Politics between philosophy and polemics : political thinking and thoughtful politics in the writing of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt

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Politics between Philosophy and Polemics
Wout Cornelissen

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Political Thinking and Thoughtful Politics in the Writing of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt

Wout Cornelissen

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Politics between Philosophy and Polemics:
Political Thinking and Thoughtful Politics in the Writing of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt

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This project was started in September 2005. Initially, it was intended as an attempt to compare and evaluate the different strategies – polemical, philosophical, and performative – for a legitimization of liberal democracy that could or could not be reconstructed on the basis of the work of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt, with specific reference to their respective interpretations of the work of Plato. Gradually, the focus of the project shifted to the more fundamental question of the nature of the political as such, and, finally, to what is perhaps the most fundamental question a political philosopher could raise: the question of the conditions of political thinking itself.

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INTRODUCTION

Callicles: 'You're in nice time, Socrates. For a war or battle, as the saying goes.'
Socrates: 'Does that mean we're too late? Have we missed the feast, as they say?'[1]
Plato

Not all of us are interested in politics, and none of us is interested in politics all the time. However, to the extent that we are interested in it, that is to say, in passing the right political judgments and making the right political decisions, in doing what is, politically speaking, the right thing to do, we need to have some kind of acquaintance with politics. At least implicitly, we need to have some kind of answer to the question: what is "political"? For instance, we need to be able to distinguish between political and non-political "things". On the basis of this distinction, we can decide whether what is *presented* to us as "political" or what is *said* to belong to the sphere of "politics" (e.g. by the government or the powers that be) is "really" political, is "rightly" on the political agenda. The converse is also true: we need to be able to decide whether what is implicitly *ignored* or what is explicitly *denied* to be "political" and is instead labeled as, for instance, "merely" "technical", or "personal", ought, to the contrary, be characterized as "political". To be sure, the question what "counts" as political is by no means merely *theoretical*, for we also need to possess some kind of knowledge of what it means to *act* politically, what is involved in actually exercising political judgment and in taking political decisions in concrete situations. In other words, we need to be able to *orient* ourselves within "the political" as a specific realm of human interaction.

It is by no means evident that we should turn to philosophy if we wish to learn something about politics in the sense just described. Other disciplines, such as journalism, historiography, literature, and other arts such as theatre, film, and photography, may seem to serve as a much better guide, insofar as they acquaint us with and attune us to political reality in its concreteness and particularity. More often than not, political philosophy, being a "branch" of philosophy, considers itself as an attempt to justify in an intellectually rigorous way certain (moral) standards, criteria, principles, or ideals in light of which actual political practices (institutions, forms of legislation, policies, etc.) are to be evaluated, that is, to be adopted or rejected.[2] Typically, a political philosopher claims to provide a rationally justified answer to the question of which policies or forms of legislation

[1] Plato, *Gorgias*, 447a, opening sentences of this dialogue.
[2] See e.g. Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 2: "Political philosophy is a *normative* discipline, meaning that it tries to establish norms (rules or ideal standards).", Bird, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 4: "…our political arrangements are subject to rational assessment and choice. This assumption lies behind the effort to distinguish political practices and forms of political action that can be justified and those that cannot. That effort, more than anything else, defines the general project of political philosophy."; Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 3, 7.

a state or government may legitimately adopt, or to the question of the conditions under which we are even permitted to speak of legitimate power or rule, with reference to a certain standard, principle, or ideal which should in itself also be capable of rational justification.

Usually, this conception of political philosophy is called "normative" political philosophy – as opposed to what is termed "conceptual" political philosophy – but in fact this name is not entirely felicitous. In so far as political *practice* itself is inherently normative (as such, all human actions, including political ones, are capable of being approved or disapproved of, of being called good or bad, right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate, desirable or undesirable, etc.), political philosophy – as *theory* of that practice – can never completely avoid becoming to some extent evaluative, even if it considers itself to be "merely" conceptual.[3] It is impossible to separate the allegedly conceptual question "what is politics?" from the allegedly normative question "what is *good* politics?", or "what is political *par excellence*?" Hence, in fact it is not the normative character *as such* which constitutes the specific difference between this conception of political philosophy and other possible conceptions. Rather, I submit, the specific character of the self-conception of political philosophy just introduced lies in a combination of the following two elements: (i) the positing of certain *normative propositions* (ranging from more abstract or theoretical standards or principles to more concrete or practical proposals or judgments); (ii) the validity of which it derives exclusively from their (being capable of) being *rationally justified*.

According to this conception of political philosophy, Plato is taken to argue in favor of the "ideal state" presented in his *Republic*, whereas Aristotle, his archetypical adversary, is understood to have decided in favor of the "mixed regime" as presented in his *Politics*. We read these philosophical texts "as if" their authors were actually in a position to *decide* which proposal is to be adopted and which is not, or what course of action is "allowed" and what is "not allowed",[4] which brings them close to what actual politicians and legislators are doing. Yet, at the same time, we understand them as positioning themselves at a certain distance from actual politics, for their "proposals" lay claim to validity *exclusively* on the basis of their being *rationally justified* according to specific universal epistemological (or "methodological") criteria of validity which are themselves understood as being non-political, or at least as not being political in the strict sense of the term.[5]

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[3] Lane, 'Constraint, Theory, and Exemplar', 133: "We are reflective as well as political animals, which makes us (among other things) reflectively political; the two practices cannot be segregated or insulated from each other. The study of what political agents do becomes normative when pursued in light of what they should do."

[4] Waldron, 'What Would Plato Allow?', who turns against this approach.

[5] Lane, 'Constraint, Theory, and Exemplar', 131-132: "Insofar as it is 'normative', political theory is a branch of moral theory considered in its widest sense: it involves the advancing and testing of ought-claims, both prescriptions for actions and claims about how concepts ought to be understood. Insofar as it is 'theory', it positions itself at some remove from actual practice, though the nature of

This tension can be traced back to the opposition traditionally derived from Plato, especially from his *Gorgias*, in which a *privileged* (because "rational" and truthful) philosophy on the one hand is played off against a *depreciated* (because "irrational" and untruthful) politics on the other. To be more specific, the Socratic search for *true* knowledge is contrasted with the sophists' competition [*agōn*] for political *success* or *victory*. Accordingly, "dialectical" conversation or discussion is contrasted with the "rhetoric" of polemical speech, and "being right" is contrasted with "being proved right". Plato allows his main character, Socrates, to present himself as Athens' only "true politician" because he,[6] in contradistinction to Callicles and other sophists, rationally examines his opinions [*doxai*] according to the criterion of truth / untruth rather than success / failure: the truth, and not "the majority" or "the strong", should "decide". Only the philosopher is capable of reaching true knowledge [*epistēmē*], and only a life devoted to a search for the truth is worth living. Yet, at the same time, Socrates clearly draws on the vocabulary of actual politics, as when he depicts the struggle for truth within the soul as an "*agōn*".[7]

Political philosophy thus understood usually takes for granted what politics typically consists of, viz.: lawmaking by the government; advocating proposals before or within a people's assembly; the solution of social problems by institutional reform, etc. Put otherwise, by focusing on the question of what "politics" is to *do*, or what counts as legitimate "outcomes" of politics (which decisions the government is to take, which laws the state is to adopt), the answer to the question of what "politics" *is*, is already presupposed, i.e., it is not first treated as a *question*. Little is explicitly *articulated* about the nature of politics as a peculiar form of human interaction, nor about its difference from other forms of human action – one of these being the practice of philosophizing itself.

Indeed, more often than not, philosophy tends to disregard the fact that its own activity of theorizing, testing propositions and thus acquiring knowledge, is itself also a practice. As a consequence, political philosophy tends to interpret politics, its object of investigation, in the image of its own activity – i.e. the rational justification of cognitive claims – and it tends to disregard the respects in which it is precisely *at odds* with the practice of politics. Thereby, certain features or aspects of the practice of politics tend to disappear from view, among them being the contingent temporal and spatial conditions under which political "things" (i.e., the words, deeds, and events which make up political reality) occur, as well as the relations of power within which, with which, and against which human beings operate.[8]

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that remove and relation to such practice is a matter of divergence among diverse theorists. Yet insofar as it is 'political', it must be related to the political as a domain of practical predicament."

[6] Plato, *Gorgias*, 521d.

[7] Ibid., 526e.

[8] See Tully, 'Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy'; Geuss, 'Political Judgment in Its Historical Context'.

Political philosophy does not seem to offer much, then, if we wish to find an explicitly articulated answer to the question "what is political?" Yet, what we have described so far is by no means the only possible self-conception of the intellectual pursuit named "political philosophy". In fact, what we have presented so far is primarily a specific way of *reading* political-philosophical texts, which are indeed often read "as if" the authors offer a proposal to *do* something; but they may as well be read "as if" they aim to offer a certain *understanding*, or to make sense of something, such as the phenomenon we call "politics" itself.[9] To stick to the example of Plato's *Republic*: instead of reading it "as if" Plato presents a blueprint for a perfectly just society which is to be realized in practice, we may read it as an attempt to understand the problem of justice and its political realization.

Moreover, we can go one step further, since what the reading of texts as if they present a practical "proposal" or "ideal" and reading them as if they offer a specific theoretical understanding (of a problem, or a phenomenon) have in common, is that they remain focused on the explicit *propositions* that are contained in a text, the truth value and / or normative validity of which we may examine. By contrast, we may say that there are texts which can be read not so much as to offer a certain "result" or a "last word" (either in the form of a practical proposal or a theoretical proposition), but rather so as to stage and *set the example* for a certain *way* of thinking or for a certain "thoughtful" attitude or approach to politics, which we may or may not start to practice for and by ourselves. Accordingly, we may take into account that Plato's *Republic* is written in the form of a dialogue (instead of considering the dialogue as a mere left-over of a "primitive" stage of philosophy when it had not yet developed into its "mature" form of "Aristotelian" rational justification) and discover that Socrates, Plato's main interlocutor, eventually lets go of the "constitutional" proposal of the rule of philosopher-kings and instead claims that the ideal state serves as the model for the individual soul. What is ultimately at stake becomes clear in the concluding myth of the dialogue: learning "to distinguish the good life from the bad and always to make the best choice possible in every situation".[10] Similarly, Socrates' famous words in Plato's *Gorgias* that he is the only "true politician" may be read not so much as the *prescription* of an alternative way of life (viz. the only "true" way of life with its one and only "method" of philosophical "dialectics"), but rather as an *invitation* to us, as readers of this text, to investigate for and by ourselves whether what *presents* itself as the best way of life (or what *pretends* to be the best way of life – indeed, *even* if that

[9] See Waldron, 'What Would Plato Allow?', 143: "we run a great danger if we think of theory – even *evaluative* theory – as primarily political advocacy or as primarily the laying out of a social or a constitutional "wish-list." We should think of it instead, I want to say, literally as political *philosophy* – a deepening of our insight into the realm of the political and of our understanding of what is involved in making judgments and decision in that realm.". For example, Waldron himself speaks of "the circumstances of politics" as "the felt need among the members of a certain group for a common framework or decision or course of action on some matter, even in the face of disagreement about what that framework, decision or action should be" (Waldron, *Law and Disagreement*, 102). See also Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason*.

[10] Plato, *Republic*, 618c.

way of life is said to consist in the application of the philosophical "method" of "dialectics") *is* indeed the best way of life.[11]

Furthermore, insofar as political philosophy (and political thinking in general) is expressed in speech or writing, it becomes itself, as action or as work, part of political reality; it becomes part of its own object of examination. As soon as we realize that texts, pieces of writing, are "frozen" practices, we may even go so far as to suggest that, just as in the case of "real" practices, we can take our cue not only from their explicit propositions (i.e., from what is *said* or claimed to be intended), but by taking our cue from their performance (i.e., from what is in a certain sense *not* said), from what kind of *activity* they actually enact. When we apply this manner of reading, we will learn from these philosophical texts not only "thanks to" themselves, that is, thanks to what they explicitly assert, propose, or claim to intend, but "despite" themselves, that is, thanks to what they do not say but nevertheless *do*. To put this in another way, political philosophies can be understood and judged not only in terms of the validity of their *propositions* (the politics they *claim* to support, that is, descriptive and normative propositions *about* politics that are either verifiable and justifiable or not), but also in terms of their *performance* (the politics they *enact* and thereby implicitly further). In other words, we may find an answer to our initial question "what is political?" not only in what political philosophers explicitly say *about* politics (if indeed they do so at all), but also and perhaps even primarily by the politics that they actually *enact*.

We may receive an initial indication of the performative meaning of political-philosophical texts by taking our cue from their *actual* "influence" or "success" within political reality. As Raymond Geuss has claimed: "In the long run, … when a theory is widely believed and has come to inform the way large groups of people act, deeply hidden structural features of it can suddenly have a tremendous political impact."[12] These hidden features may exist in the assumptions that people who are going to *act* upon the theory are bound to make, or in forms of language that are *used* rather than mentioned, such as certain analogies and metaphors or a polemical rather than an argumentative way of reasoning. Hence, it may well be possible that a political philosophy which explicitly offers and understands itself as offering a certain proposal for a "good" or even the only "right" form of politics (for instance, one based on individual freedom and responsibility) has in fact achieved the opposite (Marx being the classical example). Of course, the actual impact of a certain text depends not only on the "deeply hidden structural features" of the writing itself, but also on the contingent historical circumstances and specific institutional context within which it is received.[13] Accordingly, we can distinguish at least three different ways in which political philosophical texts may be read: (i) according to their *propositional* contents (their "proposal", "theory", or "argument"); (ii) according to their *performative* meaning (their "action" or "practice", whether intended or not); (iii)

[11] Cf. Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 22.
[12] Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 35.
[13] Cf. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 36.

according to their *historical* impact (their actual "influence", "success", or "legacy" within political reality).

By confronting the first two readings with each other, we are able to reconstruct the understanding of politics or the specific orientation towards politics that is presupposed and furthered by the "performance" of a political philosophy which otherwise considers its own pursuit as being merely "propositional". On this basis, we will be able to assess the extent to which the political philosophy in question does actually enable us to make sense of politics and to develop a sense for politics, that is to say, whether it teaches to adequately assess our day-to-day political reality that is constituted by actions and events and of aptly *attuning* ourselves to that reality. As John Dunn has argued: "Few factors have more causal force in politics (do more to determine what in fact occurs) than how well we understand what we are doing. … If we understood politics better we would certainly be less surprised by its outcomes, as well as surprised much less often."[14] In other words, an adequate understanding of politics seems to be a necessary prerequisite for the formation of sound political judgment, for taking the right political decisions, and for choosing the right courses of action, *hic et nunc*.

Given the political condition to which all political philosophy (and political thinking in general) is subject, we may ask which specific demands we may set for political philosophy, should it wish to do justice both to the peculiar nature and demands of politics (as its object of examination) *and* to the peculiar nature and demands of thinking itself (as its manner of enquiry). The question of what is involved in acting politically thus leads us back to the question of what is involved in the activity of thinking.

This leads to the following questions: (i) how can we philosophize (think) about politics (action) in such a way; (ii) that it takes into account the specific characteristics of both politics (action) and philosophy (thinking); (iii) and that it prepares us to exercise what may be called "thoughtful politics", that is, forming sound political judgments, taking adequate political decisions, choosing the right courses of political action?

In answering these questions I argue as follows. In the first place, a political philosophy should possess / develop a realistic / adequate understanding not only of politics (action) but also of philosophy (thinking), for which it is at least required to offer some degree of critical distance from what is *generally* called "political" (e.g. state / government legislation) and what is *generally* called "philosophical" (e.g. the rational justification of propositions). In the second place, a political philosophy should possess / develop some degree of theoretical self-consciousness about the implications of its necessarily being a practice (a) for the validity or status of its propositions / theory and (b) for its possible impact within political reality / actual politics. In the third place, the forms of "thoughtful"

[14] Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason*, x. See also: idem, 92-93: "What might make it worthwhile to understand politics is the effect of doing so on our political judgment, and hence on our political actions. The less we understand what is really going on, the less likely are we to act, individually or collectively, in a well-advised way."

political decision-making and judgment suggested or embodied by a political philosophy should meet these first two demands.

These questions are refined and answered by offering a reading of the writings of Karl Popper (1902-1994), Leo Strauss (1899-1973), and Hannah Arendt (1906-1973). All three may to some extent be considered outsiders within political philosophy, in the sense that, in confrontation with the events and ideologies of their time, they *explicitly* address the question of the relation between politics (action) and philosophy (thought), albeit in very different ways and varying degrees. To be more precise, all three attempt to "save" a kind of what I call "thoughtful politics", which may be said to be constituted by proper cooperation between thought and action, while at the same time doing justice to their specific difference and peculiarity.

Moreover, all three authors attempt to rethink the relation between philosophy and politics (or between thought and action) by relating to the conceptualization of the relation between the philosophical life [*bios theōrētikos*] and the political life [*bios politikos*] as it assumed shape in Plato's dialogues (again, especially in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*). In the work of Popper, Strauss, and Arendt, the names of Plato, Socrates, the sophists (especially Callicles and Thrasymachus) and statesmen (such as Pericles) function as placeholders for specific positions that may be occupied within this framework. Popper aligns the philosopher "Socrates" and the statesman "Pericles" together as friends of the "open society" against the pseudo-philosopher "Plato" as its enemy. By contrast, Strauss draws a sharp distinction between the philosopher "Socrates" and the statesman "Pericles", while defending "Plato" (albeit a different Plato than Popper's) against both of them. Finally, Arendt, while at first sight choosing a position similar to Popper's (defending "Socratic" thinking and "Periclean" acting against "Platonic" making), in fact aims to think outside the underlying "Platonic" framework as such.

Furthermore, the thought of both Popper and Strauss, in contradistinction to Arendt's, acquired a certain historical influence in the guise of political movements, ideologies, or schools that base themselves on their thought,[15] which makes us attentive to the performative meaning of their political thinking. In Popper's case, the substitution of political Islamism for communism as the "enemy" of the open society, makes us aware of the force of the friend-enemy logic prominent in his writing. In the case of Strauss, him being named the "godfather of the neo-cons" during the war against Iraq causes us to attend to the question of the extent to which his political philosophy implies a rehabilitation of

[15] In the case of Popper, especially his theory of the "open society" has been utilized by liberal political parties and activists in Europe to provide an ideological foundation. In the case of Strauss, especially the neoconservative movement is, in part, inspired by his thought. Perhaps more importantly, he deliberately founded his own "school" of political philosophy. Although Arendt's reflections on the Eichmann case and Little Rock have generated a lot of discussion and controversy in public debate, it is striking that there does not seem to be such a thing as an "Arendtian" political movement or ideology.

the merits of war as instrument of "regime change" and of the use of "noble lies" by "the few" against "the many". The thought (or at least the writing) of both authors has been acted on in recent history, and this historical "influence" or "success" provides us with a glimpse into the deeply hidden structural features of their thought.

Finally, the choice of three rather than two authors (or even one) reduces the risk that we in turn, as readers, lapse from the outset into an approach that focuses exclusively on the philosophical and / or polemical weighing of the validity of *propositions* for and / or against concerning a common issue and according to a common set of criteria that are self-evidently presupposed and perhaps even imposed on their texts from the "outside", a weighing that is supposed to "result" in our own positing, in turn, of a rationally justified and / or polemically defended "last word" or "bottom line". In the secondary literature, these authors have thus far been compared as pairs: Popper and Strauss,[16] and Strauss and Arendt.[17] The advantage of the choice of *three* authors is that it increases the number of perspectives on the political and thus stages a *plural* and *perspectival* in-between.[18]

As indicated, in order to trace the political within the philosophical (and the other way round), it is necessary to study the writings of our authors not only in terms of what they say *thanks to* themselves (their propositions, what they explicitly *argue* for), but also, and more fundamentally, in terms of what they say *despite* themselves (their performance, what they *do*). We may learn from them not only from what they say (what they propose, or what they intend), but also from what they do (the principles inherent in their action).

Popper sets the scene, as we demonstrate what the problem of political thinking is by providing a reading of his work. By offering a specific reading of his

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[16] For a comparison of Popper and Strauss, see e.g.: Lane, 'Plato, Popper, Strauss, and Utopianism: Open Secrets?'; Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom: On 'Cold War Liberalism''.

[17] For a comparison of Strauss and Arendt, see e.g. Beiner, 'Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: The Uncommenced Dialogue'; Villa, 'The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates'; Harald Bluhm, 'Variationen des Höhlengleichnisses. Kritik und Restitution politischer Philosophie bei Hannah Arendt und Leo Strauss'; Widmaier, *Fin de la philosophie politique? Hannah Arendt contre Leo Strauss*. The volume edited by Kielmansegg et. al., *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss* contains essays devoted to either Arendt or Strauss. Except for the chapter by Kateb, 'The Questionable Influence of Arendt (and Strauss)' (ibid., 29-43), it hardly offers any explicit comparison of the two.

[18] The only (other) scholarly piece of work that has ever been published in which the same three thinkers (Popper, Strauss, Arendt) are being compared is: Holmes, 'Aristippus in and out of Athens'. Holmes uses a single criterion to measure them: allegedly, they devote insufficient consideration to the fundamental distinction between the classical Greek *polis* on the one hand, which, being a "total" state, knew of no distinction between state and society, and our modern society on the other, which, by contrast, is essentially characterized by "functional differentiation". As a result, he not only misses the fundamental differences among them within their interpretations of "the Greeks" – Holmes asserts, for instance, that Arendt aims for a return to Plato (!) – but, more fundamentally, his approach assumes that these philosophers should in the first place be read as if their primary goal lies in presenting some decisive standpoint or proposition (answer), instead of articulating and understanding a theoretical problem (question).

work we can show that political thought, insofar as it is expressed, also becomes a form of political *practice*; a practice that can be at odds with the *theory* of politics that is formulated in the very same work. It will be argued, however, that Popper does not explicitly display any awareness of this performative condition of philosophy, nor does he offer a strategy to deal with it. Strauss, by contrast, explicitly shows awareness of the implications of this condition, but it will be argued that the remedy he offers amounts to the unrealistic fantasy of *escaping* from that very condition. Finally, Arendt is shown to be also aware of the predicament, but it will be argued that her thinking offers strategies to deal with this condition, which do not amount to an escape from it.

The first two chapters of this dissertation are devoted to a reading of the writing of Karl Popper, especially his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). Popper conceives of political philosophy as the application of epistemological or methodological principles, or the "rational" methods of science to political practice: "piecemeal social engineering". According to him, this approach to politics serves the freedom and responsibility of individual citizens. As we will argue, however, his methodological assumptions cause his conception of "rationality" to be too narrow to account for the normative validity of political proposals and decisions (Chapter 1). Subsequently, our attention shifts from the level of the inner consistency of the *propositions* or argument of his texts (i.e., what he explicitly accounts for) to the level of *performance*. We will argue that Popper fails to offer a "theoretical self-consciousness" (Geuss) of the political conditions to which all thinking about politics is necessarily subject. It is demonstrated that his texts do not escape from this condition. In the first place, his texts rest upon the force of the *analogy* with science – a use of language which seems to overstep the limits of scientific language he himself explicitly sets. In the second place, his texts are written in accordance with a *polemical* friend-enemy logic that is in flat contradiction with the rules of rational discussion he himself determines (Chapter 2).

Strauss, in contradistinction to Popper, acknowledges that philosophy (or thinking), insofar as it is expressed in speech or writing, is subject to the conditions of politics: one may say that *scribere est agere* ("writing is acting"). This political condition of philosophy (or thinking) is diagnosed as problematic: according to Strauss, philosophy and politics are naturally *at odds* with each other. Although it is often stated that Strauss's thought in the last instance is meant to serve the philosophical way of life, I argue that he also offers a specific theory or understanding of the political and a specific form of guidance for actual political decisions and judgments [*phronèsis*]. He presents this as an alternative to both modern "doctrinairism" and ultramodern "existentialism" (Chapter 3). However, the strategies Strauss develops to deal with the conflictual relation between politics and philosophy in order that we may philosophize (or think) independently and, as an *indirect* consequence, make better political judgments and take better political decisions, implies that he neglects the peculiarity of this relation. It will be demonstrated that his theory reflects the supposedly sovereign position of

philosophy over politics. A reconstruction is given of his account and practice of the *politics* of philosophy, the “art of writing”, which consists of a “Platonic” cooperation between philosophical dialectics (Socrates) and polemical rhetoric (Thrasymachus), the latter of which is supposed to be entirely “ministerial” to the former. Yet, the *performance* of this politics of philosophy attests to the problematic presupposition that the contingent (political) conditions of thinking can be completely known and controlled from the supposedly sovereign position of the philosopher (Chapter 4).

In the case of Arendt, this deconstructive reading of her work – the confrontation of its propositions with its performance – has already received quite a lot of attention in the secondary literature. In her case too, it can be demonstrated that the performative meaning of her writings is at some points at odds with the explicitly formulated intention. Yet we will argue that this reading tends to disregard the fact that it is not her intention to offer a “proposal” in the guise of a “solution” or “ideal” – her alleged and, according to many, deficient *advocacy* of “Greek” political life – for this would place her within the traditional philosophical framework which she precisely and *explicitly* rejects. Instead, space is given to what she asserts is her original intention: to *understand* the specific conditions of political action and decision-making. More specifically, we will present her conception of politics as one of “public freedom”, by reconstructing the way she attempts to understand the question of the legitimacy of political order (power, authority) that has “traditionally” been understood as a *philosophical* (theoretical) question, as an “originally” *political* (practical) question instead (Chapter 5). By sticking to Arendt’s explicitly formulated wish not to move within the traditional framework, we subsequently allow ourselves to present alternative ways of thinking that *are* capable of doing justice to politics. For, in contrast not only to Platonic contemplation and contemporary “thoughtlessness”, and – in contradistinction to what is sometimes asserted – *also* in contrast to Socratic dialectics, Arendt presents two different ways of thinking that may be considered suitable ways to think about politics and make us more attentive to political reality, in order that we may make better judgments and take better decisions. These ways of thinking are “representative” thinking – which, in contradistinction to Strauss’s conception of *phronèsis*, aims for *perspectival* judgment – and “poetic” thinking – which amounts to a re-conciliation with and *praise* of the world by making adequate use of the metaphorical and analogical power of language (Chapter 6).

PART I

THE SPELL OF POPPER:

POLITICS BETWEEN SCIENCE AND POLEMICS

CHAPTER 1

Popper's Proposal for Piecemeal Social Engineering

Instead of posing as prophets we must become the makers of our fate.
We must learn to do things as well as we can, and to look out for our mistakes.
And when we have dropped the idea that the history of power will be our judge,
when we have given up worrying whether or not history will justify us,
then one day perhaps we may succeed in getting power under control.
In this way we may even justify history, in our turn.
It badly needs a justification.[19]
Karl Popper

Where ends are agreed, the only questions left are those of means,
and these are not political but technical, that is to say, capable of being settled
by experts or machines, like arguments between engineers or doctors. That is why those
who put their faith in some immense, world-transforming phenomenon, like the final
triumph of reason or the proletarian revolution, must believe that all political and
moral problems can be turned into technological ones.[20]
Isaiah Berlin

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the "open society" is often invoked in public debate to indicate who "we" are, in terms of both "our" way of life and "our" form of government. Those who use the term often refer to the philosophy of Karl Popper (1902-1994), whose book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in 1945, gave the term widespread currency. The book, which can be read as a defense of liberal democracy against totalitarianism (both fascist and communist), played an important role in the dissident movement in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Popper is therefore sometimes classified as a typical "Cold War liberal".[21] This does not mean, however, that his influence declined after 1989. His philosophy formed the inspiration for George Soros's Open Society Institute, founded in 1993. Furthermore, in response to the rise of ethnic violence on the fringes of Europe in the '90s and the challenge of political Islam in the wake of "9/11", his book is being taken off the shelves again, to be used in the struggle against ethnic nationalism and fundamentalist religion, which are depicted as embodiments of the

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[19] OSE2 280.
[20] Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', 168.
[21] Together with Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) and Raymond Aron (1905-1983), see Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom'; Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 24. Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) is sometimes also counted among them.

idea of a "closed society". Apparently, the logic of Popper's argument remains appealing, even though his original enemies have been gone for over twenty years.

In contrast to his presence in public debate, Popper is almost completely ignored in academic political philosophy. Some suggest that this is due to the fact that it is sometimes still believed, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, that nothing of much importance happened in this field in the second half of the twentieth century before the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971.[22] It is certainly due to the fact that within the university, Popper is primarily known as a philosopher of science. His books *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934) and *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963) are still read, and his falsificationist theory of science is still taught, at least in introductory courses. Moreover, Popper himself has repeatedly claimed that his primary interest lay in the methodology of the natural sciences.[23]

In this light *The Open Society and Its Enemies* might be considered as nothing more than a pamphlet, a polemical intervention in current affairs written by a worried citizen who chose to publish his personal opinion on the political situation of his time. Indeed, Popper himself called his book his "war effort", his contribution to World War II against Hitler and to the Cold War against Stalin.[24] At the same time, though, he intended it to be more than a tract for the times. He describes it as a contribution to "the philosophy of society and politics" (OSE2 259), or, to be more specific, as an examination of "the application of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society" (OSE1 1). His criticism of the two influential totalitarian political movements of his time is informed by his criticism of "historicism", a faulty methodology of the social sciences which he ascribes especially to Plato, Hegel, and Marx. It seems thus that Popper's approach to politics is embedded in, or even dependent on, a broader set of philosophical, (that is, epistemological) convictions.[25]

Whether his book is considered a "mere" pamphlet or a "mere" application of his philosophy of science, in neither case does it seem to be of serious interest to political philosophers. Some have argued, however, that Popper's philosophy of science should be understood as an application of his philosophy of politics, in which case the latter would deserve to be taken more seriously.[26] However this may be – whether his political philosophy is regarded as an "application" of his philosophy of science or the other way around – insofar as political philosophers are interested in the conditions of their own enterprise, they ought to be interested in Popper's work for a different reason. For, precisely if and insofar as a political philosophy is "influential" – that is, insofar as people write, speak, and hence *act* in

[22] This is the explanation given by Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 46.
[23] See, inter alia, OSE1 2, OSE2 85.
[24] Popper, *Unended Quest*, 131.
[25] Lessnoff, *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century*, 176-177: "There is no doubt that Popper's political theory builds on his analysis of the scientific enterprise, of the conditions necessary for the growth of knowledge, and for rational thought in general." See also T.E. Burke, *The Philosophy of Popper*.
[26] See Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics, and Scientific Method*.

accordance with its assumptions – it may teach us something worthwhile about the conditions of our political understanding. As Raymond Geuss aptly formulates it:

> A political philosophy ... is not really an exclusively theoretical construction, but it must also be seen as an attempt to intervene in the world of politics: the consequences of acting on it ought thus never to be considered matters of complete indifference in evaluating it. ... In the long run ..., when a theory is widely believed and has come to inform the way large groups of people act, deeply hidden structural features of it can suddenly come to have a tremendous political impact.[27]

Insofar as a political philosophy's underlying conceptual assumptions inform our actual political understanding and judgment, then, we are permitted to ask whether its contribution to that understanding and judgment is sound or not.

The force and positive appeal of Popper's idea of the "open society" was felt especially due to the contrasting force of the negative, almost demonic picture he drew of the "closed society" as a backward and primitive society reigned over by irrational belief in magical taboos. Now that the imminent threat of his original contemporary enemies is gone, however, we may seize the opportunity to evaluate his philosophy of the open society on its own terms, according to its inner structure.

As is well-known, Popper's attack on Marxism in the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* – entitled *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* – is preceded by his attempt to break the "spell" of the "alluring philosophy" (OSE1 199) of Plato in the first volume – entitled *The Spell of Plato*. Popper accuses Plato of having laid the basis for the success of later kinds of utopianism by propagating an "Ideal State" that pretends to be wise, just, and happy, and thus by consciously appealing to humanitarian ideas and sentiments, which is reinforced by his use of Socrates as his mouthpiece. Yet, Popper argues, *in fact*, when judged from a *rational* point of view, this state is totalitarian in nature. He points to an "inner conflict" (OSE1 196) within Plato's mind between reason and sentiment, which was decided in favor of the latter, the remedy to which would consist in making political philosophy more "rational".

When, in turn, I attempt to identify what may be called "the spell of Popper", the way I read his work differs from the way he read Plato, if only because, as we shall see, the criterion of "rationality" used by Popper turns out to be too narrow. Moreover, I do not point to any "inner conflict" in Popper's mind, nor do I turn the tables by defending Plato or any other of his "enemies" against him.[28] Instead, I will reconstruct and then deconstruct what may be called respectively the "inner logic" and the "deeply hidden structural features" of Popper's writing, in the first case by critically examining the inner consistency of

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[27] Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 35.
[28] For the latter, see, inter alia, Levinson, *In Defense of Plato*.

what is explicitly *proposed* in it (what is explicitly articulated and accounted for),[29] and in the second case by examining what is actually *enacted* by it (what is performed, even without being explicitly articulated and accounted for).[30]

The current chapter examines the inner logic of Popper's work, that is, the consistency of his work on the level of its *propositions*. He presents his theory as an "application" of the "rational" methods of science to politics, which results in his "proposal" for a politics of "piecemeal social engineering". We examine whether the "rational" and (hence) "responsible" politics he aims to further is in fact supported by his epistemological assumptions. We will argue that, in fact, he requires a wider conception of rationality, for which he can at the same time not account within the epistemological framework he explicitly advocates. As a consequence, his work is vulnerable to the reproach that it lapses into some kind of "decisionism".

The next chapter examines what I have called the deeply hidden structural features of his work, that is, the assumptions *performatively* affirmed by his writing, as well as their consistency with what is *proposed* in it. In the *first* part, I draw attention to the fact that the force of his proposal for a politics of the rational discussion of proposals turns out in the end to rest on the use of the *analogy* between science (or engineering) and politics. Besides being problematic in terms of substance, the crucial because constitutive role of the language of analogy within his work remains unaccounted for within his rationalist picture of language. In the *second* part, I draw attention to the fact that his proposal for a politics of proposing is set in a state of necessity, that is, in a situation in which a collective of "friends" is urged to unite against its "enemies". Hence, the rational (and thus freely discussable) character of Popper's "proposal" is impaired by the conception of politics as *polemics* that is *performatively* affirmed by his writing. Thus, the "open" society harbors in itself a moment of "closure", which leads me to question both the consistency and the adequacy of Popper's rationalist conception of politics.

In the *first two* sections of the present chapter, I give an account both of Popper's notion of "the open society" and of the two alternative approaches to

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[29] Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 56: "Of course, personal professions are one thing – the inner logic of political ideas propounded another."

[30] Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 35. See also ibid., 36: "The liberal thinkers like Berlin who gave their penetrating historical and conceptual analysis in the middle of the last century realized that understanding a political philosophy involves taking account of a wide variety of factors that have no parallel in the case of strictly empirical theories. These include hidden structural features of the theory, various assumptions the people who are going to act on the theory make, and the actual institutional, economic, and political reality of the world in which the theory is trying to allow us to intervene (even if that intervention is at the level of a mere normative assessment). Liberalism ought to have applied the theoretical sophistication which it had acquired in its critical struggle against Marxism to the task of understanding itself better in terms of these factors." Holmes, 'Aristippus in and out of Athens', 118, mentions only the third factor: "the normative claims of political philosophy, so I believe, can never be understood from behind a self-imposed veil of ignorance, but rather must always be interpreted in light of historical information about the institutional order within which these claims are to be enforced."

politics that he distinguishes: historicism and social engineering, the former of which he rejects, while embracing the latter on condition that it is not “utopian” but “piecemeal” in nature. He claims that the latter is the only approach that does justice to the open society’s demand to assume full responsibility for our political decisions. Since Popper argues that “piecemeal social engineering” is the only approach to politics that deserves the predicate “scientific”, in the *third* section I go on to provide an explanation of his distinctive philosophy of science, more specifically of his strict separation of “facts” (or scientific propositions) and “decisions” (or moral and political proposals). In the *fourth* section, I reconstruct in detail both his criticism of the “utopian” form of social engineering and of “totalitarianism”, which he ascribes to Plato, and his own “piecemeal”, liberal-democratic alternative to it, which he ascribes to Pericles and Socrates. In the *final two* sections, I critically examine the consistency of Popper’s position, arguing that the distinction between “piecemeal” and “utopian” social engineering, crucial to his project, is in fact difficult to maintain if it is based on the restricted conception of rationality inherent in the “scientific” attitude of “social engineering”. I show that he requires as complement a more comprehensive conception of rationality, that is, a conception that is capable of accounting for the rational validity not only of *technological* propositions (the choice of *means*) but also of *political* proposals (the choice of *ends*). However, this broader conception of rationality can itself not be accounted for on the basis of Popper’s restricted epistemological presuppositions, especially due to his strict separation of facts from decisions. As mentioned above, he thereby runs the danger of lapsing into some kind of “irrational” political “decisionism”, despite his explicitly professed rejection of this stance.

1.2. POLITICS WITHIN THE OPEN SOCIETY

Before we are able to answer the question of whether Popper’s philosophy of science does indeed further the rational and responsible form of politics he advocates, we need to reconstruct Popper’s concrete “proposals” as presented especially in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* – by far his most influential political philosophical work.[31] In the preface (written in 1943) to the first edition, he states that what is at stake is nothing less than the survival of our “civilization”. The aim of his book is to unite “those on whose defence civilization depends” (OSE1 vii) by breaking with “the habit of deference to great men” who “supported

[31] In my analysis of Popper’s writing I focus primarily on *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which became his most influential work. I also refer to *The Poverty of Historicism* (published as a book in 1957, being a re-worked and expanded version of a paper originally written in 1936) and to an unpublished paper written between 1944 and 1946. Because I am primarily interested in the illustrative function of Popper’s work for our purposes of understanding the practice of political philosophy rather than offering a full exegesis of the idiosyncrasies of the work, I largely leave out of consideration his so-called “later” political philosophy and his theory of three worlds. For a detailed account of these aspects of Popper’s work, see especially Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, chapter 3, entitled ‘After *The Open Society*’.

the perennial attack on freedom and reason" (OSE1 vii). The larger part of the book consists of an attack on the authority of three such "intellectual leaders" in particular: Plato, Hegel, and Marx. Still, he claims that the problems treated are "the problems of our own time", and although he states he has tried to state them as simply as he could, the object of his book is "not so much to popularize the questions treated as to solve them" (OSE1 vii).

Hence, Popper's final aim consists in a defense of free and rational political decision-making. As he explains in chapter 10 (which bears the same title as the book as a whole), "civilization" or an "open society" is characterized by the fact that people accept their individual freedom and their responsibility for decisions. In a "closed society", on the other hand, decisions are governed by a belief in magical taboos. As Popper calls his distinction between these types of society a "rationalist" one,[32] we may conclude that the adoption of the distinction itself already presupposes the "method" and perspective of the "open society".

In fact, however, his distinction is more than a purely "rationalist" one, because Popper places its adoption and defense within the context of a grand historical narrative of a continuing struggle, which runs through the history of Western civilization, between the adherents of the open society on the one hand, and those who wish to "return" to the closed society on the other. He states that the open society first came into being in Greece with the "breakdown" of the archaic tribal societies.[33] He regards Socrates, Pericles, and some of the sophists[34] – all of whom he counts among "the Great Generation" – as the first to articulate the principles of the open society, but who were confronted by the conservative reaction of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. Later in history, the principles of early Christianity were challenged by orthodox Judaism and the authoritarian medieval Christian Church; early modern and Enlightenment thinking, as embodied especially in the French and American Revolutions, was jeopardized by Romanticism and its nationalist aftermath; and, finally, in the twentieth century, liberal democracy was threatened by totalitarianism. Popper speaks of a "perennial fight" (OSE1 1) for freedom, individualism, egalitarianism, and humanitarianism against collectivism and the division of mankind into superiors and inferiors – a struggle to which he clearly wishes to add his own share.

As Popper explains, one of the issues in an open society which assumes the character of "a problem which can be rationally discussed", is the quest for the "best constitution" (OSE1 173): as soon as political laws are no longer considered magical taboos, they become capable of rational discussion, to be changed

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[32] OSE1 202n. Popper derives the terms "open society" and "closed society" from Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932), but Popper uses them in a different way: "My terms indicate, as it were, a *rationalist distinction*; the closed society is characterized by the belief in magical taboos, while the open society is one in which men have learned to be to some extent critical of taboos, and to base decisions on the authority of their own intelligence (after discussion). Bergson, on the other hand, has a kind of *religious distinction* in mind."

