

2014

## Revealing the Jewishness of Hannah Arendt

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REVEALING THE JEWISHNESS OF HANNAH ARENDT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Political Science

by

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May 2014

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To take it upon oneself to answer before mankind for every thought means to live in that luminosity in which oneself and everything one thinks is tested.

~ Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio"

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

When Arendt was just twenty-six years old, she had a life-changing experience that, ultimately, caused her to shift course and dedicate her intellectual life to political theory. She recalls that the burning of the Reichstag in 1933 was “an immediate shock,” and “from that moment on” she “was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander.” The events of September 11, 2001, catalyzed my own transition into the field of politics. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon sparked the same sense of responsibility in me, a twenty year old who previously had no real intellectual direction. From that point on, I set out to understand, a task that will no doubt be a lifetime endeavor, but that has culminated at this point in time with my doctoral dissertation.

My dissertation committee is something remarkable. All five members of my committee have contributed to my growth as a scholar and as a human being. Of particular importance are the three members of my committee who have known me since I was an undergraduate student, who have seen me through every stage of my academic path, and who have contributed immensely to my intellectual development.

In Fall 2003, I took a theory course with Dr. Ellis Sandoz that welcomed me into a world of thought that was exciting and exceedingly intriguing. It was Dr. Sandoz who noted my capacity for “thinking,” and who gave me the confidence to tread boldly through murky waters. A couple years later, when I was considering the graduate program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Dr. Sandoz was especially encouraging. Once back at Louisiana State University, Dr. Sandoz continued to inform my intellectual growth and support my research endeavors. I am forever grateful for the unwavering dedication Dr. Sandoz has shown to me over more than a decade of intellectual growth and achievement.

At the same time that I took Dr. Sandoz's theory course, I took my first course in Middle Eastern politics with Dr. Mark Gasiorowski. From the beginning, Dr. Gasiorowski has challenged me to be a better student and a better scholar. It was Dr. Gasiorowski who prompted me to consider doing a Master's degree abroad and who strongly recommended that I study in the Middle East. As such, he was incredibly supportive of my decision to go to the Hebrew University. When I returned to LSU, I believe he spent two years warning me of the realities of academia. I am so grateful for that! He prepared me for the rigors of the doctoral program and for a career in academia. Like Dr. Sandoz, Dr. Gasiorowski has watched me grow as student and intellectual for over a decade. He, too, has been endlessly supportive, and I could never thank him fully for the way in which he has contributed to my growth as a scholar.

The third member of my committee who has been with me since my undergraduate days is also my advisor, Dr. Cecil Eubanks. Arendt says that the moment we articulate our thoughts in words, the full meaning is lost. As such, I feel my words of respect and gratitude for Dr. Eubanks will fail miserably to convey the fullness of what lies beneath them. It would be impossible to speak to the many ways in which Dr. Eubanks has enriched my life. He has guided me through the invariable twists and turns, intellectually, professionally, and personally. This dissertation would not be what it is without him. He spent countless hours reading countless drafts of these chapters. He helped me find my voice and he taught me how to articulate my thoughts with confidence and clarity. This dissertation is as much his as it is mine.

The final two members of my committee deserve much gratitude, as well. I am forever regretful that I was unable to spend more time studying under Dr. James Stoner. The questions he raised regarding my interpretation of Arendt were extremely valuable. And, our discussion of particular concepts prompted further inquiries that I am excited to explore. And, finally, Dr. Charles Isbell, who joined my committee as the religious studies expert, weighed in on the

Jewish aspects of my dissertation. He contributed valuable insights into the Jewish tradition and bolstered the argument of my dissertation in substantial ways. All of the members of my committee were generous with their time, reading through the material and carefully considering what I have written.

I would also like to thank my dear friends and colleagues, Dr. Susan Gaines (University of Leeds) and Dr. Thomas Laehn (McNeese State), for the ways in which they have contributed to this dissertation. Both offered valuable wisdom that comes only by way of experience. I must also note the many phone conversations with Dr. Gaines in which she allowed me to talk through nebulous concepts and amorphous ideas, conversations in which clarity and articulation were created. I appreciate both of them for their patience, support, and encouragement.

I must also thank my wonderful family. My sister, Allison, and my brother, Kieth, have helped me through the writing process by being loving siblings who believe in their little sister. My father and step-father have both offered words of wisdom and encouragement. I, quite literally, was dependent on them at times, and they were always so willing to help. Thank you, Dad and Vince. And, finally, my mother. She has offered me love, a home, a listening ear, a pep talk, a kick in the butt, or whatever was needed to keep me moving along this challenging road. She may still ask what it is I am writing on, but she understands, more than anyone, what it is that I have done. I am so grateful.

Finally, I must thank Arendt, herself. Over the past four years, I have become deeply acquainted with Hannah Arendt. At times, I felt as though she was my closest friend, something that made me question my sanity, or at the very least, my “normalcy.” We lived in different times and have had wildly different life experiences, mine in no way comparable to the traumatic details of Arendt’s. Nonetheless, I felt a likeness, a similarity, a closeness with her. In the most Arendtian sense, I felt at home.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER I: ARENDT'S THEORY OF NARRATIVE .....	12
CHAPTER II: THE ACTIVITIES OF THE MIND: THINKING, WILLING, JUDGING .....	50
CHAPTER III: ON ACTION .....	87
CHAPTER IV: THE SPACE OF APPEARANCE .....	123
CHAPTER V: FREEDOM .....	157
CONCLUSION: WHAT OF JUSTICE? .....	184
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	199
VITA .....	208



## **ABSTRACT**

Hannah Arendt, one of the most important political thinkers of the twentieth century, passed away before finishing her final statement on politics. Because her political theory is incomplete, scholars have adopted many means for interpreting her work. In this dissertation, I adopt a phenomenological approach to understanding Arendt by engaging with the phenomenological method Arendt, herself, used— narrative. I specifically employ the Passover narrative as a metaphorical framework alongside which Arendt’s political theory is traced. In this approach, four elements of Arendt’s theory emerge to distinguish her thought from the Western political tradition: the role of the mental activities, the definition of action, the space of appearance, and the concept of freedom. As Arendt separates herself from her European influences, such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Kant, and Nietzsche, the Jewish aspects of her work begin to come into focus. For each of the elements, the distinct influence of Arendt’s Jewish experiences is expounded. Drawing from the mystical and orthodox traditions of Judaism, novel and intriguing insights into Arendt’s work are discovered. In the end, Arendt leaves us with a theory of politics that is possibly grounded in a concept of love that is both humanist and Jewish.

## INTRODUCTION

What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding. . . . And if others understand—in the same sense that I have understood—that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.

~Hannah Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains’”

Hannah Arendt did not set out to be a political thinker. She writes, “I was interested neither in history nor in politics when I was young.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, she became one of the most important political theorists of the twentieth century. In 1924, she went to university where she studied philosophy, first, under the tutelage of Martin Heidegger, and subsequently, Karl Jaspers. Her doctoral dissertation, completed in 1929, addressed the concepts of love in the writings of Saint Augustine.<sup>2</sup> The work clearly displays the influences of both teachers, weaving Heideggerian concepts and language together with Jaspers’s phenomenological method of understanding. After completing her doctoral work, Arendt relocated to Berlin, where she was reacquainted with Kurt Blumenfeld, a leading German Zionist. Her association with the Zionists in Berlin marks the starting point of her gradual shift from philosophy to politics. She is careful to maintain, however, that while she was influenced by the Zionists, politically she “had nothing to do with Zionism.” By 1931, indifference to the realities of anti-Semitism was no longer possible and she was “firmly convinced that the Nazis would take the helm.” She was, of course, correct; by 1933 Hitler had ascended to power. Arendt notes a specific moment in which her transition to politics was complete:

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 466.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt. *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

February 27, 1933, the burning of the Reichstag, and the illegal arrests that followed during the same night. The so-called protective custody. As you know, people were taken to Gestapo cellars or to concentration camps. What happened then was monstrous, but it has now been overshadowed by things that happened later. This was an immediate shock for me, and from that moment on I felt responsible. That is, I was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander.<sup>3</sup>

The events of that night inspired in Arendt a responsibility to human-ness that underlies all of her work from that point on.

Arendt's mode of understanding bears the mark of her intellectual development under both Heidegger and Jaspers. From Heidegger, she had learned the "way of the rebels who doubted philosophy's traditional identity"; and from Jaspers, Arendt learned an entirely new approach that sought to understand the connection between thinking and acting.<sup>4</sup> Further, Jaspers exposed her to "a conception of freedom linked to reason," which she found intriguing.<sup>5</sup> These philosophical influences came to inform *how* Arendt thinks about the political realm. Arendt's political work can be described as a rebellion against the Western tradition of political thought, a rebellion that is rooted in a desire to understand how that tradition could allow for the development of political realities that suppress human freedom. Her analysis concludes that the tradition of Western political thought, from Plato through Marx, fails to account for action. It is in that failure that the suppression of human freedom was brought to its totality in the twentieth century.

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 4, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 22.

While the philosophical influences are an important element in understanding the political theory of Hannah Arendt, it is necessary to note that her move to a consideration of politics was driven by personal experiences. And, further, those experiences were determined by the fact that she was Jewish. In a famous letter to Gershom Scholem she writes, “To be a Jew belongs for me to the indisputable facts of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind.”<sup>6</sup> As Ron H. Feldman writes, “[T]his fortuitous and uncontrollable circumstance of her birth determined the basic parameters of her fate.”<sup>7</sup> As I shall argue in the body of this work, it also shaped the parameters of her political thought.

Ron H. Feldman’s collection of Arendt’s Jewish writings in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (1978) largely exposed this significant aspect of Arendt’s life and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this was the first collection of Arendt’s specifically Jewish writings and included much of what Arendt had written on Jewish identity, culture, history and politics. This text was an important addition to the corpus of Arendt’s thought, providing access to *some* of Arendt’s Jewish writings. However, even with this, not many scholars were prompted to a serious investigation of her Jewishness.

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 466.

<sup>7</sup> Ron H. Feldman. “The Pariah as Rebel: Hannah Arendt’s Jewish Writings” in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, edited by Roger Berkowitz, et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 198.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, eds. Ron H. Feldman (New York: The Grove Press, 1978).

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography of Arendt, *For Love of the World* (1982), further exposed the importance of Arendt's Jewish heritage and provided the first real glimpse into the life of an entirely private person.<sup>9</sup> The intellectual biography details the private life of Arendt from the time she was a child in Königsberg, through the trials of World War II and up to her death in 1975. At the same time, Young-Bruehl also provides an account of the intellectual development of Arendt, including the major European influences mentioned previously. This work is essential to understanding Arendt as it provides a thorough account of her experiences, noting the ways in which Arendt's Jewishness determined many of the critical moments in her life.

Between the biographical sketch provided by Young-Bruehl and the writings collected by Feldman, an entirely new dimension of Arendt's life and thought was made public. The idea that Arendt was greatly influenced by her Jewish heritage and experiences then became a valid, but still not prevalent, topic of scholarly research and debate. In 1990, Dagmar Barnouw wrote a treatise that approached Arendt from an experiential point of view, in which her political thoughts were considered as a response to her German-Jewish experience.<sup>10</sup> Barnouw's study was made possible by the important insights and publications of both Young-Bruehl and Feldman. Furthering the scholarship on this topic, in 1996, Richard Bernstein published *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, a work that illustrates how the Jewish question was central to all of Arendt's intellectual endeavors.

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<sup>9</sup> Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*.

<sup>10</sup> Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Ron Feldman and Jerome Kohn further expanded the corpus of Arendt's published work in 2007 with the publication of *The Jewish Writings*, a collection of *all* of Arendt's Jewish writings from the 1930s through the 1960s. Through the various newspaper articles, essays, and letters, one has the opportunity to witness the evolution of Arendt's intellectual concerns over a period of four decades. While the writings do deal with political issues and in many cases present the nascent stages of later political theory, they "are less exemplifications of Arendt's political ideas than the experiential ground from which those ideas grew and developed."<sup>11</sup> The writings tell of Arendt's Jewish experiences, from her Jewish perspective, from which she will eventually articulate the very simple foundation for all of her political theory: "The meaning of politics is freedom."<sup>12</sup>

The publication of *The Jewish Writings* prompted a deeper investigation of Arendt's Jewishness, with even more scholars taking note of how this aspect of Arendt's identity significantly impacted the development of her political thought.<sup>13</sup> These scholars echo earlier commentaries on the relevance of Arendt's Jewishness; overwhelmingly, they agree with Jerome Kohn that Arendt's "political thought in

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<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, xxviii.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *The Promise of Politics*, John Kohn, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 108. What "freedom" means for Arendt will be further expounded in the first substantive chapter of the dissertation.

<sup>13</sup> See the following essays, all printed in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, edited by Roger Berkowitz, et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010): Jerome Kohn, "Hannah Arendt's Jewish Experience: Thinking, Acting, Judging" (179-194); Ron H. Feldman, "The Pariah as Rebel: Hannah Arendt's Jewish Writings" (197-205); Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "Hannah Arendt's Jewish Identity" (207-210); Suzanne Vromen, "Jewish to the Core" (213-217). Earlier works also acknowledge the importance of Arendt's Jewishness, including, Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

general is anchored in her experience as a Jew.” The new material, however, afforded the opportunity for new insights to be made, including the general consensus that the “power of her political thought can be fully grasped if and only if her ideas strike chords and resonate in the experiences of others, however different they may be from hers.”<sup>14</sup> Further, Feldman notes, while Arendt writes about Jewish politics and concerns over a forty-year period, “this does not mean that we should categorize . . . her work as a whole as a ‘Jewish’ political theory.”<sup>15</sup> All of these scholars, then, posit the importance of the Arendt’s Jewish experiences. I agree with these scholars; however, I will argue that Arendt’s Jewishness *also* emerges in the *content* of her theory, often in subtle, yet significant ways. Therefore, while it might be inaccurate to categorize Arendt as a political theorist in the Jewish tradition, we would also be remiss if we did not recognize the ways in which ideas and concepts central to the Jewish tradition manifest in her political thought.

This dissertation is built on the premise that, as Benhabib has written so clearly: “Any presentation of [Arendt’s] thought that does not emphasize the formative experience of German philosophy as well as of Jewish politics would be grossly inadequate . . . [they] are the dual sources of her philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> In investigating the nature of the connection between Arendt’s Jewishness and her political theory, it became evident that her Jewishness does not merely serve as the foundation of her

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<sup>14</sup> Kohn, “Arendt’s Jewish Experience,” 187.

<sup>15</sup> Feldman, “Pariah as Rebel,” 205.

<sup>16</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: Lanham, Maryland, 2000), 47.

entry into politics; rather, her Jewish experiences are an integral part of her political formulations. Further, her Jewishness appears from within the framework of the Jasperian phenomenological approach, which penetrates particular experiences in order to understand how human beings fulfill their human possibilities. Throughout Arendt's work, the narrative is often employed as a mode of understanding because it serves this phenomenological goal. That is, the narrative is useful in discovering when and how human potential is fulfilled.

A moderate amount of work has been done on the topic of Arendt and narrative; however, Julia Kristeva's *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative* is the most extensive.<sup>17</sup> Kristeva notes, "The missing link between Arendt's early work and her celebrated writings on totalitarianism may be found in her conception of human life as a political action that is revealed to us through the language of a story."<sup>18</sup> In this book, she elucidates how Arendt uses narrative to connect her Jewish experiences and philosophical insights. In essence, she finds that underlying Arendt's political theory is the assumption that if we want to ascribe meaning to life and our experiences, we must first tell our stories.

In 2013, the scholarship on Arendt was illuminated by the work of Ronald C. Arnett, who approaches Arendt's work from the field of communications and rhetoric. In *Communication Ethics in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Rhetoric of Warning and Hope*, Arnett offers an atypical analysis of Arendt that significantly contributes to the research

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<sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2001). Another contribution on the topic of narrative is Seyla Benhabib's *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*.

<sup>18</sup> Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 69.



on narrative. A remarkably innovative work, Arnett “seeks to listen to a storyteller who calls us out of darkness that is masked by the banality of artificial light.” He recognizes that Arendt’s work was not analytical but “an existential intellectual journey that points to an existential understanding.” He understands her existential approach to be the telling of stories that are “metaphors of genuine darkness and genuine light, permitting us to witness ‘holy sparks’ of genuine hope.” Arnett also dedicates an entire chapter to an analysis of *The Jewish Writings*, providing a succinct summary as well as a brief analysis of the value of the essays in the collection. In these essays, he sees the experiential background to Arendt’s political theory, much as other scholars do. He adds, “Arendt worked within roots that had to meet the challenge of existence, not our romantic demands.” He finds that there is no romanticizing about the past or the future for Arendt, no purpose in postulating the romantic ideals of the perfect society. Rather, there is benefit in seeking to understand what is happening in the present, and a useful mode of understanding is to uncover the meaning of human-ness that lies in the stories of the past. According to Arnett, through Arendt’s use of narrative, we learn that, “[p]eople live ultimately not by the signs of image makers but by stories that guide when darkness attempts to crowd out all genuine light.”<sup>19</sup>

*Rahel Varnhagen*, written in 1933; published in 1957, is one of Arendt’s earliest exercises in the use of narrative as a phenomenological method of understanding. She did not wish to write a biography of Varnhagen, but rather, she sought to understand,

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<sup>19</sup> Ronald C. Arnett, *Communication Ethics in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt’s Rhetoric of Warning and Hope* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 3, 197-219, 218, 219.

through recounting particular stories, *who* Varnhagen was and *what* her life meant.

Arendt would continue to use narrative as a mode of understanding, recounting the lives and stories of numerous individuals such as Henrich Heine, Bernard Lazare, Franz Kafka, Martin Buber, and Chaim Weizmann. Perhaps her most well-known exercise in narrative is the collection of essays gathered under the title, *Men in Dark Times*. All of Arendt's narrative accounts are stories of what Arendt calls "conscious pariahs." The conscious pariah is the individual with "heart, humanity, humor, and disinterested intelligence."<sup>20</sup> By disinterested, she means that these individuals were driven by no *particular* interest other than a deeper understanding of what it means to be human.

In 1962, Arendt wrote,

I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say.<sup>21</sup>

As Arendt develops her political thought, she draws from many personal incidents; however, the Passover story is central to Jewish self-understanding. The Passover story is not simply a story of the liberation of an oppressed people. Rather, for Arendt, it is a story of what it means to be human. As individuals recognized their freedom to act, even within the bonds of slavery, they became a publicly appearing people with the potential for justice. It holds, "in a nutshell," the fullest expression of man as a publicly

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<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 274.

<sup>21</sup> Hannah Arendt, Essays and lectures---"Action in the Pursuit of Happiness," lecture, American Political Science Association, New York, N.Y.---1960, The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.), 1.

appearing being through action and freedom. This ancient story is specific to the Jewish people; but, insofar as it reveals the possibilities of human potential, it is relevant for understanding what it means to be human in general. As such, throughout this dissertation, the Passover story is used as a metaphorical framework for understanding Arendt's political theory. If the goals of narrative and phenomenology are the same, then this quintessential narrative has significant revelatory value. I identify four elements of the Passover story that become central to Arendt's political theory: the stirring of the mental activities (thinking, willing, and judging), a move to action, the emergence of the space of appearance, and the manifestation of human freedom. Further, within each of these elements specific connections to various Jewish traditions emerge. Arendt had formative experiences with scholars, colleagues, and friends that introduced her to concepts from Jewish mysticism, Rabbinic Judaism, and Reform Judaism. As Arendt distances herself from the Western tradition these subtle influences begin to appear, shedding new light on her political theory.

The task set before me is difficult for many reasons. First, Arendt speaks to politics through the Greek and Western political traditions, which makes an assertion of her Jewishness inherently difficult. Nonetheless, while it is true that she works from within the Western political tradition, her project is largely a critique of the ways in which that tradition, from Plato through Marx, failed to account for political action. In her efforts to construct a political theory that incorporates the value of thinking *and* acting, certain Jewish characteristics appear. Second, the Jewish aspects of her thought are not explicitly stated, but they are subtly present. Thus, it would be easy to recognize

the ways in which her key concepts of thinking, acting, and freedom can be situated in the dialogue of the Western tradition. But, as she distinguishes herself from that tradition, the Jewish origins of these ideas begin to appear. This dissertation seeks to remember that Arendt thinks as a political theorist *and* as a Jew. Despite Arendt's distancing efforts, she is grappling with fundamental notions of the Western political tradition. We shall see how, in the midst of that distancing and grappling, the Jewish aspects of her work often signify her unique contributions to that tradition.

Thus, the original aspect of this dissertation is the approach I will take whereby I frame Arendt's Jewish identity and experiential background in terms of what she herself regards as critical, namely, the activities of the mind, action, appearance, and freedom, with specific attention to the ways in which these elements can be understood through the Passover story and other attendant and specifically Jewish concepts. Given the importance of the Passover story, articulating Arendt's theory of narrative is the task that sets this project in motion and to which I now turn.

## CHAPTER I: AREN'T'S THEORY OF NARRATIVE

Having no social position that would render an orientation self-evident, the only possibility for Rahel to encounter the world was in her own life. That she relied on this life and its experiences was the precondition of her eventual success in breaking through to reality. But hardly more than the precondition. For in order to really enter an alien history, to live in a foreign world, she had to be able to communicate herself and her experiences.

~Hannah Arendt, "Original Assimilation"

Hannah Arendt belongs to a part of modern Jewish history that is largely forgotten by the Jewish tradition, a fate she herself speaks of in 1943. In "We Refugees" she writes, "Modern Jewish history, having started with court Jews and continuing with Jewish millionaires and philanthropists, *is apt to forget about this other thread of Jewish tradition . . . the tradition of a minority of Jews who have not wanted to become upstarts, who preferred the status of 'conscious pariah.'*"<sup>1</sup> Writing in a tone that is somewhat disparaging and perhaps even farcical, she contends that the conscious pariah has "all vaunted Jewish qualities—the 'Jewish heart,' humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence" and stands in contradistinction to the social parvenu, the Jewish philanthropists, the millionaires, the "upstarts" who possess "all Jewish shortcomings—tactlessness, political stupidity, inferiority complexes, and money-

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees" in *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 274.

grubbing.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the pariahs do not “think it worthwhile to change their humane attitude and their natural insight into reality.”<sup>3</sup>

Arendt’s conscious pariah is marked by four distinguishing elements: the recognition of the individual as a being capable of action; the courage to will subjective thoughts into objective actions; the vulnerability of disclosure in the public realm; and an enduring resilience driven by a hope for freedom and justice. The pariahs begin with “their own hearts and brains” as they seek to answer the question, “Who am I?”<sup>4</sup> In this way, a pariah starts as an individual revolutionary, one who seeks to overthrow the weak identity of the self, constructed in the mind, in favor of an identity grounded in action, the only viable agent of disclosure.

Embracing the vaunted Jewish qualities and stepping into the role of the conscious pariah, in 1942, Arendt writes a biweekly column for *Aufbau*, a German Jewish periodical published in New York. In these articles she presents the case that the modern Jew has essentially died to the world.<sup>5</sup> She longs to see meaning brought back to the life of the individual Jew and the longstanding history of the Jewish people once again imbued with political significance. In her better-known political writings, she laments the ways in which the public realm has grown lifeless due to the overwhelming

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Seyla Benhabib summarizes the pariah-parvenu distinction in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*: “The pariah accepted the position of the outsider, and retained the otherness that bourgeois society continued to impose upon him or her, whereas the parvenu sought to overcome his or her outsider status and otherness either by denying the difference altogether or by exaggerated identification with the values and behavior of that ‘genteel Christian society’ who recognition he or she sought” (37).

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, “We Refugees,” 274.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening,” in *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 134-185.

emphasis on work and labor and the insufficient understanding of the importance of political action. In both genres of her writings, she makes the same case for the resuscitation of mankind through a newfound meaning in political existence. The source of meaning and the mode of revival, both for the pariah and for the broader political world, can be found in the underlying theory of narrative present in Arendt's political theory.

In a lecture delivered in 1960, Arendt said, "I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for us ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say."<sup>6</sup> If action is the only mode of human disclosure, then the stories that recount particular actions preserve that revelation, ensuring that the individual or collective will remain exposed, viable, and distinct in the political realm. Because the narrative, like action itself, is revelatory, it is a significant tool for understanding individual and collective identity alike. While Arendt may draw from many personal incidents, the Passover story is the basic narrative that underlies all of her works. It holds, "in a nutshell," the fullest expression of man as a publicly appearing being through action, which is rooted in the individual awareness of innate freedom. Thus, this chapter serves two purposes: first, to render an account of Arendt's theory of narrative; and, second, to make the case for the Passover story by uncovering how Arendt understood it, how she experienced this narrative in her own life, and how this experience manifests itself in her political theory.

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, "Pursuit of Happiness," 1.

Throughout this dissertation the tension between two modes of conceptualization will continuously present itself. Arendt is averse to concrete conceptualizations that seek to offer static definitions and favors a phenomenological approach within which experience reveals understanding. Despite this, she often times expounds greatly upon Greek concepts, definitions and ideas. It is important to note, however, that these analyses are, more often than not, points of departure, ways in which Arendt distinguishes herself from the Greek and Western traditions. Arendt is phenomenological; she considers the world not to define it, but to understand it. She recognizes that all experiences in the world are conditioned by the essential conditions of time and space. Understanding what is manifesting in particular human experiences requires perpetual consideration of the experiences themselves. For Arendt, the narrative is a primary means for this type of consideration. This dissertation follows the phenomenology of the Passover narrative. This chapter provides an account of the value of narrative in Arendt's political theory and concludes with an example of the phenomenology of narrative as presented in *Men in Dark Times*. What a careful reading of Arendt reveals is a conceptualization of narrative that is distinct, even while remaining quite vague. It is this ill-defined, somewhat amorphous concept of narrative that is more concretely conceptualized here. While Arendt was opposed to such concretizations, the value of the concept lies in the fact that it provides the guidelines within which a thing is identified. This is crucial because it will distinguish the narrative from mundane stories as well as historical accounts. It will be shown that Arendt's concept of narrative is phenomenological insofar as it shares in the revelatory



character of human experience. This way of conceptualizing narrative is not specific to Arendt. Others, such as Stephen Crites, have employed phenomenological accounts of narrative in explaining human phenomena. Due to the significant similarities in the ways in which Crites and Arendt utilize narrative, Crites' more concretized account of narrative will be instructive in formulating Arendt's theory of narrative.

Arendt's theory of narrative is not explicitly articulated in her works; however, the use of narrative in her own writings and the cursory remarks she makes on the power of narrative offer significant insight into the way in which she understood and utilized this mode of expression. Further, the theory of narrative that will be expounded hereafter is quite obviously drawn from her notion of the conscious pariah as described in the introductory remarks. It is through her many narrative accounts of various pariah-types that one can see how Arendt casts the conscious pariah as the agent of the authentic narrative.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the stories Arendt finds meaningful in terms of human life all follow the conscious pariah. As such, the narrative is going to share the same qualities already discussed regarding the pariah. Indeed, the relationship between narrative and pariah will prove to be reciprocal, leaving one to question whether the pariah type emerged from a latent understanding of narrative, or whether the underlying theory of narrative is a byproduct of the activity of the pariah types.

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<sup>7</sup> For example: "Soren Kierkegaard," 1932; "Friedrich von Gentz," 1932; "A Guide for Youth: Martin Buber," 1935; "Dilthey as Philosopher and Historian," 1945; "Heidegger the Fox," 1953; *Men in Dark Times*, 1955; *Rahel Varnhagen*, 1957. Also part of narrative expression are the correspondences that Arendt meticulously maintained, no doubt a testament to the value that these documents bring to her story. Amongst the published collections are the correspondences between Arendt and her husband, Heinrich Blucher, as well as the very lengthy collection of letters between Arendt and her teacher, Karl Jaspers. (Interestingly, the correspondence between Arendt and Jaspers is the most voluminous, perhaps due to the fact that both thinkers had an affection for the phenomenological and saw experience as the primary mode of understanding.)

In providing an account of Arendt's theory of narrative, it is appropriate to begin by stating what is intended in the use of the word "narrative." For Arendt, the notion of narrative refers only to stories that meet a certain set of criteria. It is clear that the *authentic* narrative will disclose the identity of the agent, have a "living meaning" that awakens the will of the agent, quickens the agent to action, and manifests a universal opening to inquiry about freedom and justice. This is a fairly demanding set of criteria, which deliberately filters out those stories that are historical, diminutive, or destructive, leaving them to be stories that are something *other than* narrative. For example, the narrative of German National Socialism would not meet these requirements. The story created by Hitler and the Nazi regime leads to the un-concealment of a political world that does not invite inquiry about freedom and justice, but categorically defines in absolute terms what the world *ought* to look like. This story, like any story that posits absolute truths, limits the will to what has been prescribed, effectively stripping it of its inherent freedom. Without the freedom to choose one's position in the world, the disclosure of the agent is also impossible.

With this definition in place, it is useful to note how this conception of narrative relates to other important terms that will appear throughout this dissertation, specifically, *tradition*, *myth* and *history*. Tradition is often built out of narrative and is the "cumulative construction of belief and practice that actualizes the founding revelation for the ongoing community."<sup>8</sup> The effect of the founding revelation on the

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<sup>8</sup> Micahel Fishbane, "Law, Story, and Interpretation: Reading Rabbinic Texts," in *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume 1: Authority*, ed. Michael Walzer et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xxxix.

behavior of the community is the content of the narrative; thus, tradition is that which keeps the narrative alive and present. In the case of the Passover narrative, for example, the tradition of the Seder meal is meant to actualize the meaning of the story itself, which, for Arendt is the recognition that as human beings we are free. A myth is an “imaginative fiction” created to reveal “what [is] thought to be timeless and constant in our existence.”<sup>9</sup> To refer to the Passover narrative again, it could be understood as a myth in the sense that it has this revelatory quality and is ultimately concerned with meaning. Insofar as myth can have a “profound effect upon our experience and behavior” it is very similar to Arendt’s notion of authentic narrative. Finally, while there is certainly a connection between narrative and history, the function of authentic narrative is not mere *historical account*, a characteristic that will be expounded further in the discussion on “living meaning.”

In seeking to construct Arendt’s theory of narrative, it is helpful to turn to Stephen Crites, who provides a theory of narrative that is also phenomenological. Arendt’s notion of authentic narrative is comparable to what Stephen Crites calls “sacred” narrative.<sup>10</sup> Arendt would not use this term, due to the implicit religious connotation of the term “sacred.” In “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” Crites makes the argument that “the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative.” In this essay, Crites refers to narrative as one of the “persistent forms of cultural expression.” The persistence of the narrative lies in “the fact that people speak”

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Random House, 2000), xv.

