps it with any certainty. The meaning of thinking therefore does not lie in its results, since thinking has no real end, just a series of beginnings, and instead it lies in the *journey* of thinking, that is, the motion or *activity of thinking* itself.

<sup>93</sup> This focus on the *activity* of thinking further explains Arendt’s apparent disregard for the results of thought, thinking’s “thought-things”, as her primary concern is the actual *experience* of thinking and not with the “objects of thought” (Bernstein 2000:286).

Despite being free from banisters and rigid guidelines, thinking, as Arendt understands it, is far from arbitrary as it always relates to a worldly event, not in its sheer happening, but as a consequence of *lived experience*: “I do not believe that there is any thought process possible without personal experience. Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event” (Arendt 1994:20). By couching thinking in these terms, Arendt actually *binds* the activity of thinking to the experience of worldly phenomena: “my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and *must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings*” (Arendt 1977:14, my emphasis).<sup>94</sup> In other words, thinking arises from experience and “happens to everybody who ever reflects on something” (Arendt 1978:53).

This suggests that thinking itself is a process of reflection, the recalling of events and experiences in order to reflect on them and find understanding. This involves a process of translation or transformation from the appearing, sensed and experienced event itself to a remembered image of the event, achieved through recollection. This distance from both appearance and the senses is a crucial component of thinking, which, by its very nature, is non-appearing and deals with invisibles, “with things not *present* to the senses” (Arendt 1978:51), or perhaps more accurately, with things that have *disappeared* from my senses (Arendt 1978:85). Thinking requires a deliberate withdrawal from the direct sense perception of the world of appearances, as while-ever I actively sense whatever appears, I am unable to “stop and think”. While man’s corporeality means that he is unable to withdraw completely from the world, he can actively suppress his sensation of it by withdrawing from the body into the mind.<sup>95</sup> This requires the faculty of the imagination which enables us to represent, that is, *re-present* or present anew, a sensation by “making present what is actually absent”

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<sup>94</sup> This is an interesting turn of phrase given Arendt’s explicit rejection of *banisters* which she claims make men thoughtless. However, unlike banisters, which are rigid constraints, *guideposts* provide illumination for thought, enabling it to take its bearings but not prescribing its direction. Although events provide the impetus for thinking, therefore guiding or initiating thought’s beginning, unlike moral or traditional banisters, events themselves do not bind the process of thinking, that is, they do not prescribe particular outcomes or constrain the directions of thought.

<sup>95</sup> This presents a difficulty in ascertaining just *where* we are when we think: “While I am thinking I am not where I actually am; I am surrounded not by sense-objects but by images that are invisible to everybody else. It is as though I had withdrawn into some never-never land, the land of invisibles, of which I would know nothing had I not this faculty of remembering and imagining. Thinking annihilates temporal as well as spatial distances. I can anticipate the future, think of it as though it were already present, and I can remember the past as though it had not disappeared” (Arendt 1978:85).

(Arendt 1978:76). In this way, the imagination provides the mind “with suitable thought-objects” (Arendt 1978:77) as it prepares “the particulars given to the senses in such a way that the mind is able to handle them in their absence; it must, in brief, *de-sense* them” (Arendt 1978:76-77).

The deliberate withdrawal from the world of appearances implies a corresponding withdrawal from the company of other men whose presence actually constitutes the world (Arendt 1998:50). In other words, in addition to withdrawing from direct sense perception, Arendt argues that thinking requires men to retreat to a condition of solitude: “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 solitude, as though not men but Man inhabited the earth” (Arendt 1978:47). In this way, thinking demands a withdrawal from the human condition of plurality, “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (1998:7). However, the condition of solitude required for thinking is not the same as loneliness, and we are never alone when we are thinking as we always have ourselves for company: “To be in solitude means *to be with one’s self*, and thinking, therefore, though it may be the most solitary of all activities, is never altogether without a partner and without company” (Arendt 1998:76, my emphasis). Despite turning away from the bodily plurality of men, thinking therefore captures the fact of plurality internal to each self which Arendt refers to as the “original duality” (1978:75), or the “two-in-one” (1978:179). As a consequence, Arendt suggests that “nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists *essentially* in the plural than that his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself” (1978:185).

Thinking therefore presupposes a relationship between me and myself, and the activity of thinking takes the form of a dialogue of the two-in-one “in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers” (Arendt 1978:185).<sup>96</sup> This intercourse between the two-in-one is well captured by Kant’s description of thinking as “talking with oneself...hence also inwardly listening” (Arendt 1978:85). Here, Kant draws to our attention the role of speech in thinking, the internal speaking of me to myself. Without speech, I would be unable to talk with myself, neither asking nor answering

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<sup>96</sup> Arendt, however, admits that the dialogical structure of thinking is difficult to detect given its invisible and soundless nature and its inherent swiftness (1978:185).

with myself whatever arises in the course of my thinking. In short, without speech I would be unable to think. However, speech plays an additional role in thinking by overcoming its fleeting and invisible nature, as without literally 'speaking our minds', we have no way to substantiate any claim to have thought at all. According to Arendt, if language did not offer us "such thought-words, technically called "concepts," such as justice, truth, courage, divinity, and so on, which are indispensable even in ordinary speech, we would certainly lack all tangible evidence for the thinking activity" (1978:52). Further to this, without language we would be unable to think them at all. In this way, thinking "is driven to language" as a medium for its manifestation (Arendt 1978:110), "not only to the outside world but also to the mental ego itself" (Arendt 1978:102).<sup>97</sup>

Although thinking relies on language to make itself manifest to the outside world, in doing so, it loses something of its original quality as an activity. The "thought-thing", expressed as a "concept", can never fully capture what has been thought as the experience of thinking is fluid and dynamic, characterised by restless motion. By expressing thinking through language as concepts, it is as though we move from the *activity* of thinking, strictly speaking, to a statement of its results, that is, what thinking has thought.<sup>98</sup> This is problematic in terms of Arendt's understanding of thinking as performance, although it stems from the need to have "tangible evidence for the thinking activity" (1978:52). By needing such evidence, we put ourselves in the paradoxical situation where we seek something tangible from what is, by its very nature, intangible. Complicating matters further, language itself "is by no means...evidently adequate for the thinking activity" (Arendt 1978:102), as it is unable to capture the specific nature of the thinking as a *mental* activity. Language has no "ready-made vocabulary for the needs of mental activity" and thinking must

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<sup>97</sup> When the activity of thinking has reached the "limit where things must be decided, when the two say the same and are no longer uncertain" and I have made up my mind, I have formed an opinion (Arendt 2003:91). Socrates explained what it means to "think a matter through" like this: "I call it a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering...Making up one's mind and forming an opinion I thus call a discourse, and the opinion itself I call a spoken statement, pronounced not to someone else and aloud but silently to oneself" (in Arendt 2003:91-92). In this way, an opinion marks the end of thinking and is an expression of its activity.

<sup>98</sup> This predicament is somewhat remedied by the *active* quality of speech which enacts "sequences of sentences" (Arendt 1978:121), thereby transforming a series of fixed and definite words into a fluid and dynamic *act of speaking*. However, in order to capture a "concept" the motion of speech is made static and the original quality of action is lost.

“borrow” its vocabulary from “words originally meant to correspond either to sense experience or to other experiences of ordinary life” (Arendt 1978:102).

According to Arendt, “this borrowing...is never haphazard or arbitrarily symbolic” and thinking borrows language in the form of metaphors that mark the relations between things, expressing “similarity in dissimilars” (Arendt 1978:102-103). In this way, metaphors “bridge the gap between a world given to sense experience and a realm where no such immediate apprehension of evidence can ever exist” (Arendt 1978:32), that is, they bridge the gap between life in the world and the life of the mind. The use of metaphorical language both makes possible the dialogue of the two-in-one and enables the invisible and de-sensed activity of thinking to manifest in the world by forging an alliance with what is sensed in the world of appearances:

And this speaking in analogies, in metaphorical language...is the only way through which...thinking, can manifest itself. The metaphor provides the “abstract,” image-less thought with an intuition drawn from the world of appearances whose function it is “to establish the reality of our concepts” and thus undo, as it were, the withdrawal from the world of appearances that is the precondition of mental activities (Arendt 1978:103).

Metaphors not only “translate” the invisible into the visible but they *anchor* thinking to the world by providing it with something concrete to hold onto: “Analogies, metaphors, and emblems are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absent-mindedly, it has lost direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience” (Arendt 1978:109). In this way, metaphors exhibit a similarity to examples which illuminate concepts by illustration.

Our exploration to this point has provided us with some key insights into Arendt’s understanding of thinking. We have seen that Arendt understands thinking as an open-ended and inconclusive endeavour that neither creates, nor seeks, fixed or rigid conclusions, but instead, proceeds without the aid of banisters to reflect on worldly experiences. For Arendt, thinking is an unsettling activity that subjects all certainties to doubt, rupturing established understandings, fixed boundaries and universal categories. The activity of thinking requires a withdrawal from the world of appearances into the solitude of the mind, where I am free to engage in a dialogue with myself, recalling and recollecting images and events through the faculty of

imagination in order to find meaning and understanding. In this way, thinking, as Arendt understands it, “always deals with absences and removes itself from what is present and close at hand” (Arendt 1978:199). While thinking is able to manifest itself through words and metaphors, it is unable to adequately express the particularity or swiftness of its activity. These factors combined make thinking *about* thinking a difficult enterprise. How can we adequately capture the *experience* of thinking, that is, how can we conceptualise its *activity*? To express this another way, how can we make the intangibility of the activity of thinking tangible? For Arendt, the answer to these questions lies in Socrates, the exemplar for thinking.

### **AN EXEMPLAR FOR THINKING: SOCRATES**

Despite her general appraisal of thinking, Arendt is reluctant to pin thinking down, to enclose its boundaries or to claim to have captured the thinking activity or experience completely. In fact, she explains that to do so would only serve to counter the description of thinking she had offered:

As I approach the end of these considerations, I hope that no reader expects a conclusive summary. For me to make such an attempt would stand in flagrant contradiction to what has been described here. If thinking is an activity that is its own end and if the only adequate metaphor for it, drawn from our ordinary sense experience, is the sensation of being alive, then it follows that all questions concerning the aim or purpose of thinking are as unanswerable as questions about the aim or purpose of life (Arendt 1978:197).

In other words, the very nature of thinking precludes it from being rigidly defined. This conceptual openness reflects the nature of thinking as “sheer activity” (Arendt 1978:167). As a motion rather than a means to a fixed result, thinking itself is slippery and difficult to grasp with any certainty.<sup>99</sup> This, coupled with the invisible nature of all mental activities (Arendt 1978:71), presents us with the unfortunate “helplessness of the thinking ego to give an account of itself” (Arendt 1978:166-167). We are therefore

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<sup>99</sup> While all concepts are “slippery” (Arendt 1978:170), thinking is particularly difficult because it is impossible to separate the concept ‘thinking’ from the activity of thinking. In other words, thinking *about* thinking is inherently perplexing as it implies a motion about motion, a dialogue of the two-in-one about itself, an unravelling of the process of unravelling, which requires the thinking ego have an awareness of itself. However, this in itself is impossible: “For the trouble is that the thinking ego, as we have seen – in distinction from the self that, of course, exists in every thinker, too – has no urge to appear in the world of appearances. It is a slippery fellow, not only invisible to others but also, for the self, impalpable, impossible to grasp. This is partly because it is sheer activity” (Arendt 1978:167). In this way, we cannot even grasp the thinking ego in ourselves, let alone in more general terms.

left in a predicament where our original question – what is thinking (to Arendt)? – appears to be fundamentally unanswerable.<sup>100</sup>

As we have already seen, Arendt approaches conceptual difficulties such as these by making use of examples to illustrate particular concepts (1978:103). By considering Eichmann, Arendt's exemplar for thoughtlessness, we were better able to comprehend Arendt's particular understanding of thoughtlessness as it was embodied and demonstrated by his example. Not surprisingly therefore, Arendt argues that the best clues for what *thinking* means can be found in the records "of what thinking as an activity meant to those who had chosen it as a way of life" (1978:12), that is, in the life of a particular thinker. For Arendt, the exemplar for thinking is Socrates, as in her estimation, he best represents for us "the actual thinking *activity*" (Arendt 1978:167, my emphasis). More importantly, unlike the "professional" thinkers, Socrates is "representative for our "everybody,"...a man who counted himself neither among the many nor among the few" (Arendt 2003:168-169). This speaks to Arendt's rejection of the Platonic tradition, which subordinated politics to philosophy and formulated rigid doctrines based on the "claim to know how to improve and take care of the citizens' souls" (Arendt 2003:168-169).

Arendt describes Socrates as a thinker concerned with thinking itself, rather than as a means to finding truth or knowledge:

Socrates taught nothing; he never knew the answers to the questions he asked. He did the examining for examining's sake, not for the sake of knowledge. Had he known what courage, justice, piety, etc., were, he would no longer have had the urge to examine them, i.e., to think about them. Socrates' uniqueness lies in this concentration on thinking itself, regardless of results. There is no ulterior motive or ulterior purpose for the whole enterprise. An unexamined life is not worth living. That is all there is to it (Arendt 1992:37).

In other words, Socrates was solely concerned with the *experience* of thinking rather than its consequences, results or conclusions, and "to have talked something through, to have talked about something...seemed result enough" (Arendt 2005:16). For Socrates, "the unexamined life is not worth living: it is not a form of living, but a

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<sup>100</sup> Arendt herself tries to overcome this difficulty by asking the question "What *makes* us think?", rather than "What *is* thinking?", searching for a way to "bring [thinking] out of hiding, to tease it, as it were, into manifestation" (Arendt 1978:167).

form of deadness”, as it stops asking questions about how we should live, assuming that there are fixed and packaged answers which are already given” (Lear 1999:4). This suggests that the meaning of what Socrates was doing lay not in the results of thought, in what thinking produced, but in *the activity itself*, the motion of thinking (Kristeva 2001:42). In this way, Socrates embodies Arendt’s notion of thinking as “motion in a circle” as his thoughts turned back in on themselves, never settling on any single or final conclusions:

The first thing that strikes us in Plato’s Socratic dialogues is that they are all aporetic. The argument either leads nowhere or goes around in circles. In order to know what justice is, you must know what knowledge is, and in order to know that, you must have a previous, unexamined notion of knowledge...None of the *logoi*, the arguments, ever stays put; they move about, because Socrates, asking questions to which he does not know the answers, sets them in motion. And once the statements have come full circle, it is usually Socrates who cheerfully proposes to start all over again and inquire what justice or piety or knowledge or happiness are (Arendt 1978:169-170; Arendt 2003:171).

Socrates’ fundamental conviction that “an unexamined life is not worth living” not only led him to think and examine life himself, but to provoke his fellow citizens into “becoming *thinking* persons” (Bernstein 2000:281) who thought and examined *for themselves*. Subjecting his fellow citizens’ opinions to the unravelling of the thinking activity, Socrates “shatter[ed] unquestioning belief and unquestioning obedience” (Arendt 2003:102), undermining the certainty with which men believed anything. By seeking well-considered opinions and engaging men in a critical dialogue, Socrates stimulated the movement required for thinking through the ‘to and fro’ of discourse, shifting the emphasis from conclusions or results, to the dialogic intercourse of the thinking *activity*. Further to this, Arendt argues that by thinking with other men, Socrates transformed the inner dialogue of the thinking process into a *public* discourse:

What he actually did was to make *public*, in discourse, the thinking process – that dialogue that soundlessly goes on within me, between me and myself, he *performed* in the marketplace the way a flute-player performed at a banquet. It is sheer performance, sheer activity (Arendt 1992:37).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> However, this performance describes the way in which Socrates made the thinking activity public *more generally* rather than his *own* activity of thinking. Arendt argues that like all men, in order to think for himself, Socrates had to withdraw from the company of others and the presence of the world in order to engage *with himself* in a dialogue: “Even Socrates, so much in love with the marketplace, has to go home, where he will be alone, in order to meet the other fellow” with whom he thinks (Arendt

In this way, Socrates made thinking worldly by “moving amongst others in the public world and exploring their opinions” (Canovan 1992:258). As a consequence, Arendt describes Socrates as a thinker:

...who in his person unified two contradictory passions, for thinking and acting – not in the sense of being eager to apply his thoughts or to establish theoretical standards of action but in the much more relevant sense of being equally at home in both spheres and able to move from one sphere to the other with the greatest apparent ease, very much as we ourselves constantly move back and forth between experiences in the world of appearances and the need for reflecting on them (1978:167).

By Arendt’s account therefore, Socrates exemplified thinking as an activity, embracing the open-ended and circular motion of thought and inspiring others to do the same. However, Arendt argues that we can augment this appraisal of Socrates by examining what he *himself* thought about his practice of thinking, which according to Arendt, “can best be illustrated by the similes he applied to himself. He called himself a gadfly and a midwife; in Plato’s accounts somebody else called him an “electric ray”” (1978:171).<sup>102</sup> At the outset, the gadfly invokes images of restless movement, as it rushes madly about with no particular destination in mind, stopping here and there to sting others into thought (Minnich 1989:136). Socrates’ description of himself as a gadfly therefore captures the motion of thinking, without purpose or result in mind, but affecting others in its restless journey. More importantly, it suggests that without such a gadfly to *sting* men to thought, they will “sleep on undisturbed for the rest of their lives”, content to live unthinking lives, which, in Socrates’ appraisal, were neither worth much, nor fully alive (Arendt 1978:172). As such, Socrates’ metaphor of the gadfly also captures the rousing quality of thinking, which overcomes thoughtlessness by *provoking men to think*, unsettling their complacent unthinking lives.

The simile of the midwife suggests that Socrates saw himself as helping others to give birth to their thoughts. Without such a midwife, men would be unable, or perhaps unwilling, to give birth to new thoughts on their own. Socrates argued that his

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1978:190). This public performance of thinking is distinct from Socrates’ own thinking where he would be “suddenly overcome by his thoughts and thrown into a state of absorption to the point of perfect motionlessness for many hours” (Arendt 1998:302).

<sup>102</sup> This embodies Arendt’s conception that conceptual metaphorical language captures thinking, makes the activity of thinking manifest in the world despite its necessary withdrawal.

suitability as a midwife stemmed from his ‘sterility’, that is, his assertion that he knew nothing and therefore had nothing to teach, “he was “sterile” like the midwives in Greece, who were beyond the age of childbearing” (Arendt 1978:172). This sterility gives Socrates the expert knowledge of the midwife, and he can determine whether the thought-child he delivers “is a real child or a mere wind-egg of which the bearer must be cleansed” (Arendt 1978:172). In Arendt’s re-telling, Socrates rarely considered the thoughts brought forth by others anything but wind-eggs, and as a result, his role as a midwife often meant purging “people of their “opinions,” that is, of those unexamined pre-judgments that would *prevent* them from thinking” (Arendt 1978:172-173, my emphasis). In this way, the image of the midwife describes not only the process of giving birth or delivering thoughts, but the elimination of empty thoughts that are characteristic of thoughtlessness.<sup>103</sup>

Lastly, Socrates was called by others an “electric ray” in the sense that he paralysed others with perplexities in an effort to make them think. According to Arendt:

Socrates recognized the likeness as apt, provided that his hearers understood that “the electric ray paralyses others only through being paralyzed itself...It isn’t that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself” (1978:172).<sup>104</sup>

Arendt contends that this sharing of perplexities is “quite different from the inclination to find solutions for riddles and then demonstrate them to others” (1978:172), as it implies an open-ended sharing of concerns rather than a hierarchical imposition of knowledge or universal truth. This notion of paralysis is redolent of Arendt’s assertion that “all thinking demands a *stop-and-think*” (1978:78), as paralysis itself means to bring to a standstill, the cessation of all activity. Arendt acknowledges that this appears to imply that the electric ray is the opposite of the gadfly as the ray paralyses

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<sup>103</sup> This purging quality of Socratic thinking, which rids men of “wind-eggs” that constrain their ability to think, is similar to Arendt’s rejection of banisters which themselves make thinking empty. By reconsidering thinking in this way, Arendt embraces this idea of purging, aiming to rid men of banisters and traditions which “prevent them from thinking”.

<sup>104</sup> Arendt suggests that this process of infecting others with the perplexities I feel myself “sums up neatly the only way thinking can be taught” (1978:172). This is an interesting claim given that “Socrates, as he repeatedly said, *did not teach anything*, for the simple reason that he had nothing to teach; he was “sterile” like the midwives in Greece” (Arendt 1978:172, my emphasis). However, while Socrates did not explicitly *teach*, by stimulating thinking and leading by example, he improved men’s practices of thinking. This is not the same as improving *men themselves*, and according to Arendt, Socrates does not pretend that thinking improves anybody, only that it “seems to him a great good for the City” (1978:178).

where the gadfly arouses. However, “what cannot fail to look like paralysis from the outside...is *felt* as the highest state of being active and alive” (Arendt 1978:173),<sup>105</sup> that is, Arendt argues that the state of paralysis induced by Socrates is a cessation of all *other* activity that frees men for the activity of thinking. The electric ray therefore captures the *activity* of thinking which is paralysing in its attempt to deal with unresolvable perplexities and it disables our ability to do anything else. This paralysis is a condition of thinking, Arendt’s “stop and think”, but as exemplified by Socrates, it also indicates a sharing, a perplexity held in common.

Be he gadfly, midwife, or electric ray, Socrates exemplifies the activity of thinking for Arendt as he shatters certainty, asking questions and interrupting “our everyday derivation of judgment and action from unquestioned virtues, values, or principles...to throw us back on our “internal dialogue,” the dialogue of thought, of me with myself” (Villa 1998:151).<sup>106</sup> In doing so, Socrates provokes others to think, stirring, delivering and paralysing men so that they might think for themselves. For Socrates, the worth of thinking lies in its activity and not its results, and “as far as he himself is concerned, there is nothing more to be said than that life deprived of thought would be meaningless, even though thought will never make men wise or give them the answers to thought’s own questions” (Arendt 1978:178). For Arendt, Socrates therefore embodies the thinking activity, and by understanding Socrates’ practice of thinking, we can better appreciate what Arendt understands by thinking, as it manifests in his example.

## **THINKING VERSUS KNOWING**

Our discussion to this point has uncovered Arendt’s understanding of thinking via her understanding of thoughtlessness, illustrating them both with the lived examples of Socrates and Eichmann. As a result, we have confirmed our original assertion that Arendt’s understanding of thinking is poles apart from common conceptions of

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<sup>105</sup> This heightened state of activity is supported by Arendt’s oft-cited phrase, attributed to Cato: “Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself” (Arendt 1998:325). Arendt uses these as the final words of *The Human Condition*.

<sup>106</sup> In this way, Socrates embodies the notion of ‘thinking without banisters’. By its very nature, Socratic thinking works without a ground, responsive only to contingency and particularity and encouraging others to abandon banisters and think freely for themselves. Further to this, Socratic thinking demonstrates how thinking *destroys* banisters, dismantling men’s unthinking hold on them and forcing them to think for themselves.

thinking that see it as part of everyday life or central to scientific discovery. In fact, Arendt rejects the common emphasis on the results or ends of thinking in favour of the activity of thinking as an end in itself. As a consequence, Arendt asserts that thinking and knowing are diametrically opposed mental activities.<sup>107</sup> While thinking is an endless activity concerned with finding meaning, knowing is concerned with cognition or truth and it forms the basis for science and the pursuit of knowledge:

Thought and cognition are not the same...Cognition always pursues a definite aim, which can be set by practical considerations as well as by "idle curiosity"; but once this aim is reached, the cognitive process has come to an end. Thought, on the contrary, has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results; not only the utilitarian philosophy of *homo faber* but also the men of action and the lovers of results in the sciences have never tired of pointing out how entirely "useless" thought is (Arendt 1998:170).

Arendt contends that in the modern world, however, our dependence on banisters has distorted our understanding of genuine thinking, that is, thinking as Arendt understands it, to such an extent that we now identify thinking solely "with the insatiable quest for scientific knowledge" (Bernstein 2000:284). For this reason, Arendt's description of thinking is also an "attempt to isolate and examine one of the basic sources of non-cognitive thinking" (1978:151), which in her opinion, is no longer understood.

According to Arendt, the modern conflation of thinking and knowing stems from the fundamental fallacy that meaning can be interpreted on the model of truth (1978:15). Not only are truth and meaning completely different, but they are fundamentally incompatible. Arendt argues that truth is "what we are compelled to admit by the nature either of our senses or of our brain" (1978:61), and it is therefore beyond dispute. It is universal, singular and finite. In Arendt's estimation, the quest for truth and the desire to know underpin science's basic goal "to see and know the world as it is given to the senses" (1978:58): "What science and the quest for knowledge are after is *irrefutable* truth, that is, propositions human beings are not free to reject – they are compelling" (Arendt 1978:59). As such, science holds the cognition of truth as its "highest criterion", and it derives these truths from "the common-sense

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<sup>107</sup> According to Arendt, to equate thinking with the logical operations of knowing "means to level the capacity for thought, which for thousands of years has been deemed to be the highest capacity of man, to its lowest common denominator" (1994:318).

experience of irrefutable evidence, which dispels error and illusion” (Arendt 1978:58). As we saw in Chapter 1, the best example of this, according to Arendt, was the invention of the telescope.<sup>108</sup>

In contrast to truth, meaning is open-ended and multiple, subject to interpretation and therefore offering no real certainty. The quest for meaning provides the impetus for thinking, and Arendt “often *defines* thinking as the quest for meaning; the quest for meaning is “reason’s need”” (Kateb 2002:326). Arendt contends that unlike cognition, thinking “does not ask what something is or whether it exists at all – its existence is always taken for granted – *but what it means for it to be*” (Arendt 1978:57). While cognition seeks to *know*, to find answers to its questions, thinking stems from man’s capacity to ask himself questions that, by their very nature, have no answers.<sup>109</sup> As such, truth cannot arise from thinking, but more than this, thinking does not pursue truth at all, and “to expect truth to come from thinking signifies that we mistake the need to think with the urge to know” (Arendt 1978:61). Instead, thinking is concerned with the search for meaning, and however long we may think, this thinking itself never ends in truth.<sup>110</sup> Like Penelope’s weaving, thinking both establishes and undermines meaning, subjecting thoughts which seem to have fixed or established meanings to new scrutiny and undermining any sense of certainty with which we hold them. As a consequence, meaning itself is fleeting, and any particular meaning is inseparable from the activity of thinking.