[33] OSE1 176.

[34] Of the sophists, Popper considers Protagoras as one of the most prominent theorists of the open society, while he counts Callicles and Thrasymachus as adherents of the idea of the closed society.

according to the outcome of that discussion. Although Popper does not explicitly *thematize* the question "what is political?", he *uses* a specific conception of "political" that can be distilled from his work. If only in passing, he describes "political life" as "the field of problems concerned with the power of man over man" (OSE2 236). In addition, he claims that "*all* power, and political power at least as much as economic power, is dangerous" (OSE2 129). Throughout his book it becomes clear that for him, the "most fundamental problem of all politics" consists in "the control of the controller, of the dangerous accumulation of power represented in the state" (OSE2 129).[35] He seems to take it for granted that the use of power by some human beings over other human beings is an ineradicable fact of human reality, an empirical datum which he wishes neither to dispute nor challenge. Hence, he is no anarchist.[36] What he wants to challenge, though, is how to deal with this fact, how we *ought* to deal with this "fundamental problem of politics".[37]

To be sure, Popper addresses the problem of political power insofar as the latter is institutionalized in the state. He identifies "political laws" with "the laws of the state" (OSE1 173), and he distinguishes "the realm of legality, i.e. of state-enforced norms" as the sphere of politics from "the realm of morality proper, i.e. norms enforced not by the state, but by our conscience" (OSE1 113). In other words, he conceives of the "political" as a separate sphere within our (open) society or civilization, called "state" or "government". Hence, insofar as he claims to offer a "political philosophy" or a "philosophy of politics" – terms he does not use that often – he is primarily thinking of a philosophy of state or of government.

1.3. Two Approaches to Politics: Historicism versus Social Engineering

As Popper writes in the introduction, his book examines "the application of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society" (OSE1 1). Thus, he approaches "the problem of politics" from the perspective of "social philosophy" – a term he uses as shorthand for the (his) methodology of the social sciences. He states that we are ultimately confronted with a choice between *two* alternative approaches to the problem of politics, only one of which is methodologically sound: either we pose as the "prophets" of our fate and thus let "the history of power … be our judge", or we become the "makers" of our fate and then "one day perhaps we may succeed in getting power under control." (OSE2 280 – see epigraph to this chapter). In the first case, we adopt the attitude of

[35] See also OSE1 120-121.

[36] Cf. Popper, 'Reason and the Open Society', 282: "government is a necessary evil. Total absence of government is an impossibility and – another regrettable truth – the more people, the more government."

[37] OSE1 120. He also speaks of "the problem of politics" (OSE1 120), or of "the political problem" (OSE1 127).

"historicism": in the second, we adopt the attitude of "social engineering", which is then subdivided into a "utopian" and a "piecemeal" variant.

In the secondary literature, Popper's own choice for "piecemeal social engineering" is usually presented as a "middle way" between "historicism" and "utopian social engineering".[38] Accordingly, Jeremy Shearmur depicts the last two as the "Scylla" and "Charybdis" which Popper wishes to avoid.[39] Although this imagery aptly captures the equal *polemical* distance of Popper's proposal from these two alternatives, its use is slightly misleading if we wish to determine the exact *philosophical* relation between the three positions. We therefore adhere to the initial account provided by Popper himself, who presents the distinction between historicism and social engineering as the primary one.[40]

Popper describes historicism as the doctrine which holds that "history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man." (OSE1 8). Knowledge of these historical laws enables the historicist to foretell "which political actions are likely to succeed or likely to fail", and thereby to "put politics upon a solid basis" (OSE1 8).[41] Hence, human beings cannot alter the course of history.[42] The appeal of historicism consists specifically in its providing "*certainty* regarding the ultimate outcome of history" (OSE1 9), its promise to relieve us from "the strain of

[38] Lessnoff, *Political Philosophies of the Twentieth Century*, 188.

[39] Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 40-47.

[40] OSE, chapters 1-3.

[41] This conception of historicism should be distinguished from the more common understanding of historicism [*Historismus*], viz. the doctrine which holds that all human thought and knowledge is historically determined. In order to avoid the two being mixed up, Popper calls the latter 'historism' (OSE2 208, 255). In fact, he opposes *both* kinds of historicism, if only because the latter is necessarily part of the former. As the second part of this dissertation shows, Leo Strauss employs the second understanding of *Historismus* only, which he renders in English as "historicism".

[42] According to Popper, "one of the simplest and oldest" forms of historicism is the religious doctrine of the chosen people, for it assumes that God has laid down the law of historical development insofar as it holds that "God has chosen one people to function as the selected instrument of His will, and that this people will inherit the earth" (OSE1 8). Popper indicates that his picture of "theistic" historicism serves to illustrate characteristics that are also shared by "the two most important modern versions of historicism", that is, the "non-theistic" historicism of racialism or fascism on the right and that of Marxism or communism on the left (OSE1 9). The former substitutes the chosen people by the chosen race, the latter substitutes the chosen people by the chosen class.

It should be noted that Popper comes close to formulating the thesis that modern totalitarian movements are "political religions", that is, secularized forms of religion. Although he claims that his attack on "theistic" forms of historicism "should … not be interpreted as an attack upon religion" (OSE1 9), I am inclined to conclude that this claim is difficult to uphold. On the one hand, it seems that he does indeed criticize only *some* forms of religion, while embracing others. For instance, he speaks approvingly of (early) Christianity as a form of protest against "Jewish tribalism" (OSE2 22-23, OSE2 301n56). Sometimes he suggests that a similar distinction can be drawn *within* Judaism (OSE2 23) and *within* Christianity (OSE2 24, 273). On the other hand, to the extent that he reduces "the theistic doctrine of historicism" to a mere *effect* of historical, that is, *human* circumstances (social change, oppression), and insofar as he makes *human conscience* (OSE2 271) instead of *divine law* the touchstone of human conduct, he seems to turn against revealed religion *as such*.

civilization", that is, from the demand inherent in the open society to assume our individual freedom and responsibility, even in times of great social turmoil.[43]

Social engineering, by contrast,[44] implies that "man is the master of his own destiny and that, in accordance with our aims, we can influence or change the history of man just as we have changed the face of the earth" (OSE1 22). Moreover, the social engineer is convinced that a "scientific basis of politics" is to be found in "the factual information necessary for the construction or alteration of social institutions, in accordance with our wishes and aims" (OSE1 22) and not in any knowledge of the future course of history. Whereas the historicist will ask for the "origin" and "end" of certain social institutions or the "true role" played by certain institutions in the development of history, the engineer will ask: "If such and such are our aims, is the institution well designed and organized to serve them?" (OSE1 23). Accordingly, "the engineer or the technologist approaches institutions rationally as means that serve certain ends, and ... he judges them wholly according to their appropriateness, efficiency, simplicity, etc." (OSE1 24).

Next, Popper draws a distinction within the camp of the social engineers between a "utopian" and a "piecemeal" kind.[45] The "utopian" social engineer adopts certain institutional means in order to realize ends that are presumed to be set by history. Popper therefore sometimes characterizes the utopian kind as a *combination* of the attitudes of social engineering (viz. its belief in the possibility of human intervention by institutional means) and of historicism (viz. its determination of the choice of ends).[46] The "piecemeal" social engineer, by contrast, restricts himself to a consideration of the *facts*, that is, of the actual efficiency and effectiveness of certain measures, while the *ends* that these measures are meant to serve are chosen by the *citizen*,[47] who, as we shall see below, is supposed to speak "the *language of political demands or of political proposals*" (OSE1 109).[48]

According to Popper, "piecemeal" social engineering – which he sometimes calls "democratic social reconstruction" – is the only approach that

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[43] Popper notes that historicist ideas seem to surface especially in times of great social change: "They appeared when Greek tribal life broke up, as well as when that of the Jews was shattered by the impact of the Babylonian conquest. (...) In modern Europe, historicist ideas were revived during the industrial revolution, and especially through the impact of the political revolutions in America and France" (OSE1 17). More specifically, he claims that the doctrines of the chosen people, of the chosen race, and of the chosen class originated as reactions to some kind of *oppression*. The doctrine of the chosen people became important during the Babylonian captivity; Gobineau's theory of race was a reaction to the revolutionaries' rise against aristocracy; Marx's prophecy of the victory of the proletariat is a reply to a period of great oppression and exploitation (see OSE1 203n3). In these circumstances especially, "the strain of civilization", that is, the demand for personal responsibility, is harder than ever to bear. See especially OSE1, Introduction, and Chapter 10.

[44] In OSE1 210n9 Popper indicates that the term "social engineering" (in the "piecemeal" sense at least) seems to have been used first by Roscoe Pound in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Law* (1922).

[45] OSE1 22, 24, 157.

[46] OSE1 24, 157.

[47] OSE1 23-24.

[48] Cf. OSE1 211n11.

offers a truly "scientific" and "rational" basis for politics, being an "application" of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society. In his view, only this method will lead to free and responsible political action. As his plea for a program of "piecemeal social engineering" is clearly linked with his philosophy of science, we turn to the latter first.

1.4. PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE: DUALISM OF FACTS AND DECISIONS

As indicated above, Popper himself has repeatedly claimed that his primary interest lies in the methodology of the natural sciences. His book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, originally published in German in 1934, was written in response to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. Popper famously argued that the latter's method of verification does not offer a solution to the problem of logical induction. He argued that only the method of *falsification* can offer a criterion by which to "demarcate" scientific from pseudo-scientific propositions. For, whereas verification cannot lead to logical certainty, falsification can. Hence, a theory or proposition deserves the predicate "scientific" only if it is capable of being refuted by experiment. If it is refuted, it is demonstrated to be false by way of logical *deduction*. This method is not only applicable to natural science, but also to technology or engineering (as applied sciences), the latter of which are not so much interested in the explanation of phenomena through the positing of universal laws, but which apply those laws in order to make a specific prognosis in individual cases.[49]

Popper argues that the social sciences, by contrast, presuppose a distinction between factual statements (sociological laws, to be formulated in the language of scientific propositions) and normative statements (social norms and decisions, to be formulated in the language of normative proposals).[50] He claims that norms cannot be reduced to facts: "*it is impossible to derive a sentence stating a norm or a decision, or, say, a proposal for a policy from a sentence stating a fact*; this is only another way of saying that it is impossible to derive norms or decisions *or proposals* from facts" [emphasis in original] (OSE1 64).

Hence, he speaks of "the autonomy of ethics" (OSE1 67). That is to say, whereas the truth (or in any case the falsity) of statements of fact (i.e. of natural or sociological laws) can in principle be proved by scientific experiment, there is no way to deduce the goodness or rightness of normative proposals by having recourse to facts:[51]

> A normative law, whether it is now a legal enactment or a moral commandment, can be enforced by men. Also, it is alterable. It may be perhaps described as good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or

[49] OSE2 263.
[50] OSE1, chapter 5.
[51] Cf. OSE2 238: "it is impossible to prove the rightness of any ethical principle, or even to argue in its favour in just the manner in which we argue in favour of a scientific statement. Ethics is not a science."

> unacceptable; but only in a metaphorical sense can it be called ‘true’ or ‘false’, since it does not describe a fact, but lays down directions for our behavior. (OSE1 58)

For instance, Popper claims that “equality before the law” is “not a fact but a political demand based upon a moral decision; and it is quite independent of the theory – which is probably false – that ‘all men are born equal’.” (OSE2 234).[52] Social sciences have the task of predicting the “unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions” (OSE2 95) by the formulation of sociological laws, but they cannot establish moral and political norms. Social engineering (as applied social science) implies the same strict distinction between factual and normative statements, the former of which establish the most efficient and effective functioning of social institutions, while the latter formulate the ends the institutions are chosen to serve.

We should note that the *adoption* of the “rationalist” distinction between facts and norms (or decisions) is itself again placed by Popper within the very same grand historical narrative of the progressive development of human civilization mentioned above. He provides a sketch of the history of mankind (still) developing itself from “naïve monism”, which does not distinguish between natural and normative laws and which belongs to the tribal, closed society, to “critical dualism”, which does distinguish natural laws from man-made norms and which belongs to the individualist, open society.[53]

Popper seems to offer two grounds for the adoption of this distinction, and hence for the autonomy of ethics. His first argument is of a *logical* kind: it is against the rules of logic to infer the validity / invalidity of a normative statement from a factual statement, for the mere *existence* of a decision (or norm) does not yet vouch for its *validity*. However, there appears to be a second, “deeper” reason for the need to maintain this distinction, which “possibly forms the background of the first” (OSE1 73), and which consists in the recognition that:

> … the responsibility for our ethical decisions is entirely ours and cannot be shifted to anybody else; neither to God, nor to nature, nor to society, nor to history. … Whatever authority we accept, it is we who accept it. We only deceive ourselves if we do not realize this simple point. (OSE1 73)

To be sure, Popper displays his awareness of a possibly problematic consequence of this allegedly “simple point”. For, if norms are “man-made” or “conventional”, they may as well be said to be “arbitrary”.[54] In fact, he explains, the attempt to escape from moral “autonomy” into some form of what we may call moral

[52] Cf. OSE2 278: “Men are not equal; but we can decide to fight for equal rights.”; cf. Popper’s claim that the decision to oppose slavery “does not depend upon the fact that all men are born free and equal” (OSE1 62).
[53] OSE1 59-61.
[54] OSE1 61, 64-65.

“heteronomy” should precisely be understood as a way of dealing with this danger of “arbitrariness”.[55]

Besides historicism, which has already been introduced in the previous section, Popper mentions two other strategies that attempt to deal with this risk of the “arbitrariness” of norms and decisions. The first is “naturalism”, which reduces norms to natural laws. A defense of the “natural” inequality of human beings, for example, may be mounted by justifying the “natural” rule of the strong (cf. Callicles’ plea in Plato’s *Gorgias*),[56] or proclaiming the “natural” prerogatives of the few “noble” or “wise” (as, in Popper’s view, Plato has done),[57] but naturalism may just as well be used to defend a humanitarian form of ethics which proclaims the “natural” rights of each human being.[58] The second strategy is “positivism”, which reduces norms to actually posited laws, to which “historism” [*Historismus*], which claims that all norms are historically determined, is obviously closely related. Just as in the case of naturalism, some positivists have come to defend a conservative or authoritarian position – “might is right” –[59] while others have taken a progressive or humanitarian position – “if all norms are arbitrary, why not be tolerant?” (OSE1 72).

Popper claims that his *own* position does not imply, however, that moral “decisions” or “demands” (such as the demand for the autonomy of ethics itself) are “arbitrary”:

> The statement that norms are man-made (man-made not in the sense that they were consciously designed, but in the sense that men can judge and alter them – that is to say, in the sense that the responsibility for them is entirely ours) has often been misunderstood. Nearly all misunderstandings can be traced back to one fundamental misapprehension, namely, to the belief that ‘convention’ implies ‘arbitrariness’; that if we are free to choose any system of norms we like, then one system is just as good as any other. (OSE 64-65)

We will have to examine, however, whether his claim that his position is more than “merely” a personal opinion is actually vouched for by the assumptions of his philosophy of science,[60] or whether the inner logic of his theory (in terms of its *propositions*) is consistent. Doing so provides part of the answer to the central question of this chapter: do Popper’s epistemological assumptions indeed permit rational, responsible political decision-making?

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[55] OSE1 68.
[56] OSE1 70.
[57] OSE1 73.
[58] Popper comments that “this form of naturalism is so wide and so vague that it may be used to defend anything” (OSE1 73).
[59] Popper contends that the first outcome especially is an expression of “ethical nihilism”, that is, of “an extreme moral skepticism” or “a distrust of man and of his possibilities” (OSE1 72). See also OSE2, Addendum 11, esp. 381-383, where Popper criticizes Nietzsche’s nihilism.
[60] OSE2 259. Cf. OSE1 3, 123, 171.

After having reconstructed the principles of Popper's philosophy of science, I now go on to reconstruct the content of his preferred "solution" to the problems of the open society, his answer to the fundamental question of "the best constitution", which consists in his "proposal" for "piecemeal social engineering".

1.5. TWO POLITICAL PROGRAMS: UTOPIAN VERSUS PIECEMEAL SOCIAL ENGINEERING

As the two epigraphs with which Popper opens the first volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* reveal, he associates piecemeal social engineering, as "method" of the open society, with the name of Pericles, whereas he associates Utopian social engineering, as "method" of the closed society, with the name of Plato:

> *For the Open Society (about 430 B.C.):*
> Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it.
> Pericles of Athens
> *Against the Open Society (about 80 years later):*
> The greatest principle of all is that nobody, whether male or female, should be without a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody be habituated to letting him do anything at all on his own initiative; neither out of zeal, nor even playfully. But in war and in the midst of peace – to his leader he shall direct his eye and follow him faithfully. And even in the smallest matter he should stand under leadership. For example, he should get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals ... only if he has been told to do so. In a word, he should teach his soul, by long habit, never to dream of acting independently, and to become utterly incapable of it.
> Plato of Athens

These two contrasting passages illustrate that in the final instance,[61] Popper wants to have us realize that we have a choice between independent political judgment and decision-making on the one hand, and blind adherence to authority on the other. He wants to save our individual responsibility by preventing us from handing it over to the compelling laws of History (as in the case of "historicism"), of Nature (as in the case of "naturalism"), of Society (as in the case of "positivism"), or of God (as in the case of authoritarian religion). Hence, Popper's struggle against historicism is in fact part of a greater fight against the escape from personal freedom and responsibility, from what he considers "the strain of civilization" that has accompanied the open society since its birth.[62] I therefore

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[61] OSE1 7. Popper ascribes the first fragment to Pericles, whereas his words (from the Funeral Oration) were written down by Thucydides in his *The Peloponnesian War*, while he chooses to ascribe the second fragment to Plato, who in fact put these words in the mouth of the Athenian Stranger, his main dialogue character in the *Laws*. The exact references are Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* II .40 and Plato, *Laws,* 942abc. The same two passages are quoted by Popper in OSE1 186 and OSE1 103 respectively.
[62] OSE1 4-5, 176.

examine the extent to which his own approach to politics, viz. "piecemeal social engineering", indeed serves his final aim.

As he develops his approach primarily in opposition to the "utopian social engineering" of Plato, we turn to Popper's account of the latter first. Although his most significant contemporary enemy was Marxism – which he regards as "so far the purest, the most developed and the most dangerous form of historicism" (OSE2 81) – in the first (and best known) volume of his book he chose Plato as his main intellectual opponent, because he considers Plato's social and political philosophy to be "the earliest and probably the most influential example" (OSE1 24) of "utopian social engineering", that is, of the combination of technological and historicist elements which he regards as "representative of quite a number of social and political philosophers who produced what have been later described as Utopian systems."[63]

Popper grants that Plato's intentions were benevolent and that he "attempted to answer a very real need" (OSE1 170).[64] For, he states, "we find in the work of Plato … indications that he suffered desperately under the political instability and insecurity of his time" (OSE1 18-19),[65] and that he wished "to win back happiness for the citizens" (OSE1 171) by relieving them from the "strain" that accompanied the birth of the open society. Yet, Popper adds, by employing his excellent writing skills, especially by using Socrates as his mouthpiece, in order to present his Ideal State as being wise, just, happy, etc. and by thus consciously appealing to humanitarian ideas – Popper suggests that in this respect he "knew very well what he was doing" (OSE1 93) – Plato "fully succeeded" (OSE1 92) in casting a "spell" over the friends of the open society which lulled their critical capacities.[66] Hence, they do not realize that his political program is in fact anti-humanitarian and even totalitarian in nature.[67]

Popper claims that Plato's "political program" consists of three demands. *First*, it adopts the historicist law that "*all social change is corruption or decay or degeneration*" (OSE1 19). Popper bases himself here especially upon Plato's *Statesman*, which contains a myth about "the Age of Cronus", a kind of Golden Age in which human beings are ruled by the Gods, which is followed by "the Age of Zeus", our own age, "in which the world is abandoned by the gods and left to its own resources, and which consequently is one of increasing corruption." (OSE1 19).[68] *Secondly*, Popper claims that Plato, despite his historicist stance, nevertheless believed "that it is *possible* for us, by a human, or rather by a superhuman effort, to

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[63] OSE1 24: "All these systems recommend some kind of social engineering, since they demand the adoption of certain institutional means, though not always very realistic ones, for the achievements of their ends. But when we proceed to a consideration of these ends, then we frequently find that they are determined by historicism." See also OSE1 157.

[64] OSE1 293n5.

[65] Popper quotes from Plato's *Seventh Letter*, 325e: "Seeing that everything swayed and shifted aimlessly, I felt giddy and desperate" (translation Popper, OSE1 19).

[66] OSE1 92-93, 99, 169-170, 199-200.

[67] OSE1 34, 87-88, 92, 169-170.

[68] Plato, *Statesman*, 268e-274d..

break through the fatal historical trend, and to put an end to the process of decay" (OSE1 20). In other words, Plato believed in the possibility of social engineering: further corruption in "the political field" can be stopped by "*arresting all political change*" (OSE1 21),[69] by the establishment of "a state which is free from the evils of all other states because it does not degenerate, because it does not change" (OSE1 21). *Thirdly*, Popper claims, Plato found the model or original of this perfect state in a distant past, viz. in the Golden Age of Cronus.[70] He puts forward the naturalist demand to go "*back to nature*", that is, to "the original state of our forefathers, the primitive state founded in accordance with human nature, and therefore stable; back to the tribal patriarchy of the time before the Fall, to the natural class rule of the wise few over the ignorant many" (OSE1 86).

Popper claims that the last two demands, taken together, result in a "totalitarian" political program, laid down especially in Plato's *Republic*, which consists in a strict division of society into two classes and in the identification of the fate of the state with the ruling class, which, in turn, is divided into "herdsmen" and "watch dogs". This class operates as a strong unity; it possesses a monopoly of violence; it does not participate in economic activities; its intellectual activities are censored and controlled by means of propaganda; and the state as a whole is completely self-sufficient and not dependent on trade.[71]

Yet, Popper asks, if this is the case, what then to make of the fact that Plato claims that his Ideal State is perfectly *just*, that it is ruled *wisely*, and that its individual citizens are *happy*? Is his political program not fundamentally different from modern totalitarianism in this respect?[72] It is precisely Popper's intention to unmask this benevolent intention as being part of the "spell" of Plato. We will therefore now turn to Popper's criticism of the "anti-humanitarian" way in which Plato invokes the ideas of justice, wisdom, and especially happiness,[73] as well as to his own alternative, "humanitarian" interpretation of these concepts.

[69] OSE1 86.
[70] OSE1 25.
[71] OSE1 86-87.
[72] OSE1 87: "Even writers who criticize Plato believe that his political doctrine, in spite of certain similarities, is clearly distinguished from modern totalitarianism by these aims of his, the happiness of the citizens and the rule of justice." One of the authors to whom Popper refers here is Richard Crossman, *Plato Today* (1937).

We may ask, of course, whether it is not the case that modern totalitarian regimes, too, possess an element of idealism insofar as they, too, *claim* to make their individual citizens happy. Popper seems to grant this, for he claims that "the strength of both the old *and the new* totalitarian movements rested on the fact that they attempted to answer a very real need, however badly conceived this attempt may have been. In the light of my new interpretation, it appears to me that Plato's declaration of his wish to make the state and its citizens happy is not merely propaganda. I am ready to grant his fundamental benevolence [emphases added]." (OSE1 171)
[73] Popper's treatment of these three concepts largely coincides with chapters 6, 7, and 10 of OSE1, respectively. Other (Platonic) ideas he discusses are "truth" (chapter 8) and "beauty" (chapter 9).

1.5.1. JUSTICE: STATE INTEREST VERSUS PROTECTIONISM

The central question of Plato's *Republic* is "what is justice [*dikaiosunē*]?", and its Ideal State is presented as being perfectly *just*. Popper argues, however, that Plato employs a concept of justice that is completely opposite to our liberal understanding of justice as "equality of the citizens before the law" (OSE1 89).[74] He claims that for Plato, the predicate "just" refers to "that which is in the interest of the best state" (OSE1 89): it is in the interest of the state that each of its classes attends to what is its own work, assigned by nature, which means in fact that "*the state is just if the ruler rules, if the worker works, and if the slave slaves*." (OSE1 91) By thus using "justice" as a characteristic of the *state* as a whole instead of as category of how *individuals* are to be treated, Popper states, Plato changed the meaning even of the Greek term, which was "isonomy" [*isonomia*] or equality before the law (OSE1 93), the conception of justice to which Pericles adheres in his well-known Funeral Oration.[75]

Popper argues that Plato's conception of justice displays a refusal to use "the *language of political demands or of political proposals*" (OSE1 109). Instead of asking the "historicist" question "How did the state originate, and what is the origin of political obligation?" or the "naturalist" question "What is the state, what is its true nature, its real meaning?", Popper deems it rational to ask "What do we demand from a state?" or "What do we propose to consider as the legitimate aim of state activity?" (OSE1 109). He claims that a rational way to answer this question would be: "I demand that the state must limit the freedom of the citizens as equally as possible, and not beyond what is necessary for achieving an equal limitation of freedom" (OSE1 110). Popper calls this demand "protectionism", for it situates the aim of state activity in the *protection* of the freedom of its citizens, both against each other and against state power. The underlying egalitarianism and individualism find expression, he adds, in the Kantian demand to always recognize that human individuals are ends, and not to use them as mere means to other ends.[76]

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[74] OSE1, chapter 6 is devoted to the Idea of Justice.

[75] OSE1 95, 102. Popper refers to Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, II, 37 ff., more specifically to 37 and 41. In OSE1 95, 255n17, Popper also points to Herodotus, *Histories*, III, 80, 6, which contains a eulogy on "isonomy".

As chapter 5 shows, Hannah Arendt also praises the Greek concept of "isonomy", in both *The Human Condition*, 32n22 and in *On Revolution*, 30. She too derives it from Herodotus.

[76] OSE1 102. See also OSE1 256n20: "I hold, with Kant, that it must be the principle of all morality that no man should consider himself more valuable than any other person." Cf. Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 47, who notes that Popper adheres to "a liberal universalism which has a decidedly Kantian flavor, in that all people are treated by Popper as ends in themselves, not to be sacrificed to the general well-being, or to the well-being of the state." Shearmur treats this Popper's "liberal universalism" as one of the two main elements of Popper's political thought, the other being his "negative utilitarianism". He rightly notes that there is a tension between these two elements (ibid., 99-106).

1.5.2. WISDOM: UNCHECKED SOVEREIGNTY VERSUS CHECKS AND BALANCES

Popper states that the Athenian philosopher Socrates, Plato's teacher, embodied "the true scientific spirit" (OSE1 128), for Socrates' wisdom consisted precisely in "his awareness of what he does not know" (OSE1 129), in his realization that he was *not* wise. Accordingly, he regarded the philosopher as a lover of truth, a *seeker* for it, rather than as a learned professional (a "sophist") or as a proud *possessor* of truth.[77] Popper states that Plato, by contrast, "*gives the term philosopher a new meaning*" (OSE1 145), which follows from the famous statement which Plato put in the mouth of Socrates, the culmination of Plato's *Republic* which Popper calls "the key to the whole work" (OSE1 152):

> … unless, in their cities, philosophers are vested with the might of kings, or those now called kings and oligarchs become genuine and fully qualified philosophers; and unless these two, political might and philosophy, are fused (while the many who nowadays follow their natural inclination for only one of these two are suppressed by force), unless this happens, my dear Glaucon, there can be no rest; and the evil will not cease to be rampant in the cities – nor, I believe, in the race of men. (OSE1 151-152) [78]

Plato presents the philosopher-king as "a lover and seer of the divine world of Forms or Ideas" (OSE1 145),[79] which he is capable of seeing by intellectual intuition and which he longs to realize on earth, as "a painter of constitutions"[80] who is "letting [his] eyes wander to and fro, from the model to the picture, and back from the picture to the model" (OSE1 145).[81] According to Popper, the idea of the philosopher-king implies that the philosopher is a "proud possessor" of truth rather than its "modest seeker" (OSE1 132). He contends, therefore, that the Platonic state is correctly to be described as "the rule of learnedness", or a "*sophocracy*" (OSE1 144).[82] Furthermore, as the philosopher-king knows what is in the best interest of the state, Plato allows him to administer "noble lies" to its

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[77] OSE1 132. Popper also explains Socrates' conviction that knowledge can only be taught by the method of "midwifery" [*maieutikē*]: "Those eager to learn may be helped to free themselves from their prejudice; thus they may learn self-criticism, and that truth is not easily attained. But they may also learn to make up their minds, and to rely, critically, on their decisions, and on their insight." (OSE1 129)

[78] Plato, *Republic*, 473cde, as quoted by Popper.

[79] Cf. OSE1 132.

[80] Plato, *Republic*, 501c (translation Popper). See also OSE1 165-166.

[81] Plato, *Republic*, 501b (translation Popper), cf. 484c. The Idea of Beauty is also at stake here, in the attempt of the philosopher-king to bring about a *radical* change in reality by imitating the beauty of the Ideal State. See OSE1, chapter 8 (second half), chapter 9 (second half), 145, 165-6.

[82] Cf. OSE1 132.

citizens [83] – rendered by Popper as "lordly lies" in order to avoid the positive connotation of the adjective "noble" [*gennaios*].[84]

Popper argues that Plato's plea for the rule of wisdom is rooted in the wrong approach to "the fundamental problem of politics": by asking the question "Who should rule?", "Plato created a lasting confusion in political philosophy." (OSE1 120). For, Popper argues, as soon as this question is asked, it is hard to avoid answers like "the best" or "the wisest", or even "the general will" (Rousseau), "the master race" (racism), "the industrial workers" (Marxism), or "the people" (as in the theory of popular sovereignty).[85] Indeed, he asserts, "far from having solved any fundamental problems, we have merely skipped over them" (OSE1 121), for "even those who share this assumption of Plato's admit that political rulers are not always sufficiently 'good' or 'wise' ... and that it is not at all easy to get a government on whose goodness and wisdom one can implicitly rely" (OSE1 121).

According to Popper, Plato's approach presupposes that political power is essentially sovereign, that is, unchecked. Popper provides three arguments against this "*theory of (unchecked) sovereignty*" (OSE1 121). *First*, he formulates the objection that, in fact, no regime has ever been completely sovereign, and that "as long as men remain human …, there can be no absolute and unrestrained political power. So long as one man cannot accumulate enough physical power in his hands to dominate all others, just so long must he depend upon his helpers" (OSE1 122-123). However, he himself indicates that "these empirical points" do not really count as an "argument" (OSE1 122). *Secondly*, therefore, he issues the claim that "it is reasonable to adopt, in politics, the principle of preparing for the worst, as well as we can, though we should, of course, at the same time try to obtain the best" (OSE1 122). Yet, again, he hastens to add that his argument does not depend on these "more personal opinions" either (OSE1 122). Apparently, he believes that something more compelling is required than *empirical facts* or *personal opinions*. *Thirdly*, therefore, he has recourse to "a kind of logical argument", which serves to lay bare the *inconsistency* of any theory of (unchecked) sovereignty (OSE1 123). One variant of this argument is the so-called "*paradox of freedom*" (OSE1 123), which he claims was in fact first formulated by Plato himself. According to Popper, in Book VIII of the *Republic*, in the context of the story of the degeneration of democracy into tyranny, Plato implicitly raises the question of what to do if it turns out to be the will of the people that not they, but a tyrant should rule: "The free man, Plato suggests, may exercise his absolute freedom, first by defying the laws and ultimately by defying freedom itself and by clamouring for a tyrant" (OSE1 123).[86]

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[83] Popper claims that the Idea of Truth is at stake here. See OSE1, chapter 8 (first half): 138-141, where Popper refers to Plato, *Republic*. 414b-415d.

[84] In OSE1 270-271n9, Popper calls the common choice to translate "noble lie" or "noble falsehood" "one of the typical attempts of idealizing Plato."

[85] OSE1 120.

[86] Popper refers to Plato, *Republic*, 562b-565e, more specifically to 562c, 563de, 564a, and 565cd. Popper claims that the assumption of (unchecked) sovereignty leads to similar paradoxes in the case

Yet, Popper says, what Plato overlooked is the fact that *all* theories of sovereignty are necessarily paradoxical. After all, "the wisest" might select "the best", and "the best" in his goodness might decide that "the majority" should rule. Popper therefore proposes to replace the question "*Who should rule?*" by the question "*How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?*" (OSE1 121), and thus to replace the theory of sovereignty by the "theory of checks and balances" (OSE1 122). The latter proceeds not from "a doctrine of the intrinsic goodness or righteousness of a majority rule," but rather from "the baseness of tyranny; or more precisely, it rests upon the decision, or upon the adoption of the proposal, to avoid and to resist tyranny" (OSE1 124).

Popper claims that this proposal allows us to draw a distinction between two main types of government: "democracy", and "dictatorship" or "tyranny". He adds that these labels are "nominalist", in the sense that they do not define any "essence". That is to say, the term democracy does not signify something like "the rule of the people" – if only because "the people" in itself of course never rules, but only its representatives.[87] Instead, Popper provides the following, by now famous, description of democracies:

> … governments of which we can get rid without bloodshed – for example, by way of general elections; that is to say, the social institutions provide means by which the rulers may be dismissed by the ruled, and the social traditions ensure that these institutions will not easily be destroyed by those who are in power. (OSE1 124)

Tyrannies, on the other hand, are "governments which the ruled cannot get rid of except by way of a successful revolution – that is to say, in most cases, not at all" (OSE1 125). In other words, it is impossible to get rid of a tyranny except by means of a revolution, which is understood by Popper as a bloody, that is, a *violent* replacement of the rulers. Democracy, by contrast, enables the reform of existing institutions and the design of new institutions by the use of *reason* instead of violence. Popper adds that this does not mean that these institutions will be faultless, nor that there is any guarantee that the outcome of democratic policy will be "wise" or "good". His point is rather that the various methods of democratic control, such as general elections and representative government, are safeguards against tyranny, which in themselves remain "open for improvement, and even providing methods for their own improvement." (OSE1 125). In this respect,

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of the principle of *majority rule* – "What if a democratic majority chooses to abolish democracy?" – and in the case of the principle of *toleration* – "What if we are tolerant towards the intolerant?" (OSE1 265n4).

[87] OSE1 125 (in parentheses): "For although 'the people' may influence the actions of their rulers by the threat of dismissal, they never rule themselves in any concrete, practical sense." Cf. Popper, 'Zur Theorie der Demokratie', 207-208: "Denn nirgends herrscht das Volk: Überall herrschen die Regierungen (und leider auch die Bürokratie, das heisst die Beamten, die nur schwer oder gar nicht zur Verantwortung gezogen werden können.)"

Popper may be said to regard democracy as the *political institutionalization* of the Socratic spirit of self-criticism.[88]

1.5.3. HAPPINESS: PROMOTING GOOD VERSUS AVOIDING EVIL

As we have seen, in answer to the question of what the primary purpose of the state is (the *aim* of government), Popper formulates the demand that the freedom of individual citizens should be duly protected, both against other individuals and, especially, against the state itself. In addition, in answer to the question of how to deal with power (the *form* of government), Popper formulates "the principle of a democratic policy" as "the proposal to create, develop, and protect, political institutions for the avoidance of tyranny" (OSE1 125). In both cases, Popper tends to formulate his demands *negatively*. Accordingly, not only our choice of the primary aim of the state and of the way we deal with power, but also the concrete content of public policy is to be determined by one and the same principle: the avoidance of evil rather than the promotion of some good. As he puts it: "Pain, suffering, injustice, and their prevention, these are the eternal problems of public morals, the 'agenda' of public policy .... The 'higher' values should very largely be considered as 'non-agenda', and should be left to the realm of *laissez-faire*." (OSE2 237).[89]

Elsewhere,[90] he provides a more explicit exposition of what is sometimes called his negative utilitarianism.[91] Popper describes his own view as a "complete inversion" of the ethical philosophy defended by theorists (like Plato) who

> … had the idea of an ultimate or highest good (usually made even higher and better by calling it by its Latin name the *summum bonum*) and they believed that all the lesser goods were in some way dependent on, or derivable from this highest good. And they believed that the realization of the highest good was a duty of the greatest urgency, while the realization of the lesser goods was less urgent.[92]

Popper asserts, to the contrary, that it is "the most urgent duty to fight the greatest and most concrete evil" and he adds that "the urgency decreases when we proceed to lesser evils and certainly when we proceed to positive goods."[93]

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[88] Cf. OSE2 238-239.
[89] Cf. OSE1 158.
[90] See Popper, 'Public and Private Values', unpublished paper written between 1944 and 1946.
[91] Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, 47. Cf. OSE 235n6(2), 284-285n2.
[92] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 120.

As is shown in chapter 2, Popper's thesis that the highest good was also considered as the most urgent good is disputed by Leo Strauss in the name of classical political philosophy.

[93] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 120. He explicitly states that he does not mean to say that "positive values" – "health, wealth, happiness, and so on, or more concretely, the enjoyment of one's life, or of one's work; or more concretely, of music; or perhaps of a discussion" (ibid., 119) – are unimportant: "On the contrary, few things are more important in our lives than our hopes, and dreams, our aesthetic and our religious ideals. My contention is that the world of these values is our private

As Jan-Werner Mueller has noted, insofar as Popper's political philosophy focuses on preventing the worst rather than promoting the best, it fits perfectly within the framework of what Judith Shklar has called "the liberalism of fear".[94] This type of liberalism, which considers cruelty an absolute evil against which every state should protect its citizens, goes back rather to Locke and Kant (who is indeed one of the few philosophers to whom Popper refers in positive terms) than to Hobbes (OSE1 247n4),[95] insofar as the former focus on the claims or *rights* of the individual citizens towards or against the state or government rather than on their *obligations* to state or government *authority*.

To summarize this section, in answer to the "fundamental" question of the best constitution, Popper demands the following. *First*, the question itself is to be phrased and answered in the language of "proposals", for "rational" political philosophy ought to express itself in the language of discussable proposals instead of in historicist or naturalist language. *Secondly*, the content of the "proposals" formulated in answer to this question consists in the demands of negative utilitarianism, that is, the avoidance of human suffering. In this spirit, Popper defines liberalism as the protection of individuals against avoidable suffering caused by other individuals or the state, and democracy is defined as the avoidance of tyranny. *Thirdly*, these "constitutional" proposals regarding the aim and form of government are to be realized by means of what we may choose to call the "normal" politics of "piecemeal social engineering", which is supposed to determine the most efficient and effective means for realizing the ends or aims that we have set for social institutions. For, against the objection that the very principle of freedom is endangered as soon as one demands that freedom should be limited by the state, Popper answers that "[i]t mixes up the *fundamental* question of what we want from the state with certain important *technological* difficulties in the way of its realization of our aims [emphasis added]" (OSE1 110). He calls these "technological" difficulties of determining the *degree* of freedom "the main task of legislation in democracies" (OSE1 110).

When we take a closer look, however, it is not particularly easy to neatly separate the "constitutional" politics of proposing from the "normal" politics of social engineering. If we wish to answer the question whether the notion of "piecemeal social engineering" does indeed further Popper's goal of "rational" and

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world – the world which we may share with our intimate friends; but we deprave and destroy these values if we try to force them upon the public." (ibid., 121).

[94] Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 47-48. See Shklar, 'The Liberalism of Fear', 11: "The liberalism of fear … does not … offer a *summum bonum* toward which all political agents should strive, but it certainly does begin with a *summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if only we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself."

[95] In OSE1 247n4 Popper refers to Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 373, where he describes a just constitution as "a constitution that achieves *the greatest possible freedom of human individuals* by framing the laws in such a way that *the freedom of each can co-exist with that of all others*", as well as to Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 'Introduction to the Theory of Right', §B: "Right (or justice) is the sum total of the conditions which are necessary for everybody's free choice to co-exist with that of everybody else, in accordance with a general law of liberty."

"responsible" politics, we need to examine the complexity of this notion more critically.