<sup>10</sup> The discovery of the term is found in Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971): 291-311.

and this speaking is “a necessary mark of being human.” Narrative is, for Crites, a *condition* of human existence. That is, all human existence is *in time* and is known only through *action*. Action, the content of narrative, includes “every gesture, every footstep, every utterance” and narrative “gives it a purified expression.” For Crites, narrative is not artifice, that is to say, it is not a fabrication. Importantly, however, there are fundamental qualities to stories that differentiate them from one another. Crites finds that stories function in one of two ways and are therefore either “sacred” or “mundane.” The sacred, not named so because of any religious or spiritual significance, are those stories that “cannot be fully and directly told, because they live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of the celebrant . . . they form consciousness rather than being among the objects of which it is directly aware.”<sup>11</sup>

Crites also asserts that sacred narratives are mythopoeic stories wherein “men’s sense of self and world is created.” A mundane story, on the other hand, does not have this revelatory, evocative nature; rather, it is more acutely located in a particular time and place. That is to say, mundane stories are temporally bound to the particular circumstances. Sacred stories, on the other hand, are not bound by temporal constraints and have a universal applicability in what they allow the reader/teller to access. Mundane stories are subject to the perspective of the teller, who is also part of the story itself. Sacred stories may change, but do so through time in an evolutionary manner that reflects the identity of the collective itself. Thus, “People do not sit down

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 291, 293, 295.

on a cool afternoon and think themselves up a sacred story. They awaken to a sacred story.”<sup>12</sup>

Arendt’s narrative is an awakening as well, which is evidenced in the actions of the conscious pariah. It is that awakening/sacred narrative, or as I have earlier called it “authentic narrative,” and its relationship to the conscious pariah that will be expounded hereafter. The following subsections individually address each of the qualities of narrative. There will be obvious overlap as the elements exist coevally and with no logical linear or sequential character. The disclosure of the agent will be discussed first, although, it could very well have been discussed last, as the general purpose of narrative is to disclose knowledge of the identity of the self. It is a useful starting point, however, as this characteristic holds, in a nutshell, the entirety of the theory of narrative and leads directly to the space of politics.

For Arendt, the primary purpose of the authentic narrative is to generate an understanding of one’s self that will motivate further disclosure. What is revealed is not only the actors *in* the story, but, perhaps more importantly, the identity of the re-teller of the story. It is as if in telling a story, by engaging the experiences of another, one receives the benefit of participation—knowledge of self. Thus, Arendt’s moments of narrative exploration, as much as they are stories *about other* pariahs, are also Arendt’s stories about herself: these stories tell us how she understood herself and human being in general. If the narrative is revelatory, then a keen reader must look at Arendt’s stories to see what it is she is disclosing about herself. Further, the way in which Arendt

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 295, 296.

describes the Passover story and the function of this narrative in the collective identity of the Jewish people is significant. Because narrative is revelatory, it opens up the world of action, which is implicitly political. The Passover story, because it teaches the difference between freedom and slavery, disclosed to Arendt a political philosophy. This is why this story can rightly be used as the centerpiece for understanding Arendt's political theory. It is the story that discloses to the reader of Arendt the fundament of her political theory.

While the narrative has the capacity to foster the identity of the individuals who participate in it, it also evokes powerful communal associations. It provides a sense of continuity in collective identity, which allows individuals to locate themselves in time and space. As one identifies with the stories of one's past, it is possible to move forward by acting as a character in that narrative. The problem in modernity is that narrative is being isolated, trapped, in an historical moment, of a time gone by, making it appear distant and irrelevant to the meaning and purpose of individual or communal life. According to Arendt, this results in telling stories *about* the Jewish people as opposed to participating in the story *of* the Jewish people.<sup>13</sup> The knowledge that was disclosed in the action of the story is then re-concealed and confined to a past that can only account for *what was*. With this veil in place, the story is no longer capable of disclosing the identity of *who the agents are*; that can emerge only in action and speech.

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<sup>13</sup> This is explained in greater detail in the section that discusses the "living meaning." Simply stated, Arendt criticizes the way the reform Rabbis transformed Judaism, claiming they removed the life from the tradition and made it an historical account.

In essence, the once powerful content of narrative has faded into distant memory and has become nothing more than a dim recollection of a past far gone.

The capacity for disclosure, then, is largely dependent upon participation in the narrative as an act of re-membrance and re-collection. The narrative allows one to connect to the past through memory for the purpose of propelling oneself into the future through present action. By participating in the narrative, the individual is able to engage with the revealed entities of the story. This participation is also self-revealing as it helps individual human beings to understand themselves as well as the conditions of the world in which they live. This understanding is essential for the actualization of the individual's un-concealment. In this way, then, the narrative is a mimetic catalyst for the disclosure of human being. Mythos allows human beings to participate in the great power of the collective memory, where the power lies in what it bequeaths to us, the heirs. Through remembrance men are bound together by self-identification. In order for the myth to maintain its value, for tradition to be more than acts but meaningful rituals, the story must be told to an audience who will, eventually, become the disseminators of the story. The power of the myth lies in the memory of the people and the re-collection that passes it on *through* history.

In her essay "The Gap between Past and Future," Arendt writes,

Without testament or, to resolve the metaphor, without tradition—which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is—there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither

past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it.<sup>14</sup>

Published in 1954, her stance on tradition is clearly presented in this essay and in the collection of essays it prefaces. This mature articulation is foreshadowed in her earlier writings wherein she points to the importance of tradition, and even specifically the myth of the Passover story. In “What is Authority,” published in 1954, she further articulates this the following way:

With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past...We are in danger of forgetting, and such an oblivion—quite apart from the contents themselves that could be lost—would mean that, humanly speaking, we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence. For memory and depth are the same, or rather depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.<sup>15</sup>

From all of this we get the notion that for Arendt *authentic human life* is the continuity of the past in the present moment leading to an uncertain future. This means that remembrance, or memory, in other words, the myth, is a crucial aspect of human life. In remembering, one removes the veil, the concealing agent. The power of narrative is that it nurtures and maintains the revelation, it keeps the space of the community and the possibility of action open to further participation. With further action will come

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1954), 5. This passage also seems to be responsive to Nietzsche's concept of Eternal Recurrence. For Arendt, the myth tells the story of is the rectilinear moment that breaks into the cyclical pattern of nature but only insofar as it creates a continuity of human activity. Further, the indeterminate nature of human activity does not negate cause and effect but highlights both the limits of human knowledge and the necessity for continuity, ie., the myth.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.



further disclosure. The process itself is recursive: but, one does not participate in the tradition to go to the past, but to maintain the space of the present that moves forward only through continued action. There must be this “willed continuity” that comes from tradition, which is known through the narrative, the story that maintains the presence of the tradition. Without it, there may be an historical account of an ancient people, but with the loss of continuity there is loss of *life*.

Deeply affected by the loss of *life* that defined the atrocities of the twentieth century, Arendt rails against the veils of modernity. She, like the pariahs she writes about, is aware of and awakened to the veils that conceal that which has appeared in the past. Her project of understanding is a task of revival: the veils must be lifted for human being to emerge full of life once again. The notion of storytelling, and the process of un-concealment that occurs in narrative, lies at the heart of Arendt’s biographical work, *Rahel Varnhagen*.<sup>16</sup> The epigraph to the text, a poem by Edwin Arlington Robinson, an American Pulitzer Prize winning poet, begins:

We tell you, tapping our brow,  
The story as it should be,—  
As if the story of a house  
Were told or ever could be;  
We’ll have no kindly veil between  
Her visions and those we have seen,—

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<sup>16</sup> The un-concealment in Arendt’s theory of narrative is not meant to be analogous to the Heideggerian notion of the concealment and un-concealment of Being. For Heidegger, the Truth of Being and the Meaning of Being are the same. For Arendt, truth and meaning are wholly different and pursued by different mental faculties. Because of this, along with the fact that Arendt does not admit to *any* notion of Truth, the un-concealment here cannot be confused with Heidegger’s concept. That being said, the simple fact that un-concealment is necessary for human actualization certainly prompts one to consider a Heideggerian influence.

As if we guessed what hers have been  
Or what they are or would be.<sup>17</sup>

Working from within her own experiences, one veil of concealment that troubles Arendt is that which covers the Passover story. While the reform movement was successful in changing various aspects of Judaism, Arendt contends that, detrimentally, it turned the Passover tradition into an historical account that speaks *about* the Jewish identity without drawing one into participatory membership in the community. She writes, “This ‘reform,’ which ruthlessly and nonchalantly removed all national, all political meaning from the tradition, did not reform that tradition...it *merely robbed it of its living meaning.*” Thus, with the removal of political meaning, the foundational myth became “dead and mute to no one more than the very people who once wrote it.”<sup>18</sup>

Julia Kristeva, in *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, notes that Arendt’s concern with the narrative is the quality of experience it provides. Indeed, while the Jewish historical account of the Passover story has been preserved, what is missing in the foundational myth is its living meaning, what Kristeva calls the “*praxis* of the narrative.”<sup>19</sup> The narrative is useful only insofar as the recollecting of it evokes a deeper level of understanding of what it means to be human, which, for Arendt, implies a certain move toward action. Without the action, the praxis, the story is an historical

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<sup>17</sup> As written in Hannah Arendt’s *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 73.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 149, 150, emphasis mine.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 8.

account, lacking the necessary qualities of an authentic narrative. Arendt articulates this more clearly in *The Human Condition*:

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it “somehow is a kind of *praxis*.”<sup>20</sup>

If this is the case, then the critique of modernity as “dehumanizing” would mean that the narrative, the *bios* as *praxis* able to be told, is gone. This is Arendt’s point exactly when she addressed the Jewish people in 1942 in “The Jewish War the Isn’t Happening.” Her constant cries for the formation of Jewish army were calls for the recognition of and solidarity in Jewish identity. She writes,

One truth that is unfamiliar to the Jewish people, though they are beginning to learn it, is that *you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as*. A person attacked as a Jew cannot defend himself as an Englishman or a Frenchman. The world would only conclude that he is simply not defending himself.<sup>21</sup>

The failure to connect to the past, to remember through narrative, is depriving the Jewish people of their very identity.

Gershom Scholem is instructive in this matter. Scholem highlighted the importance of narrative in the mystical Jewish tradition, claiming that “the documents of religion are . . . not conceived as expressing a separate and distinct world of religious truth and reality . . . The [stories] . . . are simply descriptions of the relation between

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<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 97.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 137.

matter and form, spirit and matter, or the faculties of the mind.”<sup>22</sup> As a secular Jew, like Scholem, Arendt sees the religious tradition in the same way; that is to say, the value of the narrative is its ability to articulate the connection between the individual and society, or between the activities of the mind and the active life. This “living meaning” of the stories is only sustained through active participation in the continuation of the story, which entails a continued engaging in the narrative through action and speech. For European Jewry in the twentieth century, the problem is not the Passover narrative, rather it is the way in which the reform movement removed the living meaning from that narrative.

One may question the legitimacy of Arendt’s argument here, noting that the Passover meal, the Seder, has always been celebrated annually. Arendt would claim, however, that no amount of ritualistic activity can replace the living meaning of the story. People could gather together and tell the story, but with the loss of the revelatory character of the narrative the ritual becomes lifeless, as well. The practice of retelling the story was no longer an exercise in disclosure, removing the veils of concealment on identity; it no longer invited participation in the narrative but merely told a story about a time long past. To wit, because Arendt asserts that the reform movement diminished the political relevance of the Passover story, the ritual enactment of the story also lost its revelatory capacity. The ritual could not reveal what the reform movement had concealed. This collapse of meaning is not specific to the Jewish people, it is an innate threat to the living meaning of any narrative because “The moment we

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<sup>22</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 26.

want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is. . .with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.” The stories themselves may be reified, converted into objects and historical artifacts. Regardless, “They themselves, in their living reality, are of an altogether different nature than these reifications.”<sup>23</sup> The stories are of a different nature than the reifications insofar as they are in essence the revelation of the agents or the actors in them. The objective documents, monuments, moments they may honor form that which is really not objective at all, and that is the identity of the agent.

For the Israelites, the wandering through the wilderness is the compositional ground of the narrative that begins with the Passover. In the wilderness, there can be no end, simply new places and new times within which to compose our own narratives. And because there is no end to the narratives, we are participating in those narratives that came before us. Arendt is making the case that modern man should not merely reify the past and in that way remove the living meaning of the stories. Rather, self-identity demands that human beings continue to act, to participate in the narratives in such a way that stories are able to perform the function of disclosure. That disclosure is the revelation of *life*.

Stories that reify the past, for Arendt, are historical in nature. They are valuable as history, but do not hold the seeds of knowledge in the same way that authentic narrative does. A narrative without living meaning in many instances is history. History is an account of past moments, an account that does not supercede the bounds of time

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<sup>23</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 181, 184.

and space. That is to say, history is confined by the temporality of the moment of the story. Both history and narrative rely in some way upon memory and are concerned with action. This deep relationship between memory and action is clearly articulated in “The Concept of History,” an essay found in *Between Past and Future*. Arendt starts with a discussion of Herodotus, a Greek historian and the father of Western history, who understands the task of history to be “to save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion.” The Greek notion of immortality held that all natural things are ever-present, or immortal, and man is a natural being. “All living creatures, man not excepted, are contained in this realm of being-forever . . . man, insofar as he is a natural being and belongs to the species of mankind, possesses immortality.” With the idea that man is immortal, the role of history is to save the great moments, the great deeds, from being forgotten in the abyss of what-always-is. The modern concept of immortality is in great distinction from this ancient one, however. This eternal recurrence of natural things “does not, of course, make individual men immortal.” Moreover, it is the mortality of man that marks human existence. To wit, man moves along a rectilinear course of movement, from birth toward death, writing the story of his *bios*, the historical narrative of mortal existence. Therefore, the purpose of narrative, for Arendt, is not merely to save man from the oblivion of the eternally recurring natural world, but to remember the instances in which the actions and deeds of man cut into the cyclical nature of the world and bring to light the beauty of mortality. Arendt says, thus:

When Sophocles (in the famous chorus of *Antigone*) says that there is nothing more awe-inspiring than man, he

goes on to exemplify this by evoking purposeful human activities which do violence to nature because they disturb what, in the absence of mortals, would be the eternal quiet of being-forever that rests or swings within itself.<sup>24</sup>

What Herodotus did for historiography was a great contribution to the continuity of human being. He recognized, “The mortality of man lies in the fact that individual life, a *bios* with a recognizable life-story from birth to death...is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement.” Embracing the concept seen in Sophocles, Herodotus saw the unique power of mortality which “[moves] along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.” History is the account of the extra-ordinary moments of mortal interruption and historical accounts can become authentic narratives when they evoke disclosure, motivate the will of the reader/teller, and result in volition. Indeed, narrative is *historical*, but, again, it is not *merely history*. As narrative, the purpose of maintaining these historical accounts is so that “mortals themselves would find their place in the cosmos, where everything is immortal except men.”<sup>25</sup> And Arendt says, the faculty used for this recollection and placement in the universe is memory. The narrative exercises the human faculty of remembrance so that man can find himself in the great abyss of the ever-present.

The narrative is essential to political identity, however, it is plagued by the threat that its very articulation will in fact diminish its capacity to fulfill its purpose.

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *Past and Future*, 41, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 42, 43.

This frustration has the closest affinity with the well-known philosophic impossibility to arrive at a definition of man, all definitions being determinations of interpretations of *what* man is, of qualities, therefore, which he could possibly share with other human beings, whereas his specific difference would be found in a determination of what kind of a “who” he is.<sup>26</sup>

Participation in the narrative reveals an understanding that contributes to the way in which one understands one’s self, the particular identity of “who” one is. In the case of participating in the Passover narrative, in the modern world there is no need to place blood on the lintels, there is a new lintel and a new blood, a new circumstance and a new action. For Arendt, writing in the early 40s, the narrative is now about the political persecution of Jews and the proper action is the formation of the Jewish army.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the participation in the narrative allows the individual to reveal himself, and the collective to emerge into the dynamic web of human action. The action does not mitigate the impossibility of the definition of man, but “the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech, has great bearing upon the whole realm of human affairs, where we exist primarily as acting and speaking beings.”<sup>28</sup>

The narrative helps us to identify ourselves *so that* we can reveal ourselves through our own actions in the present moment. It helps us to understand the *who* that we wish to reveal so that our actions and words can continue the revelatory task. “The

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<sup>26</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 181.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, as the war continued, Arendt extended the pariah status of the Jews to all of Europe. She recognizes that not just the Jews, but all European countries are being challenged by the “mundane” story of Hitler’s National Socialist regime. She writes: “All European nations have become pariah people, all are forced to take up the battle anew for freedom” (*Jewish Writings*, 141).

<sup>28</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 181.



disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt." Understanding narrative becomes more complex because all that is revealed is part of an already existing story, which Arendt refers to as a "web of human relationships." This web has been constructed by "innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions" and it is because of this "that action almost never achieves its purpose." It is because of the plurality of human existence that all actions and words are indeterminate, "but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it 'produces' **stories** with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things." Action is meant to reveal identity, but we are always moving, changing, wandering. The dynamic nature of the world does not obviate the role of action, but reinforces its necessity. Because time and space are in constant motion the individual and the collective must continuously act and speak in order to maintain a presence in the world of appearance; otherwise, they will fall into the despair of meaninglessness, the loss of self, the concealment of identity. Because we live in the world that is constantly being reconditioned by labor, work and action, we must continue to act and speak to be present in it. The story cannot end and the narrative cannot die. Action may never achieve its purpose, but that is because it is always achieving its purpose! That is, it is always producing the narrative, so long as human beings are acting and speaking. This is important because together action and speech "start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer" to the web of

things and affects uniquely “the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact.”<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, it has been noted that due to the nature of action, there is no “end” to any story. However, what the Passover story gives us is a definitive beginning. Even within the perplexity of the web of actions, “in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion.” The Passover story is the foundational myth of the Jewish people because it is the moment that can be isolated as the beginning, which does not give it any more significance than the rest of the story, but it is indicative of the power of natality.

Without the power of this moment, there is no natality, no moment of birth. So, the meaning of the Passover story is dead to those who refuse to see the story beyond the reification, to those who cannot see the meaning of the life that was born in the story, not simply the product of an external author. Furthermore, the Passover story cannot be understood as the workings of God, or of an invisible hand. If we simply attribute this story to God then we are killing the meaning; that is, we are stripping the actors of their task of acting and giving that power to God, in which case it would be a story that reveals God as the agent. But, we can rightly assume that this story, for Arendt, does not reveal God, but man, and more specifically that this story only exists, as all stories only exist, as the revelation of the acting agent. As Arendt writes,

The invisible actor behind the scenes is an invitation arising from a mental perplexity but corresponding to no real experience. Through it, the story resulting from

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 184.

action is misconstrued as a fictional story, where indeed an author pulls the strings and directs the play.

The Jewish story is not fictional; it is a political reality. Therefore, any means of understanding that deny this are detrimental to the Jewish identity as a whole and the Jewish experience in the world because what Arendt and the Jewish people experience is *real*. “The distinction between a real and a fictional story is precisely that the latter was ‘made up’ and the former not made at all.”<sup>30</sup>

The disclosure of one’s own narrative is daunting because it will put up boundaries implicit in definition. It means that one cannot remain in the interminably malleable world of the mind, free to construct and deconstruct oneself as one wills. Nay, action defines and one can never undo what one has done. This is why “The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own.” Or, stated again, “Courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one’s private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self.”<sup>31</sup>

These ideas are further bolstered in the practice of the Seder meal as it is an opportunity to annually participate in the Jewish narrative. The theater or performance of the story is, in a sense, inserting one’s self into the history or into that web. “Only the actors and speakers who re-enact the story’s plot can convey the full meaning, not so

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 185, 186.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 186.

much of the story itself, but of the ‘heroes’ who reveal themselves in it.”<sup>32</sup> The theater of the Seder meal consists in performing the actions themselves and thereby inserting one’s self into that particular revelation of that particular agent: I am a Jew. Of course, the disclosure of such an identity is only possible if the ritual, like the living narrative, quickens the agents to action and thereby ushers forth the space of politics wherein human beings innately inquire into the nature of freedom and justice.

Through action human beings emerge in what Arendt calls the space of appearance, the political realm where human beings exist as men in plurality. Thus, because the purpose of narrative is, like action, the disclosure of the human being, both action and narrative deposit the agents into the polis. In the polis, man is located in the web of action. Because every action affects other human beings, the question emerges: how are we to maintain our freedom? Indeed, freedom is the only means by which human beings can act and therefore all of the political realm is dependent upon this freedom. Also emerging in this space is the question of justice, where what is just is that which maintains freedom. Arendt often uses the two terms together because justice is the preservation of freedom. This means, then, that just human beings will not use their innate freedom to inhibit the freedom of other human beings. To reiterate, for Arendt, the meaning of politics is freedom, where freedom is manifested in the ability to create anew through action, and the narrative that teaches this is the Passover story. So, the loss of this narrative is not simply an historical loss, but a human one. Furthermore, the Passover narrative is more than a Jewish story: insofar as it teaches freedom and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 187

justice, it is the quintessential story of human being. This is why even a secular Jewess can learn from this narrative, and why it is applicable not just to Jews, but to all people.

As Michael Walzer points out, the story of the Exodus “is a common reference point” that has been used by many people in many different ways. For example,

[It] figures prominently in medieval debates over the legitimacy of crusading warfare. It is important to the political argument of the radical monk Savonarola . . . It is cited in the pamphlets of the German peasants’ revolt. John Calvin and John Knox justified their most extreme political positions by quoting from Exodus . . . The text underpins the radical contractualism of the Huguenot *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* and then of Scottish Presbyterians. It is crucial . . . to the self-understanding of the English Puritans . . . Benjamin Franklin proposed that the Great Seal of the United States should show Moses with his rod lifted and the Egyptian army drowning in the sea . . .<sup>33</sup>

Arendt moves a step further from Walzer; she considers it to be THE political narrative par excellence—a story that highlights the human condition of plurality and the ways in which the human essence of freedom is brought to the phenomenal world through action in order eventually to create the space of appearance and ultimately to establish justice. The central focus of the story, for Arendt, is the Passover event, wherein one can see Arendt’s understanding of human nature, and more importantly, of man as political being. For her, this historic Jewish narrative contains the requisite elements to the human experience of reality, namely self-disclosure, an active will, and concern for freedom and justice.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (USA: Basic Books, 1985), 5.

Arendt makes reference to the Passover story in many of her Jewish writings and claims that this narrative teaches “the difference between freedom and slavery” and calls to mind “the eternal rebellion of the heart and mind against slavery.”<sup>34</sup> The Passover narrative is an invitation to recognize the inherent freedom to experience existence by moving to action. Freedom is a value that resides in the “heart and mind” of the individual; it exists from birth and always has the potential to express itself in the public realm. However, freedom is first innate, individual, and private. Freedom becomes a matter of public interest only after the polis is established. The polis works to maintain “the function of the public realm” which is “to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in word and deed ... who they are and what they can do.”<sup>35</sup> The narrative, as the account of words and deeds, is inherently political insofar as its living meaning necessarily manifests in the space of appearance, the polis.

It is important to reiterate that this entire project rests on the assertion that the power of the Passover story, while a Jewish story and understood to be a significant part of Jewish history, lies in its application as a metaphor for *life* as Arendt understands it. This understanding is not, therefore, specific to the Jewish people. In other words, the way in which Arendt understands the Jewish narrative does not serve to place her in a Jewish context explicating *only* the Jewish experience; but rather it is her entry point, through her own particularly Jewish experiences, to understanding human life in general

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<sup>34</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 150.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1968), viii.

and political life in particular. Thus, to a Jewish woman, as a human being connected to *this particular* historical story, the Passover narrative is more palpable and more appropriate than any other story. It at once recognizes her political identity and gives access to a deeper understanding of the primary concern of all of her works, an understanding of what it means to be human in a world of appearances.

The Jewish historical narrative is full of many “interruptive” moments, with the Passover being the single most defining moment in that story. Accordingly, it is in this moment that one sees the great deeds and works of which man in general, and Jewish peoples in particular, within the boundaries of their own narrative, are capable. In other words, it is this moment that clearly illustrates all aspects of human-ness as Arendt understands it. As she writes regarding these moments,

These single instances, deeds or events, interrupt the circular movement of daily life in the same sense that the rectilinear *bios* of the mortals interrupts the circular movement of the biological life. The subject matter of history is these interruptions—the extraordinary, in other words.

The moments are extra-ordinary insofar as they highlight specific human-ness of human being: essentially, the unique ability, as mortals, to create something new within the constant churning of the universal order of things. It is, further, the recollection of these moments that connects man to man through time. “If mortals succeeded in endowing their works, deeds, and words with some permanence and in arresting their

perishability, then these things would, to a degree at least, enter and be at home in the world of everlastingness.”<sup>36</sup>

As has been seen, for Arendt authentic narrative is essential first because it preserves a collective identity, second because it allows the individual and the whole to recognize their place in time as they draw on the past and contribute to the future by continuing to pass on the story. The Passover narrative, as the foundational narrative of the Jewish people, takes on these tasks for the Jewish people specifically. Thus, to understand Arendt’s political thought, it is appropriate to look at the founding myth of her own political identity. As Arendt, herself, notes, all we have of her life is her literary contributions, her own stories, if you will. Thus, and as she puts the matter, it is equally important to note that not only her political existence, that is, those experiences occurring with regard to her “existence as a member of society”, but also her literary existence is marked by two things: “First, thanks to my husband, I have learned to think politically and see historically; and, second, I have refused to abandon the Jewish question as the focal point of my historical and political thinking.”<sup>37</sup> From this passage, written in a letter to Jaspers in 1946, Arendt claims that her thought is political, meaning concerned with the way in which human beings exist (or *live*) with one another, and historical, meaning it looks at the moments, comprised of actions and deeds, that constitute the stories that can be told, the *bios* that is *praxis*. And all of this is, as she claims, focused on the Jewish question, which I assert is her general crisis of existence:

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt, *Past and Future*, 42, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence: 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1992), 31.



how am I to be human in this world that recognizes me as Jewish? If political and historical circumstances point to my Jewishness, then how am I to perpetuate a *meaningful life*, that is, a life among other human beings that is driven by action and maintained by memory? If either of these things, memory or action, disintegrate, then with it goes my own human-ness, my own life.

To summarize briefly, the Passover story is told in Exodus and is the account of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Moses was divinely chosen to be the mediator between the Israelites and Pharaoh. He was told, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land.”<sup>38</sup> Repeatedly, Moses and Pharaoh engage in a series of negotiations. Each time, Moses requests the freedom of the Israelites, and each time, Pharaoh refuses. Upon each refusal, the Egyptian people are struck down by a plague, which causes Pharaoh to plead with Moses to relieve the burden from his people. The final plague to befall the Egyptians is the death of every firstborn child in all of Egypt. Moses gives the Israelites specific instructions on this day to slaughter a lamb and apply some of the lamb’s blood to the lintel and doorposts of their homes to serve as a sign for the Lord. When the Lord sees the blood he will pass over the home and “not let the Destroyer enter” and smite any in the household.<sup>39</sup>

This story of liberation from the oppression of Pharaoh in Egypt came to hold a significant place in the hearts and minds of Jewish people throughout history, eventually

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<sup>38</sup> Exodus 6:1, *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 122.

<sup>39</sup> Exodus 12:23, JPS.

evolving into a political symbol of national redemption. For many years the Passover festival (Pesach) was celebrated in individual homes, bringing together small bands of Jews to participate in the activity of remembering the story of their deliverance. The Passover festival was celebrated at the start of spring, at the same time as, but in a different manner than, the Festival of Matsos (Unleavened Bread). “The Feast of Unleavened Bread was observed by the entire community gathered in a holy place, while Pesach was celebrated in the home as a family festival.” The two festivals were combined under the rule of Josiah, when Jerusalem became the one sanctuary for all Jews and the location of all festivals. The exodus occurred in the first spring month of the year; thus, it was natural to adapt the pre-existing spring festivals to the newer, more significant event in Jewish history. “Spring, the time of liberation for nature, and the idea of human freedom seemed to fit very well together; in this way Pesach became the festival of the freedom of the Jewish people, its deliverance from slavery, and its awakening to a new life.” Thus, Pesach was moved out of the house (the private realm) and into society (the public realm) when the festival was celebrated at one central place, the Temple in Jerusalem. People were literally united in time and space at this festival and Passover became “a symbol of the striving of the people toward *national* freedom.”<sup>40</sup>

After the destruction of the Second Temple, Pesach underwent further changes and “the importance of the festival grew and . . . it became, in time, the greatest Jewish

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<sup>40</sup> Hayyim Schauss, *Pesach: A Jewish Festival* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 43-45, emphasis mine.

*national* holiday.” The activities of Passover, including those carried over from the Festival of Matsos were assigned new symbolic meanings and interpretations whereby “the freeing of Jerusalem from foreign rule became the main item.” The festival no longer concerned individual liberation or redemption, but celebrated the collective freedom of the entire nation. “Pesach now attained still greater importance as the anniversary of the deliverance from the first exile.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the Passover narrative and the Passover festival underwent changes as the Jewish people evolved and history unfolded. While the Passover story as a religious narrative is arguably a story of responding in faith to the actions of YHWH, the Passover experience came to be an annual remembrance of the recognition of the freedom that allowed the Israelites to reemerge as a nation. No longer necessarily faith based, but national-identity oriented, the secular understanding of the Passover story is one in which reality and phenomenal existence have replaced a life in relationship with YHWH. One can see in the evolution of the meaning of Passover the move from the spiritual to the phenomenal world; this is similar to Arendt’s move from philosophy to politics and further supports the argument presented here.

The metaphorical use of the Passover narrative as a framework for understanding Arendt’s political theory necessitates a more thorough investigation into her Jewishness. As a secular Jew, Arendt participated in the festival of remembrance. While it would be speculative to assume that she participated in the festival every year, it can be assumed that she celebrated the holiday as a child, while under the influence

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 46, 56, emphasis mine.

of her paternal grandparents and under the tutelage of Rabbi Vogelstein.<sup>42</sup> It did not lose its significance when she became an adult. Indeed, in 1975, the year she died, Arendt celebrated Pesach with a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Louis Finkelstein. Dr. Finkelstein wrote a letter to Arendt in February of 1975 inviting her to celebrate Pesach, “I wonder whether it would be convenient for you to come to the seder at my home this year again, as you did last year.” Arendt replied, “I’ll come with great pleasure.”<sup>43</sup> Whether she consistently participated in the annual celebration of Passover, recalling the experience of freedom, is not clear; what is clear is that at the beginning of her life and at the end of her life the Passover experience was present.

As a secular Jew, Arendt’s “Jewishness” is not a faith-based quality, but is a social and moral concern. She wrote, regarding the “pariahs” and “intellectuals” of European Jewry, “their own Jewishness, which played hardly any role in their spiritual household, *determined their social life* to an extraordinary degree and therefore *presented itself to them as a moral question* in the first order.” These pariah Jews, and Arendt as a pariah in her own right, were living under conditions that readily relate to the Passover story: like the Israelites of Pharaoh’s Egypt, their social/political reality was oppressive and ultimately dehumanizing. They could remain inactive, dissembled, effectively concealed

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<sup>42</sup> “Neither of Hannah Arendt’s parents was religious. But they sent their daughter to the synagogue with her Arendt grandparents, and they maintained good relationships with Rabbi Vogelstein and his family.” Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, General, 1938-1976*, n.d.---“Fa-Fram” miscellaneous---1958-1975, n.d. (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.). Images 005968, 005969.

individuals living in “lying denial” of their “isolation from reality.”<sup>44</sup> If they desired to exist *in* reality, they would have to embrace the essential human capability, freedom, and from this freedom choose to act.<sup>45</sup> Their Jewishness, then, was the remembrance of their human-ness as it exists in the recognition that man is innately free. This return was embodied, for Arendt, in the resuscitation of the Passover story, the fundamental narrative of the Jewish experience and symbol of freedom and liberation. These concepts lie at the heart of Jewishness as a cultural and ethical quality.