Despite this opposition of thinking and cognition, that is, that they are fundamentally different concerns, Arendt acknowledges that thinking “no doubt, plays an enormous role in every scientific enterprise, but it is the role of a means to an end” (1978:54). This suggests that thinking is both itself *and* a fundamental component of the cognitive process. Although “thinking can and must be employed in the attempt to know”, according to Arendt, “in the exercise of this function it is never itself; it is but

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<sup>108</sup> As we saw in Chapter 1, Arendt argues that with the telescope, Galileo “delivered to human cognition “with the certainty of sense-perception” the secrets of the universe which had previously “seemed forever beyond his reach, at best open to the uncertainties of speculation and imagination” (Arendt 1998:260). Where previously men could only speculate about the universe, the telescope enabled him to see it, and as he *saw it with his own eyes*, he could be certain of its truth.

<sup>109</sup> *Like* thinking, cognition is based on questioning, but *unlike* thinking, is solely concerned with finding the answers rather than the process of “talking something through”.

<sup>110</sup> Socrates understood this open-endedness of thinking, admitting himself “I know that I do not know” (Arendt 2005:19), and while he dissolved citizens’ *doxa*, he left no truth in its place.

the handmaiden of an altogether different enterprise” (1978:61). In other words, Arendt argues that while-ever thinking is employed as a means to something else, such as knowing, it is a *handmaiden of knowing* rather than thinking itself. To be itself, thinking must be done for itself, for no purpose outside its own performance. This means that while thinking is an end in itself, it also easily lends itself to appropriation as a means to something else. This explains Arendt’s assertion that thinking was traditionally conceived as “the most direct and important way to *lead to* the contemplation of truth” (Arendt 1998:291, my emphasis). It also provides a basis for Arendt’s claim that the modern world has come to see thinking as a *means* to the cognition of scientific truth, that is, thinking not as an end in itself, as sheer performance, but as a mere handmaiden to knowing.

### **TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THINKING AND THOUGHTLESSNESS**

Arendt’s distinction between thinking and knowing refocuses our attention on the idiosyncrasy of her understanding of thinking. By considering thinking outside its modern role as servant to cognition, Arendt reasserts thinking as an end in itself that pursues nothing outside its own performance. As a consequence, it is clear that Arendt considered neither cognition nor scientific thinking as thinking at all, as, in contrast to thinking, they seek to reveal the truth of the world to the senses, and not only pursue, but leave behind, “a growing treasure of knowledge” (Arendt 1978:62). This is antithetical to her characterisation of thinking as a fluid and dynamic activity which leaves behind no tangible results, dealing with representations of things that are absent and de-sensed, and involving a deliberate withdrawal from the world.

With these things in mind, we are now finally in a position to make sense of Arendt’s contention in the opening pages of *The Human Condition* that modern men are thoughtless. By making this claim, Arendt was not seeking to deny the intellectual and cognitive abilities of scientists, nor detract from their overwhelming advances in knowledge. Rather, her statements stemmed from her (then unclear) understanding of thinking which is fundamentally opposed to both cognition and truth. For Arendt, while modern men might *know* more than ever before, they do not necessarily *think*. In fact, Arendt contends that the modern reverence of science and cognition as the

key to truth has cemented the conditions for thoughtlessness by entrenching scientific guidelines and banisters, therefore restricting men's abilities to really think *for themselves*. This dependence on science and our insatiable desire to know, not only mean that we no longer experience the thinking activity, but we no longer understand just what thinking *is*. In this way, the absence of the activity of thinking has led to a crisis of meaninglessness of all things (Arendt 1994:313), including thinking itself.

This process of finding an answer to our initial question regarding the perplexity of Arendt's statement that thoughtlessness is an outstanding characteristic of the modern world, has yielded some clear insights into Arendt's understanding of thinking as an open-ended activity that pursues meaning, and her corresponding understanding of thoughtlessness as the rigid application of rules and guidelines. At the same time, however, it has sparked a series of further questions and perplexities. Perhaps most puzzling of all, if thinking serves only to disorient us, undermining all certainty and leaving nothing in its place, then outside its actual activity, what *good* is thinking? What purpose does thinking serve? Arendt herself recognised this difficulty, acknowledging that:

...thinking as such does society little good, much less than the thirst for knowledge, which uses thinking as an instrument for other purposes. It does not create values; it will not find out, once and for all, what "the good" is; it does not confirm but, rather, dissolves accepted rules of conduct (Arendt 1978:192).

Further to this, thinking has no *political* relevance in the sense that it is an activity of the mind, done only in the company of myself when I withdraw from the world. Why, then, should men think at all?<sup>111</sup>

Notwithstanding man's inherent need to think (Arendt 1979:303), Arendt suggests that thinking *becomes* politically relevant when "special emergencies arise" (1978:192).<sup>112</sup> In such circumstances, Arendt argues that the destructive element of

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<sup>111</sup> Apart from the need satisfied by thinking, thinking itself is *useless* if it remains in a condition of withdrawal as it remains unrelated to the world. As such, perhaps a better question would be, how can we translate the withdrawn and solitary activity of thinking into something meaningful *to the world*?

<sup>112</sup> It would appear that Arendt's "special emergencies" are a reference to totalitarianism. This seems a fair assumption given the significance this event held for Arendt's life and work, and the world more generally. As we have seen, totalitarianism provided the impetus for Arendt's examination of

thinking, “Socrates’ midwifery, which brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them – values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions” (1978:192), has a liberating effect on the faculty of *judgement*. This is highly significant as judgement “is the faculty that judges *particulars* without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules” (Arendt 1978:192-193). In this way, judging is closely aligned to ‘thinking without banisters’ as it considers particulars *in their particularity* without recourse to pre-established rules or guidelines. Further to this, judging goes some way to remedying the withdrawn and general nature of thinking<sup>113</sup> as it reaffirms a link between thinking and the particular events and circumstances of the world.

In light of this, it appears that an understanding of judging could further illuminate Arendt’s understanding of thinking, shedding further light on its nature and its place in human life. By enabling thinking to manifest in the world, judging helps us overcome the “helplessness of the thinking ego to give an account of itself”, that is, judging helps us bring thinking out of hiding, “to tease it, as it were into manifestation” (Arendt 1978:167). In this way, a consideration of Arendt’s understanding of judging and its relationship to thinking might better enable us to make sense of the role thinking plays in *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s reconsideration of the human condition in the modern world.

## **2. From Thinking to Judging**

Thinking, as Arendt understands it, is a mental faculty which deals with invisibles, recollecting and representing things that are absent and considering them in a dialogue of the two-in-one. Although thinking *begins* by reflecting on the particularity

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thoughtlessness and her conclusion that rigid adherence to banisters and guidelines prevented Eichmann from realising what he was doing. As such, Arendt’s thoughts on thinking arise from her experience of totalitarianism and therefore remain bound to it “as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings” (see Arendt 1977:14).

<sup>113</sup> According to Arendt, it is the nature of thinking to *generalise*: “Human thought...leaves the world of the particular and goes out in search of something generally *meaningful*, though not necessarily universally valid. Thinking always “generalizes,” squeezes out of many particulars – which, thanks to the de-sensing process, it can pack together for swift manipulation – whatever meaning may inhere. Generalization is inherent in every thought, even though that thought is insisting on the universal primacy of the particular” (Arendt 1978:199).

of lived experience, thinking's "thought-things" are eventually represented in words and metaphors as general concepts, so that generalisation is inherent in every thought (Arendt 1978:199). In light of this, Arendt suggests that whenever the thinking ego "emerges from its withdrawal and returns to the world of particular appearances, it turns out that the mind needs a new "gift" to deal with them" (1978:215).<sup>114</sup> According to Arendt, this gift is the faculty of judgement, which, in contrast to thinking, "always concerns particulars and things close at hand" (1978:193). While thinking enables general concepts such as courage or beauty to emerge from its activity, by undermining universals, thinking also liberates the faculty of judgement by which we can *discriminate between particulars* to say 'this is courageous', or 'this is beautiful'.

This means that thinking both precedes and enables judging, supplying it with general concepts that can be transposed onto particular circumstances, and liberating it from the constraints of universal banisters. At the same time, judging *requires* thinking as judging is "articulated and actualized in the processes of thought" (Arendt 2003:97-98). While this appears to suggest that judging is reliant on thinking, Arendt asserts that judging and thinking are "interrelated", as judging also *realises* thinking, "makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to think" (1978:193). In other words, judging makes thinking worldly, providing a means for thinking to both make its appearance and find a home in the world. This makes judging a kind of "thinking particularity" (Bernstein 1986:235), as it combines the generalisations of thought with the particularity of whatever is being judged, forming judgements on particulars by engaging in the activity of thinking. Arendt therefore describes judging as "the mysterious endowment of the mind by which the general, always a mental construction, and the particular, always given to sense experience, are brought together" (1978:69).

Arendt's understanding of judging therefore emerges from her thoughts on thinking to combine the freedom of the thinking activity with the particularity of our experience of

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<sup>114</sup> Although thinking always begins with particulars, it always ends in generalisations as a result of its own requirement to de-sense and withdraw from the world. In spite of itself, thinking is unable to retain the particularity that caused its activity in the first place. As such, when thinking returns to the world, it returns with generalities, and the mind requires a second faculty to respond to the particulars of the world *in their particularity*.

the world. As such, it appears that judging is an *extension* of Arendt's understanding of thinking that finds a way to think about particulars while maintaining their particularity. However, we must be mindful that thinking and judging are distinct mental faculties and thinking is *not* judging: "Thinking requires judgement, thinking makes judgement possible, but thinking is not judgement" (Jackson 1989:54). While thinking reflects on and considers the world, it retains a conceptual openness, whereas judging *takes a stand* with respect to the world, giving it a definite form and conclusion. This distinction notwithstanding, the ability of judging to make thinking manifest in the world stands to illuminate not only Arendt's understanding of thinking, but the significance of this thinking for Arendt's consideration of the particular events of the modern world in *The Human Condition*. With this in mind, this discussion proceeds to explore Arendt's understanding of judging in the hope that the relationship between thinking and judging will shed further light on Arendt's understanding of thinking.

### **THE NATURE OF JUDGING: REFLECTIVE JUDGEMENT**

Arendt argues that "in our general usage, the word "judgment" has two meanings that certainly ought to be differentiated but that always get confused whenever we speak" (2005:102). Firstly, and perhaps most commonly, judgement "means organizing and subsuming the individual and particular under the general and universal, thereby making an orderly assessment by applying standards by which the concrete is identified, and according to which decisions are then made" (Arendt 2005:102). Arendt calls this first form determinant judgement as such judgements are *determined* through the application of rules and guidelines. According to Arendt, all determinant judgements are grounded in a pre-judgement, those pre-conceived prejudices "that we take to be self-evident, that we can toss out in conversation without any lengthy explanations" (2005:99). By their very nature, prejudices are unthinking as we "take them to be self-evident", habitually deferring to them without explanation or regard to their origin or validity. As such, prejudices take the form of banisters to which determinant judgements thoughtlessly adhere, leaving no room for individuality, particularity or autonomy. Arendt therefore rejects determinant judgement on the basis that it is both thoughtless and incapable of dealing with the unprecedented events of the modern world.

However, Arendt argues that judgement can “mean something totally different” which avoids this kind of reliance on pre-determined banisters (2005:102). According to Arendt, this second form of judgement knows no standards, “can appeal to nothing but the evidence of what is being judged, and its sole prerequisite is the faculty of judgment, which has far more to do with man’s ability to make distinctions than with his ability to organize and subsume” (2005:102). Here, Arendt highlights the specificity of the *faculty* of judgement which is distinct from the administrative ability to “organize and subsume” particulars under universals.<sup>115</sup> To differentiate this second meaning of judging from the first, Arendt refers to this faculty as *reflective* judgement, and contrary to determinant judgement, it has no need of pre-given rules or universals as it responds to circumstances in their particularity (D’Entreves 2000:247). Arendt’s reflective judgement has a fidelity to the open nature of thinking without banisters, and like thinking, “such judgments are never of a compulsory nature, never force others into agreement in the sense of a logically irrefutable conclusion, but rather can only persuade” (Arendt 2005:104).

### **ARENDT ON KANT: TASTE, COMMON SENSE AND THE IMAGINATION**

In her appraisal of judging, Arendt was drawn to the “authoritative testimony” of Kant, arguing that it was not until him that judgement became “a major topic of a major thinker” (1978:215).<sup>116</sup> Despite the magnitude of Kant’s work on practical reason, Arendt found a model for reflective judgement – the judging of particulars without reference to universal categories – in Kant’s comments on *taste* and aesthetics.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Arendt makes very clear that her understanding of judging has no place for the mere application of universal rules in any sense, including those associated with logical reasoning: “my own main assumption in singling out judgment as a distinct capacity of our minds has been that judgments are not arrived at by either deduction or induction; in short, they have nothing in common with logical operations – as when we say: All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, hence, Socrates is mortal” (Arendt 1978:215).

<sup>116</sup> It is important here to draw a distinction between Arendt’s turn to Kant to understand judging and her turn to Socrates and Eichmann to understand thinking and thoughtlessness. Arendt considered both Socrates and Eichmann *exemplars* of thinking and thoughtlessness (respectively), that is, they provided a lived example that illuminates meaning through performance. In contrast, Arendt turns to Kant not as an exemplar for judging, but as a “great philosopher”, the first and last “*to deal with judgment as one of the basic mental activities*” (Arendt 1978:95, my emphasis), that is, to *think* about judgement, which is very different from exemplifying its practice.

<sup>117</sup> Arendt rejected Kant’s understanding of practical reason as a foundation for judging on the basis that it prescribed universal adherence to law, therefore leaving no room for responding to events in their particularity: “For judgment of the particular – *This* is beautiful, *This* is ugly; *This* is right, *This* is wrong – has no place in Kant’s moral philosophy. Judgment is not practical reason; practical reason

According to Arendt, it was only in his work on taste that Kant dealt “with objects of judgment properly speaking” (1992:13), as the sense of taste involves a “subjective, noncognitive, spontaneous response to experience” (Bell 1987:231-232) that cannot be couched in terms of predetermined rules or principles (Disch 1993:684). By their very nature, judgements of taste are reflective rather than determinant, as when we judge that something is ‘beautiful’, for example, we do not “subsume [the thing] under a general category of Beauty as such; we have no rule that could be applied” (Arendt 1992:13). In other words, a judgement of beauty is an aesthetic judgement of a *particular* object rather than an application of the rules of beauty: “What confronts you in a reflective judgement...is not the general category “rose” but the particular, *this* rose. That *this* rose is beautiful is not given in the universal nature of roses” (Zerilli 2005:159).<sup>118</sup> To put this another way, aesthetic judgement deals with particulars *in their particularity*, free from the constraints of universal rules and banisters.

Despite this apparent suitability of aesthetics, Arendt acknowledged that the fact that a faculty of judgement that discriminates between particulars should be based on taste is “surprising” (1992:64; 1977:221). On one hand, taste is inherently suitable as it is the only sense which is discriminatory by its very nature and that relates to the particular *qua* particular (Arendt 1992:66). It is also the faculty by which we *choose* (Arendt 1992:69). On the other hand, taste is fundamentally incompatible with the notion that judging makes thinking manifest in the world as taste is an inner sensation which is entirely private. Further to this, in matters of taste, “I am directly affected” by the object I am tasting (Arendt 1992:66-67), and the sensation of “it-pleases-or-displeases-me is immediate and overwhelming” (Arendt 1992:64). As such, taste itself *is a sensation* that is “unmediated by any thought or reflection” (Arendt 1992:66). The sensation of pleasure or displeasure inherent in taste is not only idiosyncratic, but is also incommunicable as “what I taste and what I smell

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“reasons” and tells me what to do and what not to do; it lays down the law and is identical with the will, and the will utters commands; it speaks in imperatives” (Arendt 1992:15). The rigidity and practicality of reason places limitations on men by prescribing outcomes under the authority of law. As such, Arendt considered Kant’s moral philosophy a banister that precludes men from thinking, and therefore judging, for themselves.

<sup>118</sup> Arendt herself illustrated the same notion this way: “If you say, “What a beautiful rose!” you do not arrive at this judgment by first saying, “All roses are beautiful, this flower is a rose, hence this rose is beautiful”” (1992:13). Although we might judge a particular rose, we are judging it not on its being a rose, but on its being beautiful. As such, Kant’s aesthetic judgement judges the *particularity* of the rose, leaving open the possibility that a particular rose can be judged ‘not beautiful’ despite clearly being a rose.

cannot be expressed in words at all” (Arendt 1992:64): “Isn’t it true that when it comes to matters of taste we are so little able to communicate that we cannot even dispute about them?” (Arendt 1992:65).<sup>119</sup> As such, taste is inherently incompatible with thinking which deals “with things not present to the senses” (Arendt 1978:51). In light of these inconsistencies between taste and thinking, we might ask ourselves, with Arendt, “Why then should taste...be elevated to and become the vehicle of the mental faculty of judgment?” (1992:64). Why should our faculty of judgement, which discriminates “between right and wrong” be “based on this *private* sense?” (Arendt 1992:65). According to Arendt, the solution to these “riddles” lies in the faculties of imagination and common sense (1992:66).

As we have already seen, Arendt argues that the imagination re-presents a sensation to the mind in a de-sensed form, transforming “a visible object into an invisible image, fit to be stored in the mind” (1978:77). In this way, the imagination “transforms an object into something I do not have to be directly confronted with but that I have in some sense internalized” (Arendt 1992:66-67), making it “an object for one’s inner senses” (Arendt 1992:68). The imagination therefore overcomes the immediacy and presence of taste’s *sensation*, replacing it with a de-sensed *representation* of my sense of taste that I can recall and reflect on, but that no longer effects me directly. In doing so, the imagination establishes “a proper distance” from the object, fulfilling the condition of disinterestedness required both for thinking and “evaluating something at its proper worth” (Arendt 1992:67). By presenting us with a representation of an object rather than a direct sense perception, the imagination prepares the object for the “operation of reflection”, which according to Arendt, “is the actual activity of judging something” (1992:68). As such, Arendt argues that with the assistance of the imagination “one then speaks of judgment and no longer of taste”, because “though it still affects one like a matter of taste”, we have moved beyond a private and subjective sensation “by means of representation”, establishing the necessary distance for both thinking and judging (Arendt 1992:67).

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<sup>119</sup> Matters of taste “are not communicable” as they stem from my subjective sense of something, my pleasure or displeasure, which by its very nature, is unable to be expressed in words. Further to this, Arendt argues that because “I am directly affected” in matters of taste, “there can be no dispute about right or wrong here” (1992:66), that is, my sensation of taste is outside the normal bounds of discrimination between right and wrong. For example, “no argument can persuade me to like oysters if I do not like them” (Arendt 1992:66), as my sensation of displeasure when eating oysters, my not liking them, is not itself “wrong” and therefore cannot be overcome by reason.

Arendt's second solution for the "riddle" of taste lies in common sense. Here, Arendt takes her lead from Kant who "was very early aware that there was something nonsubjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense" (1992:67). According to Arendt, this awareness stems from Kant's belief that matters of taste only arise when men live together in society: "A man abandoned by himself on a desert island would adorn neither his hut nor his person...[Man] is not contented with an object if he cannot feel satisfaction in it in common with others" (Kant quoted in Arendt 1992:67). This implies that taste, although a subjective sensation, has an *intersubjective* element as it makes a demand on others: "In other words, the nonsubjective element in the non-objective senses is intersubjectivity. (You must be alone in order to think; you need company to enjoy a meal)" (Arendt 1992:67). Unlike in other spheres, "in taste," Kant says, "egoism is overcome" – we are considerate in the original sense of the word, we consider the existence of others" (Arendt 2003:142), responding and making reference to the community of which we are part. Arendt contends that this sense of the community is *common sense*, not a *sensation* common to all of us, but a "sense which fits us into a community with others, makes us members of it and enables us to communicate things given by our five private senses" (Arendt 2003:139).<sup>120</sup>

Arendt therefore reads Kant as suggesting that we can "rightly refer to aesthetic judgment and taste as a *sensus communis* or "public sense"" (Beiner 1992:122), as judgements of taste always make an appeal to others who have in common a ground of shared judgement, a *common sense*. For example, while my appraisal of 'beauty' is subjective, it is based on a common sense of pleasure in 'the beautiful'. This makes my judgement that 'this is beautiful' *intersubjective* as it not only expresses my subjective sense of this object, but it expresses a sense of 'the beautiful' that I attribute to everyone else (Disch 1993:684). By saying 'this is beautiful', we therefore make a demand on others:

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<sup>120</sup> In aesthetic judgements, "common sense, the sense through which we are members of a community, is the mother of judgment" (Arendt 2003:141). This means that aesthetic judgements always make reference to the judgements of others, overcoming ego to consider the existence of other men. This is distinct from Kantian morality where "we are not considerate for we need not consider the positions of others and we don't consider the consequences of our act which are immaterial for the law or for the goodness of the will from which the act springs" (Arendt 2003:142). As such, aesthetic judgement avoids the rigidity of moral judgement by taking into account the particularity of the community.

In this statement, we mean not only that it pleases me, but that it will and should please others or everyone...In making this judgement, we take the perspective of others or of everyone...If an object pleases me independently of my particular subjective situation, then it ought to please others too, independently of their subjective situations (Jackson 1987:94).<sup>121</sup>

Judgements of taste judge a particular object with reference to others who constitute the common world, that is, with reference to the company we keep (Young-Bruehl 1982:297). Although the *sensation* of taste is private and subjective, *judgements* of taste move beyond an individual expression of personal preference to something that is shared and relational.

With this in mind, Arendt asserts that “judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgments into account” (1992:67). That is, we judge with reference to the *sensus communis*. Arendt explains that this is not to say that one must possess “an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the minds of all others” (1992:43), nor does it mean that we must ascertain the *actual* judgements of other men. Instead, for Arendt, judgement involves a critical thinking “made possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection”, not in their actuality, but in the sense that I abstract myself from the limitations of my own judgement, disregarding my “subjective private conditions, and therefore releasing myself from self-interest” (Arendt 1992:43). In doing so, we open ourselves to the judgements of others, but in order to take them into account, we require the assistance of the faculty of imagination to “make present in itself all those who actually are absent” (Arendt 2003:140). In other words, “my judgment of a particular instance does not merely depend upon my perception”, nor on my de-sensed representation of my perception, “but upon my representing to myself something which I do not perceive” (Arendt 2003:140), that is, the perceptions of others which I cannot know but can only imagine.

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<sup>121</sup> Although my judgement that ‘this is beautiful’ is intersubjective as it refers to a commonly held sense of pleasure in ‘the beautiful’, it is neither objective nor universal and others may disagree. While we might make an appeal to others in our judgement, they certainly do not have to agree. Because my judgement is intersubjective “it *ought* to please others”, yet nothing about my judgement *compels* agreement.

Imagination therefore plays a central role in judging as it enables us to liberate ourselves from our own private conditions and take account of the perspectives of others. By doing so, Arendt argues that we “attain that relative impartiality that is the specific virtue of judgment” (1992:73). Arendt’s conception of impartiality refers not to “some higher standpoint” (Arendt 1992:42), but to the collection of multiple subjectivities that transcend individual interests, perspectives and prejudices while still retaining the particular, combining them in such a way as to gain an overall sense of the world we hold in common (Villa 1992:296). By emphasising that this impartiality is relative to, and conditional on, the combination of perspectives from which it arose, Arendt distances herself from the understanding of impartiality as objectivity that comes from a withdrawal to an Archimedean point outside the world. Instead, Arendt’s understanding of impartiality stems from her appreciation of Homer’s ability to “see the same thing first from two opposing sides and then from all sides” (Arendt 2005:167). This suggests that the more standpoints I am able to take into account, that is, the more “general” I can make my thinking, the more impartial I can make my judgement (Arendt 1992:43).<sup>122</sup> As such, in order to judge with reference to the *sensus communis*, with impartiality, we must take into account the possible judgements of others by *imagining* the standpoints of others, that is, we must train the imagination to “go visiting” (Arendt 1992:43).<sup>123</sup>

As we saw in our discussion of thinking, Arendt rejects the passive and complacent acceptance of the thoughts of others on the grounds that this is thoughtless. This means that Arendt’s notion of “visiting” does not involve simply *replacing* one’s viewpoint with the viewpoint of another: “To accept what goes on in the minds of those whose “standpoint”...is not my own would mean no more than passively to

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<sup>122</sup> While Arendtian impartiality is general in the sense that it combines multiple standpoints, it is not a “generality” in the same sense as a concept that can be universally applied. It is still closely connected “with the *particular* standpoints one has to go through in order to arrive at one’s own “general standpoint”” (Arendt 1992:44, my emphasis).

<sup>123</sup> This idea of “visiting” parallels the quality of motion that is characteristic of thinking, and the judge, like the thinker, is “not irrevocably bound, either mentally or physically, to one’s own standpoint or point of view” (Arendt 2005:167-168). As such, the activity of judging suggests a freedom in terms of freedom of movement, as the judge moves freely through the thoughts and judgements of others in order to come to his own judgement: “In the case of the polis, the political man, given the characteristic excellence that distinguished him, was at the same time the freest man: for thanks to the insight that enabled him to consider all standpoints, he enjoyed the greatest freedom of movement” (Arendt 2005:169). This freedom exists only on the basis that the judge does not bind himself to a single perspective, including his own, as a fixed position impedes his ability to judge with reference to the *sensus communis*.

accept their thought, that is, to exchange their prejudices for the prejudices proper to my own station” (Arendt 1992:43). To do so, is to restrict my own thinking to the thoughts of someone else, that is, to think with banisters, which is not thinking at all. Instead, “this is a question...of *being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not*” (Arendt 1977:241, my emphasis). We “visit” other perspectives not in order to assume the perspective of the visited, but to re-consider the world *as it appears to the visitor from that location*. In other words, Arendt’s imaginative thinking involves asking “how would the world look to *you* if you saw it from this position?” (Disch 1993:687; also Denny 1979:264).<sup>124</sup> In this way, imaginatively “going visiting” enables us to move beyond subjectivity to *intersubjectivity*, judging as members of a community. By thinking from the standpoints of others, we are able to *judge* in relation to the world held in common.<sup>125</sup>

Arendt’s notion of “going visiting” suggests that through the faculty of imagination “thought is able to venture beyond itself” (Jackson 2002:255) to the thoughts of others. By employing the imagination to take the thoughts and judgements of others into account, the activity of judging, as Arendt understands it, implies “the capacity to *think representatively*, that is, from the standpoint of everyone else” (D’Entreves 2000:250, my emphasis). Thinking representatively allows the judge “to look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects” (Arendt 1977:51), therefore enabling him to judge “in that many-sided common sense” (Canovan 1992:227) that arises from the intersection of a plurality of perspectives. Referring to Kant, Arendt describes this capacity to think representatively as an “enlarged mentality”, that is, the notion that “one can “enlarge” one’s own thought so as to take into account the thoughts of

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<sup>124</sup> Although we cannot simply *adopt* another viewpoint, we can *adapt* our standpoint relative to the experience gained from our travels. In this way, imagination allows us to improve our opinions and judgements by “taking divergent opinions into account in the process of making up one’s mind and, ultimately, locating one’s judgment in relation to those views” (Disch 1993:686). The process of representative thinking therefore exhibits a similarity to Socratic thinking which aims to improve men’s *doxa* by engaging them in the dialogue of thinking, helping them to reconsider their viewpoints by presenting them with the viewpoints of others. This further highlights the inter-relationship of thinking and judging.