1.6. Two Conceptions of Rationality: Scientific and Moral

On the one hand, it seems that Popper suggests that engineering or technology, that is, the method of empirically establishing the most efficient and effective functioning of social institutions, *differs* from the moral or political choice of the right ends of those institutions:

> In his function as a citizen who pursues certain ends in which he believes, [the social engineer or technologist] may demand that these ends, and the appropriate measures, should be adopted. But as a technologist, he would carefully distinguish between the question of the ends and their choice and questions concerning the facts, i.e. the social effects of any measure which might be taken. (OSE1 23-24)

On this account, social engineering in itself is value neutral, while its ends can either be formulated in the language of "proposals", as in the case of "piecemeal" social engineering (presumably by citizens on the basis of common deliberation with an eye to a democratic process of legislation; Popper does not say much about the kind of citizenship he envisions),[96] or in historicist or naturalist language, as in the case of "utopian" social engineering.

On the other hand, Popper may be understood to suggest that the use of the language of "proposals" *intrinsically* belongs to the scientific attitude that is inherent in "social engineering" itself. When he explains that formulating the question of the aim of the state in the language of proposals or demands constitutes a "rational" approach to politics, he adds that it will lead to a demand "which permits the social technologist to approach political problems rationally, i.e. from the point of view of a fairly clear and definite aim" (OSE1 110).[97] He would thus seem to suggest that social technology or engineering can *itself* be considered as "rational" *only* if it employs the "piecemeal" approach, that is, the language of proposals, and that it is hence *by definition* incompatible with the "utopian" approach.

In order to get a clear grasp, therefore, of the apparently complex nature of "piecemeal social engineering" and the conception of rationality implied in it, we need to contrast it more carefully with "utopian social engineering" than we have done so far. For, if we gain a better view of the *difference* between them – that is, between the "utopian" or "wholesale" approach on the one hand and the "piecemeal" / "democratic" approach on the other – we will also gain a clearer

[96] Cf. OSE1 207n, 234n5(3).

[97] Cf. "It is a question which a technologist must try to answer before he can proceed to the construction or reconstruction of any political institution. For only if he knows what he wants can he decide whether a certain institution is or is not well adapted to its function." (OSE1 109)

view of the *similarity* between them, especially with regard to the specific nature of "social engineering" or the technological means-end-rationality itself.

As is apparent in Popper's critical account of Plato's "canvas-cleaning" especially,[98] the "utopian" engineer aims for a radical reform of society *as a whole* on the basis of a *positive* answer to the question of the best society, viz. the Ideal State, which serves as blueprint and *ultimate* end. He wants to go to the root of the matter and eradicate all evil: "Both Plato and Marx are dreaming of the apocalyptic revolution which will radically transfigure the whole social world." (OSE1 164) The "piecemeal" or "democratic" engineer, by contrast, tries to reform parts of society (viz. specific social institutions) *step by step* on the basis of *moderate* goals, that is, on the basis of a *negative* answer to the question of the best society, that consists in the elimination of avoidable human suffering.

At first sight, what we are dealing with here is a difference in scale or scope, as the terminology of "piecemeal" and "wholesale" suggests. However, in fact the outcome of a specific experiment with reform may lead to the conclusion that a "wholesale" reform *is* in some cases rational – a possibility that is clearly suggested by some of Popper's formulations: "we must reform … institutions little by little, *until* we have more experience [emphasis added]"; "*it is not reasonable to assume that a complete reconstruction of our social world would lead* <u>*at once*</u> *to a workable system* [underlining added]" (OSE1 167); "*At present*, the sociological knowledge necessary for large-scale engineering is simply non-existent [emphasis added]" (OSE1 162). These phrasings leave open the possibility that at some future point we *will* have gained the experience that sanctions large-scale planning. If this is the case, Popper's theory is vulnerable to the criticism that the distinction between "piecemeal" and "utopian" is not a *principled* one, but that in fact it is only the *success* of an experiment that *decides for us* whether or not a specific program is desirable, and not so much its planned scale or scope.

Popper seems to be aware of this possibility. In the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* he addresses what he calls "the paradox of state planning": "If we plan too much, if we give too much power to the state, then freedom will be lost, and that will be the end of planning" (OSE2 130). Yet, by indicating that the solution to this problem is to be found within the resources of (piecemeal) social engineering itself – "this is again merely a problem of social technology and of social piecemeal engineering. But it is important to tackle it early, for it constitutes a danger to democracy" (OSE2 193-194) – he is begging our question whether social engineering does in and of itself imply a "democratic" approach. In *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), he addresses the same issue more sharply: "It may be questioned, perhaps, whether the piecemeal and holistic approaches here described are fundamentally different, considering that we have

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[98] OSE1, chapter 9, especially 165-166: "They will take as their canvas a city and the characters of men, and they will, first of all, *make their canvas clean* – by no means an easy matter. But this is just the point, you know, where they will differ from all others. They will not start work on a city nor on an individual (nor will they draw up laws) unless they are given a clean canvas, or have cleaned it themselves." (OSE1 166)

put no limits to the scope of a piecemeal approach" (PH 62). Popper now indicates that the distinction between "utopian" and "piecemeal" is to be found elsewhere.

As we have seen, his philosophy of science offers a demarcation criterion on the basis of which science can be distinguished from pseudo-science. Yet his philosophy of the social sciences does not offer such a precise demarcation criterion on the basis of which the two methods can be distinguished from each other. Instead, he speaks of "the rather different *point of view* from which the holist and the piecemeal technologist look upon the task of reforming society [emphasis added]" (PH 62). As he indicates, "while the piecemeal social engineer can attack his problem with an *open mind* as to the scope of the reform, the holist cannot do this; for he has decided *beforehand* that a complete reconstruction is possible and necessary [emphasis added]" (PH 63).[99] Nevertheless, Popper adds that the decision to adopt a piecemeal "point of view" or "attitude" is supported by the *empirical fact* that it is impossible to centralize all the knowledge that would be required for a holistic project,[100] and that it is impossible to place oneself, like Archimedes, outside the social world one wishes to reform.[101]

We may argue, however, that the adoption of a scientific "attitude" or "point of view" already presupposes an affirmation of the *value* of science, an *interest* in acquiring scientific knowledge and in applying that knowledge through technology (in order to solve political problems by the reform of social institutions). As Jürgen Habermas has argued, this "technical cognitive interest" in which the scientific attitude is rooted is itself by no means value-neutral.[102] As Geoffrey Stokes contends, Popper's epistemology may indeed be said to depend on a specific set of moral or political values, rather than vice versa.[103]

However, because Popper asserts that normative judgments (which he demands must be formulated in the language of proposing, demanding, deciding, etc.) are by definition unscientific, it follows that science cannot establish its own normative value (or meaning), nor that of technology (as applied science, with its criteria of efficiency and success). A rational justification of values would require a more encompassing notion of rationality than Popper's strictly scientific one.

Yet, besides the difference between a scientific and an unscientific "point of view", viz. regarding the choice of means, of what will and what will not "work", there is *another* way in which Popper draws the distinction between the "piecemeal" and "utopian" approaches, viz. in terms of their different way of choosing their *ends*. The "utopian" approach presupposes knowledge of some highest good. Yet, Popper retorts, this presupposition can only be saved by "the Platonic belief in one absolute and unchanging ideal" (OSE1 161), together with the assumptions that there are rational methods for determining what this ideal is, and that there are rational methods for determining the best means for its

[99] Cf. OSE1 163, 167.
[100] See PH 58n10, 82.
[101] See OSE1 167.
[102] Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 264.
[103] Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*.

realization. He asserts that "even Plato himself and the most ardent Platonists" (OSE1 161) would admit that there are no rational methods to determine this ultimate goal, but at best some kind of *intuition.*[104] Moreover, as soon as *disagreement* arises, reason would be of no help here, and a resort to violence will be the only option left. The "piecemeal" engineer, by contrast, adopts the method of "fighting for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society" instead of "searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good" (OSE1 158). What counts in favor of this method, Popper claims, is that:

> a systematic fight against suffering and injustice is more likely to be supported by *the approval and agreement of a great number of people* than the fight for the establishment of some ideal. The existence of social evils, that is to say, of social conditions under which many men are suffering, *can be comparatively well established*, whereas it is infinitely more difficult to judge about an ideal society [emphasis added]. (OSE1 158-159)

Hence, in Popper's view, the fact that a *peaceful agreement* will likely be reached counts as an argument in favor of the piecemeal approach.

However, we may argue that this second way of drawing a line between the two approaches again presupposes a certain conception of rationality that enables us to distinguish justified moral decisions and judgments from unjustified ones; that is, a conception on the basis of which some moral decisions and judgments *can* be considered "justified" (such as "negative utilitarian" ones), and others *cannot* (such as the choice of an "ultimate good").

In other words, it seems that Popper requires a conception of rationality which vouches for the rationality *both* of the choice for the application of the "scientific" attitude as such (to politics) *and* of the choice for certain (moral, political) ends (aims, proposals, decisions) above others (which may be said to include the choice for the scientific attitude itself).[105] Should he turn out *not* to (be able to) deliver a more encompassing conception of rationality which is required for this purpose, he will then run the danger that the "language of proposals" has nothing more to offer than "personal professions" in the sense of subjective, arbitrary preferences – a result which he explicitly denies.

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[104] It should be noted that Plato *does* believe that there are rational methods to determine this goal, but Popper is not capable of taking this claim seriously, due to his more restricted, "scientific", conception of rationality.

[105] In his article 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', Habermas criticizes "positivism" – a system of thought to which he also reckons Karl Popper – for failing to distinguish between two different conceptions of rationality, the one formal or scientific, the other more substantial and comprehensive, comprising enlightenment values such as individual autonomy and emancipation. He argues that Popper's rationalism tacitly requires "the comprehensive rationality of unconstrained dialogue between communicating human beings" which he cannot justify according to his explicit conception of rationality. In other words, he is in need of a form of "committed reason" (ibid., 258, 268, 281), that is, a form of rationality that is not yet divested from its normative elements (ibid., 279).

We now ask, therefore, whether his “critical rationalism” – which presents itself as being broader than scientific rationality – does indeed provide a broader conception of rationality that *is* capable of incorporating value rationality, and hence the value of rationality, within itself.

1.7. THE (IR)RATIONALITY OF RATIONALISM

While the “scientific attitude” restricts itself to logical arguments and *experiments* – with falsification as criterion – Popper defines the “rationalist attitude” in the broader sense (which he sometimes calls the attitude of “reasonableness”, OSE2 225) as an attitude that tries to solve problems by having recourse to arguments and *experience* instead of emotions and sentiments.[106] He describes this attitude as follows:

> It is fundamentally an attitude of admitting that ‘*I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth.*’ It is an attitude which does not lightly give up hope that by such means as argument and careful observation, people may reach some kind of agreement on many problems of importance; and that, even where their demands and their interests clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals, and to reach – perhaps by arbitration – a compromise which, because of its equity, is acceptable to most, if not to all. (OSE2 225)

In other words, a rationalist attitude in this broader sense implies a readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience. In fact, Popper continues, we only argue with ourselves because we have learned to argue with others. Furthermore, we have learned that it is the argument that counts, rather than the person arguing. This leads to the view that *each* individual is a potential source of arguments and information, or to what Popper calls “the rational unity of mankind” (OSE2 225). He draws a link between this “inter-personal theory of reason” (OSE2 226) and the rationalism of Socrates, which consists in “the awareness of one’s limitations, the intellectual modesty of those who know how often they err, and how much they depend on others even for this knowledge” (OSE2 227). Popper contrasts it with the “intellectual intuitionism” of Plato, which regards reason as “a kind of ‘faculty’, which may be possessed and developed by different men in vastly different degrees” (OSE2 226).

Popper is intellectually honest enough to acknowledge that the *adoption* of the attitude of “rationalism” *itself* – being an attitude which claims that only arguments and experience may count – cannot be justified (“established”) by its own rational means, that is, by arguments and experience, because their use already presupposes an attitude of *readiness* to use them.[107] He therefore draws a distinction between “uncritical” and “critical” rationalism. “Uncritical” rationalism

[106] OSE2 224-225.
[107] OSE2 230.

would claim that any assumption that cannot be established by argument or experience is invalid. Yet, Popper states, this principle cannot itself be established by argument or experience. Thus, being logically inconsistent, it is defeated by its own means. "Critical" rationalism, on the other hand, acknowledges that the rationalist attitude itself cannot be established by argument or experience, because "only those who are ready to consider argument or experience, and who have therefore *adopted* this attitude already, will be impressed by them [emphasis added]" (OSE2 230), and because "no rational argument will have a rational effect on a man who does not *want* to adopt a rational attitude [emphasis added]" (OSE2 231).

Popper concludes that the choice for rationalism is an "irrational" one, for it cannot be established in terms of the rationalist criteria themselves: "…whoever adopts the rationalist attitude does so because he has adopted, consciously or unconsciously, some proposal, or decision, or belief, or behaviour; an adoption which may be called 'irrational'" (OSE2 231). Hence, Popper speaks of an "act of faith", an "irrational *faith* in reason" (OSE2 231).[108]

He claims that the nineteenth-century conflict between faith and reason has become "superseded": "Since an 'uncritical' rationalism is inconsistent, the problem cannot be the choice between knowledge and faith, but between two kinds of faith" (OSE2 246). In Popper's view, we are confronted with a choice between a "faith in reason" on the one hand and a "faith in the mystical faculties of man" on the other (OSE2 248).[109]

Yet, although this decision cannot be "determined" by argument, Popper adds that arguments may nevertheless be of some help, for we may *imagine* the concrete consequences that are likely to result from the alternative options between which we have to choose – a procedure which will at least prevent us from deciding "blindly".[110] On this basis, he argues that irrationalism is closely related to a division of mankind into "few" and "many", into "friends" and "foes",[111] for the emphasis on emotions, such as fear, but also love (of one's own group), will eventually lead to violence as arbiter. After all, he states, "we cannot feel the same emotions towards everybody. Emotionally, we all divide men into those who are near to us, and those who are far from us. The division of mankind into friend and foe is a most obvious emotional division …." (OSE2 235) Rationalism, by contrast, is "bound up with" the idea that everyone is liable to mistakes, and that, hence, everyone deserves to be heard, which suggests the ideas of impartiality, tolerance, and, finally, responsibility: "we have a duty to respond, to answer, where our

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[108] Cf. OSE1 353n6, where Popper states that the teaching of Duns Scotus and Immanuel Kant could be interpreted as approaching his "critical rationalism", insofar as their doctrines of "the primacy of the will" may be interpreted as the primacy of an irrational decision.

[109] See also OSE2 238, 240.

[110] OSE2 232-233.

[111] See also OSE2 236: "By thus abandoning reason, they split mankind into friends and foes; into the few who share in reason with the gods, and the many who don't (as Plato says); into the few who stand near and the many who stand far; into those who speak the untranslatable language of our own emotions and passions and those whose tongue is not our tongue."

actions affect others" (OSE2 238). In this sense, Popper posits, there is indeed an "ethical basis of science, and of rationalism" (OSE2 238), although he concedes that "the rightness of any ethical principle" (OSE2 238) can still not be *proved*.

Finally, we have to conclude that Popper's broader conception of rationality, or what he calls the "rationalist attitude" or the "attitude of reasonableness" – which, in contradistinction to the strictly "scientific attitude", concerns the determination of the validity of moral and political "proposals" – cannot be justified by its own standards. Elisabeth Ströker has argued that Popper could have resolved this dilemma by explicitly differentiating between his conception of scientific rationality (of falsification), which is in the foreground, and his broader conception of "reasonableness" (of listening to others), which is in the background.[112] According to her, the latter concept "turns out to be much broader and breaks out of the frame of Popper's expressly represented concept of rationality, yet without his having become aware of it."[113] This conception would allow for the possibility that decisions might be "reasonable" instead of completely "arbitrary", were it not for the fact that it does not fit into his explicitly defended conception of scientific rationality.

Habermas concludes that Popper runs the risk of lapsing into some kind of "decisionism", which maintains that political decisions are not accessible to rational consideration at all,[114] as in the political existentialism of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). However, although in Popper's case a genuine rational "consensus" about moral and political values does indeed seem to be impossible, he still allows for some kind of "arbitration" of our proposals or demands or decisions, in order thus to reach a "compromise".[115] He claims:

> … we can compare the existing normative laws (or social institutions) with some standard norms which we have decided are worthy of being realized. But even these standards are of our making in the sense that our decision in favour of them is our own decision, and that we alone carry the responsibility for adopting them. (OSE1 61)

At one point Popper characterizes our demands or decisions as "*ad hominem* arguments", that is, "appeals made in the hope that you may be induced to think or to feel in certain matters similarly as I do".[116] Again he claims that "rational argument is not entirely impossible", for:

> We can ... investigate our demand from the point of view of its compatibility with certain important and widely accepted moral and

[112] Ströker, 'Does Popper's Conventionalism Contradict His Critical Rationalism?', 275-277.
[113] Ibid., 276.
[114] Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 266; idem, 'The Analytical Theory of Science and Dialectics', 146.
[115] OSE2 225; Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 121. Cf. Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 271.
[116] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 121.

> political creeds. If we can show that it may be acceptable to some of the major creeds, and especially to some creeds which seem to disagree on the issue in question, then we can consider our demand as a little more than a merely personal solution.[117]

However, we may argue, insofar as these "major creeds" are merely accepted because they are "widely accepted", this position comes very close to what Popper himself explicitly rejects as "historism" [*Historismus*], or the doctrine that all human knowledge is historically dependent,[118] which was precisely one of the forms of moral "heteronomy" he wished to avoid in the first place.[119]

1.8. CONCLUSION

Geoffrey Stokes has argued that it is not so much the case that Popper's political philosophy is an application of his philosophy of science – his "social philosophy" in the sense of "methodology of the social sciences" – but that it is in fact the other way around. He claims that "Popper's commitment to certain political values such as freedom and toleration are conceptually prior to any epistemological commitment" and that his moral and political philosophy is "constitutive" of his philosophy of science.[120] He adds the qualification that this conceptual priority is not of any "formal" or "deductive" nature [121] – which leaves open the question of what kind of conceptual relation it is.

We have seen that, on the one hand, Popper himself indeed acknowledges that "there is an ethical basis of science, and of rationalism" (OSE2 238). Moreover, we have argued that in order for moral proposals to be in some sense rationally justified, he is bound to presuppose some kind of broader rationality. Yet at the same time he is incapable of incorporating this form of rationality within his narrower conception of scientific rationality. Accordingly, Popper maintains that "there is no 'rational scientific basis' of ethics" (OSE2 238). As a consequence, we may conclude, his "ethical basis of science, and of rationality" (OSE2 238) is floating in the air.

Nevertheless, Popper maintains that his thesis of the "autonomy" of ethics by no means implies that moral decisions are necessarily "arbitrary". On the basis of his own propositions, however, we have to conclude that this remains a mere "personal opinion",[122] because our examination of the inner logic of his theory – the mutual consistency of his propositions – leaves us with no other conclusion than that norms or decisions are by definition "personal" or "*ad hominem*". However, precisely insofar as his "proposals" retain their *ad hominem* character,

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[117] Ibid., 122.
[118] OSE2 208, 255.
[119] Cf. OSE2 267-269.
[120] Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*, 5, 6. Cf. OSE2 238, where Popper himself comes closest to affirming this thesis.
[121] Stokes, *Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*, 6.
[122] Cf. OSE1 3, 122, OSE2 259.

Popper's polemical rejection of *absolute* heteronomy (that is, of historicism – "posing as prophets" – and of naturalism, but also of "historism"), must indeed lead to a polemical embrace of *absolute* autonomy (that is, of moral statements being created and posited "ex nihilo" – "becoming the makers of our fate" – as in the case of "decisionism").

The following chapter examines whether there are moments in Popper's *writing* in which this binary distinction between and mutual interdependence of strictly objective, scientific rationality on the one hand and irrational, subjective "personal" preference on the other, is left behind. We look for moments in the text of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* about which his propositionally defended, narrower conception of rationality remains silent or for which it cannot account, but which *de facto* form the "ratio" or *raison d'être* of what Popper himself calls his "irrational" faith in reason. We examine what this "irrational" decision *attests to*, what his "act of faith" shows him to be *committed to* and *oriented by* without its being (fully) explicitly articulated by him. Moreover, we examine what the presence of these moments tell us about the conditions and possibility of political philosophy, of "thoughtfully" approaching the political.

CHAPTER 2

Analogies with Science and the Staging of Polemics

Rationality, in the sense of an appeal to a universal and impersonal standard of truth, is of supreme importance .., not only in ages in which it easily prevails, but also, and even more in those less fortunate times in which it is despised and rejected as the vain dream of men who lack the virility to kill where they cannot agree.[123]
Bertrand Russell

If we dream of a return to our childhood, if we are tempted to rely on others and so be happy, if we shrink from the task of carrying our cross, the cross of humaneness, of reason, of responsibility, if we lose courage and flinch from the strain, then we must try to fortify ourselves with a clear understanding of the simple decision before us. We can return to the beasts. But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society.[124]
Karl Popper

2.1. INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the framework of Popper's own "critical rationalism" contains no standards on the basis of which the normative decision in favor of rationalism itself can be rationally justified. In fact, he claims that rationalism coincides with the explicit discussion or justification on the basis of arguments and experience of decisions or "proposals", but the decision to adopt the *attitude* of rationalism in the first place cannot be justified in these terms. Instead, he speaks of "an irrational *faith in reason*" (OSE2 231).

Yet we may say that Popper's distinction between "reason" / the "rational" and "faith" / the "irrational" remains stuck within the traditional "Platonic" binary and hierarchical opposition between knowledge [*epistēmē*] and opinion [*doxa*], between demonstrated and undemonstrated knowledge. Within this framework, Popper can only conceive of ethics (or morality) *either* as being "scientific" *or* as being "arbitrary". As we have seen, however, he explicitly rejects both conceptions, for neither of them serves his primary intention of "saving" our individual responsibility for decisions.

Yet it should be noted that there is one occasion in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* where Popper does not merely speak of a decision in the sense of a

[123] Russell, 'The Ancestry of Fascism', 71, quoted by Karl Popper as epigraph to Chapter 23 of OSE2 212.
[124] OSE1 201.

"proposal", "demand" or "claim", but also in the sense of a "belief" or (some form of) "behavior". This is the passage in which he asserts that "whoever adopts the rationalist attitude does so because he has adopted, consciously or unconsciously, some proposal, decision, or belief, or behaviour; an adoption which may be called 'irrational'" (OSE2 231). It may be said that Popper is gradually turning away here from the notion of a "decision" understood as a "proposal", in the sense of a piece of *knowledge* to be explicitly discussed in rational terms (that is, in what he calls the language of proposals, demands, etc.), towards the notion of a "decision" understood as an *act*. What is brought to light by focusing on this one passage, is the common presupposition that underlies Popper's explicitly articulated conception(s) of rationality, for he conceives both of "propositions" (in the sense of statements of fact, "truth" claims) and "proposals" (in the sense of statements of value, claims of "rightness") as statements that are somehow capable of explicit demonstration or justification. In other words, he thinks of "decisions" in either of the following two ways: (i) as *propositional* attitudes, the truth / falsity or rightness / wrongness of which is rationally and cognitively to be established (which explains his use of the term "belief" here – which may still be understood as a propositional attitude – instead of "*act* of faith"); (ii) as empirical *facts*, the occurrence of which is to be empirically established (which explains his use of the term "behavior" here – a social scientific term – again instead of "*act* of faith").[125] It seems thus that Popper can only conceive of an "act of faith" as a form of immature *knowledge* – knowledge still to be "tested" by rational justification or by empirical proof – instead of as a form of *action* or *practice*.

Indeed, what is hidden by his use of the terms "belief" and "behavior" is the possibility that his "irrational faith in reason" could as well be conceived of as a form of thoughtful *action*, which, precisely because it falls outside of Popper's binary rationality / irrationality distinction, need *not* be characterized as "irrational" merely for the fact that it is not (yet) explicitly formulated in the form of a cognitive and testable "proposition" or "proposal". James Tully has argued that even Jürgen Habermas, while being a critic of Popper, does not sufficiently acknowledge that the form of validation – the form of rational justification inherent in communicative action which demands that an agreement reached communicatively must be based "in the end" on reasons that are capable of being made explicit – must itself be considered as a *practice* of thought, which, in common with all practices, presuppose ways of acting with words that are in themselves not true or false.[126] Accordingly, Tully speaks of a false dichotomy between rational justification and irrational behavior.[127] Similarly, Arnold Burms has argued that the demand for rational justification or a foundation of morals

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[125] See OSE1 63-64.
[126] Tully, 'Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy', especially 18, 21, 24, 26.
[127] Ibid., 27: "… once we free ourselves from the convention that we are free and rational only if we can justify the grounds of any uses we follow, we can see that there is a multiplicity of ways of being rationally (and thoughtfully) guided by rules of use, short of self-grounding validation, that is not reducible to the behaviorist's causal compulsion of habit."

falsely assumes that ethics is the same kind of "objectifying" pursuit as science.[128] Instead, he proposes to replace the notion of a "justifying truth" by the alternative notion of an "orientating truth", which he uses to refer to an evocative truth to which my life is attuned, towards which my life is oriented,[129] or by which I am inspired,[130] and which forms an answer to the question *in light of what* should I live.[131]

This chapter examines the *de facto ratio* (or *raison d'être*) of the "decision" which Popper himself characterizes as "irrational" and yet not "arbitrary", in order thus to contribute to tracing the "deeply hidden structural features" of his writing, that is, the elements which shape the *performative* meaning of his work.

In the first part, we explore the main strategy that is employed in Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in order to escape from the possible consequence of his conception of rationality, viz. the verdict that decisions are "arbitrary". Although moral or political "proposals" – including the "proposal" to adopt the attitude of rationalism itself – cannot be justified in the same strict sense as scientific propositions – after all, Popper maintains a strict dualism of facts and values – attention is drawn to the fact that he takes refuge instead in the use of several *analogies* between politics and science. We examine three of such analogies that can be traced within his writing. It is not only their content that is assessed, that is, their correspondence to political *reality* – is politics "really" "like" science? – but, and perhaps more fundamentally, we also take notice of the fact that the *use* of analogies *as such* points to the presence of a language within Popper's writing that *differs* from the "propositional" language that has been discerned so far. In fact, the former turns out to be *constitutive* of the latter, insofar as "faith" in reason (or in "rationalism") is carried by reason's analogy with science. It is argued that science, or rather Popper's idealized picture thereof, serves as an "orientating truth" in our understanding of politics, or as that in light of which Popper *makes sense* of politics and gives it its *meaning*.

The second part explores another moment in Popper's writing that escapes from the "propositional", that is, from the order both of testable scientific rationality and value rationality. Attention is drawn to the conception of politics that is *performed* by his discourse, viz. the polemical politics of appealing to sentiments such as fear and pride in the sole service of achieving victory in the "necessitated" struggle between the "friends" and the "enemies" of the open society, which is precisely the opposite of the conception of politics which is *proposed* in his discourse, viz. the politics of rational (free and impartial) discussion of proposals.

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[128] Burms, *Waarheid, evocatie, symbool* [Truth, Evocation, Symbol].
[129] Ibid., 10.
[130] Ibid., 41.
[131] Ibid., 12.

2.2. ANALOGIES WITH SCIENCE

Here we assess three different analogies between scientific and political rationality that can be traced throughout Popper's book, all of which fulfill an *orientating* role in the decision to adopt the attitude of rationalism, a decision that he characterizes as "irrational" according to his explicit standards. The analogies surface on several occasions in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, and especially towards the end of its second volume, in chapters 24 and 25, where Popper articulates his "critical rationalism" and his method of historical interpretation.

2.2.1. THE ANALOGY BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENT AND MORAL IMAGINATION

Popper acknowledges that moral and political proposals or decisions differ from scientific propositions to the extent that they cannot be immediately deduced from experience, nor can they be unambiguously "determined" by argument. Nevertheless, as the previous chapter has shown, he argues that they may be "helped" by a kind of argument, which consists in the visualization of the concrete consequences that are likely to result from the alternatives between which we have to choose, a procedure that will at least prevent us from deciding "blindly":[132]

> ... whenever we are faced with a moral decision of a more abstract kind, it is most helpful to analyse carefully the consequences which are likely to result from the alternatives between which we have to choose. For only if we can visualize the consequences in a concrete and practical way, do we really know what our decision is about; otherwise we decide blindly. (OSE2 232)

In this respect, Popper contends, there is "a certain analogy" (OSE2 233) between testing by argument and actual *experiment* on the one hand (as in the case of a scientific method), and testing by our *conscience*, that is, by argument and imagined experience, by foreseeing and assessing the consequences of one's actions, on the other hand (as in the case of moral and political decision-making). In both cases, we employ a kind of decision *procedure* that enables us to "test" the validity of propositions and proposals.[133]

However, we argue that this analogy has several shortcomings. In the *first* place, I would argue that the mere visualization of the (possible) consequences of our moral decisions is not sufficient, for what is still needed is a *substantial* standard or norm in light of which we may assess and decide which consequences are morally permissible and which are not.[134] As the previous chapter has shown,

[132] OSE2 232-233.
[133] OSE2 233: "The rational and imaginative analysis of the consequences of a moral theory has a certain analogy in scientific method."
[134] Cf. OSE1 61: "… we can compare the existing normative laws (or social institutions) with some standard norms which we have decided are worthy to be realized."

when seeking to establish substantial norms, Popper does not seem to go further than claiming that such "standard norms" (OSE1 61) – presumably freedom, individualism, egalitarianism, humanitarianism – are also "of our making" (OSE1 61), which would merely reiterate the problem of the *grounding* of these norms. There are only a few occasions when Popper comes to a more concrete scrutiny of the validity of these standard norms, as in the following passage, for instance:

> We can … investigate our demand from the point of view of its compatibility with certain important and widely accepted moral and political creeds. If we can show that it may be acceptable to some of the major creeds, and especially to some creeds which seem to disagree on the issue in question, then we can consider our demand as a little more than a merely personal solution.[135]

As has already been asserted, Popper does not make it clear why we *ought to* accept these "creeds" for reasons other than that they are "important" insofar as they are *in fact* "widely accepted", and hence he comes very close to adopting a *historicist* (or, in Popper's terms, a "historist") position, which is precisely one of the positions he criticizes.[136]

Apart from this failure to provide a substantial norm, there is a *second* shortcoming of this procedural analogy, which consists in the fact that it does not differentiate between *moral* decisions – i.e. "norms enforced not by the state but … by our conscience" – and *political* decisions – i.e. "state-enforced norms" (OSE1 113) or laws. It is not clear to what extent and exactly how a procedure for the "testing" of moral decisions by individual consciences would work in the case of political decision-making. For, in the *first* place, the additional element that comes into play in the case of political decision-making is the problem of how to attune (the decisions of) different individual consciences to each other. To that end, Popper needs a notion of *citizen*ship or *public* reason, which in this analogy remains underdeveloped.[137] Later, political philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, who wrote at a time when liberal democracy was (once again) more firmly established, did focus on the development of such notions.[138] In the *second* place, another element that comes into play in the case of political decision-making is that *political* proposals are to be turned into *law*, that is, into binding norms (decisions that are somehow collectively enforced) that constitute a duty or an *obligation,* instead of norms that are agreed to by our *conscience* (decisions that are individually upheld) and that constitute a mere demand or *claim*.

Popper seems to acknowledge this crucial difference between a moral (or private) and a political (or public) decision when he states that Socrates, whom he

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[135] Popper, 'Public and Private Values', 122.

[136] Cf. OSE2 267: "… since each generation has its own troubles and problems, and therefore its own interests and its own point of view, it follows that each generation has a right to look upon and re-interpret history in its own way, which is complementary to that of previous generations."

[137] Cf. Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision', 271, 278, 279.

[138] See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*; Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.

associates closest with the idea of individual conscience,[139] “was mistaken when he considered himself a politician; he was a teacher” (OSE1 191). Socrates, in caring for the souls or individual selves of his interlocutors, proved to be more interested in the “personal aspect” of the open society than in “institutional reform” (OSE1 191).[140] In his book as a whole, the crucial *difference* – and even *opposition*, as is shown in Plato’s *Gorgias* – between Socrates, a philosopher, and Pericles, a politican, is downplayed by Popper in service of his attempt to stage them as *allies* against Plato in what he considers the crucial respect: the *decisive* and even historical struggle of the “friends” of the open society against its “enemies”.[141]

2.2.2. The Analogy between Eliminating Falsity and Eliminating Suffering

As we have seen, the first analogy Popper uses, which focuses on the *procedural* character of scientific and moral or political decisions, does not offer any *substantial* criterion. The second analogy, to which we now turn, does appear to offer such a substantial standard. According to Popper, there is an *analogy* to be drawn between the elimination of false theories (or falsificationism), which he considers to be the task of science, and the elimination of human suffering (or negative utilitarianism), which he considers to be the task of politics.[142] Jan-Werner Mueller has noted that, by thus taking the fallibility of human knowledge as his basic assumption, Popper seeks a kind of “certainty about uncertainty”.[143]

To be sure, Popper’s analogy does not draw solely on the common element of “elimination”, that is, of *negation*. For the general or universal validity of the attempt to eliminate human suffering is somehow linked to the *urgency* that is inherent in such matters: “human suffering makes a direct moral appeal, namely, the appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway” (OSE1 284n2).[144] Accordingly, and perhaps more

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[139] OSE1 66: “[The historical Socrates] felt compelled, by his conscience as well as by his religious beliefs, to question all authority and … searched for the norms in whose justice he could trust.

[140] Cf. OSE2 276.

[141] As we shall see in the second and third part of this dissertation, both Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt are much more aware of the difference between philosophy and politics, and between individual conscience and the law, which testifies to the extent to which Popper’s political philosophy moves within the framework of liberal and democratic political philosophy, according to which both conscience and law rule within their own, pre-established spheres within the already structurally differentiated “open society”.

[142] OSE1 285n2: “There is some kind of analogy between this view of ethics [i.e. the negative utilitarian one, WC] and the view of scientific methodology which I have advocated in my *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. It adds to clarity in the field of ethics if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness. Similarly, it is helpful to formulate the task of scientific method as the elimination of false theories (from the various theories tentatively proffered) rather than the attainment of established truths.”

[143] Mueller, ‘Fear and Freedom’, 51.

[144] Cf. OSE1 65, where Popper explains the difference between moral and aesthetic decisions in terms of the greater urgency of the former: “Many moral decisions involve the life and death of other men. Decisions in the field of art are much less urgent and important. It is therefore most misleading to say

precisely, Popper points to an analogy between the *compelling* character of the logic of falsification (which is absent in case of the logic of verification) and the equally *compelling* character of appeal of the need to escape from suffering and pain (which is absent in case of a longing for the realization of so-called positive values).[145]

However, it is questionable whether this analogy solves the problem of "arbitrariness" either, for it should be noted that the professed *universal* validity of the collective effort to eliminate human suffering cannot be understood without and must in the last instance be derived from the experience of a *particular* appeal of a concrete human individual who is in distress. As Arnold Burms has argued, one first needs to understand what it means to respond to the suffering of a concrete individual in order to be able to understand what it would mean to care about the reduction of the totality of human suffering. Because the latter enterprise is embedded in an experience it cannot incorporate, then, our response to the suffering of a concrete individual cannot be understood as a mere additive contribution to the collective enterprise of reducing the totality of human suffering.[146] Moreover, when we focus on the particular experience of a concrete moral appeal, it is clear that as long as someone is in severe pain, the relief of that pain will indeed be the urgent and encompassing goal that takes precedence over all other possible moral goals. As Burms argues, however, it is not thereby implied that the relief of pain is also the central or *highest* goal in life. What deserves priority (or what is compelling) in *some* situations is not thereby the highest goal in *all* situations, in human life as such.[147] This implies that the difficult and potentially *divisive* question "how should we live?" (which *positive* values do we consider worth realizing?) cannot be avoided by having recourse to the professed *compelling* appeal of human suffering – as if it were possible to find a standard in moral and political reasoning that provides the same compelling evidence as do the rules of logic in scientific reasoning.

Perhaps we should say, then, that the final reason why Popper embraces a negative utilitarian view of ethics in answer to those questions is based on the expectation that this is the only answer that will increase the chance that *agreement* will be reached. For, as we have seen in the previous chapter, he seems to praise the value of political *disagreement* at best and exclusively within the limits of technology, that is, precisely when the fundamental, constitutional questions have already been decided,[148] about which he says:

that a man decides for or against slavery as he may decide for or against certain works of music and literature, or that moral decisions are purely matters of taste. Nor are they merely decisions about how to make the world more beautiful, or about other luxuries of this kind; they are decisions of much greater urgency."

[145] Cf. OSE2 237.

[146] Burms, 'Disagreement, Perspectivism, Consequentialism', 162-163.

[147] Burms, *Waarheid, evocatie, symbool* [Truth, Evocation, Symbol], 96-97.

[148] See OSE1 110-111.

> In favour of his method, the piecemeal engineer can claim that a systematic fight against suffering and injustice and war is more likely to be supported by the approval and agreement of a great number of people than the fight for the establishment of some ideal. The existence of social evils, that is to say, of social conditions under which many men are suffering, can be comparatively well established. Those who suffer can judge for themselves, and the others can hardly deny that they would not like to change places. (OSE1 158-159) [149]

We may answer that, even in this case, Popper would still need to provide an answer to the question of what makes “agreement” (or public peace) a greater good than “disagreement” (or public conflict), and in which cases. To conclude, there is no way to avoid the question of the positive (or substantial) good from surfacing in moral and political matters.

On the basis of this analysis, we may argue that Popper, rather than insisting on the “irrationality” of moral and political decisions, could have adopted a different conception of rationality, one that does not seek an objective “decision procedure” or compelling standard (either of a more procedural or a more substantial nature) analogous to (empirical) science. For, as Burms has argued, the search for an objective decision procedure is simply not what we are doing when we are making moral (and political) decisions. Perhaps it would be possible to avoid the danger of the “arbitrariness” of moral and political decisions, then, precisely on the condition that we leave behind the functioning of science or engineering as our “orientating truth” (and look instead for a different “orientating truth”).

One of the advantages of this approach would be that it fits much better with Popper’s *own* explicit rejection of what he calls a “scientific ethics”, that is, an ethics that aims “at telling us what we ought to do, i.e. at constructing a code of norms upon a scientific basis, so that we need only look up the index of the code if we are faced with a difficult moral decision” (OSE1 237n18). He calls this form of ethics “a form of escape, and escape from the realities of moral life, i.e. from our moral responsibilities” (OSE1 237n18). Hence, Popper’s rejection of “scientific ethics”, which is informed by his assumption of the *logical* separation of facts (or science) and norms (or ethics), stands in direct opposition to his embrace of any *analogical* correspondence between the two. He argues that “scientific” ethics harbors the same danger as would a “historicist”, “naturalist”, etc. ethics, viz. turn it into something “heteronomous”. Apparently, in *this* sense ethics is *far from* analogous to science.

In sum, we may say that Popper wishes to have it both ways: he insists on the strictly *logical distinction* between science and ethics (the dualism of facts and

[149] Cf. Popper, ‘Public and Private Values’, 122: “It is much easier to agree on a list of urgent social evils to be combated at once and by piecemeal measures than on a vision of a good society, to be realized in some more or less distant future.” See also Judith Shklar, ‘The Liberalism of Fear’, 11: “Because the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal, moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal and can gain recognition without much argument.”

values) – "ethical problems cannot be solved by the rational methods of science" (OSE1 292n11) – but in order to escape from the verdict of "arbitrariness", he simultaneously insists on the *analogical similarity* between them, in the hope of somehow thereby bestowing the aura of "certainty" upon ethics, a characteristic which in fact belongs to science (or his idealized picture thereof).

2.2.3. THE ANALOGY BETWEEN THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF SCIENTIFIC RATIONALITY AND THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF MORAL RATIONALITY

We now return to our question of what the *de facto* foundation is for the rationalist attitude (or the attitude of reasonableness). As the previous chapter has shown, Popper asserts that it rests on an "irrational faith", while he also claims that the rationalist attitude is *intrinsically* "linked up with" (OSE2 238) certain ethical principles and the political institutionalization thereof. In order to fortify this latter thesis, he uses another analogy.