In order to understand the relevance of her Jewishness and the Passover story to Arendt’s political theory, it is useful to turn to her collection of essays entitled, *Men in Dark Times*. The text is a narrative practice in which Arendt accounts the lives, qualities, and actions of various pariah types and through which she discloses an understanding of her own Jewishness. Allen Speight notes the remarkable congruence between the “thematic content on the topic of narrative in this collection” and her developed, albeit brief, discussion of narrative in *The Human Condition*. Speight also notes that Arendt “appears to be using her narrative praxis to think through the theoretical claims about narrative from [*The Human Condition*].”<sup>46</sup>

Speight’s presentation of Arendt’s narrative theory is insightful and articulate. However, there seems to be more to the collection of essays in *Men In Dark Times* than

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<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 183, 186, emphasis mine.

<sup>45</sup> In her reply to Eric Voegelin’s review of her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in *The Review of Politics*, Hannah Arendt presents freedom as an essential capability of human beings. Hannah Arendt, “A Reply to Eric Voegelin,” in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 401-408.

<sup>46</sup> Allen Speight, “Arendt on Narrative Theory and Practice,” *College Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Winter 2011), 122, 123.

he purports, and more than Arendt explicitly states. There are eleven chapters dedicated to ten different pariah-types (Karl Jaspers is the subject of two essays), each of whom challenge their political identity in some way. Arendt sets out to tell the stories of these men and women, “how they lived their lives, how they moved in the world, and how they were affected by the historical time.” She chooses for her exercise a sampling of individuals who “could hardly be more unlike each other” except for the fact that “they share with each other the age in which their life span fell,” with the exception of Lessing, who is treated as a contemporary, nonetheless. It seems that the contemporaneity of these subjects is quite significant, however, because the historical time they shared was filled with catastrophe, moral disaster and unprecedented scientific developments. The stories she tells are of lives deeply affected by this age that “killed some of them and determined the life and work of others.”<sup>47</sup>

However, all the protagonists in this collection are woven together by a thread much more interesting than mere contemporaneity: association with and involvement in 20<sup>th</sup> century European Jewry. More specifically, all of the individuals in this collection were at the very least personally threatened and persecuted due to some connection with Jews in Europe or the position they took with regard to the treatment of Jews by the Nazi regime. Lessing, while not Jewish, had a significantly close relationship with Moses Medelssohn, the 18<sup>th</sup> century leader of the Jewish reform movement, a movement that Arendt speaks at length about in *The Jewish Writings*. During his life, Lessing took a firm stance against conservative religious notions, wrote various plays

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<sup>47</sup> Arendt, *Men In Dark Times*, vii.

and poems, and was a staunch literary critic. Holding fast to a universal understanding of human being, Lessing advocated a tolerance toward Jews during a time when they were still relegated to the ghetto, a stance neither popular, nor familiar among non-Jews in Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Angello Giuseppe Roncalli (Pope John XXIII) was, clearly, not Jewish; however, his contributions to Jewish-Christian relations are well known. Moreover, as the apostolic delegate to Turkey during WWII, Roncalli was instrumental in providing escape and asylum for thousands of European Jews. Karl Jaspers, beyond the obvious connection with Arendt and other Jewish intellectuals, was married to a Jewish woman. For his liberal attitude toward human beings, his willingness to see people as they exposed themselves to be, Jaspers suffered persecution under the National Socialist regime and was removed from his position at the university. Isak Dinesen, adored by Arendt, not only wrote wonderful stories, but she, too, exhibited heroic activity during WWII, opening her home in Denmark as part of a passage to Sweden. She was instrumental in facilitating the escape of tens of thousands of Jews. Bertolt Brecht was a fearless critic of the Nazi movement who wrote plays and poems distinct in their anti-Nazi sentiments. He fled from Germany in 1933 after Hitler came to power, but his vehement criticism of the regime never faltered. Randall Jarrell was a poet who impressed Arendt with some of his poems written during and about WWII. The two shared commonalities too complex to expound here; but, they enjoyed an intimate friendship of respect until he died in 1965.

The other four subjects, Rosa Luxemburg, Hermann Broch, Walter Benjamin, and Waldemar Gurian, were born into Jewish families, although Broch and Gurian converted

to Catholicism. Luxemburg is well known for her defiance of authority and her anti-war demonstrations. Her vehement activism was driven by a strong belief in the power of the masses and the necessity of revolution. It was her unrestrained fervor for political action that drew Arendt to her and why she must be included among the pariahs of the twentieth century. Broch and Gurian shared more than a religious conversion; both were writers and both were deeply concerned with phenomenal reality. Broch was motivated to an active life by an ethical imperative: he believed human beings had to help one another. Gurian was a realist who was deeply moved by his experiences and a recognition that he could act to change circumstances. Finally, Benjamin was gifted with poetic *thinking*, a faculty of the mind requisite for political action.

If one takes Arendt at her word, the various narratives are stories of pariahs who have nothing in common other than the time they happened to be thrown into this world. However, if one carefully considers the accounts themselves, the stories as they disclosed the individual actors, one cannot help but notice the specific types of people she chose for this exercise. It seems to be the case that her conscious pariahs, while not necessarily Jewish, are, due to the historical circumstances, inextricably connected to the Jewish story. As Speight notes, she uses the practice of writing narrative to better understand her theory of narrative, but she also uses the stories themselves to better understand *life*. *Men In Dark Times* is an exercise in discovering the living meaning of ten narratives. The experience of engaging in these diverse stories informs her understanding of human being and life, in many ways reflecting the sophisticated articulation of political theory given in *The Human Condition* some ten years prior.



What these stories hold fundamentally is an exposition on freedom and justice, the very task she sees as the purpose of narrative, in general, and the Passover story, in particular. The lives of these 20<sup>th</sup> century pariah types are powerful because they call to mind the type of activity necessary for honest un-concealment of identity. The stories of these people do exactly what the Passover story does: teach the difference between slavery and freedom. Thus, the Passover story, while particular to the Jewish people, has a broader context for application. The living meaning of the story, of all authentic narratives, is the same: in the revelation of action, the political space of appearance emerges, a space that Arendt believes is equivalent to freedom. Action is political, and the meaning of politics is freedom; therefore, the living meaning of any authentic narrative as it conveys actions is innately political and must reveal some notion of freedom and justice.

The interruptive moments that create the content of narrative are driven by something that occurs in “the hearts and brains” of individual human beings. That is to say, it has the power to interrupt whatever is occurring and activate the faculties of the mind. As Jerome Kohn writes in his introductory remarks to *The Promise of Politics*, “What is crucial for Arendt is that the specific meaning of an event that happened in the past remains potentially alive in the reproductive imagination.”<sup>48</sup> The Passover story, and the stories of those individuals who have acted in word and deed, are “living” when they spur the mind to consider the world and its infinite possibilities. This capacity to look at the world from a multitude of perspectives is, for Arendt, “thinking.” The activity

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<sup>48</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. John Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p.xxi.

of thinking culls an awareness of the ability to emerge in the world through action, which motivates the mental activity of willing. Kohn points out that the power of narrative lies in its *reproductive* capacity. Thus, remembrance itself is not enough to create the volition *to do*; the will is the faculty that looks to the future, by drawing from the past, and creates a present, that is an entirely new moment. Finally, thinking and willing manifest a third mental capacity—judging. For Arendt, judging is the most political activity of the mind because it assesses particulars and is the manifestation of thought. While the mental faculties are inherent in all human beings, they must be active in order for human beings to emerge in the world via action. Thus, the subsequent chapter seeks to explain the *vita contemplativa* and its part in the political realization of the plurality of men that live in the world.

## CHAPTER II: THE ACTIVITIES OF THE MIND: THINKING, WILLING, JUDGING

The business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope:  
it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before.

~ Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*

Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* as an investigation into “what we are doing.”

As such, the work focuses on the *vita activa*, a realm of existence that is distinguished from the realm of the *vita contemplativa*. These terms are Latin translations of ideas and concepts that were originally Greek. Simply translated, they mean the “active life” and the “contemplative life.” Arendt traces these Latin words back to the Greek terms *bios askholia* and *bios theoretikos*, the “unquiet life” and the “quiet life.” For the Greeks, starting with Aristotle, the distinction between the quiet and unquiet life is “between an almost breathless abstention from external physical movement and activity of every kind.”<sup>1</sup> This distinction is more decisive than the distinction between the *bios theoretikos* and the *bios politikos*, “the political life,” because *all* human activity is included in the term *bios askholia*. In this way, the unquiet life and the quiet life exist in absolute exclusivity, so much so that “[e]very movement, the movements of body and soul and well as of speech and reasoning, must cease before truth.”<sup>2</sup> For the ancient Greeks, the two realms of human existence, the world of quiet and the world of unquiet, are altogether separate. Arendt, steeped in the Greek and Western traditions of thought, considers the two worlds and determines that, in fact, they are not exclusive

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

realms of existence. Rather, they are both part and parcel of the human experience insofar as the activities of the mind and the activities of the physical body are both conditioned by the terms of human existence. Further, she notes that the active life “is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*.”<sup>3</sup> What we find in *The Human Condition* is that her inquiry into the active life, the world of human experience, effectively reinforced that the answer to the question “what are we doing?” involves both realms of existence, the active and the contemplative. Coming from the Greek tradition, with a bifurcated framework of understanding, Arendt asserts, that contrary to the Greek position, “all thinking in two worlds suggests that these two are inseparably connected with each other.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, she concludes *The Human Condition* “with a curious sentence that Cicero ascribed to Cato, who used to say that ‘never is man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.’”<sup>5</sup>

Cato’s strange observation leads to the inquiry found in *The Life of the Mind* where Arendt ponders, “What are we ‘doing’ when we do nothing but think? Where are we when we, normally always surrounded by our fellow-men, are together with no one but ourselves?” Like *The Human Condition*, *The Life of the Mind* is an inquiry into the conditions of being human. While rejecting the classical notion that the two realms are separate from one another, Arendt must confront the aspect of humanness that she

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

specifically did not address in *The Human Condition* if she is going to present a comprehensive theory of the human experience. Thus, *The Life of the Mind* is an exercise built on the notion that “one could look at this matter from an altogether different viewpoint,” one that includes in the notion of *praxis* not only what man does, but also what man thinks.<sup>6</sup>

Early on in her works, Arendt identifies the faculty of reason and its activity, thinking.<sup>7</sup> In “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” written in 1965-66, she clearly proposes the existence of an altogether separate faculty of the mind, namely, the will.<sup>8</sup> While she was certain that this faculty existed, she was uncertain about the activities particular to it. Specifically, she was perplexed by the activity of judging, which *seemed* to be one of the activities of the will. Of this, however, she was not convinced: “Whether this faculty of judgment, one of the most mysterious faculties of the human mind, should be said to be the will or reason or perhaps a third mental capacity, is at least an open question.”<sup>9</sup> This passage tells us three things: 1) at this point in 1966 Arendt was certain of at least two *distinct* mental faculties, reason and will; 2) she was still deciphering the particular activity/ies of the will; 3) she was uncertain whether judging was an activity of the will or of an altogether separate faculty of the mind. In the end, she determines that there is indeed a third mental faculty, to which the activity

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7, 8.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Human Condition* (1958) the faculty of thought and the activity of thinking are discussed throughout.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003): 49-146.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 131.

of judging belongs. In *The Life of the Mind* (1971) the faculties of the mind are clear: “Thinking, willing, and judging are the three basic mental activities; they cannot be derived from each other and though they have certain common characteristics they cannot be reduced to a common denominator.”<sup>10</sup>

In *The Life of the Mind* Arendt planned to carefully investigate the activities of the *vita contemplativa*. The text, accordingly, was broken into into three parts: Thinking, Willing, and Judging. She completed manuscripts for both “Thinking” and “Willing”; however, due to Arendt’s untimely death in 1975, the third part, “Judging,” was never written. A discussion of the activities of the mind necessarily depends heavily upon this text, despite the fact that it is incomplete. As I progress through the three elements of the *vita contemplativa* I will acknowledge and examine her dialogue with Socrates, Plato, Augustine, Kant, and Heidegger. It is in her divergence from each of these sources, with the possible exception of Socrates, wherein her Jewishness becomes apparent. Admittedly, in this area of her philosophy, the Jewish experiential and intellectual influences may not be the most important; however, recognizing her Jewishness adds subtle but significant nuances to her thinking. The conversation she has with the Plato and thinkers in the Western tradition is far more prominent in her works, but it is important that we not leave her Jewishness behind even when it seems to be cursory or insignificant.

Discerning the presence of the Jewish tradition in this particular area of Arendt’s thought is difficult. In an effort to discover if Arendt’s notion of thinking does, in fact,

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<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 69.

have any affinity with the Jewish tradition, I turn to *The Jewish Political Tradition*, a multivolume work that presents the texts and arguments that comprise the history of Jewish political discourse. In his introductory remarks, Michael Fishbane offers instructive and important commentary on the concept of thinking in the Jewish tradition. Specifically, he addresses the ongoing and cross-referencing commentaries of the Talmud and he notes that the structure of the Talmud is that of one mind, so to speak. He says that this 'mind' "thinks through the traditions . . . criticizing them . . . and deliberating their implications with respect to religious actions."<sup>11</sup> That is to say, the Talmudic tradition is one that uses the authoritative texts and commentaries to continuously interpret correct action according to the revelation. Because Arendt was secular, the tradition has a different bearing on her. However, her work, specifically her view of thinking, stands firmly in this tradition: she refers to the tradition (of freedom and justice) to deliberate, criticize, and understand the possibilities for action in the world. Thinking, like the communal mind of the Talmud, is always considering the world, inquiring into its value, and pondering the possibilities of action.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Fishbane, "Law, Story, and Interpretation: Reading Rabbinic Texts" in *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume One: Authority*, eds. Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zohar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xlv.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Walzer also wrote an introductory essay to *The Jewish Political Tradition* entitled, "Introduction: The Jewish Political Tradition." In this essay, he notes the specific qualities that denote members of the Jewish tradition. Specifically, the Jewish tradition emphasizes a set of texts (the Hebrew Bible and its commentaries) and an event (political exile). While Arendt does not emphasize any religious texts in her works, she does revere the living meaning of the Passover and the consequent exodus from Egypt. Furthermore, Arendt shares an experience of exile with many European Jews, an experience that resonates with the Passover event.

The tradition retrieved, integrated, and criticized in *The Jewish Political Tradition* is one built upon thinking. That is, it is one that constantly refines, interprets, and comments on its experiences in the world. The works and writers that are included in the tradition are categorized by an “engagement with a set of issues” that creates a “*continuing* argument.” The Jewish tradition is one that perpetually *thinks* about the world to address the issues at hand. It has a point of reference, the Exodus story, and it has an experiential basis. Both of these things can be found in Arendt’s concept of thinking. In her discussion of thinking, her Jewishness is highlighted by the simple fact that thinking, like the tradition itself, never ends. It is a continuing process. So long as human beings live in the word it is necessary. The writers included in the tradition, “expose the tradition (as it was regularly exposed in the past) to the challenge of contemporary understandings and convictions.”<sup>13</sup> Arendt’s method of investigating the world is quite similar; she challenges the Western tradition and exposes the political and moral formulations of its writers with her phenomenological approach to understanding. Many of the conceptions do not stand under the scrutiny of her approach; and it is there that many Jewish influences are revealed

Before moving into an exposition on the activities involved in the life of the mind, it is important to note the complexity of the subject matter. While Arendt breaks down the life of the mind into these three separate activities, they are very intricately connected. Thus, to discuss them as wholly separate is difficult and at certain points even problematic. The reason the activities of the mind are impossible to reduce is

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<sup>13</sup> Walzer, “The Jewish Political Tradition,” xxxi.



because each one corresponds to a specific condition, which in turn necessitates its function. For example, thinking, performed by the faculty of reason, corresponds to the condition of freedom; willing corresponds to the condition of natality; and, judging corresponds to the condition of responsibility. Together, these three activities of the mind greatly affect the way an individual moves in the world. Thus, to understand the *vita activa*, one must also understand the mental faculties as they determine not only *if* men act, but also *how*. The purpose of this chapter is to show how these faculties operate and, more importantly, how they are relevant to action. It will also be shown that the catalytic power of the narrative is embedded in the mind and that no action (as Arendt understands it) is possible without thinking, willing, and judging. Before we can understand the realm of action, the polis itself, Arendt gives an account of how we move from the subjective individual to the plurality of human experience. This is the basis of her phenomenology; it explains how consciousness appears in the world. This chapter, then, explains the faculties of the mind as well as the significance they have in a phenomenological understanding of the world.

The mental activity of thinking plays a primary role in Arendt's political theory because it is the basis for how we understand the world as we experience it. It allows us to prescribe meaning to our experiences and through it we determine what is *generally* good and bad. Note, Arendt does not claim that thinking produces knowledge of *the* Good or any other absolute form: "*The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same.*"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 15.

Further, this is a capacity that is common to all men, not just the privileged few. And, finally, it is a task that is based in freedom and, as such, is riddled with implicit dangers. Nonetheless, it is fundamentally necessary that we think in order to maintain our human-ness.

The modern influence on Arendt's conception of thinking will be noted shortly, particularly the debt she owes, and acknowledges, to Kant. However, it is first important to note the ways in which Arendt's notion of thinking is influenced by Greek ideas. It is Greek not in a Platonic sense, as she is careful to reject the idea that thinking is for the privileged few or that it results in Knowledge. Part of her project is the grounding of the activity as a capacity common to all and necessary for the fullest expression of human-ness. She does, however, turn to Socrates, who "seems indeed to have held that talking and *thinking about* piety, justice, courage, and the rest were liable to make men more pious, more just, more courageous, even though they were not given either definitions or 'values' to direct their further conduct." Like him, Arendt posits that thinking about things will affect how one acts and appears in the world despite the lack of absolute values, Truths, or doctrines. Socrates claimed not knowledge and he taught not facts. Rather, he merely sought to inquire with other people because he "felt the urge to check with his fellowmen if his perplexities were shared by them—and this urge is quite different from the inclination to find solutions for riddles and then to demonstrate them to others."<sup>15</sup> The process of inquiry for

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<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 173, 174.

Socrates was unending because there was nothing definitive to attain. Thinking, for Arendt, shares this Socratic element of inquiry.

To understand the mental faculties and how they relate to the active life, three texts will be examined: *The Human Condition*, *The Life of the Mind*, and *Responsibility and Judgment*. In these works, Arendt highlights the importance of thought by comparing it with the faculty of cognition. To begin, in *Responsibility and Judgment*, Arendt credits Kant for establishing “the distinction between thinking and knowing, between reason, the urge to think and to understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> In her discussions of thought, she carefully maintains the distinction between the Kantian *urgent need to think* and the *desire to know*. In *The Life of the Mind*, she notes that in modernity, philosophers have constructed a new ‘science’ that blurs the line between thinking and knowing: “Pursuing the Cartesian ideal of certainty as though Kant had never existed, they believed in all earnest that the results of their speculations possessed the same kind of validity as the results of cognitive processes.”<sup>17</sup> The equivalency between meaning and truth is poignantly displayed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. He writes, “‘Meaning of Being’ and ‘Truth of Being’ say the same.”<sup>18</sup> Arendt categorically rejects this assertion:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Einleitung zu ‘Was ist Metaphysik?’” *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1967). 206. Translation Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 15, emphasis mine.

“The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same.”<sup>19</sup>

Arendt refers to the intellect as the cognitive faculty driven by the desire to know and it is fulfilled when an answer to a question is determined. The process of acquiring knowledge is limitless in the sense that there will always be questions that positive science can penetrate. However, the questions that arise from the intellectual pursuit of knowledge are seeking a *definitive* answer. Arendt does not deny the importance or relevance of the intellect. Indeed, intellect and its product, knowledge, “concern most intimately our ways of thinking.” The products of the intellect have an objective, observable impact on the artifice of the world itself, which is why knowing “is no less a world-building activity than the building of houses.”<sup>20</sup> Knowledge manifests in the making of things that comprise the world in which we live. It is responsible for some of the most world-changing developments in modernity such as factories, satellites, and the atomic bomb. Knowing, a mental capacity, is closely related to the activity of work insofar as work is predicated by the condition of worldliness. Both knowledge and work contribute to the artifice of the world and thereby structure the way in which we operate within the world.

Arendt posits the existence of thinking and knowing while at the same time maintaining the careful distinction between the two. Further, the connection between the activities of thinking and knowing, both being mental faculties, in no way supposes

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 163.

their equivalence. The capacities cannot be subsumed within one another because both come from different human conditions: the urge to understand, on the one hand, and the desire to know, on the other. Thus, the end of these activities is not and cannot be the same. The end of knowing is knowledge of things that are verifiable; thinking “has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results.”<sup>21</sup> Because thinking is not in search of truth, it is an ongoing process of comprehension. Therefore, any framework, including those that propose a definitive understanding of the world, must be continuously pondered and questioned.

As noted, Arendt draws upon the Socratic method of inquiry. However, it is important to note that the Jewish tradition also recognizes the perpetual need for inquiry and investigation. Interestingly, Maimonides, perhaps the most well-known Medieval Jewish thinker and an unquestionable part of the Jewish political tradition, goes against that very tradition in his *Mishneh Torah*, as it is an attempt at a definitive codification of the law. That is, Maimonides attempted to define, in a very Platonic manner, what the law has determined to be Right. Because the tradition does not seek final answers, but rather, seeks always to question how the law applies to particular instances, his code was not accepted as a final statement on the topic. It was, however, questioned, synthesized when appropriate and abandoned when necessary. Thus, despite writing in a way that is contrary to the tradition of inquiry and continuity, the work was maintained by the tradition. Maimonides might have intended for his work to provide *the* definitive understanding of the law. In actuality, it is considered to be one

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<sup>21</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 170.

of many commentaries on the law, definitive only in that fact that it is a significant contribution to the tradition of inquiry.<sup>22</sup> The Jewish tradition can incorporate and maintain the value of a work like the *Mishneh Torah*, in spite of the fact that Maimonides' goal in the work ran contrary to the Jewish tradition. Similarly, Arendt can distill value from thinkers in the Western tradition who also posit statements of certainty. Further, in her insistence that thinking never cease and absolutes never be assigned, she aligns herself more closely with the Socratic method of inquiry as well as the Jewish political tradition.

The fact that thinking does not accept "its own results" as axioms has a further implication. Namely, due to its endless nature, "we cannot expect any moral propositions . . . no final code of conduct from the thinking activity, least of all a new and now allegedly final definition of what is good and what is evil." This is not to imply that thinking is not involved in moral sensibility; but rather, that morality, too, is subject to the endless process of thinking and therefore cannot be definitively codified. If anything, thinking is the activity that provides the *hope* for morality given the ever-changing world of phenomenal reality. Thinking is implicitly concerned with possibilities over determinations. It considers the world and never ceases to look for a meaning in a world that has no inherent meaning. The conflation of thinking into knowing limits the human experience because it removes the very faculty by which we understand our experience *as* human beings. Final solutions are predetermined answers "which prevent thinking by suggesting that we know where we not only don't know but cannot

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<sup>22</sup> Walzer, "The Jewish Political Tradition," xxiv-xxv.

know.” Any worldview that asserts a definitive, unchanging understanding of the world can only be overcome by *thinking what we are doing*. Thinking is both unending and irresolute due to the dynamic nature of the world about which the thinking activity is concerned. Because the world is constantly changing, thinking is always relevant, appropriate, and necessary. If there is a prescription to what that world *ought* to be, then the individual is “freed” from considering the world as it is experienced and focuses on how to create the world that ought to be. This is fundamentally impossible on many grounds. The nature of action, which will be discussed in Chapter 3 in more detail, is such that every action is limitless and unpredictable. Therefore, regardless of the thought that goes into any action, further contemplation is always necessary once the consequences of that action begin to appear. This is why, “The business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before.”<sup>23</sup>

In a very concise definition, Arendt writes that thinking is “the *habit* of examining whatever happens to come to pass.” By describing thinking as a habit, Arendt is suggesting that it is an activity that one *chooses* to engage in repeatedly until it becomes an unconscious pattern. It is a capacity common to all; however, there is the underlying sense of freedom attached to thinking. That is to say, all human beings, by virtue of being capable of thought, are *free* to think, *if they so choose*. It is in consistently choosing to think that the activity becomes a habit. As a habit that has been formed through practice, it can also be changed. That is, the thinking person can become

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<sup>23</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 167, 174, 166.

thoughtless. It is important to note that the capacity to think is disconnected from any notion of intelligence. This is significant because it is in this distinction that thinking can be demanded of all human beings. The habit of thinking does not presume any intellectual development; therefore it cannot be reserved for the capable, elite few. Rather, “we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be.” Likewise, the lack of thought is not indicative of intellectual capacity. This is why Arendt can say, “Absence of thought is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people.”<sup>24</sup> Thinking, not intelligence, determines how we understand the world and, therefore, how we act in it.

Because “wickedness may be caused by absence of thought” the potential dangers of thoughtlessness cannot be ignored. First and foremost

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 get used to is . . . the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars.

If a society is filled with nonthinking people who accept the rules and live by them, then any new set of rules or conduct is easily implemented. In other words, in a society where people have not cultivated the habit of thinking, where they are not perplexed by a set of rules that determines conduct, new rules are easily put in their place because no one is there to question the value of the new set of rules. The non-thinker is the person who has committed to a set of rules or code of conduct, which allows him to *not think* what he is doing, but rather to follow the code wholeheartedly. These people “get used

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 5, 13, emphasis mine.



to never making up their minds” and effectively cultivate the habit of thoughtlessness. They never have to deal with the perplexities and therefore never have to decide what is good or bad, right or wrong. Because the code has determined the value of things, then acting in accordance with the code is valuable. This does not require thought. This is also why “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good.”<sup>25</sup>

Two notes must be made here. First, anyone who is familiar with Arendt’s work on Eichmann must be curious as to why *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has not been mentioned here. In that text, Arendt charges that Eichmann is “thoughtless” and comes to the further conclusion that evil is banal. While these two issues are certainly relevant here, they will be addressed at a later point. In Chapter 5, which speaks to Arendt’s notion of freedom, the charges of thoughtlessness and banality will be far more clear and therefore an explanation at that point will not only be more accessible, but also more powerful. Second, there is a glaring problem with Arendt’s theory that appears here and throughout her work. Namely, she posits that there is no definitive nature to human existence, only conditions that inform *how* we exist in the world. Yet, she consistently speaks in moral language, asserting the presence of good/bad, right/wrong, and most poignantly, evil. This is a problem that underlies the whole of her political theory; it will be dealt with more completely in Chapter 5 after the emergence of the polis has been explained and within a discussion on the meaning of politics.

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<sup>25</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 178, 180.

To continue, Arendt warns that although thinking is absolutely necessary for the fullest expression of our human-ness, it, too, is dangerous. First, thinking, like acting, is interruptive. Its “chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be.” The moment one engages in the mental activity of thinking, of considering the world, one necessarily stops acting in the world. There is a paralysis that “is inherent in the *stop* and think, the interruption of all other activities.” What is most detrimental, perhaps, is that this stopping to think about the world “may have a paralyzing effect when you come out of it, no longer sure of what had seemed to you beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing.”<sup>26</sup> Because thinking is consideration of the world, one can only think *after* or *before* an activity is performed in the world. This is not to say that the mind is not somehow engaged during the activities of the *vita activa*. However, the specific activity that Arendt calls thinking cannot occur at the same time as an activity of the *vita activa* is being performed. While thinking and acting are both necessary elements of the human condition, they cannot be performed simultaneously.

Second, thinking can be dangerous when the urge to know is confounded with the desire to understand. Faced with the uncomfortable awareness that all existence is inherently value-less, the thinking mind may decide to seek an ultimate value of things, turning on its very nature. Arendt writes, “The quest for meaning, which relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules, can at every moment turn against itself, as it were, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare these as

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 164, 176.

‘new values.’” Thinking, then, is a fragile enterprise that must be chosen and carefully employed so as not to fall prey to any idea that “would make further thinking unnecessary.”<sup>27</sup> Thinking, human beings must always consider the world, inquire into its value, and ponder the possibilities of action. These possibilities for action prompt the question of how thinking manifests in action. Arendt’s answer to that question lies in the activity of willing.

Arendt admits that there are “perplexities inherent in the human faculty of willing.”<sup>28</sup> In grappling with the innate difficulties present in this faculty, she looks to the various ways that it has been conceived. Thus, Part II of *The Life of the Mind* is largely an historical account of the concept of the will. In this text, Arendt tells us that there are, generally, two options for understanding the faculty of the will: either, the will is a faculty of choice, and, as such, is an arbiter between two things, most often reason and desire; or, the will is a faculty of creation, the task of which is to *spontaneously* begin new things.<sup>29</sup> Modernity, with the notion of progress, has taken the two options for the faculty of the will, conflated them, and left the will impotent. To wit, the notion of progress necessarily implies that the will is moving humanity along a predetermined path, thus destroying the defining element of choice, namely, freedom. At the same time, progress destroys the creative element of the will, characteristic of the second option for understanding this faculty, because it is not creating

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 177, 178.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 158.

spontaneously but according to some developed plan of things. The will, for Arendt, is both free and creative; it is the faculty that, precisely *because* it is free, allows human beings to create the world anew at any moment. The tendency of modern philosophers to fear the uncertainty implicit in freedom has destroyed it, leaving the will to be an instrument of implementation rather than a faculty of choice. Arendt insists that to be human we must be free; the will must be free to choose from the options presented by thinking and thereby maintain the essence of freedom in action.

One of the primary reasons Western philosophy has had such a difficult time with this faculty is because it “was unknown to Greek antiquity” and only discovered in the Christian era, leaving later thinkers to “reconcile this faculty with the main tenets of Greek philosophy.” While the faculty of the will was not discovered until the first century of the Common Era, Arendt sees Aristotle’s concept of deliberation (*proairesis*) as “a kind of forerunner of the Will.” This faculty of choice “opens up a first, small restricted space for the human mind” which is the “space left to freedom” and is characteristically “very small.”<sup>30</sup> In Aristotle’s concept of deliberation, Arendt sees the space necessary for human deliberation, the space in which the individual can *choose* to act. The choice is necessarily not compulsory. Like Arendt’s notion of willing, it is free in its potential to perform its task. This is the space of individual freedom that belongs to the life of the mind; therefore, it is private and subjective, meaning it is conducted entirely within the mind of an individual. What comes from willing, namely the action, is certainly public, but that is yet to come.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3, 6, 62.

The will must be understood as separate from reason because its function is different; however, as parts of the collective life of the mind, the two faculties work together. Reason does not *command* the will. It does, however, *inform* it. In order for the will to remain free to choose it cannot be controlled by any other faculty. This follows logically from what has already been mentioned regarding thinking. If thinking were capable of coming to knowledge it would have the coercive power to control the will. To wit, any knowledge of truth would be an imperative force upon the will. But, because reason's task, thinking, is to ponder the possibilities, "Reason can only tell the will: this is good, in accordance with reason; if you wish to attain it you ought to act accordingly."<sup>31</sup> The *ought* presented by reason is not a command. The will does not move from a notion of *I-ought*, but *I-can*. The will acts not because there is an imperative in the Kantian sense, but because it is free to choose.

The problem of the freedom to deliberate arises with the advent of Christianity and the belief in an omniscient God whose will is far more powerful than any human will. The problem is confounded by the notion of causality that is attached to will, albeit mistakenly. The idea that the will, in its deliberative choice-making, *causes* things to be as they are is problematic for Christianity, and it is untrue for Arendt. The mental faculty, itself is not capable of causing anything in the phenomenal world. In trying to understand particular circumstances and experiences, the mind confuses willing and acting. Interestingly, this conflation is primarily done in the process of making narratives:

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<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 71.

