

# Opening Ceremony of the Hannah Arendt-Zentrum in Oldenburg

The following speech was held by Jerome Kohn as a speaker by special invitation.

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to participate in the inauguration of the Hannah Arendt Research Center at the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg. I want to thank the University for its generous hospitality, and in particular my respected colleague and cherished friend, Antonia Grunenberg, the Director of this splendid Center. Speaking on behalf of the Hannah Arendt Center at the New School University in New York, I want to state at the outset that we in America look forward to many years of fruitful cooperation with Professor Grunenberg and the Oldenburg Center on a variety of projects. These include but are not limited to the exchange of students and faculty, joint lectures and conferences, and the publication of materials from the vast Arendt archive that is currently being digitized at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Perhaps most important of all is that both Centers recognize the presence of Hannah Arendt's thought in the world today. The meaning of that *presence* may differ in our two countries: to me it seems that in Germany it is more a matter of making political theory practical, whereas in America it is rather a matter of counteracting the debasement of political speech and the parallel waning of public spirit. It is clear, I believe, that each Center can learn a great deal from the other. In both cases there is recognized a felt need to think *with* Arendt, even or especially when not in full agreement with her, and without necessarily accepting her own conclusions. Neither

Jerome Kohn

## HANNAH ARENDT AND THE POLITICAL

Center seeks to "institutionalize" or "dogmatize" Arendt's thought (which would be the last thing she would have wanted) but to adapt according to our different needs the *principles* of her thinking to our own present circumstances.

In turning to my topic, "Hannah Arendt and the Political," let me say that it is only in the present dimension of time – that which lies between past and future, between what has already happened and what is yet to come – that the priority of the political dimension of human existence fully emerges. For Arendt the political is by no means the be-all and end-all of human experience, but apart from political activity, apart, that is, from action and judgment, all experience that properly can be called human is thrown into jeopardy. Arendt was not born with this insight, but discovered the meaning and the importance of the political by witnessing its negation in the terrible wars and horrific events that have marked the twentieth century. Today this century is approaching its calendric conclusion. If we heed the Russian poet Akhmatova, however, when she speaks of "the real twentieth century" we will ask ourselves: What, if anything, is ending? Arendt might counsel us to seek the answer to that question by asking a different question: What, if anything, is beginning?

### I.

It would be difficult to reflect on Hannah Arendt without also considering the question of human freedom. It is not only the coherence of the *idea* of a free being

**Jerome Kohn** is adjunct professor of philosophy at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Art and Science, a member of the Committee on Liberal Studies at The New School's Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, and Successor Trustee of the Hannah Arendt Literary Trust. In 1990 Kohn began publication of Arendt's *Nachlass*, the vast repository of writings left in various stages of completion at her death. He published Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954* (New York, 1994) and co-edited *Hannah Arendt, Twenty Years Later* (Cambridge/Mass., 1996). His latest writing "Freedom: The Priority of the Political," from which in part the present address is drawn, will be published in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (forthcoming from Cambridge University Press, 2000).

that would be called into question, however, but the past and the present *status* of such a being and, in a sense, the past *in* the present. For the historical events that Arendt relates, ancient and modern, and the stories she tells of real and sometimes fictional or legendary persons, all have present relevance; they are examples intended to *illuminate* the present – resonant fragments, something to think about, and sometimes warnings.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as Arendt writes about the past she does so “monumentally,” that is, not as one whose chief concern is to establish the continuity of history but in order “to awaken the dead,” as her friend Walter Benjamin put it, by revealing *action*. Her engagement is not to destroy but to *dismantle* the past, thereby stripping “progress” of its necessity and seeing history’s victors naked. She is convinced that “the thread of tradition,” through which the past was transmitted from generation to generation for centuries, is “broken” now and its “authority” gone for good.<sup>2</sup> But unlike the stories traditionally told by monumental historians, hers are not meant to be imitated in the sense of being repeated; she does not inspire or exhort us to specific deeds, any more than she attempts to determine specific policies or proffer solutions to specific problems. She never tries directly to influence what lies ahead, for cautionary tales, reflection, and deliberation notwithstanding, she knows that at any moment and toward no safe harbor spontaneous and unpredictable action steers

1 It has been well said that Arendt’s “use of exemplarity was not ... to expect a modern jackass to run like an ancient horse, but to caution modern horses not to act like jackasses.” K. M. McClure, “The Odor of Judgment” in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, eds. C. Calhoun and J. McGowan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 54.

