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The Relationship of the Public and Private Realms in the Work of Hannah Arendt

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The Relationship of the Public and Private Realms in the Work of Hannah Arendt

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Introduction

In her corpus of works from the early 1920s to the early 1960s, Hannah Arendt examined the nature of political organization in terms of what makes a political community. Arendt considered herself a political philosopher and studied many, diverse subjects throughout her life, including revolution, totalitarianism, the nature of freedom and action, as well as the capacities of thinking and judging, and political history. She held unorthodox views of works by her contemporaries and by her mentors like Heidegger and Jaspers, and even sought to combine theories of Plato and Kant into a cohesive model of human thought. The list of theorists and philosophers from which she draws inspiration is varied and numerous and includes the likes of Aristotle, Augustine, and Nietzsche. Never did she write a central theory of political philosophy and expound upon its ideas, but instead she weaved a variety of themes throughout the entirety of her life's work. One such theme and the topic of this paper is her view of the properly public and properly private within a polis of participating citizens.

Examining the distinction between the public and private spheres of human living means specifically finding where certain actions and values are properly placed so as to ensure a lasting and active political arena and a private life that meets necessary requisites for existence. For this exercise it is essential to draw from several of Arendt's considerations on human experience to extract cohesive concepts of private and public. The differentiation of the public, or political, from the private is more accurately a discussion of what politics is and what it should be. Arendt seems to consider Athenian democracy as what politics should be – a group of citizens equal

and free to speak and act within a plurality of opinions. Arendt sees the politics of the modern era as a distortion of this political ideal. She sees this distortion in, obviously, the rise of totalitarian governments, but also in the majoritarian systems in which freedom includes freedom from politics and in political regimes or welfare states that function under an administrative role providing biological needs for its populace.

Arendt's thoughts on the meanings of public and private, their evolution through history, and the impact the evolution of meanings made on political organization may seem strange to those who study politics, history, and philosophy on a regular basis. But, the fact remains that Arendt may have brought to light a way of thinking about the public that can restore politics to a subject of interest and genuine involvement and to an avenue to higher thinking for a vast number of citizens. The questions are whether man desires and can conceive of a politics of old at all and whether man places enough value in the government structures prevalent today to avoid any major shifts toward a revival of political organization or even if a revival of political organization is possible in today's society. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the public and private spheres of human life as Arendt sees them, including a specific emphasis on her use of *Billy Budd* and Adolf Eichmann to describe instances in which men engage in activities that threaten the political realm.

The Public and Private, according to Arendt

One of her most frequently referenced reasons for arguing that Athenian politics is what politics should be is that there existed in Athens a perfectly unambiguous division between the *oikos* and the polis. The *oikos* is the household in which economic and

material affairs of the family are carried out. It is also the reproductive and child-rearing arena. It is the realm which contains the feminine and passionate. The polis is the area of speech, action, and ideas. The polis is the citizen-centered area for assembly, debate, and discussion. The *oikos* is the space of necessity; while the polis is the space of freedom. In the *oikos*, the head of the household has the authority to make decisions for the family according to his will. According to Arendt, coercion, hierarchy, and necessity are characteristic of the private realm of the *oikos*. The polis, however, is a legally established arena in which each citizen has a public self that is separate and different from his role as private head of the household.¹ For Arendt the integration of the household into the public has led to the distortion of the political, namely by portraying freedom as freedom from politics and the political as concerned with administrative and economic activities, originates from philosophers making faulty analogies between politics and the *oikos*.² Attempts to explain political phenomenon by using the analogy of familial functioning start the descent from proper politics to social government; and, if the political and public become confused with the household, then it seems logical that political freedom may give way to coercion, hierarchy, and necessity.³

In the *Human Condition*, Arendt argues first that freedom lies in action and then explains three areas of human action that vary in degree of freedom. Authentic or proper politics is defined in its propensity to allow human freedom. According to Arendt, the human behavioral qualities of labor, work, and action form a three-part framework she calls the *vita activa*. Within this framework, labor ranks lowest by not allowing human

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 28-37.

² Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 104-114.

³ Dana Villa, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 183-185.

freedom. Labor consists of the activities necessary for the biological preservation of life. In other words, this area of activity contains the picture of man as *animal laborans*. Arendt sees man in this role as a slave to necessity and opposes those who emphasize man in this role in a political arrangement. The modern era disallows man proper politics because the political realm is preoccupied with economic matters that are by her definition not a public issue. The modern public man cannot act freely and within a truly political realm because economic affairs dominate the bulk of state functioning, whether that state be welfare or capitalist. The second version of man within the *vita activa* is man as *homo faber*. When man assumes this type of behavior, he is acting against natural or biological forces to shape them for his purposes. This idea represents man's ability to create a stable physical and cultural context for his purposes. Work differs from labor because it is public. Work is the means by which man creates the buildings in which politics may take place and by which he makes the laws that emerge from the plurality of opinions in an authentic polis. Because work is necessary before man as a political actor may exist, it is less free than man as a political animal. Arendt builds her concept of man as most free in political action and speech from both the Aristotelian and Augustinian ideas of *zoon politikon*. The ability to speak freely and persuasively with other men is what makes man a political animal. For Arendt and others, the reason politics exists is for the establishment of freedom among men, and freedom is brought into being only in action. Acting in the political realm is being free; therefore politics has value for its own sake.

Proper politics is acting and speaking in public on public matters. From the plurality of opinions that surface in these political activities, an expert opinion

materializes. With the process of politics so opposed to that which occurs in the household, the two cannot be confused without detriment to the freedom of politics.⁴

Arendt gives indication of the distinct separation between public and private in her essay “Public Rights and Private Interests.” She writes:

Throughout his life man moves constantly in two different orders of existence: he moves within what is his own and he moves in a sphere that is common to him and his fellow man. The “public good,” the concerns of the citizen, is indeed the common good because it is located in the world which we have in common without owning it. Quite frequently, it will be antagonistic to whatever we may deem good to ourselves in our private existence.⁵

Two important ideas seem to be present in this statement. The first is that participation in politics is not to promote one’s general welfare or well being, which suggests once again that politics has value for its own sake. The second has already been hinted at and is that the distinction between public and private is more significant than saying that the public interest, a phrase that Arendt held in contempt, is more than just a compilation of private interests. In fact, the public realm is concerned with the world that existed beyond every single man’s life and exists also beyond death. The public realm revolves around action and institutions that exist for their own purposes and that are separate from and may be in opposition to individual, private interests.⁶ In other words, citizens share the public realm and can participate in the shared world and pursue political interests that are clearly separate from individual self-interests and necessities. Arendt uses the example of participating in a jury to further explain the distinction. As jurors, citizens are asked to

⁴ Villa, 184-187.

⁵ Maurizio Passerin D’Entreves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 10-11.

set aside their private, individual interests to uphold the publicly desirable institution of justice. The political community created its own laws to govern and uphold public goals that serve a purpose separate from and longer lasting than any individual's interests, and each generation of citizens serves this public interest apart from private persuasions. However, private interests may tug at the individual acting in public as a citizen. In continuing the example, jury duty may be inconvenient, challenging, or even dangerous in some situations. But, by setting aside private interests, the citizen may act for the public and gain experience of what Arendt coins "public happiness." Public happiness is the enjoyment of participating in conjunction with others as citizens serving the public. The acts of political participation and action allow freedom as well as happiness, according to Arendt. In public speech, action, and convergence with other men as citizens, ideals for the public realm are discovered. These public interests are enacted with the purpose of serving the common world and not necessarily the private, though the two may just as easily hold the same interests as they hold opposite interests.⁷

But what guides this public interest? After establishing the public as seriously distinct from the private, the direction in which each of these spheres aim must surely be guided by something separate. If a moral conscience guides individual interest, does something opposite guide the public interest? Even if morality does not play a leading role in the political realm, it does factor into the political in some way. And from the beginning of political and philosophical thought, morality has played a significant role. According to Plato, the end of politics is making men good, virtuous, and moral. The good man and the good citizen were one and the same; they were man partaking in the virtuous life, the knowledge of the good. Aristotle severed this connection between good

⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7-9.

man and good citizen. For Aristotle a good citizen is not necessarily a good man. They are the same in that they both fall under the category of the good, but being a good citizen does not require being moral. Arendt takes Aristotle's distinction and roots it in her own definition of citizenship and politics as she gives a set of principles or standards for citizens acting and speaking in the public realm.⁸ In *On Revolution*, Arendt specifically states that "courage, the pursuit of happiness, the taste of public freedom, and ambition that strives for excellence regardless not only of social status and administrative office but even of achievement and congratulation" all have their role in her authentic politics.⁹ Though these statements are characteristics of what a public self must possess to be authentic, they do provide a moral-like guidance. Courage and the other virtues are more the content or elements of a public man rather than what makes civilized human interactions possible. It is becoming more and more evident that Arendt sees morality as without an overwhelming presence in the political sphere. For Arendt, moral standards are most necessary for the types of normal human activities outside of the public sphere. The normal human behaviors, many of which fall under today's conception of the political, are the product of necessity or utility. Though Arendt's theory is not devoid of moral concerns (her advocacy of forgiveness has a moral tendency), the public self is not confined by the necessity of the private. Politics creates a space in which the public functioning may occur, and it is the action of speech, logic, discussion, and deliberation under which public selves come to a public opinion. As such, it does require an undeniable cooperation among public selves to exist and accomplish its purpose.¹⁰ A

⁸ Shiraz Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), 86-95.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 275-276.

¹⁰ Dossa, 115.

certain hint at morality also occurs here in Arendt's writings. But, it is a morality separate from and without passionate or emotional concerns. This type of passion greatly harms the public realm, for Arendt.¹¹ Politics is not free from morals, but additionally it does not aim at morality.¹²

Arendt's early writings divide a concept or action as either public or private. Though the public and private also function as spaces like the polis and *oikos*, they also seem to be very significant as the measures by which an element fits into its proper arena. This distinction also makes it much easier to speak of something as proper in the public or in the private. However, Arendt concedes that in the world it is possible, and likely, that these two realms of opposites may blur into what she calls the social. The social is the sphere in which properly private concepts or actions, like economics or passions, make their way into the public.¹³ Obviously, someone who takes such great effort in differentiating public from private sees danger in merging the two. When elements of the dark, private, and personal seep into the light, public, communal area, the political realm suffers misdirection. The properly public is timeless, spanning across lifetimes and generations, and introducing a finite element to the political detracts it from its proper purposes and proper perpetuation of the political. Therefore, Arendt holds these social elements in disapproval for being the forces that can destroy the political from its revolutionary moment of creation through its evolution into public functioning.

For Arendt, the rise of the social is a crisis, and indeed a crisis unique and detrimental to the modern era. The rise of the social perverts the political and eliminates

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 147.

¹² Dossa, 94.

¹³ Michael G. Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 49-51.

the private. But Arendt argues that there was a time when the social did not exist or rather was inconceivable as appropriate for human life – active and contemplative. She is convinced that man’s ability to organize into a polis is more than different from the *oikos* and the familial organization; the two are also directly opposed to one another according to Greek thought. This time without the destructiveness of the social existed in Greek and Roman history. However, the first indications of the emergence of the social occur in the translation of Aristotle’s *zoon politikon* to Seneca’s *animal socialis* and even progress to what Arendt would characterize with her term social in Aquinas’s *homo est naturaliter politicus, id est, socialis*. When translated, this phrase is “man is by nature political, that is, social.” This translation is not an elaborate theory on where the social idea comes into the world of man. It is really just an explanation of how the nuance of meaning carried with the word changed in historical progression from one civilization to the next. The word “social” did not exist in the Greek language. It is Roman in origin but becomes what is meant here when examples of household rule are applied to the polis in early Christian thought.¹⁴ But, in returning to the idea that the *oikos* and polis are opposing forces, the first relates to the maintenance of life, while the second relates to the common world.¹⁵ Additionally, opposition lies in the points from which each come into operation and the methods by which they operate and the tensions between the time frames in which each takes place. The polis is the realm of freedom in which each citizen is granted a forum for the political elements of action and speech. The private *oikos* is the realm in which the household meets its biological needs through despotic rule or even violence. Freedom and necessity cannot occur in one setting without opposition just as

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 23-24.

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28.

speech and violence cannot mutually exist without destruction. Arendt writes, “only sheer violence is mute.”¹⁶ Also, transcending many life spans is characteristic of the political. The public realm is meant to perpetuate itself with persuasion that occurs when citizens come together and participate in common, a polity of ideas that forms a more perfect opinion. The private realm is much more concerned with preserving life in one man’s single term on earth or even with preserving an entire generation. The private realm is very shortsighted and concerned with an individual lifespan. The political is meant to last through generations and the rise and fall of a man and the rise and fall of mankind. The political is in one sense essentially human and superhuman; it partakes of that which makes man unique from nature and uses this human something more lasting than the finite human life via the political.

With the development of the city-state, man gained a new arena for free activity and life in addition to his private life. Before the city-state emerged in ancient Greek life, social organization according to kinship was the primary structure for organizing peoples. But as these kinship societies weakened, the city-state filled its role. At this point, two individual orders of human existence occurred – one in which man sustained his biological natural existence and one in which man acted and spoke in a political sense. Action in the political means to find “the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information nor communication they may convey,” whereas speech quite literally is the persuasive word itself.¹⁷ For Arendt, as for Aristotle and the Greeks and essentially for the Romans as well, the polis is the realm in which these two aspects, action and speech, free man from necessity and allow him to create a common world with

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 26.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24-26.

his fellow man that might last longer than his lifespan. In contrast, the household and those outside of the polis live a more natural and basic life. Rather than being afforded the freedom of persuasion and the ability to engage in politics for politics' sake, household life is under the force of necessity that makes the actions of the household actions for survival's sake. The head of the household rules "with uncontested, despotic powers" and commands even violently because the household deals with sustaining in this case human life but even more basically fulfilling biological needs.¹⁸

In my opinion, one of the greatest scenes depicting the Greek distinction between the *oikos* and the polis is in Book VI of the *Iliad*. Hector has just come from battle followed by discussions with the other citizens and is stopped as he sees his mother approach. Before Hector greets his mother, it is almost as though he is in an uncomfortable position. When she asks her son to make an offering to the gods he replies, "I dare not make a drink-offering to Jove with unwashed hands; one who is bespattered with blood and filth may not pray to the son of Saturn."¹⁹ Unfit to enter into the household realm, he must transform himself into a man fit for the household after he has come from battle and the polis. His mother and the women around her rush away to finish their sacrifices to the *Pennates*, or household gods. Hector then seeks out his wife, Andromache, and child on the city ramparts. He is in neither the household nor the polis at the moment; he is standing in the area in-between. His infant son cries at the sight of the man in armor. In this instance, Hector is not befitting entrance into the household. The scene is exemplary of just how manifest the distinction between public and private

¹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 27.

¹⁹ Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 128-153.

was and of how much tension existed between the two before the rise of the social in this modern era.

Even into the middle Ages what Arendt refers to as the “gulf between the private and public still existed somehow.”²⁰ Though the distinction between the public and private realms is not as pronounced in the Middle Ages as in the eras of Greek and Roman dominance, the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church and the feudal manor structure perpetuated the divisions between the two realms. The Catholic Church in the middle Ages emphasizes the degrees of difference between the glorious and splendid existence in the sacred and the laborious toiling and suffering that occurs in the necessary worldliness of the secular. Arendt writes: “The medieval tension between the darkness of everyday life and the grandiose splendor attending everything sacred, with the concomitant rise from the secular to the religious, corresponds in many respects to the rise from the private to the public in antiquity.”²¹ This idea is very clearly pronounced in the preaching, art, and structure of the church itself. Participation in the sacred is completely for the sake of existing in the sacred state. And, the sacred realm does draw from the best parts of man something that lasts longer than each man’s singular existence, but the sacred is also otherworldly and different from the public realm in this aspect. However, it is also not a stretch to imagine the similarities between divisions of public and private and divisions of sacred and secular. These distinctions are also maintained by the necessity of survival that figures into the secular and private and the household that existed under the feudal system. The feudal lord ruled the manor in the same way as that of the head of household. The feudal lord ruled with the urgency and tyranny required

²⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 33.

²¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 34.

for the manor's survival. The feudal lord had to take measures to organize the household similar to that the head of household had.²²

Thanks to Marx's presence in the modern era, any division between public and private was called into question, according to Arendt. His theories allowed man to be valued as means to an end in political organization rather than as a political actor valuable for his own sake. Man as a means to fulfill the vital processes of survival replaces the idea of man as an immortal being. The shift from freedom in politics to political organization as a structure of labor completely merged the public sphere with the private sphere and placed the social realm in the forefront of all activity. With the modern era and the emergence of the nation-state, the gulf between the public and private that had existed in various extents from antiquity blurred so greatly that the thought of such a distinction appears radical and questionable as history has continued to today.

The Public and Private of Today

Modern society, with its almost inextricable fusion of the more ancient concepts of public and private, gives different meanings to the terms than the historic past. Even for America, what public and private meant in the revolutionary era now mean something separate in today's vocabulary. Technological advances and the capitalist mindset, both of which Arendt held in great suspicion, have helped to shape the meaning of public and private for modern society in a manner that Arendt saw as unfit for the perpetuation of political philosophy.

First of all, today's public and private are distinct in the perspective they portray on the level of happening between persons in a private setting versus a public setting. That which is personal, like feelings, emotions, and thoughts, is private or secret.

²² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 33-34.

Personal and private are one and the same, and a feeling of embarrassment frequently takes place if private behaviors are brought to public light. That which involves a number of others is public knowledge and information. Certain behaviors are acceptable in private and not acceptable in public. Humans encourage or discourage particular behaviors depending upon the setting in which they occur and not so much according to the statement they make.²³ This variation supports the fact that human behavior often varies according to time and place, and the setting and time in which a happening occurs affect not only the action itself but also the characterizing of the action as public or private. For example, a conversation between two individuals is considered private until the moment that conversation is broadcast via radio, television, word of mouth, or other media at which time it becomes public. Today, the setting of an event or happening is key to classifying whether it is a public matter or private concern. It is not that the setting of an event was not important for classification of the event as public or private for Arendt. But, the setting in which a deed was performed or speech was made was not a defining characteristic for the public or private nature of it. Instead, the defining characteristic was the subject of the speech or action. Taking the example of the conversation, Arendt would classify the discussion as private or public according to its subject matter. A discussion about the amount of grain farming subsidies the government issues would relate to the private sphere because it is primarily economic in nature and involves the human biological necessity for survival through food production and income. On the contrary, a discussion concerning the consequences of First Amendment speech protection belongs to the public sphere because it relates to man's ability to interject his reasoning into a political debate over freedom of speech and action. The

²³ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 9-12.

difference may seem odd at first, but this peculiarity illustrates the modern bridging of the ancient divide between private and public.

Second, public and private refer to ownership and administration.²⁴ Private clubs, private schools, private property, and private corporations all refer to a lack of governmental ownership. Whereas, public schools, public property, and public services all refer to that which the government owns and usually operates. These lists of public and private fixtures are just examples, but they illustrate the way citizens today think of public and private as descriptions of ownership because many of these institutions function in the exact same way but are labeled public or private depending on ownership. Presently, government ownership is synonymous with public entities. For Arendt, public does not equate to today's sense of government. The government often operates to provide for families' needs in ways that the family formerly organized itself to meet. Simply put, Arendt's notion of public does not include governmental functioning in a bureaucratic, economic, or domestic fashion. A group of workers, no matter the size of that group, performing individual tasks or individually performing specific steps in a lengthier process does not qualify as a plurality of opinions gathered in a single space to speak and act politically. However, considering fusions of public and private industry like self-regulatory agencies and additionally considering corporations so large that they seem more powerful than many states involves a trickier analysis of public and private. First of all, it is unclear how these agencies and corporations are classified today. They are usually privately owned but also lend high-ranking employees to government positions and, as a whole, act as an extension of the government in implementing

²⁴ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory*, v9, n3, (Aug. 1981): 329-330.

programs and advising government action and regulation.²⁵ Furthermore, are entities like international political organizations public or private? They are certainly more public and less governmental than say the Department of Homeland Security, but they are representative of no certain geographic collection of citizens aside from the world as a community. Arendt valued the idea that a polis be a relatively manageable group of citizens that needed no more relation to each other than to inhabit the same region. Despite this assessment for manageability, Arendt would probably see international political organizations as belonging to the public realm. She expresses affirmation of the political nature of foreign affairs “because the relationships between nations still harbor hostilities and sympathies which cannot be reduced to economic factors.”²⁶ Presently, most modern citizens would see international political organizations as private institutions that aim to influence nation states. Numerous examples exist today that blur both modern and ancient views of what is private and what is public. Nonetheless, modern connotations for the public and private realms rely heavily on the ownership and administration of the entity for its identification in one of the two spheres.

Third, in the modern era, the public is seen as a burden where the private is the sphere of freedom. The modern mindset is “dominated by the notion that freedom is an attribute of will and thought much rather than of action,” Arendt writes.²⁷ Though there are a few exceptions to the scenario, vast numbers of the population see the home and its privacy as an area for freedom. People work, go to school, or run errands in the public light. Relief from these actions and chores is associated with the private. Duties and obligations must be fulfilled in public interactions, but freedom from these commitments

²⁵ Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public,” 330.

²⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 155.

²⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 155.

and freedom from participation in public affairs occurs in the privacy of one's home. Freedom has become willing or choosing activity or inactivity. It is fairly easy to trace the path of freedom from political interactions in the public sphere to the current resting place of freedom in the private sphere, and Arendt does a convincing job of this succession. The home was once the place in which necessity ruled and required the head of household to provide the domestic resources by whatever means necessary. To an extent, this depiction of household still holds true, but today basic survival is not as much at issue. Governments now function to provide basic resources to citizens and combat poverty. Even though the success of governments to combat poverty is questionable, there is no denying that governments have lessened the burdens of fulfilling basic survival needs at the familial level. Also, the center of production shifted from within the household to outside of the home. The work and chores once performed at the home now primarily take place in the modern public realm of human interactions. People now earn money from jobs outside of the home to buy the necessary goods for survival, and a significant number earn enough to meet these needs easily. Because of these modern conditions, the home is seen as the place for the most privacy, and relaxation is seen as freedom. Freedom is no longer participation in the exclusively human capabilities for reasonable interactions; it is freedom from the tasks that ensure fulfillment of biological necessities.

Arendt looks at the story of human life to trace its development, and she utilized this approach when examining the historical collapse of public and private into a blurred realm of human existence. Nature's manifestation of biological processes in the human body, physiological growth and decay, are circular, natural, and less durable than the

speech and actions of man's life. That time designated by a beginning and end, a birth and death, is not limited to a natural cycle. For man, life contains a specifically human and principal characteristic of being "always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography."²⁸ For Arendt, action and speech are "the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear to be."²⁹ Narrative and biography are important to Arendt as tools to examine the human experience.