The will first causes volitions, and these volitions then cause certain effects which no will can undo. The intellect, trying to provide the will with an explicatory cause to quiet its resentment at its own helplessness, will fabricate a story to make the data fall into place. Without an assumption of necessity the story would lack all coherence.<sup>32</sup>

And this is the paradox of the free will: it is indeed *free to will* as it does, but the mind, in looking to comprehend actual experiences, things as they appear, looks for causality that is necessary, not contingent. The story, then, is essential to the process of assigning meaning. While the narrative will tell a particular story with events links together by causal factors, the story itself would not exist without the will that chose the volitions.

In understanding the freedom characteristic of willing, Arendt is careful to point out that this is different from political freedom. Specifically, she says, “Philosophic freedom, the freedom of the will, is relevant only to people who live outside political communities, as solitary individuals.”<sup>33</sup> It is the cognizance that *I-will* that leads to the *I-do*. The *doing* is political by nature insofar as it no longer involves only the individual, but the plurality of human being. The freedom characteristic of being members of community is political freedom, which is concerned with something altogether different than the will and will be discussed in the following chapter. The philosophic freedom that accompanies the will is what allows individual human beings to freely choose to act in a particular way.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 199.

While it will be shown that the judging activity has a strong role in *how* an individual acts, the willing activity is responsible for determining that an action is chosen at all. In this way, willing is the activity that throws the thought into action. Arendt writes, “We deliberate only about *means* to an end,” where the means is manifest in the action, but willing is the deliberating task.<sup>34</sup> At this point it seems a natural question arises out of the complexity of this concept: how does one actually get from *willing* to *acting*? How do we get from the inner experience to the outer experience? The question is one of motivation or volition. If one is *motivated* to act, then we must consider whether the motivation is *simply* the willing or if it is a desired outcome that drives the action. If it is a desired outcome that forces the willing to transform into acting then there is an inherent problem: namely, the insistence by Arendt that the end of any act can never actually be known. Willing, the deliberative task of choosing to act, cannot be driven by a particular end because the end of action cannot be known. The end, then, is not the impetus for the action; the deliberation chooses the means and willing is the volition to the means decided upon. Remember that for Arendt “action almost never achieves its purpose” because there are “innumerable, conflicting wills.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, as with thinking, willing is the end in itself. As thinking does not seek knowledge, but options, so too willing does not seek a particular end, but in choosing is able to manifest itself. This is not to presume that human beings do not have an end in mind when they choose particular actions. The end is what gives the intellect the

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<sup>34</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184.

“assumption of necessity” without which the action “would lack all coherence.”<sup>36</sup> The formulating of ends seems to be both a product of the intellect, which is concerned with knowledge, not understanding, as well as a calming of the intellect. The intellect’s domain is the collection of verifiable facts. Thus, the notion that one can choose to act and calculate the consequences of that act is particularly comforting to the intellect despite it being altogether useless for the will.

In her investigation into the concept of will as conceived by Augustine she marks the startling difference and interdependence of willing and acting. It is here that the problem of causality in the connection between willing and acting is articulated: “What is it then that causes the will to will? What sets the will in motion? The question is inevitable, but the answer turns out to lead into an infinite regress.” And this is because “the Will is a fact which in its sheer contingent factuality cannot be explained in terms of causality.” This is to say that the *faculty* of the will in itself is not *causal* in spite of the fact that it “experiences itself as *causing* things to happen which otherwise would not have happened.” Therefore, perhaps the will “lurks behind our quest for causes—as though behind every Why there existed a latent wish not just to learn and to know but to learn the know-how.”<sup>37</sup> This understanding of the will does not remove the infinite regress, per se, because the question will still be raised as to what causes the will. The point here is that the will, despite its apparent causal nature, is in fact the nutritive element that brings acting to life but is itself not the causal element. Indeed, one may

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 89.



be tempted to say that the activity of the will, namely *willing*, is the causal element insofar as the willing of the will brings action into the realm of objective reality. This is to say: actions, deeds and words, are the causal elements of the objective world and willing is the causal element of the subjective mind whose activity, willing, has the significant role of connecting the life of the mind with the life of the public world. Understood this way, willing underlies all human action and is created out of deliberation and somehow stokes some form of volition.

Perhaps even though the end is not known the choice made by the will determines certain possibilities. For, if one does not will to act then *no end is possible*; but, if one chooses A then *possibly* X, Y, or Z, for example. In this sense willing is, indeed, motivated by an end, albeit, one that is not determined. It seems to be the case that even though a particular end cannot be known, the will is motivated by the very possibility for an end. That is to say, the hope that the subjective individual can emerge in the world of appearances, contributing to it, affecting it, altering it, provides the volition whereby the deliberate choice motivates the will and is actualized in action. This is a categorically hopeful idea rooted in the knowledge that what *can be* may in fact *not be*. As human beings, subject to the volitions of those we live in the world with, this hope is essential for action, appearance, and self-understanding. As human beings we will to act and in this we embrace our innate natality and create anew in the world of appearance. Willing is not only the inner experience, but it is the connection between the life of the mind and the political realm of human plurality. We use our reason to

determine how we can act and our will to choose; our choices determine that we create. Thus, we move from thinking to willing to acting.

The connection between willing and acting reveals the second characteristic element of the will: it is creative. Arendt's understanding of willing is the mental faculty associated with the condition of natality, where natality is the ability to create anew. Because the will moves an individual to action it can be understood as the root of natality. What Arendt's concept of natality implicitly borrows from Augustine, although in a different context (one that does not involve the Creator-God), is this: "that there may be novelty, a *beginning* must exist." In other words, in order for new things to emerge (actions) there must be a beginning, and for her this beginning, this natality, is willing. This notion of a beginning must not be confused with a linear point of reference from which all things proceed. Rather, the beginning-ness of the willing activity lies in the fact that it is required for all voluntary actions. Arendt writes, "The freedom of spontaneity is part and parcel of the human condition. Its mental organ is the Will."<sup>38</sup> The will is free to deliberate and motivate the spontaneous appearance of men in the political realm.

Arendt addresses the Heideggerian conception of the will, noting that it does not recognize and fails to remember its role in creating new beginnings. She rejects this understanding of the will. It is through the faculty of the will that there is a beginning and the narrative is what allows the mind to remember the will and keep it willing. According to Arendt, when Heidegger merges thinking and acting, he ends up *in* the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 108, 110.

mind, with thinking being the activity “in which man opens himself to the authentic actuality of being thrown.”<sup>39</sup> Whereas in Arendt’s understanding, thought and activity are separate yet connected. Action is not subsumed within thinking; that is to say, in order for man to understand himself as an existing being he does not simply engage in the activity of thinking. Rather by willing, the thinking man engages the very condition of his being born, namely natality, and acts in the phenomenological realm of other existing beings, and thereby emerges in the plurality of human existence. Thus, thinking and willing are both necessary for acting and as mental activities they are prior to the objective activity itself.

Thus far, the analysis has moved through a perspective on thinking and willing in which Arendt is using, responding to, and criticizing the traditional sources of Western political thought, among them Plato, Socrates, Augustine, Kant and Heidegger. It is at this point of willing, forming volitions, that her Jewishness begins to re-emerge and inform her own thinking. Arendt, persistent in her pursuit of understanding, seeks to find “what experiences caused men to become aware of their capability of forming volitions.” She finds that the experiences were “*Hebrew in origin*, were not political and did not relate to the world of appearances and man’s position within it or to the realm of human affairs, whose existence depends upon deeds and actions, but were exclusively located *within* man himself.” The “Hebrew origin” of the experiences of the will lies in the understanding that “we are dealing with experiences that men have not

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 174, 185.

only with themselves, but also *inside* themselves.”<sup>40</sup> In the Passover story, the Israelites were told, “Go, pick out lambs *for your families*, and slaughter the Passover offering. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts.”<sup>41</sup> The command was directed to families, not to the Israelites as a collective. This is because each family, and presumably one member of the family, the father, had the freedom to choose whether he would partake in this specific action. The act was not an attempt to attain freedom; the act was done in complete freedom. And, it was done in the household. As such, it is not political but private. For Arendt, this is a prelude to political community insofar as free actions create the polis. Once the polis is established within the space of appearance a tribal identity can be, and many times is, established, however, the primary result of free action is the formation of the polis. She says that the Passover story is meant to teach freedom and that the space in which the individual privately deliberates is the small space of freedom. Thus, one may conclude that the notion of freedom in the Passover story is meant to teach us this faculty; ultimately, the Passover story has within it the power to teach that as human *being* we have the capacity, through the primacy of choice, deliberation and thence volition, to create anew; that as human beings we are *natal*, or have the capacity for *natality*.

In the *Jewish Writings*, Arendt attempts to awaken the Jewish world to the freedom of willing. In “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening” Arendt pleads for Jews to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 63, emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Exodus 12:21-22, JPS, emphasis mine.

recognize that “our freedom and our honor hang in the balance” just as much as the freedom and honor of the nations that had been conquered by Nazi Germany. The freedom she speaks of is both philosophic and political. It was her call to solidarity and it had one central purpose: the formation of a Jewish army. This army could only be formed, however, if individual wills chose this particular action. Just as Moses called the Israelites to act together by coating their doorposts with blood and to walk out of Egypt as a people, Arendt called the Jews from all over the world to “coat their doorposts with blood” and act together by forming an army and to either die or survive as a people. She makes the case “that you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as. A person attacked as a Jew cannot defend himself as an Englishman or Frenchman.” Unless the Jewish people gathered under one flag, a Jewish flag, they would never experience the freedom that is the fundamental basis of political action *and* human being. The formation of the Jewish army would be the first step in establishing the Jewish people as a people once again. Palestine would remain a refugee asylum until the Jewish people recognized that “*the defense of Palestine is part of the struggle for the freedom of the Jewish people.*”<sup>42</sup> This action would manifest the will of the individual Jew and unite all Jews together in the activity of defense. Her articles are meant to stoke the fire of volition in Jewish people everywhere so that, recognizing that small space of freedom to deliberate, they would, in fact, choose to act.

Arendt concludes “Willing” with a blithe acceptance of the fact that human beings are “*doomed to be free by virtue of being born.*” She refuses the impulse “to

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<sup>42</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 137.

escape its awesome responsibility by electing some form of fatalism.” Instead, she appeals to another mental faculty “no less mysterious than the faculty of beginning, the faculty of Judgment, an analysis of which at least may tell us what is involved in our pleasures and displeasures.”<sup>43</sup> Judging is, arguably, the most difficult mental faculty to discuss because Arendt’s own thoughts on the matter were never fully articulated. As mentioned, the final portion of *The Life of the Mind*, “Judging,” was not completed when she died abruptly. She does discuss judging, to some degree, in *Responsibility and Judgment* and the edited work, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, brings together the main texts that speak to the topic. However, the absence of her final statement cannot be understated because it seems that judging, of all the mental faculties, is the most significant for politics. While willing is connected to natality and the freedom to appear in the world, judging makes thinking “manifest in the world of appearances.”<sup>44</sup>

The faculty of judging is, indeed, a mysterious thing. In the *Postscriptum* to “Thinking” Arendt writes that one of the main difficulties one faces when analyzing the faculty of judgment is “the curious scarcity of sources providing authoritative testimony.” It was, in fact, not until Kant wrote the *Critique of Judgment* that judgment became “a major topic of a major thinker.”<sup>45</sup> As with every other concept that will be covered in this dissertation, Arendt uses the Western tradition as a starting point for her considerations, but she will decisively break from that tradition and in that break her

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<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 217.

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 189.

<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 215.

Jewishness appears. She admires Kant's work, however her admiration does not prevent her disagreement and the development of her own pronouncements on the topic.

It was noted that willing takes us from the inner world of the mind to the phenomenal world via an evocation of volition. Judging, on the other hand, takes us from the world of the senses back into the inner sense of the mind. This sounds contrary to what was previously stated, that judging manifests thinking; however, this is not the case. Thinking considers the world, willing motivates emergence in the world, and judging determines whether what is happening in the world is pleasurable or not. This notion of "pleasure" is what Arendt calls the "silent sense." Often, she notes, it has been referred to as "taste," which is problematic due to the connection it draws to the realm of aesthetics. The silent sense is the means through which the mind makes judgments, conclusions that "are not arrived at by either deduction or induction, in short, they have nothing in common with logical operations."<sup>46</sup> Arendt says that it is this silent sense, the capacity to judge, that she is in search of.

For Kant, judgment is ultimately dependent upon reason. Reason "comes to the help of judgment."<sup>47</sup> And this is where Arendt sees a significant flaw in his analysis. Namely, Arendt sees the faculties of reason and judgment as separate from one another. This means that there must be a particular reason why both faculties exist. If judging were dependent upon reason in the way Kant suggests, then judging would be an

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

operation performed for the sake of reason. But, if the two faculties are indeed separate, “then we shall have to ascribe to [judgment] its own *modus operandi*, its own way of proceeding.”<sup>48</sup> Arendt is clear in the distinction between thinking and judging. “The faculty of judging particulars . . . is not the same as the faculty of thinking . . . judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand.”<sup>49</sup> With the certainty that judging is a distinct activity, Arendt wrestles with articulating what exactly the faculty of judgment is concerned with and how it connects to the other activities of the mind.

The “actual activity of judging something” is an “operation of reflection” wherein what is affecting you in the phenomenal world of sensory awareness “is removed from your outward senses” and “becomes an object for your inward senses.”<sup>50</sup> Judging, then, applies a value to particular sense perceptions and emotional responses. Arendt seems to imply that there are two possible values that can be ascribed to any phenomenal experience: pleasurable or not pleasurable. Judging whether experiences in the world are “pleasurable” informs the way in which we think about the world. Arendt does not explicitly explain what she means by the term “pleasurable.” However, from what she does say, one can assume that pleasure is a natural response to particular experiences and that the memory of that response informs the activity of thinking. This is not reason *commanding* judgment, in the way that Kant would suggest. Rather, it is the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>49</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 189.

<sup>50</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 266.



idea that what an individual experiences as “pleasurable” speaks to the way in which he considers the world and, therefore, comes to understand what is right and what is wrong. Judging particulars as we experience them is the only means by which we can claim that thinking has anything to do with the ability to tell right from wrong. In thinking we remember the particulars and the judgments made regarding them, whether they were pleasurable or not, and these judgments inform both how we understand the world and what it is our will drives into action. It is on this ground, then, that judging is the most political of all mental activities.

In a world where knowledge claims to know how men *ought* to interact with one another, there is a standard against which all experiences are measured. In this kind of world, what is good or bad, notions which thinking would otherwise determine, has already been decided. Thus, if one need not consider what is good/bad, right/wrong, then the precursory role of judging, wherein one determines whether a particular experience was pleasurable or not, has been altogether removed. That is to say, if the task of judging is to determine what is pleasurable and those determinations inform how we understand the world as we think about it, then they are all but useless in circumstances where one is not thinking. On the other hand, in a world where Arendt’s notion of thinking is present, frameworks are challenged, final solutions are dissolved, and judging is necessary to evaluate particular experiences. This is why,

The purging element in thinking . . . that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions—is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on . . . the faculty of judgment, which one

may call, with some justification, the most political of man's mental abilities.<sup>51</sup>

So, Arendt undoubtedly rejects the Kantian notion that reason informs judgment and asserts that judgments are non-logical conclusions about particular experiences regarding whether the experiences are pleasurable or not. In order to better understand the faculty of judgment, and particularly this notion of pleasure, it is, again, useful to turn to the Jewish tradition. The idea that judgment has something to do with pleasure is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition. Perhaps nowhere is this illustrated more clearly than in Leviticus chapter 19: "Judge your kinsman fairly" and "Love your fellow as yourself."<sup>52</sup> To judge your kinsman fairly *is* to love him as yourself. Hermann Cohen, a 19<sup>th</sup> century German-Jewish philosopher wrote that perhaps the "correct translation should read: 'Love him; he is like you.'"<sup>53</sup> It is this sense of likeness that Arendt implicitly relies on in her conception of judging. That human beings are alike, fundamentally, seems to be an underlying assumption. It is only with that assumption that she can make claims about judging, that it regards what is pleasurable, in the way that she does. It is as if she is saying that what is pleasurable is pleasurable for all and therefore it correctly informs the moral valuations prescribed by the thinking activity. This is a difficult interpretation to accept, given Arendt's aversion to defining anything, particularly human nature. If what is pleasurable to one is pleasurable to all, and

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<sup>51</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 188.

<sup>52</sup> Leviticus 19: 15 and 19:18, JPS.

<sup>53</sup> Hermann Cohen, "Affinities Between the Philosophy of Kant and Judaism" in *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume One: Authority*, eds. Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zohar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 92.

therefore is the basis for how we understand the world, then is she not positing both a human nature and a definitive truth?

The notion of pleasure must not be confused with the notion of happiness. One must recognize that what is pleasurable is not equivalent with what brings happiness. Hermann Cohen points out that this “rejection of eudaimonism and all its variations” characterizes Kant’s ethics and that “Jewish philosophy also unequivocally rejects the principle of happiness.”<sup>54</sup> Arendt’s thought, which was clearly influenced by Kant, also has this affinity to the Jewish tradition. Kant and the Jewish philosophers, however, posit a criterion by which views and actions can be judged. Kant asserts the categorical imperative; Jewish philosophy always has the Law and the Prophetic tradition. What source, then, does Arendt have? If she rejects the Kantian notion of judgment being determined by reason and is admittedly not one who would turn to the Torah and the law, then what is the ultimate criterion for judgment? Perhaps the questions arise here more than in any other place because her thoughts on the matter were not complete. The absence of a comprehensive work on the topic forces one to speculate.

It seems out of character for Arendt to posit here that there is either a human nature or that there is some inherent source by which all experiences are judged, that is, understood to be pleasurable or not. She parts with Kant over the determination of a universal law that is derived by reason, and is imposed upon both judgment and the will. In spite of the fact that there is some complementarity between Judaism and Kant in terms of positing a universal law, there is still a small space in which Arendt draws

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

nearer the Jewish tradition than Kant. If Kant's premise were to hold in the Jewish framework, if reason were responsible for establishing the universal law anew, then God "would become a useless machine."<sup>55</sup> In Judaism the source for moral law is God and that law is revealed in the Torah and also in the exercise of human reason. Perhaps it is a more useful understanding of Arendt to posit that the source for morality is human experience. And while human beings do not have a fixed nature, human beings do share the same conditions. And it is due to the likeness of conditions that human experiences have the same revelatory value. Ultimately, what revelatory experiences teach is freedom. And it is that sense of freedom that provides the "quiet sense" of pleasure.

There is yet another thread of Jewish thought that has explanatory value as well as plausible influence on Arendt. The school of Jewish mysticism understands judgment as the "imposition of limits." Further, the "quality of judgment is inherent in everything insofar as *everything wishes to remain what it is*, to stay within its boundaries."<sup>56</sup> The Kabbalistic notion of judgment is something Arendt was definitely aware of, particularly as it is articulated in Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, a text we know Arendt read and was very familiar with.<sup>57</sup> An individual constructs an identity in the mind. That identity, however, is purely subjective. In order for the human being to really answer the question, "Who am I?" the self-constructed identity must be

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 263, emphasis mine.

<sup>57</sup> The relationship between Arendt and Scholem as well as the basis for using this text as evidence of Jewish influence is mentioned in Chapter 1 and is fully explained in Chapter 3.

challenged by the uncertainty and unpredictability of the world of appearances. Only in phenomenal experience is one's identity authentically revealed. If judgment is the faculty that considers particular experiences, specifically, whether they were pleasurable, then, perhaps, pleasure is determined by whether or not the self revealed in the particular experience is congruent with the hidden self that was already constructed in the mind. If one understands oneself in a particular way, but experiences deny that reality, then the experience is unpleasurable, it does not reveal an identity acceptable to the individual. If, on the other hand, the experience reveals the identity of the individual as the individual already understands herself to be, then the experience allows the individual to remain who she is, and is therefore considered pleasurable. Rooting Arendt's concept of judging in the Jewish tradition, particularly in the mystical Jewish tradition, helps not only to understand the faculty of judgment, but also how it relates to the other two mental faculties. Understanding judging as the internalization of an outward experience of revelation creates consistency and is more coherent than a conception of judging that is more Kantian.

In looking into the life of the mind, the interrelatedness of the three faculties makes their individual explication difficult. The attempt here has further reinforced a significant aspect of Arendt's Jewishness. Namely, the life of the mind is undetermined, uncoerced, and cannot be understood in linear terms. Rather, looking into the life of the mind makes it clear that these activities are circular with no determined starting point and no prescription regarding direction of travel as if there were a cause and effect. The activities that comprise the *life* of the mind are what we are doing when we

are doing nothing in the world of appearances. And yet, not only do they have the power to change the world of appearances, they are necessary for its very manifestation.

Below, Figure 1 illustrates the activities of the mind, which occur in the subjective space of the individual, and the activities of the physical body that comprise the world and the space of appearance.

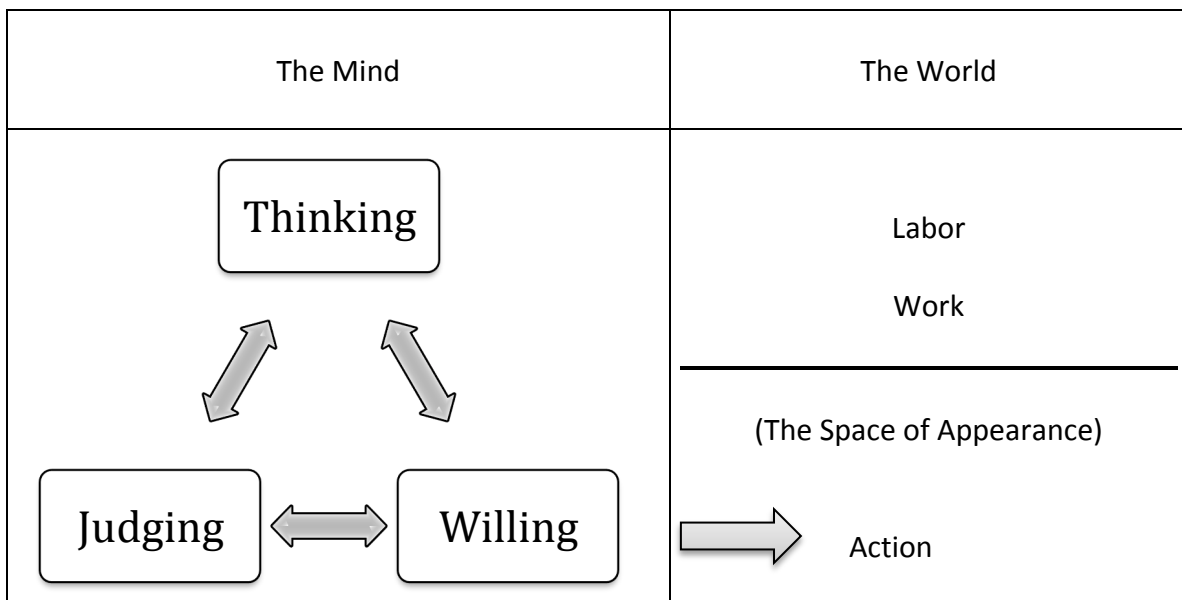


Figure 1: The activities of *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* and the spaces in which they exist.

The activities of the mind are thinking, willing, and judging. All of these activities are necessary because they all have a different function. Thinking regards generalities and determines what is good and bad; willing and judging both deal with particulars and “concern matters that are absent either because they are not yet or because they are no more.”<sup>58</sup> While the function of each faculty is distinct, the product of each faculty affects, but does not command, the others. The physical world is the space into which

<sup>58</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 213.

human beings are born. Upon birth, certain biological activities are necessary for survival, thus the conditions for labor. Work is conditioned by worldiness, that we exist in a created artifice and continue to contribute to that artifice. Both work and labor can be performed in solitude or in the plurality of men. Action, however, is the only activity that exclusively occurs between human beings and is necessitated by the fact of our plurality. Thus, the space in which action occurs is altogether different than work and labor and it is what Arendt call the space of appearance, or the polis. This implicitly political activity is inherently connected to the activities of the mind. For it is only in thinking, willing, and judging that action can occur. As Arendt writes, “The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.”<sup>59</sup> It is thinking, willing and judging that “prevent catastrophes.” That is to say, it is the life of the mind, in concert with the *vita activa* that determines the world in which we live. And it is to that action that we must now turn our attention.

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<sup>59</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 189.

### CHAPTER III: ON ACTION

Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure.

~Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

The relationship between thought and action is one that Arendt is constantly working out. It is present in two of her most significant works, *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*, as well as most of her other works. Her thoughts on the matter were discussed in a less formal way in her correspondences with her husband, Heinrich Blucher. Arendt and Blucher were very close and there is general consensus that they had a reciprocity of thought, contemplating shared experiences and working through ideas together. In the introductory remarks to their published correspondence it is written, “What had become clearer to [Heinrich Blucher] was the relationship between the two: the indispensability of advancing from words to actions, moving from theoretical contemplation to the reality of interpersonal relationships.”<sup>1</sup> This is a point that Blucher and Arendt clearly shared: both thought and action are important, and neither is *more* important; *both* must occur. The “true world” of the mind is only “true” insofar as it brings to life the phenomenal world of experience. Further, while the mind can contemplate actions infinitely, the only way to learn and to experience is to act. This is why Lotte Kohler, author of the introduction to the correspondence, writes, “The answers to the question ‘What should we do?’—the human rules of conduct between

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blucher, *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blucher, 1936-1968*, ed. Lotte Kohler, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2000), xvi.



individuals—can be found and determined only within the parameters of dialogic praxis.”<sup>2</sup> In *The Human Condition*, Arendt states it thus, “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 task “is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”<sup>3</sup> Considering action, then, is not a negation of the place or importance of the activities of the mind, it is simply another necessary component of the human experience of freedom.

Further distilling the two worlds of human experience, Arendt writes, “The active one goes on in public, the contemplative one in the ‘desert.’”<sup>4</sup> She is careful to articulate that thinking is an activity that occurs in the mind of the *individual* that creates a “mode of existence” in a “silent dialogue of myself with myself” that she “now shall call *solitude*.” Solitude is the space of appearance that is *internal* to the individual, that is, it emerges in the mind via the activities of the mind. “The main distinction, politically speaking, between Thought and Action lies in that I am only with my own self or the self of another while I am thinking, whereas I am in the company of the many the moment I start to act.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, action occurs amongst the *plurality of men*, while the contemplative activities comprise the *solitary* life of *man*. The solitude of the thinking person “can become loneliness,” which occurs when “all by myself I am deserted by my own self.” The solitude of thinking is valuable insofar as it prompts the eventual

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 98, 106.

emergence of the self into the realm of appearances through action. Loneliness, however, fosters the loss of the self in the insistence that the self cannot be understood by anyone. It is a solitude that cannot be broken because the self cannot emerge in the space of appearance where it can be “confirmed in its identity.” The danger of loneliness, then, is the loss of the “company of equals” amongst whom the identity of the self is revealed. In this state, man loses the self and the world loses its significance as the realm in which actions reveal the self. Thus, “Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.” Loneliness was “once a borderline experience” suffered by those marginalized by society; however, in the twentieth century, amidst the growth of totalitarian regimes, it “has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses.”<sup>6</sup>

It is well known that Arendt’s critique of totalitarianism is largely centered on the idea of *thoughtlessness*. It is the thoughtlessness of human beings that allow for the atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that create what she termed the banality of evil. In her articulation of the connection between thinking and acting, she draws upon Nietzsche and, to a certain extent, Heidegger. From Nietzsche she gains the notion that the suprasensory world and the sensory world are comingled in such a way that the destruction of one necessarily entails the destruction of the other. Nietzsche writes, “We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.”<sup>7</sup> For Arendt,

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1968), 467, 477, 478.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (written 1888), in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 486.

this is to say that with the impotence of the *vita contemplativa*, the *vita activa* can have no hope of expression. Nietzsche's "true world" is connected to the apparent world through the activity of willing, and thus, the loss of the activities of the mind necessarily entails a loss of those activities that are dependent upon them. As shown in the previous chapter, without thinking there can be no willing; and, without willing there can be no action. Thus, while action is certainly *distinct from* thinking, both activities are necessary for the fullness of humanity insofar as both correspond to the human condition.

The idea of thoughtlessness, then, has significant political implications because the political world *is* the world of appearances—the apparent world that is manifested only through action. As pointed out in chapter 2, the connection between these "two worlds" is, for Arendt, so obvious that "all thinking in terms of two worlds implies that these two are inseparably connected with each other."<sup>8</sup> Her work on the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition* and her work on the *vita contemplativa* in *The Life of the Mind* seek to explain the activities that are conditioned by the material world and those that are specific to the subjective realm of the mind with the underlying recognition that the activities are wholly dependent upon one another. It is useful to filter the activities out, to distinguish the two worlds from one another, but one must not forget that together, both worlds comprise the human experience.

As noted in the Introduction, Arendt criticizes the Western political tradition for its failure to account for action. Arendt defines action phenomenologically, stipulating

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<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 11.

that actions are the words and deeds that pass *between* human beings. She limits what can rightly be considered *action* by specifying certain criteria. First, action always occurs in the plurality of *men*. Second, action inherently involves natality; the words and deeds that constitute action *necessarily* create something new. Further, it is unpredictable insofar as the end of any action cannot possibly be known prior to the articulation of the word or deed. Finally, action is responsible for creating an entirely new public space, the space of appearance. When human beings *act* in this sense, something entirely new and inherently political emerges. Insofar as thinkers in the Western tradition failed to account for action, “they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: What is politics?” Arendt finds that most political thought has come from philosophers who have not been able to adequately address the topic of politics, lamenting, “what is remarkable among all great thinkers is the difference in rank between their political philosophies and the rest of their works—even in Plato.”<sup>9</sup> The root of this discrepancy is the failure of these great thinkers to recognize that politics and philosophy consider two different subjects. The philosopher considers *man*, and this has little to do with the subject of politics, that is, *men*. The tradition of political and philosophical thought offers little to political understanding because these thinkers failed to recognize that in which politics is ontologically rooted: action. Because of this vacancy in the Western tradition, this chapter differs from all of the other chapters in that there is little discussion of Arendt’s European and Greek influences. She simply cannot start from the Western tradition in her considerations on action because the discourse is not there.

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 93.

A note regarding terminology is appropriate here. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt posits that the term *vita activa* refers to three fundamental human *activities*: labor, work, and action. Action, then, is a particular *type* of activity. And, while labor and work are *activities*, they are not *actions*. Likewise, thinking, willing, and judging are mental activities, but they are not actions. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the “activity of action” in order to reiterate that action, for Arendt, is a particular type of activity (with the aforementioned characteristics) amongst various other activities. In many ways, Arendt’s meticulous distinction between the activities of the *vita activa* is what allows the activity of action to be revealed. Indeed, because previous thinkers lacked such clarity, action was obscured and the political was concealed.

As this chapter explores the phenomenological nature of action, the Passover narrative becomes even more useful as a metaphorical framework of understanding. It poignantly illustrates what Arendt has determined is lacking in the Western tradition. Since the Israelites put blood on their lintels, since they acted, they emerged as political beings. For Arendt, they participated in the human activity that is the *most* humanizing because it is the only human activity that answers the question, “Who am I?” The way in which Arendt conceives of action fully differentiates her political thought from the Western tradition. With this significant departure from Athens, she enters Jerusalem and the Jewish tradition. Thus, the chapter begins with a lengthy description of the concept of action as a necessary foundation from which the link to the Jewish tradition can then be emphasized.