2 H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 212; hereafter *LMT*.

the course of the world. Put this way the question of human freedom presents a challenge to traditional ways of considering it, for it would be an error to infer that Arendt simply assumes freedom as an inherent and essential property of human nature. On the contrary, in her view human nature is unknowable by human beings, and if it were known it would only perplex or baffle freedom as she conceives it. If, moreover, the gift of freedom is imparted through birth, on which Arendt insists,<sup>3</sup> for her that does not imply that it can be imputed to humans as natural beings.<sup>4</sup> Man is not born free, as Rousseau believed, but born *for freedom*. A first preliminary response to Arendt’s challenge might be, therefore, that freedom, as the great and identifying gift of human existence, is manifest in the *activities* that distinguish human from other forms of life.

With this emphasis on activities, freedom may be said to guide Arendt’s thought as surely as Vergil guided Dante’s progression through hell and purgatory. But Dante no longer needed Vergil when he entered paradise,<sup>5</sup> for there the pilgrim, his own activity suspended, came to rest in the *possession* of the vision of

3 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973) 479; hereafter *OT*. Cf. “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal ‘natural’ ruin is ... the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born” (*The Human Condition* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958] 247; hereafter *HC*).

4 At *HC* 9-11 Arendt distinguishes between “the human condition” and “human nature.” At 175-177 of the same work she elaborates differences between human and natural beings. In general, nature is associated with necessity and therefore opposed to freedom.

5 Literally of course Vergil, a pagan, was not allowed to enter paradise, but that is another matter.

eternal love, an all-knowing and all-powerful love determining the movement of the universe and the fate of every individual within it.<sup>6</sup> The times Dante lived in were harsh, but the particular events through which Arendt lived some six hundred years later differed in their impenetrable darkness. That darkness precluded spiritual reconciliation, preventing all but the most evanescent imagination, much less the possession, of “an absolute standard of justice” indwelling in a transcendent god. In the twentieth century it was under no definition of *wickedness* – not even Hitler’s or Stalin’s – that human beings were banished to the man-made hells of Auschwitz and the Gulag (*OT* 446-47).<sup>7</sup> More than anything else it was due to this vision-defying darkness that freedom became the touchstone of Arendt’s own formidable power of judgment. Thus a second preliminary response to the challenge posed by the question of human freedom might be that today judgment is not a divine but a human act, and that freedom is the test of whatever comes before it, no matter how strange, uncompromising, and controversial its exercise turns out to be.

The question of the status of a human being endowed with the gift of freedom became crucial for Arendt when, as a young, classically educated German Jew, she collided head-on with a totalitarian movement in the early 1930s. In that collision she experienced a shock of reality: the reality of an organized mass of mankind, masquerading as a political party,<sup>8</sup> that was intent on marring both

6 Cf. H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 122-23; hereafter *LMW*.

7 Cf. “The Image of Hell” and “Reply to Eric Voegelin” in H. Arendt, *Essays In Understanding*, ed. J. Kohn (Harcourt Brace, 1994) 198-200 and 404 respectively; hereafter *EU*.

8 See *OT* 250-66 for the distinction between parties and movements.

the social milieu into which she was born and the private, reflective realm in which she grew to maturity. That shock was severe, and at first less connected with political insight than with plain outrage at the reactions, stemming from dissatisfaction and resentment, of many of her compatriots with whom she believed she shared that realm, its culture and its spirit.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately the German language, *die Muttersprache*, Arendt's principal and enduring medium of reflection, became the sole memorial of what then was vanishing from the world. But for her the German language was not the everyday language that even earlier than the 1930's had lapsed into "mere talk" (*Gerede*) of "the they" (*das Man*). This debased language, far from preserving German civilization, publicized and trivialized it, and was itself integral to the encroaching darkness. Due to what was for her the undeniable givenness of being Jewish, Arendt lacked the opportunity open to others, some of whom she knew intimately, of withdrawing from "this common everyday world" and from a "public realm" permeated with its language. Henceforth Arendt would look upon such world-withdrawal to a "land of thought" (*LMT* 87), a purely philosophic, thought-filled "solitude," with a degree of disillusion and misgiving.<sup>10</sup> There can be little doubt that the experience of the loss of what was most familiar to her lay close to the root of what later became central to her understanding of the political: her sharp, firm, and unwavering distinction between the private and the public realms of human existence. In other words, the significance of what was lost at that time