This *third* analogy which we can trace in Popper's writing, is drawn between the social or inter-personal character of scientific method on the one hand and the social or inter-personal character of the rationalist attitude on the other.[150] Thus he seems to suggest that the validity of the moral recognition of the other which is linked with the (broader) rationalist attitude, is somehow "similar" to the same recognition that is part of the scientific attitude. Popper explains that scientific method has a *public* character: the scientists needs to allow his theories to be *freely criticized*, and the observations and experiments done need to be of a *public* character: "scientists try to express their theories in such a form that they can be tested, i.e. refuted (or else corroborated) by such experience" (OSE2 218). Analogously, the attitude of rationalism (or of reasonableness) in general requires one to listen to the others' arguments, and to refer to arguments and experiences (rather than emotions and passions), which can be publicly scrutinized.[151] In the first place, the attitude of rationalism implies – is "bound up with" or "linked up with" (OSE2 238) – the moral recognition of the other as other, just as in the case of science. In the second place, the attitude of rationalism requires some kind of political institutionalization of that moral recognition, again analogous to scientific practice.[152]

It is clear that, just as in the case of the previous analogies, this one does not serve as a *justification* for the decision to adopt a rationalist attitude (or an attitude of reasonableness), because, from the perspective of Popper's conception of rationalism at least, the validity of the scientific attitude in light of which it is interpreted – or which provides its orientation – would also require justification: what justifies the decision to adopt the method of science in the first place? What Popper needs instead is a theoretical account of what it *means* to adopt an

[150] OSE2 225, 217-218.
[151] OSE2 224-225.
[152] OSE2 227, 236, 238-239.

"attitude" or to participate in a "practice", and of the extent to which *analogical* thinking may serve as *ratio* for that adoption.

In the second place, we may ask how the *political* institutionalization of the moral principles that are embodied within the attitude of reasonableness takes shape.[153] For there is an important difference between the "social institution" of science on the one hand, and the "social institution" of politics or of the state on the other. In the case of science, the recognition of the other only regards people who are somehow willing to contribute to the search for knowledge and the methods for gaining knowledge (for example, by speaking the language of science). What is at stake in science (that is to say, in Popper's idealized form thereof), is the search for theoretical, propositional truth, or, in the case of the applied sciences such as engineering, the successful application of that knowledge. In the field of politics, on the other hand, what is at stake is "the power of man over man" (OSE2 236), as Popper himself acknowledges in passing. In this case, the *binding* – in the sense of *obligating* – power of the institution in question is at least to a certain extent bound up with the implicitly presupposed and potentially violent use of force that is exercised by the *state* or *government*, sanctioned by the *law*. As we have seen, the presence of state power is always presupposed by Popper, although he does not provide a full theoretical articulation of it. Moreover, nor does he articulate the founding or institution of the state as such, that is, the *obligating* rather than *claiming* decision with which it is bound up. We may therefore characterize Popper's explicit conception of politics as an anti-revolutionary (anti-violent) one: because politics coincides with *democratic* politics, the *decisive* moment (the choice *in favor of* democracy) is removed from sight and is not *recognized* as itself also *political*.

This omission may well be connected to the fact that Popper chooses from the outset to treat his political philosophy within the framework of "social philosophy". That is to say, he applies the methodology of the social sciences and social engineering / technology as applied social science to the sphere of "*the state*", that is, the realm of "the political" insofar as it can be distinguished as a separate sphere within "the open society" (or "civilization"), while (the legitimacy of) the institution or founding of the latter is always already presupposed, without being called into question. As a result, Popper does not arrive at the formulation of a political philosophy in the more encompassing sense of an explicit and theoretical articulation of the *raison d'être* of "the political" in a broader sense, that is, "the political" as it is implied in the decision in favor of the "open society" as a *particular* type of society, a decision which precedes and constitutes the institution of "the political" in the narrower sense of the realm of the state or of legality, understood as a sub-sphere within that "open society".

So far, this section has shown that Popper attempts to remedy the danger of the "arbitrariness" of his "faith" in reason – which is in itself caused by his strict separation of (scientific) facts and (moral) decisions – by *drawing on several*

[153] Cf. OSE2 238.

analogies between scientific reasoning on the one side and moral (and political) reasoning on the other. As such, the aura of certainty – or of certainty about uncertainty, as Jan-Werner Mueller puts it [154] – which belongs to science (or to Popper's idealized picture thereof) is "carried over" to morality and politics. We have traced and examined three such analogies: (i) the analogy between testing by scientific experiment and testing by the imaginative power of our conscience; (ii) the analogy between the elimination of false theories and the elimination of human suffering; (iii) the analogy between the social (or inter-personal) character of the science and the social (or inter-personal) character of moral (and political) reasoning.

All three of these analogies have been found wanting for several reasons. In the *first* place, they are wanting in their *substance*. By invoking and attesting to the self-evidence of "science" and "engineering" as models or ideal types for politics, several aspects of the latter are removed from sight. Insofar as Popper (and his readers) is (are) led by this picture of politics, that is, insofar as this picture of politics is *constitutive* of his discourse, insofar as it provides the *orientation* for his discourse instead of merely being the *subject* of his discourse (which it also is), we can locate part of what I would call "the spell of Popper" – the effect of a language he *uses* that falls outside the "scientific" or "rationalist" language he *advocates* – precisely in the force and meaning of these analogies. These analogies are enforced by Popper's use of the expression "social engineering", which is a frozen metaphor for the analogy between mechanical engineering and political reform, and which determines from the outset the perspective from which he invites us to picture the phenomenon of politics.[155] Whereas the use of metaphorical language seems to be excluded from Popper's conception of rational language on the propositional level – remember his claim that a normative statement, in contradistinction to a factual one, can "*only* in a metaphorical sense [emphasis added]" be called "true" or "false" (OSE1 58) – at crucial moments his writing turns out to be *resting* precisely on such language.

In the *second* place, and more fundamentally, Popper fails to account for this crucial, because *orientating* (rather than *justifying*) role of analogies which is present within and which underlies his own discourse. That is to say, he does not make it clear whether the use of analogies can be considered as part of the "rationalist attitude" or not; that is, of the attitude in which only logical argument and actual experience may count.[156]

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[154] Mueller, 'Fear and Freedom', 51.

[155] See especially OSE1 24, 67-68, 163.

[156] In his 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition', 180-182, Popper draws a distinction between the "expressive" and "stimulating" functions of language on the one hand, and the "descriptive" and "argumentative" functions on the other. He claims that human beings share the first two functions of language with the animals, while he considers the latter two specifically human. Although he admits that language, in so far as language *qua* language has all four functions, may be ambivalent, Popper strongly defends a critical tradition which works against this ambivalence, in favor of the descriptive and argumentative uses of language only.

Popper might reply that the role performed by analogy within the rationalist attitude belonging to moral and political reasoning is similar to that of the role of the “searchlight” in the empirical sciences (OSE2 260-261, 268).[157] He claims that the role performed by a hypothesis in the empirical science “is analogous to” that of a “point of view” or an “interest” in historiography or the interpretative sciences. However, when it comes to explaining what such a “point of view” or “interest” in the case of the latter sciences consists of, Popper claims that it is determined by a certain “pressing need’, while he does not mention the constitutive role of analogies in shaping such a “point of view” or “interest”. As he characterizes the use of such a “point of view” within the interpretative sciences as “analogous” to the role fulfilled by the “searchlight” in the empirical sciences,[158] we have in fact traced another, *fourth* analogy with the (empirical) sciences. Thereby our initial point is merely reinforced, for once again Popper employs the use of analogy without showing any “theoretical consciousness” (Geuss) of that use.

Meanwhile, our attention to the unarticulated *use* of analogies has put us on the track of an aspect of philosophical writing that differs from its propositional (or justificatory) aspect, for Popper’s multiple appeal to forceful “analogies” within the heart of his argumentation shows that there are moments within his writing when he uses a language that not only falls outside the “scientific” language of “propositions”, but is also not explicitly included by him within the category of the “rational” language of “proposals”.

2.3. THE STAGING OF POLEMICS

The second part of this chapter considers the assumption that thought – including political thought – is a *practice* and not merely a body of knowledge, the validity of which is to be tested as our starting point. Accordingly, we ask whether the politics *enacted* by Popper – that is, the political attitude to which his writing attests – is in fact in agreement with the politics he explicitly *proposes*, that is, with piecemeal social engineering as “rational” method of politics. In other words: with regard to the *decision* in favor of the politics of proposing, does Popper *act* in accordance with his own *proposal* to conceive of politics in terms of a free and rational discussion about proposals?

Let us first return to the primary goal of Popper’s project as reconstructed in the previous chapter. He aims to save a politics of rationality and responsibility, which is closely linked to the moral recognition of “the rational unity of mankind”. However, we have found that this kind of politics is jeopardized by the merely scientific or technological conception of rationality he defends on the level of his propositions. In fact, it turned out that the decision in favor of a rational politics of proposing cannot be justified on the basis of its own assumptions, that is, on the basis of logical argument and experience. As Popper explains, all argumentation

[157] OSE2 261-262, 268.
[158] OSE2 261, 268.

rests on certain assumptions, and these cannot all be based on argumentation themselves. He could have chosen to *broaden* his conception of rationality (in order to *include* assumptions which are themselves not argued for), but he chose to retain his narrower, falsificationist, conception of rationality. As a consequence, his position seemed to lead to some form of "decisionism", in which case (moral and political) arguments would be merely *ad hominem*.

We now shift our attention from the *propositional* level of his text to the level of its *performance*. It is argued that his writing attests precisely to a "polemical" conception of politics in the emphatic sense of the word, viz. as a life-and-death struggle between friends and enemies, a conception of politics that is in fact very similar to that of Carl Schmitt,[159] which is completely at odds with the rational form of politics defended by Popper on the propositional level. As we have seen, Popper stages his *act* of proposing within the larger framework of a necessary and historical struggle, of the invocation of a "state of necessity" in which the very survival of "our civilization", of *our* "open society", is at stake.

Examining Popper's discourse more closely, its structure turns out to be very polemical indeed. He divides mankind into two camps, a camp of the "friends" of the open society and a camp of its "enemies", who are involved in a struggle within which there are only two options: *victory* or *defeat*.[160] As we have seen in the previous chapter, Popper speaks of the need to overcome the "fatal division" among "those on whose defence civilization depends" (OSE1 vii). There is no time for discussion – i.e. for the attitude of "*I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth*" (OSE2 225) – but only for a *fight*, in which it is actually permissible to use other means than (mere) rational argument, such as emotions and sentiments.

Popper employs several means. In the *first* place, the choice in favor of the open society is staged within a *progressive* historical narrative within which the allies of the "closed society" are pictured as "primitive" and backward. In other words, historically, the decision in favor of the open society has already been taken, whereas on the propositional level Popper has claimed that historical "progress" rests with us and hence is never secure.[161] In the *second* place, the *decision* in favor of the open society is equated with *being human* as such, which becomes clear from the penultimate sentences of the first volume of the book:

> If we dream of a return to our childhood, if we are tempted to rely on others and so be happy, if we shrink from the task of carrying our cross, the cross of humaneness, of reason, of responsibility, if we lose courage and flinch from the strain, then we must try to fortify ourselves with a clear understanding of the simple decision before us. We can return to the beasts. But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society. (OSE1 201)

[159] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.
[160] OSE1 vii.
[161] OSE2 279-280.

In other words, whoever does not make the “simple decision” in favor of the open society is not merely an enemy of the open society or of “civilization”, but places himself outside *humanity* as such.[162] Thus, Popper acts as if there is “only one way”, as if there is really *one* option, by which he excludes or at least starkly reduces the possibility of free choice he wishes to save in the first place.

In addition, the sentiments that are actually *invoked* by Popper here, such as fear (of being primitive and even inhuman), and love (for) and pride (in) (being progressive and human) are precisely the sentiments which he declares on the propositional level are to be *rejected* because of their divisive and possible violent effect. Indeed, we have seen him praising faith in and hope for the open society and its concomitant rational attitude over the fear and despair which would lead to an escape from the autonomy and responsibility belonging to “the strain of civilization” into the heteronomy of the “historicist” attitude belonging to the closed society.[163]

In sum, the *polemical* politics which Popper *performs* by his manner of writing appeals to the necessity of *struggle*, that is, to a “decision” in the sense of a specific course of *action* to be taken instead of in the sense of a “proposal” to be discussed in *theory*. This conception of the political includes the following elements. First, invoking a space for reasonable discussion in *freedom* is replaced by invoking a state of *necessity*. Secondly, *logical argumentation* is replaced by an appeal to *emotions or sentiments*. Thirdly, invoking the rational *unity of mankind* is replaced by a *division of mankind* into a camp of “friends” and a camp of “enemies” (the latter of which are at some point even pushed out of humanity).

Popper might defend himself by asserting that the politics which he *performs* here – invoking a state of necessity – is nothing more than invoking a state of *exception*, which is permissible *exclusively* in name of a defense of the state of *normal* politics, the status quo, which is, as we have seen, identified by him as that of the politics of piecemeal social engineering. In his treatment of Marx, Popper explicitly – that is, on the level of his propositions – discusses the possibility of the necessity to defend democracy.[164] He posits that the use of violence is permitted or considered to be legitimate *only* if the use of reason falls short in defending democracy: “… the use of violence is justified only under a tyranny which makes reforms without violence impossible, and it should have only one aim, that is, to bring about a state of affairs which makes reforms without

[162] In Schmittian terms, Popper’s *moral* decision (to belong or not to belong to “humanity”) may be said to hide what is in fact a *political* decision (to belong or not to belong to a specific friend-enemy grouping). See Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 54: “When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one’s own and to deny the same to the enemy.”

[163] OSE2 279: “… historicism is born of our despair in the rationality and responsibility of our actions. It is a debased hope and a debased faith, an attempt o replace the hope and the faith that springs from our moral enthusiasm and the contempt for success by a certainty that springs from a pseudo-science; a pseudo-science of the stars, or of ‘human nature’, or of historical destiny.”

[164] OSE2 151-152, 160-162.

violence possible" (OSE2 151). We could say that "revolutionary" (violent) politics is *only* permitted in defense of "democratic" politics. It may not be a coincidence that this is the only occasion when Popper does not speak of a battle *against* tyranny (which is his usual, negative utilitarian formulation), but of a battle *for* democracy (as if he knows that the formulation of a negative goal would not be enough to win the battle):

> Democracy provides an invaluable battle-ground for any reasonable reform, since it permits reform without violence. But if the preservation of democracy is not made the first consideration in any particular battle fought out on this battle-ground, then the latent anti-democratic tendencies which are always present (and which appeal to those who suffer under the strain of civilization …) may bring about a breakdown of democracy. If an understanding of these principles is not yet developed, its development must be fought for. (OSE2 161)

We might say, then, that *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is to be read as the product of a state of *exception*, in which the first consideration is the *preservation* of democracy.

Yet, in a certain sense this is beside the point, for what I am arguing is that Popper lacks the "theoretical self-consciousness" (Raymond Geuss) to *connect* in any meaningful way what he *is claiming* on the *propositional* level – that is, his conception of knowledge and rationality – to what he *is doing* on the *performative* level. To be more precise: he fails to relate his propositional *articulation* of the possibility and legitimacy of the state of exception in certain circumstances to what he himself, as writer and thus as actor, is *enacting*, viz. furthering a polemical conception of politics.

In the *first* place, he fails to ask what the effective consequences are (both in the sense of the performative meaning and the actual historical impact) of the conception of polemical politics he *practices* in his writing, that is, the "deed" he performs, for the actual realization of the rational and responsible politics he explicitly argues for, that is, of the "first word" he asserts. In other words, he fails in the task of giving a theoretical account of the *practice* of his thinking.

In the *second* place, Popper does not offer an explicit theoretical articulation of what the fact that he himself, on the performative level, *cannot avoid* invoking the polemical conception of politics which he rejected on the propositional level, would imply for the question of how "realistic" and how consistent his explicitly articulated conception of politics (as the politics of proposing) actually is. In other words, he fails in the task of offering a conception of the political that is sufficiently comprehensive and consistent.

2.4. Critical Perspectives: Modern and Ancient

The analysis in the previous two sections has established that the positive, substantial *question* of the good society and the best form of government cannot be

avoided; that is, the question of the right political order or “best constitution” cannot be reduced to or substituted by an (allegedly) “objective” “method”, “decision procedure”, or “language”. Moreover, every *decisive* and obligating answer to this fundamental question inevitably implies a form of “closure”, in the sense of the exclusion of other answers. Therewith, a form of “closure” (i.e. something by which it is constituted but which it cannot incorporate) is present within the heart of the “open” society. We have argued that, in Popper’s case, this place or moment is occupied by the following two elements: (i) the *orientation* towards the practice of science or engineering as a true or self-evident, presupposed ideal to which the practice of politics is pictured as being “analogous” and in favor of which ideal Popper has in fact always already *decided* (as was demonstrated in the first section of this chapter); (ii) the *staging* of a polemical politics which is rejected (or at best presented as an “exception”) on the propositional level, but which is in fact always already decided in favor of on the performative level (as was demonstrated in the second section of this chapter).

In order to find an alternative account of politics, philosophy (or thinking), and their interrelatedness, we need to open up a critical perspective on Popper’s political philosophy. We may find such a perspective by drawing attention to an apparent contradiction in his work. Throughout his book, Popper claims that the problems of the open society are coeval with civilization *as such* (which he claims was “born” in ancient Greece) and have (since then) in a certain sense been “perennial”, that is, belonging to the human condition as such. Yet, in the preface to the *second* edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1950), Popper suggests that the problems that are coeval with the open society – especially the risk of social engineering becoming “utopian” – are closely connected to the specifically *modern* belief in the possibility of relieving human suffering by *human* means only:[165]

> I see now more clearly than ever before that even our greatest troubles spring from something that is as admirable and sound as it is dangerous – from our impatience to better the lot of our fellows. For these troubles are the by-products of what is perhaps the greatest of all moral and spiritual revolutions of history, a movement which began three centuries ago. It is the longing of uncounted unknown men to free themselves and their minds from the tutelage of authority and prejudice. It is their attempt to build up an open society which rejects the absolute authority of the merely established and the merely traditional while trying to preserve, to develop, and to establish traditions, old or new, that measure up to their standards of freedom, of humaneness, and of rational criticism. It is their unwillingness to sit back and leave the entire responsibility for ruling the world to human or superhuman authority, and their readiness to share the burden of responsibility for avoidable suffering, and to work for its avoidance. This revolution has created powers of appalling destructiveness; but they may be conquered. (OSE1 ix)

[165] This contradiction is also noted by Holmes, ‘Aristippus in and out of Athens’.

What is suggested here is that the problems belonging to the open society originate in a "moral and spiritual revolution" that started "three centuries ago", that is, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, when Hobbes and Spinoza wrote their influential works.[166] We may say, then, that the problems that coincide with the use of science and technology as a means to relieve "the strain of civilization" are not the result of a *perennial* condition, but of a historical *decision*, led by the appeal of modern science and born in a polemic against pre-modern forms of authority and prejudice. As soon as this historical horizon is opened up, that is, as soon as the *institution* of "the open society" and of its "method" of "piecemeal social engineering" have become opened once again to question, two alternative directions become visible.

In the first place, the principles of modernity (especially technical rationality) can be criticized in the name of the principles of modernity itself. This is the road that has been taken by Critical Theory, in response to what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have called the dialectics of Enlightenment.[167] In its most sophisticated form, this is developed by Habermas in his theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy as the political institutionalization thereof.[168] There is indeed a clear similarity between his ideas and Popper's plea for an "attitude of reasonableness" as the embodiment of moral ideals such as impartiality, tolerance, and responsibility, based on his "inter-personal theory of reason". The drawback of this approach, however, would be that it still tends to hold on to an idealized picture of politics as a form of rational discussion, which it presents as a privileged use of language.

Secondly, the principles of modernity can be criticized in the name of those of pre-modernity, or, to be more precise, of ancient political philosophy. In a way this is the more radical road. As the next two chapters will show, it is connected with the name of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), whose restoration of the pre-modern horizon re-establishes the difference between philosophy and politics and the concomitant ranking of contemplation (theory) *above* action (practice). "Utopian" thinking in the original (pre-modern, classical) sense of the word is never "activist", but raises the *theoretical* question of the best regime, apart from the *practical* question of its actual realization.[169]

Against the background of the classical position, then, it becomes clear that Popper's notions of "utopian" and "piecemeal" social engineering in fact share one and the same presupposition: political philosophy is *active*, that is, it culminates in laying down a "political program" or "political demand", which is to be realized in practice.[170] Accordingly, Popper reads Plato from the outset as if he presents a "political program", rather than as a philosopher who wishes to come to a *theoretical* understanding of the *problem* of politics, that is, of the problematic

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[166] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670).
[167] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* .
[168] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*; idem, *Between Facts and Norms*. Cf. OSE2 238.
[169] See also Shklar, 'The Political Theory of Utopia', 164-165.
[170] See Lane, 'Plato, Popper, Strauss, and Utopianism: Open Secrets?', 119-142.

character of the question of the best constitution, in which the relation between the philosopher and the political should always be taken into account. Moreover, Popper considers Plato's dialogues merely as monologues or treatises in disguise, instead of written performances of a specific conceptualization of the relation between philosophy and politics. There is, however, *one* passage in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in which Popper appears to be aware of the possibility that Plato's dialogues can be read in the latter way, which also happens to be one of the very few passages in which he speaks favorably about Plato:

> It may be remarked that Plato, even though his theory is authoritarian, and demands the strict control of the growth of human reason in his guardians …, pays tribute, *by his manner of writing*, to our inter-personal theory of reason; for most of his earlier dialogues describe arguments conducted in a very reasonable spirit. (OSE2 227)

2.5. Conclusion

To conclude, our reading of the work of Karl Popper has led us to argue that insofar as a political philosophy wishes to realize some form of "rational politics" – or, more broadly, of "thoughtful politics" – it should acknowledge its own specific character as a *practice*. Hence, its conception of the political can be traced not only by taking notice of the "rational" character of its own cognitive claims *about* politics, but by also taking into account its own performative character; of thought being a *practice* in itself, especially insofar as it is spoken or written. In Chapter 1 it was argued that, precisely as a result of the epistemological assumptions of his "critical rationalism", Popper is insufficiently able to do justice to his final aim of realizing a rational and responsible politics (that is, his way of conceiving what I call "thoughtful politics"). Chapter 2 demonstrated that his "last word" appears to consist of his use of the *analogy* of politics with "science" or "engineering" on the one hand, and of his *performance* of politics as polemics on the other.

In order to remedy this lack of "theoretical self-consciousness", this failure to think through the conditions of "political philosophy" and of "thoughtful politics", the following three demands should be met. *First*, one would need a more comprehensive conception of both politics and philosophy. On the one hand, the political should be understood in a broader sense than as the rational justification of proposals and as encompassing more than that which belongs in the sphere of the "state" or of "government" as an already limited sub-sphere within an already established specific kind of society called "open society". On the other hand, philosophy (or thinking) should be understood in a broader sense than as a methodology of the social sciences, with its strict separation of facts and values, its concomitant denial of the rationality of value statements, let alone of other linguistic usages. *Secondly*, it needs to be acknowledged that moral and political "decisions" are not only capable of being studied under the aspect of either their propositional validity or their status as empirically falsifiable behavior, but also under the aspect of the *performative* meaning of their *practice*. *Thirdly*, it needs to

be acknowledged that some form of rationality for moral and political decisions (such as the question of the best constitution) is possible, that is, a form of "thoughtful politics" which escapes from the binary opposition between the claim that all decisions are "arbitrary" on the one hand and the demand for an "objective", quasi-scientific decision procedure on the other. The next two chapters will examine whether and to what extent the work of Leo Strauss lives up to these three demands.

PART II

THE SUCCESS OF STRAUSS:

POLITICS BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLEMICS

CHAPTER 3

Strauss's Recovery of "the Fact of the Political" and of "the Latitude of Statesmanship"

...the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad.
Are these not the subjects of difference about which,
when we were unable to come to a satisfactory decision,
you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?[171]
Plato

"Doctrinairism" and "existentialism" appear to us as the two faulty extremes.
While being opposed to each other, they agree with each other in the decisive respect –
they agree in ignoring prudence, "the god of this lower world."
Prudence and "this lower world" cannot be seen properly without
some knowledge of "the higher world" – without genuine theoria.[172]
Leo Strauss

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The previous two chapters have shown that Karl Popper conceives the task of political philosophy as to provide criteria for a "rational" form of political decision-making, called "piecemeal social engineering". In his case, the term "political" refers to a realm of free and rational discussion directed toward legislation by a liberal-democratic government, which is understood as a separate realm within a larger whole called "open society" or "civilization". However, it was argued that Popper's conception of rationality, which is modeled after the methodology of empirical *science*, turned out to be incapable in principle of vouching for the rationality of the political *ends* that "social engineering" is supposed to achieve. In order to avoid the inevitable conclusion that political decisions must be characterized as merely "personal" or even "arbitrary", he points to the *negative* aim of the relief of avoidable human suffering as the only universally valid aim of politics. It was argued, however, that this does not absolve him from the question of which *positive* aims the elimination of human suffering, in turn, is to serve. Moreover, it was demonstrated that, in his staging of the decision in favor of "the open society" as such, Popper implicitly draws on a conception of the political understood as the necessitated and possibly violent *struggle* between friends and enemies, a conception which he precisely *excluded* from his explicitly defended conception of a politics of rational *discussion*. Popper thus fails to display a

[171] Plato, *Euthypro*, 7cd.
[172] NRH 320-321.

"theoretical self-consciousness" of the fact that philosophical writings, including his own, can be "influential" not only due to their propositional content but also their performative meaning.

In this chapter and the next we turn to the work of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), which seems to offer an answer to these shortcomings. As we have seen, Popper's political philosophy is essentially oriented to "application", or the solution of practical problems by rational methods. Accordingly, he reads Plato's *Republic* as if it were a treatise in which the author presents his very own "political program", which consists in the "utopian" realization of the reign of philosopher-kings as a *practical solution* to the problem of justice. By contrast, Strauss reads the *Republic* as a dialogue in which we never hear the author's own voice, which is intended as a *theoretical* attempt to understand the *problem* of justice. Hence, the "best regime" is a "utopia" in the original sense of the word: it cannot be realized "in deed", but only "in speech". Strauss emphasizes that Plato and classical political philosophy in general insisted on philosophy and politics having essentially *opposite* orientations: while philosophy is understood as the *free* pursuit of theoretical knowledge, the political is characterized first and foremost by the binding *authority* of the *law*.

As will be shown, it is precisely Strauss's recovery of the *classical* insistence on the *difference* between philosophy and politics that enables him to offer an understanding of political reality and a normative framework for the guidance of political action, both of which more comprehensive and more refined than Popper's, whose position will turn out to be indebted to what Strauss considers the tradition of *modern* political philosophy. In addition, Strauss's classical insistence on the essential *difference* between philosophy and politics is accompanied by a theoretical self-consciousness that writing is a form of acting. Hence, he shows himself to be aware of the fact that philosophical writings, including his own, are capable of being read and misread in accordance with their performance or "action" just as much as in accordance with their propositions or "argument", for which he recovers and adopts a specific manner of communication called "the art of writing between the lines".

These few introductory remarks should already suffice to make it clear that Strauss is by no means an established member of the canon of political philosophy in the common sense of the word. Even stronger, from the very beginning, the reception of his work has been highly *polemical*, not only within academia but also in public debate. For instance, not very long ago his detractors regarded him as the intellectual mastermind behind the American "neo-cons" who waged war against Iraq. His writings were understood as containing a legitimation of the use of "noble lies" by elites against the masses and as propagating a strong belief in war as an instrument for actively enforcing "regime change".[173] His defenders responded that this reading of his work rests on several misunderstandings and, to the contrary, Strauss was in fact a loyal "friend of liberal democracy" who stood for a politics of

[173] See, inter alia, Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*; Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy*.

"moderation".[174] Whichever of these two camps is right, however, their polemic continues to revolve around one and the same *political* question: is Strauss a liberal, or is he at least liberal enough? If he is, we may safely side with him; if he is not, we should be against him.

To their great merit, Strauss-scholars like Heinrich Meier, David Janssens and others, have managed to steer away from this polemical battlefield to reach more neutral ground.[175] According to them, his ultimate intent is not political but *philosophical*. To be more precise, he aims to rehabilitate the *bios theōrētikos* over and against the *bios politikos*, that is, a rehabilitation of the philosophic life in the classical, Socratic sense, *over and above* the political life, its ambitions and aspirations. If he exposes political ideas at all, they are at best *negative*: he points to the essential "limits" of politics.[176] Moreover, in his case the adjective "political" in "political philosophy" refers rather to the political justification of philosophy than any *positive*, i.e. substantial, philosophy of politics.[177]

However, what this account tends to neglect is the fact that Strauss's recovery of philosophy actually also presupposes a recovery of politics, against the loss of *both* in modernity. *First*, it should be noted that Strauss not only warns against "visionary expectations from politics", but also against an "unmanly contempt for politics".[178] His rejection of political life in the name of philosophical life does indeed imply a rejection of the *modern* fusion of science and politics into "social engineering", which is driven by a powerful belief in the human capacity to solve social problems by institutional reform; at the same time, though, it implies the rehabilitation of a different, *classical* understanding of politics. His recovery of philosophy understood as the rise from opinion [*doxa*] to knowledge [*epistēmē*] is accompanied by a recovery of the *law* as the authoritative opinion to which the political community or city "looks up" and by which it is held together. Closely related to this, his recovery of philosophical reason [*logos*] and wisdom [s*ophia*] as its virtue is accompanied by a recovery of political "spiritedness" [*thumos*], i.e. anger, indignation, or "eagerness to fight", and "manliness" [*andreia*] or courage as its virtue.[179] *Secondly*, Strauss also suggests the possibility of providing normative

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[174] See especially Zuckert & Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy & American Democracy*; Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*.

[175] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*; Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics*. See also Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*; Tarcov, 'On a Certain Critique of "Straussianism"'.

[176] CM 138.

[177] CPP 93.

[178] Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 24.

[179] See, inter alia, OPS 9: "The polis as polis is characterized by an essential, irremediable recalcitrance to reason. … There is something harsh in the political, something angry. … It is for this reason that Plato calls the political passion 'spiritedness' (*thumos*), which also means something like anger. This harshness and severity is essential for constituting the polis and is, in a way, most characteristic of the polis." Peter Sloterdijk is one of the few philosophers who explicitly noted the importance of this strand in Strauss's thought: see his *Zorn und Zeit*, 40-41: "Es ist under anderem den Studien des neoklassizistischen jüdischen Philosophen Leo Strauss und seiner (überwiegend zu Unrecht von den politischen Neokonservativen der USA vereinnahmten) Schule zu verdanken, wenn

guidance for politics. While taking into account the "spirited" nature of politics – its "recalcitrance to reason" (CM 22)[180] – he nevertheless makes room for the possibility of a "thoughtful" politics. In the slipstream of his rehabilitation of the *theoretical* wisdom [*sophia*] of the philosopher, he provides a rehabilitation of the *practical* wisdom [*phronèsis*] or "prudence" of the statesman, which may be said to move between *logos* and *thumos*, or between an *escape* from politics into philosophical discussion and a *reduction* of politics to polemical struggle.

A precise determination of Strauss's conceptions of the political and "thoughtful" politics has not yet receive sufficient attention in the secondary literature. In part this is due to the notorious difficulty of his writings. Although he explicitly and repeatedly mentions the importance of the dialectical question "what is political?" or "what is the city [*polis*]?",[181] nowhere in his published works does he present an answer to it in his own name. This is because he not only *recovered* "the art of writing between the lines", he also *practiced* it in his own writings. Accordingly, he did not write "treatises" in which he presents himself as a philosopher who straightforwardly conveys the "results" of his own thought. Rather, his oeuvre consists mainly of dense "commentaries" and "histories of ideas" in which he offers original interpretations of philosophical works (such as of Plato's *Republic*) in order to recover a genuine understanding of perennial philosophical problems (such as "natural right") and the alternative solutions to them.

Nevertheless, in these writings of what may *prima facie* appear to be a mere *scholar*, Strauss conveys a clear *philosophical* orientation to classical political philosophy over and against modern political philosophy and the latter's culmination in positivist and historicist relativism. He even expresses his inclination to prefer one philosophical *solution* in particular, viz. that of classic natural right, over the denial of the existence of natural right by conventionalism.[182] We therefore take Strauss's "preferred" solution as the basis for our reconstruction of his philosophy of politics, saving an in-depth treatment of his politics of philosophy as embodied by "the art of writing between the lines" for the next chapter.

In our reconstruction of Strauss's philosophy of politics, i.e. his conceptions of the political and the rational guidance of political action, we focus especially on his "comments" on Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*

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man die von den Großen unter den griechischen Denkern statuierte Bipolarität menschlicher Psychodynamik heute wieder genauer in den Blick fassen kann. Strauss hat vor allem dafür gesorgt, daß man neben Platon, dem Erotologen und Verfasser des *Symposions*, wieder auf Platon, den Psychologen der Selbstachtung, aufmerksam wurde."

[180] See also OPS 9.

[181] WIPP 22, 25; CM 19, NRH 121.

[182] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 31; NRH vii: "Nothing that I have learned has shaken my inclination to prefer "natural right," especially in its classic form, to the reigning relativism, positivist or historicist." See also Strauss's letter to Karl Löwith, 15 August 1946: "I *truly* believe, although it apparently appears as fantastic to you, that the perfect political order, as Plato and Aristotle have sketched it, *is* the perfect political order" (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 662).

(1932) and his "history of ideas" *Natural Right and History* (1953). Strauss develops his classical understanding of the political in discussion with Schmitt and with Schmitt's turn to Hobbes. In addition, *Natural Right and History* contains his most detailed treatment of the possibility of moral guidance for politics, especially in his discussion of Hobbes (Chapter V.A.) and classic natural right (Chapter IV), in both of which Schmitt's silent presence can be felt. We read Strauss's "comments" and "history of ideas" as much as possible as "treatises", which implies that we need to make an effort at *thinking along* with Strauss in the direction of the "solution" to which he points.

This chapter is divided into four sections, the *first* of which gives an account of Strauss's reopening of "the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns" in light of what he calls "the theological-political problem". We start with his critique of modern political philosophy's culmination in positivism and historicism and work toward his recovery of classical political philosophy's defense of philosophical life *over and against* political life. However, we argue that Strauss's recovery of philosophical life is in fact also accompanied by a recovery of political life, against the loss of *both* in modernity.

In the *second* section we begin our reconstruction of Strauss's understanding of the essence of political life by focusing on his "comments" on Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (1932), which he reads as a genuine attempt to answer the "Socratic" question "what is political?" It is argued that Schmitt and Strauss turn out to *agree* to a great extent about the nature of "the political", insofar as they both recognize the necessity of "rule" [*Herrschaft*] within closed societies that potentially stand in friend-enemy-relations to each other. They turn out to be *at odds*, however, regarding the *raison d'être* of the political, which Strauss finds not in the seriousness of *struggle* as such, but in the seriousness of the *question* of what is "by nature" the right way of life.

Regarding the question of the possibility of rational guidance for political action, there seem then to be only two alternatives: (i) either Strauss's philosophical turning *away* from political life, which would seem to leave us without any rational standards *within political life*; (ii) or Schmitt's "decisionist" (or "existentialist") immersion in political life, which would seem to leave us without any *rational standards* within political life. At first sight a return to Hobbes would seem to be required, insofar as he appears as a successful defender of "rule" [*Herrschaft*] *and* "natural right". Therefore, the *third* section turns to Strauss's account of modern political philosophy in Chapter V.A. of *Natural Right and History*. Strauss claims that Hobbes's political philosophy is founded on the "realist" premises of Machiavelli, who had sought to *guarantee* the realization of the best regime by lowering its standards. Strauss claims that, as a consequence, Hobbes jeopardizes both "rule" and "natural right". Moreover, he adds, the "doctrinaire" character of modern "natural public law" decisively prepared the "existentialist" response of ultramodern historicism.

On the basis of a reading of Chapter IV of *Natural Right and History*, the *fourth* section of this chapter argues that Strauss's recovery of classical political

philosophy, or the classic natural-right teaching, *does* in fact suggest a possibility for "thoughtful" politics *between* philosophy and polemics. Although the classical authors believed that the *best* regime consists "by nature" in the reign of the wise, they posited that any *legitimate* regime must always "dilute" wisdom with consent. To determine the precise nature of this practical solution to the political problem, we turn specifically to Strauss's reconstruction of the "Platonic" and "Aristotelian" natural right teachings, the former of which offers an account of the philosopher-legislator's "dilution" of natural right with conventional right, while the latter offers an account of the prudence of the statesman who decides in concrete situations whether "the highest" or "the urgent" is to take precedence.

By the end of this chapter, then, we will have offered two things. First, a reconstruction of Strauss's classical understanding of "the fact of the political", which, in contradistinction to that of Popper, takes into account the phenomenon of the law and of the inevitability of "closure", while not, in contradistinction to Schmitt, reducing it to the latter. Secondly, a reconstruction of Strauss's recovery of the possibility of a "thoughtful" form of political decision-making, which, in contradistinction to Schmitt, does uphold rational standards within political life, while, in contradistinction to Popper, does not reduce them to the one single standard that is to be universally applied in practice, but allows instead for some "latitude of statesmanship".

3.2. The Re-Opening of the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns in Light of the Theological-Political Problem

Leo Strauss is best known for his re-opening of "the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns", or his "change of orientation" from modern political philosophy to classical political philosophy. The starting point for this turn is what he calls "the crisis of our time", which he claims becomes manifest when liberal democracy became uncertain of itself,[183] which he illustrates in the introduction to *Natural Right and History* by pointing to the rise of doubt whether the "self-evident truths" of the American Declaration of Independence – "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (NRH 1) – are indeed still believed to be self-evident.

Strauss states that these doubts are raised in the name of Science and History, respectively.[184] He explains that modern social science has culminated in *positivism*, that is, the doctrine which claims that value statements cannot be derived from factual statements, and that it is impossible to resolve conflicts between value statements in a rational manner.[185] Against positivism, Strauss

[183] See especially Strauss, 'Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time'; CM (introduction); NRH 253.

[184] NRH 8, WIPP 18, CM (introduction).

[185] WIPP 18-25. See also NRH Chapter II, 'Natural Right and the Distinction between Facts and Values', in which Strauss presents Max Weber as the principle protagonist of positivism. Although

claims that, since scientific questions are themselves driven by specific interests or values, science is bound to interpret its *own* enterprise as to be historically relative. For this and other reasons, he argues, positivism is bound to culminate in *historicism*, that is, in the doctrine according to which all human knowledge – both statements of fact and statements of value – is historically determined. As soon as historicism becomes self-reflexive and applies its own thesis to itself, it turns into *radical* historicism or "existentialism", which even regards the historicist thesis itself as historically determined, i.e., as a dispensation of fate. As a final result, Strauss concludes, human rationality has *undermined* itself.[186]

Strauss notes that, as a consequence of this "self-destruction of reason",[187] political philosophy in the original, classical sense, that is, as the quest for the best regime or for "natural right", is no longer believed to be possible. Originally, he claims, philosophy understood itself as the ascent from opinions [*doxai*] about nature or "the whole" to knowledge [*epistēmē*] of nature or "the whole". Accordingly, political philosophy understood itself as the ascent from conventional right to natural right. This ascent is conducted by means of a "dialectical" conversation, or a "friendly dispute" (NRH 124), in which authoritative or "common sense" opinions are questioned, as a result of which they turn out to be contradictory. In this way, they solicit a truth that is itself *trans*-historical, that is, a truth the validity of which does not depend on contingent historical circumstances.