Arendt and Literature with an Emphasis on *Billy Budd*

Arendt views and describes the world through a literary perspective. Her theory unfolds itself almost like it is a novel about man's shared and political world. She recounts where man has been in this world, explains where he is now, and suggests where he likely will and should be. At the end of her life she draws a deeper picture of man's most unique human processes. Her theory is a story about the human phenomenon. And though this emphasis on narrative in her writing complicates a concise and well-organized presentation of her ideas for modern readers, it undoubtedly reinforces her vision of politics as the story of the human being interacting with other humans in this sphere of appearances, this world. Arendt's tendency to use narratives in explaining her political philosophy is reminiscent of and probably influenced by Nietzsche's use of narrative in his philosophy. Criticism of her literary style, while it is often warranted on the grounds that it complicates a cohesive reading of her theory, regularly leads to one source of misinterpretation of her thought and writings.

²⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 97.

²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 97.

Keeping this preface of her use of literature to convey philosophical ideas in mind, Arendt reads *Billy Budd* as a devastatingly important political narrative, which questions the nature of the public sphere and the type of human required to be a citizen figure. Billy Budd is a foundling sailor impressed into service in her Majesty's navy aboard a ship named the *Bellipotent*. He is an absolutely good and innocent man and is very well liked by his fellow seamen. Disgusted by Billy's goodness, Claggart, an evil and mean-spirited sailor on the *Bellipotent*, conspires to frame Billy for mutiny. When Claggart announces before the ship's captain, Vere, that Billy is planning a mutiny, Billy strikes Claggart with a deadly blow. Though Claggart has lied about the mutiny charges, Billy has committed murder. Captain Vere must decide the appropriate punishment for this young, likeable sailor. The novel circles around the action of two moral absolutes confronted in the compromising, tangible world of human being and beings. However, it is worth noting that Arendt and Melville undeniably pronounce that Billy and his absolute goodness would not come into confrontation with evil had Claggart not exerted his absolute evil on the innocent foundling.

The character in *Billy Budd* which Arendt's thoughts surrounding the novel most concern is Captain Vere. He employs the aspects of her human condition that are necessary for action as a citizen. As seen through her discussions of the social and more specifically of revolution in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt's human citizen sheds the physical and certain moral needs when entering his capacity as public figure because this necessity precludes political action. By the same token, Melville tells his readers that Vere struggles thoughtfully through his decision in private while acting decisively in his official capacity. Essentially, Arendt is severing the passionate and moral from public

action; all the while, Melville maintains caution in separating moral action from political action.

At this point in the discussion of *Billy Budd*, it is indispensable to note that much controversy surrounds the context in which it was published. Critics argue over whether the novel was actually complete. Scribbled on an insert of the *Billy Budd* manuscript was Melville's notation of the date on which he finished the novel. However, Mrs. Melville insists that the work was not ready for publication. But to avoid further digression into this controversy, this paper refers to the Hayford and Sealts version of *Billy Budd*, a version accepted by most Melville scholars and the Melville estate. Hayford and Sealts finished the book by translating some of Melville's handwritten notes and inserting them into the text and by adding an editors's introduction in which they describe the process of the novel's publication. The text of *Billy Budd*, as arranged by Hayford and Sealts, also incorporates the order in which Melville developed the characters of the novel. Billy is the first character to be discussed in depth in the publication, and Billy was the first character Melville created when he arranged "Billy in the Darbies" for *John Marr and Other Sailors* prior to beginning work on *Billy Budd* in November of 1888. Melville then developed the characters of Claggart and Vere, respectively, and modified their personae until "completion" of *Billy Budd* in 1891.³⁰

Billy Budd has a great number of contexts even when it is considered solely in terms of Arendt's philosophy. It is a story of absolute goodness and absolute evil that meet in an earthy scene aboard an English naval vessel. Billy is an absolutely innocent foundling with an endearing quality that makes men love him. He is impressed into

³⁰ Howard P. Vincent, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Billy Budd: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 2-6, 107.

service aboard the *Bellipotent*, where he meets Claggart, a figure of absolute evil who stages a mutiny and blames it on Billy. In the presence of their intelligent, experienced Captain Edward Fairfax Vere, Claggart accuses Billy of staging the mutiny; Billy reacts with a violent, lethal blow to Claggart and his lie. Captain Vere is then faced with deciding whether Billy must hang in retribution for killing Claggart. Captain Vere is the ultimate judge in Billy's case and decides that Billy must hang the morning after Claggart's murder.

Also within the story an element of revolution exists. Captain Vere's ship, the *Bellipotent*, is the scouting ship for a British naval fleet sent to patrol waters along the French coast and to keep guard against the spread of French Revolution chaos to England. Furthermore, the story takes place around the time of the Nore mutiny. It is under this situation that Vere must decide whether to sentence to death a figure of absolute goodness or to make himself vulnerable to a possible mutiny or disorder aboard his ship, which could ultimately affect the spread of this violence and chaos to England. At any rate, Arendt uses this story as an example of how harmful absolute goodness can be when incorporated into the public realm. As much as *Billy Budd* is a story of traditionally private forces that become destructive to the public, it is also a story of revolution.

Billy and Claggart are absolute moral characters introduced into the public world. Billy is naturally good and represents "goodness beyond virtue."³¹ Billy is a foundling with no attachments to worldly affairs. Melville describes him as a character with barbarian innocence and incapable of detecting evil until it forces itself on him. In Melville's words, Billy "possessed that kind and degree of intelligence going along with

³¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 78.

the unconventional rectitude of a sound human creature, one to whom has not yet been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge.”³² Furthermore, Billy stutters and stammers in conversation with other men. It is as if natural goodness cannot make itself understood in worldly conversations with other men. Claggart is the antithesis of Billy; he is wickedness beyond vice. The evil in Claggart is a natural depravity.³³ Claggart’s absolute wickedness confronts Billy’s absolute goodness head on. For Claggart, man was basically evil, and Billy represents to him that a man can be absolutely and basically good. Billy’s mates aboard both *The Rights of Man* and the *Bellipotent* are fond of him and constantly bemused by his unfailingly good nature. The captain of the *Rights of Man* begged Captain Vere not to impress his “peacemaker” and “jewel” who brought the crew together and improved the atmosphere among the men aboard his ship.³⁴ Claggart creates the rumor that Billy is planning a mutiny. Upon hearing the lie from Claggart’s mouth, Billy reacts violently with a lethal blow to the naturally depraved man. Though this reaction may seem like Billy has lost his natural innocence, the situation is quite the contrary. Arendt writes: “The greatest of this part of the story lies in that goodness, because it is part of ‘nature,’ does not act meekly but asserts itself forcefully and, indeed, violently so that we are convinced: only the violent act with which Billy Budd strikes dead the man who bore false witness against him is adequate, it eliminates nature’s ‘depravity.’”³⁵

This natural reaction seems like it solves the controversy with good prevailing and evil extinguished. But, this point in the story begins what most concerns this essay.

³² Herman Melville, *Billy Budd: Sailor (An inside narrative)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 52.

³³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 78.

³⁴ Melville, 47.

³⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 78.

Captain Vere must play Pilate and choose between rational duty and personal passion and sympathy. Vere is also a tragic hero in that he, by his own means, sacrifices his individual self for the public.³⁶ Vere is a good commander because he has studied how other men have gained acclaim as good commanders. As commander over the situation involving Billy and Claggart, Vere knows it is his duty as captain to exact justice, and he does so by issuing a decision derived from blind justice. Melville calls Vere “a sailor of distinction even in a time of prolific renowned seamen” and always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline.”³⁷ Additionally, Vere brings with him on each sea voyage a library of books about men and events throughout all of history that “in the spirit of common sense philosophize on realities.”³⁸ Vere is not just an average man in a complex situation. First of all, he chooses to be the one to decide Billy’s fate. He could have taken the chance of waiting to hand Billy over to the leaders of the rest of the fleet. The *Bellipotent* was in the midst of returning to the fleet when the murder takes place. Also, Vere is the one who casts the deciding opinion among the council of officers who adjudicate the matter. Second, Vere has given much thought to the types of burdensome but solemn matters leaders and commanders encounter in their supervisory and managing roles. He reads much about the decisions of men in authoritative positions and has even gained the nickname Starry Vere for his tendencies to mill over such matters in his mind. Melville makes it apparent that Vere is not a chance, flippant individual who happened to be in charge of deciding in what manner to punish a fellow sailor who has broken one code to

³⁶ William T. Stafford, ed. *Melville's Billy Budd and the Critics Second Edition* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1961), 211-212.