9 "What Remains? The Language Remains" in *EU* 10-12.

10 H. Arendt, *Men In Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) viii-ix. She speaks from her own experience of the "uncanny precision" of Heidegger's analyses of "mere talk" and "the they" in *Being and Time*.

should not be underestimated, nor the fact forgotten that that loss was not entirely negative, at least in its consequences for Arendt's political thought.

The priority that the political came to have for Arendt was profoundly connected to World War II, the devastation of her homeland, and her own experienced uprootedness during eighteen years of statelessness. Which is to say that that priority probably cannot be comprehended apart from Arendt's own experience of a form of *world alienation*, the alienation she later found generally diffused throughout the world since the onset of the modern age, and which, especially in the multifarious processes of expropriation, was "so crucial to the formation of the lonely mass man and so dangerous in the formation of the worldless mentality of modern ideological movements" (*HC* 251-57). Her experience, moreover, never ceased to inform her thought, although it did so in different ways. On the one hand, she vigorously denied sharing the spiritual homesickness that for her typified not only German Idealism but also Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom, in other ways, were sources of inspiration to her (*LMW* 157-58). But on the other hand, the faculty of judgment, with which she ultimately hoped to resolve the most fundamental problems of action arising from her political thought – the judgment she had long since practiced but only turned to examine and analyze at the end of her life – depended on a degree of separation, on being situated at a certain remove from the world and its events.<sup>11</sup> Arendt was not "by nature"

11 In this same vein Dana Villa has argued convincingly that some of the most positive aspects of Arendt's political thought are not to be identified "with the absence of alienation." D. R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 203.

an actor, and considered the ability to look at political action "from the outside" an "advantage" in trying to understand it.<sup>12</sup> For her the most and perhaps the only reliable guardians of the facts and events of this world are not those who enact them but *spectators*, poets to be sure, but also those who report them, fit them into stories, and judge them.

In the years following her flight from Germany, her sojourn in France, and her emigration to America, Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the major work in which she analyzed the hidden elements of modern European history that "crystallized" in totalitarianism. There she stressed the fact that those elements would not themselves disappear with the disappearance of totalitarianism (*OT* 460), which is of some importance today, since it raises the question whether, politically speaking, the notion of a post-modern age or a post-modern world has any positive significance at all (cf. *HC* 6). The totalitarian regimes she dealt with, Hitler's Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin, were for her "an authentic, albeit all-destructive new form of government" (*HC* 216), novel and criminal, bent on demonstrating in fact rather than argument that human freedom is altogether illusory. She judged their destruction of freedom to be not only criminal but an evil without precedent in human history, not because totalitarianism was crueler than previous tyrannies (which it may have been), but because its nihilism, the *possibility* and *necessity* of its will to annihilate every aspect of human freedom, private as well as public, was unlimited. This previously undreamed of,

12 From extempore remarks made by Arendt in Toronto, November 1972, in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. M.A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) 306.

seemingly paradoxical fusion of possibility with necessity, though contradicting common sense was realized *in the world* through terror.

When fully developed, totalitarian terror chose its victims “completely at random” (OT 432), thereby rendering individual guilt and innocence utterly superfluous. Arendt does not judge such terror “subjectively,” as if she could feel what those who endured it felt, but likens it and its essential institutions, death and slave-labor camps, to “a band of iron” pressing human beings “so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic proportions.” Individuality, the question of who one is (HC 11), is unanswerable when the space opened by “the boundaries and channels of communication,” separating individuals in thought and connecting them in speech, no longer exists; individuality is a meaningless concept when anyone can be replaced by everyone. Totalitarianism’s total denial of freedom is achieved when the conditions and the meaning of action, of individuals joining together to manifest principles such as “love of equality ... or distinction or excellence”<sup>13</sup> and even the “fear-guided movements and suspicion-ridden actions” whose rationale remains all too apparent in the “desert” of ordinary tyrannies, are eliminated (OT 465-66).