<sup>125</sup> Interestingly, the *combination* of perspectives involved in this process of thinking from the standpoints of others is an expression of worldly reality: “Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (Arendt 1998:57). As such, the expression of representative thinking through judging is also a process of accounting for, and creating, the reality of the world.

others” (Arendt 1992:42).<sup>126</sup> By thinking representatively, we enlarge our view of human experience as we augment our own thoughts on experience with those of others. In this way, the enlarged mentality appears consistent with Arendt’s understanding that thinking frees men from constraints and banisters, as it similarly liberates men from the *internal* limitations imposed by their own subjectivity. Further to this, to think with an enlarged mentality remedies thinking’s solitary and withdrawn nature by taking into account the judgements and perspectives of others. By thinking representatively, judging utilises thinking in such a way as to reconnect it to both others and the world.

### **THE JUDGE AS IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR**

As we have seen, judging, as Arendt understands it, requires the operation of the imagination to transform an object from an immediate sense perception into an object for one’s inner senses, therefore preparing it for the operation of reflection, “the actual activity of judging something” (Arendt 1992:68). According to Arendt, this “twofold operation establishes the most important condition for all judgments, the condition of impartiality, of “disinterested delight”” (1992:68). By removing the object to be judged from our senses and reflecting on a representation of it gained through imagination, the judge becomes “an impartial, not a directly affected, spectator of visible things” (Arendt 1992:68). This is significant as, according to Arendt, “only the *spectator*, never the actor, can know and understand whatever offers itself as a spectacle” (1978:92). Unlike the partiality of the actor “who, because he is involved, never sees the meaning of the whole” (Arendt 1992:77), the spectator is not assigned a part and he “occupies a position that enables him to see the whole” (Arendt 1992:55).

The actor, being part of the whole, must *enact* his part; not only is he a “part” by definition, he is bound to the particular that finds its ultimate meaning and the justification of its existence solely as a constituent of a whole. Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game (the festival of life) is not only a condition for judging, for being the final arbiter in the on-going competition, but also the condition for understanding the meaning of the play (Arendt 1978:93-94).

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<sup>126</sup> Arendt explains that the “enlargement of the mind” is a crucial component of Kant’s aesthetic judgement and “it is accomplished by “comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man”” (Arendt 1992:42-43).

For Arendt, the “onlooking, standpoint of the spectator” is therefore “the position of the Judge” (Arendt 1992:55-56). As a spectator, the judge himself is impartial *by definition*, both because he has no part in the spectacle itself, and because he takes the viewpoints of others into account. Although the spectator is detached from action in the sense that he is not an actor, impartiality, in the Homeric sense, does not arise from this withdrawal alone, but rather, from the ability to take into account other spectators’ perspectives *as a consequence* of their withdrawal. In this way, the judge maintains the “proper distance” required to stand back and reflect disinterestedly (Beiner 1992:123), and from this vantage point he can judge the meaning of the spectacle, not by playing a role, but by reflecting on what is held in common.

However, Arendt argues that the judge’s withdrawal to the position of spectator is different to the withdrawal required to think, as the thinking ego withdraws from the world of appearances completely and therefore loses a connection with reality (Arendt 1978:201). In contrast, the judge maintains a strong relationship with the world by making reference to the *sensus communis*, the community in which he judges. Although the spectator withdraws from the game, he never leaves the company of other men who together constitute an audience of spectators. As such, spectators exist in the plural (Arendt 1992:63), and they correspond to a plurality of judges who constitute a community. Each spectator views an object or event from a unique perspective, and the combination of these standpoints fosters an enlarged mentality. In this way, the withdrawal to the role of spectator is a *pre-condition* for the enlarged mentality and it enables judging to take account of multiple perspectives by creating the necessary distance to reflect disinterestedly, while still maintaining a connection to the community:

Hence the spectator’s verdict, while impartial and freed from the interests of gain or fame, is not independent of the views of others – on the contrary, according to Kant, an “enlarged mentality” has taken them into account. The spectators, although disengaged from the particularity characteristic of the actor, are not solitary. Nor are they self-sufficient (Arendt 1978:94).

Unlike the solitary thinker, the judge as spectator is dependent on the presence of others on multiple levels: to constitute a community in which to judge; to foster the enlarged mentality that facilitates judging; and to be assured of the reality of the world as it arises from the combination of a plurality of perspectives.

## EXAMPLES AS GUIDEPOSTS FOR JUDGING

So far we have found that Arendt's understanding of judging, based on Kant's appraisal of aesthetic judgement, requires the faculties of imagination and common sense to enable the judgement of particulars as they appear from many perspectives. Like thinking, judging eschews rigid banisters "which subsume particular cases under general rules without ever questioning the rules" (Arendt 2003:143), and it knows no standards outside the particularity of what is being judged. For Arendt, judging responds to particulars in their particularity, combining different accounts so as to come to a judgement that relates to the world held in common. However, taking account of the standpoints of others does not mean passively accepting their thoughts, and judging is based on thinking for oneself, that is, thinking without banisters.

While this means that judging rejects predetermined rules and guidelines, "there is something to which common sense, when it rises to the level of judging, can and does hold us to, and this is the example" (Arendt 2003:143). To put it another way, while judging "cannot hold onto anything general" it can hold onto "some particular that has become an example" (Arendt 2003:143). In this way, examples provide judging with a *particular expression* of a generality without reducing it to a universal category: "in the context of French history I can talk about Napoleon Bonaparte as a particular man; but the moment I speak about Bonapartism I have made an example of him" (Arendt 1992:84). Although the example takes on a general meaning, it retains its particularity as it is anchored to a particular of our choosing.<sup>127</sup>

Examples emerge from thinking as "thought-things" "which meaningfully represent for us "that which otherwise could not be defined"" (Young-Bruehl 1982:301). In other words, examples serve as representations of "slippery" concepts (Arendt 2003:171), capturing particular instances of beauty, courage or justice that serve to illuminate and guide our judgement of the beautiful, courageous or just, without providing rigid or prescriptive conceptual definitions. By thinking in examples we are able to judge a particular by moving past the generality of the concept itself, recalling another particular that *exemplifies* this general concept through its performance. By choosing

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<sup>127</sup> This "choosing" is itself an act of judgement.

a particular incident or individual “we then proceed to make it “exemplary” – to see in the particular what is valid for more than one case” (Arendt 1992:85).<sup>128</sup> By making a particular exemplary, we bestow it with *exemplary validity*, calling on it to guide us in future judgements that relate to the same concept. Arendt explains it this way:

The example is the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept of a general rule. How, for instance, is one able to judge, to evaluate, an act as courageous? When judging, one says spontaneously, without any derivations from general rules, “This man has courage.” If one were a Greek, one would have in “the depths of one’s mind” the example of Achilles. Imagination is again necessary: one must have Achilles present even though he certainly is absent. If we say of somebody that he is good, we have in the back of our minds the example of Jesus of Nazareth (Arendt 1992:84).

For Arendt, when called on to judge, we make “present in our mind some incident and some person, absent in time or space, that have become examples” (2003:145), re-presenting through imagination the particular we have chosen as exemplary for this concept. As such, our “decisions about right and wrong”, that is, our judgements, “will depend upon our *choice of company*, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives” (Arendt 2003:145-146, my emphasis). According to Arendt, this choice of company is highly significant as our judgements only have “exemplary validity to the extent that the example is rightly chosen” (1992:84), that is, that we choose to keep the right company. As such, in the “unlikely case that someone should come and tell us that he would prefer Bluebeard for company, and hence take him as his example, the only thing we could do is to make sure that he never comes near us” (Arendt 2003:146). Given Bluebeard’s character, this example is *not* rightly chosen, and anyone choosing it will have their judgement duly affected. In this way, examples not only *guide* judgement by offering us “some particular that has become an example”, but they accompany us, and therefore constitute the community in which we judge. This suggests that our choice of examples is itself part of the “enlargement of the mind” central to judging, as we think both with and through the standpoints of those we choose for company.

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<sup>128</sup> Arendt acknowledges that this validity is somewhat restricted as it makes sense only to those who share a knowledge of the example, that is, an example is *only valid* for those who are aware of the particular incident or individual: “...take the instance of Caesarism or Bonapartism: you have taken Napoleon or Caesar as an example, that is, as some particular person exhibiting qualities that are valid for other instances. To be sure, no one who does not know who Caesar or Napoleon were can understand what you are talking about if you speak of Caesarism or Bonapartism. Hence the validity of the concept is restricted, but within its restrictions, it is valid nevertheless” (Arendt 2003:144).

Arendt argues that examples “lead and guide” (Arendt 1992:84) judging by enabling us to recognise generalities as they are expressed and illustrated by particular individuals or incidents. In an attempt to make clear this quality of *assistance*, Arendt described examples as “guideposts” for judging (2003:144), suggesting that examples illuminate the direction of judging and provide it with something to hold onto. As we saw in our discussion of thinking,<sup>129</sup> guideposts *guide*, enabling us to take our bearings, but not prescribing a particular or rigid direction. As such, Arendt’s examples are not the same as ‘banisters’ which impose rigid restraints and dictate outcomes by subsuming particulars under universal categories.<sup>130</sup> Unlike banisters, examples provide direction but do not constrain, and we freely choose our examples in terms of the company we wish to keep. In this way, thinking in examples provides judging with a guide while maintaining both freedom and particularity.

Arendt offers a second attempt at clarifying the role of examples in judging by referring to Kant: “Kant said, “Examples are the go-cart of judgment” (*Critique of Pure Reason* B174)<sup>131</sup>...We cannot hold onto anything general, but to some particular that has become an example” (Arendt 2003:143). While this appears to be consistent with the notion of “guideposts”, upon closer inspection the meaning of “go-cart” lends examples a different significance entirely. A “go-cart” (*Gängelwagen*) is a child’s walker, “a small bottomless carriage with casters that was used, like our present-day baby-walkers, so that children might move around without the danger of falling” (Schmidt in Kant 1996:64, translator’s note).<sup>132</sup> A go-cart is therefore a *learning aid*, a tool that assists children when learning to walk. Importantly, it is an interim measure that will be discarded once the child has learned to walk and can do so on its own.

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<sup>129</sup> Arendt also used the term “guideposts” in the context of thinking: “My assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only *guideposts* by which to take its bearings” (Arendt 1977:14, my emphasis).

<sup>130</sup> However, if we *unthinkingly* apply examples with no regard to the reasons for our choice, or without choosing at all, then examples can *become* banisters that restrict our ability to judge particulars in their particularity. As such, we must avoid applying examples in rule-like fashion to all situations, being mindful to maintain a sense of the particularity of what is being judged, otherwise our judgements disintegrate into determinations.

<sup>131</sup> This is Arendt’s translation of the German *So sind Beispiele der Gängelwagen der Urtheilskraft* (Kant 1968:A134/B173).

<sup>132</sup> The Oxford dictionary also defines go-cart as “a light frame-work, without bottom, moving on castors or rollers, in which a child may learn to walk without danger of falling”. The translator here uses the phrase “leading strings of the cart” in “an attempt” to translate *Gängelwagen*, but proceeds to describe the cart in terms of a go-cart or baby-walker as noted above (Schmidt in Kant 1996:64). This is consistent with the two main English translations of this phrase: “Thus examples are the leading strings of the power of judgment” (Kant translated by Guyer & Wood 1998); and “Examples are thus the go-cart of judgment” (Kant translated by Kemp Smith 1933).

Used here, in the context of judging, it appears that Kant sees examples as a *precursor* to an autonomous judgement, an interim aid for judging that will be abandoned once men are able to judge on their own.

Kant uses the metaphor of the *Gängelwagen* in his essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784) (Kant 1996). There, Kant describes mankind in a state of “self-incurred immaturity” as men exhibit an “inability to make use of [their] own understanding without the guidance of another” (1996:58). This is the *Gängelwagen* to which men are tethered, their own immaturity. According to Kant, although nature had long ago “set men free from the guidance of others” by providing them with reason, “a great part of mankind...still gladly remain immature for life” as they lack “the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another” (1996:58). Kant argues that enlightenment is “mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity” (1996:58), that is, man’s liberation from the guidance of others, the courage to use his own reason on his own terms. Kant therefore contends that while men are tethered to the *Gängelwagen*, this is “self-incurred” in the sense that men have the *capacity* to think without it, to use their reason without guidance, but out of “laziness and cowardice” they choose not to (Kant 1996:58).<sup>133</sup> In this way, Kant uses the *Gängelwagen* to refer to the interim state between men being unable to reason at all, and men being able to make free and public use of their reason. It is a means of *learning* to reason on one’s own, but it must be discarded in order for men to truly think for themselves. Returning to Kant’s suggestion that “examples are the go-cart of judgment”, it therefore appears that Kant sees judging by example as an “immature” form of judging, that is, that examples help men learn to judge, but continued reliance on them represents an immaturity in judgement in the sense that men do not make full and free use of reason.

Kant’s “go-cart” therefore places a very different emphasis on examples than Arendt’s “guideposts”, as, by its very nature, the go-cart implies that once men “free

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<sup>133</sup> This is similar to the child who can already walk *remaining* in the baby-walker, not as a means of assistance, since he can already walk, but to replace his need to walk on his own two feet out of laziness or fear. By doing so, the child limits the possibilities of further growth, remaining immature. According to Kant, “It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, and so forth, surely I do not need to trouble myself. I have no need to think if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me” (1996:58). In this way, although men *can* think, it is *easier* not to, so his remaining tethered to his immaturity is of his own doing.

themselves from immaturity through the exercise of their own minds” (Kant 1996:59), examples will no longer be necessary. Unlike Kant, Arendt places no such interim status on examples, and in fact, she suggests that examples such as Eichmann and Socrates, from all times and places, may be called on at any time to aid judgement (2003:145). For Arendt, examples give us something to hold onto, they remedy the “slippery” nature of thinking’s generalisations by giving us a particular that exemplifies a general concept. Indeed, it is only by turning to Arendt’s examples that we ourselves have been able to get some kind of hold on her thoughts on thinking and thoughtlessness.

Far from serving merely as a learning tool, for Arendt, examples have exemplary validity, and they can guide us in all future judgements on the same concept.<sup>134</sup> As such, Arendt’s attempt to clarify the role of examples in thinking by calling on Kant inadvertently shifts the emphasis away from the lasting significance of examples. This does not appear to be Arendt’s intention, however, as it is inconsistent with her own use of examples throughout her work. Nevertheless, this reference to Kant has been able to more clearly illuminate Arendt’s meaning by distinction, that is, by highlighting the points of departure between Arendt and Kant in terms of the role of examples in judging. By showing how Arendt’s “guideposts” and Kant’s “go-carts” differ, we can see more clearly the meaning of Arendt’s assertion that examples are the guideposts for judging, that is, they guide judging in a manner of our own choosing.

### **RECIPROCAL ILLUMINATION: THINKING AND JUDGING**

In summary, Arendt’s understanding of a judgement that judges particulars in their particularity is founded on Kant’s aesthetic judgement, giving it an intersubjective element in that it makes reference to a community of judges. In this way, judging makes reference to the shared world, “to what appears in public to all judging subjects, and thus not merely to the private whims or subjective preferences of individuals” (Beiner 1992:119). By relating to what is in common in its many-sidedness, judgement not only relates thinking to the world, but it relates men to one

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<sup>134</sup> This is not to say that examples think or judge for us, or as Kant might say, keep us in a perpetually immature state. Rather, we use our free ability to think so as to choose examples that have exemplary validity, seeing in “the particular what is valid for more than one case” (Arendt 1992:85). Examples guide but not bind us, therefore maintaining a fidelity to the overall freedom of the thinking activity.

another, creating a shared sense of reality. In doing so, judging also establishes a space in-between that “allows us to appreciate another person’s point of view as different from our own. It allows us to be spectators – judges – and to enjoy in respectful friendship the differences among our judgments and opinions” (Young-Bruehl 2006:207). As such, despite making reference to other men, judging relies on *thinking for oneself*, and judgements are particular, unique to the perspective of the judge and the company he chooses to keep.

Judgements themselves therefore reveal the differences between men, and far from being universal or certain, they are subject to contestation when they make their appearance in the public realm.<sup>135</sup> For Arendt, judgements “do not compel in the sense in which demonstrable facts or truths proved by argument compel agreement”, and men can only “woo the consent” of others through persuasion (Arendt 1977:222). In other words, although intersubjective, judgement is not universally valid, leaving it open to political contestation. This sits well with Arendt’s understanding of the open-ended nature of thinking which is similarly subject to contestation. The unravelling nature of thought, and the particularity of my own practice of thinking or judging, make it unlikely that others will think, or arrive at the same judgements as me, or indeed, choose to keep the same company. What makes these differences particularly interesting, however, is Arendt’s introduction of a political element whereby men hope to *persuade* one another of the validity and applicability of their judgements through contestation in the public realm. This political element emerges out of judging’s place in the world of appearances, drawing thinking back from its condition of solitude into the world to deal with particulars and to interact with others by thinking representatively. These characteristics make judging an inherently political capability.<sup>136</sup>

In many ways, then, judging is indeed an extension of thinking as it requires the movement and openness of the thinking activity as well as thinking’s conceptual expressions. While judging is articulated and actualised in thought, judging *realises* thinking, “makes it manifest in the world of appearances” (Arendt 1978:193) and

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<sup>135</sup> This suggests that judging “occupies precisely the ambiguous realm that lies between opinion and certainty” (Barber 1988:194), as judgements combat subjectivity by thinking representatively, yet eschew universal truth by making a spontaneous appeal to plurality.

<sup>136</sup> For this reason, Kateb refers to judgement as the “politically usable version of thinking” (1977:172).

returns thinking to its beginnings in particularity. At the same time, judging is endowed with the capacity to think in terms of particulars *as a result* of thinking which loosens “the grip of the universal over the particular” (Beiner 1992:112). However, judging overcomes the generalising and resultless qualities of thinking by focusing on particulars and maintaining a connection with the reality of the world. In light of this, Arendt’s appraisal of judging as “the mysterious endowment of the mind by which the general...and the particular...are brought together” (1978:69), seems particularly pertinent as it highlights the combination, inherent in judging, of the generality of thinking and the particularity of the world. As such, judging is well described by “thinking particularity” (Bernstein 1986:235), as it offers a means for thinking to find a home in the world, therefore establishing a connection between thinking and reality, that is, what is held in common by a plurality of men.

While Arendt understands judging as distinct from thinking, judging brings thinking out of hiding and back to the realm of appearances. As such, an understanding of judging is not only significant on its own terms, but it sheds additional light on the nature of thinking, highlighting the ways in which thinking can move beyond the qualities of solitude and withdrawal to think with others in imagination, that is, thinking representatively so as to judge the world. In other words, judging further illuminates the activity of thinking by “teasing it out of hiding” (Arendt 1978:167) and demonstrating how it can take account of others to take a stand with regard to the world. This re-acquaints thinking with the world, as although it may end in generalisation and uncertainty, thinking always begins from lived experience. In this way, thinking and judging inform and flow into one another, not in the sense that they are indistinct, but that they are interrelated, the meaning of each contingent on their connection.

Although we have, to some extent, separated thinking and judging and demonstrated their differences as unique human capacities, we have been confronted at multiple points with the manner of their connection. This suggests that the meaning of Arendt’s understanding of thinking lies not only in her re-conceptualisation of thinking in distinction from knowing and cognition, but in the points of overlap and intersection with other concepts, such as judging, which provide reciprocal illumination. By thinking about judging, we are inadvertently thinking about thinking due to the

manner of their connection. With this in mind, we now turn to another fragment of Arendt's thought, the activity of storytelling, to consider the ways in which the interconnections between thinking, judging and storytelling might inform and illuminate one another, enabling us to better appreciate the complexity and uniqueness of Arendt's understanding of thinking and its place in her reconsideration of the human condition.

### **3. Thinking (and Judging) and Storytelling**

Our exploration of Arendt's understanding of thinking has, to this point, uncovered some valuable insights into its nature and role in human life. Most fundamentally, Arendt's conception of thinking is based on the absence of external guidelines or frames of reference that constrain men's ability to think for themselves. Arendt's 'thinking without banisters' works to dissolve and undermine certainty, unsettling conclusions and leaving nothing in their place. For Arendt, thinking is a restless and endless quest for meaning, it is "motion in a circle" (1978:124), a movement that never results in a fixed or finite end. In this way, Arendt understands thinking as an activity that corresponds to a dialogue of me with myself in which I imaginatively consider incidents of lived experience. It is here, in this dialogue of the two-in-one, where I reflect on "some matter or event" (Arendt 1994:20), that thinking bears a striking resemblance to *storytelling*. Like storytelling, thinking is an imaginative re-telling of events with a view to uncovering meaning.

A story is an account of an event or series of events that enables us to make sense of it (Williams 2002:232). According to Arendt, stories emerge from the activity of storytelling in which the storyteller recalls and combines "what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings" (1968a:104). In this way, storytelling is a creative and interpretive endeavour that captures a string of events and occurrences, imparting "a sense of wholeness and continuity to the contingency of experience" (Vecchiarelli Scott and Chelius Stark 1996:125). By transforming events into stories, the storyteller reveals their meaning, not merely in the form of their connection, but in the performance of *telling* the story. In other words, both the story itself and its meaning emerge from the *activity of storytelling* and both are an

expression of the particularity of the storyteller, the narrated events and the manner of their combination.<sup>137</sup>

However, while storytelling reveals the meaning of particular events, stories have a conceptual openness that avoids generalisations or universally valid statements. This suggests that a “crucial feature of the storyteller’s craft is the ability to reveal the meaning of a thing or concept without committing the error of defining that meaning” (Redhead 2002:813; also Buckler 2007:470). The storyteller preserves the particularity and contingency of lived experience by *telling* a story and the motion of storytelling means that its meaning is never fixed. This notion of storytelling was a crucial feature of our initial reading of *The Human Condition* in Chapter 1. There, we suggested that Arendt offers us a *story* about general human capacities in particular historical contexts, and rather than seeking to abstract a systematic political theory from it, we can best appreciate its meaning as it is embedded in the story itself. In this way, Arendt provides a sketch of the human condition in narrative form without trying to define it.

This initial appraisal of storytelling demonstrates that it has a remarkable congruity with Arendt’s understanding of thinking. Both thinking and storytelling imaginatively re-collect and re-combine fragments of experience for remembrance and understanding, and both have their basis in the activity itself rather than its results. Where thinking produces “thought-things” in the form of concepts, storytelling produces stories, and the meaning of both is bound up in the activity of thinking or storytelling and is unique to the thinker or storyteller and their combination of experiences and perspectives. As such, storytelling, like thinking, is “an art rather than a science” (Hill 1979b:297), and both activities are free from frameworks and guidelines and contingent on experience and performance. However, given the inter-relationship of thinking and judging in Arendt’s work, storytelling also has an accord with judging. Indeed, like judging, storytelling responds to events in their particularity to produce meaningful narratives, which like judgements, take into account multiple perspectives gained from the vantage point of the spectator. This coincidence of

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<sup>137</sup> The story is “created in its telling” (Vecchiarelli Scott and Chelius Stark 1996:125) and owes its existence to the activity of storytelling in which the storyteller recalls and relates his experiences. Without the storyteller actively creating the story *there is no story*, just a series of “sheer happenings”.

thinking, judging and storytelling suggests that the activity of storytelling stands to further illuminate Arendt's understanding of the activity of thinking, shedding further light on the nature of the interaction of the two-in-one. For this reason, this discussion now turns its attention to storytelling in the hope of better understanding Arendt's conception of thinking, that is, the way in which we think, the meaning of thinking, and its significance to the human condition.

### **STORIES: THE FORM AND EXPRESSION OF THINKING**

Earlier, we saw that Arendt's key assumption about thinking is that "thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings" (1977:14). In other words, Arendt's understanding of thinking is grounded in the notion that our experience of the world provides the impetus for the activity of thinking and the guideposts by which it can take its bearings. However, thinking about an "incident of living experience" involves a separation from the sensed experience itself, as thinking deals only with invisibles, "with things not *present* to the senses" (Arendt 1978:51). For this reason, thinking requires the imagination to provide it with "suitable thought-objects" (Arendt 1978:77) by recollecting and representing my now absent experiences. This makes thinking itself a process of reflection, and thinking "always implies remembrance; every thought is strictly speaking an after-thought" (Arendt 1978:78).

This reflection takes the form of a dialogue of the two-in-one in which I think with myself about what has happened (Hill 1979b:288). However, this dialogue with myself "invariably takes the form of telling a story" (Hill 1979b:288) where I recount the circumstances of my experience, re-presenting my experience to myself. In this way, thinking, that is, talking with myself, is tantamount to telling myself a story. Storytelling is therefore "at the root of" the kind of thinking which thinks "out of "the incidents of living experience"" (Hill 1979b:288). More specifically, storytelling describes the *way in which* we remember and think through experience, making the story "the form that my remembering and thinking with myself takes" (Hill 1979b:289).

In addition to being the form that thinking with myself takes, Arendt contends that storytelling also transforms thinking from an intangible process of the mind to a “thought-thing”, a story that is able to appear in the world:

...thinking, because it can be remembered, can crystallize into thought, and thoughts, like all things that owe their existence to remembrance, can be transformed into tangible objects which, like the written page or the printed book, become part of the human artifice (Arendt 1998:76).

Storytelling therefore lends both experience and thinking a quality of permanence, as it transforms the fleeting nature of performance into tangible stories that can appear and remain in the world. Not only do I tell myself a story in order that I might think, but *in thinking* I “put this story into shape” so that I might subsequently tell it to others (Arendt 1979:303).<sup>138</sup> In other words, storytelling also describes the re-telling of an incident in the form of a story, which unlike the activity of thinking itself, is able to appear in the world, therefore relating my experience to others. In this respect, “storytelling must be understood not just as the primary form of thinking about experience, but also as the primary form of communicating with each other about experience” (Hill 1979b:289). As such, storytelling provides thinking with a means to appear in the world, but unlike thinking’s other “thought-things”, concepts, stories maintain a clear focus on particularity in the sense that they are stories about something in particular. This makes the activity of storytelling highly significant to our examination of thinking as it both describes the way in which I think with myself about my experience, and the way in which I communicate these thoughts and the particularity of my experience, as stories, to others.