According to Strauss, the account of philosophy as ascent from opinion to knowledge was depicted by Plato in his well-known cave parable. Strauss considers modernity's culmination in radical historicism as the final consequence of the creation of a second cave below Plato's.[188] In order to regain the situation of the original cave, what is urgently needed is a history of ideas to serve as a "propaedeutic", that is, as preparation for philosophy itself. Its task is to restore the "natural" horizon of classical political philosophy, against which the "artificial" edifice of modern political philosophy had been erected.[189]

In the seventeenth century, Strauss claims, Hobbes and Spinoza had set themselves the task of saving the freedom of philosophizing [*libertas*

Strauss never publicly responded to Popper's work, in a letter to Eric Voegelin dated 10 April 1950 he made it unambiguously clear that he regarded him as a positivist as well: "[Mr. Popper] gave a lecture here [at the University of Chicago], on the task of social philosophy, that was beneath contempt: it was the most washed-out, lifeless positivism trying to whistle in the dark, linked to a complete inability to think "rationally," although it passed itself off as "rationalism" – it was very bad. I cannot imagine that such a man ever wrote something that was worthwhile reading, and yet it appears to be a professional duty to become familiar with his productions." (*Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin 1934-1964*, 66-67.)

[186] WIPP 25-27. See also NRH Chapter I, 'Natural Right and the Historical Approach', in which Strauss presents Nietzsche, and especially Heidegger, as the principle protagonists of radical historicism.

[187] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 31.

[188] Strauss introduces the image of a "second" cave for the first time in his 'Review of Julius Ebbinghaus, *On the Progress of Metaphysics*' (1931), 215. The imagery keeps returning in Strauss's later work, e.g. in PAW 156.

[189] PAW 155.

philosophandi] from its severe restriction at the hands of the political authority of revealed religion. Making use of the Epicurean critique of religion, they instead attempted to ally philosophy with secular political power. Strauss contends that their project was decisively "prepared" by Machiavelli, whom he considers the "founder" of modern political philosophy. Induced by his "anti-theological ire", Machiavelli had lowered the standards of the best regime in order to make its realization more certain, or less dependent on chance.[190]

As a result of the new alliance between philosophy and politics, Strauss argues, the natures of and the specific *differences* between philosophy, religion, and politics came gradually to be forgotten. While religion came to be understood as private "faith" or "belief" rather than public "law", philosophy (or theory) was turned into the handmaiden of politics (or practice). It transformed itself into science, which (i) aims for the *conquest* of nature (and of chance), instead of the careful imitation and *cultivation* of nature; and (ii) chooses *method* as its starting point (that is, certainty based on the universal doubt of all opinions) instead of *speech* (that is, opinions that are expressed by people, the contradictions between which solicit trans-historical truth).[191]

In fact, Strauss had set himself the task of writing a "theological-political treatise", taking the opposite direction to that of the treatises written by Hobbes and Spinoza.[192] In order to "restore" classical political philosophy, Strauss recalls to memory the "natural" situation of man, or the world not as the object of science or the product of technology, but "the world in which we live and act", that is, "a world not of mere objects at which we detachedly look but of 'things' or 'affairs' which we handle" (NRH 79), and political things "as they present themselves in political life, that is, in action, when we have to make decisions" (NRH 81). Thus understood, the life of the *polis* is a life in which citizens "look up" to the *law*, which presents itself as "self-evident", "holy", or even "divine" [*theios nomos*].

One of Strauss's clearest expressions of the classical approach to politics can be found in his article 'On Classical Political Philosophy' (1945). In it, he explains that the most fundamental *political* controversy to be settled is: "who should rule?", or "who should form the regime?" In answer to this question, the *philosopher* raises a question that is never asked in the political arena itself: "what is virtue?" or "what is that virtue whose possession gives a man the highest right to rule?" (CPP 90) Yet, Strauss continues, by *questioning* the authoritative opinions about virtue, the philosopher comes into *conflict* with the *polis*. Moreover, he will gradually discover that the question to which political life points – "what is

[190] WIPP 40-47.

[191] Cf. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 58, 60.

[192] Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 138n2: "If "religion" and "politics" are the facts that transcend "culture," or, to speak more precisely, the *original* facts, then the radical critique of the concept of "culture" is possible only in the form of a "theologico-political treatise" – which of course, if it is not to lead back again to the foundation of "culture," must take exactly the opposite direction from the theologico-political treatises of the seventeenth century, especially those of Hobbes and Spinoza. The first condition for this would be, of course, that these seventeenth-century works no longer be understood, as they almost always have been up to now, within the horizon of philosophy of culture."

virtue?", which is another way of asking "what is the right way of life?" – can only be answered in a life devoted to *philosophy*: "virtue is knowledge". In this sense, Strauss claims, "philosophy – not as a teaching or as a body of knowledge, but as a way of life – offers, as it were, the solution to the problem that keeps political life in motion" (CPP 91).[193] He explains that this is what Socrates refers to when he calls himself the only Athenian who possesses the "true" political skill [*politikē technē*].[194]

In agreement with the thesis that a final *political* solution to the political problem, i.e., a solution "immanent" to political life, is unavailable, Strauss reads Plato's *Republic* not as it is usually read today, viz. as a "utopian" plea for the rule of philosopher-kings which alone would promise a "cessation of evils" (CM 127), but as a dialogue which shows that the philosopher and the *polis* are *essentially at odds* with each other. Since philosophers are devoted to the pursuit of the unchangeable truth, they do not desire to interfere with human affairs. In addition, the ability of the wise to persuade the unwise to be ruled by them is by nature extremely limited. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that the best regime – the regime which is "by nature" right – will ever be realized. Hence, it is of the essence that the best regime be utopian in the *original* sense of the word, that is, to exist as an object of contemplative aspiration rather than active realization, or to exist "in speech" rather than "in deed".[195]

In light of this account, several authors have suggested that Strauss's political philosophy should ultimately be characterized as *a-political*.[196] Accordingly, Heinrich Meier argues that Strauss turns to politics for the sake of philosophy's self-reflection; that his enterprise "is *wholly* in the service of self-examination and the justification of philosophy [emphasis added]".[197]

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[193] Cf. NRH 36: "The whole galaxy of political philosophers from Plato to Hegel, and certainly all adherents of natural right, assumed that the fundamental political problem is susceptible of a final solution. This assumption ultimately rested on the Socratic answer to the question of how man ought to live. By realizing that we are ignorant of the most important things, we realize at the same time that the most important thing for us, or the one thing needful, is quest for knowledge of the most important things or quest for wisdom." Note the contrast between the following of Strauss's remarks, the first about politics, the second about philosophy: "in political life, in action, when [political things] are our business, when we have to make decisions" (NRH 81); "There is no guaranty that the quest for adequate articulation will ever lead beyond an understanding of the fundamental alternatives or that philosophy will ever legitimately go beyond the stage of discussion or disputation and will ever reach the stage of decision" (NRH 125).

[194] CPP 91. See Plato, *Gorgias*, 521d.

[195] Strauss characterizes Plato's *Republic* as "the most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition" (CM 65), that is, for "spiritedness" [*thumos*]. Strauss speaks of "the education to moderation" (CM 97) of Glaucon, "the most spirited speaker in the work" (CM 112). For the distinction between the classical and modern conceptions of "utopia", see also Shklar, 'The Political Theory of Utopia'.

[196] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*; Bluhm, *Die Ordnung der Ordnung: Das politische Philosophieren von Leo Strauss*; Gordon, 'The Concept of the Apolitical: German Jewish Thought and Weimar Political Theology'.

[197] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 15. See also ibid., 14: "Strauss's treatises … do not put philosophy to work for the purposes of politics; rather, they turn to politics for the sake of philosophy's self-reflection".

This account implies two things for our understanding of the meaning of Strauss's "political philosophy". *First*, insofar as there is a substance to Strauss's "political philosophy", it is primarily *negative*: it points to the "essential limits" (CM 138) of political life compared to philosophical life, which is considered the highest way of life. *Polis* life is incapable of fulfilling the highest need of man, i.e. the search for theoretical knowledge. As Strauss himself contends, in the end, philosophizing, or leaving the "cave", means to use the term "political" in a derogatory sense,[198] it means "to learn to look down on the human as something inferior" (WIPP 32). *Secondly*, because the meaning of philosophy is in general insufficiently understood, philosophy needs to *justify* itself before the tribunal of society. Strauss claims, therefore, that the adjective "political" in "political philosophy" designates not so much a *subject* of philosophy, but primarily the manner of its *treatment*.[199] It is "political" insofar as it employs a specific, "politic", manner of *speaking* and *writing* that invites "the few" to radically question authoritative opinions in the name of the truth, while making "the many" believe in the "salutary" character of philosophy for the *polis*.

Accordingly, Meier claims that Strauss's writings "do not elaborate a theory of politics", and that "they do not promote … the political life as the writings of the political philosophers of the past did so emphatically at first glance."[200] We may therefore have to conclude that there is nothing *positive* to be learned about politics from Strauss's work, neither about the substance of political life nor about normative criteria for "thoughtful" political action.

Nevertheless, although the account given by Meier and others is *correct*, we must realize that it tells us the story of the relation between the two ways of life from *one* perspective only, viz. from the viewpoint of the philosophic way of life. Yet Strauss indicates that insight into the limits of the political sphere as a whole "can be expounded fully only by answering the question of the nature of political things" (CPP 94). Although Strauss considers the philosophical life to be higher than the political, he himself admits that one cannot recognize the "limits" of political life, one cannot recognize the *polis* as a "cave", i.e., as it appears from the perspective of the *philosopher,* without *first* understanding the nature of political life *in and of itself*, i.e., as it appears from the perspective of the *citizen*.[201] In other words, political life needs to be understood not as a "cave", i.e. as something *upon* which to "look down", but as a "world", i.e. as something *within* which to "look up" to certain things:

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[198] CPP 93n24.
[199] CPP 93.
[200] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 14-15. Cf. Bluhm, *Die Ordnung der Ordnung*, 22-23: "er hat keine systematische philosophische Theorie der Politik geschaffen, und zwar weder einen Vorschlag zur Lösung des Problems politischer Ordnung, noch eine politische Ethik, obwohl beides für ihn zentrale Fragen politischer Philosophie sind. … Sein Denken kreist um die Aufgabe, die politische Philosophie wieder zu ermöglichen und zu bewahren und hat insofern einen unpolitischen Kern, denn es ist wesentlich auf die Sache der Philosophie im Sinne der *Vita contemplativa* bezogen."
[201] CM 240.

> … political understanding or political science cannot start from seeing the city as the Cave but it must start from seeing the city as a world, as the highest in the world; it must start from seeing man as completely immersed in political life: "the present war is the greatest war". (CM 240)[202]

Throughout the present chapter, then, we attempt to stay as far as possible within the limits of political life, in order thus to reconstruct from Strauss's work a political philosophy in the more common sense of the word, comprising both (i) an *understanding* of the essence of politics, and (ii) the setting of standards that provide *guidance* for politics. We begin by reconstructing Strauss's exchange with Schmitt, who considers the ineradicable possibility of war as essential to the political.

3.3. The Recovery of the Political: With and against Schmitt

The best way to start our exploration of Strauss's answer to the question "What is political?" is by turning to his "comments" [*Anmerkungen*] on Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (1932), which he originally published in German in 1932.[203] There are several indications that he puts his reading of Schmitt's treatise in service of his own attempt to recover the answer to this question. In his book *Philosophy and Law* (1936), for instance, Strauss explicitly refers to his review of Schmitt when he states that "the fact of the political" [*die Tatsache des Politischen*] is one of the two "original facts" that transcend "culture", the other being "the fact of religion" [*die Tatsache der Religion*].[204] Moreover, in his lecture 'The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy' (1940), Strauss renders the title of Schmitt's essay as *What Is Political?*[205] Furthermore, Strauss points to the central place of his Schmitt review within his own oeuvre by his decision to re-publish it as an appendix to the American translation of his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930) as well as to the German translation of his *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1936), both of which appeared in 1965. In the accompanying "autobiographical preface" to the former, he calls his Schmitt review his *first* public expression of his "change of orientation", i.e. of his belief that a return to pre-modern philosophy is possible, i.e. that the classical philosophers may have found *the* truth. As David Janssens has demonstrated, Strauss did indeed read Schmitt's *The Concept of the*

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[202] To be sure, Strauss opposes *both* of these (classical, "natural") perspectives *together* against the (modern, "artificial") perspective of the "neutral" scientific observer. See WIPP 25.

[203] Strauss, 'Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen', *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 67:6 (1932), 732-749. English translations appeared in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[204] Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 138n2.

[205] Strauss, 'The Living Issues of Postwar German Philosophy', 127.

Political from the horizon of classical political philosophy, a horizon that he would render increasingly visible in his later work.[206]

As is well known, in *The Concept of the Political*, which includes the essay 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations',[207] Schmitt aims to recover "the political" against its negation by liberalism. Instead of identifying "the political" with that which pertains to the "state" (as distinguished from "society"), Schmitt claims that the concept of the political is *presupposed* by the concept of the state.[208] He claims that "the political" exists in the effective capacity of correctly designating the *public* enemy in the extreme case [*Ernstfall*], that is, in case the concrete existence of a political community is threatened, either by a foreign political power or by an internal public enemy. Hence, the specifically political tension of human life is constituted by the extreme case, that is, the *real*, i.e., existential possibility of physical extinction. Accordingly, Schmitt defines "the high points of great politics [*grosse Politik*]" as "the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy".[209] Only as long as a political community possesses the capacity to designate the enemy, it possesses sovereignty and it is effectively capable of exercising rule [*Herrschaft*]. The latter implies the authority to demand from its individual citizens the ultimate sacrifice in the extreme case, viz. death. In addition, Schmitt claims that political conflicts cannot be decided by a previously determined general norm or by the judgment of a "neutral" third party, but *only* by the participants in the conflict themselves. According to him, "all political concepts, images, and terms have a polemical meaning",[210] which is to say that they can *only* be understood from a *concrete*, i.e., existential situation.

Schmitt's militant "decisionism" and his well-known advocacy of a conception of the political in terms of the distinction between friend and enemy, have made him a controversial figure, especially among liberal and "deliberationist" political philosophers. We should not be surprised, therefore, that Strauss's reputation has been affected by his exchange with Schmitt.[211] Especially

[206] Janssens, 'A Change of Orientation: Leo Strauss's "Comments" on Carl Schmitt Revisited'; Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 133-147.

[207] Schmitt's *Der Begriff des Politischen* appeared in three different editions: 1927, 1932, 1933. The 1932 edition was reprinted in 1963, and this is the edition that is still in print today. The text 'Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Depolitisierungen', which was originally a lecture Schmitt gave in 1929, was included in the editions of 1932 and 1963. Strauss based his review on the 1932 edition. For a detailed publication history of Schmitt's text, see Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, 6-7n5.

[208] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 19-25.

[209] Ibid., 67.

[210] Ibid., 30.

[211] Strauss not only published a review of Schmitt's book; in 1932 and 1933 he wrote a number of letters to him. In fact, Schmitt himself had seen to it that Strauss's 'Comments' were published. See Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, 121-131, 8n7. Moreover, Schmitt wrote a letter of recommendation on Strauss's behalf, which successfully secured him a fellowship to do research on the work of Hobbes in Cambridge, UK. See Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher*, 56.

Strauss's own claim that his review should be understood as preparation for "gaining a horizon beyond liberalism" (NCP 122) is often used as evidence (for instance by Stephen Holmes) for the thesis that Strauss himself is not a liberal either.[212] In reply, sympathetic readers of Strauss have tried to demonstrate that he in fact draws on different, pre-modern resources in order to fortify liberal democracy.[213] Nevertheless, both camps restrict themselves to the question of whether or not Strauss is a liberal. Even Robert Howse, who offers a careful and balanced reconstruction of Strauss's response to Schmitt, argues in the end that Strauss still adopts a form of liberalism, albeit of a different, "ancient" kind.[214]

By contrast, Heinrich Meier, David Janssens, and others have tried to demonstrate that Strauss, as defender of philosophy or of the Socratic way of life, *distances* himself from Schmitt as defender of politics or the political way of life. They claim that Strauss places Schmitt's strong defense of "the political" against liberalism's forgetfulness of the political in service of his *own* attempt to make the case for *philosophy* as strong as possible.[215] This explains why Meier concludes his monograph on the "hidden dialogue" between Schmitt and Strauss with the following words:

> Whereas the political does have central significance for the thought of Leo Strauss, the enemy and enmity do not. Enmity does not touch the core of his existence, and his identity does not take its shape in battle with the enemy. The friends that Strauss chose for himself tell us much more about his identity, and it becomes visible nowhere else than in his philosophy.[216]

If we understand these words correctly, Meier means to say that there is no place for *polemics* or partisanship in *philosophy* proper. To the contrary, the philosophical quest for the truth is to be pursued *sine ira et studio*, which is the reason why it properly takes place in the form of a "dialogue", that is, a conversation among *friends*.[217]

However, I argue that this by no means implies that Strauss's conception of the *political* is also free from the enemy and enmity. As I show, Strauss *agrees* with Schmitt that the distinction between friend and enemy does indeed inevitably

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[212] Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 62. See also McCormick, 'Fear, Technology, and the State: Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the Revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany'; idem,, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology*.

[213] Zuckert & Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 187, 190.

[214] Howse, 'From Legitimacy to Dictatorship – and Back Again: Leo Strauss's Critique of the Anti-Liberalism of Carl Schmitt'.

[215] Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*; Janssens, 'A Change of Orientation: Leo Strauss's "Comments" on Carl Schmitt Revisited'.

[216] Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, 87.

[217] See also Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 144: "Strauss's philosophical affirmation of the political, unlike that of Schmitt, thus leaves room for a form of friendship that is not completely determined by the distinction between friend and foe: the friendship between philosophers who agree on the fundamental problems."

belong to the political, but he *disagrees* with Schmitt insofar as he claims that the *raison d'être* of the political is not enmity as such, but rather the question of the right way of life in answer to which the friend-enemy conflict may arise.

Strauss's "comments" on Schmitt's "treatise" consist of three sections of increasing length. In the *first* part, Strauss says that Schmitt's positing of "the political" should be read in agreement with the latter's explicitly formulated thesis that all political concepts are bound to a concrete polemical situation. Schmitt posits the political in opposition to liberalism – the system of thought in which modern thought, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, has culminated. Yet, Strauss explains, liberal thought has in fact not destroyed the political, but it has *covered* it. Hence, in order for Schmitt to succeed in *recovering* it, he is confronted with the task to *escape* from the powerful systematic of liberal thought. Hence, Strauss aims to find out in which respect Schmitt *differs* from liberalism.[218]

In the *second* part of his review, Strauss claims that Schmitt understands the question of "the *essence* of the political" as the question of the *specific difference* of the political.[219] Liberalism regards the political as a part of the *genus* of "culture", which is understood as the totality of "human thought and action".[220] At first sight, it may therefore seem that Schmitt wishes to recover the autonomy of the political and its own specific distinction, viz. that of "friend" and "enemy", *next to* other, equally autonomous "provinces of culture",[221] such as the aesthetic, the economic, the juridical, and the moral, each of which also upholds its own specific distinctions, viz. that of beautiful and ugly, profitable and unprofitable, lawful and unlawful, good and evil, respectively. Strauss explains that a second look, however, clearly shows that Schmitt does *not* regard the political as a cultural "province" next to and analogous to others. To the contrary, since the political is oriented towards the possibility of *war*, that is, the real possibility of physical killing, Schmitt regards the specifically political distinction as the *fundamental* distinction.[222]

Strauss infers that Schmitt's assumption of the fundamental character of the political actually implies a *critique* of the modern conception of "culture". In modern thought, "culture" is conceived of as a sovereign creation of man. Strauss argues, however, that this causes us to forget that culture is always culture of *nature*, which may consist either in the careful *cultivation* of nature as an exemplary order to be obeyed, or in the *conquest* of nature as a disorder to be eliminated. In accordance with the second, distinctly *modern* conception of culture, Hobbes conceives of the *status civilis* in *opposition* to the *status naturalis*, which he describes as a state of war, or, to be more precise, as a state of the continuous and real *possibility* of war. Hence, Strauss infers, insofar as Schmitt aims for a

[218] NCP 99-101.
[219] NCP 101.
[220] NCP 102. As the previous chapters have revealed, Karl Popper's use of the term "political" betrays a similar conception: it is understood as a separate "realm" within human "civilization" or the "open society", next to other "realms", such as that of (private) morality, aesthetics etc.
[221] NCP 102.
[222] NCP 101-104.

recovery of the political, he aims for a recovery of the *genus* of the "natural" situation of mankind. Yet, Strauss adds, there is a crucial difference between Hobbes and Schmitt. Hobbes conceives of the state of nature as a state of war between *individuals*, a situation that ought to be *overcome* in the name of protecting the lives of these individuals, which is why Strauss regards him as the founder of liberalism.[223] By contrast, Schmitt considers the state of nature as a state of war between *collectives*, between friend-enemy groupings, each of which demand *obedience* from their individual subjects, including, in the extreme case, the sacrifice of their lives. Strauss concludes that liberalism, which was born within the modern conception of "culture", forgets the *basis* of "culture", viz. human "nature" in its dangerousness and in its being endangered.[224]

At the beginning of the *third*, final, and longest part of his review, Strauss states that Schmitt's affirmation of "the political" appears as an attempt to say "what is", that is, to give an *un-polemical* description of the *fact* of the political. Schmitt considers the political as the inescapable fate of man: it is given in human *nature*. Accordingly, he claims that even the pacifists' struggle for a "world state", which would put an end to the existence of separate, juxtaposed political entities or states, would, as *struggle*, precisely be an affirmation of the *inevitability* of the political.

The opposition between the negation and the position of the political can ultimately be traced back to a quarrel about human nature, viz. the question of whether man is by nature good or evil, that is to say, undangerous or dangerous. In Schmitt's view, the thesis of the inevitability of the political is in the end based on the thesis that man is by nature dangerous.[225] He admits that this thesis is in itself an "anthropological confession of *faith*" [*Glaubensbekenntnis*].[226] Yet, if this is the case, Strauss infers, it is possible to adhere to a *different* faith, as a result of which the political would *remain* endangered. Hence, he continues, Schmitt's positing of the political is more than a mere *description* of the reality of the political: it is an *affirmation* of the political.

Strauss claims that Schmitt's affirmation of the political cannot be understood *politically* in the sense mentioned above, i.e. existentially: during war one does not wish for dangerous enemies – "a nation in danger wants its own dangerousness not for the sake of dangerousness, but for the sake of being rescued from danger" (NCP 112). The affirmation of the political must therefore have a "normative", *moral* meaning: it is the affirmation of the power of state formation, *virtú* in Machiavelli's sense. Hence, Strauss claims, the ultimate legitimation for Schmitt's affirmation of the political seems to lie in warlike morals, or "bellicose nationalism".[227]

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[223] NCP 108. See also NRH 181-182.
[224] NCP 104-108.
[225] NCP 108-111.
[226] NCP 111.
[227] NCP 112-113.

For Schmitt, however, the more fundamental question is whether "rule" [*Herrschaft*] of men over men is necessary or superfluous. It is in view of this question that the question of man's dangerousness or undangerousness surfaces again. Strauss argues, therefore, that the ultimate quarrel occurs not between bellicosity and pacifism, but between authoritarianism and anarchism: while *authoritarian* theorists, such as Hobbes, claim that human beings are by nature dangerous and that they thus stand in need of rule, *anarchist* theorists claim that human beings are by nature not dangerous and that hence they do not stand in need of rule. Strauss claims that, at first sight, Schmitt seems to follow Hobbes in asserting that mankind is evil in the sense of animal dangerousness, that is, of an *innocent* evil. Yet, if this were the case, mankind could be domesticated, educated. Whereas Hobbes, whom Strauss considers the *founder* of liberalism, believed that the malleability of mankind in this respect is limited, liberalism itself is more optimistic. However, insofar as evil is understood as innocent evil, the opposition between good and evil loses its significance. Strauss therefore stipulates that, if Schmitt wishes to *overcome* liberalism, he has to conceive of evil in a stronger sense, viz. not as innocent evil but as moral *depravity*. In an earlier text, *Political Theology* (1922), Schmitt had indeed stated that "the core of the political idea" is "the *morally* demanding decision".[228]

Strauss claims, though, that Schmitt contradicts himself insofar as he displays a *sympathy* for evil, that is, a merely *aesthetic* admiration for animal dangerousness. How, after all, can one admire the need for rule, which, being a *need*, is not an excellence, but a deficiency? In reality, Strauss argues, Schmitt affirms the political because it is the only guarantee against the world becoming a world of "entertainment", a world that lacks seriousness. Schmitt had said:

> A definitively pacified globe, would be a world without politics. In such a world there could be various, perhaps *very interesting*, oppositions and contrasts, competitions and intrigues of all kinds, but no opposition on the basis of which it could sensibly be demanded of men that they sacrifice their lives [emphasis added by Strauss]. (CP 35)

According to Strauss, the "perhaps" conceals and hides Schmitt's *nausea* over this capacity to be "very interesting". He concludes that Schmitt rejects pacifism – or "civilization" – because it forms a threat to the *seriousness* of human life: "His affirmation of the political is ultimately nothing more than the affirmation of the moral."[229]

Strauss claims that Schmitt's critique of the modern tendency of neutralization, which culminates in the spirit of *technology*, leads to the same conclusion. While it is indeed possible in principle to reach agreement regarding the means to an end that is already established, Strauss argues that there is always a

[228] NCP 115. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 65.
[229] NCP 117.

quarrel about the ends themselves.[230] If one seeks agreement at all cost, one needs to abandon the question of what is right and concern oneself solely with the means, which forms the basis of the modern faith in technology. Strauss adds that Schmitt rightly indicates that technology is in fact never neutral, however, for it can serve any end. Strauss infers that peace at all cost is only possible when the question of the meaning of human life, the question of the *right* way of life, is no longer raised in all seriousness. If this question is asked seriously, though, the life-and-death quarrel will be ignited. Hence, Strauss concludes, "the political – the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies – owes its legitimation to the seriousness of the question of what is right" (NCP 118).

However, he notes, Schmitt does not openly acknowledge this affirmation of the seriousness of the moral question, of the question what is right. Strauss offers as explanation that in order to *defeat* liberalism, Schmitt was bound to *start from* the strongest contemporary opinion, which is the *liberal* conception of morality. Liberalism understands morality primarily as private preference or demand instead of trans-private obligation or duty. Insofar as Schmitt remains tied to the same conception of morality as his opponent, then, he has to *conceal* the moral character of his own affirmation of the political and instead present the political as an ineradicable *necessity*. However, Strauss argues, the affirmation of the political in disregard of the moral would mean nothing more than an affirmation of *struggle as such*, regardless of *what is struggled for*:

> He who affirms the political as such respects all who want to fight; he is just as *tolerant* as the liberals – but with the opposite intention: whereas the liberal respects and tolerates all "*honest*" convictions so long as they merely acknowledge the legal order, *peace*, as sacrosanct, he who affirms the political as such respects and tolerates all "*serious*" convictions, that is, all decisions oriented to the possibility of *war*. Thus the affirmation of the political as such turns out to be a liberalism with the opposite polarity [emphasis in original].[231]

According to Strauss, then, Schmitt is *incapable* of recovering political authority or rule [*Herrschaft*] *insofar as* his affirmation of "the political" – of struggle at all cost – remains polemically tied to the affirmation of tolerance – of peace at all cost – by its liberal opponent.

Strauss argues, therefore, that Schmitt's polemic against liberalism can only be his "first word": it is meant to clear the field between "the spirit of technology", the "mass faith that inspires an antireligious, this-worldly activism",

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[230] Strauss refers to Plato, *Euthypro*, 7bd, in which Socrates suggests that differences about number, size or weight are capable of being resolved by having recourse to measurements, whereas he asks about the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad: "Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?" Strauss also refers to Plato, *Phaedrus*, 263a, which contains a similar passage.

[231] NCP 120.

and an opposite faith which seems as yet to have no name.[232] According to Strauss, Schmitt's "last word" does not consist in the battle against liberalism, but in "the order of the human things".[233]

Strauss claims that Schmitt's entanglement in the polemic against liberalism is the necessary result of his thesis that "all concepts of the spiritual sphere … are to be understood only in terms of concrete political existence" and that all political concepts have a polemical meaning.[234] He notes, though, that Schmitt effectively *contradicts* this principle when he opposes his unpolemical concept of the state of nature to Hobbes's polemical concept of the state of nature, and that he even *rejects* this principle when he states that the order of human things is to be expected from a "pure and whole knowledge". Schmitt concludes his text with the following words from Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*: "*ab integro nascitur ordo*" / "order is born from what is pure and whole".[235] According to Strauss, the best political order cannot come into being out of *polemical* knowledge, but only out of *genuine* knowledge:[236]

> For a pure and whole knowledge [*ein integres Wissen*] is never, unless by accident, polemical, and a pure and whole knowledge cannot be gained "from concrete political existence, from the situation of the age," but only by means of a return to the origin, to "undamaged, noncorrupt nature". (NCP 122)

Heinrich Meier has argued that Schmitt and Strauss find the *source* for a recovery of this moral seriousness in different, even *opposing* directions. He states that Strauss clearly finds it in a return to classical political *philosophy*, which strives for genuine knowledge of nature, whereas Schmitt finds the spirit and faith which seemed to have no name in a return to revealed political *theology*, as the topical reference to Virgil's *Eclogues* would seem to indicate.[237] Whereas philosophy lives in the seriousness of the *question* of the right way of life, religion lives in the seriousness of the divine *answer* to the question of the right way of life. In other

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[232] NCP 121.
[233] NCP 121.
[234] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 84.
[235] Ibid., 96. The complete line from Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* runs as follows: "Magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo."
[236] Cf. Strauss, letter to Gerhard Krüger, 19 August 1932, in: Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 399: "im Gegensatz zu der Verständigung um jeden Preis ist der Streit wahrer; das letzte Wort kann aber nur der Friede, d.h. die Verständigung in der Wahrheit, sein. Dass diese Verständigung der Vernunft möglich sei – firmitur credo." Strauss suggests that *struggle* is "truer" than agreement at all cost because its concomitant conviction that one is in the right implies that it is at least *possible* to know the truth. See CM 111: "every act of human spiritedness seems to include a sense that one is in the right."
[237] Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, 60-71, 65n70. Meier interprets Schmitt's use of Virgil's words from the *Fourth Eclogue*, 5 as a signal of his underlying belief in divine providence. See also Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts*, 256: "Sosehr sich die geschichtlichen Lagen ändern, auf die Schmitt mit seinem »blinden Vorgebot« unmittelbar antwortet, sowenig ändert sich sein Glaube, daß die göttliche Vorsehung die Geschichte regiert."

words, whereas in the case of philosophy, “moral evil” consists in a lack of *knowledge* – “virtue is knowledge” is the Socratic dictum – in the case of revealed religion, moral evil consists in a lack of *obedience* to divine authority.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that a difference in understanding of the source of the *raison d'être* of the political does not yet imply a difference in understanding of what the political *in itself* – political life, the political world from the perspective of the citizen – *looks* like. As we have seen, Strauss stated that the opposition between authoritarian and anarchist theories of the political is more fundamental than that between bellicose nationalism and pacifist internationalism. In a letter to Schmitt which he presents as a follow-up to his review, Strauss explains how they are connected:

> … because man is by nature evil, he therefore needs rule [*Herrschaft*]. But rule can be established, that is, men can be unified, only in a unity [*Einheit*] *against* – against other men. Every association [*Zusammenschluss*] of men is necessarily a separation [*Abschluss*] from other men. The tendency to separate [*Abschliesungstendenz*] (and therewith the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies) is given with human nature; it is in this sense *the* fate [*das* Schicksal] [emphasis in original].[238]

In other words, Strauss suggests that the co-existence of political unities that are characterized by mutual “closure” and the possibility of the friend-enemy conflict is according to *nature*. In the same letter, he notes that Schmitt's opening thesis that the concept of the state “presupposes” the concept of the political is in fact ambiguous.[239] Pointing to the etymological affinity between the word “political” and the Greek word *polis*, Strauss claims that the political should not be understood as the constituting principle of the modern state, but rather as its *condition*.[240] Eight years later, in a letter to Karl Löwith, Strauss would explicitly express his belief in the truth of the classical understanding of the political:

> I *truly* believe, although it apparently appears as fantastic to you, that the perfect political order, as Plato and Aristotle have sketched it, *is* the perfect political order. Or do you believe in a world state? If it is true that real unity [*Einheit*] is only possible through knowledge of the truth or through searching for the truth, then a real unity of all human beings can only exist on the basis of the popularized, final teaching [*Lehre*] of philosophy (which is of course unavailable), or if all human beings would be philosophers (and not D.Phil. etc.) (which is not the case either).

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[238] Strauss, letter to Carl Schmitt, 4 September 1932, 125.
[239] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 19.
[240] Strauss, letter to Carl Schmitt, 4 September 1932, 125. In other words, the most “natural” form of “the political” – understood as the inevitable existence of mutually exclusive friend-enemy groupings – is not the modern “state”, but the Greek *polis*, a term which Strauss translates as “city” or “civil society”.

> Hence there can only be closed societies, i.e. states [emphasis in original].[241]

Strauss makes explicit here the classical assumption that *unity* of all men on the basis of knowledge of the truth or searching for the truth is *impossible*, because by nature not all human beings are or will become philosophers. Since it is the case that not all human beings are capable of realizing that "virtue is knowledge", therefore, the world *cannot* be united in "pure and whole" [*integer*] knowledge. If "real" unity on the basis of *philosophy* – the highest use of reason [*logos*] – is impossible, political unity on the basis of *polemics* – "spiritedness" [*thumos*] – seems to be the only alternative.[242]

We may conclude, therefore, that Strauss *agrees* with Schmitt in regarding the possibility of the friend-enemy conflict as central to the political experience.[243] Although the source of the *raison d'être* of the political may be different in the case of Schmitt and Strauss – viz. the *moral seriousness* gained by religion (versus unbelief) and by philosophy (versus ignorance), respectively – their *description* of the political is much the same. For Strauss just as much as for Schmitt, "the fact of the political" consists in the division of mankind into friend-enemy groupings or "closed societies". Each of these political communities is characterized by the exercise of *rule* [*Herrschaft*, *archè*] and by its concomitant enforcement of the *law* [*Gesetz*, *nomos*], which implies the inescapable presence of a trans-private *obligation* on its individual subjects, existing in the obligation to sacrifice their individual lives in case of war, that is, in the extreme situation.

3.4. The Foundations of Modern Political Philosophy: Machiavelli and Hobbes

After our reconstruction of Strauss's preliminary recovery of "the fact of the political", we now proceed to our second question: to what extent does he leave any room for normative guidance within the political world, or for what he calls "thoughtful" political action?[244]

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[241] Strauss, letter to Karl Löwith, 15 August 1946, in: Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 662 (translation my own).

[242] Cf. CM 111: "the city … separates itself from others by opposing or resisting them; the opposition of 'We and They' is essential to the political association."

[243] Sympathizers with Strauss deny that this is the case. See e.g. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 196: "Strauss hardly accepted a Schmittean view of the political universe as divided into mutually hostile camps of friend and enemy."; 188-189; and Zuckert & Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 192: "according to Strauss, the political is not defined or constituted by the friend-enemy-distinction." Finally, Shell, in her article 'Taking Evil Seriously: Schmitt's "Concept of the Political" and Strauss's "True Politics"', also claims that Schmitt and Strauss "differ fundamentally … in their understanding what politics is" (ibid., 185). Even so, she points to the difference between Schmitt's affirmation of human dangerousness and Strauss's affirmation of human evil as sources of dominion, while she is silent about the question of the extent to which the friend-enemy distinction plays a role in the conceptions of the politicalof both of them..

[244] NRH 127.

On the basis of the analysis so far, we seem to be left with only two options: (i) either Strauss's philosophical *turning away* from politics – which seems to leave us without any rational standards *within political life*; (ii) or Schmitt's "decisionist" (or "existentialist") *immersion* in politics – which seem to leave us without any *rational standards* within political life. We thus seem to be caught between Socrates' "true politics", which uses "dialectical" conversation to find unity in genuine knowledge of the truth, and Schmitt's "great politics", which takes decisions demanded by the concrete existential situation, especially the state of exception, in which unity and sovereign rule are established by polemically closing off one's own political community against another. While political life is incapable of fulfilling the goal of philosophic life, the goal of political life itself coincides entirely with the self-preservation of the political community. In either case, it seems there is not much to hope for within political life.

As we demonstrate, however, in fact Strauss *does* suggest the possibility of a politics *between* philosophy and polemics, which we reconstruct on the basis of his account of "classic natural right", especially its Platonic and Aristotelian variants, in chapter IV of *Natural Right and History*. Just as in the case of his classical "theory" of politics, Strauss's classical "theory" of "thoughtful" political action or of "prudence" [*phronèsis*] takes shape in dialogue with Schmitt's "existentialism", although less conspicuously so. In addition, it is to be understood as a response to what he calls the "doctrinaire" character of *modern* political philosophy. Strauss concludes his Schmitt review by formulating the task of achieving an adequate understanding of Hobbes, or of the horizon within which the foundation of liberalism was completed.[245] In accordance with this aim, Strauss published a book called *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1936). As he would only later discover that Hobbes was decisively influenced by Machiavelli, for a full understanding of Strauss's thinking on Hobbes we turn to Chapter V.A. of *Natural Right and History* (1953).

As the first section of this chapter briefly explained, Strauss regards Machiavelli as the "founder" of modern political philosophy, because he decided to break with classical political philosophy, which had taken its bearings by how human beings *ought to* live, and had argued that in answering the question of the right political order we should instead take our bearings by how human beings *actually* live. According to Strauss, Machiavelli replaced the highest virtue, that is, the virtue of philosophical life, by merely political virtue, or patriotism. By thus lowering the standard of the right political order, the probability of its realization is increased, or, stated otherwise, its actualization has become less dependent on *chance*. In order to conquer chance, Machiavelli in fact decided to take his bearings

[245] NCP 122: "The critique introduced by Schmitt against liberalism can … be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism. In such a horizon Hobbes completed the foundation of liberalism. A radical critique of liberalism is thus possible only on the basis of an adequate understanding of Hobbes. To show what can be learned from Schmitt in order to achieve that urgent task was therefore the principle intention of our notes."

not so much by how human beings actually live as by how they live in the *extreme case*, i.e. in the state of *necessity*.[246]

Strauss tells us that Hobbes, in turn, attempted to *restore* the moral principles of politics, i.e. the "natural law". However, he did so on the plane of Machiavelli's "realism": in order to *guarantee* the actualization of the right political order, *certainty* is needed about the nature of the right political order and about the conditions of its actualization. Accordingly, Hobbes attempted to *deduce* the natural law, not from an idea of human excellence or virtue, but from the most powerful of all human passions, which is fear of violent death,[247] or, as Strauss had put it in his earlier book: "death – being the *summum malum*, while there is no *summum bonum* – is the only absolute standard by reference to which man may coherently order his life".[248] Fear of violent death, in turn, is the expression of the desire for self-preservation. Hence, all moral laws or *duties* are derived from this one fundamental and inalienable *right* to self-preservation. Strauss concludes, therefore:

> If we may call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental political fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with the protection or the safeguarding of those rights, we must say that the founder of liberalism was Hobbes. (NRH 181-182)

Stated differently, Hobbes conceives of the human individual not as a being who is social or political by nature [*zoion politikon*], but as a being who is already complete by nature, i.e. within the *status naturalis*, *independently* of civil society, i.e. the *status civilis*. Thus, Strauss claims, Hobbes defends an uncompromising form of *individualism*. As a result, if everyone has an equal right, everyone is by nature the judge of what are the right means to his self-preservation. Strauss claims that only on this premise does the *problem* of sovereignty arise. If the question "who should rule?" cannot be decided by *reason*, someone or some group of people should be made sovereign by *will*, which implies that consent takes precedence over wisdom.[249]

According to Strauss, the doctrine of "natural public law", which emerged in the seventeenth century, replaced the concern for "the best regime" with a concern for "legitimate government".[250] Classical political philosophy had insisted on the *difference* between the one *best* regime – which exists "in speech" only – and the various *legitimate* regimes – which may be realized "in deed". In the case of the modern doctrine of natural public law, Strauss indicates, this difference disappears:

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[246] NRH 177-179.
[247] NRH 179-181.
[248] Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 16.
[249] NRH 186.
[250] NRH 191.