Arendt makes the case that the various human conditions “never condition us absolutely.”<sup>10</sup> This is an important caveat because it makes the case that the various human conditions do not coerce the corresponding activities. The conditions necessitate certain activities for the fullness of the human experience, but they are not guarantees of anything at all in the world. The extent to which individuals act in correspondence with these conditions is the degree to which they expand to the bounds of their humanity. When action is absent an individual is not responding to the human condition of plurality and, therefore, lacks any political identity. In action, an individual articulates a definition of self, ascribing meaning and identity. Without this articulation, the self remains veiled. And with the veil in place, human beings can be utilized in various ways through work and labor, neither of which require thought or action. Just as the narrative loses its living meaning when it does not stir the will and motivate action, the human being becomes meaning-less without action. The meaninglessness inherent in concealment is mitigated only through the combined efforts of the activities of the mind and action.

It is explicitly stated in *The Human Condition* that the condition that corresponds to action is plurality: “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”<sup>11</sup> It is also clearly stated that action is rooted in natality, the ability to create anew (as

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<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

discussed in the previous chapter), and it can be characterized as unlimited and unpredictable. This is all connected to the fact that men, not man, live in the world. Thus, “Power for human beings who are not omnipotent can only reside in one of the many forms of *human plurality*, whereas every mode of human singularity is impotent by definition.”<sup>12</sup> Action, as necessitated by the condition of plurality, is the most political activity because it manifests the inherent power of human beings, that is, the power to create anew.

Action is the only activity that is *dependent upon* other human beings. Man can labor in solitude; man can work and build a world alone as well. Work is further differentiated from action in that it has “a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end.” Moreover, “every thing produced by human hands can be destroyed by them.” It is this power over the product of fabrication that makes man immortal, that is, it gives the impression of control and power. The human being who makes things out of matter, the homo faber, “Is indeed a lord and master, not only because he is the master or has set himself up as the master of all nature but because he is master of himself and his doings.” This type of creating is different than what is created in the public sphere of action. The homo faber is the “lord and master” of the materials that are being used to wield the artifice of the world. The materials at hand are fully malleable because they have no creative capacity of their own. That is, the materials that go into building the artifice of the world are predictable and limited and therefore the master can determine how they are to be used. This type of control is not possible in the realm of action

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<sup>12</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 106, emphasis mine.

because the only way to maintain this role while in the presence of other human beings is to turn other human beings into matter that can be molded. And, if human beings are like raw materials useful for the production of things, then the other activities, those of the mind and action, are not only unnecessary but also highly dangerous. The instant that human beings are not merely objects comprising the artifice of the world, the moment we act, the homo faber who created that world loses his power. As individuals act, then, they gain the specifically human quality, which is the ability to contribute new words and deeds to the world. “No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings.”<sup>13</sup> Actions are powerful because they manifest the potency of the human capacity to create. However, what is powerful is not the *product* but the *activity itself*.

The connection between action, willing, and natality, has been discussed in the second chapter. The argument was made that, for Arendt, the mental activity of willing is what connects the activities of the mind with the phenomenal world by motivating particular actions. Indeed, the case was made that willing is the activity that corresponds to the condition of natality. That is to say, the awareness that one is capable of creating something new is what activates the will altogether. Because action is driven by the will, Arendt states that action is “ontologically rooted” in natality. The essence of action is natality. It is the fact that human beings have the capacity to create new things, this natality, that makes willing necessary. That is, willing, as “the total

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<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 143, 144, 22.



cause of volition,” is necessary for any action at all.<sup>14</sup> Natality is ultimately significant because it motivates the will to manifest actions, the words and deeds that reveal the identity of the actor. This is why, in *The Human Condition* Arendt writes,

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, *in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted*. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, *the action they are capable of by virtue of being born*.<sup>15</sup>

The “world” is not only the objective artifice, but, and perhaps more importantly, it is the space of appearance. The artifice of the world is created by work, the activity that creates material things out of raw materials; the space of appearance is created by action, the activity that creates things by the interaction of human beings through words and deeds. Action is the “miracle” of human experience:

Man himself evidently has a most amazing and mysterious talent for working miracles. The normal, hackneyed word our language provides for this talent is ‘action.’ Action is unique in that it sets in motion processes that in their automatism look very much like natural processes, and action also marks the start of something, begins something new, seizes the initiative, or, in Kantian term, forges its own chain.<sup>16</sup>

Action is unique because it is the creator; through action human beings have the power to create, sustain, and dissolve the space of appearance. Action is unique because when it ceases, the space it creates also ceases to exist.

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<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 247, emphasis mine.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 113.

Action, which is rooted in the ability to create anew, is not only miraculous, but it is responsible for the unpredictable, spontaneous character of the world. “[W]ithout action and speech, without the articulation of natality, we would be doomed to swing forever in the ever-recurring cycle of becoming.” Furthermore, action is the human faculty by which we are able to “undo what we have done and to control at least partially the processes we have let loose,” without which “we would be the victims of an automatic necessity bearing all the marks of the inexorable laws,” a necessity that “can only spell doom.” This doom, then, is thwarted only with action:

The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.

Man does not become immortal with action, but rather, becomes alive, fully empowered as the miracle-worker of the world. Action, then, is not only miraculous, but it is responsible for the unpredictable, spontaneous character of the world. “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.”<sup>17</sup>

To this point, it has been demonstrated that action is ontologically rooted in natality and its condition is plurality. What, then, does Arendt mean when she writes of action that it is the “articulation of natality?”<sup>18</sup> Natality is the condition of willing: as

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<sup>17</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 246, 178, emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

human beings we have the capacity to create new things. Plurality is the condition of action: as human beings we speak and move amongst other human beings. However, insofar as actions are manifested through the faculty of the will, then action can be said to be the articulation of natality. Actions breathe life into what otherwise would remain dormant in the confines of one's mind. These two conditions are inseparably interconnected because it is the fact of natality that gives rise to capacity for action. And, if we were not plural our natality would be of no consequence. But, due to the fact that human beings live in the world together, the newness manifested through action has inherent political consequences.

In action, the self that the thinking mind creates in solitude is revealed to the world of plurality. Arendt discovers two modes for the way in which action can exist: words and deeds. Words and deeds are the particular means by which an individual expresses the self in the midst of others. Action, then, functions to disclose the self: words and deeds bring individuals face to face with one another and, thereby, mark each person as a "distinct and unique being among equals." The individual is only fully human in the disclosure of the self, which is possible only in the plurality of the collective. Action is the revelation of *who* we are, which is *why*, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt asks what we are doing. The answer to this question is important because it also answers the more pressing question, "Who am I?" It is the activity of disclosure; it permits the individual to see and be seen, enabling the individual to emerge in the world of appearances. She writes,

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.<sup>19</sup>

This notion of disclosure has deep roots in Arendt's Jewish experiential and intellectual background. In *The Jewish Writings*, she speaks of a profound friendship and intellectual relationship with two Jewish intellectuals, Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin. In this context, she speaks of the ways in which these two men contribute to Jewish history in general, and also the way in which she was personally affected by their lives and scholarship. Indeed, Scholem was already discussed in chapter one with regard to the importance of narrative in Jewish identity and in the discussion on judgment in chapter two. Here, the mystical ideas presented in Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and Benjamin's thoughts on action and time presented in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" will be considered.

Hannah Arendt and her husband, Heinrich Blucher, together with Walter Benjamin studied Scholem's *Major Trends* together. "During the winter of 1939/40, the Bluchers and [Walter] Benjamin spent many hours discussing the book on Jewish mysticism which Scholem had sent to Benjamin from Palestine."<sup>20</sup> In this text, they read about and studied the mystical emphasis on action as the only medium through which man can *experience reality*. And, in this way, they came to respect this form of mysticism. Arendt wrote, "Jewish mysticism alone [of all mystical trends] was able to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 178, 179.

<sup>20</sup> Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 161.

bring about a great political movement and to translate itself directly into real popular action.”<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin was also deeply indebted to Scholem, as he constructed a view of history that was markedly action-oriented, so as to understand the present, in its dynamic and unpredictable nature, more fully. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl says, “[Benjamin’s] ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ were written against historicism, against attempts to isolate and reconstruct, or even relive, a past time, without regard to what came after it.” And, Arendt was in turn influenced by Benjamin: “While they waited for their ship in Lisbon, the Bluchers read Benjamin’s ‘Theses’ aloud to each other and to the refugees who gathered around them.” Of particular importance for Arendt was the fact that Benjamin rejected historical materialism on the grounds that it created “false hopes for the future” by “engaging in the kind of soothsaying prohibited by Judaism. He accepted the prohibition against soothsaying, but he interpreted it in light of a Jewish messianism he had read about in Scholem’s account.”<sup>22</sup>

The Jewish messianism presented by both Scholem and Benjamin is also present in Hannah Arendt’s political theory. In this messianism there is a pervasive, albeit underlying, sense of hope. Benjamin says, “For every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah *might* enter.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this is the hope that is inherent in Arendt’s concept of natality. It is the idea that nothing is certain in the web of experiential reality because all actions are unlimited and unpredictable. The messiah,

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<sup>21</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 311.

<sup>22</sup> Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 162.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 264, emphasis mine.

the thing that enters the world and changes it, may in fact enter at any moment and in any way because the improbable, in this view, cannot be counted as impossible. While Arendt, in her secular Jewishness, does not posit the messianic hope in the traditional sense, she very much espouses its message: action is the miracle that saves the world from doom.

Arendt praises Scholem's *Major Trends* and accounts for the ways in which it contributes to Jewish history. She writes, "Scholem's new presentation and appreciation of Jewish mysticism not only fills a gap, but actually changes the whole picture of Jewish history." The gap she is speaking of is the distance between Jewish Orthodoxy and the modern movements that broke away from Orthodoxy, most importantly, the Reform movement. Scholem discusses the Reform movement, noting the contradicting tendencies within the movement to both assimilate into new cultures and environments, to seemingly "liquidate" Judaism, and at the same time preserve the tradition. He says that the problem is *not* the Reform movement, that this movement did not remove the life from the tradition (as Arendt claimed). Rather, Scholem contends that the Reform movement was in fact "an outgrowth of the debacle of the last great Jewish political activity, the Sabbatian movement, of the *loss of messianic hope*, and of the despair about the ultimate destiny of the people."<sup>24</sup> Thus, while the Reform movement certainly signifies a loss, according to Scholem, it was a manifestation of the loss of messianic hope that began a century earlier.

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 303.

The loss of the messiah was remarkably disastrous in the history of the Jewish people because it halted the process of reality. That is to say, without the Messiah or the messianic hope the Jewish people no longer knew how to participate in the very story that they were responsible for writing. And thus, Arendt writes, “Jewish nihilism grew out of the despair of the ability of men ever to discover the hidden law of God and to act accordingly.”<sup>25</sup> The idea that anything is possible is dependent upon the notion that something new *can* come to be in the world. For Arendt, this is action itself, the recursive progenitor of miraculous improbabilities. For the Jewish mystics, this is the hope of the Messiah.

In response to this loss, heterodox forms of Jewish thought sought to revive the tradition, and more importantly, the members of that tradition. As is the case, the various forms of heterodox thought were grouped together and called Kabbalah, “a name that covers a great variety of doctrines, from early Gnostic speculations through all kinds of magical practices up to the great and genuine philosophical speculation of the Book of Zohar.”<sup>26</sup> However disparate and broad the term, there seems to be an underlying foundation to all of the various forms of Jewish mystical thought. In *Major Trends* Scholem writes,

In [the Kabbalists] interpretation of the religious commandments these are not represented as allegories of more or less profound ideas, or as pedagogical measures, but rather as the performance of a secret rite . . . this transformation of the Halakhah into a sacrament . . . by this *revival of myth in the very heart of Judaism* . . . raised

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

the Halakhah to a position of incomparable importance . . .  
The religious Jew became a protagonist in the drama of  
the world; he manipulated the strings behind the scene . . .  
Or, to use a less extravagant simile, if the whole universe is  
an enormous complicated machine, then man is the  
machinist who keeps the wheels going by applying a few  
drops of oil here and there.<sup>27</sup>

The relevance and importance of this statement with regard to the development and articulation of Arendt's theory of action cannot be overstated. Here, in the religious history of the Jewish people, an abstract idea is transformed into participatory actions that both bring to life the myth of their foundation and humanize them through the articulation of natality. Arendt secularizes these ideas in her political theory; all actions are performed by thinking and willing individuals, whereby they emerge as actors in the "drama of the world." The great, interconnected web of action is the complicated machine and every action has the power of recursion insofar as they are "the drops of oil here and there" that sustain the world.

The final connection to Scholem and Jewish mysticism that must be expounded is directly related to disclosure, one of the characteristic elements of action. The interpretation of the law as sacrament, or ritual, was "based on the new doctrine of the 'hidden God' who, in sharp opposition to the God of the revelation, is impersonal . . . a force instead of a person, revealing itself only to the 'chosen few' but concealed rather than revealed in the revelation of the Bible." Thus, there is esotericism in mystic thought; the truth is not actually revealed in revelation. And, as a result of this concealment, mysticism offers a necessary justification for action: "The main mystical

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<sup>27</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 29-30, emphasis mine.



organon of cognition is *experience*, and never reason, or faith in revelation.”<sup>28</sup> Because the revelation of the Bible does not reveal God, but conceals God, then man *must* act if the revelation is to have any meaning at all. It is in the actions of man that revelation and meaning are possible.

This religious idea of revelation serves a significant function for Arendt, as well. The basic foundation of Jewish mysticism is that the only source of revelation is in experience and this is gained through action. Arendt makes the same claim: the only way for an individual to reveal who he is, is to act. For the Kabbalists, action is what gives them access to an “investigation of a sphere of religious reality which lies quite outside the orbit of mediaeval Jewish philosophy; their purpose is to discover a new stratum of the religious consciousness.”<sup>29</sup> Stated simply, the goal of the mystic is new experience, and the only way to attain this experience is through some form of human action and participation. Or, as Arendt states, Jewish mysticism “merely wants man to become part of the higher reality and to act accordingly.”<sup>30</sup>

The mystical emphasis on action and experience is directly connected to the way in which the Kabbalists understand the creation story. In Kabbalah, as explained by Scholem in *Major Trends*, the existence of the world comes from the moment in which God withdrew or contracted from the vast expanse of eternity. Thus, the entire world is in essence a divine exile, a place wherein God cannot be at home. As creatures made

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<sup>28</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 304-305, 307, emphasis mine.

<sup>29</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 307.

in the image of God, our divine nature is constantly in a state of exile, constantly seeking an Exodus whereby we can return home. The reason we are not at home in this world is because the world is innately a place of exile. The very first act of God is the creation of the world via an act of restriction, contraction, or limitation called the *Tsimtsum*. Prior to this act, God existed without any boundaries of limitation—non-corporeal, non-spatial, non-temporal. But, the act of *Tsimtsum* imposed the boundaries of limitation; in the creation of the world—matter, space, and time—God became bound. The second act of God, however, is one of revelation—the faint light that appears and seeks to reveal that which has been limited. Scholem writes, “The idea of *Tsimtsum* is the deepest symbol of Exile that could be thought of . . . The first act of all is not an act of revelation but one of limitation. Only in the second act does God send out a ray of His light and begin his revelation, or rather his unfolding as God the Creator, in the primordial space of His own creation.”<sup>31</sup>

To secularize this, Arendt makes the claim that the first act, like the *Tsimtsum*, is not a revelatory act. Rather, in being born man is placed in the world, but he does not yet appear to the world in birth. In birth, man is limited by the conditions of corporeal existence, flesh and bone, time and space. The only way for man to reveal himself, or appear to others, in the world is by the second act, that is, action as Arendt understands it in *The Human Condition*. In action man *is* the creator, just as God is the creator in the religious story. In action man reveals himself in the space of appearance, which is the world, and the world is only that which has been made by man. The secularization of

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<sup>31</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 261.

the *Tsimtsum* is the removal of God from the notion of creation and revelation. Further, the *Tsimtsum*, insofar as it is limitation, can be understood as the very conditions that Arendt expounds in her works. That is to say, human beings are limited by the conditions of their existence; for example, the active life is conditioned by biological needs, the fact that we live in the world (“worldiness”), and plurality. The revelation is what results when we act within those limitations to expand our experiences and thereby our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us.

Finally, in mystical thought, the process of contraction and revelation is recursive. “The cosmic process becomes two-fold . . . The light which streams back into God and that which flows out of Him, and but for this perpetual tension, this ever repeated effort with which God holds Himself back, nothing in the world would exist.”<sup>32</sup> The notion that “God holds himself back” is drawn from the idea that the first act of God in creation is the contracting. In secular terms, this means that the first act, the limitations, or for Arendt, the conditions, cannot be removed. The human being cannot extricate himself from the conditions of his existence just as God cannot remove the element of concealment in the world. The only mechanism whereby God, for the Jewish mystics, or man, for Arendt, can be revealed is through the action that comes after creation, or after birth.<sup>33</sup> Man, then, is caught in the tension between his conditions and his appearance in the world. And, because the conditions will always exist, in some form,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> This is not to imply that in the mystical tradition human action does not have a place. However, in the mystical tradition, human beings, as the likeness of God, act to reveal God; whereas, for Arendt, human beings act to reveal themselves.

man must, if he is to reveal himself, *must* act in accordance with those conditions.

Action is disclosure of the individual as a human being in the world, and of the world.

Bringing this understanding into the Passover story only reiterates the reason why Arendt championed it as *the* foundational myth of the Jewish people. If action is disclosure, then, the Israelites disclosed *who* they were by *what* they did. By putting blood on the lintel they transformed their political identity from *what* they were (slaves) to *who* they were (Israelites). That is, the Passover story moved the Israelites out of the *what* of slavery (work) and into the *who* of humanity (action). This is significant because it highlights the specific function of action: “Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others.”<sup>34</sup>

The role of disclosure distinguishes action from work and labor even further. The case has already been made that both work and labor are possible in isolation, whereas action is not. If the purpose of the activity is disclosure, then it is impossible for action to achieve this in isolation. As Arendt notes, disclosure is not merely another achievement or accomplishment, it is not another day lived, it is not another building erected, it is a deeper understanding of oneself as it locates the individual in time and space and is the moment where the individual is not simply in the world but is, legitimately, a part of the world. Action is the appearance amongst the plurality of men; it is the articulation of both “It is I” and “Here I am.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 180.

<sup>35</sup> Reference to Isaiah 6:8

The Passover story indicates disclosure in the simple fact that those who participated in the activity of placing blood on the lintels were not smote by God. In other words, we know that the marking on the lintel is a disclosure because it has direct relevance to affairs that occur in the public realm. This action has direct political consequence. The action of putting blood on the doorpost does not mark the Israelites as slaves, this was already known through their work. The action of placing blood on the doorposts marks the slaves as Israelites, a collective identity that is not bound in work, but in the “who” of political identity: “The ‘who,’ the unique and distinct identity of the agent.”<sup>36</sup> Here is the emergence of an individual Israelite, an identity in its specification that comes replete with characteristics. I appear now, not as the utility I possess, that is as a slave, but as the miracle I am, that is, as a human being with the ability to create; and the human being that I am has the distinction (through action) of Israelite, not slave.

The posting of blood on the lintel intends “to show more than is plainly visible at the end of the production process.”<sup>37</sup> This is what makes it different from work and labor. By this I mean that the slave, as a human *what*, merely produced results and therefore was known and understood via his production as what he was. The posting of blood does not show a particular production, but a particular identity, which is the function of action as stated by Arendt.

This connection between identity and action is beautifully articulated in *The Jewish Writings*. In “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening,” Arendt writes, “you can only

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 180.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

defend yourself as the person you are attacked as.” The essay makes the argument that the Jewish people are being persecuted because they are Jewish; that is, their political identity as the collectivity of Jews is the reason for the oppression they are experiencing. Therefore, if the Jewish people are to respond to the realities of their public experiences, it must be as Jews: “A person attacked as a Jew cannot defend himself as an Englishman or a Frenchman.”<sup>38</sup> This was the basis for Arendt’s insistence that Jewish people have an army of their own: it was the action that was necessary for their identity to be maintained. Otherwise, Arendt feared, the world would conclude they are not defending themselves, and the Jewish identity would be lost to the Jews *and* to the world, the very definition of that dangerous thing—loneliness. They must present themselves, through action, as the unique and distinct *who* of the Jewish army because, again, “[w]ithout the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others.”<sup>39</sup> Finally, they cannot rely on statesmen or influential Jews to form the army. Arendt believed, “We will never get that army if the Jewish people do not demand it and are not prepared by the hundreds of thousands with weapons in hand to fight for their freedom and the right to live as a people.”<sup>40</sup>

Arendt’s point with the Jewish army and with defending themselves as Jews is not nationalistic in the sense of pride, but in the sense of human disclosure. Without

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<sup>38</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 180.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 138-139.

the banner of the Jewish flag, the Jewish people remain undisclosed and their particular identity remains hidden. They remain slaves, in the biblical sense of Egypt, because they remain achievement-producers, they remain in the *what* of humanness, not the full articulation of the specific *who*. Indeed, "Action without a name, a 'who' attached to it, is meaningless." If the Jews cannot defend themselves as Jews they will remain hidden, concealed, their identity and uniqueness forced to remain in the privacy of their own homes, in the private realm where human dignity cannot exist. If the Jews cannot defend themselves as Jews, if the Israelites cannot place blood on their lintels, they would fight or be slaves and be like those "whom the war had failed to make known and had robbed thereby . . . their human dignity."<sup>41</sup>

It seems that one voice, one action, often is necessary to stir the volition of the individuals who are not speaking and acting. Moses, responding to Yahweh's call, had to speak, and repeatedly, he had to appear before Pharaoh. He had to ask, with speech, for a particular action. He was demanding the disclosure of the Israelite people. He was demanding that they speak and act. Place the blood on your doorposts: *say*, "I am an Israelite." Articulate *who* you are and begin to see the change inherent in action. "This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is . . . Is implicit in everything somebody says and does. *It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity.*"<sup>42</sup> With similar intent, Arendt is saying to the Jewish people in all parts of the world, "Form an army." She urges a self-understanding that accepts and

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<sup>41</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 180, 181.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 179, emphasis mine.

understands that politically, they are Jewish, something that one's assimilation into French-ness or German-ness does not and cannot override. And yet, Arendt laments, the Jewish people are not acting, but hiding in the false pretenses of *what they believe themselves to be*, that is, assimilated members of society. The Jewish people were *not* assimilated, regardless of what they *believed in their hearts and minds*; but, in this belief they lost the collective identity and they were in hiding. They were in the limitedness of the contraction that demands the second act, the un-concealment, the hope of the miracle. They were in need of meaning in a world of appearances, a meaning that could come only through specific action.

The call to form a Jewish army was Arendt's call to put blood on the doorposts; it was the necessary step to come out of hiding and enter the public space of appearance, to disclose the humanness of the Jewish people. In the history of European Jewry there was an antagonism between being Jewish and being European. Despite the attempts at assimilation, Arendt makes the case that it was never successful. "It is the history of 150 years of assimilated Jewry who performed an unprecedented feat: though proving all the time their non-Jewishness, they succeeded in remaining Jews all the same." The problem was not that Jewish people believed that they were taking the necessary step to assimilate in various countries, but that the people in those countries did not mark these actions as being "German" or "French" but as decidedly Jewish. And, because the Jewish people were still politically Jewish, that is they were treated publically as Jews, they tried all the more to repudiate this fact. The way in which they struggled with this was not "to fight for a change of [their] social and legal status" but rather, "to try a



change of identity.” The way in which they chose to combat this created a crisis because “As long as [a Jew] can’t make up his mind to be what he actually is, a Jew, nobody can foretell all the mad changes he will still have to go through.” Meanwhile, regardless of how many “changes” an individual makes, his identity as a Jew is still not eradicated. “The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles.” Because being a Jew dictated certain political realities, then it was desirable *not* to be Jewish, but to create another identity with less harsh repercussions. This desire *not* to be *who* they were caused individual Jews to effectively go into hiding as they played various roles as Frenchmen, Germans, Russians. But, as Arendt wrote, this role-playing creates the situation wherein “Our identity is changed so frequently that nobody can find out who we actually are.”<sup>43</sup>

The disclosure of the Jewish people as Jews was, for Arendt, the honest revelation of their identity. This un-concealment did not come with any *legal* status. That is, the creation of a Jewish army would not miraculously grant certain rights to the Jews. What the creation of the Jewish army would do, however, was *allow* the Jewish people to participate in the drama of the world as viable agents, meaning human beings with the full capacity to act. The Jewish army would be a revelation, not a revolution.

Remember that being a Jew does not give any legal status in this world. If we should start telling the truth that we are nothing but Jews, it would mean that we expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected

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<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 270, 271.

by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings.

For Arendt, the formation of the Jewish army was for the purpose of the humanity of the Jewish people. The creation of the state of Israel was for the creation of particular legal status. That is to say, while the Jewish army could change the *humanness* of the Jewish people, the state of Israel could change the *legal conventions* to which the Jewish people are subject. This is, perhaps, the complete secularization of Judaism, and of the Passover story, because the leaders of the Zionist movement were advocates of a Judaism that “could no longer mean to them a religion . . . For them their Jewish origin had a political and national significance. They could find no place for themselves unless the Jewish people was a nation.”<sup>44</sup>

For Arendt, the hope that was the state of Israel was lost when certain events took place to establish Israel as the handmaiden of other countries, essentially maintaining its dependence and, in effect, its concealment. Arendt was originally part of the Zionist movement, as she saw in it an opportunity for the displaced Jewish people to reunite and reestablish a political identity. The political reality was that the Jewish people were dispersed and disconnected. Further, the Jewish people struggled for legal protection in the areas of their dispersion, a struggle that persisted despite the treaties of the 1920s, which nominally protected the rights of all citizens regardless of race, nationality, or ethnicity.<sup>45</sup> Arendt notes that even with the treaties, no “international

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 273, 339.

<sup>45</sup> After World War I, the Allied powers drew treaties with many of the newly formed countries of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The treaties were adopted for the purpose of protecting minority groups in these countries from legal discrimination based on race, religion, or language.

guidelines have been able to deal with the problem of stateless persons,” and this was the Jewish problem. She laments, “[N]o provision was made for people without a homeland.”<sup>46</sup> The Minority Treaties work to protect citizens of sovereign nations; but it does nothing to protect those who belong to a nation that does not have a state. Thus, in Zionism she saw the hope for the establishment of a nation-state within which the Jewish people could establish a legal status and, therefore, legal protection.

The fundamental problem with the Zionist cause, and with the Jewish question altogether, was the recognition that there was nowhere on earth that the Jewish people could gather that was not already occupied. If they were to create a nation-state out of their national identity, it would be replete with challenges. These challenges were not insurmountable; however, the decisions that the Zionist leaders made were unsatisfactory for Arendt and led to her eventual abandonment of the cause. Arendt was most critical of the failure of the Zionist leaders to form a Jewish army. She believed it was “the only guarantee [the Jewish people] could have created during the war for [their] demands after the war.” The failure to form an army meant that the Jewish people would not “have their word at the peace table.” And, Arendt concluded, “[T]he future protection of Jewish rights in Palestine is equally problematic.”<sup>47</sup>

Arendt praises the father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, for “his very desire to do something about the Jewish question, his desire to act and to solve the problem in political terms.” However, she admonishes the way in which Herzl went about shifting

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<sup>46</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 331, 332.

the political reality of the Jews. The statelessness of the Jewish people diminished their legal status: they did not have rights as Jews, but as Germans or Frenchmen; yet, politically they were marginalized as Jews, therefore the status of being German or French was not a guarantee of any legal protection. This certainly justified Herzl's call for the creation of a Jewish state. She believed Herzl was unrealistic in his advancement of the Jewish state and that he displayed an opportunism that was detrimental to both the Jews and other nations. He saw "the destinies of the Jews as completely without connection with the destinies of other nations, and saw Jewish demands as unrelated to all other events and trends." Essentially, he failed to recognize the plurality of human beings and the plurality of nations in the world. While he recognized the need to act, he failed to recognize the fact that Zionist actions, like all actions, necessarily affect others. Arendt sees this as an unrealistic and idealist "hope in an escape from the world."<sup>48</sup>

Because he could not escape from the conditions of world, namely plurality, Herzl's policies worked to establish the state of Israel even at the expense of the Arab Palestinians living there. In this way, the Zionist policies fostered a state where "the Jewish people are surrounded and forced together by a world of enemies." But, Arendt insists, "there is no such thing as a solidarity of fear; one cannot depend, you see, on frightened people . . . A common enemy can only *awaken* solidarity." The reason frightened people are unreliable is because fear does not create action. Solidarity, however, can stoke the will to act. In solidarity, the human capacity for action can be awakened. Solidarity "awakens the desire to join together in defense, instead of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 377, 384, 385.

running and scattering.”<sup>49</sup> Solidarity, then, is the opposite of loneliness. Solidarity prompts the unconcealment of the self; loneliness prompts the loss of the self.

Because Zionist policies created a state of fear, the Jewish people turned to larger, more secure nations for protection and security. By turning to Great Britain and the United States, they placed themselves in the spheres of interest of larger nations. The fear, then, furthered the repression of the Jewish identity in exchange for security. The same problem that plagued Europe in the 19 and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries will plague Israel: it will not be able to answer the *who* questions but, because it is so heavily dependent upon foreign nations, it will continue to work and labor so as to ensure its safety and security. The Jewish people, according to Arendt, did not gain the political freedom they hoped for in the creation of the state of Israel.

Recall from Chapter 1 that the narrative is essential for understanding the basic human capacity of action and the stirring of the will to act so that we may reveal ourselves. It helps us to understand the *who* that we wish to reveal so that our actions and words can accurately perform the revelatory task. Thus, “What is at stake is the revelatory character without which action and speech would lose all human relevance.” We live in a world filled with words and deeds and we have the ability to place ourselves in the world through past words and deeds. Moreover, “The disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 385, 156.

already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.”<sup>50</sup> At this point, it is useful to expound on the characteristics of action that create this web.

The qualities of action have been hinted at throughout this chapter, as they are implicit in Arendt’s notion of action. First, action is boundless, unlimited. The effects and consequences of any action are limitless—they *could* go on forever. Arendt writes, “To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings.” The Jewish history *starts* with the Passover; the story *continues* with the Exodus. The Exodus, for Arendt, though, is life itself insofar as exile is implicit in birth; and all actions are means of revelation. That is to say, the limitations of human existence are the very things that allow us to experience life, and the very things that prevent full disclosure of the nature of things. Furthermore, the story only ends when people stop acting within the web, as it were. The story remains alive and meaningful when people continue to act within it. “The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.”<sup>51</sup>

Nativity dictates the infinite character of action; it will never cease to effect because it is inextricably part of the web of human experience. This is precisely why human beings need some structure to maintain order in the world. Institutions, laws, governments—they all arise out of the boundlessness of action as instruments intended

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<sup>50</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 182, 184

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

to safeguard society against the very boundlessness that necessitate their existence. The unlimited nature of action not only demands that these institutions be built, but also makes them fragile. Any political structure can potentially be destroyed, changed, replaced, revolutionized because it is the nature of action to never stop changing things. “The limitations of the law are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from within the body politic, just as the boundaries of the territory are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from without.” The laws of a people are meant to “protect and make possible its political existence” by providing stability, continuity and legitimacy. They are the constructs that combat the wild and unruly nature of the constructing force itself—action; yet, they, too are susceptible to the unlimited nature of action. Laws cannot limit natality; they cannot control what an action creates. Thus, “The frailty of human institutions and laws and, generally, of all matters pertaining to men’s living together, arises from the human condition of natality and is quite independent of the frailty of human nature.”<sup>52</sup> To wit, the conditions of man are inherently fragile, and this is not to be confused with any attestation of human nature. For Arendt, human beings are imbued with the capacity to act, which is in its boundlessness a threat to stability, but also the hope for the world.