### **THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR AS STORYTELLER**

Storytelling deals with experiences, with things that were sensed in their presence but are now absent. As such, storytelling deals with invisibles, with re-presentations of events remembered through the faculty of imagination. As we have seen, Arendt argues that this transformation of an object to a representation that can become an object of reflection in imagination establishes a condition of impartiality, which is natural to the spectator: “By closing one’s eyes one becomes an impartial, not a

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<sup>138</sup> Arendt explains it this way: “Everybody who tells a story of what happened to him half an hour ago on the street has got to put this story into shape. And this putting the story into shape is a form of thought” (1979:303).

directly affected, spectator of visible things” (Arendt 1992:68). From this position of disinterestedness, the spectator can reveal the meaning of what happens in a narrative:

The meaning of what actually happens and appears while it is happening is revealed when it has disappeared; remembrance, by which you make present to your mind what actually is absent and past, reveals the meaning in the form of a story (Arendt 1978:133).

This suggests that Arendt’s impartial spectator is also a storyteller. From their position outside action, the spectator can:

...see how all the particular things in the world and every particular deed in the realm of human affairs fit together and produce a harmony...and this invisible in the visible would remain forever unknown if there were no spectator to look for it, admire it, straighten out the stories and put them into words (Arendt 1978:133).<sup>139</sup>

Arendt’s storyteller therefore occupies the same position as the judge. From the vantage point of spectator, men have the capacity to both judge and transform events into stories by creatively recalling and combining incidents into narratives that disclose meaning. Like the judge, the storyteller is removed from direct involvement in the world, and from the onlooking standpoint of the spectator he achieves the critical distance required to reveal the meaning of events in the story:

The man who does the revealing is not involved in the appearances; he is blind, shielded against the visible, in order to be able to “see” the invisible. And what he sees with blind eyes and puts into words is the story, *not* the deed itself and *not* the doer, although the doer’s fame will reach the high heavens (Arendt 1978:133).

As we have seen, Arendt argues that “spectators exist only in the plural” (1992:63), as members of a common audience. This makes for multiple stories of the same event as each storyteller sees from a different perspective. This multiplicity invites contestation from rival perspectives (Disch 1993:689), from which reality emerges as the intersection of a plurality of perspectives and stories. In this way, Arendt argues that the storyteller does not withdraw from the company of others, but only from

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<sup>139</sup> This “straightening out the stories” is akin to “putting them into shape”, which is, as we have seen, a form of thinking. In this way, the storyteller must *think* in order to put their stories into words. Arendt explains it this way: “those who come as spectators to the festival of life are filled with admiring thoughts which are then uttered in words” (Arendt 1978:132).

direct participation in the world to a relatively detached position. As such, like judging, Arendt's version of storytelling is far from a mere expression of subjectivity, and she "implicitly redefines conventional understandings of objectivity and impartiality" (Disch 1993:666) to accommodate the multiplicity of spectators.

As already noted, Arendt took her understanding of impartiality from Homer's narrative of the Trojan War which told the story from the perspectives of both sides: "The war against Troy has two sides, and Homer sees it no less through the eyes of the Trojans than those of the Greeks" (Arendt 2005:166). In doing so, Homer acknowledged that "each topic, despite its oneness, appears in a great diversity of views", and he moved towards capturing the many-sidedness of reality (Arendt 2005:167). Arendt therefore saw in Homer's storytelling "a perfect freedom from particular interests" (2005:163), as he overcame the limitations of a single-sided appraisal of experience to take into account multiple perspectives and subjectivities. As such, Arendt's storyteller takes Homer as his *exemplar*, telling his story not only from his own perspective, but embracing this notion of impartiality to tell a story "of an event or situation from the plurality of perspectives that constitute it as a public phenomenon" (Disch 1993:666). As a consequence, the story becomes an expression of the world all hold in common.

We saw a similar combination of a plurality of perspectives and appeal to a common sense in our discussion of Arendt's understanding of judgement. Kant referred to it as an "enlarged mentality", the notion that we can enlarge our thought so as to take into account the thoughts of others (Arendt 1992:43). In telling the story of the Trojan War, Homer thought with an enlarged mentality as he not only took account of the perspectives of both the Trojans and Greeks, presumably by training his imagination to "go visiting", but he thought with reference to *other spectators* who judged both Achilles and Hector great men. This makes Homer himself both storyteller *and* judge.<sup>140</sup> We can extrapolate Arendt's use of this example to suggest that like the

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<sup>140</sup> We might consider Homer to be Arendt's exemplar for storytelling as he embodied the condition of impartiality by taking into account multiple perspectives, not to generalise, but to disclose the particularity of the event from many viewpoints. In doing so, however, Homer also takes on the characteristics of the judge. According to Arendt, the "Homeric historian is the *judge*. If judgment is our faculty for dealing with the past, the historian is the inquiring man who by relating it sits in judgment over it" (1978:216). As such, Homer was not only a storyteller, but also an "inquiring man", that is, a *thinker*. Further to this, by "relating" his thoughts, he becomes a *judge*. The example of Homer

judge, Arendt's storyteller moves "from one particular place or person to another...resisting all claims to ultimate Truth by reminding us that truth is relative to where we situate ourselves, to where we stand" (Jackson 2002:253). In this way, Arendt's understanding of storytelling, like judging, is dependent on the ability to think from the standpoints of others, that is, with an enlarged mentality.

## **THINKING AS STORYTELLING**

For Arendt, storytelling is the form my thinking with myself takes, as I represent my experience to myself in a narrative that recounts what has happened. However, Arendt's conception of storytelling moves beyond mere subjectivity, as the storyteller is no longer partial to the event himself, and rather, he is an impartial spectator. From the vantage point of the spectator, the storyteller not only grasps the meaning of the whole, but he is able to take into account the perspectives of others with whom he spectates. In this way, the activity of storytelling fosters an enlarged mentality, and the storyteller thinks representatively, from the standpoint of others. According to Arendt, the stories which emerge from storytelling therefore transform thinking from a private and subjective condition into a "thought-thing" which retains a focus on particularity, a story, which, like a judgement, makes reference to others who together constitute the common world.<sup>141</sup>

By embodying an experience in shared words and stories, "individuals can grasp their subjectivity, not as something singular and separate, but as something contingent upon what is held in common with others" (Jackson 2002:138). In this way, stories are expressions of not only the individuality of the storyteller and the particularity of their experience, but also the commonality of men and the world they hold in common. When I engage in the activity of storytelling to tell others *my* story, I present my audience with an alternative perspective to their own which enhances their options for thinking in relation to others (Redhead 2002:815). In other words, by communicating an alternative perspective, the storyteller presents an opportunity for

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therefore demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between thinking, storytelling and judging as it appears Homer himself did all three.

<sup>141</sup> It is important to remember here that thinking is also *dependent* on storytelling to constitute the dialogue between me and myself in which I remember and think through my experience. In addition to this, Homer's story was *dependent on* the thoughts and judgements of others regarding greatness. As such, it appears that there is a relationship of interdependence between thinking, judging *and* storytelling.

his audience to think with an enlarged mentality, that is, to *think* from multiple positions and imagine the thoughts of others. In doing so, the storyteller “engages the critical faculties of the audience” (Disch 1993:681), rousing them to think for themselves.<sup>142</sup> In this way, the activity of storytelling invites contestation over rival perspectives, lending storytelling a political dimension. This sits well with our reading of *The Human Condition* in the context of Arendt’s storytelling, as Arendt hoped to provide a “theoretical consideration” of the “political question” facing future man (1998:3).

The overlapping elements of thinking and storytelling suggest that we can view Arendt’s understanding of thinking as storytelling, and storytelling as thinking (or at least the expression of thinking), as storytelling describes both the form of my thinking *and* the means of its communication to others. Storytelling enables my thinking with myself and with others in the form of stories that can be renegotiated, re-thought and re-experienced. Consequently, the idea of the *thinker as storyteller* is useful in the context of Arendt’s understanding of thinking as it “points toward a more contestatory, partial, and thus potentially more inclusive manner of thinking” (Redhead 2002:804). Storytelling also questions, blurs, transgresses, and even abolishes boundaries (Jackson 2002:25), therefore embodying Arendt’s notion of ‘thinking without banisters’ as it makes use of a creative, critical and free thinking that takes experience and the common world as its only guideposts. In this way, thinking as storytelling acknowledges “Arendt’s attempt to reconnect thinking with the authentic terrain of experience” (Buckler 2007:471), that is, thinking something through in order to understand what has happened and to find reconciliation to the world (Arendt 1968a:105).

Arendt’s understanding of storytelling therefore extends our understanding of her conception of thinking, giving form to the dialogue of the two-in-one without attempting to define it. The notion of thinking as storytelling enables us to better

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<sup>142</sup> Although the story emerges from the storyteller’s own thinking and reflection on an event, the storyteller does not tell this story to others in order to passively indoctrinate them, but instead, to *inspire* them to think anew about an incident of lived experience. This stems from the key elements of “partiality and contestability involved in the Arendtian storyteller’s transmission of her story” (Redhead 2002:814). Despite their impartiality, the storyteller is unable to adequately capture reality as they remain part of the shared world. In this way, Arendt’s storyteller plays a similar role to Socrates, engaging in a public dialogue with others that seeks to help them think differently about events by broadening their horizons, although the storyteller disguises this thinking in stories.

comprehend the way in which we think and the ways in which this thinking can manifest in the world as stories, lending thought and experience a quality of permanence through performance. In addition, storytelling highlights the ways in which thinking maintains a connection with both particularity and the world, augmenting the ability of judging to do the same. The similarity of their positions as spectator aside, however, the storyteller and the judge offer very different insights into the nature of thinking. While both activities require thinking, the nature of storytelling as the form thinking takes is distinct from the inter-relationship of thinking and judging, where judging remains an entirely separate mental faculty. As such, although judging demonstrated the ways in which thinking can manifest in the world and forge a connection with a plurality of men, storytelling does this *and more* by showing us the means by which we might think at all. Storytelling provides Arendt's understanding of thinking with a *form* without prescribing, binding or limiting its activity. It has the additional benefit of providing a form for the *expression* of thinking, translating the invisible processes of thought into stories that are shared and relational, while retaining the particularity of the storyteller and their experience. These things combined suggest that storytelling is a vital component of thinking, as Arendt understands them both.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the opening pages of *The Human Condition* Arendt makes some seemingly inconsistent claims about thinking and thoughtlessness. Most strikingly, she suggests that modern men are thoughtless (1998:5), while simultaneously recognising the remarkable modern advances in science and technology won by men, such as space exploration and the creation of artificial life. She also takes the confusing step of declaring that thinking is the "highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable", and then choosing to omit it from her consideration of the "general human capacities" which grow out of the human condition (1998:5). This chapter set out to shed light on these statements, ultimately hoping to make sense of their apparent inconsistencies by illuminating Arendt's conception of thinking. This forms the key foundation for our examination of *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking, and it is guided by the suggestion at the beginning of Part II that the contradictions and

inconsistencies surrounding thinking “lead into the very centre” of the book (see Arendt 1977:25).

This chapter uncovered Arendt’s understanding of thinking by first considering its opposite, thoughtlessness, as it emerged in the example of Eichmann. In contrast to thoughtlessness, the unthinking adherence to guidelines or banisters which limit our opportunities to think for ourselves, Arendt understands thinking as an unsettling activity, a performance that leaves behind no tangible results after the activity itself has come to an end. According to Arendt, thinking is both directionless and endless, free from all constraints and unable to produce certain results or conclusions. Like Penelope’s weaving, thinking, as Arendt understands it, is “motion in a circle” (1978:124), constantly undoing and re-thinking what has been thought before. Our understanding of Arendt’s conception of thinking was bolstered by our turn to Socrates as its exemplar, as according to Arendt, he embodies “the actual thinking activity” (1978:167). Socrates himself was solely concerned with the *experience* of thinking rather than its results, thinking simply because “an unexamined life is not worth living” (Arendt 1992:37). Not content just to think for himself, however, Socrates provoked others to “stop and think” with him in public discourse. In doing so, he improved his fellow citizens’ ability to think by rousing them from prejudice and unthinking belief. As such, Socrates is not only an exemplar for the thinking activity, but he shows us how this thinking can take on public significance.

From thinking, Arendt led us to the faculty of judgement, the ability to discriminate between particulars. According to Arendt, judging realises thinking, “makes it manifest in the world of appearances” (1978:193), anchoring the generalisations of thinking to the particularity of the world and our experience of it. The inter-relationship of thinking and judging demonstrated for us the way in which thinking might make its appearance in the world, retain a focus on particularity, and forge a connection with other men. As such, judging reciprocally illuminates thinking by showing how thinking can take account of others to take a stand with regard to the world. Like judging, storytelling also provides a means for thinking to appear in the world, and as “thought-things”, stories capture and express my thinking about experience and relate it to others. As impartial spectators, both the storyteller and the judge are able to discern the meaning of events by reflecting disinterestedly and combining a

plurality of perspectives. However, storytelling is especially significant as it describes the *form* of thinking, both enabling and expressing its activity. In this way, storytelling captures the way in which we think without attempting to define it, leaving the activity of storytelling open to the particularity of both experience and the storyteller himself.

As this summary demonstrates, this chapter has gone some way to illuminating Arendt's understanding of thinking. In doing so, however, it has also uncovered some key conceptual connections – between thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world – that appear to be significant not only to Arendt's understanding of thinking, but to an understanding of Arendt's work more broadly. While these connections themselves have not been examined in all their detail, the main purpose of this chapter was simply to shed some light on Arendt's perplexing statements about thinking and thoughtlessness in the opening pages of *The Human Condition*. Following our illumination of Arendt's understanding of thinking, we certainly find ourselves in a better position to understand Arendt's initial claim that modern men are thoughtless. Both the significance of this statement, and the sense we can make of it, hinge on our awareness that Arendt's understanding of thinking is at odds with both conventional and scientific notions of thinking that value process and rational decision making and aim at truth or knowledge.

Although modern science has led to unprecedented advances in space exploration, the creation of artificial life and machine automation, according to Arendt, these examples are not, in themselves, evidence of *thinking*. In fact, the dominance of scientific rules and processes entrench modern thoughtlessness, as rather than thinking for themselves, men complacently and recklessly adhere to the banisters offered to them by "truth" (see Arendt 1998:5). Far from denying the value of science and technology, Arendt's comment about modern thoughtlessness draws our attention to the loss of thinking, strictly speaking – the creative and interpretive search for meaning that requires courage and commitment to think without banisters – from the range of ordinary human experience. In light of this, Arendt's brief and seemingly offhand statement that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (1998:5), speaks more broadly to her concern with freedom and her contention that in the absence of an understanding of the

significance of general human capacities, modern men deny themselves the full range of human experience.

Given this new-found understanding of Arendt's notion of thinking and its relationship to judging and storytelling, we can now begin to appreciate the sense in which Arendt's "reconsideration of the human condition" is "obviously...a matter of thought" (1998:5). This also gives more weight to our decision to read *The Human Condition* as a kind of storytelling, in the sense that it is an expression of Arendt's own thinking, "the opinion of one person" (1998:5). However, it is not yet entirely clear how this understanding of thinking will allow us to reveal new meaning in *The Human Condition*. In the chapters that follow, we will therefore continue our investigation of thinking and situate it more clearly in terms of Arendt's approach to politics. We will also return to the conceptual connections outlined above in more detail, considering the ways in which their combination offers us a "new form and shape" via which we can better understand Arendt's approach to political theory (see Arendt 1968a:205-206). As such, these following chapters intend to show how the conception of thinking outlined here, when combined with Arendt's understanding of politics, allow us to reconsider the meaning of *The Human Condition*, "prying loose" a new reading that makes sense of Arendt's central proposition "to think what we are doing" (1998:5).



## CHAPTER SIX:

# Crystallisation

This chapter explores the significance of Arendt's understanding of thinking and situates it in the context of her understanding of politics. While the previous chapter helped to make sense of the apparent inconsistencies in Arendt's comments regarding thinking and thoughtlessness in the 'Prologue', it is not yet clear how thinking will reveal new meaning in *The Human Condition*. As such, where the previous chapter gave us a sense of what Arendt means by thinking, this chapter investigates the *meaning* of this meaning for Arendt's consideration of the human condition. In this way, this chapter builds on the previous chapter to more clearly distinguish Arendt's understanding of thinking, hoping to get a clearer sense of its consequences for an understanding of her approach to political theory. In the chapter that follows, we will finally return to *The Human Condition* to reconsider its meaning, re-reading it in light of the conceptual understanding gained here. This present chapter, however, attempts only to provide an interpretation of the conceptual connections between thinking and politics in Arendt's work, laying the foundations for our reconsideration of *The Human Condition* in the next chapter. This is necessarily inward-looking in the sense that it thinks *with* Arendt *about* her understanding and practice of thinking, in the hope of drawing together the thinking we have done so far.

This chapter begins by examining Arendt's rejection of the Platonic tradition and the rigid hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. It lays bare Arendt's understanding of this tradition and its consequences for the relationship between politics and philosophy and thinking and acting. This examination of the place of thinking in the Platonic tradition provides a striking contrast to Arendt's understanding of thinking, enabling us to better appreciate Arendt's meaning and its political significance. Disentangling thinking from philosophy, Arendt re-thinks the relationship between thinking and politics, moving beyond the Platonic tradition in such a way as to overcome the strict dichotomy between thinking and acting, seeing it as a "constitutive tension" rather than a problem to be solved (Buckler 2007:463). As a result, this chapter argues that Arendt presents a new understanding of thinking congruous with the activity of storytelling, re-configuring elements of thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world in such a way as to preserve the inherent tensions between thinking and politics. In this way, this chapter suggests that Arendt's thought fragments intersect and crystallise into a new form that it designates as 'thinking politically'. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to re-imagine the manner of the connections between the thought fragments we separated in the previous chapter. By re-considering them in their crystallised form as 'thinking politically', this chapter explores the ways in which they can lead us to a new appreciation of the meaning of Arendt's work, hidden in its depths.

## **1. Arendt's Thoughts on the Platonic Tradition**

As we saw in Chapter 1, Arendt's response to the Platonic tradition underpins much of her political thought and it frames her consideration of the activities of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*. There, Arendt contends that the *vita activa* originally referred to "a life devoted to public-political affairs" (1998:12). However, "with the disappearance of the ancient city-state...the term *vita activa* lost its specifically political meaning and denoted all kinds of active engagement in the things of this world" (Arendt 1998:14). Arendt attributes the origins of this shift to the Platonic tradition, which, "guided by the ideal of contemplation", saw all activities as equally satisfying necessity, leaving the *vita contemplativa* "as the only truly free way of life" (1998:14). This re-configured the very notion of the *vita activa* as a life of politics

chosen in freedom, ultimately leading to Plato's "utopian reorganization of *polis* life", which is "not only directed by the superior insight of the philosopher, but has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher's way of life" (Arendt 1998:14). In other words, by establishing contemplation as the guiding standard for the best kind of life,<sup>143</sup> the Platonic tradition relegated politics to the sphere of necessity, making it a necessary pre-requisite for the superior life of contemplation. Arendt argues that in doing so, the Platonic tradition added freedom from political activity to the ancient freedom from the necessities of life as the necessary conditions for the best way of life (1998:14).

Arendt contends that this shift away from politics, coupled with the "enormous superiority of contemplation over activity of any kind", meant that all human activities came to be re-defined "from the viewpoint of the absolute quiet of contemplation" (1998:14-15). By this, Arendt means that all activities were re-understood in terms of the guiding ideal of contemplation, the standard of eternal truth, rather than on terms appropriate to distinct human capacities: "Traditionally, therefore, the term *vita activa* receives its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*; its very restricted dignity is bestowed upon it because it serves the needs and wants of contemplation in the human body" (Arendt 1998:16). Compared with this single ideal of truth, which defines the *vita contemplativa*, "all distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* disappear" (Arendt 1998:15-16). As we have seen, *The Human Condition* is Arendt's response to this conflation of activities, and in it, she attempts to re-distinguish the activities of the *vita activa* – labour, work and action – and re-determine their political significance.

Despite what she sees as the traditional "abasement of the *vita activa* to its derivative, secondary position", Arendt does not doubt "the validity of the experience underlying the distinction" itself, that is, that the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* denote fundamentally different modes of life (Arendt 1998:16-17). Instead, her problem lies solely with "the hierarchical order inherent in it from its inception"

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<sup>143</sup> Although we saw in Chapter 2 that Aristotle does not adequately resolve the question of which is the best life, Arendt argues that he "is clearly guided by the ideal of contemplation (*theoria*)" (1998:14). Indeed, Aristotle contends that contemplation is the best of man's activities as it seems to be "the only activity that is appreciated for its own sake; because nothing is gained from it except the act of contemplation, whereas from practical activities we expect to gain something more or less over and above the action" (2004:271).

(1998:17). According to Arendt, this hierarchy is founded on the “assumption that the same central preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men, since without one comprehensive principle no order could be established” (1998:17). Here, Arendt is referring to the re-definition of all activities “from the viewpoint of the absolute quiet of contemplation” (1998:15). Seen from the perspective of eternal truth, anything belonging to the realm of human affairs is inferior, as “no work of human hands can equal in beauty and truth the physical *kosmos*, which swings in itself in changeless eternity without any interference or assistance from outside, from man or god” (1998:15). As such, it is not simply the hierarchical order that concerns Arendt, but the fact that this order presupposes that there is a single concern underlying all human activities, that is, the pursuit of eternal truth. For Arendt, this is not the case:

This assumption is not a matter of course, and my use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa* (Arendt 1998:17).

In other words, Arendt contends that the Platonic tradition is misguided in its attempt to define the distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* on terms dictated by contemplation alone. For Arendt, politics cannot be understood in terms of contemplation or truth for the simple fact that “truth and politics are on rather bad terms” (1977:227). This stems from the fundamental incompatibility of truth, which is singular and eternal, and the changing nature of politics which is based on plurality (1998:7). In distinction from this tradition, Arendt had a “desire to take politics seriously and on its own terms as a practice” (Buckler 2007:478), rather than as an inferior means of pursuing the ideal of eternal truth. She was “anxious to abandon what she view[ed] as a distorting philosophical standpoint” (Villa 1998:161), seeking to re-assert the difference between the life of philosophy and the life of politics on terms not intrinsically incompatible with politics. In this way, Arendt’s re-thinking of the *vita activa* was an attempt “to look at politics...with eyes unclouded by philosophy” (Arendt 1994:2), more specifically, with eyes unclouded by the Platonic tradition.

## THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS

To better understand these assumptions underlying the Platonic tradition, Arendt returns to “the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which in the history of political thought plays the same role of a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion” (2005:6). In Arendt’s re-telling of this story, Socrates had wanted to make philosophy relevant for the *polis*, bringing “philosophy down from the sky to the earth” (Arendt 1978:165) by engaging others in thinking through public discourse. For Socrates, the relationship between philosophy and politics was not one where the philosopher imparts philosophical truths to the citizens, but where he acts as a gadfly, stinging men into thought and making citizens more truthful “by revealing *doxa* in its own truthfulness” (Arendt 2005:15): “Socrates did not want to educate the citizens so much as he wanted to improve their *doxai*, which constituted the political life in which he took part” (Arendt 2005:15).

However, Socrates’ trial led to a dramatic change in the relationship of the philosopher to the *polis*, and following his death, Plato turned away from politics entirely as he “despaired of the turbulence, the uncertainty, and the “moral irresponsibility” of politics and of its consequences” (Dossa 1989:21). As a result, Arendt argues that philosophy and politics, once on such good terms, parted company as the philosopher sought shelter from the unpredictability of the world:

The conflict ended with a defeat for philosophy: only through the famous *apolitia*, the indifference and contempt for the world of the city, so characteristic of all post-Platonic philosophy, could the philosopher protect himself against the suspicions and hostilities of the world around him (Arendt 2005:26).

According to Arendt, the immediate result of this flight of philosophy from the sphere of human affairs was “the parting of the man of thought from the man of action” (2005:26). Philosophy subsequently came to regard politics as “the field in which the elementary necessities of human life are taken care of and to which absolute philosophical standards are applied” (Arendt 2005:37). By Arendt’s account, therefore, the Platonic tradition of political philosophy was founded on the conflict between philosophy and the *polis* which led to Plato’s contempt for politics and “his conviction that “the affairs and actions of men...are not worthy of great seriousness””

(Arendt 2005:81). As such, Arendt contends that from its beginning, the Platonic tradition deprived political affairs, “those activities concerning the common public realm...of all dignity of their own” (2005:82).

However, Arendt argues that these historical circumstances alone could not “establish our tradition of political thought”, and a deeper conflict between philosophy and politics was already apparent in Socrates “the person” (2005:26-27). According to Arendt, “it is generally forgotten that every political philosophy first of all expresses the attitude of the philosopher to the affairs of men”, and this necessarily involves the difficult relationship between his philosophical experience and his experience among others (2005:27). In the first instance, Arendt argues that the philosopher faces two alternatives in expressing the attitude of philosophy towards the affairs of men:

It is equally obvious that every political philosophy at first glance seems to face the alternative either of interpreting philosophical experience with categories which owe their origin to the realm of human affairs or, on the contrary, of claiming priority for philosophic experience and judging all politics in its light. In the latter case, the best form of government would be a state of affairs in which philosophers have a maximum opportunity to philosophize, and that means one in which everybody conforms to standards which are likely to provide the best conditions for it (Arendt 2005:27).

This is related to our earlier discussion of the hierarchy between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, and Arendt’s contention that the Platonic tradition chose to “claim priority for philosophic experience”, therefore “judging all politics in its light”. However, Arendt moves on to suggest that “the very fact that only Plato of all philosophers ever dared to design a commonwealth exclusively from the viewpoint of the philosopher...indicates that there is another side to this question” (2005:27). For Arendt, the relationship between our “specifically philosophical experience and our experience when we move among men” (2005:27) takes the form of the conflict in the sense that they are “diametrically opposed ways of life” (1977:232). The very fact that men are able “to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it” (Arendt 1978:45), means that this conflict is internal to the philosopher himself:

The philosopher, although he perceives something that is more than human, that is divine...remains a man, so that the conflict between philosophy and the affairs of men is ultimately a conflict *within the*

*philosopher himself.* It is this conflict which Plato rationalized and generalized into a conflict between body and soul: whereas the body inhabits the city of men, the divine thing which philosophy perceives is seen by something itself divine – the soul – which somehow is separate from the affairs of men (Arendt 2005:27-28, my emphasis).

This is reminiscent of the unresolved tension in Aristotle's work between the life of the philosopher and the life of the statesman. By suggesting that both constitute the good life, Aristotle is plagued by the conflict between philosophy and the affairs of men. This is a conflict not in the sense that men possess the ability to do both, as after all, both activities stem from man's general human capacities which belong to the human condition. Rather, it is a conflict only in the sense that under the guidance of the ideal of contemplation and the pursuit of eternal truth, the Platonic tradition established the assumption "that the same central preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men" (Arendt 1998:17). This means that the contradictory experiences of the philosopher – between his experience as a philosopher and his necessary experience among other men – create a tension, as his own experiences expose the inadequacy of holding a single ideal.