> Natural public law, we may say, replaces the idea of the best regime, which does not supply, and is not meant to supply, an answer to the question of what is the just order here and now, by the idea of the just social order which answers the basic practical question once and for all, i.e., regardless of place and time. Natural public law intends to give such a universally valid solution to the political problem as is meant to be universally applicable in practice. (NRH 191)

As a consequence of the claim that political *theory* has already solved the essentially *practical* problem of what order is just here and now, there is no longer any need for statesmanship *as distinguished from* political theory. Strauss calls this type of thinking "doctrinairism",[251] while failing to mention his indebtedness to Schmitt in this regard, who had used this term in a similar way in his *Constitutional Theory* (1928).[252] Strauss claims that, from the seventeenth century on, "the sensible flexibility of classical political philosophy gave way to fanatical rigidity", as a result of which "the political philosopher became more and more indistinguishable from the partisan" (NRH 192). In addition, he claims that from the viewpoint of natural public law, what is needed to establish the right political order is less "the formation of character" than "the devising of the right kind of institutions" (NRH 193).

When we now choose to interpret Popper's political philosophy against the background of Strauss's sketch of modern political philosophy, he turns out to fit very well within the profile. As we have seen, Popper abandons the "utopian" question of "the ideal state", claiming that there is only *one* legitimate form of government: democracy. Moreover, he claims that the fundamental political problem has been "solved" by the demand that there is *one* single value that may serve as the goal of politics: the reduction of avoidable human suffering, being the *summum malum*. Finally, the only political problems left are mere "technological" ones, capable of being solved by "social engineering", that is, by the design and reform of social *institutions* which serve as efficiently and effectively as possible the realization of an aim that has already been established.

Strauss continues his account of Hobbes by stating that the historical thought of the nineteenth century has tried "to recover for statesmanship that latitude which natural public law had so severely restricted" (NRH 192). However, he notes, "since that historical thought was absolutely under the spell of modern "realism", it succeeded in destroying natural public law only by destroying in the

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[251] Strauss uses the term in NRH, 192, 277, 303, 319, 321.

[252] Carl Schmitt speaks in his *Constitutional Theory*, 63 of "doctrinaires" as a group of nineteenth-century French liberal legal thinkers who regarded the "constitution" [*Verfassung*] as the seat of "sovereignty". In a broader sense, his use of the term can be understood to refer to the thesis that not men but laws are sovereign. Schmitt claims that the "doctrinaires" circumvent "the actual political question", i.e. the question "who should rule?" (viz. the people or the prince) (ibid., 63). While Schmitt speaks about a specific group of *legal* thinkers, Strauss notes that "lawyers are altogether a class by themselves" (NRH 192), thereby suggesting that legal thinkers are "doctrinaires" by profession. Strauss claims, however, that "doctrinairism" was introduced within *political philosophy* in the seventeenth century.

process all moral principles of politics" (NRH 192). As we have seen above, Strauss contends that historical thought culminated in "radical historicism" or "existentialism", [253] a position which he associates with Nietzsche and more especially with Heidegger.[254] Although he does not mention Schmitt explicitly, it is clear that he must have had him in mind as well, since he explicitly adopts an "existentialist" stance, both in his *The Concept of the Political* and his *Constitutional Theory*.[255]

Finally, I point to the following lines from the last chapter of *Natural Right and History*, which may serve as conclusion to Strauss's account of "the moderns":

> "Doctrinairism" and "existentialism" appear to us as the two faulty extremes. While being opposed to each other, they agree with each other in the decisive respect – they agree in ignoring prudence, "the god of this lower world." Prudence and "this lower world" cannot be seen properly without some knowledge of "the higher world" – without genuine *theoria*. (NRH 321)

In sum, both Schmitt's "existentialism" and Strauss's attempt at a recovery of the *bios theōrētikos* are to be understood as responses to modern political philosophy's "doctrinaire" (con)fusion of philosophy and politics. However, whereas Schmitt's position leaves us without any moral standards within political life, Strauss's recovery of philosophical life, or the pursuit of purely theoretical wisdom [*sophia*], which may at first appear to be an *escape* from political life, in fact serves as *prerequisite* for the recovery of "thoughtful" political action, or for the practical wisdom [*phronèsis*] of the statesman, to the reconstruction of which we now turn.[256]

3.5. The Recovery of Classical Political Philosophy: Plato and Aristotle

We now turn to Strauss's account of classical political philosophy, or more specifically, to his reconstruction of the classic account of "natural right",[257] i.e., of the "best regime", which he offers in Chapter IV of *Natural Right and History*. As has already been stated, in the end this book is meant as an attempt to *understand*

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[253] NRH, chapter 1. He uses the term "existentialism" in NRH 32, 321.

[254] NRH 320.

[255] Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, 64: "The fact is a constitution is valid because it derives from a constitution-making capacity (power or authority) and is established by the will of this constitution-making power. In contrast to mere norms, the word "will" denotes an actually existing power as the origin of command. The will is existentially present; its power or authority lies in its being. A *norm* can be valid because it is *correct*. The logical conclusion, reached systematically, is natural law, not the positive constitution. The alternative is that a norm is valid because it is positively established, in other words, by virtue of an existing *will*."

[256] Cf. Strauss, letter to Karl Löwith, 2 February 1933, in: idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 620: "Es fragt sich also: ob man bei der *Antithese* Tapferkeit-Wissen stehenbleiben muss."

[257] NRH 93: "This precisely is the basic controversy in political philosophy: Is there any natural right?"

the *problem* of "natural right" (the question whether such a thing as natural right exists) and the *alternative* solutions to it,[258] most notably conventionalism (which denies the existence of natural right, claiming that all right is of human origin) and the classic natural right teaching (which affirms the existence of natural right). However, the book suggests a strong preference for the latter solution, not only against contemporary relativism, positivist and historicist,[259] but also against classical conventionalism. Our account of Strauss's answer to "doctrinairism" and "existentialism" is therefore based on the classic natural-right teaching.

It is important to note that Strauss's recovery of "natural right" [*phusei dikaion*] should not be confused with a recovery of "natural law". He notes that in light of the classical distinction between "nature" [*phusis*] and "law" [*nomos*], "natural law" [*nomos tēs phuseōs*] is a contradiction in terms rather than a matter of course.[260] Hence, the notion of "natural right" is to be distinguished from the Thomistic teaching on natural law. Strauss argues that if the best regime is the City of God, or if the cessation of evil is brought about by God's supernatural intervention, the *question* of the best regime loses its crucial significance: "The notion of God as lawgiver takes on a certainty and definiteness which it never possessed in classical philosophy" (NRH 144). Moreover, the notion of "natural right" should also be distinguished from the modern notion of "natural public law", of which we have seen in the previous section that its certainty is "scientifically" deduced from human nature, i.e., from the universal desire for individual self-preservation.[261]

In contrast to these "natural law" doctrines, Strauss notes, the classic natural right teaching is "political" in nature: it consists in the construction "in speech" of the best regime. It holds that the definite character of the virtues, and hence of the virtue of justice, cannot be *deduced* from human nature. After all, Strauss argues, the idea of man is not problematic in the same way as the idea of justice: "there is hardly disagreement as to whether a given being is a man, whereas there is habitual disagreement in regard to things just and noble" (NRH 145). As virtue exists in most cases as an object of aspiration rather than fulfillment, it exists "in speech" rather than "in deed". Therefore, Strauss argues, the proper starting point for the study of the virtues is what is *said* about them, i.e. opinions about justice. Against the claim of *positivism,* that the existence of natural right is refuted by the actual existence of a variety of opinions about justice, Strauss suggests that this would only be the case if *actual* consent of all men in regard to the principles of right were required, whereas in fact only *potential* consent is required.[262] The

[258] See NRH 6: "Let us beware of the danger of pursuing a Socratic goal with the means, and the temper, of Thrasymachus." Cf. Kennington, 'Strauss's Natural Right and History', 67; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 123.
[259] NRH vii: "Nothing that I have learned has shaken my inclination to prefer "natural right," especially in its classic form, to the reigning relativism, positivist or historicist."
[260] Strauss, 'On Natural Law', 138. Cf. NRH 90. See also Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 118.
[261] NRH 181.
[262] NRH 125.

replacement of mere opinions [*doxai*] by true knowledge [*epistēmē*] about natural right is sought for in philosophical conversation. Yet there is no guarantee that it "will ever legitimately go beyond the stage of discussion or disputation and will ever reach the stage of decision" (NRH 125).

In fulfillment of the aim of this chapter, we reconstruct the description of the essence of the political and the prescriptions for the thoughtful guidance of political action as they are manifest in Strauss's account of classic natural right. We first turn to his account of the classic teaching of natural right in general, after which we focus on his treatment of what he calls "the Socratic-Platonic-Stoic" and the "Aristotelian" subtypes, respectively.[263] In each case, we take an effort at *thinking along* with Strauss in the direction he points, paying specific attention to his uses of the word "political" and related terms.

3.5.1. Classic Natural Right and the Recovery of the Political

Against conventionalism, which identifies the good with the pleasant, the classical natural-right thinkers hold that the good is higher than the pleasant. They claim that every being possesses a natural order of wants, which is determined by the natural constitution, or the "what" of the being concerned. A being is good if it does well the work that corresponds with its nature. Hence, a good human life consists in the perfection of human nature, i.e. in excellence or virtue.[264] Strauss suggests that "the rules circumscribing the general character of the good life" may be called "natural law" (NRH 127). By putting the latter term between quotation marks he reminds us that the actual *decision* in favor of a specific "natural law" always remains a matter of (contestable) speech about "ideas" rather than (certain) deduction from "facts" or divine revelation.

According to the classics, man distinguishes himself from the brutes in the *first* place by his possession of "speech or reason or understanding" (NRH 127) [*zoion logon echon*]. The proper work of man thus consists in "living thoughtfully", i.e. in "understanding" (especially *philosophical* understanding) and in "thoughtful action" (especially thoughtful *political* action) (NRH 127). Man distinguishes himself in the *second* place because he is by nature a social being [*zoion politikon*]. Since speech is communication, man is social in a more radical sense than any other social animal: "Man refers himself to others, or rather he is referred to others, in every human act, regardless of whether he is 'social' or 'antisocial'" (NRH 129). Hence, Strauss explains, implicitly arguing against Hobbes, man's sociality does not proceed from a calculation of the pleasures or benefits he expects from association, but he derives pleasures from association because he is by nature social. He adds:

[263] For reasons just indicated, we will leave the third type – Thomistic natural right (NRH 163-164) – out of consideration.

[264] NRH 128.

> By virtue of his rationality, man has a latitude of alternatives such as no other earthly being has. The sense of this latitude, of this freedom, is accompanied by a sense that the full and unrestrained exercise of that freedom is not right. Man's freedom is accompanied by a sacred awe, by a kind of divination that not everything is permitted. (NRH 130)

In other words, and again in contrast with Hobbes, restraint is as natural as freedom. Moreover, Strauss argues, since restraint must sometimes be *coercive* to be effective, "rule" or "power" [*archè, Herrschaft*] is as such not against nature, nor is it in itself an "evil".[265]

Since man is a social being, Strauss adds, he can only reach perfection in society, i.e. in a specific kind of society called "civil society" or "city" [*polis*]. This is a closed society as well as a small society, for, Strauss explains, the classics believed that freedom requires trust, and that trust presupposes a certain degree of acquaintance. They also believed that man's capacity for "love" or "active concern" is limited. Furthermore, he goes on to explain, the classics believed that political freedom, especially that which justifies itself by the pursuit of human excellence, becomes actual only through the effort of many generations. Hence, the chance that all human societies should be capable of achieving it is very small. In the following passage, Strauss implicitly takes up his discussion with Schmitt about the possibility of a "world-state", or, with implicit reference to Popper, an "open society":

> An open or all-comprehensive society would consist of many societies which are on vastly different levels of political maturity, and the chances are overwhelming that the lower societies would drag down the higher ones. An open or all-comprehensive society will exist on a lower level of humanity than a closed society, which, through generations, has made a supreme effort toward human perfection. The prospects for the existence of a good society are therefore greater if there is a multitude of independent societies than if there is only one independent society. If the society in which man can reach the perfection of his nature is necessarily a closed society, the distinction of the human race into a number of independent groups is according to nature. (NRH 132)

We may now therefore conclude that according to Strauss's preferred classical position, the justification for the existence of "closed societies" rather than an "open society" consists not in the ineradicable possibility of *war*, but in its being the best condition for the realization of human excellence.

Moreover, Strauss claims, the classics believed that the full actualization of humanity consists not in passive citizenship but in "the properly directed activity of the statesman, the legislator, or the founder" (NRH 133). He states that "political greatness" manifests itself in the pursuit of "mankind's great objects", viz. "freedom" [*eleutheria, Freiheit*] (i.e. independence from other cities) and "empire"

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[265] NRH 130, 132-133.

[*archè, Herrschaft*] (i.e. hegemonic or even imperial power over other cities).[266] These are *conditions* of happiness, Strauss claims, while reminding us that happiness consists in human excellence. Since political activity is then properly directed toward human virtue, the end of the city and of the individual is ultimately the same: “the end of the city is peaceful activity in accordance with the dignity of man, and not war and conquest” (NRH 134).

As mentioned already, according to the classics the question of natural right coincides with the question of the best regime. For the classics, Strauss explains, the fundamental social fact is the regime, and not “culture” or “civilization”.[267] In order to reach excellence, the classics believed, man must live in the best kind of society, i.e., in the city [*polis*] *par excellence*, which they called *politeia*. Strauss translates this term as “regime” rather than “constitution”, for it does not refer to a legal phenomenon but rather to the *source* of the laws, or to “the factual distribution of power within the community” rather than to “what constitutional law stipulates in regard to political power” (NRH 136). In implicit agreement with the descriptive part of Schmitt’s existentialism, Strauss claims: “No law, and hence no constitution, can be the fundamental political fact, because all laws depend on human beings” (NRH 136). He defines the “regime” as the “way of life” of a community as it is essentially determined by its “form of government” (NRH 136):

> The character, or tone, of a society depends on what the society regards as most respectable or most worthy of admiration. But by regarding certain habits or attitudes as most respectable, a society admits the superiority, the superior dignity, of those human beings who most perfectly embody the habits or attitudes in question. That is to say, every society regards a specific human type (or a specific mixture of human types) as authoritative. … In order to be truly authoritative, the human beings who embody the admired habits or attitudes must have the decisive say within the community in broad daylight: they must form the regime. (NRH 137)

[266] NRH 134. As he makes clear in his footnote (NRH134n13), Strauss derives these terms from Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, III, 45.6. Strauss appeals to the same passage in CM 239, where he emphasizes that cities are unequal in power, which leads to the consequence that “the most powerful cities cannot help being hegemonial or even imperial”. He claims: “The city is neither self-sufficient nor is it essentially a part of a good or just order comprising many or all cities. The lack of order which necessarily characterizes the “society” of the cities or, in other words, the omnipresence of War puts a much lower ceiling on the highest aspiration of any city toward justice and virtue than classical philosophy might seem to have admitted. … For the city which is not on the verge of civil war or in it, the most important questions concern its relations with other cities. Not without reason does Thucydides make his Diodotus call freedom (i.e. freedom from foreign domination) and empire “the greatest things” (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, III 45.6).” Cf. the following two lines from the Prologue of Friedrich Schiller’s *Wallenstein*, to which Strauss refers in ‘Cohen und Maimuni’, 406: “Und um der Menschheit grosse Gegenstände / Um Herrschaft und um Freiheit wird gerungen”.

[267] NRH 137-138.

Strauss explains that the classics' answer to the question of the best regime is that the wise should rule. Although they were convinced that the best regime in this sense is desirable (it is the object of "wish" or "prayer" by all good men or "gentlemen") and possible (it is according to nature), they knew that its realization is highly unlikely: it depends on *chance*. As the best regime is possible only under the most favorable conditions, it is only legitimate under those conditions. Under less favorable conditions only less perfect regimes are possible and legitimate. Because the wise cannot rule the many unwise by force, the wise must be recognized by the unwise and be freely obeyed because of their wisdom. However, the ability of the wise to persuade the unwise is naturally extremely limited. In fact, Strauss says:

> What is more likely to happen is that an unwise man, appealing to the natural right of wisdom and catering to the lowest desires of the many, will persuade the multitude of his right: the prospects for tyranny are brighter than those for rule of the wise. This being the case, the natural right of the wise must be questioned, and the indispensable requirement for wisdom must be qualified by the requirement for consent. The political problem consists in reconciling the requirement for wisdom with the requirement for consent. (NRH 141)

More concretely, what ought to happen according to the classics is that a *wise legislator* frames a code which is then freely adopted by the citizens. That code should be as little subject to change as possible: "the rule of law is to take the place of the rule of men, however wise" (NRH 141). The equitable administration of the law as well as the "completion" of the law in light of situations that were not foreseen by the lawgiver should be entrusted to a specific type of men, called "gentlemen". Strauss describes the "gentleman" [*kalokagathos*] as "the political reflection, or imitation, of the wise man",[268] for, like the wise, he is experienced in "noble" things and he "looks down" on many things that are esteemed by common men, but unlike the wise he has a "noble" contempt for *exactness* (NRH 142). In sum, since the best regime – the rule of the wise – is not available, the practically best regime exists in the rule, under law, of gentlemen, or, as Strauss calls it, the "mixed regime".

On the basis of our reconstruction of Strauss's account of classic natural right, we have found the following picture of the political. In his Schmitt review, Strauss claims that the *justification* for the existence of "closed societies" consists in the question of the right way of life. In classical political philosophy this question coincides with the question of natural right or the best regime. The construction "in speech" of the best regime, which consists in the rule of the wise, shows that it is not available "in deed", i.e., that it is not available as a *political* solution, the underlying premises being that not all human beings are or are capable of becoming philosophers and that the "natural" rift between "the few" and "the

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[268] Plato, *Statesman,* 293e ff.

many" cannot be healed. Strauss's picture of "political greatness" in fact coincides with Schmitt's identification of it with the safeguarding of the independence and power of separate friend-enemy groupings or "closed societies", the difference being that Schmitt *reduces* their aim to the urgent goal of self-preservation or physical existence only, while Strauss considers this goal as the *condition* for and as *justified* by the higher goal of self-improvement or human excellence.[269]

Having completed our reconstruction of Strauss's classical understanding of the nature of the political, which he began to develop in his Schmitt review, we now turn to a more precise determination of the possibility for normative *guidance* for political action as presented in his accounts of two subtypes of classic natural right that he distinguishes, viz. (i) the Socratic-Platonic-Stoic type; (i) the Aristotelian type. In the first case we focus on the Platonic elements only.[270] In both cases, the understanding of the political we reconstructed so far is presupposed without further justification. The difference between Plato and Aristotle consists in the fact that the former considers the political life with constant reference to the philosophic life. Since he considers the philosophic life as the only way of life which is by nature right, the city requires a "dilution" of natural right. By contrast, Aristotle treats natural right on the level of political right only.

3.5.2. The Platonic Philosopher-Lawgiver

What is characteristic of Plato is that he is continuously aware of the *tension* between the requirements of justice (i.e. of what is by nature just – in the end only the philosophic life is by nature right: "virtue is knowledge") and the requirements of the city (i.e. of what is just by law and according to "merely" moral or political virtue). Strauss notes that this tension is *not* relieved even in the best regime, i.e., a regime in which wise men are in absolute control, for it is still the regime [*politeia*] of a "city", or "civil society' [*polis*]:

> Civil society as closed society necessarily implies that there is more than one civil society, and therewith that war is possible. Civil society must therefore foster warlike habits. But these habits are at variance with the requirements of justice. If people are engaged in war, they are concerned with victory and not with assigning to the enemy what an impartial and discerning judge would consider beneficial to the enemy. (NRH 149)

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[269] Cf. CM 6: "for the foreseeable future, political society remains what it always has been: a partial or particular society whose most urgent and primary task is its self-preservation and whose highest task is its self-improvement."

[270] As Tanguay explains, in Strauss's view the Stoic doctrine differed from the teaching of Plato (and Aristotle) inasmuch as it relied on belief in a divine providence that sanctioned men's actions. It thus became the foundation of the natural law tradition which culminated in the Thomistic teaching. See Tanguay, Leo Strauss: *An Intellectual Biography*, 120. Cf. Strauss, 'On Natural Law', 141.

Whereas Plato suggests that the man who is simply just appears not to harm anyone, Strauss notes in implicit agreement with Schmitt that the city necessarily draws a distinction between "friends" and "enemies": "the just man is who does not harm, but loves, his friends or neighbors, i.e. his fellow-citizens, but who does harm or who hates his enemies, i.e. the foreigners who as such are at least potential enemies of his city" (NRH 149). According to Strauss, the city necessarily requires this type of justice, which he calls "citizen-morality" (NRH 149) and of which he claims elsewhere that it is akin to "spiritedness" [*thumos*].[271]

He adds that citizen-morality distinguishes between war and peace: deception of others in order to harm them is just in wartime, but not in peacetime. He notes, though, that the city cannot help but regard deception in order to harm other people as something that is *in itself* not something to be *admired*, i.e., not even in wartime. If the city wishes to resolve this tension, Strauss contends, some suggest that it must transform itself into a "world-state". However, he states without adding further justification, "no human being and no group of human beings can rule the whole human race justly" (NRH 149). Since a "world-state" is impossible, then, "the justice which is possible within the city, can be only imperfect or cannot be unquestionably good" (NRH 151).

As the first section of this chapter showed, there is at least one "solution" to the problem of justice that *transcends* the limits of political life, which consists in the life of the philosopher who strives for *wisdom* [*sophia*], i.e. knowledge of the eternal truth. As we have seen, the philosopher *ascends* from the city and he *looks down upon it* as a "cave".[272] So far, then, the Platonic natural right teaching does not seem to have much to offer in answer to our search for orientation and normative guidance *within* political life.

However, Strauss notes, Plato makes the philosopher *descend* back into the cave, both because of "the obvious dependence of the philosophic life on the city" and because of "the natural affection which men have for men, and especially for their kin, regardless of whether or not these men have "good natures" or are

[271] CM 111, where Strauss also states: "the opposition of 'We and They' is essential to the political association."

[272] Cf. NRH 151: "If striving for knowledge of the eternal truth is the ultimate end of man, justice and moral virtue in general can be fully legitimated only by the fact that they are required for the sake of that ultimate end or that they are conditions of the philosophic life. From this point of view, the man who is merely just or moral without being a philosopher appears as a mutilated being. It thus becomes a question whether the moral or just man who is not a philosopher is simply superior to the nonphilosophic "erotic" man." See also Strauss's letter to Jacob Klein, 16 February 1939, in: Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 567, in which he claims that according to Xenophon just as according to the Platonic Socrates, morality [*Moral*] is "purely exoteric" and that in the Socratic circle *kalokagathia* – i.e. to be a "gentleman" – was in fact a term of abuse [*Schimpfwort*]. In the same letter, Strauss states that *thumos* is also "purely ironic": "Die unterscheidung zwischen [*epithumia*] und [*thumos*] ist nur exoterisch zulässig, und damit bricht "Glaukons" [*kallipolis*] zusammen." (ibid. 568). In other words, the distinction between the lower part of the soul (*epithumia*) and the middle part of the soul (*thumos*), which is essential to the perfect *polis*, is actually a "noble lie". Due to the unbridgeable gap between "non-philosophic" and "philosophical" *eros*, the perfect *polis* or best regime as it is wished for by the "gentleman" Glaucon will never be realized in practice.

potential philosophers" (NRH 152). He is thereby necessitated to "take care of the affairs of the city, whether in a direct or more remote manner" (NRH 152). By doing so, Strauss explains, the philosopher acknowledges that what is by nature "the highest" – viz. the philosophic life – is not the most "urgent" for man. When attempting to *guide* the city, the philosopher must "dilute" the requirements of wisdom with the requirements of the city. In other words, the city requires a "fundamental compromise" (NRH 152) between natural right, which is discerned by reason or understanding [*logos*], and conventional right, which is discerned by opinion [*doxa*] only:

> … the simply good, which is what is good by nature and which is radically distinct from the ancestral, must be transformed into the politically good, which is, as it were, the quotient of the simply good and the ancestral: the politically good is what "removes a vast mass of evil without shocking a vast mass of prejudice."[273] (NRH 153)

Only when we turn to his footnote to this passage do we get an indication of what Strauss has in mind when he speaks about the task of determining "the political good".[274] In it, he mentions two passages from Plato's *Republic*. *First*, he refers to *Republic* 414b-415d, which is about the "noble lie" that is to be told by philosopher-lawgivers to the rulers and citizens of the ideal city, which consists of two parts: (i) they are told that the city into which they were born is their "natural" city; (ii) they are told that the social class into which they were born is their "natural" class. *Secondly*, he refers to *Republic* 501a-c, in which the philosopher-lawgivers are presented as painters who are looking at the virtues on the one hand and at human reality on the other hand, trying to reproduce the former in the latter by a process of "mixing" and "diluting".

Note that both the notion of the "noble lie" and the notion of "dilution" imply that the philosopher-lawgiver is somehow in the position to assume a viewpoint that is cognitively superior to that of the citizens, who are the object of his knowledge and active intervention. However this may be, both notions remain rather *remote*, since they do not provide us with any *concrete* orientation for the "thoughtful" handling of political affairs. To that end, we now turn to Strauss's reconstruction of the natural right teaching of Aristotle, who, in contradistinction to Plato, treats natural right exclusively *within* the limits of political life.

3.5.3. The Aristotelian Statesman

According to Strauss, Aristotle suggests in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that there is no need for the "dilution" of natural right. He treats human life in its own terms. Since man is by nature a social being [*zoion politikon*], a right that transcends political society cannot be a right natural to man. Insofar as Aristotle is concerned with the

[273] Strauss took the quote from Macaulay, *The History of England*, 280.
[274] NRH 153n27.

guidance of human actions, then, he claims that natural right *coincides* with political right.[275]

In addition, Strauss notes, Aristotle claims that all natural right is *changeable*. Strauss suggests that this means that natural right consists not so much in general rules, but concrete decisions: "In every human conflict there exists the possibility of a just decision based on full consideration of all the circumstances, a decision demanded by the situation. Natural right consists of such decisions" (NRH 159). Strauss adds, though, that every individual decision implies general principles. Justice, or the common good, consists of two parts: (i) justice in the *normal* sense of the word, that is, in Aristotle's case, "distributive" and "commutative" justice; (ii) the demands of public safety, that is, everything that is needed for the mere existence, the mere survival and independence of a political community. According to Aristotle, only in *extreme* situations may considerations of public safety prevail over justice in the normal sense. Strauss adds that there is no principle that clearly defines when justice in the sense of public safety and when justice in the normal sense prevails, for it is impossible *exactly* to define what constitutes an extreme situation and what a normal one. However, he claims:

> What cannot be decided in advance by universal rules, what can be decided in the critical moment by the most competent and most conscientious statesman on the spot, can be made visible as just, in retrospect, to all; the objective discrimination between extreme actions which were just and extreme actions which were unjust is one of the noblest duties of the historian. (NRH 161)

In conclusion to his treatment of Aristotle, Strauss contrasts Aristotelian natural right with Machiavellianism, claiming that Machiavelli denies natural right because he takes his bearings from the *extreme* situation in which the demands of justice coincide with the requirements of *necessity*. By contrast, the Aristotelian statesman takes his bearings from the *normal* situation and by what is normally right, from which he reluctantly deviates *only* in order to serve "the cause of justice and humanity itself" (NRH 162).[276] Strauss adds that there is no way of expressing the difference between the two positions in *legal* terms, but its political importance is obvious. Strauss's "Aristotelian" reply to "Machiavellianism" may clearly also be read as a reply to Schmitt, who, as we have seen, also takes his bearings from the extreme situation.[277] Furthermore, Strauss claims, according to the classics the quality of the decisions taken is decisively determined by the character of the statesman concerned. They therefore believed that character formation, or the

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[275] This does not imply that Strauss denies that Aristotle considers the *philosophic life* as the highest way of life, nor that he also offers a theoretical *understanding* of political action.

[276] Machiavelli turned against a natural law that was based on revealed religion and that restricted the "latitude of statesmanship" (NRH 164) in dealing with moral and political matters. Strauss seems to believe that by turning to Aristotle instead, the "evil" consequences of Machiavellianism can be avoided. See Schall, 'A Latitude for Statesmanship? Strauss on St. Thomas', 132.

[277] Cf. Howse, 'From Legitimacy to Dictatorship – And Back Again', 80-81.

appropriate kind of moral education, is at least as important as devising the right kind of institutions.[278]

To conclude, whereas the "Platonic" kind of guidance to politics seems to remain rather general and relatively remote, the "Aristotelian" kind clearly offers a more elaborate framework for "normal" political decision-making and judgment.

3.5.4. Thoughtful Politics beyond Doctrinairism and Existentialism

Strauss concludes his treatment of classic natural right by stating that what Plato and Aristotle have in common, despite the differences just indicated, is the acknowledgement that the demands of justice may vary in practice. As Strauss puts it, they avoided the Scylla of "absolutism" and the Charybdis of "relativism" by holding that there is a "universally valid hierarchy of ends", without there being any "universally valid rules of action" (NRH 162). Strauss explains:

> … when deciding what ought to be done, i.e., what ought to be done by this individual (or this individual group) here and now, one has to consider not only which of the various competing objectives is higher in rank but also which is most urgent in the circumstances. What is most urgent is legitimately preferred to what is less urgent, and the most urgent is in many cases lower in rank than the less urgent. But one cannot make a universal rule that urgency is a higher consideration than rank. For it is our duty to make the highest activity, as much as we can, the most urgent or the most needful thing. And the maximum of effort which can be expected necessarily varies from individual to individual." (NRH 162-163)

Strauss concludes that there are indeed universally valid standards, viz. the hierarchy of ends. However, he adds, whereas these standards are sufficient for passing *judgment* "on the level of nobility of individuals and groups and of actions and institutions" (NRH 163), it is insufficient for guiding our *actions*.

Thereby, Strauss's reconstruction of the classical position regarding the "thoughtful" guidance of politics appears to overcome the opposition between the "doctrinairist" demand of a *single* rational standard to be universally applied in practice on the one hand, and the "existentialist" denial of the existence of rational standards on the other. The recognition of the existence of a hierarchy of ends runs counter to the "existentialist" assumption that politics is entirely at the mercy of the "urgency" of saving the existence of a political community in the extreme case. On the other hand, the classical recognition that such a hierarchy of ends will never be sufficient to guide our actions agrees with the "existentialist" admission that practical decisions are in theory "undecidable", while it runs counter to the "doctrinairist" assumption that theoretically established standards are to be *immediately* applicable in practice. As the previous chapter showed, Popper mistakenly assumed that the classics demand that "the highest" or the *summum*

[278] Ibid., 79. See, inter alia, NRH 193.

bonum was to be universally realized in practice. His own decision to adopt the admittedly lower and more "urgent" goal of the elimination of the *summum malum* of avoidable human suffering operates on the same assumption.

3.6. Conclusion

At the start of this chapter we stated that Strauss's "change of orientation" from modern political philosophy's culmination in positivism and historicism toward classical political philosophy is in the end to be understood as a rehabilitation of the philosophic life *over and above* the political life. As we have demonstrated, however, his recovery of philosophy in fact also *presupposes* a recovery of the political, against the oblivion of the distinct features and mutual opposition of *both* in modernity. Moreover, we demonstrated that his return to classic political philosophy also provides a framework for the normative guidance of political decisions and judgments.

We argued that Strauss's classical understanding of "the political" includes Schmitt's definition of the political in terms of the friend-enemy distinction: given that *war* is an ineradicable human possibility, political societies or "cities" [*poleis*], will always be *closed* societies, each of which upholds its own *law,* in the name of which it may demand the ultimate sacrifice – the death of individual citizens – in the extreme case. However, Strauss suggests, the *raison d'être* of political societies does not consist in the real possibility of war itself, but rather in the pursuit of *virtue* or excellence [*aretē*] by its citizens and the *peaceful* order or *law* [*nomos*] that is required for it, in the name of the *defense* of which it may indeed in some situations be necessary to wage war.

We also argued that Strauss's understanding of "classic natural right" offers the possibility of normative guidance of political action. Against the modern "doctrinairism" of Hobbes and others, which upholds a *single* normative standard – "natural public law" – which is to be universally applied in practice, it recognizes the possibility of formulating a *hierarchy* of ends, the application of which in concrete situations is to be interpreted by the individual lawgiver or statesman concerned. Against the ultramodern "existentialism" of Schmitt and others, which denies the existence of moral standards for political action other than that of *necessity* in concrete situations, it recognizes the possibility of formulating a *hierarchy* of ends which is still to be applied in concrete situations by the individual lawgiver or statesman concerned. Thus, Strauss's reconstruction of the classical position regarding the "thoughtful" guidance of politics does indeed provide us with a framework for political decision-making and judgment that moves *between* an escape from politics into *philosophy* on the one hand and a reduction of politics to *polemics* on the other.

Accordingly, Strauss claims, the classics believed that the "best regime" in theory or "in speech" consists in the rule of the wise, while the best regime in practice or "in deed" exists in a "mixed regime", i.e. the rule of gentlemen under a law drawn up by a wise lawgiver and then freely adopted by the citizens.

According to the "Platonic" natural right teaching, the guidance provided for the philosopher-lawgiver consists in the requirement of "diluting" natural right, i.e. what is right by nature, by conventional right, i.e. what is right by mere convention. According to "Aristotelian" natural right, the guidance provided for the statesman consists in the formulation of principles for "normal" politics, i.e. commutative and distributive justice, and of principles for "exceptional" politics, i.e. public safety. Which of these principles is to prevail is to be determined by the individual statesman on the spot, who should decide by taking his bearings from the normal situation wherever possible, and from the extreme situation only if absolutely necessary. The quality of his decisions is determined by the quality of his character, and hence by the moral education he received.

Strauss's "classical" account of the political and of thoughtful politics may of course be criticized, for example on the basis of Popper's critique of "naturalism". We may note that Strauss tends to picture the political figures of the lawgiver and the statesman as "imitations" of the philosopher, the validity of whose truth claims appeared to be derived from a *privileged* form of knowledge of "nature" that appears to be inaccessible to "the many" *by definition*. Hence, it seems that not all citizens are considered to be capable of asking whether a specific "natural law" formulating a "natural" hierarchy of ends in *answer* to the question of "natural right" and *in the name of which actual decisions are being made*, is in fact all that "natural". A similar model of a privileged form of cognition seems to underlie Strauss's suggestion of the possibility of a just decision based on a "full" consideration of "all" the circumstances" (NRH 159) and "objective" discrimination of just and unjust actions (NRH 161). What appears to be missing from Strauss's account, then, is a theory of *public* reason, i.e. of rational discussion – a giving-of-account in the spirit of a "Socratic" attitude of reasonableness – about political decisions and judgments among citizens who enter the public domain as political *equals*, each of whom is entitled to give his own point of view.

Be that as it may, it is too early to draw any definite conclusions about Strauss's classical "theory" of the political and about his classical "theory" of thoughtful political action, for at the beginning of this chapter we bracketed one consideration that is of crucial importance: his work is *in the final instance* not intended to provide an *answer*, to defend a body of *knowledge* – either a specific set of descriptive propositions about the nature of politics or a specific set of prescriptive propositions about the nature of "thoughtful" political action – but instead to raise *questions* and articulate problems and the alternative solutions to them in order that *we ourselves* start to philosophize, i.e. to use our very own freedom of thought. Hence, we must emphasize the *tentative* character of the "theories" we have reconstructed. In the introduction to *Natural Right and History* he claims that the *need* for natural right that has risen in reaction to the relativist consequences of positivism and historicism does not yet *prove* that this need can be satisfied: "A wish is not a fact. Even by proving that a certain view is indispensable for living well, one proves merely that the view in question is a salutary myth: one does not prove it to be true" (NRH 6).

We therefore need to shift our focus from Strauss's political philosophy in the sense of the philosophy of politics to his "political" philosophy in the "deeper" sense of the politics of philosophy, which manifests itself especially in his theory and practice of "the art of writing between the lines". As will be shown, this is the most prominent manifestation of the more "remote" guidance provided by the "Platonic" philosopher-lawgiver in the guise of telling "noble lies" or "salutary myths", which we mentioned above and the precise nature of which we have yet to determine.

Moreover, even when we assume that we have actually *succeeded* in reconstructing Strauss's preferred position here, we have not yet examined what seemed to fulfill a decisive role in political decision-making and judgment: the quality of the character of the statesman concerned. Since much seems to depend on the quality of the moral education he receives, we need to examine the nature of the education Strauss envisions and in fact practices in his own writing: learning through reading [*lesendes lernen*], i.e. the reading of texts that are written according to the "political" art of writing between the lines.

In order to complete our examination of Strauss's political philosophy, then, in the next chapter we focus on a reconstruction and critical examination of his theory and practice of "the art of writing between the lines", in which his theoretical self-consciousness of the political conditions of philosophy becomes manifest. We examine both its ontological and its hermeneutical assumptions. More specifically, we ask to what extent the practice of "political" philosophy does in fact reach its professed goal of stimulating its "attentive" readers themselves to philosophize in a "Socratic" manner rather than teaching them to dogmatically accept a *specific* answer to the question of "nature" and "natural right". Moreover, we ask to what extent does this practice differ from an allegedly "Machiavellian" politics that takes its bearings from the extreme case – in this case, a mutual hostility between the philosophical "few" and the un-philosophical "many" – in answer to which it presupposes that it is possible to conquer "chance" – in this case, a denial of the contingency that is intrinsic to all human action, including reading and writing.

CHAPTER 4

Freedom of Thought and the Art of Writing

They believed that the gulf separating "the wise" and "the vulgar" was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of "the few."[279]
Leo Strauss

Socrates: 'But after all, we too were there in the theatre and were part of the general public, so perhaps we are not these select few.'[280]
Plato

4.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we reconstructed the philosophy of politics of Leo Strauss (1899-1973) or what we believe to be his likeliest answer to the philosophical question "what is political?". In doing so, we deliberately bracketed the fact that his work is ultimately not aimed at the presentation of a certain teaching – his "last word" in the guise of an ontological or normative claim about "the political" – but first and foremost at creating an awareness of perennial philosophical problems and the alternative solutions to them, or, to be more precise: at recovering philosophy as a distinct way of life, the *bios theōretikos*.

Thus, we acted as if he has written philosophical "treatises" instead of "commentaries", "histories of ideas", or perhaps even disguised "dialogues". We acted as if he himself does not employ the manner of writing that he describes as "the art of writing between the lines" (PAW 24). If we were to use his own terminology, we might say that we proceeded too quickly to "the philosophical question" to which we sought his *answer*, instead of first paying attention to "the literary question" and how he deals with it,[281] that is, the question of the *communication* of philosophy and his framing of it in terms of philosophy's relation to society. Moreover, we claimed to know Strauss's own position, while in fact he warns us that the crucial part of the argumentation of a philosopher who applies the art of writing is to be discovered by his readers, provided they are "attentive" or "careful".[282] But if this is the case, we may wonder *who* exactly has

[279] PAW 34.
[280] Plato, *Symposium*, 194c
[281] For the distinction between "the philosophical question" and "the literary question", see PAW 78, CM 52.
[282] NIP 351.

spoken in the previous chapter: Strauss, or we ourselves?[283] Moreover, if he does not fully disclose his thoughts in his texts, will we ever be able to find his "last word" in the same way as he claimed to have found Carl Schmitt's, for example? Is there any propositional content that we can ascribe to him?

In order to find his answer to the question "what is political?" we therefore need to shift our attention from his political philosophy in the ordinary sense of philosophy *about politics* to his political philosophy in the "deeper" sense of *politics of* philosophy, that is, of politics as philosophy's specific "manner of treatment" or as the specific way the philosopher communicates with the city.[284] This "political" philosophy is conducted through "the art of writing between the lines" or of "exoteric writing", which is supposed to allow the philosopher-writer to fish for "the few" who are "by nature" fit to become philosophers, while simultaneously keeping "the many" at peace by telling them "salutary myths" or "noble lies".[285]

We not only pay attention to what Strauss *says about* "political" philosophy – his *propositions* about the art of writing – but also, and more fundamentally, to the politics to which any text *attests* that is written in accordance with the rules of the art of writing. It may well be the case that we will be able to find Strauss's "last word" precisely within his *deeds*, that is, within the principles as they are *performed* by his writing.