The dynamism of Arendt’s account, without peer in this respect, is a function of its disclosure of both the development of the elements and the *newness* of totalitarianism. The force of her condemnation of the “overpowering reality” of the “radical evil” of full-fledged terror, its enslavement of human masses to the higher-than-human goals set by ideologically imagined, supposedly immutable laws of Nature and History, is likewise a function of its newness (OT 459). And it

appears that at least in *The Origins* Arendt’s treatment of traditional constitutional structures, along with the theoretical underpinnings of different kinds of government, including tyranny, all of which totalitarianism deranged, is deliberately curtailed in order to avoid relativizing the phenomenon itself, to highlight its newness and the attraction it held for lonely, worldless masses of mankind. These masses, along with equally misled members of both the mob and the elite (cf. OT 326-40), found that the inexorable movement of totalitarianism, while denying freedom in the real world, held out the *illusion* of freedom in a *fictitious* world: freedom for the unfree, one might say, ending in terror for all.

One result of her magisterial study of totalitarianism was to recognize the capacity for freedom as the source of human *plurality*, itself the condition through which politics is possible and without which it is not (HC 7). But even when it was not political, freedom still was the resource that enabled historical groups of human beings, such as Jews, to remain more or less intact and persevere, and human individuals, in one way or another and in the most varied circumstances, to affirm and be grateful for their finite lives. What is as new as totalitarianism itself, however, is the recognition that the human capacity for freedom may make life supremely worth living. This is the transparent meaning of the conclusion of Arendt’s study of the revolutions that mark modernity with their attempts, which may never yet have proved successful, to constitute and establish freedom in the world. There she cites words fashioned by Sophocles at the close of his life, words evoking “in pure precision” the original sense of freedom: that when it is politically experienced – experienced as *action* – freedom can “endow life with splendor.”<sup>14</sup>

This is only one but perhaps the most startling way in which the realm of politics, as conceived by Arendt, takes precedence over all other realms of human activity. A third response, still preliminary, to the challenge of human freedom might be that in freedom men and women appear as a plurality of unique beings, irreducible to repeatable concretions of qualities, but when deprived of freedom, though still alive, they differ in only one significant respect from the multiplicities of other animal species: loneliness, the despair of lost desire, of “not belonging to the world at all” (OT 475); that to conceive freedom as an *inalienable* human right is, from a political point of view, to misconceive it; and that speech and deed actualize freedom in the world *without* reifying it.

## II.

The human activities that concern Arendt – in active life: laboring, working, and acting; in mental life: thinking, willing, and judging – all bear different relations to freedom. Willing, for instance, “as the spring of action” is “the power of *spontaneously* beginning a series of successive things or states.” But willing itself is unable – its discovery by St. Paul was an experience of the will’s “impotence” or *inability* – to grasp *how* it does that and to what effect (LMW 6-7 [quoting Kant], 64-73). Arendt’s story of the will’s career in Western thought leads to what she calls “the abyss of freedom;” however much it may individuate us, however closely it is associated with the condition of natality in which action is “ontologically rooted,” willing in itself only *dooms* human beings to freedom (LMW 217, HC 247). In the realm of human affairs, of historical events that would not *come to pass* except for human beings, the importance of action may seem obvious. In *On Revolution* Arendt speaks of action’s “elementary grammar ... and its more complicated syntax, whose rules determine the rise and fall of human power.” Its grammar is “that action is