For Arendt, the underlying problem of philosophy and politics therefore appears to stem from "the participation of the thinking person in two distinct and incommensurable realms of experience, life in the world and the life of the mind" (Canovan 1992:264).<sup>144</sup> Although philosophy seeks to impose a common standard on men's experiences in terms of the ideal of eternal truth, the incommensurable nature of life in the world and life in the mind means that philosophy is marked by a tension inherent in men who possess thinking as a general human capacity. Arendt refers to this as the "intramural warfare" of philosophy, "between man's common sense, this sixth sense that fits our five senses into a common world, and man's faculty of thought and reason, which determine him to remove himself for considerable periods from it" (Arendt 1978:81). Devoting his entire life to thinking, "thus monopolizing and raising to an absolute what is but one of the many human faculties" (1978:80), the philosopher therefore engages "in an activity *contrary to the*

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<sup>144</sup> Arendt refers to this as "the paradoxical condition of a living being that, though itself part of the world of appearances, is in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it" (1978:45).

*human condition*" (1978:78) in the sense that he attempts to deny the rich plurality of activities and capabilities that he possesses.

Arendt argues that the philosopher himself is aware of the conflict between his philosophic experience and his experience among men, as his "own common sense – his being "a man like you and me"" makes him "aware of being "out of order" while engaged in thinking" (1978:80). Here, Arendt refers to the "strange lack of fit between the life of the mind and the world of appearance in which we live" (Canovan 1992:271), that is, the difficulty of thinking itself which requires men to withdraw completely from the world in order to think at all. This is "out of order" "since we normally move in a world where the most radical experience of disappearing is death and withdrawal from appearance is dying" (1978:80). Arendt argues that in this way, the philosopher, who devotes his life to thinking, experiences a kind of death, politically speaking, as he pursues the eternal at the expense of all other life activities (1998:20).

### **PHILOSOPHY VERSUS POLITICS: PLATO'S PARABLE OF THE CAVE**

Arendt contends that "Plato himself described the relationship between philosophy and politics in terms of the attitude of the philosopher toward the polis" in the parable of the cave (2005:28-29). There, Plato's solitary "future philosopher frees himself from the fetters which chain the cave dwellers", their eyes fixed on a "screen on which shadows and images of things appear", and when he turns around he sees "an artificial fire that illuminates the things in the cave as they really are" (Arendt 2005:29; see Plato 2003:240-248). In Arendt's reading, Plato argued that "the images on the screen...were the distortions of *doxa*", that is, how things *appear* to individual men who have been limited to seeing in one direction only. These images are clearly very different to the truth of life in the cave.

This liberation of the philosopher and his discovery of the fire at the back of the cave notwithstanding, Arendt argues that a "much more decisive turning point" came when the philosopher sought to find out "where this fire comes from and what the causes of things are" (2005:30):

Again he turns around and finds an exit from the cave, a stairway which leads him to the clear sky, a landscape without things or men. Here appear the ideas, the eternal essences of perishable things and of mortal men illuminated by the sun, the idea of ideas, which enables the beholder to see and the ideas to shine forth (Arendt 2005:30).

It is here that Plato establishes the concern of the philosopher with “eternal, nonchanging, nonhuman matters” (Arendt 2005:9). The Platonic notion of eternal truth, which is perceived from an objective position outside the world of men, is decidedly different from the political nature of the affairs of men which are in a constant state of flux. Arendt therefore contends that Plato designed the allegory of the cave to depict “not so much how philosophy looks from the viewpoint of politics, but how politics, the realm of human affairs, looks from the viewpoint of philosophy” (2005:31). In doing so, Plato imposed the ideal of absolute standards, the pursuit of eternal truth, on politics, that realm of human life which is essentially unpredictable and spontaneous, and “for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised” (Arendt 1998:57):

And the purpose is to discover in the realm of philosophy those standards which are appropriate for a city of cave dwellers, to be sure, but at the same time for inhabitants who, albeit darkly and ignorantly, have formed their opinions concerning the same matters as the philosopher (Arendt 2005:31).

Arendt argues that Plato’s concern to find appropriate standards for political affairs stemmed from “the spectacle of Socrates submitting his own *doxa* to the irresponsible opinions of the Athenians, and being outvoted by a majority” (2005:8). That Socrates could be condemned by citizens who were chained by the neck and able to see only the distortions of the fire and not the truth of things, was unacceptable to Plato as this meant placing power in the hands of the ignorant, giving authority to mere opinion rather than truth. In response, Plato denounced opinion entirely, yearning for absolute standards “by which human deeds could be judged and human thought could achieve some measure of reliability” (Arendt 2005:8). As a result, Platonic philosophy was founded not only on the opposition of truth and opinion, but on the imposition of truth in the realm of human affairs:

To the citizens’ ever-changing opinions about human affairs, which themselves were in a constant state of flux, the philosopher opposed truth about those things which in their nature were everlasting and from which,

therefore, principles could be derived to stabilize human affairs. Hence the opposite to truth was mere opinion (Arendt 1977:233).

In this way, Arendt argues that Plato's turn away from politics led more broadly to the imposition of the standard of eternal truth to both thinking and action. Arendt describes this as Plato's "tyranny of truth, in which it is not what is temporally good, of which men can be persuaded, but eternal truth, of which men cannot be persuaded, that is to rule the city" (2005:12).

This notion that the philosophical contemplation of eternal and unchanging truth is distinct from the process of formulating an opinion marks a series of key oppositions fundamental to the Platonic tradition: between truth and opinion, solitude and plurality, and contemplation and activity. To explain, Arendt contends that Plato defined the origin of philosophy as *thaumadzein*, "the wonder at that which is as it is" which is "a *pathos*, something which is endured, and as such quite distinct from *doxadzein*, from forming an opinion about something" (Arendt 2005:33).<sup>145</sup> As such, Arendt argues that the active nature of forming an opinion contrasts the "absolute quiet of contemplation" in which truth reveals itself only "in complete human stillness" (Arendt 1998:15). In addition, Arendt argues that *thaumadzein* is based on the singularity of wondering about truth, which is distinct from "the ensuing solitary dialogue" where the two-in-one arrive at an opinion (2005:36). By seeking to prolong the speechless wonder of contemplation, Plato "bases his whole existence on that singularity which he experienced when he endured the *pathos* of *thaumadzein*. And by this he destroys the plurality of the human condition within himself" (Arendt 2005:37). This is very different from Arendt's assertion that "nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists *essentially* in the plural than that his solitude [required for thinking] actualizes his merely being conscious of himself" (1978:185).

These oppositions correspond to the Platonic distinction between the life of the philosopher and the life of the citizen, the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, "two diametrically opposed ways of life" (Arendt 1977:232). We can express the Platonic model in the following table:

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<sup>145</sup> Arendt suggests that this arose from Plato's "concrete and unique experience" of "those frequently reported traumatic states in which Socrates would suddenly, as though seized by a rapture, fall into complete motionlessness, just staring without seeing or hearing anything" (2005:33).

<i>vita contemplativa</i>	<i>vita activa</i>
philosophy	politics
contemplation	activity
thought	action
truth	<i>doxa</i> (opinion)
eternal	flux
solitude	plurality
dialectic	rhetoric
objective	subjective
divine	human
mind	body
mind	world

As we have already discussed, for Plato, the life of the philosopher is marked by the concern for eternal truths “*regardless of the realm of human affairs*” (Arendt 2005:10, my emphasis). In Arendt’s appraisal, this led to the hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa* as it is only through contemplation that the philosopher can reveal truth. This hierarchy has implications for politics as it led Plato to use a purely philosophical doctrine of ideas for political purposes, ultimately hoping to “erect his ideocracy, in which eternal ideas [would be] translated into human laws” (Arendt 2005:11). Platonic philosophy is therefore not only dominated by a concern for the fixed nature of universal truths, but the desire of the philosopher “to be the ruler of human affairs because he must spend his life among men and cannot dwell forever under the sky of ideas” (Arendt 1998:226). As a result, Arendt contends that Platonic philosophy is marked by the attempt to impose the doctrine of ideas onto the political life, the *vita activa*:

It is only when [the philosopher] returns to the dark cave of human affairs to live once more with his fellow men that he needs the ideas for guidance as standards and rules by which to measure and under which to subsume the varied multitude of human deeds and words with the same absolute, “objective” certainty with which the craftsman can be guided in making (Arendt 1998:226).<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> For Arendt, this is part of the “Platonic wish to substitute making for acting in order to bestow upon the realm of human affairs the solidity inherent in work and fabrication” (1998:225).

In Arendt's reading, the tradition of Platonic philosophy is therefore an attempt to overcome the open-ended, contingent and essentially temporal nature of politics and the affairs of a plurality of men under the guidance of the single ideal of "eternal, nonchanging, nonhuman" truth (Arendt 2005:9). Arendt discussed attempts of this nature in *The Human Condition*, arguing that "it has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action" in the hope of overcoming its intrinsic unpredictability and haphazardness (1998:220). According to Arendt, these attempts "always amount to seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end" (1998:220). This certainly accords with the Platonic notion of philosophy that we have outlined here, that is, Plato's attempt to impose the doctrine of ideas onto political life as a means of introducing rules and standards to human affairs. For Arendt, this is problematic as it denies fundamental elements of the human condition under the guise of "eliminating the character of frailty from human affairs" (1998:226). This is a fundamental rejection of the political nature of the human condition. In addition, the resulting degradation of the political life further entrenches the Platonic hierarchy where the *vita contemplativa* is regarded as the unmistakably superior way of life (Dossa 1989:23), and politics, the *vita activa*, "the field in which the elementary necessities of human life are taken care of and to which absolute philosophical standards are applied" (Arendt 2005:37).

However, Arendt contends that by designing a system exclusively from the viewpoint of the philosopher, Plato "in a sense deformed philosophy for political purposes" (2005:37). Although his "inhuman ideal state never became a reality", according to Arendt, Plato's legacy was such that "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" (Arendt 2005:37-38).<sup>147</sup> In Chapter 5, we referred to these kinds of standards as 'banisters' which constrain the activity of thinking by dictating rigid frames of reference. By adhering to banisters of this nature, men are unable to think for themselves as they become dependent on external structures to think in their place. The Platonic

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<sup>147</sup> This corresponds to Arendt's assertion that "neither the radical separation between politics and contemplation, between living together and living in solitude as two distinct modes of life, nor their hierarchical structure, was ever doubted after Plato established both" (2005:85).

imposition of rules and standards has a remarkable congruity with Arendt's notion of the unthinking reliance on frameworks and external rules. This is Arendt's definition of thoughtlessness.

This implication that for Arendt, the Platonic tradition, in its attempt to rigidly define human affairs on the basis of truth, is thoughtless, is striking. While this does not suggest that Arendt holds either Plato or philosophy itself thoughtless, it does provide further ground for her rejection of the Platonic tradition on the basis that *adherence* to it makes men thoughtless. It also provides a context for her contention that the concern underlying the activities of the *vita activa* "is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*" (Arendt 1998:17). By asserting this, Arendt is not only rejecting the hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*, but any attempt to make one answer to the other. The depth of the human condition is such that the variety of general human capacities and activities that comprise it are incommensurable, and by elevating a single capacity to the position of ultimate standard, Platonic philosophy re-defined all other capacities on the basis of their failure to live up to a single ideal. For Arendt, this is not only unfaithful to the human condition, but it represents a denial of the range of capacities that comprise it.

As we have already seen, Arendt argues that the circumstances of the modern world are such that the "usefulness for understanding" of *all* yardsticks, including those of the Platonic tradition, has been exhausted (2005:38). As such, Arendt's assertion that totalitarianism had shattered the "guiding thread" of tradition entirely (1977:25), presents the possibility for a re-thinking of the relationship between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* on new terms "in manifest contradiction" to the Platonic tradition (1998:17):

The breakdown of common sense in the present world signals that philosophy and politics, their old conflict notwithstanding, have suffered the same fate. And that means that the problem of philosophy and politics, or the necessity for a new political philosophy from which could come a new science of politics, is once more on the agenda (Arendt 2005:38).

This goes some way to explaining Arendt's attempt in *The Human Condition* to re-distinguish the activities of the *vita activa* from one another and to assess their

political significance on her own terms rather than on terms dictated by the Platonic tradition. For Arendt, the Platonic tradition is not only misguided in its assumption that a single preoccupation prevails in all activities of men, but the consequences of this assumption, the imposition of the ideal of eternal truth on politics, established a series of rules and standards on which we have subsequently relied to understand politics. This means that our understanding of the affairs of men is grounded in terms dictated by the philosophic ideal, which are innately hostile to political plurality and the formation of opinions. This is unfaithful to the open-ended and essentially temporal nature of politics. It is also thoughtless in the sense that it indicates a holding onto Platonic banisters, rather than the freedom of thinking about and responding to the world and the particularity of lived experience. This suggests that Arendt's rejection of Plato's philosophy and the hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa* is also a response to the modern condition of thoughtlessness, in which men, accustomed to the rules and banisters provided by the tradition are unable to think, and therefore unable to comprehend modern events themselves. With this in mind, Arendt herself thinks *beyond* the Platonic tradition, thinking without banisters about thinking, politics and the human condition, not in terms of a single ideal, but with reference to the multiple and incommensurable general human capacities that emerge from the human condition.

## **2. Thinking Beyond the Platonic Tradition: Thinking Without Banisters**

Arendt sees the Platonic tradition as a "chain to which each new generation knowingly or unknowingly was bound in its understanding of the world and its own experience" (1977:25). In other words, Arendt holds that the nature of the tradition is such that it constrains our ability to think independently of it. This presents particular problems for thinking about the political dimensions of the human condition as, according to Arendt, the Platonic tradition was founded on the elimination of particular political experiences (Arendt 1998:12). As such, Arendt's rejection of Plato's attempt to impose the philosophic standard of eternal truth on human affairs necessitated a re-thinking of the distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. This kind of re-thinking was possible, according to Arendt, in the wake of

totalitarianism which had shattered “our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment” (Arendt 1994:310). By destroying the guiding thread of tradition entirely, the events of the modern world presented a valuable new opportunity to re-conceptualise the *vita activa* in terms not dictated by philosophy, that is, on terms not intrinsically hostile to politics: “It could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear” (Arendt 1977:94). This is not to say, however, that Arendt seeks to re-order the Platonic hierarchy or re-configure philosophy on political terms. Rather, as we have seen, Arendt argues that the *vita activa* is neither superior nor inferior to the *vita contemplativa*, but merely a different realm of human experience (1998:17) that deserves meaning on its own terms, meaning faithful to the contingency and open-endedness of politics.

## **THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THOUGHT AND CONTEMPLATION**

So far, this chapter has seen that Arendt describes the Platonic tradition of political philosophy as founded on the back of two events: the discovery of contemplation as a distinct human faculty, “a higher principle to replace the principle that ruled the *polis*” (1998:18); and the trial and condemnation of Socrates. In different ways, according to Arendt, both of these events caused a turning away of philosophy from politics, establishing a hierarchy where the *vita contemplativa*, the philosopher’s way of life, came to be seen as superior to the *vita activa*, which had “lost its specifically political meaning and denoted all kinds of active engagement in the things of the world” (Arendt 1998:14). In this way, Arendt contends that the Platonic tradition established contemplation as superior to activity of any kind. This ultimately led to the “parting” of the men of thought and the men of action (Arendt 2005:26). This separation suggests that the division between philosophy and politics corresponds to the division between thought and action. Indeed, this is reflected in the Platonic division between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* that we outlined in the table above. Yet, Arendt’s understanding of thinking as an endless and resultless activity seems to be poles apart from the Platonic ideal of the contemplation of eternal truth. How, then, does Arendt understand the relationship between thought and contemplation, and of both to philosophy?

Arendt very clearly states that contemplation is “distinctly different from thought and reasoning” (1998:16). At the outset, this is consistent with the Platonic division between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, where thought and contemplation were opposed to action and activity respectively, suggesting that they are distinct human concerns. In the table above, we noted that the “absolute quiet of contemplation” (Arendt 1998:15) exists in opposition to all human activity. According to Arendt, *all* movement, “the movements of body and soul as well as of speech and reasoning must cease before truth” can appear (Arendt 1998:15). Further to this, and in deference to its origins in *thaumadzein*, Arendt argues that contemplation is endured rather than enacted and cannot be related in words (2005:33).

In contrast, we have already seen that thinking, as Arendt understands it, is incompatible with the search for results or truths, and it arises from incidents of lived experience, that is, it emerges from the world and the haphazard and spontaneous affairs of men. Unlike the speechlessness of contemplation, Arendt contends that thinking involves engaging in a dialogue of the two-in-one, and by doing so, it captures the fact of plurality internal to each self, “the original duality” (Arendt 1978:75). This contrasts Plato’s attempt to destroy the plurality of the human condition within himself by prolonging the speechless wonder of contemplation (Arendt 2005:37). Although the dialogue of thinking “lacks all outward manifestation and even requires a more or less complete cessation of all other activities, it constitutes in itself a highly active state” (Arendt 1998:291). As such, Arendt argues that the outward inactivity of thinking is “clearly separated from the passivity, the complete stillness” of contemplation “in which truth is finally revealed to man” (1998:291). It therefore appears that Arendt sees thought and contemplation as not only *distinct* human capacities, but as fundamentally incompatible human concerns.

We have therefore uncovered a series of parallel oppositions in Arendt’s work between philosophy and politics, contemplation and thinking, and truth and opinion. Again, we can represent these in a table:

<i>vita contemplativa</i>	<i>vita activa</i>
philosophy	politics
contemplation	thought
truth	<i>doxa</i> (opinion)
eternal	flux
solitude	plurality
passivity	activity
speechlessness	speech
objectivity	intersubjectivity

While Arendt's distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* exhibits many similarities to Plato's, outlined in the previous section, there are several key differences. Most importantly to us here, Arendt not only distinguishes thought from contemplation but she *opposes* them on the grounds that they correspond to the (Platonic) division between opinion and truth. To explain, we saw in Chapter 5 that the process of forming an opinion is part of the discourse of thought (Arendt 2003:91-92), making the opposition between truth and opinion akin to the opposition between contemplating and thinking. This is highly significant as it suggests that despite her reading of traditional claims to the contrary, Arendt contends that thinking *itself* is incompatible with the traits of philosophy in the sense that it is opposed to the philosophic ideal of eternal, unchanging truth. However, Arendt argues that this is not so much a divergence from the Platonic tradition as a drawing of our attention to the traditional subjugation of thought as a means to an end:

Traditionally, thought was conceived as the most direct and important way to lead to the contemplation of truth...Since Plato, and probably since Socrates, thinking was understood as the inner dialogue in which one speaks with himself...both [Plato and Aristotle]...considered this dialogical thought process to be the way to prepare the soul and lead the mind to a beholding of truth beyond thought and beyond speech (Arendt 1998:291).

Here, Arendt contends that the tradition put thinking in the service of contemplation and philosophy, that is, thinking was used as a means to philosophy's end. We also saw in Chapter 5 that while Arendt acknowledges that thinking lends itself to pursuits outside its own activity, she argues that "in the exercise of this function *it is never itself*, it is but the handmaiden of an altogether different enterprise" (Arendt 1978:61, my emphasis). As such, Arendt's key contention is that while the Platonic tradition

made thinking a servant to contemplation, in “the exercise of this function” it is *not really thinking*. As a consequence, it would appear that Arendt’s understanding of thinking *strictly speaking*, that is, thinking *itself*, does not correspond to philosophy or contemplation at all. Although philosophers devote themselves to thinking (1978:80), this is thinking understood on philosophic terms, that is, thinking in the pursuit of eternal truth. However, Arendt’s understanding of thinking as a free and open activity, responsive to the contingencies of political experience, is at odds with this philosophical understanding which makes it a handmaiden to truth. This returns us to Arendt’s rejection of the assumption that a single comprehensive principle, the standard of truth, underlies all human activities (1998:17). By considering all human activities from the standpoint of the *vita contemplativa*, including thinking, the Platonic tradition imbued them with characteristics which are not internal to the activities themselves. This is to say that by imposing the ideal of contemplation, the Platonic tradition re-defined thinking on the basis that it served philosophy, neglecting its inherently political characteristics.

This has important implications for our own understanding of the place of Arendt’s notion of thinking. While she clearly holds that it belongs in the life of the mind, this does not naturally correspond to contemplation or the *vita contemplativa*. In contrast, thinking sits uneasily *between* life in the mind and life in the world. On one hand, thinking emerges in response to the world, taking its bearings from particular incidents of lived experience. On the other, thinking requires a withdrawal from the world, a distancing from direct sensation and participation in the world so as to think at all. Arendt describes this as a problem common to all mental activities:

For although there are great differences among these [mental] activities, they all have in common a withdrawal from the world as it appears and a bending back towards the self. This would cause no great problem if we were mere spectators, godlike creatures thrown into the world to look after it or enjoy it and be entertained by it, but still in possession of some other region as our natural habitat. However, *we are of the world and not merely in it*; we, too, are appearances by virtue of arriving and departing, of appearing and disappearing; and while we come from a nowhere, we arrive well equipped to deal with whatever appears to us and to take part in the play of the world. These properties do not vanish when we happen to be engaged in mental activities and close the eyes of our body, to use the Platonic metaphor, in order to be able to open the eyes of the mind (Arendt 1978:22).

This is related to Arendt's notion of the "intramural warfare" of philosophy (1978:80), in which the philosopher himself is aware of the incommensurable nature of his philosophic experience and his experience among men. While, in Arendt's appraisal, Platonic philosophy seeks to resolve these experiences under the assumption that all activities can be guided by the single ideal of eternal truth, by distinguishing between thought and contemplation, Arendt has effectively disentangled thinking from the stranglehold of Platonic philosophy. This acknowledges the incommensurate nature of men's experiences rather than seeking to reconcile them under a single comprehensive principle. By doing so, Arendt leaves open the possibility of a relationship between thinking and politics on terms free of the Platonic imposition of absolute standards.

This departure from the Platonic ideal suggests that while we can express Arendt's distinctions and the opposition of thinking and philosophy in a table as above, Arendt's concern lies not so much in re-defining the traditional divide between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, as in enlarging our understanding of the *vita activa* itself, the political life of men, on terms not dictated by the Platonic tradition. In contrast to Plato who opposes truth to opinion in an effort to impose rigid philosophic standards on the affairs of men, Arendt uses this same opposition to separate thinking from philosophy, reclaiming a key distinction within human activities which had disappeared in response to the Platonic hierarchy.<sup>148</sup> Arendt contends that the very nature of politics is such that it defies understanding on philosophic terms as it is contingent on the haphazard and unpredictable actions of men to which absolute standards cannot be applied.

Unlike Plato, however, Arendt argues that this does not make politics merely subjective as opposed to the objectivity of eternal truth. While politics is indeed characterised by flux, spontaneous and unpredictable change that arises from the human condition of plurality (Arendt 1998:220),<sup>149</sup> the relationship between men that constitutes the political life means that individual opinions can be combined to

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<sup>148</sup> This is a reference to Arendt's contention in *The Human Condition* that "the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself" (1998:17).

<sup>149</sup> In Chapter 1 we noted Arendt's assertion that plurality is the condition of all political life, making action "the political activity par excellence" (1998:9).

provide an *intersubjective* account of reality. We saw this kind of political combination of a plurality of perspectives in our discussion of Arendt's understanding of thinking, its relationship to judging and the elements of the enlarged mentality, or "going visiting", and Homeric impartiality in the previous chapter. Although this can only be done from the vantage point of the spectator, this position outside action but within the world is a clear departure from the Platonic objectivity of the "sky of ideas" (Arendt 1998:226). In this way, Arendt's re-conceptualisation of the divide between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* preserves the fundamentally distinct nature of philosophy and politics without making one answer to the other. This remains faithful to her presumption that the concern underlying the activities of the *vita activa* "is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*" (1998:17).

But what does this mean for the Platonic opposition of thought and action? How can Arendt contend that thinking is political given the inherent tension between thinking and the world in terms of its necessary condition of withdrawal? Thinking beyond the Platonic tradition therefore requires a parallel re-thinking of the relationship between thought and action, "*the problem at the heart of the tradition*" (Kohn 2005:xvi). Arendt's rejection of the Platonic move to subsume all activities under a single comprehensive principle suggests that she seeks not to reconcile thought and action, nor to reduce them to a single experience. Rather, she seeks to preserve them as distinct political activities that emerge from the depth of the human condition itself. This sits well with our assertion that Arendt seeks to enlarge our understanding of the *vita activa* on distinctly political terms.

This intention is a direct consequence of Arendt's belief that the activities of the *vita activa* "have been curiously neglected by a tradition which considered it chiefly from the standpoint of the *vita contemplativa*" (Arendt 1998:78). By considering the *vita activa* solely from the standpoint of the life of the philosopher, the Platonic tradition assumed that politics was a means to an end, a means to the contemplation of eternal truth. In contrast to the ideal of contemplation, the opinions and haphazard actions of men are clearly an inferior means to this end. For Arendt, however, politics is an end in itself and never a means, and far from pursuing a single best kind of politics, Arendt contends that the plurality of men defies claims to universal ideals. All

we can look for is *meaning* as it emerges from thinking about the events of the world. These events correspond to the unpredictability of action and natality, man's capacity to begin something new (1998:9). In this way, unlike Plato, Arendt hopes to re-define how politics looks from the standpoint of *politics* rather than philosophy (see 2005:31), so as to maintain a fidelity to the contingent and essentially temporal nature of the realm of human affairs.

## **RE-THINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHT AND ACTION**

As we have seen, Arendt rejects the Platonic division between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* because it is based on a fundamental hostility to politics. As a result, Arendt's problem with the traditional hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa* is not that it is founded on the division between different human experiences, but that it assumes that a single concern underlies *all* human activities, that is, the pursuit of eternal truth. This suggests that Arendt's problem with the Platonic tradition is that it attempted to "resolve the conflict between thought and action by blurring the distinction between them" (Buckler 2007:464). By this, we refer to Arendt's contention that the Platonic tradition conflated *all* activities on the basis that they were *not* contemplation, re-defining politics in relation to the ideal of eternal truth. In "manifest contradiction to the tradition" (1998:17), Arendt not only seeks to re-assert the distinctions between man's activities, but to re-define them on terms not dictated by philosophy so as to restore dignity to politics.