As we have indicated in the previous chapter, the reception of Strauss's work has been highly polemical. Critics have accused him of proclaiming the use of "noble lies" as well as maintaining an all-too-rigid dichotomy between "the few" and "the many", or "the wise" and "the vulgar", between philosophers and the rest of mankind. Stephen Holmes, for instance, argues that "Strauss is undemocratic and illiberal" because "he knows in advance that the philosophical few have nothing whatsoever to learn from the unphilosophical many."[286] Shadia Drury even goes so far as to claim that Strauss "corrupts", since he "seduces men into thinking that they belong to a special and privileged class of individuals that transcend ordinary humanity and the rules applicable to other people."[287] The use of noble

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[283] In a letter to Jacob Klein, 16 February 1939, Strauss claims: "…der [*thumos*] ist rein ironisch! Die Unterscheidung zwischen [*epithumia*] und [*thumos*] ist nur exoterisch zulässig, und damit bricht »Glaukons« [*kallipolis*] zusammen." (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 568.) If we take Strauss at his word here, then in the previous chapter we have indeed reconstructed his exoteric teaching instead of his esoteric thought.

[284] CPP 94, 93.

[285] NRH 6, PAW 35, CM 102-103.

[286] Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 79.

[287] Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, 193. Cf. Czeslaw Milosz's description of the phenomenon of "ketman" in his book *The Captive Mind*, 58: "Ketman fills the man who practices it with pride. Thanks to it, a believer raises himself to a permanent state of superiority over the man he deceives, be he a minister of state or a powerful king; to him who uses Ketman, the other is a miserable blind man whom one shuts off from the true path whose existence he does not suspect; while you, tattered and dying of hunger, trembling externally at the feet of duped force, your eyes are filled with light, you walk in brightness before your enemies. It is an unintelligent being that you make sport of; it is a dangerous beast that you disarm. What a wealth of pleasures!"

lies is considered to be incompatible with the liberal demand that the legitimacy of politics must be founded upon (public) reason instead of authority, which in turn is based on the fundamental moral demand that *every* single human individual is to be regarded and treated as an end in him/herself, and never merely as an instrument in the hands of others.[288]

Charitable readers such as Nathan Tarcov and Heinrich Meier have retorted that these interpretations of Strauss's work rest on a misunderstanding. According to them, the use of "noble lies" was never intended as a device to be employed by politicians against their citizens, but as a means for *philosophers* to protect their life of truth-seeking, their freedom of thought, against the authoritative claims of the law – whether political or religious – and, more importantly, to stimulate gifted young readers to start philosophizing for themselves, to live a life devoted to philosophy in the original Socratic, that is, "zetetic" sense of "searching" for the truth.[289]

Notwithstanding the great merits of their reading, I consider it worthwhile to examine whether and to what extent the "misunderstanding" which is spoken of here is indeed simply a misunderstanding. After all, in a certain sense, Strauss's whole work can be considered a persistent attempt to think through the possibility and consequences of the misunderstanding of philosophy. Indeed, Strauss shows himself to be very much *aware* of the extent to which the societal or historical impact of a text can be very different from, even opposite to its original philosophical intent. More specifically, he realizes that writing is a form of acting, and that philosophy, to the extent that it is expressed in public, becomes *part* of history, while, he insists, essentially being an attempt to search for trans-historical truth, that is, to replace opinions [*doxai*] about nature or "the whole" by knowledge [*epistēmē*] about nature or "the whole".

It is rather striking, therefore, that the vast majority of Strauss scholars choose to present an apology on the basis of their professed knowledge of what he *says*, that is, of the philosophical propositions or standpoints he is "really" supposed to hold,[290] instead of seizing the opportunity to critically examine his specific attempt to rethink the possibility of philosophy being misunderstood.

We need to examine both his specific way of *framing* this condition – viz. as shaped by the *necessary* opposition between "the few" and "the many", philosophy and society, nature and history, caused by the "natural" order of rank between them – as well as his specific *response* to this condition – viz. his recovery and practice of the politics of the art of exoteric writing. I argue, however, that Strauss's expectations of the capacity of the "art of writing" to remedy this condition are *exaggerated*. This exaggeration concerns both the hermeneutical assumption of the possibility of a perfect "logographic necessity", that is, of the

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[288] Schofield, *Plato*, 293.

[289] Tarcov, 'On a Certain Critique of "Straussianism"'; Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*.

[290] Especially Zuckert & Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*; but also Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to his Thought and Intellectual Legacy*; Smith: *Reading Leo Strauss*.

complete elimination of contingency or "chance" in writing and reading – which denies the fact of their always being in part determined by conditions of which neither the writer nor the reader is in full control or completely aware – and the ontological assumptions that are *affirmed* by his texts insofar as they are written in accordance with the rules of the "art of writing". I argue that Strauss's defenders' claim that the accusatory reading of his work rests on a misunderstanding may be justified insofar as it is based on what he *says*, that is, on his explicitly formulated philosophical *intention*, but that it is wrong if they were to take into account what he *does*, that is, the principles that are necessarily acted on in his *practice*. In the final instance it is *herein*, I claim, that we must locate the "deeply hidden structural features" of his political philosophy that have co-determined Strauss's historical influence and "success".

In the *first two* sections of this chapter I reconstruct Strauss's recovery of the politics of philosophy, "the art of writing" and its use of "irony" and "noble lies", as well as the ontological assumptions about the relation between the philosopher and society and between nature and history that it presupposes. Strauss, following Al-Farabi, identifies the art of writing with "the way of Plato", which he presents as a combination of "the way of Socrates" and "the way of Thrasymachus", the former of which is the manner of dialectically addressing "the few", while the latter is the manner of rhetorically addressing "the many".

In the *third* section I present a critique of Strauss offered by Alexandre Kojève and Claude Lefort, who claim that his art of writing implies the assumption of the complete "self-sufficiency" of the philosopher-writer who conceives himself as the sovereign master of his writings as well as his readership. Thus, the conception of politics implicit in "political" philosophy appears to be strikingly similar to the *modern*, "Machiavellian", conception of politics as the conquest of chance, which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Strauss precisely *rejects*.

In the *fourth* section I formulate a reply to this critique, the reconstruction of which owes a great deal to the readings of Tarcov and Meier. Strauss expresses his awareness of the overwhelming "success of Plato", of the fact that the latter's exoteric teaching, viz. the conviction that philosophy is salutary for society, may have become "too successful" in comparison with its esoteric intent, viz. the conviction that philosophy and society are naturally at odds. In other words, Strauss realizes very well that *no* writing can shield itself from misunderstandings, *despite* the various remedies against it that may be inserted in such writings.

If we read his own writings on the basis of this premise, we are enabled to decide which parts of his work are meant *philosophically*, that is, as expressions of a genuine freedom of thought, and which parts are meant as Strauss's mere *polemical* reply to a powerful contemporary adversary, viz. the thesis of radical historicism that philosophy and society are essentially *in harmony* with each other. We therefore consider the possibility that even the ontological assumptions that underlie the art of writing are not meant esoterically but *exoterically*, that is, as "noble lies", designed primarily to undermine modern philosophy's having become completely "oblivious of the whole or of eternity" (NRH 176). Strauss's "last

word" should not be identified with these assumptions, then, but only with the exhortation to philosophize as such. Hence, when we, as readers, attach more weight to the "success" of his writings than to their "intention", the responsibility is entirely our *own*.

In the *fifth* section I suggest a reply. First, Strauss himself admits that not only the esoteric but also the exoteric meaning of the text is *intended* by its author. We may therefore assume that he *deliberately chose* to cause a *specific* "misunderstanding" or "lie", which we may ascribe to him and the professed "salutary" or "noble" character of which we may critically evaluate. Secondly, and more fundamentally, insofar as his works are themselves *performances* of the art of writing they *attest to* the ontological assumptions mentioned earlier (viz. the strict separation between "the few" and "the many", philosophy and society, nature and history), including the possibility of eliminating contingency or chance. These are so to speak the "confessions of faith" that become manifest in his writings- (and readings-) *as-actions*.[291] In this sense, the criticisms inspired by Kojève and Lefort still hold, albeit not when based on what Strauss *says*, but rather when based on the assumptions which the philosopher-writer (or -reader) simply *has to* make as soon as he starts *practicing* the art of writing (or reading) between the lines.

Strauss seems to assert that the choice whether to read a text according to its "speech" or its "deed" is, in turn, determined by the question whether its particular *reader* is "naturally" interested in *theory* or rather in *action*. In order to illustrate his *own* stance in this regard, in the *sixth* section we examine his reading of a telling passage in one of Plato's dialogues in which the very distinction between "the few" and "the many" is *itself* at stake.

In contradistinction to Popper, Strauss not only *articulates* the political condition of philosophy, but he clearly displays a "theoretical self-consciousness" in the sense of an awareness of the implications thereof for his *own* manner of writing. We conclude, however, that the practice of this "art" harbors and furthers the assumption of both the "natural" division between "the few" and "the many" – which seems to be driven by the desire of philosophers to *escape* altogether from their political, and even from their "Socratic" condition – and the possibility of eliminating contingency or "chance" – which, ironically or not, Strauss considers precisely the core assumption of *modern*, "Machiavellian", political philosophy that he aimed to remedy in the first place. Thus, both Strauss's specific conceptualization of and his specific solution to the peculiar conditions under which political thinking operates seem to presuppose an inadequate understanding of these conditions.

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[291] Cf. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 36, who speaks of the "various assumptions the people who are going to act on the theory make". In the previous chapter we saw that in his comments on Schmitt, Strauss himself speaks of the different "*Glaubensbekenntnisse*" that underlie the authoritarian and anarchist theories of the political.

4.2. The Problem of Socrates: "True" Politics

As the previous chapter showed, Strauss aims at a re-opening of "the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns", or a "change of orientation" towards the ancients. He argues that modern political philosophy, "founded" by "Machiavelli", has culminated in radical historicism, or the thesis that human thought is essentially historically determined – including the historicist thesis itself. As a result, philosophy in its original sense, as well as political philosophy in its original sense, are no longer believed to be possible. He claims that philosophy originally understood itself as the attempt to rise from opinion [*doxa*] of "the whole" or of "nature" to knowledge [*epistēmē*] thereof. Accordingly, political philosophy originally understood itself as the attempt to rise from mere opinions about what is the right way of living together or what is "natural right", to true knowledge thereof.

Strauss repeatedly reminds us that it is Socrates whom tradition regards as the "founder" of political philosophy,[292] that is, the first philosopher "who called philosophy down from heaven and forced it to make inquiries about life and manners and good and bad things" (NRH 120). Insofar as Platonic "political" philosophy and the "art of writing" can be understood as a "solution" to the "problem" that is posed by Socratic political philosophy, we first need to acquire an adequate understanding of the latter.

Since the mere *articulation* of a problem already *orients* us towards a specific solution to it, we first need to address "the problem of Socrates" in the sense of determining what he stood for – which would seem to be difficult enough, since he himself did not write anything – *before* addressing "the problem of Socrates" in the sense of determining the *worth* of what he stood for.[293] To achieve this first aim, we need to search for Strauss's understanding of Socrates' teaching *before* his "change of orientation" to the ancients, and especially before his recovery of the Platonic "art of writing", that is, before Strauss *took sides*.

Such an account of what Socrates stood for can be found in a lecture that Strauss delivered in 1931. This is one year before he published his "comments" on Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, which Strauss regards as his first public expression of his "change of orientation", after which he would gradually rediscover "the manner in which heterodox thinkers of earlier ages wrote their books".[294] The lecture, titled 'Cohen and Maimonides', remained unpublished during his lifetime.[295] In it, Strauss aims to arrive at an understanding of the political meaning of the philosophy of Maimonides (1135-1204) through an understanding and critique of the moral philosophy of Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). Insofar, Strauss argues, as Cohen regards Plato rather than Aristotle as the

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[292] Cf. CM 13; Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 3

[293] Cf. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 6.

[294] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 31.

[295] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni'. The lecture was delivered on 4 May 1931 at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin.

ancient example of true philosophizing, he helps us to understand the extent to which Maimonides' thought is fundamentally Platonic instead of Aristotelian in nature. Strauss notes in his lecture that Plato's philosophizing is essentially the same as that of Socrates, at least insofar as he is presented to us in the Platonic dialogues.[296] As there is no mention of any *difference* between Socrates and Plato, therefore, it is precisely against the background of this as yet "undecided" stance toward them that we are enabled to bring into clear view the *decision* that will underlie Strauss's later understanding of "the problem of Socrates", in the sense of the worth of his teaching and his recovery of the Platonic "solution" to it.[297]

Strauss begins the account in 'Cohen and Maimonides' by stating that Socrates did not have a teaching [*Lehre*]. Instead, he brought others to insight by *raising questions*, starting with the insight that they did not know what they thought they knew.[298] Moreover, Socrates himself did not possess the knowledge that others lacked, for his wisdom consisted precisely in the fact that he knew that he knew nothing. Strauss adds, however, that this not-knowing must itself *not* be understood as a teaching, that is, as an answer to a question. Socrates is not a skeptic. The apparent answer he gives – knowledge of not-knowing – is merely the sharpest expression of the *question*: "Socratic philosophizing means questioning".[299] In agreement with this, Strauss was in his later work to characterize Socratic philosophizing as being neither dogmatic nor skeptic, but "zetetic", or as skeptic in the original sense of the word.[300]

Nevertheless, Strauss adds, one only asks questions if one is seriously interested in finding answers. Indeed, there were many things that Socrates in fact *knew*, such as that Themistocles and Pericles, "the greatest sons of Athens", had actually not benefited their city at all, contrary to common opinion.[301] Strauss concludes that Socrates deliberately *chose* to lead a life of questioning. This, though, is not a questioning "at will" [*beliebig*], that is, a questioning of "the things in the Hades, underneath the earth and in heaven".[302] Socrates is no natural philosopher. Rather, it is a questioning that is "necessary for life" [*lebensnotwendig*], which consists in asking how one should live, in a giving-of-account [*sich-verantworten*] for one's own way of life. Since Socrates *knew*,

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[296] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni', 411.

[297] Strauss focuses on "the problem of Socrates" especially in the posthumously published lecture series 'The Problem of Socrates' (1958), as well as in the following three works: *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966); *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse* (1970); and *Xenophon's Socrates* (1972). For Strauss's introduction of "the way of Plato" as a combination of "the way of Socrates" and "the way of Thrasymachus", see Strauss, 'Farabi's Plato' (1945), 363-364, 382-383; *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), 16; 'How Farabi Read Plato's *Laws*' (1957), 153-154; 'The Problem of Socrates' (1958), 159; *On Plato's* Symposium (1959), 246-247.

[298] Strauss does not give a direct reference here, but we may assume that he refers to Socrates' practice of *maieutic* as it he describes it in Plato's *Theaetetus*.

[299] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni', 411.

[300] Strauss, 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*', 196.

[301] Plato, *Gorgias*, 515d-517a.

[302] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni', 411.

therefore, that an unexamined life is not worth living,[303] he provides an *answer* to the question of the right way of life: "*Questioning the right way of life – that is the only right way of life*" [emphasis in original].[304] Strauss explains further:

> The questioning and examining is not a questioning-oneself and examining-oneself of the solitary [*einsam*] thinker; it is a *mutual* questioning and *mutual* examining; it is a *giving-of-account* [*Sich-verantworten*] in the original sense: one can always only give account before a *person*. Socrates always only philosophizes with others. His questioning of the right way of life is a questioning *together*. He questions together with others not because he wants to persuade [*überzeugen*] others – only someone who is purely a teacher [*Lehrender*] may want this –, but because he aims for *understanding* [*Verständigung*] and *agreement* [*Einklang*]. He aims for understanding and agreement, because only out of understanding and agreement, out of concord [*Einsinnigkeit*] among the citizens, can the state truly be a state [translation my own] [emphasis in original]."[305]

Strauss concludes that Socratic questioning of the right way of life is a questioning together of the right way of living together for the sake of the right way of living together, that is, the "true state". He therefore regards Socratic questioning as "essentially political".[306]

Strauss notes, however, that the meaning of the word "political" is ambiguous. He explains that the basis for this lies in the fact that human life exists as such in living together and is thus political life: "all human doings and goings [*Tun und Treiben*] and thinking [*Denken*] are in themselves political".[307] However, the latter is not always *explicitly* [*ausdrücklich*] the case. After all, Strauss argues, we call people "politicians" *only* when they deal explicitly with living together. One may deal explicitly with living together in two ways: either without giving account [*ohne Verantwortung*] or by giving account [*in Verantwortung*], which explains the ambiguity of the term "political".[308]

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[303] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 38a.

[304] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni', 412.

[305] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni', 412. Cf. Strauss, letter to Gerhard Krüger, 19 August 1932: "das letzte Wort kann aber nur der Friede, d.h. die Verständigung in der Wahrheit, sein. Dass diese Verständigung der Vernunft möglich sei – firmitur credo" (Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 399).

[306] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni', 412.

[307] Cf. NRH 129: "man is social in a more radical sense than any other social animal: humanity is itself sociality. Man refers himself to others, or rather he is referred to others, in every human act, regardless of whether that act is 'social' or 'antisocial'."

[308] Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 121, gives a different reading of this passage insofar as he understands the ambiguity of the concept of the political to consist primarily in the difference between implicit and explicit politics, whereas in my view it makes better sense to understand the ambiguity to exist in the two kinds of explicit politics, that is to say, in the way of the sophists and the way of Socrates, respectively. This makes more sense because Strauss inserts the word "ambiguity" [*Zweideutigkeit*] the second time after having introduced this distinction, and because he includes a reference at this point to Plato's *Gorgias*, in which this distinction is central.

In the case of the first kind of politics, Strauss explains, one does not ask what is good; rather, one is of the opinion that one *knows* what is good. Moreover, if one knows what is good, one is capable of teaching it, of teaching it publicly. Hence, one is capable of *writing* it down. In the case of the second kind of politics, he continues, one does *not* know what is good, and hence one can*not* teach it publicly, one can*not* write it down. Because Socrates knows that he knows nothing, or that understanding can only exist by consent [*Einverständnis*], he does not address the multitude [*die Menge*], but the individual [*der Einzelne*], with whom he speaks in the form of a *dialogue* [*Dialog*]. Strauss claims that this is the reason why Socrates *speaks* and does not write. For, as Socrates says in Plato's *Phaedrus*, what is written is *necessarily* misunderstood, what is written cannot protect itself against misunderstanding.[309] Since a piece of writing does not know whom to address, it always says the same thing, whereas, Strauss claims, "the crucial point is rather to *speak* the one truth [*das eine Wahre*] ever differently".[310]

We may note that the account of Socrates given here coincides pretty much with Socrates' self-presentation in Plato's *Gorgias*, where he calls himself "the only true politician", in contrast to statesmen like Themistocles and Pericles, who are praised by Callicles, the sophist.[311] In sum, Strauss seems to have made a distinction between two kinds of politics: (i) the sophistic kind of politics, which attempts to persuade the *multitude* of one's *opinions* by means of rhetoric; (ii) the Socratic kind of politics, which consists in the philosophical search for agreement in *truth* about the right way of living together, and which can only take place in the form of a dialectical discussion between two *individual persons*.[312]

Now that we have "solved" "the problem of Socrates" in the sense of determining what he stood for according to Strauss, we need to turn our attention to "the problem of Socrates" in the more fundamental sense of determining Strauss's answer to the question of the *worth* of what he stood for. The question Strauss does *not* address in his early lecture is whether Socrates' "true politics" is at all capable of achieving its *aim*, that is, whether its method of "dialectical" conversation with individual persons is indeed capable of delivering its promise of uniting the citizens in true knowledge. In light of the fate of the historical Socrates, who was sentenced

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[309] See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275de.

[310] Strauss, 'Cohen und Maimuni', 413. Presumably Strauss bases himself on Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276a in this sentence, for the page to which he actually refers (*Phaedrus*, c. 60) does not exist.

[311] Plato, *Gorgias*, 521d.

[312] As we have seen in the first two chapters, the picture of Socrates presented by Karl Popper is very similar. See for instance *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, 130: " 'Whatever authority I may have rests solely upon my knowing how little I know': this is the way in which Socrates might have justified his mission to stir up the people from their dogmatic slumber. This educational mission he believed to be also a political mission. He felt that the way to improve the political life of the city was to educate the citizens to self-criticism. In this sense he claimed to be 'the only politician of his day', in opposition to those others who flatter the people instead of furthering their true interests." As the last chapter shows, we encounter the same picture of Socrates in an unpublished lecture by Hannah Arendt, 'Philosophy and Politics', 81: "Socrates wanted to make the city more truthful by delivering each of the citizens of their truths. The method of doing this is [*dialegesthai*], talking something through …."

to death in the name of the laws of the city, it seems that the answer to this question must be negative. Yet if Socratic politics is indeed bound to fail, it would seem that every state, or political life in general, is *necessarily* at the mercy of sophistry.

One of Strauss's clearest accounts of the conception of political philosophy that is exemplified by Socratic "true politics" especially, and of its vulnerability, can be found in his article 'On Classical Political Philosophy' (1945).[313] Strauss explains that classical political philosophy regards itself primarily as a *practical* discipline, aimed at the right *guidance* of political life rather than at *understanding* it.[314] Hence its orientation is the same as the one inherent in political life, although not that of the partisan "who prefers victory in civil war over arbitration", but of the good citizen who attempts "to make civil strife cease and to create, by persuasion, agreement among the citizens" (CPP 81). More specifically, the political philosopher tries to settle "the most fundamental political controversy" (CPP 84), that is, the question of the best political order, or "who should rule?"

However, Strauss adds that this question can only be answered if the philosopher raises "an ulterior question which is never raised in the political arena" (CPP 90). In order to answer the question "what is that virtue whose possession … gives a man the highest right to rule?" (CPP 90), the philosopher first needs to address the question "what is virtue?", which Strauss calls a "distinctly philosophic question" (CPP 90). As soon as one tries to answer this question, however, it will turn out that opinions that are commonly held about virtue are in fact contradicted by other opinions about virtue that are equally commonly held, which leads to the following:

> To reach consistency the philosopher is compelled to maintain one part of common opinion and to give up the other part which contradicts it; he is thus driven to adopt a view that is no longer generally held, a truly paradoxical view, one that is generally considered "absurd" or "ridiculous". (CPP 91)

In other words, the philosopher is compelled to hold a view that is para-doxical in the literal sense of being "beside" common opinion.

However, Strauss continues, *ultimately* the philosopher is compelled to transcend not only the sphere of common opinion, but even the sphere of political life *as such*, for he will realize that the ultimate aim of political life cannot be reached by political life, but only by a life devoted to contemplation. The highest subject of political philosophy, then, is the philosophic life: "philosophy – not as a teaching or as a body of knowledge, but as a way of life – offers, as it were, the solution to the problem that keeps political life in motion" (CPP 91). Strauss notes that *this* is what Socrates is referring to when he calls his own questioning a search for "the *true* political skill" (CPP 91).[315] We may note that the account he presents

[313] Originally published in *Social Research* 12:1 (1945), 98-117.
[314] CPP 88.
[315] Strauss refers explicitly to Plato, *Gorgias*, 521d.

so far coincides with his picture of the Socratic life of questioning presented in his earlier lecture.

At the same time, Strauss continues, as philosophy understands itself as "an attempt to rise from opinion to science", it remains necessarily *related* to political life, being "the sphere of opinion" (CPP 92). Therefore, the question "why philosophy?", or "why does political life need philosophy?" (CPP 92, 93), will arise sooner or later. Philosophy is thus called before the tribunal of the political community, it is made "politically responsible" (CPP 93). Strauss adds that such a justification was urgent because the meaning of philosophy was not generally understood, and philosophy was therefore distrusted by many citizens. After all, he reminds us: "Socrates himself fell victim to the popular prejudice against philosophy" (CPP 93).

Strauss explains that in order to justify itself before the tribunal of the political community, philosophy has to justify itself *in terms of* the political community, that is, by making use of a kind of argument that appeals not to *philosophers* as such but to *citizens* as such:

> To prove to citizens that philosophy is permissible, desirable or even necessary, the philosopher has to follow the example of Odysseus and start from premises that are generally agreed upon, or from generally accepted opinions: he has to argue *ad hominem* or "dialectically". (CPP 93)[316]

In other words, Strauss introduces a type of "dialectics" here that differs from the one encountered in his earlier lecture. Now we learn that there are *two* distinct types of "dialectics", each of which is meant to address a *different* kind of audience. Strauss derives the distinction from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, where it is noted that Socrates employed two different types of dialectics,[317] the first of which appeals to "philosophers as such" and leads to the *truth* by way of *questioning* generally accepted opinions,[318] while the second appeals to "citizens as such" and leads to *agreement* or concord while never altogether leaving the dimension of generally accepted opinions.[319]

Strauss concludes that from the viewpoint of philosophy's need to justify itself before the tribunal of the city, "political philosophy" changes in meaning:

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[316] Cf. Strauss, 'The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon', 520. Strauss uses the motif of Odysseus for the first time in 'Persecution and the Art of Writing' (1941), and it regularly resurfaces in later publications.

[317] Xenophon, *Memorabilia* IV 6.13-15. Strauss refers to this passage in CPP 93n23, OT 111n46, CM 54n5, Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates*, 122-123.

[318] CPP 91; OT 27, 47, 111n46; NRH 124; CM 51, 53. Strauss calls it the art of conversation or friendly dispute.

[319] PAW 35-6; CPP 93; OT 27, 47, 111n46; CM 51, 53. Strauss identifies it with the art of Odysseus. Sometimes he calls this type of dialectics "noble rhetoric". See OT 27; Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates*, 123.

> From this point of view the adjective "political" in the expression "political philosophy" designates not so much a subject matter as a manner of treatment, from this point of view, I say, "political philosophy" means primarily not the philosophic treatment of politics, but the political, or popular, treatment of philosophy, or the political introduction to philosophy – the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life. (CPP 93-94)

In sum, Strauss introduces a division of "dialectical" speech into *two* kinds. This division was not present in his earlier lecture. The earlier statement that one should speak the one truth "ever differently" is now reduced to two typical options: one may either strive for (i) agreement based on truth, or (ii) agreement based on generally accepted opinions. But because Socrates turned out to be incapable of convincing the masses that philosophy is salutary for the city, it seems that he did not fully master the second, "Odyssean", kind of dialectics.[320] The situation of philosophy seems very precarious, therefore, for *writing* seems to offer no solace either, since Strauss claimed in his earlier lecture that *all* writings are *necessarily* misunderstood.

However, Strauss would qualify this latter thesis after his "change of orientation". As the next section shows, he claims that Plato employed a specific "art of writing" that *is* capable of remedying the precarious political condition of philosophy. To be more precise, Strauss presents the Platonic dialogue as embodying a type of writing that *is* capable of speaking differently to the *two* kinds of people who were addressed by Socrates in speech, a kind of writing that *is* indeed capable of protecting philosophy from misunderstanding.

4.3. The Solution of Plato: "Political" Philosophy

As has already been mentioned, in his autobiographical preface Strauss intimates that after his "change of orientation" he gradually became "ever more attentive to the way in which heterodox thinkers of earlier ages wrote their books."[321] He owes his rediscovery of "the art of writing between the lines" especially to his reading of the work of Al-Farabi (c. 872-c. 950) and Maimonides (1135-1204). In reconstructing Strauss's account of this art, we focus first on the first two chapters of his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952).[322]

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[320] CPP 89, OPS 246.

[321] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 31.

[322] The introductory chapter, simply called 'Introduction', owes much to Strauss's earlier article titled 'Farabi's *Plato*', which was published in 1945. The second chapter, which bears the same title as the book as a whole, had been published as an article in 1941.

4.3.1. THE ART OF WRITING: BETWEEN "THE WAY OF SOCRATES" AND "THE WAY OF THRASYMACHUS"

In the first chapter, Strauss explains that the Jewish and Islamic thinkers of the medieval ages, insofar as they were philosophers, found themselves "compelled to justify their pursuit of philosophy before the tribunal of Divine Law" (PAW 10). To be sure, divine law was understood not as a "creed" or a set of dogmas (as in Christianity), but as a "social order, if an all-comprehensive order, which regulates not merely actions but thoughts and opinions as well" (PAW 10). According to Strauss, Al-Farabi expressed his thought most clearly in a short treatise called *Plato*, which was the central part of a tripartite work called *On the Purposes of Plato and of Aristotle*.[323] Strauss indicates that this work owes its origin to a concern with a restoration of philosophy "after it has been blurred or destroyed" (PAW 12). Moreover, he adds, it is more concerned with the purpose *common* to Plato and Aristotle than with their disagreements.

In his *Plato*, Al-Farabi tells us that philosophy, which delivers "the science of the essence of every being" (i.e. of the nature of every being), is both necessary and sufficient for realizing man's happiness (PAW 12): "*Through the mouth of Plato*, Farabi declares that religious speculation, and religious investigation of the beings, and the religious syllogistic art, do not supply the science of the beings, in which man's highest perfection consists, whereas philosophy does supply it" [emphasis added] (PAW 13). Thus, Strauss explains, Al-Farabi "avails himself … of the specific immunity of the commentator or the historian in order to speak his mind concerning grave matters in his 'historical' works, rather than in the works in which he speaks in his own name" (PAW 14). He puts things in the mouth of Plato that do not only flagrantly deviate from the letter of Plato's teaching – he refuses "to succumb to Plato's charms" (PAW 14-15), as Strauss puts it – but also from what Al-Farabi *himself* tells us when he speaks in his own name.

Although Al-Farabi's Plato identifies the philosopher with the king, he suggests that they are not simply identical. In Al-Farabi's view, Plato agrees with the orthodox view that philosophy needs to be supplemented if it is to lead man toward happiness. Because the required supplement is not religion, but politics, however, the "other world" is replaced by the "another city", which is an earthly city, although it exists not "in deed" but "in speech".

According to Al-Farabi, Plato states that according to "the way of Socrates", philosophy is primarily a *political* matter, since Socrates focuses on "the scientific investigation of justice and the virtues" (PAW 16). As there was no freedom of teaching and investigation in his time, Socrates was confronted with an alternative: either *obey* the law and public opinion, or *challenge* them by *openly* searching for the "other city", that is, for the "virtuous city", in speech (see Plato's *Republic*). Socrates could have chosen "security and life", but then he would have had to conform with his fellow-citizens' false opinions and wrong way of life.

[323] PAW 11. A recent English translation is published under the title *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (2002).

Socrates chose the only alternative: "non-conformity and death" (PAW 16). Plato's attitude was different, because for him philosophy was primarily a *theoretical* matter, that is, "the science of the essence of every being" (PAW 16), or natural philosophy.

Strauss explains that Plato found a solution to the problem posed by Socrates' fate. According to Al-Farabi, Plato in fact gave *two* accounts of Socrates, or he "repeated" his first account. Strauss states that such a "repetition" is actually a pedagogic device that is meant to reveal the truth to those who are capable of finding it for themselves, while hiding it from those who are not fit for it. While "the vulgar" will fall asleep from the repetition, "the wise" will notice the "addition" that is present in the "repetition".[324] According to Al-Farabi, Plato's second statement in fact amounts to a modification of his first statement,[325] that is, to a correction of the Socratic way:

> The Platonic way, as distinguished from the Socratic way, is a combination of the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus; for the intransigent way of Socrates is appropriate only for the philosopher's dealing with the elite, whereas the way of Thrasymachus, which is both more and less exacting than the former, is appropriate for his dealings with the vulgar.[326] (PAW 16)

To explain, Thrasymachus is a sophist who figures prominently in Book I of Plato's *Republic* and who defends the popular opinion that justice is in fact nothing more than the right of the strong. As Strauss explains elsewhere,[327] Thrasymachus knows how to "play" the city, how to act like the vulgar. Al-Farabi suggests that by combining the way of Thrasymachus with that of Socrates, Plato was able to avoid the conflict with the vulgar and thus avoid the fate of Socrates. Socrates' "revolutionary quest for the other city", for the best political order, was replaced by Plato's "more conservative way of action" (PAW 16, 17).

The course of action chosen by Plato is described by Strauss as "the gradual replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation to the truth" (PAW 17). This replacement can best be understood as a gradual undermining of the accepted opinions, which are accepted provisionally. At the same time, their replacement is accompanied by the suggestion of opinions that point to the truth (for the few, the potential philosophers) but that at the same time

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[324] Strauss, 'Farabi's *Plato*', 382, PAW 16, 62-64.
[325] Cf. PAW 62-64, especially 64n79.
[326] Cf. Strauss, 'How Farabi Read Plato's Laws', 153: "The way of Plato emerges through a correction of the way of Socrates. The way of Socrates is intransigent: it demands of the philosopher an open break with the accepted opinions. The way of Plato combines the way of Socrates, which is appropriate for the philosopher's relations to the elite, with the way of Thrasymachus, which is appropriate for the philosopher's relations to the vulgar. The way of Plato demands therefore judicious conformity with the accepted opinions."
[327] CM 78.

do not too flatly contradict the accepted opinions (for the many, the vulgar),[328] as they are a mere "imaginative representation" of the truth.[329] Strauss says that Al-Farabi's Plato thus eventually replaces the philosopher-king, who rules openly in the virtuous city, with the secret kingship of the philosopher who, being "a perfect man" precisely because he is an "investigator", lives privately as a member of an imperfect society, which he tries to humanize within the limits of the possible.

Moreover, Strauss explains that what is described as "Plato's policy" or "the procedure of the true philosophers" coincides with the application of the philosophic distinction between "exoteric" and "esoteric" teaching. Al-Farabi recovered this "antiquated and forgotten distinction" because philosophy and the philosophers were "in grave danger", since society did not recognize the right of philosophizing (PAW 17). The exoteric teaching was needed to protect philosophy. Strauss writes: "It was the armor in which philosophy had to appear. It was needed for political reasons. It was the form in which philosophy became visible to the political community. It was the political aspect of philosophy. It was "political" philosophy" (PAW 18). The following two sections examine the ontological and hermeneutical assumptions of this "politics".

4.3.2. The Art of Writing: Ontological Assumptions

In the following passage from the title chapter of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss indicates there are certain assumptions that underlie the "political" philosophy of the "art of writing":

> [The earlier philosophers] believed that the gulf separating "the wise" and "the vulgar" was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of "the few." They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men. *Even if they had had nothing to fear from any particular political quarter*, those who started from that assumption would have been driven to the conclusion that public communication of the philosophic or scientific truth was impossible or undesirable, not only for the time being but for all times. They must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group of pupils, or by writing about the most important subject by means of "brief indication." [emphasis added] (PAW 34-35)[330]

[328] See PAW 64: "… the purpose of repeating conventional statements is to hide the disclosure, in the repetition, of unconventional views. What matters is, then, not the conventional view, constantly repeated, which may or may not be true, but the slight additions to, or omissions from the conventional view which occur in the repetition and which transmit "chapter headings" of the secret and true teaching."

[329] Strauss, 'Farabi's Plato', 384.

[330] The term "brief indication" refers to the "additions" that are present in what seem to be mere "repetitions".

First, this passage clearly indicates that the separation between philosophers ("the wise") and non-philosophers ("the vulgar") is regarded as an unchangeable fact of human nature. As Strauss insists on several other occasions, philosophy, as the attempt to replace opinion [*doxa*] by knowledge [*epistēmē*], is necessarily at odds with society, for society necessarily lives in the element of opinion, no matter how well it is ordered.[331] Hence, the philosopher, who *as philosopher* is independent of society or "the cave", is "self-sufficient" and "truly free". [332] *Secondly,* what underlies this freedom or independence of the philosopher is an even more fundamental independence: the independence of nature or "the whole" from history or "the historical process", as Strauss indicates in the following footnote to the earlier version of the same chapter:

> … there were always people who were not merely exponents of the society to which they belonged, or of any society, but who successfully endeavored to leave "the cave." It is those people, and those people only, whom we still call philosophers, lovers of the truth about "the whole" and not merely about "the whole historical process." The independence of the philosopher, as far as he is a philosopher, is only one aspect of a more fundamental independence, which was recognized equally by those who spoke of a presocial "state of nature" and by those who emphasized so strongly the fact that "man is generated by man and the sun," not by society.[333]

Strauss thus indicates that the existence of something called "nature", which exists independent of "history", is recognized not only by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, who in his *Physics* claims that "man is generated by man and the sun",[334] but even by modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, insofar as they proclaim the existence of "state of nature" that predates civil society or exists independently of it.

4.3.3. The Art of Writing: Hermeneutical Assumptions

Now we have reconstructed Strauss's account of "the way of Plato" and its underlying assumptions about the relation between philosophy and society, we turn to his account of the hermeneutics of the "art of writing". We focus on his analysis of the Platonic dialogues, which may perhaps be considered as the most exemplary kind of exoteric writing. We find Strauss's most elaborate account of this in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, which is the central essay of his book *The City and Man* (1964).

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[331] See inter alia Strauss, 'On a Forgotten Kind of Writing', 221.

[332] CM 127:"the philosopher is the only individual who is just in the sense in which the city is just: he is self-sufficient, truly free, or his life is as little devoted to the service of other individuals as the life of the city is devoted to the service of other cities." Cf. OT 91: "the highest form of justice is the preserve of those who have the greatest self-sufficiency which is humanly possible."

[333] Strauss, 'Persecution and the Art of Writing', 503n21.

[334] Aristotle, *Physics*, II.2 194b14.

Strauss begins with a well known problem of interpretation. Since Plato wrote dialogues, that is, since he never speaks in his own voice, it would seem to be impossible to know what Plato himself stood for, apart from his characters. Perhaps we should assume, then, that he chose Socrates, his chief character, as his spokesman, which is what is usually done. In that case, the dialogues seem to tell us that we should live as Socrates teaches us to live. However, Strauss retorts, this is problematic too, because Socrates is famous for his *irony*.

According to Strauss, irony is a kind of dissimulation, or untruthfulness. In opposition to the boaster, who overstates his worth, the ironic man *understates* his worth. Strauss, who follows Aristotle here, describes irony as the humanity that belongs to the "magnanimous" man, that is, "the man who regards himself as worthy of great things while in fact being worthy of them" (CM 51). Moreover, if the highest superiority consists in superiority in wisdom, irony in the highest sense would then consist in the dissimulation of one's wisdom or of one's wise thoughts. This can be done in two different ways:

> either expressing on a "wise" subject such thoughts (e.g. generally accepted thoughts) as are less wise than one's own thoughts or refraining from expressing any thoughts regarding a "wise" subject on the ground that one does not have knowledge regarding it and therefore can only raise questions but cannot give answers. (CM 51)

Note that what is described here corresponds to the two types of "dialectics" distinguished above, the former being directed to "the many", the latter to "the few". Strauss concludes: "If irony is essentially related to the fact that there is a natural order or rank among men, it follows that irony consists in speaking differently to different kinds of people" (CM 51).[335]

However, he adds that we still need to understand what a Platonic dialogue is: the understanding of Plato's teaching cannot be separated from the form in which it is presented, for the meaning of the substance depends on the form, the "what" depends on the "how". As Strauss states, before reaching the philosophical questions, one has to focus first on the "literary question",[336] that is, the question of the communication of philosophy. According to him, this question, properly understood, is identical to "the question of the relation between society and philosophy" (CM 52).