³⁷ Melville, 60.

³⁸ Melville, 62.

right a moral wrong. Vere recognizes that Billy is absolutely good and innocent and that Claggart is absolutely evil and wicked. He, personally, does not blame Billy for acting instinctually but deliberately against the naturally depraved. But, at the same time, he cannot neglect that he has accepted the responsibilities of captain that include ensuring justice aboard his ship. So, Vere must decide between mutually exclusive moral justice and civil justice. Vere accepts responsibility for commanding his crew, turns to the history of his peers, and decides Billy's earthly fate accordingly. His decision to put Billy to death is not his complete comment on human nature. He reveals toward the end of his life an additional expression of the divisiveness of the human condition when he remorselessly utters the words, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd."³⁹ Here, Melville begs the question of whether justice is perhaps a tragic value.

Vere makes his decision in accordance with what appears to be the decision Arendt's virtuous man would make. It is here that the tragedy begins with the introduction of virtue "into the conflict between absolute good and absolute evil."⁴⁰ Before Vere's injection into the story, *Billy Budd* is a tale of the enigmatic forces that evil brings to the world. It is a story questioning the method and reasoning in which absolute evil chooses to act out against absolute goodness. After the virtuous Vere becomes involved, the story evolves into a more complicated matter of the mysterious forces through which goodness complicates and endangers the world.⁴¹ Virtue, though it is less good than absolute goodness, is able to be incorporated into man's lasting institutions and laws. Man is capable of the range of activities between virtue and vice and has created a system of governance for that realm of existence. These lasting institutions and laws

³⁹ Melville, 129.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 79.

⁴¹ Vincent, 20-21.

operate for the human realm and move between the two human extremes of virtue and vice. Laws and institutions are made for men and his range of being and action and as such “cannot recognize what is beyond it.”⁴² The absolutes of goodness and evil come from beyond human interactions between men on earth and are therefore antipolitical.

While it is not disturbing that absolute evil be considered antipolitical and dangerous to the realm in which humans interact, it seems against common sense and notions of goodness to think of the absolute form of goodness as dangerous and destructive to the world of men. But to Arendt, absolute goodness in its natural form can only act out violently against a naturally depraved evil. When it meets with absolute evil, absolute goodness is inflexible, unyielding, and exactingly strict in stamping out evil. In other words, absolute goodness will act violently to right wrongs. But, violence is antipolitical as well. Since the public realm relies on speech to create an arena comprised of sharing opinions among equal citizens, the public realm emphasizes human life on Earth and as such exists apart from absolute moral constraints. When confronted with opposition, absolute goodness silences any speech and sharing with violence, just as Billy did. Absolute violence takes control of any such situation and enforces its opinion totally. In this sense, violence is dangerous to the political. Having said that absolute goodness enforces itself completely and violently to right wrongs, it might seem that this occurrence is fitting. Why should not absolute goodness act out in the political? The difficulty lies in determining what acts stem from this absolute goodness. In the public realm, it is difficult to discover and recognize absolute goodness.⁴³ Additionally, it is virtually impossible to incorporate absolute goodness into political regimes, even if it

⁴² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 79.

⁴³ Dossa, 117.

should be discovered. Absolute goodness overrules and dominates the nature of politics by definition. Man's range of action allows him to create a political system for himself. However, man's limits are far greater than limits on absolute goodness, if limits on absolute goodness exist. For Arendt, and likely for Melville, absolute goodness cannot exist within man's political creations because it dictates action rather than voicing a political opinion like the political self is required to do among a collection of other reasoning selves.

Billy is not the only character of absolute goodness placed into the temporal world. Billy is a Christ-figure and also demonstrates characteristics of a Socratic figure. All three of these men were called into the public, and their actions were judged by its standards. Though Arendt and others differentiate between Christian absolutism and Socratic absolutism, the point remains that certain emotions and passions may be appropriate for the private life, but what is best in the private life is not always best or feasible in the public life.⁴⁴ All three examples raise the question of whether a person and his actions can be good—just and loving—and opposed to the public simultaneously. Arendt's answer to the question remains yes.

As Arendt continues her study of political philosophy, she begins to present her ideas in relation to the events of her lifetime. She begins frequently including a journalist approach to the subjects of her study, providing commentary on contemporary happenings. She writes for magazines and newspapers and adapts and customizes her political thought to the current events she saw as fulfillments of the early ideas she had expressed in relation to narrative works.

⁴⁴ Dossa, 26.

**Arendt's Redirection of Political Philosophy and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as
compared to *Billy Budd***

Eichmann in Jerusalem is a very volatile piece for Arendt, according to both her students and critics. It marked the beginning of the turn in Arendt's career from an exploration of political order throughout history to a more psychological focus on the components of a human being. Heidegger is the figure that most occupies and motivates her early view of man as creator of and participant in the political order. *Eichmann* marked her first major move to try to define the inner working of human beings as such. Her encounter with Eichmann shifted the focus of her work from the nature of political existence apart from other arenas of human existence to the functioning of the human mind. This turn is not a complete departure from her earlier thought because her theory of action, which she draws from ideas of ancient and modern politics, provides a logical and requisite transition between the two stages of thought. Without a discussion of action, a theory of political human existence would not nearly be complete; likewise, the thinking, judging, and willing that occur in conjunction with the activity of the mind could not be systematically evaluated without examining the faculty of action that they sustain. The fact that Arendt's turn of direction in political philosophy is able to be seen as a logical progression from her early works, while simultaneously able to be seen as a reasonable foreword to her later works, illustrates the turn as a redirection rather than an abandonment.

It is also a volatile piece for Arendt because the range of approval and disapproval of her writing seems to be greatest in *Eichmann*. Before *Eichmann*, there existed a fairly clear divide between those who agreed or sympathized with Arendt and those who

rejected her political, historical, or philosophical commentary. However, *Eichmann* was and is still interpreted in such a wide variety of ways by many members of her traditional alliance, namely the Jewish scholarly population, that a shocking number of myths arose over what she had actually written in her account of Adolf Eichmann. To read the actual text and then to read the critics' reviews make the two readings seem virtually incompatible, at least in some cases. Helpful to an accurate reading of *Eichmann* is at least a superficial background of Arendt's past works in order to see and appreciate the progression of thought and also to think in terms of Arendt's political framework aside from the modern political condition. Plainly stated, a significant number of critics did not miss the mark with their criticisms; instead, they offered criticisms to exaggerated and incorrect versions of Arendt's statements. For example, Arendt never said that the Jewish victims of the holocaust were guilty of their own situation as victims. Arendt did, however, question whether the Jewish population was a completely innocent victim when she discussed Eichmann's banality. Arendt writes that Eichmann's trial is of great importance for human discussion because it presents "the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society—not only in Germany but in almost all countries, not only among the prosecutors but also among the victims."⁴⁵ Granted this questioning on its face is harsh, Arendt doubted the perfect innocence of the Jewish population in the midst of a discussion of the man responsible for that same population's and others' murders.

Though Arendt had set out to laud the Israeli judges for their participation in conducting a trial that proceeded with justice as its focus, she also included many

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Press: New York, 1965), 126.

statements that attacked leaders of the state of Israel for releasing “propaganda” before the trial and for encouraging the prosecution of Eichmann based on the suffering of the Jewish population at large rather than the deeds he performed. From the first several pages of *Eichmann*, Arendt drew claims that she was unsympathetic to the Jewish population’s sufferings and that she had become anti-Israel in her writings. Shocking statements, insensitivities, and errors of fact aside, Arendt’s so called arrogance in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* proved controversial worldwide and marked the realignment of her political philosophical focus.⁴⁶ Arendt moved from inquiring into the design and events of political communities throughout history to studying the functions of the human mind. At the beginning of this realignment, Eichmann was one of her first subjects.