The second qualifying aspect of action is its unpredictability, which follows naturally out of its unlimitedness. This characteristic is somewhat more perplexing because, unlike the boundless aspect, there is no way to prevent against its effects. Where laws and institutions “may offer some protection against the inherent

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 191.

boundlessness of action, they are altogether helpless to offset its second outstanding character: its inherent unpredictability.” This characteristic is a natural outcome of the first: there is no way to tell the future, thus no way to know where the action ends, and no way to know what it produces. This unpredictability is more, though. It is “not simply a question of the inability to foretell all the logical consequences of a particular act...but arises directly out of the story which, as the result of action, begins and establishes itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past.” Understood this way, then, new stories are always being started, being added to the web of human actions. Thus, action is not about predicting logical outcomes, but imagining the infinite possibilities based on the many stories that are always being told and constantly created anew. This is further compounded by the idea that “its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended.” This is not to say that stories do not end, because surely they do. But, “the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, frequently when all the participants are dead.”<sup>53</sup>

The two characteristics of action, its limitlessness and unpredictability, make the narrative that much more important. Because the actors will be dead when the story ends, they cannot tell the meaning. It is up to the disseminators of the story to see the meaning and pass the meaning on. Thus, the storyteller becomes quite important. “Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants.” The narrative allows the storyteller to learn from the action that created the narrative

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 191, 192.



and at the same time participate in it, thus creating new stories and new narratives. In this context, the annual retelling of the Passover story is meaningful when the storytellers receive what the action reveals, that is, the identity of the Jewish people. “Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story.”<sup>54</sup> The storyteller may reify the story, thus “making” it in this sense; but, more importantly he “makes” the meaning by perceiving what has been revealed. The actors, the actions and deeds, give the meaning and the storyteller maintains the meaning as a living thing, indeed it is reified, in the narrative itself.

Interestingly, it has been noted that due to the nature of action, there is no “end” to any story. The Passover story gives a definitive beginning. However, because the story does not end, it remains relevant and useful. This is why even a secular Jew, like Arendt, can retell the story in light of new events. Even though the characters change and the events themselves shift, the fundamental story remains: it is a story of action and it teaches the difference between slavery and freedom. The Passover story is the foundational myth of the Jewish people. It is the moment that can be isolated as the beginning and it is indicative of the power of natality. So, the meaning of the Passover story is dead to those who refuse to see the story beyond the reification, the meaning of the life that was born in the story, not simply the product of an external author. The Jewish story is not fictional, it is a political reality. Therefore, any means of understanding that deny this are detrimental to the Jewish identity as a whole and the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 192.

Jewish experience in the world because what Arendt and the Jewish people experience are *real*. “The distinction between a real and a fictional story is precisely that the latter was ‘made up’ and the former not made at all.”<sup>55</sup>

The disclosure of one’s own narrative is daunting because it will put up boundaries implicit in definition. It means that one cannot remain in the interminably malleable world of the mind, free to construct and deconstruct oneself as one wills. On the contrary, action defines and one can never undo what one has done. This is why “The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own.” Or, stated again, “Courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one’s private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self.”<sup>56</sup>

These ideas are further bolstered in the practice of the Seder meal as it is an opportunity to annually participate in the Jewish narrative. The theater or performance of the story is in a sense inserting one’s self into the history or into that web. “Only the actors and speakers who re-enact the story’s plot can convey the full meaning, not so much of the story itself, but of the ‘heroes’ who reveal themselves in it.” The theater of the Seder meal is performing the actions themselves and thereby inserting one’s self into that particular revelation of that particular agent: I am a Jew.

The specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and 'reified' only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the *drama*, whose very name. . . indicates that play-acting actually is an imitation of acting.<sup>57</sup>

In the act of unconcealment, there is a simultaneous creation of a new worldly space: the space of appearance. The moment human beings act perceiving and being perceived by others, the space of appearance emerges. This space of appearance is what Arendt calls the polis; it is the only space that is always inhabited by the plurality of men, and therefore, it is the space of politics, the space wherein freedom is manifest.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 187.

#### CHAPTER IV: THE SPACE OF APPEARANCE

To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an 'objective' relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself.

~ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Arendt begins *The Human Condition* by recalling a major scientific event of 1957: the projection of a man-made object into space where "it dwelt and moved in the proximity of the heavenly bodies as though it had been admitted tentatively to their sublime company." She notes the significance of the success of Sputnik 1, even claiming that it is the most important event in world history, more important than the splitting of the atom. The importance for the scientists resided in the fact that this marked the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth." Arendt saw the way in which modern science sought to rid itself of the shackles of the earth as the final step in the "emancipation and secularization of the modern age, which began with a turning-away, not necessarily from God, but from a god who was the Father of men in heaven" insofar as it would culminate in the "even more fateful repudiation of an Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky."<sup>1</sup>

Arendt criticizes this modern desire for freedom from the earth on two premises. First, she claims the earth is the very essence of the human condition because it allows man to exist "without effort and without artifice." Man exists without effort insofar as

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 1, 2.

he is thrown into the physical world of existence upon birth and is left with the potential to realize the fullness of his humanity. The effort of man creates the artifice of the world and separates man from mere animal life. However, "life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms." Her second critique follows from the first and questions the modern contributions to the artifice of the world. Specifically, Arendt criticizes the scientific attempt to rid man of the earth, as was witnessed in the successful launching of Sputnik 1 and is also seen in the endeavors to create human life in test tubes. She views these scientific pursuits as the objective realization of the desire to escape the human condition. This wish to ultimately destroy existential world space in favor of objective reality is a "political question of the first order" because the destruction of world space is the final destruction of man insofar as the essence of man lies outside the realm of artificial existence.<sup>2</sup> And, because the relation of man to man lies in the very nature of the human condition the final escape from the human condition would entail a subsequent destruction of the polis because man would cease to be political. Arendt, then, wants to rescue the earth and man from final obliteration at the hands of modern positive science.

In her essay "The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question," Arendt discusses Johann Gottfried von Herder, an interpreter of Jewish history. Herder claims that formation and tolerance are the two concepts that characterize humanity. He refutes the Enlightenment claim that thinking characterizes human formation. By human

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

formation he means the humanization of man, or the realization of the essence of man. He criticizes this concept of formation on the ground that it lacks any sense of reality because it does not arise out of any experience or lead to action. "It cannot form man, since it forgets the reality out of which he comes and in which he stands." In much the same way, Arendt asserts that modern positive science does not allow man to flourish because in its efforts to form man anew it is actually destroying the very essence of human life, which precedes the created world. Like Herder, Arendt rejects claims of reality that are not grounded in experience and directed toward action. While Herder himself was not Jewish, Arendt notes that his interpretation of history changed the way in which Jewish history was understood and consequently changed the response to the Jewish question. Arendt notes the importance of the Jewish question, claiming that its various formulations and answers have "defined the behavior and the assimilation of the Jews."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Arendt's identity as a German Jew was substantially informed by Herder's interpretation of Jewish history due to the effect it had on the Jewish question.

When an individual acts, he appears to another person or people, thus establishing a space wherein he appears to existing beings outside of his own subjective mind. Arendt calls this space the "space of appearance" and it is a significant element in her political theory. This chapter will explore Arendt's concept of spatiality and the ways in which it can be directly related to Jewish concepts. The way Arendt understands both the physical space of the earth and the political space of human

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question" in *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books: 2007), 13, 3.

existence are crucial elements in her concept of political action. Her conception of the polis stems from a careful investigation into Greek ideas; therefore, the chapter begins with an in-depth analysis of those Greek concepts. What becomes apparent in Arendt's consideration of these notions is the way in which she distinguishes herself from them. In that distinction, one can then see how her conception of the space of appearance draws near to Jewish ideas. The concepts Arendt constructs regarding the space of appearance and politics, the realm of action, are quite similar to the Jewish mystical account of the creation of earth. Once again, these ideas are aptly illustrated in the Passover story, thus, the use of the Passover story as a metaphorical framework for understanding Arendt's theory remains useful. It highlights the basic premise of Arendt's work: the fact that we exist in this world, with certain given conditions of existence, necessitates the emergence of the space of appearance if we are going to actualize our truest potential as human beings.

The earth, for Arendt, is not merely the physical construct of the planet Earth. Rather, the *earth* is the experiential realm of human existence and the objective, physical *artifice of the world* is created by man within the space of the earth via work, labor, and action. Man exists prior to the artificial world and is marked by two things: speech and action, the very elements that make men political beings. Arendt refers to the earth as the "space of appearance" and claims it "predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized."<sup>4</sup> In the Passover story, the

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 199.

Israelites appeared to one another through the action of sacrificing a lamb and marking their doorposts with blood; once they appeared to one another they became a “polis,” a publicly organized entity formed and maintained through action and existing. Their identity was revealed via their action. It was only later, after the polis had already been established, when they were wandering in the wilderness that the formal constitution, the Decalogue, was delivered.

The previous two chapters, which discuss the activities of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, deliver us, now, into the realm of the *polis*. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses the different realms within which the activities of the *vita contemplativa* and those of the *vita activa* operate. It is because of these two distinct realms of operation that different conditions exist and necessitate particular activities. The purpose of Arendt’s careful consideration of the two realms, however, is not to further the bifurcation of human being into these distinct realms, but rather, to recognize that the differentiation renders the activities of both realms to be indefatigably necessary. She writes, “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*.”<sup>5</sup> Although different activities are conditioned by the two realms, the activities of both, together, are requisite for the fullness of human being which is witnessed only in the “space of appearance.”

As discussed in chapter 2, it is the activities of the mind that provide understanding and motivation for individuals to appear to others. That is, it is through

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17.



willing that thinking and judging are manifested in the world to “spectators” who “acknowledge and recognize” the existence of the actor. It is for this reason that Arendt insists that we exist not merely *in* the world, but that we are also *of* the world, “perceiving and being perceived.”<sup>6</sup> As thinking beings we are in the world, perceiving the world; as acting beings we are of the world, being perceived by it.

The activities of the private realm are forces that “lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.” All of the inner workings of our minds and the experiences we have in the sphere of privacy can be transformed through word and deed, or the stories that tell of them. Arendt claims that storytelling is the “most current of such transformations” because it allows for words to capture the significance of particular deeds and calls to mind the human capacity for action. All actions are important insofar as they signify two phenomena: reality and the world. Whoever acts does so in public, meaning the words and deeds that comprise the action can be seen and heard by anyone. Thus, the result of action is appearance “—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves.” And, appearance “constitutes reality.” For Arendt, human being is fully manifested when the activities necessitated by the conditions of humanness are performed in concert. With action the activities of the mind are manifested, and from action the individual emerges in the world of appearances. The world constituted by action “is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 20.

movement of men and the general condition of organic life.” The world of action is the space that emerges when human beings speak and act together. Thus, it is *related* “to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands” that comes out of the activity of work, “as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together.” There is a natural and artificial world upon which and within which action occurs. But, action itself signifies a space that is not limited by these conditions. Rather, the space of appearance “relates and separates men at the same time.”<sup>7</sup> It is in action that individuals recognize one another as human beings, relating them to one another in their fundamental likeness; it is in action that individuals reveal their unique, distinctive, qualifying characteristics that make each of them fundamentally inexchangeable.

Arendt writes: “According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family.”<sup>8</sup> This very basic distinction is not only central to understanding what the space of appearance is, but, more significantly, it rests at the heart of her political theory. If Arendt’s political theory is based on a concept of political action, and action is the political activity par excellence, then a distinct political space is a necessary condition for action. In seeking to understand Arendt’s concept of the space of appearance, the present chapter will explain what the polis is, in both its original Greek meaning and in modernity. The connection between action, the space of appearance, and the goal of politics will be

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<sup>7</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 50, 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

illuminated. Finally, narrative will, once again, prove to be useful in the emergence of the polis, making it a political tool par excellence. As mentioned, this exposition of Greek ideas serves as a basis for understanding the Jewishness of Arendt's thought. It is in extrapolating Arendt's differences from the Greek tradition that the Jewish ideas will, themselves, have the space to emerge. Thus, the following lengthy explanation of Greek ideas is a necessary precursor to the Jewish ideas that will subsequently be presented.

The polis comes to exist within the common world as a result of the human condition of plurality. Men, not man, exist and the space between them becomes the polis: "action and speech create a space between the participants . . . the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me." The space of appearance, then, is the realm in which man recognizes his own existence and the existence of others through the politicizing elements of speech and action. The space of appearance, the polis, "is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together." The polis, then, is truly the space that "lies between people living together."<sup>9</sup> It follows, then, that any attempt to understand man as a being which exists only within the artifice of the world denies man the space of appearance that is necessary for the realization of human being through speech and action. So it is that reality is grounded in political action because man exists in the space of appearance, a space in which speech and action engender the polis.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 198.

The purpose of the polis is “to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness.”<sup>10</sup> The polis is dependent upon action that is rooted in thinking, willing and judging. Thus, the loss of any of these activities transforms human beings as well as the public space in which they act together. In *The Human Condition* Arendt gives a careful analysis of the transformation of the public realm, an analysis that must be addressed here. Because the transformation of public space changed the course of politics and, therefore, human beings, it is absolutely crucial to understanding Arendt’s critique of modernity and the human condition. The transformation of the public realm from the political to the social is a reflection of as well as a contribution to the continued loss of human-ness.

Contemplating the Greek understanding of the polis, Arendt contends that the public realm in antiquity was the realm of freedom, words and deeds. The private realm, on the other hand, was the space that was confined to the household and where basic needs and desires were met. The private realm, or the household, was the arena in which rulership existed; it was the space wherein there existed a hierarchy, a structure of command. Moreover, the purpose of the household was not freedom, but preservation of life and production of those things that would contribute to building the world. The private realm was the prepolitical realm that was characterized by inequality and whose conditions necessitated the activities of work and labor. The “whole concept of rule and being ruled, of government and power in the sense in which we understand

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 197.

them as well as the regulated order attending them, was felt to . . . belong in the private rather than the public sphere.”<sup>11</sup>

In antiquity, the word *private* “meant literally a state of being deprived of something, and even of the highest and most human of man’s capacities.”<sup>12</sup> In the private realm, individuals were deprived of both freedom and equality. It is important to note that the private realm begins with households comprised of one family and any slaves that may belong to it. Households can join together to form societies; societies can join together to form nations. Regardless of the size of the household, society, or nation, the activities specific to them remain the same: work and labor. In all of these collective groupings, the third activity, action, is still not to be found because none of these have the necessary conditions for the polis to emerge, namely freedom and equality.

The public realm, on the other hand, was the space of freedom and thereby, the space of action where individuals could speak and act, creating the world that lies outside of the household and that was common to those who created it. The men of the polis were both free and equal, and the purpose of the polis was to maintain the freedom of movement and freedom of speech that was the fullest manifestation of human being. In the ancient sense of the term, “To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself.” The private realm, with its hierarchical structure of command implemented to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38.

meet the biological and social needs of the individuals within it, is not a realm of freedom. Human beings are subject to the activities of work and labor because the conditions of biological life and worldliness demand that they be performed. Freedom, on the other hand, is the ability “to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed” and this was fundamentally impossible in the private realm.<sup>13</sup>

The comfort of the private realm was such that the necessities of life were provided and emerging out of the private realm automatically introduced certain threats. In the openness of the public space, one must choose if and how to act. The panic of self-revelation is enough to keep one in the hidden confines of privacy, closed off from the world and yet still living in it. It was understood that whoever “entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life.” That is, the movement from the private to the public space challenges not only the biological security found in the household, but also the identity one has in that household. When an individual emerges in the space of appearance the very basic understanding of oneself is challenged, and if one is not up to that challenge due to “too great a love for life” the consequent result is “obstructed freedom” which “was a sure sign of slavishness.”<sup>14</sup>

The distinction between the prepolitical, household realm and the political realm shrinks with modernity and the order and inequality of the household begins to permeate the public sphere. Arendt writes, “In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 32, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36.

process itself.”<sup>15</sup> The blurring of the public realm with the private has the detrimental effect of maintaining the structure and activities of the household where freedom and equality are not present. The blurring of the lines meant that because people were neither free nor equal, they could not perform the words and deeds that constitute action. Thus, the conflation of the two realms of existence consequently produced a world in which the basic elements necessary for politics were not present.

Action is only possible where human beings understand themselves to be free and equal in their human capacities. In the household, the human capacities are limited by a utilitarian understanding of human being where individuals are merely tools of production and preservation. As the lines between private and public realms blurred, the public realm increasingly lost its distinct political qualities: freedom and equality. The social realm eventually took over the polis and the activities associated with it, labor and work, came to dominate human activities in the public realm. The public realm became what the private realm once was: a realm of hierarchical domination, inequality and slavery. The social qualities were confused as political because they occurred in the public realm; however, the polis was effectively diminished and in its place stood a society of workers and laborers. In antiquity, a “man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human.” With the social conquest of the public realm experienced in modernity, all human beings were subjected to this deprived, private kind of existence where the fullness of human

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33.

capacity is thwarted. Thus, "It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household."<sup>16</sup>

The role of the leader of the house (society, or nation) was to organize the house so that the necessities of sustenance and maintenance were available. The members of the household, including slaves, had roles that were assigned to them. The job of each member of the household was to perform the various tasks assigned, and not to venture beyond those assignments. In other words, the household, society or nation can expect "from each of its members a certain kind of behavior imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalize' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement." With the spreading of the social realm into the public sphere, social organization took over the public realm and, with it, political organization. With the ever-expanding modern nations, wherein many diverse societies are joined, "the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength."<sup>17</sup> The modern nation-state is altogether different from the ancient city-state. The city-state indicates a clear separation between private and public, because the activities that occur in public and that constitute the city (the *polis*) cannot occur in private. The nation-state, on the other hand, has created a public realm where social forms of organization originally found in the private realm have come to dominate. Thus, the depravity, inequality, and slavishness originally

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 38, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 40, 41.



found in the private realm have become characteristic of modern mass societies. In this development the space of appearance created and maintained through action was effectively concealed.

The equality of mass society must not be confused with the equality of the ancient polis. The equality of mass society is one that is based in necessity, not freedom. That is, in mass society all people are equally enslaved to the biological and social necessities of life and the nation. These necessities require specific activities; that is, the equality of mass society is maintained only through work and labor and does not invite that highest human capacity, action. Indeed, mass society is maintained by members who execute the duties of work and labor, leaving the status quo untouched. "This modern equality, based on the conformism inherent in society and possible only because behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship, is in every respect different from equality in antiquity."<sup>18</sup> The equality of the Greek polis was concomitant with the freedom of choice and freedom of movement and was a characteristic of the space of appearance that was produced by action.

Along with the loss of freedom and equality that came with the transformation of the public realm from the polis to the nation came also the loss of identity. The activities of mass society do not allow the subjective elements of identity to be tested in the public realm; rather, individuals are defined by work and labor. Identity is prescribed by society, rather than experienced through individual action. In the political realm, the realm of action, people could be distinct in their identities as individuals, "it

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 41.

was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, with the loss of the polis, and the loss of identity, people become fully exchangeable. In the political realm every individual is valued *precisely* because of his or her individuality and uniqueness. And, it is because of the distinctions that mark the individual that every human being is absolutely *inexchangeable* in the political sphere. Further, the words and deeds of every individual are fomented from specific circumstances and a history unique to each, so that no two human beings can affect the web of relationships in the same way. Every word, every deed, every action in the political realm marks the utter distinction and value of each human being. This is why human beings need the space of appearance. Only here can individuals appear in their own, distinct, nonreplicable, irreplaceable self.

What Arendt shows in her analysis of the transformation of the public realm is that the public realm does not have an unchanging nature. Rather, the public “must change in accordance with the activities admitted into it.” The public realm in modernity is a space “in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the public realm is not *inherently* political. At its best, it is political and this is when human beings are freely acting and at the same time bound by the laws of the space itself. It is only the public space that is characterized by action that can rightly be called the space of appearance. Labor and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 46.

work, even when carried out in the public realm, do not and cannot reveal our identities. Rather, in a public space dominated by labor and work, individual identities are further suppressed behind the masks of productivity and sustenance.

Arendt draws upon the ancient understanding of the private and public realms because, for her, both are absolutely distinct and necessary, as they were for the Greeks. However, Arendt breaks with Greek thought in her understanding of the private and public realms because, for her, one does not exist *for the sake of* the other; rather, the human condition necessitates *both*. That is, the ancient Greeks placed a priority on the activities of the polis, as they distinguished the slaves from the citizens, the barbarians from the civilized human beings. In the Greek structure of things, the freedom and equality of the polis was superior to the conditions of the household and because of this they attempted to “exclude labor from the conditions of man’s life.” This attempt to deny such a fundamental human condition was not only detrimental to human beings, but to the development of political thought in general. Further, while the ancient Greek philosophers recognized the distinction between the private and the public, they still considered the activities of the public realm to be a burden, “that even this freest of all ways of life was still connected with and subject to necessity.”<sup>21</sup> In carefully analyzing her ideas regarding the transformation of public space, it is right to assert that for Arendt, human beings are not political *or* social by nature; rather, we have the capacity for both. While Arendt’s critique focuses on the loss of the public political realm, it is important to note that this does not equate to a preference for the political over the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 84, 37.

social. Rather, the problem in modernity is the lack of distinction between the two realms, and the loss of the important activity, action, in the public realm. This is not meant to imply that the activities that occur in private are not also important, as they are certainly part of the human condition, however, without the space of appearance and the actions that create it, human beings are left without the objective experiences of reality.

Because Arendt makes a decisive break with Greece in her understanding of the relationship between the private and public realms, it is helpful to look, once again, to some of the elements of her thinking that are decidedly Jewish. To begin, the Hebrew Bible and the traditions that stem from it are overtly preoccupied with space.<sup>22</sup> In the classical Hebrew commentaries and philosophical writings, space is often times connected to the concept of identity and home and appears to be physical or objective in nature. When the Hebrew people existed as a community in a particular physical location, namely Israel, it was easy to make such objective characterizations of spatiality, particularly with regard to identity. However, upon the dispersion of the Jewish people to various parts of the world, the concepts of space and place were challenged. Because space and place were connected to the identity of the Jewish people, the Diaspora forced a reconsideration of these concepts if the Jewish people were to maintain their identity. The concepts of space and place had always contained certain existential or

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<sup>22</sup> This statement is true of both rabbinic and mystical Jewish traditions; both are considered in the subsequent analysis.

experiential elements, however, upon dispersion these elements came to the fore in the Hebraic tradition.

In grasping with the concept of space in the Diaspora, the historical experience of the Jewish people became prominent. While the physical locality of the Jewish people no longer existed as the boundary of their identity and existence, the historical account of the experiences of the Jewish people remained. Thus, the experiences of the Jewish people became foundational in the new existential understanding of space. As Jewish scholars, religious and philosophical, began to reinterpret the meaning of Jewish history in light of the concept of spatiality the question of the creation of the world became quite important. In order to understand the way in which spatiality directly affects the political and ethical structure of the temporal realm of human existence, one must first understand how world space came to be.

The main concepts underlying the Hebraic notion of spatiality are the *Tsimtsum* and the subsequent *Reshima*.<sup>23</sup> *Tsimtsum* literally translates as “contraction” or “concealment”; *Reshima* means “impression.” It is believed that prior to the creation of the universe God existed as an infinite light. The moment of creation occurred when God contracted His light, concealing a portion of Himself. The empty space created by the *Tsimtsum* was left with an impression of the light that once was there. The world created within the empty space of the *Tsimtsum* and all of creation is left with the *Reshima*, the impression of God’s light. After the creation of the space of the world,

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<sup>23</sup> The concept of the *Tsimtsum* was explored in Chapter 3 in connection to Arendt’s notion of action. Here, the spatial aspects of the *Tsimtsum* are expounded.

God continued to create things within the world. The way in which the story of creation concludes in the Hebrew Bible is essential to the understanding of man's role in space as it results from the contraction of God's light.

In the Torah, the last verse of the creation story states, *Bara Elohim la'sot*, which literally translated means, "God created *to do*" or "God *had done* creating."<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, it is not simply written that God created, but rather the text emphasizes the *action* of creating. Generally, Hebrew is a very systematic language in which words are derived from three-letter roots. However, the Hebrew word for "truth," *emet*, is not derived from a traditional three-letter root, but is instead believed to have been created through the combination of the final radicals of the last three words of Genesis 2:3:

*Bara Elohim la'sot*.<sup>25</sup> This concept of truth as something located in action is transferred to man in Genesis 1:27: "And God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them." Thus, within the Hebraic tradition, truth is found in the activity of God as well as in the activity of man, as man is made in the image of God: God *did* creation, man *does* the actions commanded by God (*mitzvot*). The space created upon the contraction of God's light is a space for God's creative activity as well as the activity of those creations. Also, the *Reshima* of God's light exists within all created things, most important here, in the human being. Thus, because God is an active Being and through actions God is known, so the impression of

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<sup>24</sup> Genesis 2:3, JPS, translation mine.

<sup>25</sup> In Hebrew: "ברא אלהים לעשות." Thus, the word for truth, formed by the last letters of each word is "אמת," (*emet*).

God in human beings moves man to action, through which one's own humanness is known.

We know that Arendt was exposed to Jewish stories of creation (Scholem and Benjamin) and the history of the Jewish identity (Herder). Also, the way in which Arendt understood Jewish identity was greatly influenced by her childhood rabbi, Hermann Vogelstein, who supported the new modern view that Jewish identity is something one is born into and not based on any personal or religious beliefs. Indeed, when Arendt declared that she no longer believed in God his response was, "Who asked you?"<sup>26</sup> The Jewish connection between space and identity is intricate and is highly relevant to any study of Arendt because of her account of the space of appearance. In essence, space and identity are interdependent on one another and foster the human experience of being: "The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves."<sup>27</sup> These ideas are, perhaps, more clearly explained by returning to the relationship between Arendt and Gershom Scholem. As noted earlier, Arendt's close relationship with Gershom Scholem and acquaintance with his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* had a profound effect on her thinking.

Returning to the concept of *Tsimtsum*, the first act of God, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, the most significant sect of Jewish mysticism, was an act of limitation, and all subsequent acts were acts of revelation. In order to reveal himself, God first had to conceal himself. Arendt's notion of the space of appearance has comparable

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<sup>26</sup> Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 50.

components to the Kabbalistic idea of creation. Specifically, for Arendt, the first act for all human beings is birth, an act that gives precise definitive boundaries to the biological and physiological being. The human being, upon birth, is not revealed as a particular identity or a unique life; rather, that can only come from the second act, the voluntary activity of action, whereby the individual reveals himself. So, just as for Luria, there is a primary act, birth/the creation of the world; and there are acts that follow, human actions/divine revelation. The first element of the *Tsimtsum* makes the second element possible. Without the first act, creation, the second act, revelation, would not be possible. Further, with the first, the second is beckoned, prompted, prodded. That is, the fact of existence naturally behooves a sense of self-revelation, wherein an individual can answer, “Who am I?”

Arendt notes that “our feeling for reality depends utterly upon appearance and therefore upon the existence of a public realm into which things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered existence.” The Lurianic notion of the creation of a space and the activities that occur in that space can be seen here. For Arendt, the public realm is created by the fact of birth—a plurality of human beings exist in the world. The simple fact that men, not man, live in the world, makes the space “public.” And it is in this public space that man *can* act, thereby revealing the self that is otherwise hidden, concealed within the darkness of the private realm. Emphasizing the idea that action is dependent upon the activities of the mind, which are dependent upon the experiences had within the public realm, Arendt continues, “even the twilight which illuminates our private and intimate lives is ultimately derived from the much harsher light of the public



realm.”<sup>28</sup> That is to say the first *Tsimtsum* (birth) creates the conditions necessary for revelation (natality and plurality) and it is in the subsequent *Tsimtsum* (action) that the public space is transformed into the space of appearance wherein individual human beings are revealed. In Lurianic Kabbalah, this illuminating twilight of the private realm is called the *Reshima*, “a vestige or residue of the divine light.”<sup>29</sup> The *Reshima* is the trace of God that is in the space created out of the *Tsimtsum*. In Arendt’s theory, the activities of the mind are dependent upon recollection of experiences in order to make proper judgments about how to act in the world. That memory, then, holds the trace of what is revealed in the public realm.

In Jewish mysticism, the *Reshima* is present after “the withdrawal of the substance of the *En-Sof*.”<sup>30</sup> The *En-Sof* is, literally, the “Unending.” It is the characteristic of God that acknowledges that there is no beginning and no end. The divinity of God is the unending capacity to create, to act, to move in the world. In the first *Tsimtsum*, the *En-Sof* is limited by the contraction of the light of the divinity. By putting limitations on himself, God removes the fullness of the capacity to act. However, the residue of that capacity remains. Secularizing this concept of the *En-Sof* in the theory of Arendt supports her concept of natality and creation. That human beings can create something new is the miracle of human action; however, because we cannot exist in the public space of appearance at all times and cannot be constantly engaged in

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>29</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 264.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

the activity of action, the *Reshima* (memory) gives us the courage we need to emerge once again into the public space. Further, the *Reshima* is the vestige of what one experiences in the sphere of revelation that is brought into the realm of the hidden. The memory holds to the experience of reality and continues to engender the life of the mind. The *Reshima*, the trace of reality, is what spurs us on in the activities of the mind; it is what makes thinking, willing, and judging persist.

In what Arendt calls “dark times” the space of appearance is missing from the public realm. The light that shines from revelation is absent, covered by the “camouflage, emanating from and spread by ‘the establishment.’” But, even in the darkest of times, the conditions of being human remain. Thus, even in the dim light of twentieth century Europe or Russia, there is the hope for revelation. Arendt even claims that “we have the right to expect some illumination” in the dark times and “that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women” will have the courage to shine.<sup>31</sup> It is these men and women that she discusses in *Men in Dark Times*, those who recognized that “A free man distinguishes himself from the slave through courage.”<sup>32</sup> These people and the narratives Arendt writes about their lives behoove us to act, to join the public realm, to challenge our own identities. It is these people and the stories of them that provide the trace of light, the *Reshima*, which stokes the memory and motivates the experience of reality.

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<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *Dark Times*, viii, ix.

<sup>32</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 36 f.