13 H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968) 152; hereafter BPF.

14 H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963) 285; hereafter OR.

the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men," and according to its syntax "power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related" (*OR* 173, 175). These remarks indicate how men acting "in concert" generate power and direct the course of the world, and also suggest how the loci of power shift, but it remains to see how Arendt conceives the human capacity to act and how that capacity at once *clears* a public space, the realm of the political, and establishes its priority.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt undertook to rethink the hierarchy of modes of activity that originally characterized the active lives of human beings.<sup>15</sup> For her such beings *labor*, *work*, and are capable of *action* in ways that distinguish them from other animal species. Some animals do, in a sense, labor and even work – they hunt and forage to keep alive, they procreate, and they build nests and hives and dams – but the meaning of the hierarchical ordering of human activity is that within it the specific ways men labor and work become intelligible in their relation to the highest activity, that of action, an activity unique to humans.<sup>16</sup> This is not meant teleologically (certainly no "final cause" or explanation by "design" is implied), but in the sense that of these activities *qua* activities action alone depends on a *plurality* of beings, each of whom is

15 She did this among much else. Her overall purpose was to reconsider "the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears" (*HC* 5).

16 Arendt speaks of *animal laborans* and *homo faber*, but only *human* beings are capable of action. Thus action is the principal artery of what may be called her humanism. Moreover, while at least some animal species are *social* and every one of them "lives in a world of its own" (*LMT* 20), none are *political*.

unique (*HC* 7). No one, not even Achilles, can act alone, and a crucial theme in *The Human Condition* is the consequent boundlessness of action, its inherent unpredictability, and the strict limitation of the actor's own knowledge of what he is doing (*HC* 233, 239). Action to be free must be free from "motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other" (*HC* 205). If we knew what we were doing when we act we would not be free but enacting or unfolding a plan, as if the course of the *world* were set like that of a *planet* plotted on a celestial map, itself a human artifact and an emblem of the "victory" of *homo faber*. To put it succinctly, "[t]he calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality" (*HC* 220), and this "is the price [human beings] pay for plurality ... for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all" (*HC* 244).

What must be emphasized here is that it is only in action, in *acting*, that the uniqueness of the actor *appears* in the world, and that this "distinct identity" does not appear to the actor himself; it is not he but rather those to whom he appears who recognize it, and those others are also equally unique beings (*HC*, 193).<sup>17</sup> If such recognition smacks of tautology, it is not empty. For action, which to Arendt signifies deed and

17 That this uniqueness (in Greek Arendt calls it the daimon, and what is in question is *eudaimonia*, its "well-being") "appears and is visible only to others" is the "misery ... of mortals," the *curse* of action, resulting from the fundamental "human condition of plurality, ... the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (*HC* 7).

speech, either a deed and its account, a deed accounted for, or speech-as-deed (*HC* 25-26), insofar as it is *free* is by definition *undetermined*.<sup>18</sup> What is recognized, therefore, is nothing morphological, neither a face or a body nor anything that a mirror might reflect. Perhaps it could be likened to a temporally extended, fully articulate *gesture*, one that cannot be copied or repeated, although it may be imitated *poetically* and also, when recollected as an example, relived as a principle of new action. What is recognized is a passing image of "the most elementary and authentic understanding of human freedom," of a *beginning inserted in the continuum of time* (*HC* 225, 19). It is an individual image of spontaneous initiation, of the *actualization*, that is, of the uniqueness and *origin* that every human being is.

Free action transcends the necessity of labor and the utility of work, and transforms those activities. Thus human labor is organized in a variety of ways, frequently unjust and hardly ever equal, so that some men, wily or lucky enough to escape the fate of Sisyphus, are relieved of the *dolor* of ceaseless, endless labor and thereby released from serving the necessity of the biological processes of their own lives. Human work, the goal or purpose of which always lies outside the activity itself, not only complements labor by making tools that are useful for easing it and rendering it more productive, but with them constructs an *artificial* world, an elaborate and changing cultural artifact as structurally complex and intricately contrived as the web of

18 Speech-as-deed is explicitly distinguished from conveying "information or communication," and no doubt derives from Homer's *epea pteroenta*, the "winged words" that may or may not occur in deliberations. To say such speech is "persuasive" is to say too little, but it certainly is the precursor of persuasion as the medium of authentically *political* decisions.