When Arendt proposed to the *New Yorker* that she cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann, she did so out of a self-proclaimed obligation to see one of Nazi Germany’s bureaucrats from a first-hand perspective. When Arendt did get to see Eichmann personally, she was “flabbergasted” that such an ordinary-looking, common, and silly individual was the man standing trial for a horror of accusations. The stature and presence of this man was inadequate to both the magnitude of the crimes and the significance of the trial for those who had suffered and those countless other members of the human race curious at the actions of this criminal to humanity.⁴⁷ For Arendt, this man was vastly disproportional to the memories of those lost at his hand.

In reporting, Arendt took liberty in mingling the factual background of the case with her own personal commentary. Granted the *New Yorker* was in the habit of getting

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Young-Breuhl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 337-340.

⁴⁷ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 204-207.

volatile writers like Arendt to report on similar historical trials, it is questionable whether any person could foresee the commentary she would put forth and yet more surprising that she herself was unprepared to witness the characteristics of Eichmann that surfaced in his trial. Early in Arendt's reports, she gave a factual characterization of Eichmann that gave herself and her readers pause. Eichmann was not a high-ranking Nazi official; he was centrally located in the network of concentration camps. He did not personally kill, though he did sign the orders that sent countless captured Jews to their death at these concentration camps.⁴⁸ Eichmann was not an anti-Semite; he was a man who had failed at school and work and hoped to find a renewal in life from the Nazi party. The mob that was the Nazi party offered him a chance to participate in a "great" movement in history; so, he accepted and did as told in order to advance his career.⁴⁹ Arendt says of Eichmann, "Out of sheer passion he would never do harm to a fly."⁵⁰ With no malice or cruelty Eichmann did his horrific work. But to him, this work was not horrific because he did not think of what he was doing beyond his personal career advancement. Not to be meticulous and hard working at his occupation would be far greater a consideration to Eichmann than stopping to put a human face on his actions. It is difficult to conceive of a human being in such mechanical state; it seems too abstract a construction to have ever been a reality.

Eichmann was a bureaucrat and a member of the bourgeoisie. According to Arendt, these were two substantial strikes against him. Though Arendt was quick to paint classes and segments of society in a negative light (and she mostly had good reason to do

⁴⁸ Accompanying this statement after the release of *Eichmann*, Arendt reminds an interviewer that much of the physical killing of the captured was done by fellow prisoners. However, these prisoners likely had little choice between their own death and performing the tasks to which the guards assigned them.

⁴⁹ Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, 207-208.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 234.

so for there is hardly a thing which does not comprise itself of something negative), bureaucrats and members of the German bourgeoisie were two groups especially under her sharp attack. The bureaucrat was the individual that emerged from the mob. The bureaucracy was the social functioning mechanism that aimed at political order but was actually the antithesis of political speech and action. Bureaucrats functioned without producing an individual identity that could be known in public. The bureaucracy corrupted politics in a way opposite to the way by which absolute morality was dangerous to politics. The bureaucracy subverted the rational capabilities that allowed man to be political and placed emphasis instead on mechanical functioning, or work that humans can provide. Man became a tool. The bourgeoisie was the class that emerged from the social sphere and had two main components that guided its functioning, economics and conformism.⁵¹ The bourgeoisie willed themselves to be socially respectable and the means to achieving this social respectability was money. From proper politics to the social, political distinction was lost and replaced by money. The bourgeoisie resented the elite in part because they were excluded from it. But, the elite class was less threatening to man and the remnants of the political order because it was an apolitical group. Once the bourgeoisie rose to prominence, it recreated the elitist structure and entered into what it called politics.⁵² Because of these movements, those outside of the middle class labeled the bourgeoisie hypocrites. So, Arendt sees Eichmann as both a machine and hypocrite.

Following from this dual-faceted analysis of Eichmann is a reflection back on *Billy Budd*. There are parallels between *Billy Budd* and *Eichmann* that arise in curious

⁵¹ Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Public and Private," 333-334.

⁵² Hannah Arendt, *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1951), 333-339.

places. Arendt's reading of *Billy Budd* when compared to her depiction of Eichmann brings strange and curious questions to the discussion of morality in public. Claggart is a naturally depraved character lacking morality and exuding absolute evil. So, it is he who represents the evil character that humans most comfortably see as an enemy to the public. Because Eichmann was not the insane, classically evil figure the world had anticipated, the world sought a new name for his character. Arendt depicted him as the banality of evil and others saw him in the same light. Elie Wiesel responded to the disturbing Eichmann with the following statement: "if he were sane, I should choose madness...We could not inhabit the same universe."⁵³ Eichmann was not a source of malice like Claggart. He was a man who had encountered some failures in his past and performed the duties of a malicious regime. The great danger was in what the regime had asked this man to become. The Nazi party was an example of the power of politics and showed all too vividly what Arendt was afraid had happened with the modern merging of public and private. One shocking conclusion of comparing *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Billy Budd* is that Billy and Eichmann are both unlikely threats to the political sphere. Eichmann is a regular man; Billy is absolutely innocent and moral. The complexity and irony of this comparison between Eichmann and Billy is that the human political realm cannot withstand the non-negotiable nature of absolute morality; nor can it stand a terror-infused ideology that erased the line between freedom and necessity.

Other parallels emerge between *Billy* and *Eichmann*. The first is that of language. Billy and Eichmann have distinctive speech patterns that speak to their personal relationship with the public sphere of life. Second, depravity appears in two different

⁵³ Stephen J. Whitfield, "Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil." *The History Teacher*, v14 i4, (Aug. 1981), 472.

types of political individuals. Claggart is naturally depraved; and Eichmann is depraved of acting in public, or rather in a tightly knit merger of public and private. Last, it is important to note that Billy and Eichmann suffer the same worldly fate. Because both are hanged, serious questions arise as to the merit of Arendt's rigid system of public and private and the place of morality in these spheres.

Arendt evidences the importance of speech to politics through the speech deficiencies Billy and Eichmann demonstrate. Melville gave Billy a stutter that prevented him from communicating with others when he needed to communicate in the public sphere. Billy could not speak to Vere after striking Claggart dead. Billy's inability to manifest a verbal presence in the political sphere prevents him from engaging in a significant political existence. This speech impediment is just one reason why, for Arendt, Billy is dangerous to the political realm. Eichmann has a speech impediment of his own. Despite his soft-spoken tone and misuses of words, Eichmann's speech hurdle is one of meaning rather than physiological demonstration of inability to communicate. Eichmann did not communicate by means of the type of speech Arendt envisioned in her proper political regime. His speech was utilitarian to his functioning as an administrator of the regime. It was not speech unique to time, place, and person that is characteristic of participation in the public sphere, and it had no value of its own accord. Eichmann's proud declaration that his only language was "officialese" caught Arendt's attention, and she wrote of Eichmann's official language in trial notes to Jaspers. She used Eichmann's speech as a defense of her call for a "law of humanity" to be held above state law. Apart from her discussions of a legal system to pursue justice in cases of state-induced crimes against humanity, Eichmann's unoriginal speech spoke to the fundamental legal concept

of intent.⁵⁴ Eichmann performed a morbid occupation without thinking it heinous because his murderous functionings had the backing of the state. Additionally, Arendt does not appeal to lack of love for humanity as an explanation of Eichmann's guilt, or at least she does not label it as such. She makes crimes against humanity violations of respect for the human race, and, by doing so, removes a hint of the passion detrimental to the public realm from legal proceedings. Intent was a problematic area of Eichmann's trial. He had intended to serve as administrator of mass murders; but, he was ordered by the state to do so and followed this duty without thinking. His intent was not malicious. The regime's intent was malicious though. Regardless of intent, he had been a voluntary member of the regime that murdered without cause and was guilty of ordering the murders of countless citizens. The court found him guilty, and Arendt concurred with its decision. Eichmann's official style of speaking, though it illustrated his unthinking acceptance of orders from the state and the consequences of the loss of political speech and action, made him no less detrimental to politics and no less guilty of murder.