As Arendt progresses through her analysis of the public realm and the activities found in it, it becomes apparent that speaking only of a public realm is not sufficient. Because the nature of the public realm is dependent upon the activities that occur within it, the public realm of mass society is far different from the public realm of the polis. At a certain point, then, Arendt begins to refer to the public realm that is characterized by the activity of action as the “common world.” Action, words and deeds create the common world, the space that is shared by multiple individuals. The common world “is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us.” The common world is transcendent, that is, it transcends the mortality of the private realm that necessarily dies with the individual. The common world, the political world, transcends human mortality and is maintained by the ever-growing web of actions. Thus, the space of appearance is the complicated web of actions, past present and future. “But such a world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public.” Without action, past deeds and words are lost, but can be revived by emerging back into that space. “It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time.”<sup>33</sup>

The common world of the polis is “where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity” and only in this space “can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.” The end of the common world, and politics, then, is

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 55.

dependent upon suppression of individual identity, suppression of action, suppression of appearance. The complete transformation of the political common world into mass society is indicated by the conformity found in mass society, where the world “is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective.”<sup>34</sup> In mass society, individuals are not permitted to reveal themselves in their uniqueness. The plurality of the public realm and the space of appearance which constitutes reality must be concealed. Any emergence would challenge the absolute notions inherent in the prevailing ideology of the society. Hence, tyrants such as Pharaoh, Hitler, and Stalin all depended not on politics but on the lack thereof to maintain the manifestation of their very private musings. They did not create politics, but forced human beings into inaction so as to build the artifice of the world that they envisioned in their minds. This vision, this world that they created, was inherently threatened by any *action*, in the Arendtian sense.

While the atrocities of the twentieth century were very *real*, they did not create the sense of reality that is concomitant with political action and the space of appearance. The annihilation of millions was “real enough as it took place in public; there was nothing secret or mysterious about it.” However, when considering the dark times, Arendt is careful to note that, while these things occurred in public, “it was by no means visible to all, nor was it at all easy to perceive it.” The space of appearance is a space of perception and of being perceived. Perception in mass societies is difficult, if at all possible, because the atrocities are “covered up not by realities but by the highly

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 57.

efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives.”<sup>35</sup> This is the problem with any tyranny, any framework that does not permit variety. This is the problem with Nazi Germany, Stalin’s USSR, and perhaps the bureaucratic giant of the United States. “The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the tyrant and the tyrannized are deprived of reality.

It is not enough to say that Hitler or Stalin are delusional, holding to an opinion of things as the absolute truth. Rather, they created a world built by that delusion and forced, in totality, all human beings into the confines of that delusion. The “progress” of National Socialism and the Leninist state required massive bureaucratic machines to administer the mechanisms of the state. The greatness of the bureaucratic administration was its ability to execute the orders of the state; the detriment of such capacity is that “there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted.” The totality of control exhibited by Germany and the Russia, despite the public nature of things, was not political because it did not allow the freedom of movement necessary for the space of appearance to exist. They created an apolitical form of government “in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act.”<sup>37</sup> The leaders,

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<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *Dark Times*, viii.

<sup>36</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 178.

themselves, partook in the activity of action, creating something altogether new; but the tools of their production were decidedly non-political.

In the twentieth century, “the public realm has lost the power of illumination which was originally part of its very nature.” This is due to the long process of transformation whereby the activities that were once relegated to the private sphere gradually entered and came to dominate the public sphere. However, the right to expect illumination persists. For Arendt, the narrative is the most powerful tool not only for sparking the light of remembrance in the life of the mind, but also for igniting the action that can bring the public realm back to life. Hence, “No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story.” The ability to convey past words and deeds in a manner conducive to narration requires what Arendt calls the “mastery of the past.” This is the ability to relate what has happened and is, in general, what the storyteller/historian does. The mastering of the past in itself does not provide anything for the listeners or readers other than a recollection of past events. But, if the story has a meaning and that meaning is living, if it is an authentic narrative, then it has the capacity to foster far more than mere recollection. “As long as the meaning of the events remains alive—and this meaning can persist for very long periods of time—‘mastering of the past’ can take the form of ever-recurrent narration.”<sup>38</sup>

The power Arendt ascribes to the authentic narrative is also seen in the Jewish mystical tradition. According to Scholem, the Jewish mystics viewed the Torah as “a

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<sup>38</sup> Arendt, *Dark Times*, 4, 22, 21.

living organism animated by a secret life which streams and pulsates below the crust of its literal meaning.” The stories of the Torah are understood to be “the living incarnation of the divine wisdom which eternally sends out new rays of light.” The power of the stories found in the Torah is, for a Jewish mystic, “the secret of his life and of his God.”<sup>39</sup> Jewish mysticism “had always prepared its followers for action” and Lurianic Kabbalah “raised every Jew to the rank of protagonist.”<sup>40</sup> This is, likely, one of the reasons Arendt was attracted to this particular tradition; the power of any narrated story lies in its ability to be relevant in any time and place, so there are “those aspects which are discovered by later generations” and which are often “of greater importance than their original meaning.”<sup>41</sup> For Arendt, the significance of the narrative, in general, lies in its ability to provoke action, the consequent space of appearance and the freedom that corresponds with the political realm.

The Jewish mystic is, ultimately, concerned with an experience of reality. The purpose of the Torah was to help the individual to ascend to the highest experience of reality, which is God. Arendt, too, is concerned with an experience of reality, and the highest reality human beings can experience is one of self-revelation that occurs only in the space of appearance. The space of appearance, or the common world, is common to all people at all times, thus its immortality is established. Scholem points out that a story “cannot, according to the mystic, have come to pass once only and in one place.”

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<sup>39</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 308.

<sup>41</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 14.

With this understanding, stories “cease to be an object of learning and acquire the dignity of immediate religious experience.”<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Arendt is not concerned with the fact-gaining that historical accounts provide, but rather with the experience of reality that an authentic narrative can engender.

The experience of reality can only occur in the public space that is characterized by action. The Passover story, then, is the fundamental narrative of the Jewish people because it is, quite literally, the movement of the Israelites from the household into the public space. In this story, individuals act and by that action they emerge into public space. The location of the act, on the very doorway of their homes, is a powerful symbol of revelation. By placing blood on their lintels, the individuals remove the cloak that shrouds them in slavery. The moment of the Passover is an emergence out of the private realm of social affairs, where one is relegated to particular tasks that contribute to the overall well-being and health of the community, but who has no individual identity that is distinct. It is only upon that action that the Israelites are free, not merely from slavery and the grips of Pharaoh, but from the private realm altogether. It is only with that action that they emerge in the space of appearance.

As can be seen, the idea of the space of appearance is critically important for Arendt’s understanding of politics. Thus, when Arendt claims that the Jewish reform movement “ruthlessly and nonchalantly removed all national, all political meaning” from the Passover tradition and “robbed it of its living meaning,” she is essentially pointing out that a consequence of the reform was the diminishing of the public space

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 19.



of appearance.<sup>43</sup> This is particularly problematic if one understands the Passover narrative to be the foundational narrative of the Jewish people. What the reform movement did, then, in removing the living meaning, was to make the Jewish people impotent. Without the illumination that comes by way of authentic narrative, without the stirring of the potential greatness of what it means to be human, the narrative loses its evocative value.

The “immediate religious experience” that the Jewish mystic receives from the sacred stories, the experience of self-revelation that the human being experiences through the motivation of the authentic narrative—these are not guaranteed experiences. Arendt acknowledges that because “it is always the ‘dead letter’ in which the ‘living spirit’ must survive” there is an inherent difficulty in the role of narrative. This difficulty is one of impotence; that the story remains dead and mute is a possibility. However, this is “a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it.”<sup>44</sup> The deeds and words of those who, in the past, created the web of action that constitutes the common world are rescued and revived when the narrative comes to have relevant meaning in the present. When the story inspires the courage needed for individuals to emerge in the space of appearance, the common world, then they are able to contribute to that web of action. The narrative is “dead” when it is whittled to a mere history, a recounting.

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<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 149, emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

The living spirit of the narrative is the action of those who are inspired to the highest humanness because of it.

The narrative is not the only means of transforming the activities of the mind into the realities of the common world; but, according to Arendt, it is the most accessible. The narrative helps individuals to recognize their potent capacity for revelation and immortal existence in the common world. The narrative illustrates a perspective that illuminates what “the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth.” The only way that the world can be a home for men is in the space of appearance; otherwise, there is no identification with the world, no connection to it. The “human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech” because it is only in that space that individuals can find their place.<sup>45</sup> Human beings are at home when they are fully revealing their unique identities, and that occurs only in the space of appearance.

The significance of the Passover story is further indicated by two important elements. First, it was individuals who acted. Second, it was the actions of individuals that set a precedent, an example, for future generations. The retelling of the Passover story, like the maintenance of the *polis*, guarantees that “without assistance from others, those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and future ages.” Thus, if the Passover narrative has lost its living meaning, then the story does not have practical relevance for the present time. That is, the memory of the actions accounted for in the

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<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 173, 174.

Passover story no longer inspires the admiration that spurs people to act, even in the darkest of times. “The *polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to win ‘immortal fame.’”<sup>46</sup> The narrative continues this immortality by prompting the emergence into the space of appearance that maintains the polis. The value of the narrative, then, is not a dead remembrance, but a remembrance that is alive and that contributes to the everlasting realm of appearance.

The power of the Passover story, like any narrative, is that it reminds the teller and/or listener of the human capacity for action and the consequent creation of an entirely new public space. Because the ability to speak and act is always potent, the space of appearance “never altogether loses its potential character.”<sup>47</sup> That is, because the space of appearance is created by speech and action, the possibility for the individual to emerge in the public space characterized by action always exists. It is that possibility that makes the public space dynamic and ever-changing. Because it is created by action, which is limitless and unpredictable, the polis can never be absolutely defined. It is never absolute, but always potentially appearing.

The emergence of the space of appearance “predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.”<sup>48</sup> The type of activities that take place in the public realm determine what type of organization is needed to

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 199.

maintain that particular space. So, the organization of the household is hierarchical with rulers, workers, and slaves. The organization of mass society, because it is like the household in terms of the types of activities that take place, also has a hierarchical organization. The polis is altogether different because the purpose of organization in the space of appearance is the protection of the freedom and equality that permit the action that maintain the public space.

Once in the public space of appearance we are confronted with the “burden of jurisdiction, defense and administration.” This is illustrated not in the moment of the Passover, but in what follows. In the Passover story, the Israelites appeared to one another through the action of sacrificing a lamb and marking their doorposts with blood; once they appeared to one another the polis emerged. Their identity was revealed by their activity. Upon the establishment of the polis, while they were wandering in the desert wilderness, they received a very basic code of conduct that was meant to govern their affairs in public. The Israelites emerged in a public space that was maintained through action and organized through law. Thus, “action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it.”<sup>49</sup>

With the space of appearance established via the manifestation of the activities of the mind in action, we can now turn to the purpose of politics: freedom and justice. The following chapter will look into these concepts, which often appear to be vague and ambiguous in Arendt’s work. The hope is that by uncovering the Jewish aspects of her

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 41, 198.

political theory in the midst of the powerful role of narrative, a spark of illumination can be brought to her work. If the meaning of politics is freedom, and justice is the product of freedom, then it is important to know how that freedom is to be maintained. It is to this question that we now turn.

## CHAPTER V: FREEDOM

“Freedom of movement is also the indispensable condition for action, and it is in action that men primarily experience freedom.”

~Hannah Arendt, *Men In Dark Times*

In the Passover story, when the Lord delivered the commands to Moses, he said, “This *day* shall be to you one of remembrance.” Thus far, this dissertation has remembered the significance of that *day*. However, the final element that must be considered is how the actions of that day changed all the days that would follow it. Because the Israelites put blood on their lintels, they were passed over by the Lord and “[t]he Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country.” With that, the Israelites “had been driven out of Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> The Egyptians exiled the Israelites; however, it is an important caveat to note that it was the actions of the Israelites that rendered their exile necessary. Taking Arendt’s ideas into account, the necessity of the exile was born of the fact that the Israelites created a political space that could not be sustained in the public space already existing in Egypt. Arendt asserts that political space is marked by equality and freedom; thus, the only way the Israelites could maintain their new political reality and remain in Egypt would be if they were understood to be equals within the existing Egyptian order. With the Egyptians unwilling to recognize such equality, leaving Egypt was the only means by which the Israelite’s could preserve their newly established political existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 12: 14, 33, 37, JPS, emphasis mine.

Using the Passover story as a metaphorical framework for understanding Arendt affords an altogether different understanding of the experience of wandering in the wilderness. By looking at Arendt's theory alongside the Passover story, one comes to recognize that exile, for Arendt, is necessary. Exile occurs when one emerges from the home; that is, in order to create and maintain the political realm, one must necessarily leave the home. In that departure, one leaves the comforts of predictability and order. The exile is from subjective ideas to objective, experiential reality. The exile is from the comfort of one's mind and one's home to the unpredictable expanse of the polis. The exile is founded by courage and in it alone can one experience truly the essence of freedom and justice. Arendt claims that the meaning of politics is freedom and that only in the space of political freedom is justice possible. This chapter seeks to explain Arendt's conceptions of freedom and justice, how these are the fundamental political ideals, and how they can be preserved. It will consider politics as the denouement of the narrative, one that is never absolutely concluded, but always writhing with possibility.

The Israelites, according to the story, were freed from a spatial locality and emerged in an entirely new space of appearance: the wilderness. For Arendt, this means that through the human condition of natality, the individuals acted, and because of that action, they experienced the freedom that is inherent in the space of appearance. The Israelites, now free from the house of bondage, began a journey of wandering that would last for forty years. Immediately upon exile the Israelites were given a law—the law of the Passover offering—which maintained the public space that was created by

the offering itself.<sup>2</sup> The law was created after and because of the action. The articulation of this law indicates that the Israelites were a separate political entity. It stipulates who and who is not a citizen of this newly formed polis. And, it determines the means by which outsiders can be admitted to the community. The law of the Passover offering, essentially, commemorates the actions that brought forth the space of appearance and sets the criteria for maintaining the equality necessary for freedom of movement in that space.

Moses' role in the Passover story is one of instigation: he calls to mind the capacity for volition and the necessity for action. Whilst in the wilderness, Moses continued to remind the Israelites of the necessity of action for maintaining their freedom. When his role became too demanding, his father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." Moses was acting as chief magistrate and judge, maintaining the functioning of the political community. Because the task of maintaining the polis was too much for him, he established an administration of leaders who "judged the people at all times."<sup>3</sup> After the administrative system was put in place, it was necessary to have a standard by which all the leaders could make judgments. Hence, after the third new moon, or approximately ninety days into their wandering, a law, including the Ten Commandments, was given. The law provided the citizens of the Israelite community with standards by which they

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12: 43-49 contains the specific stipulations of the law of the Passover offering.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 18: 17-18, 26, JPS.



could judge the benefit of their own actions and a standard by which all actions could be judged. In *Exodus and Revolution*, Michael Walzer considers the law to be “the discipline of freedom.” He explains, the law obliged the Israelites to “live up to a common standard and to take responsibility for their own actions.” The Hebraic notion of freedom, as illustrated in the Passover narrative, is not merely liberation from bondage. Rather, “[t]rue freedom, in the rabbinic view, lies in servitude to God.”<sup>4</sup> The Israelites are freed from the bondage of slavery; however, they are now bound to act in accordance with God’s commands. The paradox of law is that although it is binding, it serves to maintain the freedom that brings about justice, that is, right action.

The Passover narrative is a story that tells of the birth of a political community. This narrative holds, in a nutshell, all of what Arendt is trying to say because it answers the most important question: the question of political freedom. In order to better understand political freedom, it is first important to understand politics. When asked about the *meaning* of politics, Arendt is clear and concise: “The meaning of politics is freedom.”<sup>5</sup> Arendt is not speaking about the *purpose* of politics. That is, the polis is not created *so that* human beings can experience freedom. Rather, the polis *is* the experience of freedom. Freedom is not the *end* of politics; freedom *is* politics. In the previous chapter, the space of appearance was discussed, along with the idea that it is freedom of action that creates this space. In order to understand what creates and

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<sup>4</sup> Walzer *Exodus and Revolution*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 108.

maintains the polis, then, it is right to look further into the notion of freedom, how it is maintained, and how law can promote it.

Arendt speaks of freedom frequently in her writings that specifically address Jewish concerns, such as those collected in *The Jewish Writings*, as well as the essays found in *The Promise of Politics*. What is most interesting about this is that while so many of her ideas shifted, evolved, and expanded throughout her life and career as a political thinker, the place of freedom remained constant. From the start and through the end, freedom is the essential human characteristic.<sup>6</sup> This is not to imply that human beings, by nature, experience freedom; but, rather, human beings *can* experience freedom. Arendt avoids any notions of human nature and any theories that posit such definitions. For Arendt, definitions are anathema to freedom. It is problematic, then, that when the Western tradition seeks to answer what the meaning of politics is it results in definitions that “are essentially justifications.” And, all of the justifications “end up characterizing politics as a means to some higher end.” We are told that the purpose of politics is “to safeguard life in the broadest sense.”<sup>7</sup> For Arendt, though, the safeguarding of life is the task of labor and is not necessarily public and certainly not political. Thus, any theory or philosophy that posits freedom or sustenance as the goal of politics is fundamentally at odds with Arendt’s understanding of politics, human

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<sup>6</sup> Examples: In “A Way Toward the Reconciliation of Peoples,” written in 1942, she asserts that all politics are based on the concepts of freedom and justice (JW p.259). In “Paper and Reality,” written in 1942, she criticizes some scholars who became “unpolitical” as they separated themselves from truth, which is freedom and justice (JW p.153). In “From Army to Brigade,” written in 1944, she equates “the real,” freedom and justice, with the political (JW p.258).

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 114, 115.

beings, and the world. The conception of the world, which is undeniably focused on and rooted in freedom, separates Arendt from many in the Western, European tradition, and draws her more near to the Jewish tradition where “every solution is subject to further analysis.”<sup>8</sup>

Arendt posits “the most important of all questions” is “the question of political freedom.”<sup>9</sup> The reason for the primacy of political freedom lies in the fact that only this freedom signifies the fullness of human being.<sup>10</sup> That is, political freedom is the space of appearance, the space where human beings reveal who they are. The question of political freedom, then, is whether or not human beings have the necessary space within which their unique identities can be revealed, and therefore, objectified in the realm of experiential plurality. It is the freedom that comes by way of manifesting all of our human capacities, including and perhaps most importantly, natality. By acting and manifesting the power to create new beginnings, human beings move into a realm of experiential reality that *is* freedom. Here, freedom is “identical with beginning.”<sup>11</sup>

This understanding of freedom is “strange to us because, according to our tradition of conceptual thought and its categories, freedom is equated with freedom of the will, and we understand freedom of the will to be a choice between givens or, to put it crudely, between good and evil.” Given Arendt’s understanding of will, this notion of

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<sup>8</sup> Fishbane, “Reading Rabbinic Texts,” liv.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 334.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt discusses various other types of freedom in *The Promise of Politics*, including the freedom of movement, freedom of opinion, and freedom of choice.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 113.

freedom is not applicable in her theory. Arendt understands the will to be a mental faculty responsible for the activity of willing, whereby judgments incurred by thinking about the world are manifested. In this way, the individual is responsible for willing action. That is, the individual is responsible for beginning, which is, in essence, identical with freedom. Thus, political freedom is not about choosing between good and evil; perhaps that could be considered part of the activity of judging. And, insofar as the activities of the mind are essential in the process of political action, it, too, could be a part of political freedom. But, if freedom is understood to be a freedom of will, which is purely private, then what is the place of freedom in the light of day? In understanding freedom as beginning, Arendt is infusing the political realm with the characteristics inherent in action itself: it is unpredictable and limitless. In other words,

[I]n this realm—and in no other—we do indeed have the right to expect miracles. Not because we superstitiously believe in miracles, but because human beings, whether or not they know it, as long as they can act, are capable of achieving, and constantly do achieve, the improbable and unpredictable.<sup>12</sup>

In discussing the concept of freedom and its relation to the polis, Arendt turns, once again, to the Greeks. “What distinguishes the communal life of people in the polis from all other forms of communal life—with which the Greeks were most certainly familiar—is freedom.” The freedom that characterized the Greek polis, however, was not altogether the same as the freedom that Arendt establishes *as* the polis. The freedom of the ancient Greek polis is interesting because “to be able to live in a polis at

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 113, 114.

all, man already had to be free in another regard—he could not be subject as a slave to someone else’s domination, or as a worker to the necessity of earning his daily bread.” The freedom of ancient Greece was one that could not possibly be enjoyed by all people because the very nature of the polis was dependent upon the subjugation of at least a portion of the society. The only means by which any person could be free from the necessity of earning one’s daily bread, that is, of the biological necessities, is to ensure that someone else will be earning them in one’s stead. The freedom found in the Greek polis was born out of a liberation from “domination by life’s necessities.” The crucial point here is that the freedom of the polis came only when individuals (men who were not slaves) were liberated from the conditions of work and labor and could, therefore, enjoy “leisure” time. It was the leisure time that permitted these free beings to act in the public space. In this way, the “free life” for the Greeks was the liberated life of the few; but, this liberation was dependent upon slavery, “the brute force by which one man compelled others to relieve him of the cares of daily life.”<sup>13</sup>

According to Arendt, the types of actions that are performed and experienced in the slave-master relationship are not *real* actions. She explains, “To speak in the form of commanding and to hear in the form of obeying were not considered actual speech and hearing.” The words and deeds of both the master and the slave lack the fundamental element that characterizes all *actual* action—freedom. The actions of both master and slave “were not free because they were bound up with a process defined not by

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 116, 117.

speaking but by doing and laboring.”<sup>14</sup> In trying to understand the polis and whether politics has any meaning in the modern world, we must keep in mind that politics is born out of action, which Arendt previously describes as words and deeds spoken or performed in the plurality of men. The question is raised, then, why modern society is *not*, in Arendt’s view, political. After all, human beings are indeed speaking and performing deeds in the company of one another.

Just as it was important to note the difference between a narrative and an authentic narrative in chapter one, it is crucial to realize the distinction between words and deeds, in general, and those that constitute political action. To wit, only words and deeds that are performed out of careful thought and judgment and out of the freedom of the individual performing them, without the subjugation of another human being, are in actuality political actions. The leader of the household, or the leader of any hierarchical order in which the person at the top determines the activities of those beneath, *commands* work and labor, but action cannot ever be commanded. This is why any form of government that has a ruler *over* people cannot be considered *political*. Arendt writes, “The despot, who knows only commands, finds himself in the same situation [as slaves]; in order to speak, he would need others who are his equals.”<sup>15</sup>

Due to the political phenomena that the world witnessed in the twentieth century, Arendt ponders whether politics retains any meaning at all. She writes, “Our question nowadays arises out of the very real experiences we have had with politics; it is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

ignited by the disaster politics has wrought in our century.” If, theoretically, the meaning of politics is freedom and this freedom is the characteristic of human beings who are thinking what they are doing, then what are we to make of the totalitarian modes of government that have come to exist in the world? And, not just the totalitarian modes, but what of massive bureaucracies where thinking is sacrificed to routine? These very real political phenomena give rise to the question, “Does politics still have any meaning at all?”<sup>16</sup>

The loss of political meaning has significant consequence, something Arendt recognized early on. She notes, in an article written in 1942, that when the Reform rabbis sought to reform the Passover tradition, they removed all political meaning from the story, and consequently “robbed it of its living meaning.” The power of the Passover narrative is the very meaning of the story. This is why, in the same article, she warns:

As long as the Passover story does not teach the difference between freedom and slavery, as long as the Moses legend does not call to mind the eternal rebellion of the heart and mind against slavery, the ‘oldest document of human history’ will remain dead and mute to no one more than the very people who once wrote it.<sup>17</sup>

Because the power of the Passover narrative lies in its capacity to awaken the reader (or teller) to the human capacity for freedom, its meaning is inherently political. In this way, the Passover narrative is powerfully instructive for Arendt’s investigation into whether or not politics has meaning in the modern world. What she is looking for, in essence, is

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>17</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 150.

whether or not the experience of politics does exactly what the Passover story, in its living richness does. Is politics the revelatory experience of freedom?

In seeking to answer the question of whether politics has meaning in the contemporary world, Arendt turns to “our experience with totalitarian governments, in which the totality of human life is claimed to be so totally politicized that under them there is no longer any freedom whatsoever.” In modern societies where these types of governments have come to exist, Arendt questions “whether politics and freedom are at all compatible.” If the political has taken the shape of something so completely opposed to freedom, then it has lost its essentially *political* character. Arendt continues her investigation into these political arrangements pondering whether “freedom does not first begin precisely where politics ends, so that freedom cannot exist wherever politics has not yet found its limit and its end.”<sup>18</sup> The totalitarian mode of governance is fundamentally unacceptable for Arendt because it separates politics from freedom. Insofar as the political is *only* found in the space of freedom, then any circumstance wherein freedom is what comes *after* politics is problematic.

Understanding how totalitarian modes of government destroy the space of appearance is crucial for Arendt because, again, “the most important of all questions” is “the question of political freedom.”<sup>19</sup> This notion of political freedom is completely dependent upon the space of appearance. That is, the space of appearance is the locality within which political freedom is manifest. Thus, political freedom “is a spatial

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<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 108, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 334.



construct. Whoever leaves his polis or is banished from it loses not just his hometown or his fatherland; he also loses the only space in which he can be free—and he loses the society of his equals.”<sup>20</sup> The reason political freedom is the most important question is because it is only this kind of freedom that allows human beings to experience the fullness of their unique identities; further, it is only in political freedom that justice, the articulation of freedom and equality, is possible.

Arendt seems to be somewhat inconsistent on the issue of totalitarian regimes and the experience of the political. Are these versions of politics really political? On one hand, because she contends that what is real is political, then in order to respect the experiences of the oppressed under totalitarian regimes as *real*, she must admit that they are political.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, if what is political is fundamentally grounded in freedom and equality, then the totalitarian governments cannot possibly be considered political. Thus, how are we to understand the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century? Are they political? Are they defined by political action? What, exactly, is *real* in these circumstances?

In an effort to understand what Arendt is saying across texts and through time, I present the following as a possibility for how Arendt accounts for this apparent contradiction. The totalitarian regimes were at least initially political, but the space of the polis was extremely limited. Furthermore, the space of the polis, which was defined by equals acting and speaking together, eventually ceased to exist as the tyrant’s power

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<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 119.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 228.

grew. This is the type of political structure Arendt describes when she writes, “Freedom does not require an egalitarian democracy in the modern sense, but rather a quite narrowly limited oligarchy or aristocracy, an arena in which at least a few or the best can interact with one another as equals among equals.” It is also important to note that the equality of the polis “has, of course, nothing to do with justice.”<sup>22</sup> Accepting that totalitarian leaders like Hitler and Stalin gradually attained power, to the point at which they held total control of society in all aspects, the argument can be made that, at least at the beginning, they and their associates were acting in concert with one another in a shared space of movement and speech.

The polis of totalitarian regimes, while having the character of equality, was in no way, and it need not be, concerned with justice. At some point the strength of the tyrant outweighs all other factors and the polis shrinks until it is gone. This is because there is no longer the shared public space, defined by equality, which is necessary for the polis to continue. Thus, Arendt contends that, “with the tyrant came an end to freedom.”<sup>23</sup> The political is based on a free space that is defined by an equality of movement. Thus, without equality, freedom was further diminished and true experience lost. Humanness is lost. And with this, justice is impossible.<sup>24</sup> The political problem with totalitarian forms of government is manifold. One of the most basic problems, however, is the lack of a space within which equals interact. Without the

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<sup>22</sup> Arendt, *Promises of Politics*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 258.

space of appearance, “that meant that political freedom no longer existed.”<sup>25</sup> What totalitarian modes of governance do, in essence, is whittle down the original space of politics to a space in which there is only one inhabitant—the tyrant. This space, inherently, is not political because it lacks plurality—a necessary element for politics.

In order to understand how this type of experience could develop, Arendt turns back both to philosophy and the creation myth. Arendt distinguishes between two ways in which the creation myth can be understood and employed. In the Western philosophical tradition, there is an emphasis on the creation of man, a singular entity. Arendt, however, is more interested in a tradition that emphasizes the creation of *men*, a plural collective. This is because, “Politics is based on the fact of human plurality.” In the Western creation myth, God created *man*; an emphasis that is problematic because in the singularity of *man*, there can be no politics, no relationships between multiple *men*. Nonetheless, the Western tradition posits that there is, in fact, something political in man. Arendt’s response to this claim is quite matter-of-fact; she writes, “This simply is not so; *man* is apolitical.” Elaborating this further, “Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*.” Indeed, the emphatic study of *man* throughout the history of the Western tradition has no political value; it leaves man isolated in “the likeness of God’s aloneness.” If “there were only one or two men or only identical men” these philosophical and theological “pronouncements would be correct.”<sup>26</sup> However, because

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<sup>25</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 119.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, 95, emphasis mine.

*men*, not *man*, exist in the world, neither philosophy nor theology has been able to do anything more than justify the presence of politics, as opposed to explain what it is.

As noted in previous chapters, Arendt understands the human likeness to God to be the capacity to create new things through word and deed. Further, action itself is dependent upon the activities of the mind; that is, thinking, willing and judging conceive of, determine, and motivate the manifestation of every word and deed. Thus, if, in natality, human beings share the image and likeness of God, then that likeness is grounded in the activities of the mind. Maimonides, the great medieval theologian and philosopher, explains that what is meant “in the scriptural dictum, *let us make man in our image . . .* is intellectual apprehension.”<sup>27</sup> Arendt rejects the Western creation myth that focuses on the image and likeness of God that leaves man isolated and alone, and, instead, understands creation much as Maimonides himself did. The intellectual apprehension of human beings that Maimonides speaks of was expanded when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. It is written that man became like the divine being, “knowing good and bad.”<sup>28</sup> Arendt posits that in the activity of thinking human beings determine what is good and bad. Thus, Arendt is making the same claim that Maimonides made: human beings are made in the likeness of God insofar as through apprehending the world they have the capacity to determine what is good and what is bad and to act according to those determinations.

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<sup>27</sup> Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed, Volume 1*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Genesis 3:22, JPS.

The conception of political freedom as *interaction between men* is incompatible with the Western conception of human beings where man is isolated by nature (in the likeness to God) and at the same time political. A reconciliation of man's political nature with his God-likeness "would mean *man*, created in the likeness of God, has received the procreative energy to organize *men* into the likeness of divine creation." While this proposition holds logical consistency, Arendt claims it is "probably nonsense." For Arendt, man's "procreative energy" is not *for the purpose of* politics, *it is* politics. In other words, man does not have the capacity to create in order to act as a tyrant over other individuals; men have the capacity to create in order to emerge as equals amongst one another. Because the West has assumed the correctness of the philosophical and theological assertions regarding man and his likeness to God, any philosophy that does not construct politics as a necessary end in human organization is difficult to comprehend. Yet, this is precisely what Arendt does. She posits, "there is a realm in which we can truly be free, that is, neither driven by ourselves nor dependent on the givens of material existence." This realm of freedom is understood *to be* politics: "Freedom exists only in the unique intermediary space of politics."<sup>29</sup> This understanding of politics and freedom is impossible within the framework of the Western creation myth.

Arendt's analysis of the creation myth is important for two reasons. One, the procreative power that *men* have is not for the purpose of organizing; rather, it is for the purpose of creating the space of appearance, which is defined by freedom and

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<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 95, 96.

equality. This is not to say that organizing this space will not be necessary, as indeed, this is the reason that the law is delivered to the Israelites. However, organization is not the motivating factor for the creation of the political realm. Second, *only* if the procreative powers were for organizing could there be said to be a natural law because, *in his likeness to God*, man organizes men. This sets up a framework wherein individuals are subjected to the organizer. While this is, indeed, what happened in the West, and what was experienced under the totalitarian regimes, it is fundamentally at odds with the Hebraic tradition. Saadya Gaon, the great Geonic Jewish philosopher, recounting the covenant the Israelites made with God whilst wandering through the wilderness, writes, “God . . . gave man the ability to obey Him, placing it as it were in his hands, endowed him with power and free will, and commanded him to choose that which is good.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, while there was the obligation to follow the law, each individual was free to choose how to act. In totalitarian modes of governance, the freedom to think is limited, therefore, the freedom to will and to act are also suppressed.