relationships that sensibly and legally binds those who live together within it. Such a non-natural, artificial world is a condition for leading a free or fully human life, be it of honor or shame, or even of honor enhanced by shame (the classic example of which is King Oedipus); in every case it is a life that does not merely reply but actively responds to the exigencies of the world, that which lies between and is common to those who share it. In Greek experience that life is typically viewed as heroic and tragic, in the literal sense an extraordinary life. As Arendt understands it, that life cannot be fully achieved by laborers or workers or even artists, by no one who strives to attain predetermined or self-determined ends, whatever they may be, to which their own activity is a means. Within the relative stability or balance of the human artifice a space for free action may be opened, a space relating men who desire to act, thereby revealing who they uniquely are as beings in and of the world. Which is to say that it is a space for the sole activity of active life which, non-reflective and existing in "sheer actuality," is undertaken for its own sake and comprehended as its own end.<sup>19</sup>

Arendt calls this space *public*, a common space of disclosure not only for those who act or actively move within it but for everyone to whom it appears. The remarkable claim she makes has already been alluded to: that apart from this "space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt" (HC 208).

<sup>19</sup> One hopes that it is no longer necessary to add that Arendt draws upon ancient Greek texts, poetic and historical as well as philosophical, because the distinctions that were crucial to her are clearer there, in their distance from us, and not because she wished to "revive" Athens. It was not *startings-over* but *new beginnings* that concerned her.

The "reality" of the world is its "being common," its *being between*, literally its *interest* (*inter esse*) for all those who, through their common sense, hold it in common. It is common sense, "the sixth and highest sense," which by relating the "five strictly individual senses" and their data that otherwise would be "merely felt as irritations of our nerves or resistance sensations of our bodies," fits what appears to it "into the common world." Just as in her discussion of action the identity of the self, alternatively called the *person*, does not appear to itself, so now the condition of its "reality" is also plurality, *inter homines esse*, living "politically" with others. Again it is common sense or *sensus communis*, "a sense common to all, i.e. of a faculty of judgment," a community and communicative sense, that by judging them relates the appearances of all human beings, whether they have actualized their uniqueness in action or not, to one another.<sup>20</sup> *Human reality is appearance*, then, in the twofold, complementary sense of the appearances that form the *common world*, the world into which those who desire to act will act, and of the "presence" to each

<sup>20</sup> H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 70-72; the quotation is from Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 40, and it is his emphasis. Arendt's interpretation of Kant's aesthetic reflective judgment does not, as has been alleged, represent a change in her understanding of *action*, but resolves a fundamental question about the possibility of *politics*. Already in the *Iliad* Thersites, no heroic actor (but in a sense the first anti-hero), is a *person* in a common world, and in the *Odyssey* there are women, Penelope and Nausicaa, who are *persons*. But strictly speaking the Homeric world contains only elements of political experience, and what ancient Greek statesmen learned from the "educator of all Hellas" seems to have concerned action – the possibility of men acting heroically – almost exclusively (HC 197).

other of the *persons* to whom that world is visible and audible, and who may judge it. Actions are the appearances that are *ekphanestaton*, most shining forth, most *appearing*, and they are the original source of that reality (HC 274, 208-209, 283, 50-52, 199, 225-26). Yet at a crucial moment in the life of the *polis*, Athens' greatest statesman, Pericles, said that Athenians "love beauty within the limits of political judgment, and ... philosophize without the barbarian vice of effeminacy" (BPF 213-14), thereby differentiating *political* activity from both sheer thought and sheer "creativity," even in action.

To the pagan Greeks the glory generated in the space containing free action was godlike, but its *immortality* depended on human memory. One reason the art or skill of politics – of *politeuesthai*, of doing politics, of caring for and preserving the *polis* as the situs of memory – was invented in Greece was to "remedy" the *futility* of action,<sup>21</sup> which in this context is tantamount to the futility of human life. For no actor can foretell where his beginning will lead, since he acts with and into a plurality of other free actors, but also, *being its own end*, having its end *within* itself ("nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self"<sup>22</sup>), the glory of action in itself leaves nothing behind in the world, is nothing but the image of the *actor acting* it reveals to others. Arendt empha-