Different sources cause the human depravity found in Claggart and Eichmann, but both the depravity possessed by Claggart and Eichmann are dangerous for man as a political being. Claggart's natural depravity is otherworldly. It is the intense antithesis of Billy's absolute morality; it is also eliminated by this absolute morality. Eichmann carries out immoral, evil actions that he views as his duties. He unquestionably intended to carry out his duty, but he convinces Arendt and countless others that his intent did not spring from his being evil. Instead, the political system in which he situated himself had severed rationality and the human potential for political action from machination. Eichmann was a killing machine; he had become the human equivalent to dynamite or the

⁵⁴Young-Breuhl, 338.

guillotine. Arendt looked for the human being in Eichmann, and she did not find it. Improper politics had created this depravity, and a compilation of human beings throughout history had created this improper politics. Many and notable individuals believed one of Arendt's mentors, Heidegger, had been a contributor to this improper politics. However, what individual who thought himself a political being had not contributed with either an omission or admission of action?

Both judging agents, Vere and the judicial council for Eichmann's trial, sentence Billy and Eichmann to the same fate. Billy and Eichmann are put to death after being held on trial for murder and sentenced by groups of citizens that are not exactly their peers. Additionally, both men go voluntarily to their deaths. Billy was an exceptionally good and innocent being. He was good beyond that which human beings are capable of being. Characters exceptional along the same lines as Billy are dangerous to human political organization when they enter into the political realm. Their exceptional qualities are not immoral or evil yet are instead positive and desirable for man in private. Eichmann was of opposite character. He had very little that was advantageous for either form of existence. But due to the overriding importance of the public realm that Arendt sets forth, both characters suffer the same fate.

By examining *Billy Budd* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the context of Arendt's call for a strict division between public and private human enterprises, the line she draws between these two spheres upholds a human commitment to politics as she defines it. For politics to survive in an earthly world, man must separate the absolute morality existing beyond human nature from politics and carve a space for man to exercise the specifically human characteristics that articulate the political sphere of human life. Billy silenced

political speech and action with his absolute morality. Eichmann and the regime in which he participated removed and ignored the human capacity for man to engage in politics. In Arendt's political realm, neither man's actions could find a place.

The large-scale, historical evolution of politics to which Arendt refers repeatedly and addresses in depth in *On Revolution* takes on a singular human manifestation in *Eichmann*. Eichman, the man he was and the life he lived, were a direct result of the emergence of totalitarianism. In other words, the figure of Adolf Eichmann should not exist in Arendt's political order. How Eichmann came into a bureaucratic position such as the horrible one to which he belonged is made possible not as much by his own thought, for it is questionable whether he thought about the consequences of his duties at all, but by the regime in which he participated. In fact, it was this regime or order that allowed him to be a careerist, a man thoughtlessly pursuing upward mobility in his occupation.

In the latter part of Arendt's literary career, justice fully emerges as a prominent theme. Some students of her work argue that justice is the theme which unites her corpus of work; however, that idea requires the downplay of ideas on which she spent much time in analysis and criticism and seems an unlikely main idea for some of her earlier works. The very forceful inclination toward a search for justice, the human need out of which the Eichmann trial surfaces, requires an invocation of courage. The case for action on the person of Eichmann required human beings to enter into this preexisting "web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions."⁵⁵ Justice did not have the same definition for all those who urged prosecution of Eichmann; but in the spirit of creating and maintaining political order, citizens emerged to judge and be

⁵⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183-184.

judged. They engaged in political action despite what Arendt would term the high likelihood for unpredictable results that makes political action risky behavior. The experience of freedom includes the choice man makes in deciding how to present himself to the world. Because man can never know the results of his presentation to the world until he acts, this will to present oneself to the world is full of uncertainty. Following the reasoning Arendt puts forth on the idea of self, man assumes responsibility in action for the consequences of these acts regardless of the unpredictable outcomes that may follow from his acts. This acceptance of responsibility makes possible justice because it makes possible promising and forgiving as well.⁵⁶ Arendt writes, “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover.” She continues, “Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities.” Both promising and forgiving “depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise he made only to himself.”⁵⁷ Justice requires the courage to enter the public realm, the responsibility that accompanies the presentation of self as actor in public, and the forgiving and promising that exist as alternatives to punishment in a political system aiming at justice. Still, Arendt leaves us in a gray area at this junction of justice, courage, self, responsibility, and forgiving and promising. The sphere of public action and private intention are beginning to blur in a significant way. Forgiving and promising are highly important and arguably necessary to the individual. Yet, they stem from a responsibility of the self acting in public as well. The philosophers, specifically Augustine and Kant,

⁵⁶ Suzanne Jacobitti, “Hannah Arendt and the Will.” *Political Theory*, v16 i1, (Feb. 1988), 53-76.

⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

from which Arendt draws much of her influence with regard to the will are juxtaposed at her separation of public from private. To worsen matters, it is not exactly clear what the self is or how it differs from the types of wills. These topics demand attention unto themselves which disrupts the scope of this paper, but it is important to briefly discuss at least some of these issues.

Arendt is often unclear as to what exactly constitutes the self. At times she seems to define the self as the human body. At other times the self seems to operate as a part of the human mind. Arendt regularly intertwines discussions of the human ego, specifically the thinking ego, with the idea of the self. Sometimes, the self knows what the thinking ego intends, and in other instances it is unable to function in conjunction with the ego. At any rate, the most concise definition of self Arendt gives is also the definition that seems to be most representative of the concept. She writes that the self is “an appearance among appearances.”⁵⁸ The self encounters the experiences that make men “aware of their capability of forming volitions.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, she includes experiences that occur with the human self and inside the self as places from which the will draws its capabilities. Conversely, the will allows the self to engage in certain activities along with other appearances. The will often can provide the self’s motivation for the actions in which it involves its being. The activities of the self, those motivated by the will and those resulting from other motivations, can be of a public or private nature. Because the activities of the self are obviously and necessarily present in both realms of human existence, they involve other concepts that also bridge the separation between public and private. In other words there are certain types of activities that must occur in polis and

⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Two/Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 64.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Two/Willing*, 63.

oikos alike. These mental and physical, or inner and outer, human operations include the likes of promising, forgiving, and judging.

By making justice the prominent guiding principle of Arendt's works, a rational man may be disinclined to engage in a political realm that is uncertain and judgmental. Entering into the public realm, as Vere discovered, likely requires a sacrifice of self. As Eichmann learned, the judgment participants in the political realm dispatch can be lost to man as he participates in a regime blurring public and private. It is dangerous to enter into action in the public realm, yet that same dangerous realm is meant to be specifically human. Man struggles in the creation of a human organization divided into public and private spheres, and the processes of the human mind that acts in the world is inexact still and must transition from sphere to sphere of human existence.

Criticisms of Arendt—That Which She Does Not Explicitly State But Should

There are a number of issues surrounding the establishment of absolutes for which Arendt does not come down with a verdict. Had she made a clear determination on at least some of these concepts, interpretations of her work would be less susceptible to misreading and less difficult to organize and analyze. Granted the subjects of absolute innocence and absolute evil are difficult to delineate in any context. A complete reading of moral absolutes is not finished with a discussion of *Billy Budd*. Though *Billy Budd* is an excellent example around which Arendt can build her theory of moral absolutes, she moves quickly to a discussion of revolution before thoroughly exhausting the topics the novel raises. In my opinion, Arendt should have incorporated an analysis of *Antigone* into the topics of absolute versus earthly morality and absolute goodness and evil. She also leaves readers unclear on the topic of public and private, and she could have clarified

her theories of absolute morality and the public and private spheres with a discussion of Sophocles's *Antigone*. But for the same reasons that Arendt is trying to reconcile exceptional individuals like Heidegger and Billy with society, she avoids confronting the character of Antigone.