Because it is so difficult to comprehend the free realm, the Western tradition has left the discomfort of freedom, with its uncertainties and unpredictability, and opted instead for “the ‘necessity’ of history.” Arendt considers this to be a “ghastly absurdity,” as substituting politics with history not only destroys the polis, but with it, human beings. In the transformation of politics into history, “the multiplicity of men is melted into *one* human individual, which is then also called humanity.”<sup>31</sup> In ancient Greece, the free

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<sup>30</sup> Saadya Gaon, *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, trans., Alexander Altmann (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 116.

<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 95.

realm of the polis was separate from the necessity that defined the activities of the household. Freedom and necessity occupied exclusive realms. In modernity, freedom is sacrificed for necessity and the necessity that once dominated the private realm has come to dominate the public realm. Freedom loses its place in the world. Arendt does not accept the ancient dichotomy, nor does she accept the modern dismissal of freedom. Both necessity and freedom are parts of the human condition. To subject one to the other is to dismiss part of our humanness.

The sacrifice of freedom to history is what “makes totalitarianism truly new and terrifying.” Totalitarianism was not the first political theory to bring the value of freedom into question, but it was the first to posit “the notion that human freedom must be sacrificed to historical development.” Somehow, the movement of world history toward some end was more valuable than the individual lives that constitute humanity. If history is to progress along smoothly, total control must be exercised over all human beings. The process of historical progress is innately threatened by freedom; it “can be impeded only when human beings act and interact in freedom.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, for the sake of the historical oneness of humanity, freedom must be suppressed. The task before totalitarian leaders, then, is the total domination of society so as to perfectly inhibit any expression of human freedom.

The totalitarian regimes discovered an effective means of political suppression in the integration of “human beings into the flow of history in such a way that they are so totally caught up in its ‘freedom,’ in its ‘free flow,’ that they can no longer obstruct it

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 120.

but instead become impulses for its acceleration.” The tactics employed by the totalitarian regimes to control the “free flow” of history were brutally suppressive. The regimes accomplished the total control of the flow of history “by means of coercive terror applied from outside and coercive ideological thinking unleashed from within.”<sup>33</sup> This ideological thinking is crucial to the totality of control.

It has been demonstrated that, for Arendt, the activities of the mind are all essential elements in free, political action. Thus, to control thought processes was yet another extension of total dominion. The ideological thinking was “a form of thinking that joins the current of history and becomes, as it were, an intrinsic part of its flow.” That is to say, this ideological thinking, or the control over thought processes, was absolutely necessary for the continuation of the “free flow” of history. Thinking, judging, and willing pose an immediate threat to the current of history that the regime has set in motion insofar as these activities of the mind have the potential to lead to political freedom (action). Thus, infiltrating not just the public world of society, but also the private world of individual minds, was requisite for total domination. That totalitarian regimes accomplished this is a remarkable phenomenon. Arendt says this control over thinking “is the decisive step on the path toward abolishing freedom in the real world.”<sup>34</sup>

Arendt considers the totalitarian mode of control to be an “ideological political movement.” In this classification she makes the space for a political reality that is not

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



characterized by political freedom, but rather is manifested in the purportedly free movement of history. All of these ideological movements remove the procreative power of human beings, asserting, “freedom is not localized in either human beings in their action and interaction or in the space that forms between men.” By removing the element of natality from human beings, men are subjected to the flow history. Thus, while history, at least theoretically, is moving freely through time, human beings are stripped of all notions of freedom. In these ideological movements human beings are not responsible for creating their own experiences of reality. Rather, history assigns human beings “to a process that unfolds behind the backs of those who act and does its work in secret, beyond the visible arena of public affairs.”<sup>35</sup> While Arendt calls these *political* movements, they lack all of the requisite elements of politics. The ideological political movements strip the public realm of freedom, equality and action and simultaneously strip the private realm of thought. In this totality of domination, *history* is free to create the world of experience.

Arendt’s understanding of totalitarianism is further illustrated in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann. What she discovered at the trial of Eichmann was that he was not a significant man. The psychiatrists who analyzed him found him to be normal—“More normal, at any rate than [the examiner was] after having examined him.”<sup>36</sup> How could a seemingly normal, healthy individual not know right from wrong? How could Adolf Eichmann, a man “medium-sized, slender, middle-aged, with receding hair, ill-fitting

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 25.

teeth, and nearsighted eyes,” be the executor of such despair? In answering these questions, Arendt investigates the nature of totalitarian control as it manifested in this particular man and his role in “history.”

The totalitarian ideology, which worked through an inner means of control, seized Eichmann. At a certain point, Eichmann recalls pondering, “Who was he to judge?” He accepted the ideology of National Socialism so completely that he willingly forfeited his role as judge in his own actions, thereby forging the process forward. He questioned, “Who was he to have [his] own thoughts in this matter?” In forgoing his ability to judge he subjected himself to the ideological political movement completely. By subjecting his thoughts and ability to judge to the ideology, what is right is what the ideology demands. What is morally correct is what is necessary for the “free flow of history” to continue. The ideology worked internally to control Eichmann’s basic human faculties of thinking and judging. Therefore, what appears to be a moral issue, in the case of Eichmann was “obviously no case of moral let alone legal insanity.”<sup>37</sup>

The same means of control and manipulation was utilized on the Jewish leadership. As the Nazi army expanded its domain of control, conquering more areas in Eastern Europe, they became dependent upon the local communities in the implementation of their final solution. In the areas they invaded, they demanded that the local Jewish communities form “Councils of Elders” who would act as liaisons between the Jews and the Nazis. These Councils of Elders were tasked with collecting information from fellow Jews, information that would be useful to the regime. “The

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 114, 26.

Jews registered, filled out innumerable forms, answered pages and pages of questionnaires regarding their property . . . then they assembled at the collection points and boarded the trains.”<sup>38</sup> All of this was organized by the Jewish Councils, albeit under severe threat from the Nazi invaders.

Arendt was vehemently criticized for her portrayal of the Jewish Councils. Although this segment of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* accounts for about twelve out of nearly three hundred pages, her analysis was troubling to many in the Jewish community, particularly in America where a “kind of excommunication seemed to have been imposed on the author.”<sup>39</sup> Arendt speaks of the ways in which the Jewish Councils of Elders complied with the commands of the Nazi regime. This notion of compliance was, for many, construed to be an articulation of blame, as if Arendt was blaming the victims for the crimes perpetrated against them. This is an insufficient reading of the text, however. The reason she addresses the role of the Jewish leaders was to further illustrate the depth and magnitude of totalitarian control. She writes, “To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story.” This is not to be understood as an indictment of the Jewish leaders. Rather, this is an indication of the extent to which the light that illuminates the public realm of the polis, the light of reality, had been extinguished. The great power of the totalitarian ideology was most poignantly seen in the fact that Jewish leaders performed the actions they did. Those actions were not, and could not be,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>39</sup> Amos Elon, “Introduction,” in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, vii.

*political* action born out of both equality and freedom. This darkest chapter “offers the most striking insight into the totality of moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society.”<sup>40</sup> Morality is the ability to judge right from wrong. However, morality is irrelevant in circumstances where thinking and judging are absent. The moral collapse of society was the internal destruction of the minds of individuals, which only reinforced the extensive levels of control taking place in the light of day. The totality of control and collapse extended beyond the regime and its men to the victims themselves, rendering thoughtful action all but lost in a public space where freedom and equality had no place.

In the darkest of the dark times, such as these, what is man to do? Arendt writes, “If politics brings disaster, and if one cannot do away with politics, then all that is left is despair.”<sup>41</sup> Despair comes in the totalitarian mode of things because human beings are subjected to politics. However, the hope for action remains and *true* politics, defined by freedom and equality, is always a possibility. Even in the darkest times, when the light seems to be cast out of the public realm completely, there is still hope because human beings are still human, with the potent capacity to remember and to manifest their humanness. Totalitarianism abolishes the space needed for action, the political space of freedom. It integrates the plurality of men into the singular entity of humanity. What it cannot do, however, is abolish natality. And insofar as human beings *always* have the

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<sup>40</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 117, 125.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

innate capacity for beginning, they have they consequent capacity to manifest a new space of freedom.<sup>42</sup>

In a world in which an ideological political movement has seized control of the hearts and minds of foes and allies alike, the individual who recognizes and insists upon the ability to think, judge, and act differently would still find it difficult to actually do so. To interrupt the flow of things takes daring. This is why, for Arendt, courage is the cardinal virtue of politics. It is “only by stepping out of our private existence” that “we make our way into the common public world that is our truly political space.” The Passover story aptly illustrates the place of courage in the transformation of experience and the establishment of a polis. The Israelites exemplify human beings who, filled with courage, “dared to cross the threshold of their houses.” Once they emerged from the concealment of the home, “they were among equals, who were capable of *seeing* and *hearing* and admiring one another’s *deeds*.”<sup>43</sup>

What Arendt makes clear is that how we understand freedom has significant impact on how, or even if, politics manifests in the world. Her notion of freedom can be traced back to Kant, who defines spontaneity as “the ability of every human being to initiate a sequence, to forge a new chain.” Despite Kant’s genius in understanding freedom of movement in this way, “it is only in our own time that we have come to realize the extraordinary political significance of a freedom that lies in our being able to begin anew.” The total domination of thought and action experienced in the twentieth

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<sup>42</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 466, 479; Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 113.

<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 122, 123, emphasis mine.

century has prompted people in this age to consider that freedom is far more than freedom of opinion or the freedom will. To understand freedom as the ability to create—to start new things—this opens the world to immeasurable possibilities. In summary,

This freedom of movement, then—whether as the freedom to depart and begin something anew and unheard-of or as the freedom to interact in speech with many others and experience the diversity that the world always is in its totality—most certainly was and is not the end purpose of politics, that is, something that can be achieved by political means. It is rather the substance and meaning of all things political.

This means, “politics and freedom are identical.” And, further, “wherever this kind of freedom does not exist, there is no political space in the truest sense.”<sup>44</sup>

In the “Epilogue” of *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt makes a very interesting statement about politics and the modern world. In this brief essay, she speaks of “the withering away of everything *between* us.” The space between us is the polis; therefore, the political realm “can also be described as the spread of the desert.” She claims that Nietzsche recognized this desert, but made a “decisive mistake in diagnosing it.” He understood the desert as a reflection of how one understands and relates to the world. This Nietzschean perspective has a negative effect on individuals because “we begin to think that there is something wrong with us if we cannot live under the conditions of desert life.” That is, we begin to think something is wrong with us if we find it difficult to live without the space of appearance, without freedom and equality. Modern

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 126, 129.

psychology and philosophy, then, try to help us adjust to these conditions, “taking away our only hope, namely that we, who are not of the desert though we live in it, are able to transform it into a human world.”<sup>45</sup> For Arendt, the desert conditions must not be transformed. To wit, it is the very conditions of the desert that beckon the emergence of the individual human being. The desert world, the space wherein there is but one lonely inhabitant, cannot be fully human because it does not have the basic human condition of plurality. It is only in emerging from the desert that the identity of the self is revealed and true experience is manifest.

The power of the desert is considerable: the activities of the mind that occur in the solitude of individual existence behoove the actions that create the political realm. Thus, “Precisely because we suffer under desert conditions we are still human and still intact; the danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it.” That is, if one feels at home in the realm of singular existence, there is no impetus to brave the public realm of plurality, unpredictability, and uncertainty. Indeed, “Only those who can endure the passion of living under desert conditions can be trusted to summon up in themselves the courage that lies at the root of action, of becoming an active being.”<sup>46</sup>

In modernity, as everything between us is withering away, the desert conditions create a barren public space. The gradual transformation of public space has created a “political” realm that is defined by inequality and that is controlled by historical

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 201, 202.

processes. The Passover narrative is powerful in these dark times; it reminds us that suffering under these conditions must not determine how we exist in the world. All human beings can be reminded of their potential greatness by the example of the Israelites who, because they had the courage to act, created an altogether new political reality. Thus, the possibility for the re-emergence of the space of freedom never goes out completely. Because human beings have the potent capacity for action, that is, to start new beginnings, to manifest our inherent freedom, the promise of politics remains ever possible.



## CONCLUSION: WHAT OF JUSTICE?

Freedom . . . is not a reward for sufferings endured and one does not accept justice as if it were crumbs from the table of the rich.  
~Hannah Arendt, "A Way toward the Reconciliation of Peoples"

Scholars often turn to *The Human Condition* as Arendt's clearest political statement. However, *The Human Condition* was but the first part of a protracted discourse about human beings and the world in which we live. Just a year after its publication, Arendt would come to describe *The Human Condition* as "a kind of prolegomena" to a more comprehensive work of political theory she was planning to write. She believed her discussion of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition* was important, as "the central political activity is action." Further, she found it necessary "to separate action conceptually from other human activities with which it is usually confounded, such as labor and work."<sup>1</sup> As Arendt investigated the specific character of action, she came to understand that action was itself grounded in the activities of the mind. Thus, a complete understanding of political action required a thorough investigation into the *vita contemplativa*.

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt set out to provide a meticulous analysis of the three mental faculties: thinking, willing, and judging. As the activities of the mind *necessarily* precede action, the three-part treatise was intended to be Arendt's final statement on politics. In it, she planned a careful investigation of the *other* activities, the activities that go on in the private realm of the mind. These activities, while private,

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, "Correspondence with the Rockefeller Foundation," The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.), Image 013872.

are no less important for politics than the activity of action, described in *The Human Condition*. In explaining why she was writing *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt says, “The immediate impulse came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.” At the trial, Arendt was confronted by “a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives.” It was her coverage of the trial that led to Arendt’s conclusion that Eichmann was not evil, but, rather, thoughtless. “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.”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Arendt was interested in discovering the connection between the activities of the mind and action, or politics itself.

As noted in Chapter II, Arendt did not complete *The Life of the Mind*. Perhaps this is fitting, as finalities and definitions were something to which Arendt was so opposed. Yet, the fact that “Judging” was not written has important consequences: Arendt’s political theory is incomplete. In seeking to bring Arendt’s political theory to a conclusion, some scholars, logically, turn to the essays and lectures where Arendt addresses the topic of judging. The final four essays in *Responsibility and Judgment* are concerned with judging and the edited work, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, brings together the main texts that speak to the topic. Arendt’s essays and lectures on judgment, however, are not consistent. Seyla Benhabib rightly comments that “Arendt’s incomplete reflections on judgment . . . are puzzling.” As one reads Arendt’s

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 3, 4.

works on the topic, it is evident that she is wrestling with the concept, trying to understand it herself. On one thing, however, Arendt is clear: “with some justification,” judging can be considered “the most political of man’s mental abilities.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, a statement on judging would have contributed greatly to understanding what Arendt was saying about politics.

Scholars employ a variety of different means to elucidate Arendt’s political theory. I have adopted a phenomenological method, specifically utilizing the narrative for its phenomenological value. In 1958, Hannah Arendt gave a speech honoring the life and works of Karl Jaspers. She said, “In the works of a great writer we can almost always find a consistent metaphor peculiar to him alone in which his whole work seems to come to a focus.”<sup>4</sup> I believe the Passover narrative has this focusing capacity for the work of Hannah Arendt. In this dissertation, that story has been used as a metaphorical framework for understanding what it is that Arendt is trying to say about the world and about politics. Tracing Arendt’s political ideas alongside the Passover narrative was useful for two reasons. First, Arendt was a brilliant thinker and prolific writer, not to mention, she saved a great majority of her lectures notes, essays, and correspondences, all of which are available through the Library of Congress. With so much to draw from, the Passover story served to highlight the significant elements of Arendt’s political theory, thereby focusing her work. At the same time, as Arendt’s theory came more into focus, the various sources of influence became more apparent. Of course, the well-

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 188.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 75.

known and oft-discussed influences, such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Kant, and Nietzsche, were easily noted. In addition, though, the ways in which her Jewish experiences informed the development of her political ideas also came into focus. Granted, the Jewish aspects of her work may be more subtle, and they are certainly more nuanced; but, this does not make them any less relevant. Of particular importance is the fact that Arendt's Jewish experiences do not simply inform the biographical details of her life, but also the substantive work of her political theory. Further, as the goal of the project is to understand what Arendt is doing in her political theory, the Jewish aspects help to address some of the perplexities derived from the incomplete nature of Arendt's theory.

As noted throughout, Arendt criticizes the Western political tradition for its failure to account for action. Drawing upon the phenomenological method of her teacher, Jaspers, Arendt defines action as the words and deeds that pass *between* human beings and that create the space of appearance. Thus, her political work is an investigation into both action and appearance. Arendt's mode of investigation has clear roots in the Western tradition; however, the way in which she conceives of political action markedly differentiates her political thought from that tradition. And it is in that distinction that many of the Jewish aspects of her work appear. The preceding chapters illuminate an understanding of Arendt's political theory that admits the presence of these Jewish ideas and concepts. In my opinion, it is not sufficient simply to acknowledge that Arendt's experiences as a Jew are what ultimately caused her to turn her attention from philosophy to politics. Rather, it is necessary to consider the

possibility that her Jewish experiences also significantly contribute to her political formulations.

After setting the phenomenological foundation of the role of narrative in Chapter I, Chapter II turned to an analysis of the activities of the mind. Beginning with thinking, Arendt finds that the Western tradition is preoccupied with the intellect and knowledge. The Platonic attainment of knowledge is not something Arendt is ultimately concerned with. She is far more Socratic in her method of inquiry. Her insistence upon continued questioning not only draws her nearer to Socrates than Plato, it also points to the possibility of Jewish influence. The Talmudic tradition is one that uses the authoritative texts and commentaries to continuously interpret correct action according to the revelation. That is, in seeking to understand how to act in the world, writers in the Talmudic tradition are constantly refining, interpreting, and commenting on God's revealed directives, which are recorded in the Hebrew Bible. For Arendt, thinking is the activity wherein human beings consider the world as they experience it. That is, it is activity of the mind that considers, interprets, and comments upon that which action creates. Due to the unpredictable and limitless nature of action, then, thinking is never complete. The endless nature of action makes thinking an endless task.

While it was acknowledged that accounting for Jewish experiential influences in Arendt's concept of thinking is a difficult task, her understanding of the will more explicitly admits to Jewish influence. She claims the experiences of the will are specifically "Hebrew in origin" insofar as "we are dealing with experiences that men

have not only with themselves, but also *inside* themselves.”<sup>5</sup> She refers to the will as the small space of freedom that exists *inside* every human being. The will does not cause volition in order to attain freedom; rather it operates in complete freedom itself. The Passover narrative demonstrates this freedom of will. God, through Moses, instructed each Israelite family to slaughter a lamb and place the blood of the lamb on the doorpost; yet, every Israelite family had to *choose* to act in accordance with that command. Arendt asserts that there can be no coercion in action; using the faculty of the will, one *freely chooses* to act.

Finally, it was noted in Chapter II that there is a connection to be made between Arendt’s notion of judgment and Jewish mysticism. The school of Jewish mysticism understands judgment as the “imposition of limits.”<sup>6</sup> The imposition of limits can only occur *outside* of the individual, as actions reveal the identity of the individual to others. In order for the human being to really answer the question, “Who am I?” the self-constructed identity must be challenged by the uncertainty and unpredictability of the world of appearances. For Arendt, judging involves the relationship between the subjective self, created in the mind (the person *I think* I am), and the objective self that is revealed in the space of appearance via action (the person *I appear* to be).

As demonstrated in the discussion of the activities of the mind, the Jewish aspects of Arendt’s political theory come primarily from two Jewish lineages: the mystical Judaism of the Kabbalists and the rabbinic Judaism of Orthodox Jews.

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<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 63, emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 263.

Repeatedly, the analysis herein has turned to the Jewish mystical tradition. Arendt's close friendship with Gershom Scholem and her close reading of his work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, seems to have had a profound impact on the way in which Arendt understands the world. Specifically, the mystical concepts of the *Tsimtsum* and the *Reshima* bear close proximity to Arendt's notions of creation and natality. As such, these ideas were discussed in Chapters III and IV, as they contribute to understanding Arendt's notions of action and appearance. Ultimately, the promise of politics is maintained by the ability to remember that, as human beings, we have the capacity to create new political realities.

Arendt's Jewishness can also be traced to the orthodox Jewish tradition. The different formulations of the creation myth were expounded in Chapter V. Most important for understanding the experiential influence of Arendt's Jewishness was the idea that in the West, the dominant understanding of the creation myth contributed to the exile of action from the public realm. The power of the creation myth, as Arendt understands it, draws upon the Hebraic conception of truth and revelation. For Arendt, "truth" is not a definitive notion of transcendent principles, but rather, truth is that which is experienced in objective reality. As such, truth, like action, is dynamic and ever-changing. Thinking and inquiring about truth, or, for Arendt, experiential reality, are essential to being human. The "only gain one might legitimately expect from" the activities of the mind "is not a result, such as a definition, or the attainment of a goal, such as a theory, but rather the slow, plodding discovery and, perhaps, the mapping

survey of the region which some incident had completely illuminated for a fleeting moment.”<sup>7</sup>

The Passover story is one such incident. The power of the Passover narrative, like all authentic narratives, is that it reveals something about the conditions of being human. For Arendt, the Passover narrative teaches the difference between freedom and slavery and awakens our hearts and minds to the potential of human action. The Passover narrative is specific to the Jewish people, and, as such, it is particularly relevant to Hannah Arendt. However, the power of the Passover narrative lies in the fact that it is an *authentic narrative*. That is, regardless of the fact that the Passover narrative is directed toward a particular group, the value of the narrative supersedes those boundaries. Insofar as the narrative reveals the human capacity for self-revelation through political action, it has a universal applicability.

In Chapter IV, the relationship between action, rooted in the activities of the mind, and freedom, as the meaning of politics, was articulated. Arendt has stringent criteria for the activities of thinking, willing, judging, and action. All of these activities must, by necessity, be performed in complete freedom. Because political action is comprised of the activities of the mind and the activity of action that are all necessarily *free*, the meaning of politics, then, is freedom. Arendt does not think that politics exists in order to liberate human beings; rather, politics is the un-concealment of the innate freedom of human beings.

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<sup>7</sup> Arendt, “Pursuit of Happiness,” 1, 2.



In Arendt's musings on freedom, we get some insights into the nature of justice. So often in her works, Arendt speaks of freedom and justice together. For example, there are two "concepts on which all politics are based: freedom and justice." Also, to become "unpolitical" is to separate oneself "from the cause of freedom and justice." And, "The only political ideals an oppressed people can have are freedom and justice." In statements such as these, one is left to ponder whether Arendt sees freedom and justice as the same thing. However, it seems apparent in other places that the two ideas are, indeed, different. More specifically, freedom is the meaning of politics and justice the purpose of politics. Stated another way, the reason we experience freedom is to experience justice. This conclusion regarding justice is drawn from a particularly revealing passage in an article written for *Aufbau* in 1945. In this article, Arendt discusses the responsibility of the Jewish people to determine how they will establish their national homeland. She writes, "Now we have our chance to help ourselves politically . . . This is only just, and *it is the sole justice that politics offers.*"<sup>8</sup> Justice, then, is something that comes out of the experience of freedom.

It is clear that, for Arendt, justice does not bear the mark of the Western tradition. That is, justice is not simply right conduct. Perhaps drawing a closer affinity to the Jewish tradition, Arendt's notion of justice seems to imply that what is just is that which maintains the world of appearances, that is, the realm of action that is created and maintained by freedom. Indeed, this is precisely what the end of the Passover narrative indicates. The free act of the Israelites creates a new political reality; however,

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<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 259, 153, 241, 238, emphasis mine.

in order to maintain that space, free action must continue. First, they must choose to flee the land. Once in the wilderness, they must choose to act in a way that maintains equality and freedom. The law was sent to assist Moses and the community in this task of political maintenance.

The polis is overwhelmingly dependent, then, upon the free choice to act. That is to say, the polis is heavily dependent upon the activities of the mind as all action is necessarily rooted in thinking, willing and judging. In distancing herself from the Western tradition, and specifically objecting to any universal principles, including moral principles, Arendt seemingly leaves us with a conception of justice that lacks any content. Does Arendt really intend to posit that so long as human beings are *thoughtful* their actions will naturally maintain the political space that is both free and equal? Without a religiously revealed moral code or a Kantian categorical imperative, what is it that guides human behavior? Does Arendt truly believe that human beings are so alike in the basic human condition that thinking, without any reference point for how to think, or what to think, is sufficient for eliciting ethically responsible behavior?

On this issue of justice, the Jewish tradition is once again instructive. In Book III of Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*, he states that justice applies to "every good action."<sup>9</sup> It is clear from this that an understanding of what is "good" is necessary. For Maimonides the process of moral perfection is reserved for the few, talented, and committed. For Arendt, though, it seems to be the case that the ability to determine what is good is implicit in all human beings. This is why thinking is supremely important,

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<sup>9</sup> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 631.

and why thoughtlessness is such a heavy charge. What is good is what the faculty of thinking determines. What is right is what the faculty of judgment determines. Justice comes when the will moves one to act in ways that thinking and judging have determined to be best (that is, these actions are both good and right). Without the activities of the mind, not only is the manifestation of our inherent freedom impossible, but also the possibility for justice is abolished.

Herein lies the problem. We are left to assume that anything we do or say, so long as it is done freely and thoughtfully, is just. Has Arendt been defeated by the very conditions of her project? In seeking to ground politics in the activities of the mind, has she ultimately uprooted politics altogether? There is a line of thought that allows for the possibility that this is not the case. It is not merely *thinking* and the consequent *free* actions that create justice. Rather, it is the revelation of human-ness implicit in the world of appearances that prompts just actions. Let me explain.

In order to demonstrate this line of thought, I return, once again, to *The Jewish Writings*. In “A Way Toward the Reconciliation of Peoples,” Arendt explains that the crisis of World War II was a crisis of *humanity*; it challenged nations to act, to enter into the public space inhabited by suppressive tyrants such as Hitler and Stalin. It challenged nations to act as viable agents of the human condition, complete with the ability to change the experience of reality by interrupting the historical process as it was unfolding. All nations, including the disparate Jewish nation, had to emerge in the space of appearance and, together, as equals, reclaim and re-determine political reality. This equality of nations fighting side by side *with* one another was the only “real criterion for

the justice of this war.” The justice of the war was “the degree to which other nations [were] prepared to fight their, our, and *humanity’s* battle shoulder to shoulder with Jews.” The justice of the war could be found only in the global polis created by the actions of many nations working as equals to reassert and preserve the fundamental freedom of human beings. This justice is why Arendt was vehemently adamant on her stance regarding the formation of the Jewish army: “We do not want promises that our sufferings will be ‘avenged,’ we want to fight; we do not want mercy, but justice.” Justice is *only* possible in the polis, and that requires that all people in the public space move about freely, together, as equals. For, “Freedom . . . is not a reward for sufferings endured and one does not accept justice as if it were crumbs from the table of the rich.”<sup>10</sup>

In action that is ontologically rooted in the activities of the mind, the individual human being appears in the plurality of human existence as a unique, differentiated entity. Paradoxically, however, free thinking, willing, judging, and acting also allows the individual to emerge into the space of appearance as a human being *exactly like* all other human beings. The space of appearance, or politics, then, facilitates both individuated differentiation *and* a collective identity. For Arendt, the fact that free action is unpredictable and limitless facilitates a reliance on human plurality. “Man’s inability to rely upon himself . . . is the price human beings pay for freedom.” That is to say, in a space where “everybody has the same capacity to act,” and yet, where it is impossible to “[foretell] the consequences of an act,” the community of equals becomes

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<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 263, emphasis mine.

interdependent. Further, the fact that there is plurality allows “for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all.”<sup>11</sup> Arendt’s understanding of the conditions of being human revealed within her psyche a deep, convicted love of the world. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes, “What united [Arendt’s] thought was the love she had come to understand as the one that unites self and others—*Amor Mundi*.”<sup>12</sup> Vehemently rejecting the philosophical impulse of *contemptus mundi* (contempt of the world), Arendt even proposed to call her treatise on the *vita activa*, *Amor Mundi*, love of the world. At the most extensive level, this is the love that comes as a response to the revelation that we are all human beings. That recognition, for Arendt, came from understanding and accepting the world as it is. We must learn to love the world, complete with its conditions, complete with the suffering we experience in it, because as human beings we are reliant upon it for our very existence. In this way, Hannah Arendt’s political theory is grounded in a love of the world and the recognition of the human-ness in the self and in others.

Arendt’s deep love of the world allows us to remember her Jewishness, once again. Judaism is a religion of law. As discussed in Chapter IV, when the Israelites left Egypt, after they had created a new political space, they were given a law. The purpose of the law was to maintain the polis. Throughout the Torah, God continues to issue decrees to the Hebrew people. Thus, there are many legal codes in Judaism, all based on the commandments that have been delivered by God, which are called “mitzvot.”

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<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 244.

<sup>12</sup> Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 327.

While there are mitzvot that speak to dietary laws and mitzvot that determine conduct during Shabbat, there is also a large portion of Jewish law that commands love. In the Mishnah (Avot 1:2) it is written, “Shimon the Righteous was one of the last from the Great Assembly. He used to say: Upon three things the world stands: upon the Torah, upon worship, and upon acts of kindness.”<sup>13</sup> The acts of kindness (g’milut chasidim) are considered mitzvot. The Talmud emphasizes these acts of kindness, saying that they are superior to other acts of charity because anyone, regardless of wealth, age, or other limitations, can perform these types of mitzvot.<sup>14</sup> Acts of kindness have become so honored in Judaism that the word “mitzvah” has come to mean any good deed.

Taking Maimonides’ notion of justice (that which applies to every good action) and the Rabbinic notion of commandment (an act of loving-kindness), one can see that justice is action in accordance with this loving-kindness. Of course, in Judaism, there is a source that guides all action, God and the revealed laws. Arendt’s notion of justice might appear to be Kantian, based in a categorical imperative. However, insofar as the notion of an imperative strips the inherent quality of freedom, I believe Arendt’s notion of justice is more Jewish in character. Leviticus 19:18 tells us, “Love your fellow as yourself.”<sup>15</sup> There is a great Talmudic story that highlights the significance of this commandment. A man came to Rabbi Hillel and asked if he could teach him the Torah

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<sup>13</sup> William Berkson, *Pirke Avot* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 185.

<sup>14</sup> Talmud Sukkah, 49b. Accessed online at <http://juchre.org/talmud/sukkah/sukkah.htm>. Charity, or donating to those in need, on the other hand, requires a certain amount of wealth and is, therefore, limited to those with some measure of abundance.

<sup>15</sup> Leviticus, 19:18, JPS.

in the time that he could stand on one foot. Rabbi Hillel replied: "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary. Go and study it."<sup>16</sup> The foundation of the Jewish legal code, then, is love. The foundation of Arendt's political theory may be, perhaps, this same love. In loving one another, human beings are free to appear in the world.

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<sup>16</sup> Talmud Shabbat, 31a. Accessed online at <http://juchre.org/talmud/shabbath/shabbath2.htm#31a>.

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