<sup>21</sup> Arendt is not concerned with supposed "historical causes" of the rise of the *polis*, but with "what the Greeks themselves [she refers to Pericles' Funeral Oration] thought of it," in other words with its *meaning*, for them and for us (HC 197). Her concern with the meaning rather than the "causes" of the *polis* differentiates her not only from virtually all modern commentators, but also from Aristotle.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt's translation of Dante's statement *Nihil ... agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet* (HC 175). See her comment on the difficulty of translating it (HC 208 n.41).

tically *contrasts* the “immortality” of everlasting fame, clearly dependent on the “endurance in time” of a plurality of generations, with the *solitary* experience of eternity, an experience that is perhaps only enjoyed when “the glory of the world is surely over,” in the words of Thomas Browne. Insofar as “to cease to be among men’ (inter homines esse desinere)” is “to die,” the solitude, the world-withdrawal in which eternity is experienced philosophically or religiously, is “a kind of death” (HC 8, 20).<sup>23</sup>

What for Arendt is perhaps most exemplary about the Greeks, and at the same time has the greatest relevance for the present, is that it was not just the memory of past actions but the possibility of new deeds, the *novelty* latent in *newcomers*, that made the laws that bound and secured the *polis*, conditioning political life in general and constraining action in particular, meaningful and bearable (HC 194-98). It is by virtue of “the new beginning inherent in birth,” the fact that unique human beings are born and *appear* in the world, that “natality” is a far more *politically* relevant category than “mortality” (HC 9); nor is it beside the point that for the Greeks natality likewise characterized the “deathless but not birthless” lives of the Olympian gods (LMT 131). Here it is essential to add that, as Arendt understands it, the public, shared space of disclosure was not pre-designed for freedom but first cleared and then kept open by free action, thus not only inextricably linking politics with freedom but rendering the former *dependent* on the latter (HC 198-200). It is not that Arendt means or ever says that freedom is the only concern of politics. On the contrary, she states explicitly that *freedom* “only seldom – in times of crisis or revolution – becomes the direct aim of political action.” Her point is that if men

<sup>23</sup> What is meant is not the termination of life, but that this experience neither belongs to or is part of *active* life in the world.

were *not* free initiators, if they never had lived together in the manner of speech and action, experiencing not only its joys but also its disasters, there would be no reason for them to organize themselves politically, no reason for them to concern themselves with matters of “justice, or power, or equality” (BPF 146).

The foregoing remarks have been intended as no more than a sketch of Arendt’s understanding of the *human* world, which is specifically opposed to the *inhuman* non-world of totalitarianism: that the origin of that world lies in man’s active life (*vita activa*); that the activities of active life become intelligible in the culminating experience of free action; that such freedom is constitutive of *human* reality which is, in a sense different from that of “other living or inanimate things,” “explicitly” (HC 199) a realm of *appearances*; and that political activity is the ordering and organization of those appearances for the sake of the

<sup>24</sup> Arendt’s concern with forms of government, in *On Revolution* and elsewhere, stems not from the recognition of human beings as persons but from personhood’s historically diverse political embodiments.

plurality of persons to whom they appear.<sup>24</sup> No attempt has been made to expound the richness of Arendt’s conception of action or the complexities of its relation to moral activity, especially when viewed

in the light of her chapters on keeping promises and forgiving trespasses, both of which also depend on human plurality (HC 236-247).<sup>25</sup> My endeavor today, at these opening ceremonies, has been solely to trace the relation of human action to political freedom, which Hannah Arendt states almost too compactly when she writes: “... action and politics, among all the capabilities of human life, are the only things of which we could not even conceive without at least assuming that freedom exists ... The *raison d’être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action” (BPF 146).

<sup>25</sup> Even Kant, whose notion of moral self-determination, by definition independent of anyone other than oneself and liberated even from one’s own natural inclinations, is not at all what Arendt means by free *action*, is fully aware of human plurality. Plurality in fact lies close to the heart of his moral philosophy: you must treat others as you would have them treat you, for your claim to be an end is grounded in the *idea of humanity*; you are an end only if every human being is an end, and not a means to anyone else’s (including your own) end.