In Chapter 1 we noted that Arendt understands action as corresponding to the human condition of plurality (1998:7). By its very nature therefore, action cannot be done in isolation, and in fact, it is the only activity "that goes on directly between men" (Arendt 1998:7). This suggests that acting exists in *opposition* to thinking which requires a complete withdrawal from the world of appearances into the mind. Further to this, Arendt's understanding of thinking is marked by solitude, non-appearance and imaginative reflection. This contrasts the active appearance and participation in the public realm that characterises action. As such, thinking and acting, as Arendt understands them, have completely contrasting demands. However, in the face of the Platonic move to place them in a hierarchy under the assumption that a single

preoccupation prevails in all activities of men (Arendt 1998:17), Arendt argues that “one cannot be made to answer to the other” (Buckler 2007:464) as this limits our appreciation of either on its own terms. This, in turn, has significant consequences for our understanding of the human condition as it narrows our awareness of our general human capacities and therefore the range of human experience.

In contrast to the Platonic hierarchy of thought over action, Arendt regards thought and action “as two contrasting but *equally central* aspects of our experience” (Buckler 2007:465, my emphasis). Action fills the worldly space, providing opportunities for disclosure, greatness and immortality, while thinking attempts to understand our actions, reconciling us to lived events and enabling us to reflect meaningfully on the world. As this suggests, although thinking and acting are fundamentally different experiences, they have a bearing upon one another as “thinking needs a ground in the worldly realm, while the resources that allow us to act ‘depend ultimately on the life of the mind’” (Buckler 2007:465).<sup>150</sup> As a consequence, while the activities of thinking and acting have completely contrasting demands, we must avoid the temptation to separate them entirely as they each provide a context in which we can experience the other. In more simple terms, thinking and acting *must* influence one another for the simple fact that men possess the ability to do both: “I do believe that thinking has some influence on action. But on acting man. Because it is the same ego that thinks and the same ego that acts” (Arendt 1979:304-305).

We can capture the “mutual bearing of thinking and acting” (Buckler 2007:465) by examining the example of totalitarianism, which in contrast, separated them entirely. As we saw in Chapter 5, Eichmann demonstrates for us that “where the tension between thinking and acting is diffused, thinking loses its anchor in the world and action becomes thoughtless” (Buckler 2007:466), that is, men commit thoughtless acts of evil while claiming to think by principles of reason. By separating thought and

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<sup>150</sup> The notion that thinking and acting have a bearing on one another is not the same as finding a link between them by way of their similarities (see Arendt 1968a:9). Although thinking and acting have contrasting demands and belong to fundamentally opposed realms of experience – the world and the mind – they do share some inherent features. Both acting and thinking are spontaneous activities that have no discernible or predictable end. Both rely on language for their manifestation in the world, although thinking involves a dialogue with myself, whereas action involves a dialogue with others. These similarities aside, however, thinking and acting belong to incommensurable realms, and they are fundamentally different experiences that bear upon one another rather than experiences that share a single concern.

action, Eichmann “*never realized what he was doing*” (Arendt 1964:287). Had Eichmann thought for himself, his actions may very well have been different. In a second example, Arendt contends that the Platonic tradition was founded on “the parting of the man of thought from the man of action” (Arendt 2005:26). This detachment of thought and action led to the creation of the Platonic hierarchy where action became subject to the principles of eternal truth and rigid philosophic standards. These examples demonstrate not only that thinking and acting have a mutual bearing, that one influences the other, but that the consequences of their separation are just as disastrous as the attempt to make one answer to the other by constructing a hierarchy. In response to both, Arendt “affirms that the distinction, or conflict, between thinking and acting is best understood as a tension *that is not to be resolved but preserved*” (Buckler 2007:471, my emphasis).

By tension, here, we refer to Arendt’s description of the difficult relationship between man’s philosophical experience and his experience among others (2005:27). This stems from the nature of thinking itself, the “paradoxical condition” that enables men to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it completely (1978:45). The activities of thinking and acting exist in tension in the sense that we are unable to reduce their experience to a single common denominator. In contrast to the Platonic tradition which aimed at their resolution, Arendt understands the incommensurable nature of activities such as thinking and acting “not as theoretical problems to be solved but as ‘constitutive tensions’, the results of contrasting experiences that have a common origin in basic human capabilities and which merit examination on their own terms” (Buckler 2007:463). By doing so, Arendt reasserts the depth inherent in the human condition, not by defining it under a single unifying standard, but by embracing a plurality of incompatible and competing general human capacities. This desire to preserve tensions that exist in the incommensurable nature of our human experiences suggests that Arendt herself is committed “to thinking within; rather than beyond the thinking/acting tension” (Buckler 2007:466). As such, it is important that we “appreciate the mutual bearing of thinking and acting” in Arendt’s work (Buckler 2007:465).

Arendt’s commitment to preserving tensions in our experience has a fidelity to her conception of thinking which seeks plural meanings rather than a singular truth.

Retaining tensions in our experience “has the effect of stemming the philosophical impulse, allowing us to treat these tensions and their implications as things to be reflected upon and talked about rather than as problems to do with the nature of ‘Man’ that are to be ironed out” (Buckler 2007:469). That is, retaining tensions *provides a ground for thinking*. This contrasts the Platonic ideal of eternal truth which sets rigid standards under which everything can be subsumed. This suggests that Arendt’s own thinking beyond the Platonic tradition *demonstrates* her understanding of thinking as destructive and unconstrained by external frames of reference *by example*. By thinking about the relationship of philosophy and politics, Arendt’s own thinking dismantles the banister provided by the Platonic hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, re-thinking the place of general human capacities in human life and their political significance.

This sits well with Arendt’s declaration that the breakdown of tradition at the hands of totalitarianism presents the opportunity for a new political philosophy unencumbered by the Platonic tradition (2005:38). According to Arendt, any new such political philosophy requires a re-thinking of the relationship between politics and thinking which was denied by the traditional hostility of Plato towards politics and the relegation of thinking to the role of handmaiden to contemplation:

Crucial for a new political philosophy will be an inquiry into the political significance of thought; that is, into the meaningfulness and the conditions of thinking for a being that never exists in the singular and whose essential plurality is far from explored when an I-Thou relationship is added to the traditional understanding of human nature (Arendt 1994:445).

In this way, the modern loss of tradition, coupled with a clearer understanding of the ways in which the Platonic tradition has been misleading in its representation of human experience, provided Arendt with an opportunity to re-conceptualise the relationship between the incommensurable experiences of life in the world and life in the mind in a way that preserves both, rather than making one answer to the other. It also provided a way for her to reinvigorate the political dimensions of thinking by re-exploring with fresh eyes the internal tensions of thinking – between appearance and non-appearance, particularity and generality, plurality and solitude, and body and mind – not to overcome them, but to preserve them as fundamental components of the human condition.

## RE-THINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THINKING AND POLITICS

To this point, this chapter has outlined Arendt's rejection of the Platonic tradition on the grounds that it is marked by a hostility towards politics and the haphazard affairs of men. In the face of the strict Platonic division between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* and the corresponding distinction between thought and action, Arendt contends that thinking was subjugated by philosophy, made a handmaiden to contemplation rather than seen as a distinct human activity on its own terms. In contrast to Plato, Arendt draws our attention to the *opposition* of contemplation and thinking by way of their central attributes, that is, the stillness, speechlessness, singularity and eternal truth of contemplation, as opposed to the activity, "motion in a circle", plurality and opinion that characterises thinking. Arendt suggests that this, coupled with the loss of tradition in the wake of the shattering event of totalitarianism, presents the opportunity for "a new political philosophy" (Arendt 2005:38) grounded in terms not intrinsically hostile to politics. This implies that such a political philosophy would acknowledge the plurality of concerns underlying men's general human capacities rather than reducing them to a single ideal.

According to Arendt, this requires "an inquiry into the political significance of thought" (1994:445), an inquiry that was denied by the hostile nature of the Platonic tradition towards politics and its conflation of all human activities. Returning to Arendt's use of the opposition between truth and opinion to make a distinction between contemplating and thinking, we can see that given the traditional role of thinking in contemplation, here Arendt is really making a distinction between *two kinds of thinking*, "philosophical thinking which is related to truth and political thinking which is concerned rather with opinions and judgements" (Canovan 1992:265).<sup>151</sup> This corresponds to the differences between Plato and Arendt's understandings of the division between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, particularly the place of

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<sup>151</sup> This distinction is similar to the one we made between thinking and knowing in Chapter 5. There, we used the opposition of truth and *meaning* to highlight the differences between thinking and knowing. While thinking is concerned with finding meaning in events of the world, knowing is concerned with truth and cognition, making it an apt foundation for science. This suggests that the conflation of thinking and knowing is of a piece with the conflation of thinking and contemplating, as both knowing and contemplating are concerned with truth, which is universal, singular, finite and compelling, while thinking is concerned with forming opinions or finding meaning, making it open to contestation, contingent on particular circumstances and valid only to the extent that it is persuasive.

thinking, as expressed in the two tables above. As already noted, this does not mean that Arendt seeks to *replace* Platonic understandings of the place of thinking, designated here as philosophical thinking, with her own version of political thinking, nor does she seek to re-define philosophical thinking in political terms. Instead, the *distinction itself* is key to understanding (Arendt 1979:337), as it differentiates between different modes of human activity and therefore works to preserve fundamentally different human experiences.

To explain this distinction further, Arendt acknowledges that truth is the cornerstone of Platonic philosophy. However, as noted earlier, she declares that “truth and politics are on rather bad terms” (1977:227).<sup>152</sup> Truth “carries within itself an element of coercion” (Arendt 1977:239) in the sense that truths are “beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent” (Arendt 1977:240). In other words, truth is “what we are compelled to admit by the nature either of our senses or of our brain” (Arendt 1978:61):

For those who accept [statements of truth], they are not changed by the numbers or lack of numbers who entertain the same proposition; persuasion or dissuasion is useless, for the content of the statement is not of a persuasive nature but of a coercive one (Arendt 1977:240).

Arendt therefore argues that truth is unpolitical as it arises from outside the political realm.<sup>153</sup> It is also contrary to the activities of public speech and action, which have validity only to the extent that they are persuasive. This suggests that for Arendt, the Platonic understanding of thinking directed at truth, that is, thinking in *the service of* contemplation, is unpolitical, hence our description of it as ‘philosophical thinking’. In contrast, the discourse of thinking that culminates in the formulation of an opinion is a specifically political kind of thinking as it reflects on worldly events in order to find meaning. This ‘political thinking’ is therefore faithful to the experiential ground of politics, and it retains a “fidelity to the nature of politics absent from the tradition of political philosophy” (Buckler 2007:462).

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<sup>152</sup> Arendt makes a clear distinction between *philosophical truth*, which is the passively received wisdom of contemplation, and *factual truth* which is political in nature because it “is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about” (Arendt 1977:238). Factual truth is an expression of the *experience of particular events* and therefore relates to both the realm of politics and the impartial activity of storytelling.

<sup>153</sup> This is best captured by Plato’s parable of the cave.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Arendt conceives of thinking as a process of reflection which involves a recollection of an event in the form of a story in which I ask and tell myself what has happened. As such, for Arendt, political thinking is a discourse, a process of “talking something through” (2005:16), and it arises from experience of the world. Arendt uses Socrates’ description to explain that when I have finally made up my mind by thinking, I have formed an opinion, “a spoken statement, pronounced not to someone else and aloud, but silently to oneself” (Arendt 2003:91-92). In this way, the opinion marks the end of the thinking activity. Although “thought-things”, opinions have political significance in two important ways. Firstly, opinions reflect the plurality of men who each see the world from a different perspective. This contrasts the singularity of eternal truth which is obtained “regardless of the realm of human affairs” (Arendt 2005:10). Secondly, opinions enable the invisibility of the thinking activity to make an appearance in the world. This public appearance is, in fact, a necessary requirement for validation, as although it produces them, the solitary activity of thinking alone cannot guarantee an opinion’s validity:

Opinions can only be tested and enlarged when there is a genuine encounter with different opinions. There is no test for the adequacy of an opinion, no authority for judging it, other than the force of the better public argument. The formation of opinions, therefore, requires a political community of equals, the imagination to represent other viewpoints, and the courage to submit opinions to public exposure and test (Bernstein 1986:228).

We saw this same kind of appeal to community in Arendt’s understanding of judging. Arendt contends that judging always reflects on others and “takes their possible judgments into account” (1992:67). With the assistance of the imagination, we can liberate ourselves from our own private conditions and take account of other perspectives. In the same way, Arendt contends that valid opinions can only be “arrived at by discursive, representative thinking” (1977:247), which involves an interaction with others where men imaginatively think through multiple positions. An opinion’s validity therefore stems from the taking account of a plurality of perspectives, which together, also assure us of the reality of the world (Arendt 1998:50): “the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the world presents itself” (Arendt 1998:57).

This intersubjective element of opinions, formed first through thinking with myself, then made valid by thinking with others, means that political thinking parallels the process of “going visiting” to achieve an enlarged mentality which is a key feature of Arendt’s understanding of judging (see Villa 1999:19). In this way, Arendt’s notion of political thinking combines key elements of judging – making reference to the *sensus communis*, intersubjectivity, the imaginative representation of the standpoints of others, and the enlarged mentality – with the fundamentals of thinking, including discourse, storytelling and the particularity of worldly experience. This gives opinions a “relative impartiality”, the Homeric collection of multiple subjectivities that transcend individual perspectives while retaining the particular, combining them in such a way as to gain an overall sense of the world held in common (Arendt 1992:42).

As we saw in Chapter 5, this notion of thinking representatively gives thinking political characteristics as it enables the thinker “to look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects” (Arendt 1977:51). This moves thinking from the solitude of the mind, where I think with myself, to a thinking that takes account of others, therefore showing a concern for the world. Arendt herself captures the intersection of perspectives this way:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion (Arendt 1977:241).

Political thinking therefore describes an imagined discourse between citizens with different views of the common world. This means that Arendt’s notion of political thinking bears a striking *resemblance* to judging. As we have seen, judging makes thinking “manifest in the world of appearances” (Arendt 1978:193), thinking from the standpoint of others so as to judge in relation to the world held in common. In this

way, judging is a bridge between thinking and the world, and it “mysteriously” combines the general and the particular (Arendt 1978:69), making a tension inherent in thinking part of its very activity. While thinking and judging are distinct mental faculties, judging demonstrates the way in which thinking can move beyond its fundamental qualities of solitude and withdrawal to think with others in imagination. With this in mind, some have speculated that Arendt’s unfinished work on judging was meant as a search for a *form of thinking* that, unlike philosophy, was not hostile to politics (Canovan 1992:271; see Beiner 1992), that is, that political thinking *is* judging. However, we can never know if this was really Arendt’s intention. We refer to Arendt’s notion of political thinking here not to draw similarities, but simply to make a *distinction* between a thinking in the service of philosophy and a thinking compatible with politics.

Arendt’s political thinking is also reminiscent of her description of Socrates’ practice of thinking, in which he engaged citizens in a public discourse of thought to improve their opinions. In the sense that it involves thinking imaginatively with others, Arendt’s political thinking also gives opinions, the results of thinking, an intersubjective validity that reflects the reality of the world men hold in common. In this way, Arendt’s turn to Socrates as her exemplar for thinking makes it “eminently clear what she means by political thinking, the thinking directed to making *doxa* more truthful, and how important such thinking is for the citizens of the *polis*” (Bernstein 2000:282):

For this was a kind of thinking that was not divorced from or opposed to politics, but was itself a matter of moving amongst others in the public world and exploring their opinions. Each person has his own opinion, his *doxa*, which represents the way the world appears to him, so that there are as many opinions as there are separate persons looking at the common world from different points of view (Canovan 1992:258).

While she was critical of the “enforced withdrawal from the world that pure philosophical thinking demands” (Villa 1998:156), Arendt celebrated Socrates’ public performance of the thinking activity, that is, Socrates’ *political thinking*, as it not only highlights the way in which thinking and politics can be related, but the ease with which men can *move between* incommensurable realms of experience, that is, life in the world and the life of the mind (Arendt 1978:167), without needing to reconcile them. Socrates’ example therefore demonstrates that the “paradoxical” nature of

thinking, which permits us to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it completely (Arendt 1978:45), is not so much a difficulty as a possibility for freedom of movement that reflects the depth of the human condition. In this way, Arendt's political thinking represents a political re-thinking of the relationship between politics and thought, highlighting the political characteristics of thinking in terms of opinion, movement, freedom and dialogue *in spite of* its necessary withdrawal from the world.

Arendt's conception of political thinking is therefore opposed to the Platonic notion of thinking which is oriented to the "solitary submission to the imperatives of truth" (Canovan 1992:265). Unlike Arendt's political thinker, exemplified by Socrates, Plato's philosophic thinker contemplates what is universal and unchanging. By seeking eternal truths, philosophical thinking aims at closure in the sense that it reduces a plurality of possibilities into a single statement of wisdom. This is distinctly different from Socrates' attempt to find truth in *doxa* by engaging men in the open-endedness of thinking, and his rejection of claims to wisdom, captured by his statement "I know that I do not know" (Arendt 2005:19). In addition, Platonic or philosophical thinking, as we are describing it here, is marked by motionless and speechless wonder (Arendt 2005:33), and it is removed from the world and the affairs of men (Arendt 2005:30). As such, philosophical thinking exists in opposition to the central characteristics of Arendt's understanding of thinking, including motion, dialogue, opinion and plurality.

This juxtaposition of Arendt and Plato in terms of political thinking and philosophical thinking provides us with a striking contrast. Arendt's conception of a relationship between thinking and politics, apparent in the political characteristics of thinking in spite of its withdrawal from the world, is a marked departure from the Platonic understanding of thinking which places it firmly in the service of philosophy, opposing it to the key political element of acting. In contrast to Plato, Arendt separates contemplating and thinking by using their relationship to truth and opinion to show that they are fundamentally opposed. This does not, however, mean that Arendt overcomes the incommensurable nature of thinking and acting, and rather, she preserves it as a "constitutive tension", the result of "contrasting experiences that have a common origin in basic human capacities" (Buckler 2007:463). In other words, Arendt looks upon contrasting human activities in a way that reflects the depth

of human experience, that is, on political terms, rather than reducing them to a single underlying concern. It is this fidelity to a plurality of concerns underlying the activities of the human condition that cements Arendt's turn away from the Platonic tradition.

### **3. Crystallisation: 'Thinking Politically'**

In the previous section, we uncovered Arendt's commitment to thinking within rather than beyond the tensions that arise from the incommensurable experiences of the human condition (Buckler 2007:466). This contrasts the Platonic attempt to resolve such tensions by re-defining all activities in terms of the standard of eternal truth. This suggests that tensions themselves are "constitutive" features of Arendt's thought as she seeks to retain the depth of human experience by thinking about it *in light of* its complications rather than seeing them as problems to be solved. In this way, Arendt's thinking thinks contradictory elements "together" (1963:224),<sup>154</sup> demonstrating the ways in which they can provide reciprocal illumination through tension, juxtaposing contradictions so as to highlight their differences, and retaining them as central yet contrasting elements of the human condition. As noted at the beginning of Part II, the opposing motions of separation and combination in Arendt's thinking suggest that the meaning of Arendt's work lies "not only in the repetition and reworking of themes, concepts and images, but also in the manner of their connection" (Nordmann 2007:778).

In the introduction to Part II, we also saw that Arendt described this kind of thinking, which separates and recombines disparate elements, as "thinking poetically" in her portrait of Walter Benjamin (1968a:205). There, she introduced the metaphor of a pearl diver who "wrests" various "thought fragments" from the past by descending "to the bottom of the sea", prying "loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths" and carrying them "to the surface" (Arendt 1968a:205). Arendt

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<sup>154</sup> Speaking of the lost treasure of revolution, Arendt argued that "the effort to recapture the lost spirit of revolution must, to a certain extent, consist in the attempt at *thinking together* and combining meaningfully what our present vocabulary presents to us in terms of opposition and contradiction" (1963:223-224, my emphasis). Although, here, Arendt refers to the *specific* recovery of 'revolution', we can appropriate this idea of meaningfully recombining contradictory or opposing concepts and ideas to understand Arendt's own series of distinctions which themselves often exist in tension. Despite the apparent difficulty of "combining meaningfully" Arendt's complex series of distinctions and conceptual oppositions, this suggests that the attempt to "think them together" or re-combine them in new ways has the potential to capture or finally disclose the "lost spirit" of Arendt's own thought.

explains that this thinking is guided by the “conviction” that “the process of decay is at the same time a *process of crystallization*, that in the depths of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements” (Arendt 1968a:205-206, my emphasis). In other words, the pearl diver dives into the sea under the belief that the things that sunk to the bottom remain there not in their original form, but as “new crystallized forms and shapes”, transformed by both time and the sea itself. These “new crystallized forms and shapes” retain their original components as fragments, however, they stand as distinct, yet complex, new elements of their own. As explained by Canovan:

...while it may be possible to see through a crystal to the ground in which it is embedded, it is in the nature of the same crystal to have many facets, reflecting light from different sources and glittering with inexhaustible significance (1992:5).

In this way, the “crystal” or the “new form and shape” which waits at the bottom of the sea to be discovered by the pearl diver, illuminates the elements from which it came by offering them as “thought fragments”, but it also “glitters” on its own terms, that is, it contains new meaning of its own.

Guided by Arendt’s metaphor of the pearl diver, this thesis suggests that we can re-imagine the thought fragments we have “pried loose” thus far as a “new crystallized form and shape” that we can call *‘thinking politically’*. As pearl divers ourselves, we have so far only brought to the surface “thought fragments” of what appears to sit at the bottom of Arendt’s sea as a complex crystallisation of multiple elements. This interpretation is driven by the prevalence of overlapping themes among the thought fragments we “pried loose” in the last chapter, and our discussion of Arendt’s notion of political thinking which suggests a complex relationship between thinking and politics. As such, *‘thinking politically’* resembles Arendt’s notion of political thinking examined earlier (1977:241), but it attempts to reflect with more clarity the crystallisation of multiple fragments of Arendt’s thought – thinking, storytelling, judging, experience and the world – enabling us to get a better grasp on the meaning of Arendt’s thinking and its political significance. In this way, *‘thinking politically’* is a crystallisation of the “pearls and the coral” of Arendt’s thought, the thought fragments we have already uncovered, that when considered as a whole, bring the “rich and

strange” meaning of Arendt’s work “into the world of the living”, meaning that was hidden beneath its surface all along.

While ‘thinking politically’ is a combination of Arendt’s thought fragments, it avoids conceptual closure by retaining a fidelity to both the nature of its original elements and the activity of thinking. Neither a truth nor a solution, ‘thinking politically’ describes an *activity* that is itself open and boundless, constituted by performance and contingent on experience of the world. At the same time, ‘thinking politically’ is also a concept, a “thought-thing” that emerges from our thinking about Arendt’s understanding and practice of thinking in this thesis, freezing both Arendt’s thoughts and our own, and therefore providing tangible evidence for our claims to have thought at all (see Arendt 1978:52). As both a concept and an activity, ‘thinking politically’ not only describes Arendt’s understanding of thinking by reassembling various thought fragments, but also her *practice* of thinking, illuminating both *what* she thought about thinking, and *how* she thought about politics. In this way, the concept ‘thinking politically’ is a kind of “shorthand” for the thinking done so far, a “grouping together of many particulars into a name common to all of them” (Arendt 2003:171-172). This next section therefore makes “long” the concept ‘thinking politically’, discussing the ways in which this crystallisation of thought fragments stems from the conceptual connections uncovered earlier – between thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world – while preserving their particularities in tension.

### **ILLUMINATING ‘THINKING POLITICALLY’**

Despite our attempts to “dismantle” Arendt’s thought fragments regarding thinking (Arendt 1978:212), the persistent connections between concepts suggest that they are crystallised together in a new form that contains meaning of its own. Arendt’s notion of political thinking confirms this suspicion and begins to illuminate the ways in which various elements of her thinking are interconnected. In response, this thesis has suggested the concept ‘thinking politically’ to describe a crystallisation of Arendt’s thought fragments, thinking *with* Arendt to re-combine disparate elements in a manner not only faithful to Arendt’s own thinking, but that highlights the distinct and unique conception of thinking in Arendt’s work. In this way, ‘thinking politically’ is a

crystallisation of the thought fragments we have “pried loose” so far – thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world – that reflects Arendt’s commitment to retaining thinking and acting as a “constitutive tension”, rather than reconciling them under a single principle (Buckler 2007:463). By re-imagining Arendt’s thought fragments in terms of their crystallisation as ‘thinking politically’, we are able to illuminate the meaning hidden in their connection, meaning that could not be grasped by considering individual fragments alone. Further to this, by describing Arendt’s understanding of thinking as ‘thinking politically’, we are able to draw particular attention to her re-thinking of thinking beyond the restrictions of the Platonic tradition so as to reclaim the political nature of distinct activities of the *vita activa*.

As its name suggests, ‘thinking politically’ describes Arendt’s understanding of a thinking that is inherently political. It combines the freedom of the thinking activity with the political conditions of freedom, “plurality, spontaneity, and the open-ended, unpredictable character of interaction through speech and deed” (Dolan 2000:271). Grounded in such freedom, ‘thinking politically’ resists conceptual closure to describe a creative and open thinking that is independent of traditional banisters or guidelines. In this way, ‘thinking politically’ is consistent with Arendt’s notion of ‘thinking without banisters’, and it similarly works to destroy traditional frames of reference, including those offered by the Platonic tradition, by subjecting them to new scrutiny, undermining and dissolving all certainty with which they are held. In doing so, ‘thinking politically’ unites the dissolvent quality of thinking with a regard for the political element of natality, “the new beginning inherent in birth”, which is closely connected with the general human capacity of action in the sense of initiative, “the capacity of beginning something anew” (Arendt 1998:9).<sup>155</sup> ‘Thinking politically’ therefore not only retains “the integrity of the constitutive tension between thinking and acting” (Buckler 2007:478), but it demonstrates their mutual bearing by highlighting the ways in which natality, the capacity underlying action’s ability to begin, also informs thinking itself.

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<sup>155</sup> Arendt argues that the uncertainty inherent in new beginnings, that is, the human condition of natality, implicitly prepares us for thinking and understanding events in the absence of guidance from general rules: “a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality. If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action” (Arendt 1994:321).

'Thinking politically' reflects Arendt's turn to Socrates as an exemplar for thinking. This makes it a public-minded and unsettling activity that searches for meaning through reflection, preserving the tension between life in the world and life in the mind by *thinking with reference to the world*. Like Socratic thinking, 'thinking politically' never settles on a single conclusion, and it re-thinks the meaning of the world over and over in response to new experiences: "Authentic political thought necessarily arose, she believed, out of real political events, and had to be re-thought in response to them" (Canovan 1992:5). In this way, 'thinking politically' thinks about the world in order to find meaning in its events while avoiding conceptual closure or rigid statements of truth that make further thinking unnecessary. Closing down the space for thinking would be inconsistent with the intrinsically temporal nature of politics which is neither rigid nor constant, but in a perpetual state of flux. Like Socrates, Arendt does not seek the truth of the world, valuing instead the plurality of disparate opinions that emerge from thinking and reflecting on worldly events. For Arendt, this kind of thinking attains an intersubjective validity insofar as men imaginatively think through the perspectives of others. This has similarities to the Socratic notion that the public discourse of thinking can improve men's *doxa* by subjecting it to a process of questioning to shatter unthinking subjectivity. 'Thinking politically' therefore describes a thinking in relation to the common world, thinking not from an objective position outside it, but moving between equals in the public sphere.