Antigone is the quintessential story of conflict between man's order and moral order. Antigone addresses this conflict by burying her brothers, upholding the will of the gods to the extent that her actions allow her brothers' passage into the underworld. She chooses moral order over manmade order when the two are without compromise then suffers death at the hands of man's political order. By conditioning a two-part response to Sophocles, we can glimpse some of the problematic areas of Arendt's thought. First, Antigone is, at least partly, acting out in a selfish manner. Second, though negative consequences can hurt or destroy physical existence, they are a societal reassurance simultaneously. As an exceptional figure of the polis, even before ignoring Creon's order to stay away from the two mens' bodies, Antigone already had a number of passion-induced reasons to refuse the political order in which she was placed. The greatest problem she faced with regard to her conflict with man's political order was that there was no existence outside of the polis. Breaking Creon's order was a way for Antigone to exit a political realm that forced her to withhold a religious obligation to her siblings. She wanted to be out of the world of the polis, and burying her brother provided her with a way out of its realm. Not to discount her conviction to her brothers, but readers of *Antigone* no doubt sense that it was a relief to her to disobey political orders.

That Which is a Daunting Task

Undertaking the task of segregating the political being from the moral being is first and foremost a most difficult project and one that is made impractical by modern societies through their administrative and ideological functioning. Beyond the sheer magnitude of this task lies a nagging question concerning what happens if political men are severed from the moral counterparts of their human existence. Arendt approximates answers to both questions. Though her efforts are admirable and her discussion often compelling, her theoretical corpus on the topics of political separation from morality is an incomplete answer.

Also, her idea of the social is difficult to accept on its face. The social can become something that is so great that it is all encompassing. Likewise the segregation of the public and private that the social violates is utterly difficult to achieve if not completely impossible. Arendt's definitions of the public, private, and social spheres are characteristics of her work as a whole because they, just as most other topics of her philosophy, have almost a contradictory quality at first reading. Familiarization with her work directs students to believe that her conclusions are in opposition; digestion of her work may lead readers to disagree with those conclusions, but it eases the instinctual clashes in her thought. Nonetheless it is a challenge to overcome this initial skepticism in what Arendt said and wrote. Even when her critics and friends asked for clarity in her writings, they were often surprised by her responses. Arendt's correspondence with her husband, friends, and colleagues is thoroughly documented by Young-Bruehl, and these letters and discussions are frequently marked by acknowledgements of surprise and shock

and even complete disagreement.⁶⁰ Mostly, they were surprised because her responses were the opposite of that which they expected. She is an example of a citizen who engaged in political participation, and her discussions brought others into participation. In a modern age when a large number of citizens neither think of themselves as possessing civic duty nor desires of participating in politics, Arendt offered a political philosophy to revive participation. Despite the weight of the task, Arendt chose to undertake the burden of separating the public realm from the private and encouraging action and speech as a true participatory politics. She asked a difficult question for herself, elaborated a philosophy of politics that encompassed numerous and various topics, and continued to reshape her ideas to make this theory more applicable to the world she experienced. She worked diligently to test her ideas with history and literature, and some valuable concepts came into discussion because of her writings.

Conclusions

This paper has undertaken to examine what it means to act in public and in private and what the consequences are should the private realm appear in public. In exploring these areas of thought, virtually all of Arendt's works are applicable to the subjects and have been used in this attempt to delineate what Arendt says about the public as separated from the private. Most specifically, this writing deals with where and in what manner morality occurs in politics. The two most telling examples on these topics are Arendt on *Billy Budd* and her redirection of politics in her first-hand encounter with Adolf Eichmann.

⁶⁰ e.g., Young-Bruehl, x-xii, 77-78, 253, 305-307, 314-317, 332-333, 399, 407-408.

Arendt did not try to marry modern and ancient politics. Her arguments are an appeal for a return to the ancient polis from a modern perspective. She blamed the modern emergence of the social for the novel, devastating, and disruptive events in modern political history, and her writings warned of its continued danger to man as political animal. However, her concept of social, though she proves it is dangerous, encompasses a strangely large array of possibilities. The social is manmade and man dominating. In the case of the social, it is possible that an oversimplification of its definition does not leave the concept so vaguely defined as to lose its meaning. The social is such a large idea, and it grows its components and effects with each aspect of the private that becomes infused into the public. It grows with leaps and bounds and changes rapidly and often, yet it is a core idea that Arendt's attempts to avoid with her theories of action and morality. Perhaps, it is this ever-changing social that makes her theories of public and private as sharply distinct as they are. She had to outline two very acute realms, the public and private, to prevent the wide range of negative happenings that came with modern politics. Her ideas on political history forced her theories of public and private into the form in which she presents them. The social may be so large because the public and private are limited as they are in her theory. Nevertheless, modern increases in human capacity and capabilities were not making humans more happy, peaceful, or free. Arendt's version of political accomplishment was not keeping pace with modern man's accomplishments. For Arendt, the political was shrinking, and the social was growing.

The social refers to a very large category of activities, and many of these activities are highly ingrained into the day-to-day functioning of human life and politics. Avoiding

disruptions to daily, man-measured time need not be priority by any means, but it does provide a barrier to the applicability of Arendt's theory to modern politics. The tendency of many modern individuals to see her theory as implausible or far-fetched does serve as a target for criticism of Arendt's public and private realm distinction. Her political theories sought to revive aspects of the ancient polis that could provide modern man with solutions to dilemmas in modern historical events and individual activities. Reviving these theories according to the standards in this paper may be difficult if not impossible to achieve and may require a citizenry that has long abandoned these political ideas to reconsider them through a socially-infused political regime. Will people who have risen to political positions in social instead of properly political regimes reconsider the modern definition of politics? Will members of modern political regimes agree or desire to withdraw the types of goods and services the government provides its economically challenged citizens, and should a collection of human beings withdraw basic aid and services to other humans? I tend to think that none of these three scenarios represents an action in which modern man is willing to engage.

Arendt's collection of works can, however, initiate discussions that encourage the citizenry to act as citizens in the ancient sense of the word. She issues a call to modern man to begin thinking about and judging the politics in which they do or do not participate. Because of the events she witnessed and the social source to which she attributed these historical happenings, she strongly urged an immediate revival of ancient politics. Though this immediacy is understandable in terms of her political philosophy, this same element of immediacy raises a serious red flag of criticism. Not only does immediacy exhibit characteristics of necessity that would not be native to the political

realm and that seem to conflict with her highly valued spontaneity in willing a change, but it also is an indirect logical fallacy in the presentation of an argument. For Arendt, politics itself is necessary, but the political realm must be free of necessity to be truly political. If the very existence of politics is necessary for man to fulfill his specifically human characteristic, then the decision to act and speak in that political realm may be a necessity of the human condition. Arendt relegates necessity and survival to the private. Despite its flaws and inconsistencies, I contend that Arendt's work on public and private is valuable. First, it raises interesting questions about modern politics and takes an active voice in outlining responses to modern historical dilemmas. Arendt describes the novel forms of politics she sees develop and then looks to the past for the evolution of these politics. The retrogressive approach she takes seems a logical way to approach the discovery of what went wrong between past and present. Second, her revival of modern politics also revives the importance of political participation. With the substantial amounts of empirical studies on the existence of and effects of declines in political participation, at least in the United States, Arendt presents a politics that places participation at the forefront. She provides readers a philosophical viewpoint for an existing condition in politics today. This take is a refreshing example of her combination of political philosophy with lived experience. Lastly, Arendt challenges human beings to avoid being thoughtless and inactive and to recall the importance of man as a political being; she is challenging man to revive himself to the type of reasoning and acting being idealized in ancient times but is preserving in the private sphere a means by which he may individually and privately fulfill other human necessities.

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