Describing Arendt's thought fragments in terms of their crystallisation as 'thinking politically' attempts to capture Arendt's understanding of thinking as arising from the experiential ground of politics (Buckler 2007:462): "my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts from which to take its bearings" (Arendt 1977:14). Although thinking ends in a generalised statement of meaning (Arendt 1978:199), it begins with particulars, finding meaning in the specific re-telling of a particular event. In this way, 'thinking politically' describes a kind of thinking that responds to the particularity of lived experience, and far from subsuming particulars under universal categories,<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Although philosophy is concerned with universals, Arendt argues that it "would be a mistake to look for such universals in practical-political matters, which always concern particulars; in this field, "general" statements, equally applicable everywhere, immediately degenerate into empty generalities. Action deals with particulars, and only particular statements can be valid in the field of ethics or politics" (1978:200). As such, understanding the world implies understanding the particularity of the

or solving “abstract problems”, it reflects “upon truly significant political events” (Canovan 1978:22). For Arendt, the most significant event of the modern world was totalitarianism and her own thinking was an attempt to make sense of it in a way that remained faithful to *her experience of it* rather than abstracting it to an empty generalisation:

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 (Arendt 1968b:viii).

As this explains, Arendt did not seek to know the truth of totalitarianism but to understand its reality. This in itself is a political exercise as, according to Arendt, the reality of the common world emerges from the intersection of a plurality of perspectives:

Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear (Arendt 1998:57).

This implies that in attempting to grasp reality, ‘thinking politically’ takes account of the plurality of perspectives which enable worldly reality to “truly and reliably appear”. By thinking not just through her own experience, but through the perspectives of others, Arendt hoped to account for totalitarianism in a way that enabled her to comprehend it in its many-sidedness (Arendt 2005:167). In this way, ‘thinking politically’ describes a thinking situated in a political context, making it capable of capturing the reality of the common world by thinking in the place of others.

By combining elements of thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world as ‘thinking politically’, Arendt liberates thinking from the subjective and private conditions of the mind, re-orienting it to the world and the plurality of men. By taking account of the viewpoints of others, the political thinker is able to “*understand* – not to

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events and artefacts that constitute it rather than abstracting them to empty generalisations. Events therefore not only form the backdrop of Arendt’s work but they form the basis for her political thought (Canovan 1992:2).

understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another's standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects" (Arendt 1977:51). In contrast to the Platonic provision of standards and rules that enable us to understand the realm of human affairs in terms of a single unifying principle (Arendt 2005:37-38), this does not mean reconciling perspectives or subsuming them under universal categories. Rather, it means taking account of the common world by "going visiting", thinking *through* the perspectives of others, not by "blindly adopt[ing] the actual views of those who stand somewhere else...but [by] being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not" (Arendt 1977:241). In this way, 'thinking politically' approaches an understanding of the world and the affairs of men from a vantage point inside the world, not as an active participant, but as a spectator.

This involvement of the spectator highlights the place of Arendt's understanding of storytelling in 'thinking politically'. As we have seen, Arendt's storyteller is a spectator rather than an actor, and from his vantage point outside action he is able to "straighten out the stories", putting into words what has happened so as to reveal the meaning of events (Arendt 1978:133). Arendt's storyteller achieves a Homeric impartiality by telling the story of an event "from the plurality of perspectives that constitute it as a public phenomenon" (Disch 1993:666), moving beyond individual interests and subjectivities to take the viewpoints of others into account. In this way, storytelling also makes use of representative thinking or thinking with an enlarged mentality, which are key elements of judging. As a consequence, the story itself is an expression of the reality of the world all hold in common. It is this kind of overlap between thinking, judging, storytelling and the world which we are re-imagining in terms of their crystallisation as 'thinking politically'.

However, the relationship between Arendt's understanding of thinking and storytelling is especially significant here as it suggests that storytelling is both the form that 'thinking politically' takes and the means by which this thinking can be expressed to others. This makes 'thinking politically' a process of combining fragments of experience in response to the events of the world, constructing narratives that reveal their meaning rather than finding empty truths. It also implies that the political thinker "has to be a good storyteller" (Hill 1979b:298), so as to think with themselves about

what has happened, to think with others to gain a sense of reality, and to communicate this thinking and understanding to the world.

By combining Arendt's thought fragments of thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world, 'thinking politically' not only makes use of the conceptual connections that have already appeared, but it makes clearer their mutual bearing by capturing their overlapping and interconnected elements. In doing so, 'thinking politically' enables each of its constituent fragments to provide reciprocal illumination while still "glittering with inexhaustible significance" of its own (see Canovan 1992:5). That is, it allows us to see with more clarity the meaning and intent of Arendt's own thinking which, by its very nature, is slippery and difficult to grasp. 'Thinking politically' helps us to capture Arendt's attempt to forge a space for thinking in politics by acknowledging that while thinking and acting are contrasting activities, they are "equally central aspects of our experience" (Buckler 2007:465). 'Thinking politically' therefore demonstrates the way in which Arendt conceives of a thinking that can maintain a connection with the world and the plurality of men by combining multiple perspectives, thinking representatively through the standpoints of others so as to achieve an enlarged mentality. In addition, 'thinking politically' is true to Arendt's understanding of a thinking which reflects on the events of the world by withdrawing from the world of appearances to a condition of solitude.

This combination of contradictory elements means that 'thinking politically' is consistent with Arendt's description of the "paradoxical condition" of thinking that requires men to withdraw from the world without being able to leave it completely (Arendt 1978:45). As such, 'thinking politically' allows us to "switch from togetherness to solitude and back again" as both states comprise the human condition (Heller 1989:145) and reflect our dual roles as thinkers and actors. In this way, 'thinking politically' reflects Arendt's commitment to preserving the range of human experience despite its inherent tensions. This makes our description of Arendt's thinking as 'thinking politically' faithful to Arendt's desire to preserve different human experiences, demonstrating how tensions within thinking's need to withdraw from the world in order to reflect on it do not need to be resolved, but rather, they reflect the depth of the human condition from which incommensurable experiences emerge.

## ARENDT'S THINKING AS 'THINKING POLITICALLY'

As we have seen, Arendt's own thinking is an open and creative endeavour congruous with the activity of storytelling that finds meaning while avoiding conceptual closure. Much of this thinking stemmed from Arendt's desire to understand a world in which events such as totalitarianism could occur. Yet, although she thought about these worldly events, Arendt hoped only to find understanding *for herself*.

If I am to speak very honestly I would have to say: When I am working, I am not interested in how my work might affect people...What is important for me is to understand...What is important to me is the thought process itself. As long as I have succeeded in thinking something through, I am personally quite satisfied (Arendt 1994:3).

This suggests that Arendt's own thinking embraces her notion of 'thinking without banisters', and she seeks to think for herself without providing banisters that dictate the thinking of others. As such, Arendt made no attempt to provide normative foundations for politics or to prescribe particular or preconceived responses to political events. To do so would be incompatible with her own understanding of thinking, as it would be akin to providing banisters which preclude others for thinking for themselves. In light of this, "it would be inappropriate to attempt to derive from Arendt some blueprint or definitive agenda for political theory. Such blueprints were, on Arendt's own view, unhelpful, closing down the space for judgment and inhibiting our capacity to think for ourselves without 'crutches'" (Buckler 2007:479).

This suggests that approaching Arendt's political theory looking for a definitive system to hold onto, that is, a banister, is contrary to both Arendt's notion and practice of thinking as a free activity that responds to the particularity of worldly experience. As a consequence, although we may describe Arendt's thinking in terms of the crystallisation 'thinking politically', we must resist the temptation to "transform the constellation of interrelated distinctions by which she has penetrated the depths of the past into a systematic set of categories by which to continue or re-establish the tradition of discourse called political theory" (Draenos 1979:220). To put this another way, while 'thinking politically' emerges from Arendt's work, we must not see it as a systematic category or banister as this would be contrary to Arendt's intention.

Instead, 'thinking politically' is an attempt to remain faithful to both Arendt's understanding and practice of thinking by retaining a fidelity to the freedom of the thinking activity, neither enclosing nor prescribing thinking, but illuminating the way in which thinking and politics exist in Arendt's work as a "constitutive tension". In other words, although 'thinking politically' re-combines Arendt's thought fragments, it neither constrains Arendt's own thinking nor the activity of thinking itself. It simply attempts to describe the way in which Arendt understands the possibility of a relationship between thinking and politics by crystallising elements of storytelling and judging with thinking and the world.

In the absence of a definitive system in Arendt's work, Buckler suggests that it is more appropriate "to find in her engagement (as she did in the engagements of others) *an exemplification* of political free thinking" (2007:479, my emphasis).<sup>157</sup> In other words, the way in which Arendt herself thought, can be seen as a "perfect characterization" of her own understanding of thinking (Draenos 1979:212), in that it emerged from her own experience, was deliberately unconstrained by banisters, and avoided claims to ultimate truth. This, in turn, goes some way to explaining the difficulty we are having with finding a concrete way to express Arendt's understanding of thinking and its political context. By practicing what we are now describing as 'thinking politically' herself, Arendt's own thinking resists de-contextualisation, that is, her thinking is embedded in a particular context, her experience of the world, in an attempt to find understanding rather than looking to define systematic rules that can be abstracted to a comprehensive theory. As such, the reason we are having difficulty grasping Arendt's concepts is that Arendt herself does not think in a manner consistent with generalisation or systematisation devoid of context.

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<sup>157</sup> This claim emerges from Buckler's argument that Arendt's political theory has a tentative character in terms of its relationship to politics and plurality, that is, that it must be "suitably circumspect or 'tentative'" in order to take account of plurality, to be faithful to it (2007:462). This thesis runs along similar lines in many ways, and indeed, Buckler's article made key conceptual links that have been useful to us here. In contrast to Buckler, however, this thesis argues that Arendt's political theory is "tentative" because of its nature as *thinking*. Thinking itself is characterised by an open-endedness and a quality of uncertainty in that it does not produce fixed or final conclusions. Further to this, thinking itself, understood as 'thinking politically', takes account of plurality by thinking representatively to gain an enlarged mentality. As such, Buckler's "political free thinking" (2007:479) emphasises the *political* nature of Arendt's thinking, whereas this thesis emphasises the freedom of thinking itself, arguing that it has political dimensions.

This interpretation is suggested by Arendt's assertion that all thinking arises from experience, and her repeated admission that her own thinking emerges as a reaction to the particular events of the modern world. For example, Arendt thinks about Eichmann and his role in totalitarianism in order to understand what had happened, to comprehend her own experience. While this enabled her to find new meaning in general concepts such as thoughtlessness and evil, this meaning only really makes sense in the context of these events and Arendt's thinking about them, that is, their meaning is tied to Arendt's activity of thinking, her particular story of Eichmann as an expression of her own thinking. This means that the kind of analysis this thesis is attempting here is contra-Arendt in the sense that it goes against Arendt's understanding of thinking, the very thing that it is trying to understand, by de-contextualising her thoughts and trying to abstract from them a general concept that retains particular meaning. Indeed, it is on this basis that this thesis has suggested a crystallisation of Arendt's thought fragments in terms of 'thinking politically'.

Although synthesising Arendt's thoughts in a new form that we can call 'thinking politically' takes Arendt's thinking out of context and therefore represents a very un-Arendtian approach to thinking, it is only by doing so that we have been able to see how the interconnections in Arendt's thought contain an overall meaning when considered in the context of Arendt's thinking as a whole. However, it is not so much the *concept* 'thinking politically' that is important here, as the *activity* it describes, which contains multiple elements of thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world. In other words, it is not so much this notion of 'thinking politically' that we should take away from this discussion, as the way in which it provides a description of Arendt's understanding and practice of thinking. In this way, the real treasure of Arendt's work is not the concept 'thinking politically', but her *example* of the activity of 'thinking politically' which captures the way in which she thinks through various events and concepts. This suggests that Arendt's concepts are illustrative of 'thinking politically' rather than conclusive or systematic statements, as expressions of this nature would preclude further thinking. In our approach to Arendt's concepts we must therefore keep in mind that they are part of the *activity of thinking* and not its results, that is, we must maintain a clear focus on Arendt's activity of thinking and its immediate context.

This focus on the *activity* of ‘thinking politically’ provides an explanation for the contradictions and uncertainties in Arendt’s work, as these result from the open-ended and dissolvent nature of thinking about the world. By presenting us with such perplexities, Arendt is exemplifying the activity of ‘thinking politically’. At the same time, however, these same perplexities work as a call for us to “stop and think” in order to make sense of them. In this way, by *practising* ‘thinking politically’, Arendt resembles the Socratic ‘electric ray’, infecting us with the perplexities she herself feels so that we might be moved to think for ourselves. In other words, Arendt’s own thinking not only thinks through her own perplexities to find reconciliation with the world *for herself*, but it provides a demonstration of thinking that impels us to come to our own conclusions: “in eschewing a doctrinaire position, and by opening up new horizons for thought, Hannah Arendt taught us, by her example, to think for ourselves” (Stern and Yarbrough 1978:380).<sup>158</sup> This makes Arendt an exemplar for ‘thinking politically’.

This sits well with Arendt’s contention that Socrates “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 “values” to direct their further conduct” (Arendt 2003:173). In this same way, it would appear that Arendt herself believed that engaging in a dialogue and thinking *about thinking* had the ability to make us more thoughtful, therefore addressing modern thoughtlessness not with instructions or prescriptions on *what* to think, but by exemplifying thinking in such a way as to encourage us to think for ourselves. This makes ‘thinking politically’ a potential remedy for modern thoughtlessness. With these things in mind, this thesis suggests that ‘thinking politically’ provides a means by which we can reconsider Arendt’s work in a manner faithful to both Arendt’s own understanding and practice of thinking. As already explained, this does not mean treating ‘thinking politically’ as a banister that constrains our own thinking about

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<sup>158</sup> Arendt considered her work “exercises” in thinking, demonstrating for us *the process of thinking* rather than thinking’s results. For example, she describes her thinking in *Between Past and Future* this way: “The following six exercises are such exercises, and their only aim is to gain experience in *how* to think; they do not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold. Least of all do they intend to retie the broken thread of tradition or to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between past and future. Throughout these exercises the problem of truth is kept in abeyance; the concern is solely with how to move in this gap – the only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear” (Arendt 1977:14). By framing her own thinking activity in this way, Arendt is able to impel us to think without needing to rigidly define the boundaries of this thinking.

Arendt's thinking, but rather, exploring its perplexities by thinking *with* Arendt, but *for* ourselves. Thinking *with* Arendt implies that we must embrace the freedom and open-endedness of 'thinking politically', looking not for definitive or rigid truths, but sharing in the activity of thinking and reflecting on the world and Arendt's own thinking about it. In other words, thinking *with* Arendt demands that we, too, must 'think politically'. It is this circularity that makes 'thinking politically' so difficult to hold onto.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This chapter set out to investigate the meaning of Arendt's understanding of thinking in terms of its consequences for her approach to political theory. To make clearer Arendt's conception of thinking, this chapter began by examining Arendt's rejection of the Platonic tradition. In Arendt's appraisal, the Platonic tradition of political philosophy was founded on a selective account of human experience and a denial of the political nature of the human condition. Arendt contends that the dual events of the discovery of contemplation and the death of Socrates led Plato to turn away from politics and the affairs of men entirely, as he despised the contingent and haphazard nature of political opinion. This led to the construction of a hierarchy where the *vita contemplativa* was seen as superior to the *vita activa*, and all activities, including thinking, were equally directed at satisfying the philosopher's way of life (Arendt 1998:14). However, by using Plato's opposition between truth and opinion, Arendt demonstrates the fundamental incompatibility of contemplating and thinking, disentangling thinking from philosophy and re-thinking the relationship of thinking and politics. In contrast to the hierarchy of thought over action in the Platonic tradition, Arendt argues that neither thought nor action can be made to answer to the other, and she embraces their incommensurability as a means of preserving different modes of human experience.

Following on from here, we suggested that Arendt's investigation of the opposition between truth and opinion was also an attempt to distinguish between two kinds of thinking, "philosophical thinking which is related to truth and political thinking which is concerned rather with opinions and judgements" (Canovan 1992:265). In contrast to

Plato who introduced “absolute standards into the realm of human affairs” (Arendt 2005:8), Arendt argues that universal truths are not applicable to politics as it is contingent on the haphazard and spontaneous actions of men. Further to this, she contends that opinion is not merely an expression of subjectivity, and that valid opinions can be “arrived at by discursive, representative thinking” (Arendt 1977:247). This gives opinions an intersubjective quality where men think through the perspectives of others to account for reality. Arendt’s conception of political thinking therefore resembles the process of forming an enlarged mentality which is a condition for judging. It also incorporates storytelling in terms of the combination of perspectives to gain a Homeric impartiality, and the Socratic notion of improving men’s *doxa* through public questioning. In this way, Arendt’s political thinking returned us to the conceptual connections we had uncovered in the previous chapter – between thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world – demonstrating for us the significance of their interconnections for an understanding of the place of thinking in Arendt’s political theory.

Despite our attempts to “dismantle” Arendt’s thought fragments regarding thinking, the persistent nature of their overlapping suggested that they existed as part of something more complex, a “new crystallized form and shape” hidden in the depths of Arendt’s work (see Arendt 1968a:205-206). We called this “shape” ‘thinking politically’ in an attempt to capture Arendt’s understanding of a thinking that is inherently political. By describing Arendt’s understanding of thinking as ‘thinking politically’ we have been able to get a firmer grasp on Arendt’s understanding of thinking and its relationship to politics, making clearer the connections between various activities of the human condition. Perhaps even more importantly, by capturing Arendt’s thought fragments as ‘thinking politically’ we have been able to shed light on *what Arendt was doing*, that is, we are better able to appreciate Arendt’s unique practice of thinking as ‘thinking politically’. By ‘thinking politically’ herself, Arendt demonstrates her understanding of thinking by example, leaving nothing fixed or definitive, but rather, thinking through a series of modern experiences. In doing so, however, Arendt’s own thinking demonstrates for us not *what* we should think, providing no rigid conceptual banisters for us to hold onto, but the way in which we can *think for ourselves*:

We read her today precisely because of the problematic distinctions and juxtapositions she creates, and not despite them; we read her because she helps us think politically, not because she answers our political questions (Benhabib 2003:232).

However, the nature of 'thinking politically' is such that it was embedded at the "bottom of the sea" of Arendt's work, and finding it required a conscious diving for it, "grasping what lies beneath" the distinctions at the surface. Traditional approaches to thinking prevent this hidden element from being readily seen, and it is only by thinking *with* Arendt, that is, by 'thinking politically' ourselves, that we have been able to find it.

This narrative investigation of Arendt's understanding of thinking and its relationship to her understanding of politics and the human condition has therefore resulted in our bringing to the surface 'thinking politically', a crystallisation of Arendt's thought fragments that captures both her understanding and practice of thinking and its connections to other elements of the human condition. While this de-contextualises Arendt's thinking in the sense that it abstracts from it a generalisation, 'thinking politically' offers us a means of capturing Arendt's *practice* of thinking which demonstrates her understanding through example. Rather than a rigid banister that closes down the space for further thinking about Arendt's work, 'thinking politically' enables us to hold Arendt as an exemplar for a way of thinking that offers new and multiple ways of reading Arendt's work by 'thinking politically' about it ourselves.

Returning then, to *The Human Condition* and Arendt's central proposition "to think what we are doing" (1998:5), we can now see that Arendt frames the book in terms of her own thinking. This suggests that far from attempting to develop a systematic appraisal of the human condition, Arendt seeks only to reflect on modern experiences to find their meaning. Nevertheless, the central content of *The Human Condition* suggests that the book is Arendt's attempt to reclaim, re-understand, and reinvigorate our understanding of general human capacities in the face of the modern world and its threats to their existence *by thinking about them*. However, re-reading the book in light of 'thinking politically' offers us a new way of revealing Arendt's approach, providing new insight into her thinking as demonstrating understanding by example. As such, although it may have been read as an outdated call to reinvigorate

ancient Greek political life, by reconsidering *The Human Condition* in light of these insights, the following chapter argues that it is really an *exercise in 'thinking politically'* that demonstrates the general human capacity of thinking by thinking about the general human capacities of labour, work and action. In the process, Arendt offers a remedy for modern thoughtlessness by showing us how we can reclaim the activity of thinking *for ourselves*.

# Re-considering *The Human Condition*

The illumination of incongruities is not tantamount to the solution of problems arising from a relatively closed conceptual and empirical context. It only answers the question of how these incongruities come to appear, that is, what completely different intentions lead to such contradictions, incomprehensible as they are to systematic thought. We must let the contradictions stand as what they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them.

Hannah Arendt  
*Love and Saint Augustine*  
(1996:7)

Part II has told a story about thinking over two chapters. It began by situating itself in relation to some seemingly contradictory comments regarding thinking and thoughtlessness in the 'Prologue' of *The Human Condition*. To recap, Arendt asserts that her consideration of the human condition is "obviously...a matter of thought" (1998:5), which appears to be consistent with her proposition for the book, to "think what we are doing" (1998:5). Yet, Arendt leaves thinking "out of these present considerations", despite suggesting that it is "the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable" (1998:5). At the same time, Arendt suggests that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (1998:5), which is at odds with her opening description of modern advances in science and technology which presumably result from men's ability to think and apply knowledge. It is also inconsistent with her own aim to "think what we are doing" (1998:5). As

such, our attempt to lay bare Arendt's initial comments presented us with a series of key questions: What does Arendt mean by *thinking*? Why does she think that modern men are *thoughtless*? If thinking is man's highest capacity, why does Arendt explicitly refuse to consider it? And, if a reconsideration of the human condition is *obviously* a matter of thought, then what role does thinking play in *The Human Condition*?

In response to the contradictory nature of Arendt's comments, we referred to an assertion she made elsewhere:

Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers in whom they can be discounted. In the work of great authors they lead into the very center of their work and are the most important clue to a true understanding of their problems and new insights (Arendt 1977:25).

In light of this, Part II began with the suggestion that the contradictions and inconsistencies surrounding thinking and thoughtlessness "lead into the very centre" of *The Human Condition*, and unravelling them gives us "the most important clue to a true understanding" of the problems of the book and new insight into its meaning. As such, Part II proceeded to disentangle Arendt's thoughts on thinking and thoughtlessness by turning to two exemplars: Socrates and Eichmann. Despite our attempt to "dismantle" Arendt's thought fragments regarding thinking (see Arendt 1978:212), the persistent overlapping of concepts suggested that they also exist in a new crystallised "form and shape" (see Arendt 1968a:205) that contains meaning of its own. We called this "new shape" 'thinking politically' in an attempt to capture Arendt's understanding of a thinking that is inherently political. 'Thinking politically' describes the crystallisation of Arendt's thought fragments of thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world, and it attempts to preserve the distinctions between activities while "glittering" with its own complex and unique meaning (see Canovan 1992:5). As both a concept and an activity, 'thinking politically' captures Arendt's understanding and practice of thinking, illuminating not only *what* she thought about thinking, but *how* she thought about politics.

Here, at the conclusion of Part II, we have reached the point where our story must draw together the insights gained over the course of the previous two chapters to satisfy our original aim: to re-consider *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking. This also speaks to the findings of Part I, where our investigation of *The Human Condition*

via the concept general human capacities suggested that the key to making sense of the book appears to lie in thinking. In light of our discovery of ‘thinking politically’, this chapter returns to *The Human Condition*, re-reading it armed with a better appreciation of Arendt’s understanding and practice of thinking and its relation to politics. By doing so, it argues that *The Human Condition* is really a work about thinking which presents the *activity* of thinking as a creative, open-ended endeavour congruous with the activity of storytelling, and Arendt provides a sketch of the human condition without attempting to define it. This is consistent with our earlier suggestion that we can reclassify the book in terms of its genre as narrative rather than a philosophical treatise.

By considering general human capacities, Arendt implicitly recovers genuine thinking, *distinguishing* it from modern conceptions of thinking based on scientific knowledge or progress and philosophical understandings that aim at contemplation, and *demonstrating* it by thinking about the human condition in the modern world. In this way, this thesis argues that *The Human Condition* is an *exercise* in ‘thinking politically’ that reinvigorates the distinctions between general human capacities, demonstrating for us not *what* we should think, but how we might approach thinking about the human condition *for ourselves*. In light of this, this chapter examines the ways in which Part I and Part II of this thesis intersect and overlap, suggesting that Arendt’s consideration of general human capacities is best viewed in light of her understanding of thinking, crystallised as ‘thinking politically’. As a result, this chapter attempts to weave the two parts of this thesis together, considering the ways in which the thought fragments we have separated across this thesis provide reciprocal illumination. It suggests that while we can consider fragments of Arendt’s thought separately, a “rich and strange” meaning lies in the manner of their connection (see Nordmann 2007:778).

As a starting point for these conclusions, let us begin by returning to two of our original questions: What does Arendt mean by *thinking*? And why does she think that modern men are *thoughtless*? In Chapter 5, we uncovered Arendt’s understanding of thinking by examining her exemplar for thoughtlessness, Adolf Eichmann. For Arendt, thoughtlessness refers not merely to an absence of thought, but a deficiency in thinking, a reliance on “truths” which have “become trivial and empty”, which

demonstrates the heedlessness, recklessness, and complacency of men (1998:5). By contrast, Arendt's understanding of thinking has its basis in the freedom from all external frameworks, that is, Arendt's understanding of thinking implies 'thinking without banisters'. Thinking without banisters suggests a thinking that is open and creative, and unlike the thoughtless preoccupation with "truths", Arendt understands thinking as an activity that does not produce fixed or final conclusions. Instead, Arendt argues that thinking is best characterised by "'motion in a circle" – the only movement, that is, that never reaches an end or results in an end product" (1978:124). For this reason, Arendt's exemplar for thinking is Socrates, who was solely concerned with the experience of thinking rather than its results, and "to have talked something through, to have talked something...seemed result enough" (Arendt 2005:16). In this way, the activity of thinking is endless and resultless, and Arendt emphasises the performance, the *activity* of thinking, which leaves nothing behind.

In Chapter 5, we also uncovered the basis for Arendt's claim that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics of our time (1998:5). At the outset, this seemed a puzzling statement given that Arendt opened *The Human Condition* with a discussion of the advent of space exploration and advances in modern science and technology. However, Arendt's description of the scientific pursuits of men in the modern world serves the important purpose of drawing to our attention the modern *scientific ideal*. The modern reverence of science and cognition, which fuels men's desire to escape the human condition as it has been given, has seen it become the model for all thinking (Arendt 1978:151). This runs along the same lines as the Platonic tradition which was founded on the assumption that a single concern underlies all human activities – the contemplation of eternal truth – and the subsequent re-definition of all human activities on these terms (Arendt 1998:17). While Arendt acknowledges that science results in a variety of unprecedented discoveries and advances, her understanding of thoughtlessness suggests that the scientific ideal is itself a *banister*, establishing particular scientific guidelines which preclude men from thinking freely and creatively for themselves. This thoughtless dependence on science and our insatiable desire to know, not only mean that men no longer experience the activity of thinking, but they are no longer aware of just what thinking really is. It is against this thoughtlessness of the modern world that Arendt proposes "to think what we are doing" (1998:5).

While Arendt is clearly concerned about the developments of the modern world in terms of the loss of human experience (1998:321), her emphasis on thinking and thoughtlessness suggests that what really troubles her are not so much the advances in science and technology themselves, as the way in which the combination of the scientific ideal and the loss of human activities from the range of ordinary human experience has impeded modern men's ability to *understand* the human condition, leading them to the point where they wish to escape it altogether (Arendt 1998:2). This has political implications as men are unable to experience meaningfulness or appreciate the depth of the human condition. As such, the images of modern advances that Arendt presents in the 'Prologue' act as a warning of the "imminent loss of the permanence of the human condition" (Moruzzi 2000:11), and the corresponding and "irretrievable loss" of the general human capacities that grow out of it (see Arendt 1998:6). In the face of this possibility, Arendt reconsiders the specific activities of labour, work and action, telling a story about their constellation throughout history in the context of the modern world and the inability of modern men to understand their distinctions. In this way, *The Human Condition* is Arendt's attempt to reclaim, re-understand and reinvigorate man's general human capacities in response to the modern world and its threats to their existence, in the process, re-asserting the depth of the human condition and exploring the political implications of any move to abandon it.

At the beginning of Chapter 1, this thesis suggested that we can best read *The Human Condition* as a kind of storytelling, as it is a "creative act of rethinking and reappropriating the past" (Benhabib 2003:x) in an attempt to give depth to the present. In our discussion of the relationship between storytelling and thinking in Chapter 5, we found that Arendt understands stories as both "the form that my remembering and thinking with myself takes" (Hill 1979b:289), and the way in which I can communicate this thinking to others. This suggests that Arendt's narrative attempt to reclaim, re-understand and reinvigorate general human capacities is really an expression of *her own thinking* about general human capacities in the context of the modern world. In other words, when read in light of her understanding of thinking as storytelling, Arendt's narrative exploration of general human capacities means that she *frames The Human Condition* in terms of thinking. This emphasis on thinking is made more explicit by Arendt's "simple" proposal "to *think* what we are doing"

(1998:5, my emphasis). Here, Arendt “describes the very project of *The Human Condition* as an exercise of thinking” (Bernstein 2000:282, my emphasis).

This is a striking contrast to Arendt’s assertion that thoughtlessness is “among the outstanding characteristics of our time” (1998:5). Here, Arendt contends that thinking is “what we are *not* doing” for ourselves. As a result, modern men are incapable of understanding the human condition, and they are therefore unaware of the range of general human capacities that go unfulfilled in modern life. These comments on thinking and thoughtlessness combined, suggest that *The Human Condition* is Arendt’s attempt to think in the context of the modern world, where thinking is inhibited by the complacent and thoughtless adherence to banisters which leave men incapable of experiencing the depth inherent in the human condition or comprehending its meaning (Arendt 1998:4). As such, despite explicitly declining to consider thinking, “the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable” (1998:5),<sup>159</sup> thinking is the fundamental basis of *The Human Condition* in the sense that it is an exercise *in* thinking that highlights the consequences of modern thoughtlessness. By telling a story about her own thinking, Arendt attempts to reinvigorate men’s capacity to think *for themselves*.

This notion that *The Human Condition* is an exercise in thinking goes some way to explaining the form of the book, and the fluid and unstable nature of Arendt’s concepts. The nature of thinking, as Arendt understands it, as “motion in a circle” (1978:124), suggests that Arendt’s own practice of thinking is an end in itself, rather than a means to produce a systematic or concrete political theory expressed as a series of key conceptual definitions. Arendt’s emphasis on the *performance* of thinking suggests that her own practice of thinking does not aim to set down rigid guidelines or definitions of any particular category or concept, and instead, it is simply concerned with *thinking about them*. This is consistent with Arendt’s turn to Socrates as the exemplar for thinking and his contention that an unexamined life is not worth living (Arendt 1992:37; Lear 1999:4). However, readings which highlight the

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<sup>159</sup> Arendt couches this omission of thinking from the book this way: “It deals only with the most elementary articulations of the human condition, with those activities that traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of every human being. For this, and other reasons, the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable, the activity of thinking, is left out of these present considerations” (Arendt 1998:5).

fluidity or ambiguity of Arendt's concepts (Pitkin 1998:170), seem to want to find these kinds of guidelines or definitions in terms of a series of banisters to hold onto, a concrete set of rules that generalise Arendt's thinking into a coherent political system that can be transposed onto any context. This is often expressed as a hostility towards the relation of Arendt's political thought to practice (Canovan 1978:8), and the questionable applicability of her theory to practical politics.

A key example of this kind of interpretation can be found in the transcript of a 1972 conference on 'The Work of Hannah Arendt', at which Arendt herself declined to be a guest of honour in favour of being a participant in the discussion (Hill in Arendt 1979:301). In part of the dialogue, Bernstein challenged Arendt's description of the public realm, rejecting the notion that *in practice* the social could be distinguished from the public:

But you know darn well that – at least for us, now – one can't consistently make that distinction! Although we can appreciate the distinction, the two are inextricably connected...It's a question of whether you can dissociate or separate the social and the political consistently now (Bernstein in Arendt 1979:316-317).

Arendt replied:

I think that is certain. There are things where the right measures can be figured out. These things can really be administered and are not then subject to public debate. Public debate can only deal with things which – if we want to put it negatively – we cannot figure out with certainty. Otherwise, if we can figure it out with certainty, why do we all need to get together? (Arendt 1979:317).

As this exchange demonstrates, Arendt deliberately avoids setting rigid guidelines or definitions regarding the precise nature of public, private or social realms, preferring instead to leave this open to the contingency of circumstance:

Life changes constantly, and things are constantly there that want to be talked about. At times people living together will have affairs that belong in the realm of the public – "are worthy to be talked about in public." What these matters *are* at any historical *moment* is probably *utterly* different (Arendt 1979:316).

In other words, Arendt contends that the issues that might belong in the public realm are contingent on the political context in which they arise. This sits well with Arendt's

assertion that all thinking arises from particular political experiences (1977:14), and that thinking and acting have a mutual bearing on one another: “I do believe that thinking has some influence on action. But on acting man. Because it is the same ego that thinks and the same ego that acts” (Arendt 1979:304-305).

However, Bernstein later said that “Arendt’s responses to this line of questioning [were] evasive and feeble – what is worse, they tend to obfuscate the issues” (1986:251). He was unsatisfied by what he considered Arendt’s inability to provide a more concrete distinction between *what is* public or social. At the same conference, Wellmer was similarly troubled by Arendt’s division between political and social:

It seems to me that even the social problems in our society are unavoidably political problems. But if this is true, then, of course, it would also be true that a distinction between the social and the political in our society is impossible to draw (Wellmer in Arendt 1979:318).

Arendt’s reply was of a similar tone:

Let’s take the housing problem. The social problem is certainly adequate housing. But the question of whether this adequate housing means integration or not is *certainly* a political question. With every one of these questions there is a double face. And one of these faces should not be subject to debate. There shouldn’t be any debate about the question that everybody should have decent housing (Arendt 1979:318).

Although here Arendt makes a specific reference to the issue of housing, she declines to strictly confine it to one realm or the other, suggesting instead that all issues have “a double face”. Whether housing might belong in the public or social realm is dependent on its immediate context. Further to this, while particular issues, such as housing, can be useful as illustrations in the sense that they give us something to hold onto (Arendt 2003:143), as we saw in our discussion of judging in Chapter 5, examples provide a particular expression of a generality *without* reducing it to a universal category. As such, although examples illuminate “slippery” concepts (Arendt 2003:171), they serve only to *guide* thinking and judging, and they do not provide rigid or prescriptive conceptual definitions.

In an explanation of concepts themselves, Arendt argues that “*the word “house” is something like a frozen thought which thinking must unfreeze, defrost as it were,*

whenever it wants to find out its original meaning” (2003:172-173). Here, Arendt means that all concepts, including simple ones like “house”, are thought-things”, and in order to find their meaning we must “unfreeze” them by subjecting them to the process of thinking. However, this thinking itself is always embedded in a particular context. In this way, thinking resists de-contextualisation in the sense that its meaning is tied to the activity of thinking and therefore the specific events and circumstances from which this thinking arose (see Luban 1994:80). This means that concepts such as public and private realms are contingent on the particularity of circumstances, and far from being able to produce a one-size-fits-all definition, in order to find their meaning we must think about them for ourselves. In addition, attempts to abstract a general set of rules and banisters from thinking are not true to its spirit as a free and open-ended activity that searches for the meaning of particular events. Attempts of this nature work *against* thinking as Arendt understands it, closing down the space for further thinking by providing a rigid statement of “truth”. This is contrary to thinking itself, which according to Arendt, “relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules” (2003:177).

The conceptual openness of thinking, as Arendt understands it, therefore provides an explanation for her explicit refusal to provide an answer to the “preoccupations and perplexities” of practical politics in favour of offering the “opinion of one person” (1998:5).<sup>160</sup> While *The Human Condition* is Arendt’s narrative re-telling of the different historical understandings of the human condition and man’s fundamental capacities, Arendt’s conception of thinking suggests that she does not seek to close down the space for thinking by offering a universal or single truth. In fact, by examining the “various constellations” of the *vita activa* throughout history, Arendt explores the particularity of various historical locations and the circumstances that arise from them, subsequently considering their effects on understandings of the human condition. In this way, Arendt’s thinking opens itself up to a plurality of perspectives while remaining responsive to the particularity of her own political circumstances, and her own desire to think and find understanding. Providing rigid concepts or a systematic political theory on which others could rely, would preclude

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<sup>160</sup> As we have seen, opinions themselves emerge from the activity of thinking (Arendt 2003:91-92). As such, by offering the “opinion of one person”, Arendt implicitly refers to the framing of *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking.

men from thinking for themselves about the same political events, denying them the opportunity to experience meaningfulness. It would also be contrary to Arendt's understanding of thinking as 'thinking without banisters'.

Criticisms such as those offered by Bernstein and Wellmer miss this crucial point as they seek to abstract from Arendt's work a coherent system or set of rules on which to rely for further thinking. Approaching Arendt's work looking for such rules is to close down the space for thinking about it. In fact, finding them establishes the conditions for thoughtlessness in the sense that men become reliant on banisters of this nature to think in their place (Arendt 2003:178). Given Arendt's rejection of banisters, including those offered by the Platonic tradition, it would appear that her own thinking avoids them, both in the sense of relying on them for instruction in her own thinking, and creating new ones that men might use in her name. For Arendt, the activity of thinking "leaves nothing so tangible behind, and the need to think can therefore never be stilled by the insights of "wise men"" (1978:62). This suggests that Arendt herself does not seek to still the thinking of others by leaving tangible concepts or theories behind. Rather, as we have seen, she seeks to reinvigorate our understanding of general human capacities, especially thinking, so that we might think freely and creatively about them for ourselves.

Readings of *The Human Condition*, and Arendt's work more generally, that emphasise the absence of banisters in terms of a systematic political theory, therefore overlook the centrality of Arendt's *understanding* of thinking to her *practice* of thinking. In other words, readings of *The Human Condition* that look for definitive statements of labour, work and action, or public, private and social realms, and find it lacking, are looking for the wrong thing. Re-reading *The Human Condition* in light of Arendt's understanding of thinking, we can see that for Arendt, thinking is an end in itself, it is performance, or Aristotle's *energeia*, and it leaves "no tangible end product in the world we inhabit" (1978:129). *The Human Condition* is an expression of *Arendt's thinking*, her attempt "to think what we are doing" (1998:5), and while this produces meaning and offers Arendt herself understanding, this is not the same as constructing a systematic political theory. Theories of this nature are akin to knowledge, and as we have seen, Arendt contends that the quest for knowledge is a

quest for irrefutable truth (1978:59). In contrast, Arendt is concerned only with finding meaning.

Arendt's thinking is embedded in the context of the modern world, and *The Human Condition* is Arendt's attempt "to think what we are doing" from "the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears" (1998:5). As such, the meaning of the book is tied to the specific events and circumstances from which Arendt's thinking arose. For Arendt, these events culminate in a question facing modern men regarding "whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge" to exchange the human condition as it has been given for something artificial and man-made (1998:3). It is here that Arendt's commitment to retaining "the mutual bearing of thinking and acting" (Buckler 2007:465), uncovered in Chapter 6, takes on key significance. Arendt's contention that thoughtlessness is "among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (1998:5), draws to our attention the *separation* of thought and action in the modern world. By not thinking what we are doing *for ourselves*, we risk acting in a way that changes the human condition to such an extent that our general human capacities will be "irretrievably lost" (see Arendt 1998:6). This suggests that Arendt's attempt to reinvigorate the distinctions between general human capacities is also an attempt to reinvigorate the *capacity for thinking* by providing an example of its activity. By *demonstrating* the activity of thinking, Arendt provides a remedy for modern thoughtlessness, not in the sense of a rigid prescription, but insofar as it is a call for us to *think for ourselves*. By thinking, men are able to find understanding and experience meaningfulness in the human condition. They are also able "to think what we are doing" *for themselves* (see Arendt 1998:5). This enables modern men to provide their own answers to the question regarding the future of the human condition, therefore re-establishing a relationship between thinking and acting.

This interpretation of *The Human Condition* as a work about thinking therefore comes full circle to the concept 'general human capacities' in the sense that Arendt attempts to reinvigorate the distinctions between capacities *by engaging in the activity of thinking*. In response to the thoughtlessness of modern men, and the corresponding inability to comprehend either the human condition or general human capacities, "Arendt's aim was to remind people of the limits of the human condition as well as of

its possibilities” (Canovan 1992:103). By thinking about the activities of the *vita activa*, Arendt attempts to recapture the lost meaning and political significance of what she considers our most fundamental human capacities. However, Arendt’s thinking avoids conceptual closure by remaining tentative and flexible, concerned with *thinking itself* rather than the attempt to bind or fix particular results or conceptual boundaries. As such, Arendt demonstrates through example how the *activity of thinking* itself might be reclaimed.

This returns us to our notion of ‘thinking politically’, a crystallisation of Arendt’s thought fragments that attempts to capture the combination of thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world that emerges from Arendt’s own thinking. As we saw in the previous chapter, ‘thinking politically’ provides a description of Arendt’s understanding and practice of thinking, the way in which she thinks through various events and concepts. This, combined with our appraisal of *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking, suggests that it is a work of ‘thinking politically’, thinking not in the traditional sense of thinking in service to contemplation, but free from all banisters, thinking in the context of particular action, experience and the circumstances of the modern world. Arendt’s example of ‘thinking politically’ contained in her own thoughts and practice of thinking in *The Human Condition* therefore points to a return to the freedom of genuine thinking, which, in Arendt’s understanding, has a fidelity to the political elements of plurality, dialogue, activity, spontaneity, boundlessness and the world, restoring our ability to understand and experience meaningfulness and recovering the depth inherent in the human condition.

In the sense that it is a demonstration of its activity, *The Human Condition* is an exemplar for ‘thinking politically’. This suggests that Arendt does not “so much tell us what to think or what to do, as she offers an example of how we might *engage in thinking* given the conditions of our world” (Hill 1979a:x, my emphasis). As discussed in Chapter 5, Arendt sees examples as providing guidance for thinking and judging, and they “teach or persuade by inspiration” (1977:248), but they do not constrain or prescribe. Although she thinks *about* general human capacities in *The Human Condition*, she has no interest in thinking *for* us, distancing herself from the pursuit of singular “truths” which make men thoughtless and complacent (1998:5). This suggests that Arendt never intended her thoughts on labour, work and action, or

public, private and social realms to be unthinkingly accepted or applied by us, and rather, by presenting them in the way she does, as fluid expressions of thought in the form of a narrative rather than a systematic political treatise, Arendt really calls on us to *think about them for ourselves*. In this way, Arendt's own thinking offers a remedy to the situation of modern thoughtlessness described in the 'Prologue', not by thinking in our place, but by reclaiming thinking as a political pursuit and general human capacity.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has told a story about *The Human Condition* with the aim of finding new meaning. It has tried to weave together fragments from Arendt's broader corpus and beyond, separating Arendt's categories and distinctions and exploring the manner of their connections in an effort to grasp what lies beneath the surface of a complex book. At first reading, *The Human Condition* contains many independent concepts and ideas on a range of human experiences and activities, and it is full of insights on both the modern world and the history of political thought. However, this complexity presents problems for our ability to understand the book's meaning, and Arendt provides us with a story rather than an answer to the "preoccupations and perplexities" of the modern world (see 1998:5). Nevertheless, Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* with a single intention: to reconsider the human condition in the context of the modern world. Arendt expresses this in terms of the "simple" proposition "to think what we are doing" (1998:5).

This thesis has suggested that we can best read *The Human Condition* as a kind of storytelling, as Arendt creatively re-thinks and re-appropriates "pearls" of the past in order to illuminate the present (see Arendt 1968a:205-206; Benhabib 2003:x). In its pages, Arendt engages in a process of re-discovery, seeking to re-capture and re-distinguish three fundamental activities of the human condition – labour, work and action – so as to rectify what she considers their perversion and conflation by both the Platonic tradition of political philosophy and a series of modern events. According to Arendt, political communities have always made judgements about the relative position and significance of the activities of the *vita activa* (1998:78), and *The Human Condition* tells a story of the "various constellations within the hierarchy of activities

as we know them from Western history” (1998:6), hoping to illuminate both their genuine nature and their relationship to the human condition. However, Arendt’s particular story is told from the vantage point of the modern world, and the “historical analysis” also enables her “to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society” as it presented itself at the beginning of this “new and yet unknown age” (1998:6). This, in turn, allows Arendt to understand why modern men no longer appreciate the distinctions between the activities of the *vita activa*. In response, Arendt’s discussion of the *vita activa* seeks to reclaim the inherent potentialities of the human condition, reminding us of “lost experiences and atrophied capacities” (Buckler 2007:473) that go unrealised in contemporary times.

At the outset, Arendt’s proposition “to think what we are doing” (1998:5) appears to point us in two very different directions: *thinking*, and *what we are doing*. With this in mind, this thesis took two approaches in its reconsideration of *The Human Condition*, which were arranged in two parts. Part I approached *The Human Condition* via the concept general human capacities, the essential activities, faculties or abilities that men are able to exercise, call on or perform by virtue of being human. It began as a response to Arendt’s decision to “confine” her consideration of the human condition to the “general human capacities” that grow out of it (1998:6). However, Chapter 1 suggested that we can reclassify *The Human Condition* in terms of its genre as narrative rather than a philosophical treatise. As such, it declined to give a full account of the text or test the validity of Arendt’s claims in favour of setting down the narrative structure of the book in terms of its exploration of general human capacities. It therefore presented a selective reading of the book that avoided the temptation to find analytical definitions of key terms. Instead, it simply attempted to outline Arendt’s description of the predicament of general human capacities in the modern world, culminating in the modern desire to exchange the human condition as it has been given for something man has made himself (Arendt 1998:2-3).

Looking for a way to make new sense of Arendt’s approach, Part I turned to three other thinkers – Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau – not for clarification on *what* Arendt thought, but to contrast Arendt’s work with other thinkers that share similar concerns. In other words, Part I did not seek to make causal claims about Arendt’s influences or to map the progression of Western philosophical thought. Instead, it set

out to investigate what we might learn by juxtaposing Arendt with some other key thinkers. Approaching other thinkers in this way has a fidelity to Arendt's own turn to the past in which she creatively selects and appropriates fragments from history in order to illuminate the present. By exploring the presence of general human capacities in the work of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, Part I was able to bring together particular understandings that, when grouped together, illuminated the significance of general human capacities to considerations of the human condition more generally. However, it was not so much an overall appraisal of general human capacities that we were interested in, as the ways in which other considerations of the human condition can illuminate Arendt's.

In the conclusion to Part I, we noted that the juxtaposition of Arendt with Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau highlighted some striking differences in Arendt's motivation and approach to a consideration of general human capacities. Where Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau all sought the practical realisation of their ideas as an external end, Arendt rejected practical "preoccupations and perplexities", looking only for understanding, that is, "to think what we are doing" (1998:5). This suggested that the significance of *The Human Condition* lies not in its *content*, general human capacities, but in Arendt's *process of finding understanding*, as it is this that distinguishes Arendt from other thinkers that share similar concerns. In other words, our investigation of *The Human Condition* via the concept general human capacities suggested that the key to making sense of the book lies somewhere in thinking.

This, coupled with Arendt's initial proposal "to *think* what we are doing" (1998:5, my emphasis), led Part II to approach *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking. It took as its point of departure some puzzling statements that Arendt made regarding thinking and thoughtlessness in the opening pages of the book. Chapter 5 looked to make sense of these comments by making use of two exemplars: Eichmann for thoughtlessness, and Socrates for thinking. By doing so, it revealed Arendt's understanding of thoughtlessness as the complacent adherence to banisters which think in our place. In contrast, Arendt understands thinking as a free and open-ended activity that produces neither fixed results or conclusions, but instead, is a process of finding meaning in the events of the world. Appropriating the metaphor of the "pearl

diver” (Arendt 1968a:205), Chapter 5 “pried loose” the additional thought fragments of judging and storytelling looking for further illumination. In Chapter 6, the connections between these thought fragments ultimately yielded ‘thinking politically’, a crystallisation of the related elements of thinking, judging, storytelling, experience and the world that attempts to capture Arendt’s understanding of a thinking that is faithful to the experiential ground of politics.

Re-reading *The Human Condition* in light of Arendt’s understanding of thinking, crystallised as ‘thinking politically’, we were able to see that Arendt implicitly examines the activity of thinking *by example*, that is, by thinking *about* the general human capacities of labour, work and action. This contrasts the thoughtlessness that Arendt believes characterises the modern world (1998:5). As such, by thinking what we are doing, Arendt illuminates what she sees as the deficiencies in modern understandings of the human condition in terms of the inability to distinguish between human activities. This draws to our attention the implications of any decision to exchange the human condition as given for something men have made themselves (Arendt 1998:2-3) in terms of the “irretrievable loss” of general human capacities (Arendt 1998:6). By doing so, however, Arendt also provides a *demonstration* of the way in which we can reinvigorate the fundamental experiences of human life *by thinking*. Like Socrates, Arendt does not seek to think *for us*, or to close down the space for further thinking, as this would be contrary to her understanding of thinking as a free and open-ended activity. Rather, she shows us *how* to think, so that we might think *for ourselves*:

A skillful storyteller teaches her readers to see *as she does*, not *what she does*, affording them the “intoxicating” experience of seeing from multiple perspectives but leaving them with the responsibility to undertake the critical task of interpretation for themselves (Disch 1993:687).

Our discussion of the overlapping elements of thinking and storytelling in Chapter 5 therefore helps to explain the fluid and unstable nature of Arendt’s thinking about the general human capacities of labour, work and action. Far from hoping to prescribe rigid conceptual boundaries, by ‘thinking politically’ herself, Arendt hoped only to reinvigorate our ability to distinguish between capacities by constructing a narrative that reveals meaning. However, this also implies provoking us to think about them for ourselves. In other words, *The Human Condition* acts as a prompt for thinking,

presenting us with a range of “preoccupations and perplexities” so that we might “stop and think” *for ourselves* (see Arendt 2003:105). It also functions as an *example* of thinking, as Arendt understands it, in the sense that it produces no fixed results, reflects on incidents of lived experience, and takes the form of a story.

By thinking *with* Arendt, diving for pearls in order to “pry loose” various thought fragments, and then re-imagining them in their crystallised form (see 1968a:205-206), we have been able to uncover hidden meaning in *The Human Condition* in terms of ‘thinking politically’, an expression of Arendt’s understanding of thinking that combines elements of thinking, judging storytelling, experience and the world. This enables us “to let the contradictions stand as what they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them” (see Arendt 1996:7). However, standing back from our investigation, we can see that this process of uncovering new meaning has, in itself, been an exercise of ‘thinking politically’ in which we re-considered *The Human Condition* in terms of thinking, grasping what lies beneath the surface of its story about general human capacities and finding new significance in its incongruities about thinking. In other words, this thesis has implicitly taken up Arendt’s challenge of thinking, using *The Human Condition* as an exemplar for thinking, and ‘thinking politically’ about the book for itself.

This suggestion that this thesis has been an exercise of ‘thinking politically’ offers a new way to conceptualise the relationship between its two parts. Re-reading our discussion of general human capacities in light of ‘thinking politically’, we can see that Part I *itself* is a demonstration of the kind of thinking discussed in Part II, as it engages in the activity of thinking to think about Arendt’s concept ‘general human capacities’. By thinking through the work of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, Part I essentially constructed an enlarged mentality, thinking through the perspectives of others to gain a sense of impartiality. This process of “going visiting” enabled us to find new understanding by combining a plurality of perspectives. However, the conclusions of Part I regarding *The Human Condition*, suggest that the significance of that Part was not so much its content in terms of its exploration of general human capacities in the work of Arendt, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, as the *way in which we considered it*. In other words, parallel with our investigation, the significance of Part I lies in the thinking itself.

By thinking *with* Arendt, Part I implicitly used Arendt as an exemplar for *the activity of thinking*, thinking through multiple perspectives in order to better understand general human capacities, and finding new ways of engaging with *The Human Condition* that preserve the experience of thinking. Part I therefore has a kind of fidelity to both Part II and *The Human Condition* itself, as like Arendt, it examined general human capacities by engaging in a historical narrative. This appropriation of Arendt's own techniques was an attempt to take a genuinely Arendtian approach to her thought. Following Arendt, this kind of thinking does not seek an "answer", and this thesis attempts to avoid conceptual closure by offering a re-reading of *The Human Condition* that does not claim to read it *for* anyone else. Instead, the thinking done by this thesis is merely "the opinion of one person" (see Arendt 1998:5). It simply suggests that Arendt's point in *The Human Condition* is that we *think* at all, moving beyond the thoughtlessness of the modern world to reinvigorate our general human capacities and reclaim the depth of potential human experience by thinking *for ourselves*.

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