The literary question is addressed by Plato's Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, where he speaks about the essential defects of writing and thus leads us to understand why he himself did not write any speeches or books. However, as Plato *wrote dialogues*, Strauss claims, we may assume "that the Platonic dialogue is a kind of writing which is free from the essential defect of writings" (CM 52). In agreement with what was said in his earlier lecture, Strauss states that writings are essentially defective because they are equally accessible to all who can read, or

[335] Cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 40. See Plato, *Rival Lovers*, 133de; cf. 134c.
[336] Cf. PAW 78.

because they do not know whom to talk to, and to whom they should be silent, or because they say the same things to everyone. "We may therefore conclude," Strauss claims, "that the Platonic dialogue says different things to different people – not accidentally, as every writing does, but that it is so contrived as to say different things to different people, or that it is radically ironical" (CM 52-3).[337]

Strauss suggests that what it means to properly read a piece of good writing is intimated by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 264bc. A good writing complies with "logographic necessity", which consists in the requirement that "every part of the written speech must be necessary for the whole; the place where each part occurs is the place where it is necessary that it should occur" (CM 53). Strauss claims that another clue is provided by Xenophon, who in his *Memorabilia* notes that Socrates approached different men differently:[338]

> When someone contradicted him on any point, he went back to the assumption underlying the whole dispute by raising the question "what is …" regarding the subject matter of the dispute and by answering it step by step; in this way the truth became manifest to the very contradictors. But when he discussed a subject on his own initiative, i.e. when he talked to people who merely listened, he proceeded through generally accepted opinions and thus produced agreement to an extraordinary degree. This latter kind of the art of conversation which leads to agreement, as distinguished from evident truth, is the art which Homer ascribed to the wily Odysseus by calling him "a safe speaker". (CM 53)

Here again we encounter the two ways in which Socrates addressed his interlocutors. Once more basing himself on Xenophon, Strauss adds that Socrates tried to lead men possessing "good natures", or his "good friends",[339] to the truth, whereas he tried to lead men lacking such natures to agreement through generally accepted opinions.[340] According to Strauss, the combination of the information derived from the *Phaedrus* and Xenophon leads to the following conclusion:

> … the proper work of a writing is truly to talk, or to reveal the truth, to some while leading others to salutary opinions; the proper work of a writing is to arouse to thinking those who are by nature fit for it; the good writing achieves its end if the reader considers carefully the "logographic necessity" of every part, however small or seemingly insignificant, of the writing. (CM 54)

Because the good writing must imitate the good conversation, it seems that the primary addressee in the dialogue acts as a representative of the type of reader whom Plato wishes to reach above all. Strauss therefore suggests that we hear Plato

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[337] Cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 40.
[338] Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV 6.13-15.
[339] Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I 6.14, IV 1.2-2.1.See also Plato, *Republic*, 450de.
[340] The latter way of speaking is ascribed by Homer to Odysseus, who called him a "safe speaker". See CM 53; PAW 35; OT 47.

himself, as distinguished from his characters, above all through his selection of conversations.[341] The Platonic Socrates converses only with people who belong to an elite, including potential philosophers, but never, or almost never, with the elite in the highest sense, viz. actual philosophers: “there is no Platonic dialogue among men who are, or could be thought to be, equals” (CM 55).

Insofar as the Platonic dialogues are dramas, Strauss claims, we cannot identify any utterance of Plato’s characters as his own without precaution. Rather, the “speeches” of the Platonic characters must be understood in light of the “deeds”, which comprise both the setting and the action of a particular dialogue – including its “silences” – as well as the facts that were known to Socrates or to Plato. He explains:

> The speeches deal with something general or universal (*e.g.* with justice), but they are made in a particular or individual setting: these and those human beings converse there and then about the universal subject; to understand the speeches in the light of the deeds means to see how the philosophic treatment of the philosophic theme is modified by the particular or individual or transformed into a rhetorical or poetic treatment or to recover the implicit philosophic treatment from the explicit rhetorical or poetic treatment. (CM 60) [342]

In a Platonic dialogue, poetry is “ministerial” to philosophy.[343] Strauss admits that it is much less difficult to understand the “speeches” of the characters than it is to perceive “what is in a sense not said”, or “how what is said is said” (CM 60). Hence, he postulates, the law of logographic necessity cannot be taken seriously enough. In a Platonic dialogue nothing is accidental; that is, everything necessarily occurs at the place where it occurs: “Everything which would be accidental outside of the dialogue becomes meaningful within the dialogue” (CM 60). Because chance plays a considerable role in all real conversations, it is implied that all Platonic dialogues must be radically fictitious. Strauss concludes that the Platonic dialogue is based on a “fundamental falsehood”, a “beautiful or beautifying falsehood”, viz. “the denial of chance” (CM 60).

This section has presented Strauss’s account of “political” philosophy in the sense of the “art of writing”, as well as its ontological and hermeneutical assumptions. The next section turns to a critique of these assumptions.

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[341] CM 57.

[342] In CM 54 Strauss suggests that it is actually possible to restate the teaching of a Platonic dialogue in such a way that it is valid beyond the particular situation of the conversation in question by translating the conversation between a philosopher and a potential philosopher into a conversation between two philosophers.

[343] CM 136-137.

4.4. THE “SELF-SUFFICIENCY” OF THE PHILOSOPHER-WRITER

Several authors have criticized the underlying assumptions of Strauss’s theory of the “art of writing”. The core of this criticism consists in the claim that this manner of writing implies the “self-sufficiency” and immunity of the philosopher-writer and his complicit “careful reader”. The writer assumes that he is the sovereign master both of his own thought and writing, and of the possible interpretations thereof by his readers, who are supposed to fall into *two* categories: the “careful” and the “uncareful”. However, it is claimed, not only does this attest to an overestimation of the ability to master the meaning of the language we use, it also presupposes that the philosopher-writer and his “careful” reader are immune to failure and criticism, which would be un-philosophical in the Socratic sense.

In this section we *first* pay attention to the hermeneutical assumption of “logographic necessity”, that is, the postulate that *every* “repetition”, “addition”, or “contradiction” in a text that is written in accordance with the rules of the art of writing is the consequence of the intention of its author. *Secondly*, we focus on the specific conception of philosophy and the philosopher that underlies the possibility of and demand for the “art of writing”, viz. the “natural” division of mankind in two categories: “the few” philosophers who are supposed to be “self-sufficient” and “independent”, and “the many” other people who are supposed to be incapable of escaping from “the cave”.

The objection to the first assumption has been formulated most sharply by Claude Lefort (1924-2010) in his commentary on *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), which is generally considered one of Strauss’s most difficult works.[344] Strauss reads Machiavelli as a philosopher who addresses his “careful” readers. According to Lefort, however, Strauss’s concomitant hermeneutical postulate that all contradictions and flaws within Machiavelli’s text are the effect of an intention, lacks legitimacy. Lefort argues that this postulate is bound up with a conception of philosophy as teaching and of the philosopher as master.[345] According to the Greeks, however, philosophy is not the product of the philosopher, nor is the philosopher the master who makes philosophy speak. Rather, Lefort notes, “philosophy speaks through [*à travers*] the philosopher,” and his contradictions may be precisely a sign of his *failure* or of his faithfulness to the philosophical *question* to which he is receptive.[346]

Lefort claims that it is in fact Strauss who occupies the position of the philosopher as teacher and reader alike, and who thereby reduces the discourse of the *other* – in this case of Machiavelli – to being nothing more than a moment within his own discourse. If there is nothing in the discourse of the other that escapes from the intention of its author, this would mean that no single thought is capable of escaping from Strauss himself:[347]

[344] Lefort, *Le travail de l’oeuvre Machiavel*.
[345] Ibid., 290.
[346] Ibid., 290, my translation.
[347] Ibid., 300.

> The assurance of his [viz. Strauss's] own intention is guaranteed to him by the intention that he lends out to this author who is *author* only because he freely produces his thoughts. As reader of Machiavelli, Strauss makes himself the author of the Machiavellian discourse, but he only makes himself its reader because he was already its author. Ideally, the difference between reading and writing is abolished, at the same moment as all difference that is internal to writing and all difference that is internal to reading is abolished, or all exteriority of thought to itself [my translation].[348]

Lefort adds that Strauss would probably suggest to his own "careful" readers that they should meet him half way, or, stated differently, that they should "discover" the decisive part of the argument by themselves.[349] He retorts, though, that, referring to what he has not written, Strauss suggests that he *could* have written it, as a consequence of which everything becomes readable in his texts. Ultimately, Lefort suggests, the desire of the reader is here led by the fantasy [*phantasme*] of a representation that is in fact impossible, just as the desire of the writer (i.e. teacher) is led by the fantasy that he is capable of already implying within himself the reader (i.e. pupil) he is yet to produce.[350]

To further clarify the underlying idea of the "self-sufficient" philosopher, we now turn to Alexandre Kojève's (1902-1968) critique, which is contained in his response to Strauss's commentary to Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero*. Strauss's ascription to the philosopher of "the greatest self-sufficiency which is humanly possible" (OT 91) means that the philosopher is only interested in the theoretical pursuit of the *truth*. According to Kojève, this makes the philosopher an *isolated* figure, uninterested in the opinions held of him by others.[351] In turn, the philosopher's absolute isolation can only be justified on the assumption of a specific conception of nature, that is, Being:

> one has to grant that Being is essentially immutable in itself and eternally identical with itself, and that it is completely revealed for all eternity in and by an intelligence that is perfect from the first; and this adequate revelation of the timeless totality of Being is, then, the Truth. … Man (the philosopher) can *at any moment* participate in this Truth … by his own *individual* effort to understand (the Platonic "intellectual intuition"), the only condition for such an effort being the innate "talent" of the one making this effort, independently of where he may happen to be situated in space (in the State) or in time (in history).[352]

[348] Ibid., 301.
[349] Cf. Strauss, 'On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy', 351.
[350] Ibid., 301.
[351] Kojève, 'Tyranny and Wisdom', 150, 158.
[352] Ibid., 151-152.

Moreover, Kojève states, the implication is that it is possible for the philosopher to know when his "subjective certainty" of the truth coincides with the "objective truth".[353]

However, Kojève adds, if this is the case, then the question arises of how it would be possible to distinguish the philosopher from the madman. After all, the madman also claims to have some exclusive knowledge other human beings have not. As Kojève argues:

> it is only by seeing our ideas shared by others (or at least *an* other) or accepted by them as *worth discussing* (even if only because they are regarded as wrong) that we can be sure of not finding ourselves in the realm of madness (without being sure that we are in the realm of truth).[354]

Although Strauss would probably answer that the philosopher will discuss with the others who also belong to "the few", Kojève retorts that the danger would then arise that they constitute a small elite which stick to their own prejudices.[355] Furthermore, Kojève argues, it is in fact impossible to assess "subjective certainty" by mere introspection, or decide among different subjective certainties, should they contradict each other.[356] He concludes, therefore:

> [the philosopher] will have no philosophically valid reason to *communicate* his knowledge (orally or in writing) to others (unless it be with a view to gaining their "recognition" or admiration, which is excluded by definition), and he will therefore not do so if he is truly a philosopher (who does not act "without reason"). We will therefore not know anything about him; we will not even know whether he exists, and hence whether he is a philosopher or simply a madman. What is more, in my opinion he will not even know it himself since he will be deprived of every social control, which is the only way to weed out "pathological" cases. In any event, his "solipsist" attitude, excluding as it does all "discussion," would be fundamentally *anti-Socratic* [emphasis added].[357]

In other words, Strauss's presupposition of the "self-sufficient" philosopher is simply not *realistic*, because a philosopher needs others to examine the validity of his own beliefs, that is, to discover whether his own knowledge is indeed "objectively" certain or merely "subjectively" certain, or, to use Strauss's own terms, whether he has reached the level of true knowledge [*epistēmē*] or is still

[353] Ibid., 153.
[354] Ibid., 153.
[355] Ibid., 155.
[356] Ibid., 162.
[357] Ibid., 159.

stuck with opinion [*doxa*], or whether he has mistakenly identified the goal of his thinking with the point at which he has become tired of thinking.[358]

To be sure, Kojève himself holds that there is *no* way to settle this from the outside by having recourse to some kind of trans-historical standard or procedure. He thereby takes the exact *reverse* of Strauss's position. We believe, though, that the validity of Kojève's criticism of Strauss does not depend on his commitment to the historicist claim, that human thought is *completely* determined by history, which is in fact the exact polemical counterpart of Strauss's claim that human thought is *completely* independent of history.

If the arguments advanced by Lefort and Kojève hold, we would have to conclude that the "politics" underlying Strauss's conception of the "art of writing" is that of the "self-sufficient" philosopher who is capable of a sovereign mastership over his own thought and writing and the reading thereof by others. It denies their being permeated by contingency or "chance", that is, their being at least partly determined by conditions over which we have no control, and it excludes the possibility of an unexpected encounter with the truly *other* who may call our opinions into question. It strikes us that the conception of politics presupposed by Strauss's art of writing draws *precisely* on the conception of politics underlying the project of *modern* political philosophy he professes to *reject*. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Machiavelli, whom Strauss considers the inaugurator of modern political philosophy, lowered the standards of the best regime to make its practical realization more probable, if not necessary, i.e. in order to conquer *chance*.[359]

We may suspect that Strauss would have been aware of such a manifest contradiction. We therefore must ask whether it is indeed the case that the postulates that Lefort and Kojève claim are put forward by Strauss – viz. the hermeneutical assumption that all "repetitions" or "contradictions" in a text are the consequence of the intention of the author, and the ontological assumption of the philosopher being "self-sufficient" because of his being "by nature" independent of human "history" – are indeed propositions *asserted* by him, whether they do indeed reflect his "last word" in the sense of his true intention. Stated differently, did they *misunderstand* Strauss?

4.5. FROM THE HISTORICAL SUCCESS TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL INTENTION

The beginning of this chapter asked whether our reconstruction of Strauss's philosophy of politics in the previous chapter led us in fact to mistake his exoteric teaching for his esoteric thinking. Similarly, we may now ask whether his critics' understanding of his politics of philosophy, reconstructed in the previous section, presupposes the same mistake: if Strauss's account of the art of writing itself is

[358] To paraphrase the quotation of Lessing that is contained in Strauss's following statement: NRH 22: "dogmatism – or the inclination 'to identify the goal of our thinking with the point at which we have become tired of thinking' – is so natural to man that it is not likely to be a preserve of the past."
[359] WIPP 41, 46-47.

written according to the rules of the art of writing, it may be doubted whether his statements are entirely trustworthy.[360]

First, we return to the introduction of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), specifically to its final paragraph. After stating that the art of Plato averted the danger posed to the philosopher by the city, Strauss adds the following warning: “the success of Plato must not blind us to the existence of a danger which, however much its form may vary, is coeval with philosophy” (PAW 21). Elsewhere, he puts it even more strongly: “the political action of the philosophers on behalf of philosophy has achieved full success. One sometimes wonders whether it has not been too successful”.[361] In other words, Strauss seems to leave open the possibility that the exoteric teaching of the philosophers – *even* Plato – may become so influential that the esoteric intention – to save philosophy in its original, “zetetic”, sense – will be forgotten.

Strauss thus expresses an awareness of the fact that the method of “political” philosophy harbors the risk that the esoteric teaching will be overwhelmed by the exoteric teaching, or that the historical success of a piece of writing will overshadow its philosophical intention. If he shows himself to be aware of the danger present in all “Platonizing”, he must also have been aware of the danger of his *own* “Platonizing”. Insofar as his own texts are indeed written in accordance with the rules of the “art of writing”, we may assume that his own texts are not exempt from this danger.

As Nathan Tarcov has shown in his brilliant essay ‘On a Certain Critique of “Straussianism”’,[362] Strauss’s “review” ‘On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy’ (1945), which is about a book on Plato by John Wild,[363] should in fact be read as Strauss’s equivalent to Marx’s statement that he was not a Marxist. Tarcov convincingly argues that Strauss meant the following sentence about Plato to be applicable to himself, too: “Plato composed his writings in such a way as to prevent for all time their use as authoritative texts. In the last analysis his writings cannot be used for any purpose other than philosophizing …”.[364] This means that Strauss’s “true intention” can only lie in the exhortation to his readers to philosophize for themselves.

We are thus confronted with the task to distinguish the “Odyssean” utterances, which are merely meant *ad hominem* or are polemical, from the “brief indications”, which point to the philosophical truth. To start with, Strauss saw himself confronted with a different prejudice from both Plato and his followers, such as Al-Farabi and Maimonides. These thinkers were confronted with the prejudice that philosophy *endangers* society, and therefore they attempted to show that philosophy is in fact *salutary* for the political community. By contrast, Strauss saw himself confronted with radical historicism’s conviction that philosophy and

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[360] Consider the classical paradox of the Cretan who stated that all Cretans are liars.
[361] Strauss, ‘Restatement on Xenophon’s Hiero’, 206.
[362] The subject of which is Strauss’s critique of Straussianism.
[363] Wild, *Plato’s Theory of Man. An Introduction to the Realistic Philosophy of Culture* (1946).
[364] Strauss, ‘On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy’, 351.

society are in complete *harmony*, which implies that *every* thinker is by definition a child of his time. One might therefore argue that philosophy is in greater danger than ever, for this time philosophers *themselves* have forgotten philosophy's true calling. Indeed, Strauss explains his recovery of the art of esoteric-exoteric writing – as practiced by Al-Farabi and Maimonides in earlier ages – out of a sense of *urgency*:

> *Freedom of thought being menaced in our time more than for several centuries*, we have not only the right but even the duty to explain the teaching of Maimonides, in order to contribute to a better understanding of what freedom of thought means, i.e., what attitude it presupposes and what sacrifices it requires [emphasis added]. (PAW 56)

Strauss described Lessing as the *last* author who "wrote between the lines about the art of writing between the lines".[365] In turn, we might regard Strauss himself as the *first* author for several centuries who wrote *within* the lines about writing between the lines. The reason why he explicitly conveys a secret that must under normal (or "natural") circumstances not be conveyed – viz. that philosophy and society are *essentially* at odds with each other – inheres precisely in the fact that Strauss believes that he writes under exceptional (or "artificial") circumstances.[366] It might be said that he is compelled by a historical contingency to write *exoterically* about the art of writing and, therewith, about the underlying conception of philosophy and of society and their conflictual relation, precisely because this art and its underlying assumptions are threatened with *oblivion*.

With this historical context in mind, we are now enabled to examine which statements of Strauss are genuinely philosophical and which of them are merely polemical. Let us start by quoting a passage from *Persecution and the Art of Writing* in which he describes a conviction that is the exact opposite of the conviction of "the earlier type of writers" quoted above in the second section of this chapter:

> After about the middle of the seventeenth century an ever-increasing number of heterodox philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thoughts but also because they desired to contribute to the abolition of persecution as such. They believed that suppression of free enquiry, and of publication of the results of free enquiry, was accidental, an outcome of the faulty construction of the body politic, and that the kingdom of general darkness could be replaced by the republic of universal light. They looked forward to a time when, as a result of the progress of popular education, practically complete freedom of speech would be possible, or – *to*

[365] Strauss, 'Exoteric Teaching', 64.

[366] Strauss often uses the simile of a second, "artificial", cave that is allegedly dug by the moderns underneath the first, "natural", cave of Plato. See inter alia PAW 155-156.

> *exaggerate for purposes of clarification* – to a time when no one would suffer any harm from hearing any truth [emphasis added]. (PAW 33-34)

As Strauss expressly states that he is *exaggerating* his account of the philosophers who, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, started to believe that the conflict between philosophy and society is *accidental* instead of *essential*, we may say that his positioning of the opposite conviction of "the earlier type of writers" should be understood at least in part as a *polemical* act. As he admits elsewhere: "…*today* it is perhaps better … to overstate Plato's thesis regarding the disproportion between philosophy and politics than to follow the beaten path by failing to see a problem in the relation between philosophy and politics [emphasis added]."[367]

As Strauss himself explicitly admits in the quotation, ultimately he exaggerates "for purposes of clarification".[368] That is to say, by reconstructing the two opposing alternatives he aims to clarify the significance of the philosophical question underlying these alternatives. Hence, he should not be read as if he proposes some kind of *solution*, but rather as if he induces us to grasp the *philosophical problem* at issue. In a footnote inserted immediately after the quotation above, Strauss reproduces the words of the American writer Archibald MacLeish, who wrote: "Perhaps the luxury of the complete confession, the uttermost despair, the farthest doubt should be denied themselves by writers living in any but the most orderly and settled times. *I do not know* [emphasis added]" (PAW 34n14). As we have learned from the example of Socrates, acknowledging that we do *not know* is the beginning of philosophy. In fact, we might say, Strauss induces *us*, insofar as we are "careful" readers, to examine and decide *by and for ourselves* whether the "most halcyon conditions" or the "most orderly and settled times" (PAW 34n14) have ever existed in the past (e.g. in the pre-historical age of Cronus / Saturn?), whether they exist in the present (e.g. in our current liberal democracy or "open society"?), and whether they will ever exist in the future (e.g. in Marx's post-historical realm of freedom?).

Similarly, we are capable of examining the extent to which the words of Strauss that Lefort and Kojève seem to take at face value are not in fact meant exoterically, viz. both the hermeneutical assumption that texts written in accordance with the "art of writing" do indeed comply with the law of "logographic necessity", as well as the ontological assumption that the philosopher is "self-sufficient". If this is the case, we should be able to find indications to that intent in Strauss's texts.

First, we return to Strauss's hermeneutical assumption. We found him saying that the Platonic dialogue is based on the denial of chance, yet at the same time he calls this assumption a "fundamental falsehood", even a "beautiful or

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[367] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 302.

[368] The expression "to exaggerate for purposes of clarification" is also used by him in PAW 103, 184. Cf. NRH 188: "Burke's polemical overstatements were and are indispensable for tearing away the disguises, both intentional and unintentional, in which "the new morality" introduced itself …."

beautifying falsehood". We may now note that this expression is clearly an alternative formula for the notion of the "noble lie". In other words, the statement that the Platonic dialogue complies entirely with the law of "logographic necessity" is *itself* a noble lie. Moreover, we should already have become suspicious by the sentence "We may assume that the Platonic dialogue is a kind of writing which is free from the essential defect of writings" (CM 52). This sentence is clearly contradictory, for if certain defects are *essential* to writing, we may safely infer that *no* writing can exist without them. In other words, the possibility that a piece of writing is *accidentally* misunderstood, is not excluded by Strauss.[369] This would also mean that his suggestion needs qualification that it is actually possible to recover the universal (philosophical) teaching from the particular (literary) setting of the dialogue. In his interpretation of Xenophon's *Hiero*, Strauss admits that, in interpreting a text written in accordance with the rules of the art of writing,

> ... a certain ambiguity remains, an ambiguity ultimately due not to the unsolved riddles implied in many individual passages of the *Hiero* but to the fact that *a perfectly lucid and unambiguous connection between content and form, between a general teaching and a contingent event* (e.g., a conversation between two individuals) *is impossible* [emphasis added]. (OT 66)

This would lead to the conclusion that we should understand the postulate of the "logographic necessity" of a text rather as a kind of *pedagogic device*, which is meant to induce "careful" readers not to *under*estimate the writing skills and level of intelligence of the philosophical author in question.[370] What is more, the "beauty" of the idea of a perfectly composed text arouses the philosophical *eros* of these readers.

This reading is confirmed by Strauss himself in 'On a Forgotten Kind of Writing', in which he explicitly replies to some of his critics.[371] According to Kojève, Strauss's method of reading can be compared to that of a detective, who, by a subtle interpretation of the apparent facts, finally finds the criminal – the difference, however, being that Strauss's method cannot lead to the confession of the criminal.[372] In a direct reply, Strauss retorts: "I would be happy if there were suspicion of crime where up to now there has only been implicit faith in perfect innocence".[373] In other words, he prefers to *over*- rather than *under*estimate the

[369] See CM 52, where Strauss explicitly acknowledges that all writings can be accidentally misunderstood.
[370] See also Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 47: "…it is safer to believe that he has given careful thought to every word he uses than to make allowances for human weakness. Considering the difference of rank between Machiavelli and people like ourselves, the rule of reading which derives from that belief may be impracticable since we cannot possibly comply with it in all cases. It is nevertheless a good rule, for remembering it keeps us awake and modest or helps us to develop the habit of being in the proper mixture both bold and cautious."
[371] Strauss, 'On a Forgotten Kind of Writing', 221-232.
[372] Kojève, 'Tyranny and Wisdom', 136n.
[373] Strauss, 'On a Forgotten Kind of Writing', 232.

possibility that a philosopher-writer has a "hidden" motive. In the following statement, in response to another critic, Strauss even explicitly denies that he put forward the hermeneutical postulate he is supposed to hold:[374]

> I never said that "a historian must proceed on the supposition that philosophers, even original and important ones, always know the presuppositions and consequences of all the statements they make." I merely said that the historian must proceed on the supposition that the great thinkers understood better what they thought than the historian who is not likely to be a great thinker.[375]

Thus, Strauss emphasizes that his hermeneutical postulate serves as a *caveat* to the reader (or the "historian" of philosophy) not to underestimate the level of thinking of certain philosophical writers rather than as an ontological claim. Now we have argued, therefore, that the assumption of "logographic necessity" should not be considered a "last word", but rather a pedagogic device, we proceed by examining the exact meaning and status of the other assumption attributed to Strauss, viz. that the philosopher is "self-sufficient".

As we have seen above, Kojève argued that Strauss conceives of the philosopher as an *isolated* figure, standing completely outside or above history. We submit now that this conception should at least in part be understood as the *polemical* counterpart of the radical historicist assumption of the philosopher being completely *immersed* in history. We therefore now take a closer look at the exact reply Strauss gave to Kojève on this point.

In his 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*', Strauss contends that the classic teaching about philosophy is a teaching about friendship. Philosophers, insofar as they are philosophers, are in need of friends, that is, actual or potential philosophers. Friendship presupposes shared opinions, shared prejudices. However, Strauss admits, this is incompatible with the idea of philosophy as a "quest for wisdom", for: "Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems".[376] He adds that it is impossible to think about philosophical problems without becoming *inclined* toward a solution. The philosopher ceases to be a philosopher as soon as his "subjective certainty" of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution.[377] At that point, Strauss claims, the philosopher turns into a sectarian. Nevertheless, he continues, the danger of

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[374] This response is directed at George Sabine, who had criticized Strauss's method of interpretation in a review of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* which appeared in *Ethics* in April 1953.

[375] Strauss, 'On a Forgotten Kind of Writing', 228.

[376] Strauss, 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*', 196.

[377] Cf. NRH 125: "There is no guaranty that the quest for adequate articulation will ever lead beyond an understanding of the fundamental alternatives or that philosophy will ever legitimately go beyond the stage of discussion or disputation and will ever reach the stage of decision." See also NRH 22, where Strauss calls dogmatism the inclination "to identify the goal of our thinking with the point at which we have become tired of thinking", which is a reference to Lessing.

succumbing to the attraction of solutions is "essential" to philosophy, for without it, it "would degenerate into playing with problems".[378] Moreover, he contends:

> the philosopher does not necessarily succumb to this danger, as is shown by Socrates, who never belonged to a sect and never founded one. And even if the philosophic friends are compelled to be members of a sect or to found one, they are not necessarily members of one and the same sect: *Amicus Plato*.[379]

The last two words are the beginning of the ancient saying "*Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*", "Plato is my friend, but the truth is my greater friend." Thus, Strauss suggests to us that a genuine philosopher will always be prepared to question his prejudices (i.e. his opinions) in the name of truth, *even* if he has been "compelled" (i.e., on historical / political, not philosophical grounds!) to become a member of a sect or to found one (as arguably Strauss himself has done by founding a Straussian "school").[380]

Strauss admits, however, that this reply still presupposes the validity of "the idea of philosophy",[381] that is, the *classical* idea of philosophy, and that this idea itself also stands in need of a justification. Moreover, the "idea of philosophy" in turn presupposes "the idea of nature": "It presupposes then that there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History". [382] Strauss thus seems to *confirm* the presupposition that Kojève brought to the fore as necessarily underlying the idea of the self-sufficient philosopher. However, we have to add that Strauss understands by an "idea" primarily a fundamental problem revealed in "dialectical" *speech*,[383] by which it is implied that, in turn, the "idea" of philosophy and the "idea" of nature are themselves capable of being questioned in a philosophical conversation.

If we were to follow the conclusions of Strauss's charitable readers who excavate his "true intention", we would have to admit that his critics were wrong, then. In fact his critics *misunderstood* his exoteric (or polemical, *ad hominem*)

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[378] Strauss, 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*', 196.
[379] Ibid., 196.
[380] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 15. See also Meier, 'Why Leo Strauss? Four Answers and One Consideration Concerning the Uses and Disadvantages of the School for the Philosophical Life'.
[381] Strauss, 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*', 212. For the term "the idea of philosophy", see also ibid., 195, NRH 11-12, 30, 261.
[382] Strauss, 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*, 212.
[383] In other words, Strauss does not conceive of an "idea" in the usual, "Platonic" sense of ever-existing transcendent entity. See especially Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 141-145, NRH 123-124. Cf. Kennington , 'Strauss's *Natural Right and History*', 67: "The possibility of philosophy does not require that there be "ideas" which are "the only things which are beyond all change" and "separated" from the things (cf. *The City and Man*, pp. 119-20). It requires no more than that "the fundamental problems always be the same ([*Natural Right and History*,] p. 35). In accordance with this understanding of Socratism, the usage of "idea" through Strauss's book [*Natural Right and History*] departs markedly from that usually found in the mouth of Socrates in the Platonic writings. An "idea" is a fundamental problem."

teaching for his esoteric (or philosophical, genuine) teaching. If we follow Tarcov and Meier, then, we may say that Strauss's "last word" is to be understood only as existing in the exhortation to philosophize. Indeed, in the following passage we may read "Strauss" where Strauss writes "Plato":

> No interpretation of Plato's teaching can be proved fully by historical evidence. For the crucial part of his interpretation the interpreter has to fall back on his own resources: Plato does not relieve him of the responsibility for discovering the decisive part of the argument by himself. … Plato composed his writings in such a way as to prevent for all time their use as authoritative texts. … In the last analysis his writings cannot be used for any purpose other than for philosophizing. In particular, no social order and no party which ever existed or which ever will exist can rightfully claim Plato as its patron.[384]

In other words, Strauss's postulate of "logographic necessity" should not be interpreted as a denial of the possibility of a philosophical text being *accidentally* misunderstood (besides the necessary misunderstanding between philosophy and society), nor should his assumption of the "self-sufficiency" of the philosopher be interpreted as a denial of the possibility that a philosopher fails in his grasp and teaching of the truth. Rather, Strauss induces us not to *underestimate* the *effort* it takes to genuinely understand the writings of a genuine philosopher. Moreover, *should* we decide to think for and by ourselves, he warns us not to affirm one philosophical alternative (such as that of classical political philosophy) as a merely *polemical* counterweight to another philosophical alternative (such as that of radical historicism). In other words, Strauss warns us not to pursue a philosophical goal by polemical means: "Let us beware of the danger of pursuing a Socratic goal with the means, and the temper, of Thrasymachus." (NRH 6)

On the basis of our findings in this section, we would have to conclude, then, that Strauss is in fact the genuine Socratic whom his defenders take him to be. When interpreting Strauss, we put ourselves at stake *as philosophers*, that is, we take our own stances, we make our own *decisions*, which we in our turn may examine to see whether or not they are philosophically *valid*. As Meier explains, the hermeneutical moment smoothes over into the philosophical moment, that is, the moment when we reach the point that it no longer matters which propositions are ascribed to whom, but merely whether or not these propositions are *valid*.[385] It

[384] Strauss, 'On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy', 351.

[385] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 65. See also ibid., 71: "Whoever is wholly devoted to understanding a philosopher exactly as he understood himself, and whoever allows himself to be led in the study of that philosopher by the maxim that the greatest effort and care is to be employed in order to discover whether his oeuvre contains the truth, may reach the point at which it no longer makes any difference to him whether he thinks the thoughts of the philosopher or his own, because he moves on a plane on which the arguments take the lead and the alternatives visibly emerge that, beyond the "historical embeddedness" of both the author and the interpreter, determine the issue towards which the thought of both is directed." According to Meier, the following statement of Strauss on Al-Farabi can be read as a self-explicative statement: "It may be added that by transmitting

is our own responsibility, then, to make a distinction between the esoteric (i.e. philosophical) and the exoteric (i.e. polemical) Strauss, or to refuse to succumb to Strauss's charms. To the extent that his "success" – the actual influence of his exoteric message – is greater than his "intention", we ourselves are responsible for it, for apparently we have not been "careful" readers, let alone philosophers enough.[386]

4.6. "POLITICAL" PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE

In our search for Strauss's *answer* to the question of the political as contained in his account of "political" philosophy, we seem now to have reached an impasse. On the basis of the interpretation of Strauss's work given in the previous section, it seems that the only "teaching" we may indeed ascribe to him is his "intention" to lead others, that is, his "attentive" readers, toward philosophy as a way of life, as exemplified by Socrates. In other words, there is no way to be sure (based on textual evidence) whether any theoretical *proposition* we ascribe to him – either about his definition of the political as subject matter of philosophy (previous chapter) or his definition of the political as philosophy's manner of treatment (current chapter) – and which we may subsequently want to argue for or against, is not in fact of our own finding or invention. As a consequence, Strauss himself seems to be immune to criticism and not capable of being held to account, which would in fact be un-Socratic.

There are a few strings we can hold on to, though. As we have seen, Meier claims that, as interpreters or historians of philosophy, we move from the history of philosophy to the intention of the philosopher, i.e., what is required is "that one return *from* the philosopher's transmitted "contribution" to the "history of philosophy" *to* his intention."[387] Nevertheless, Meier seems to *downplay* the fact that the "contribution" a philosopher delivers to "the history of philosophy" is not *entirely* a matter of historical *accident*.

In the *first* place it should be emphasized that not only the esoteric intent (inducing potential philosophers to become actual philosophers), but also the exoteric teaching (the telling of "salutary myths" or "noble lies") is *intended* by any author who performs the art of writing.[388] We may therefore assume that Strauss *deliberately* took the risk of creating a very *specific* "misunderstanding", which he regards as precisely the *appropriate* understanding for "the many". On

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the most precious knowledge, not in 'systematic' works, but in the guise of a historical account, Farabi indicates his view concerning 'originality' and 'individuality' in philosophy: what comes into sight as the 'original' or 'personal' 'contribution' of a philosopher is infinitely less significant than his private, and truly original and individual, understanding of the necessarily anonymous truth ." (Strauss, 'Farabi's Plato', 377).

[386] In CM 112, Strauss suggests that the inclination to "personify" standpoints, or, we may add, to argue "*ad hominem*", is itself *thumotic* in origin.

[387] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 64.

[388] OT 47: "The superficial understanding is not simply wrong, since it grasps the obvious meaning which is *as much intended* by the author as is the deeper meaning" [emphasis added].

this basis, we may retroactively conclude that our reconstruction of Strauss's philosophy of politics, which we embarked upon in the previous chapter, that is, of his teaching of "the fact of the political" and of "the latitude of statesmanship" or *phronèsis*, may indeed to some degree *legitimately* be *ascribed* to him. Subsequently, we are allowed to critically examine whether this exoteric teaching, which Strauss seems to present as being "noble" and "salutary", in fact legitimately *deserves* these characteristics.

In the *second* place, and more fundamentally, Strauss, as well as anyone else who *engages* in *practicing* the art of writing (and / or reading), necessarily *attests* to the distinctions between "the few" and "the many", "the wise" and "the vulgar", the esoteric and the exoteric, philosophy and society, and, finally, nature and history. Although the "true" intention of these texts may lie in their inviting the readers to ask *questions*, or, to be more specific, to engage in Socratic philosophy as a "zetetic" way of life, the actual *practice* presupposes and furthers certain specific *answers* to those questions from the outset , and is to that extent *dogmatic* rather than "zetetic". It may be said that these answers function as the "confessions of faith" [*Glaubensbekenntnisse*] of Strauss's "politics" of philosophy. As long as one is *performing* this art of writing and reading, one is necessarily *affirming* the ontological assumptions that are presupposed by it. And as long as one is subscribing to these assumptions, one may be held to account for doing so,[389] for the historical "success" of a specific philosopher cannot be reduced to a *mere* matter of historical contingency or fate.

I submit, therefore, that the critical evaluations of Lefort and Kojève must in the final analysis be understood not as directed against what Strauss *says* – no matter whether it belongs to his esoteric or his exoteric teaching – but rather against what he *does*, that is, against the assertions he attests to by performing them. Moreover, the legitimacy of these assertions or answers may be evaluated, either in terms of their truth value – are they "realistic" or a mere "fantasy" [*phantasme*]? – or in terms of their moral value or political impact, are they "salutary" or dangerous?

Strauss might of course reply that the approach to the performative aspect of his work sketched in the previous paragraph presupposes the primacy of practice (or action) over theory (or argument), an assumption that he would reject in the name of the primacy of theory, that is, in the name of the conviction that the Socratic dictum that "virtue is knowledge" is true and that the *bios theorētikos* is the highest way of life. This would imply not only that a theoretical thesis should not be mistaken for a practical proposal,[390] but also that a belief [*Glaube*] or commitment that is presupposed in *practice* must not be confused with an opinion

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[389] Cf. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 36, who speaks of the "various assumptions the people who are going to act on the theory make".

[390] Cf. OT 76: "When Socrates was charged with teaching his pupils to be "tyrannical," this doubtless was due to the popular misunderstanding of a theoretical thesis as a practical proposal. Yet the theoretical thesis by itself necessarily prevented its holders from being unqualifiedly loyal to Athenian democracy, e.g., for it prevented them from believing that democracy is simply the best political order. It prevented them from being "good citizens" … under a democracy."

[*Meinung*] or proposition, the truth of which is to be examined in *theory*. After all, it might be argued that a philosopher is to be judged for the validity of the opinions he *argues for*, and not for that of the engagements he *enacts*. Stated differently, when we judge his "speeches" in the light of his "deeds", we ourselves run the risk of doing so on the implicit assumption that the latter is "higher" than the former, whereas Strauss himself maintains that this assumption should be understood as a "noble lie", an *ironical* and hence merely *provisional* inversion of the hierarchy between theoretical and practical (or political) life.[391]

We should state, though, that it would be difficult to reconcile this reply with Strauss's concomitant claim that philosophy should be regarded not so much as "a teaching or as a body of knowledge", but as "a way of life" (CPP 91), which, in common with every way of life, harbors its own decisions and *commitments*.[392] What is more, Strauss claims that "philosophy (as the quest for the truth about the whole) and self-knowledge (as realization of the need of that truth as well as of the difficulties obstructing its discovery and its communication) *cannot be separated from each other*" [emphasis added],[393] or, as he puts it more precisely, that the politics of philosophy or "the art of writing" belongs to philosophy's "essential accidents" (OPS 250). Although Strauss emphasizes that the latter (the *accident*) belongs to a different, that is, lower, level than the former (the *essence*), it is nevertheless the case that the latter must of necessity be *accompanied* by the former.[394]

Strauss gives an additional explanation in his course notes on Plato's *Symposium*, which were published posthumously.[395] While he states that there is no element of "spiritedness" [*thumos*] or indignation in philosophy proper, that is, there is no *polemical* element – the element without which, Strauss claims, the political cannot exist (see previous chapter) – he adds that in "its utterances or in its teaching, this is another matter" (OPS 243). Since Socrates did not write, Strauss notes, he was the more pure or consistent philosopher. Yet, he adds, "in honor of Plato, we are compelled to say that Socrates did not write because he *could not* write [emphasis added]" (OPS 246), or "more precisely, because he could not write on the highest level, and writing on the highest level includes the ability to write tragedy, the tragedy behind which are the avenging gods" (OPS 246-247).[396]

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[391] Cf. Strauss, 'The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon', 519n2: "the "deed-speech" antithesis … is an ironical expression of the antithesis between practical or political life and theoretical life."

[392] Cf. NRH 26: "the theoretical analysis of life is noncommittal and fatal to commitment, but life means commitment", NRH 46, 81.

[393] Strauss, 'Farabi's *Plato*', 366.

[394] Ibid., 366.

[395] Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). This is the edited transcript of a course on Plato's *Symposium* which Strauss had given at the University of Chicago in 1959.

[396] Cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 296: "The philosophers and the demos in the sense indicated are separated by a gulf; their ends differ radically. The gulf can be bridged only by a noble rhetoric, by a certain kind of noble rhetoric which we may call for the time being accusatory or punitive rhetoric. Philosophy is incapable of supplying this kind of rhetoric. It cannot do more than to sketch

Examples of such writing are the myths of the rewards and punishments by the gods in the hereafter with which Plato concludes his dialogues *Gorgias* and *Republic*. Stated otherwise, Socrates was not able to practice the kind of writing that Strauss identifies with "the way of Thrasymachus". By stating that "[w]riting on the highest level is higher than nonwriting on the highest level" (OPS 250), Strauss clearly *expresses* his *de facto preference* for the "Platonic" practice of "political" philosophy *over* the "Socratic" practice of "true politics", the former of which is a combination of "the way of Socrates" and "the way of Thrasymachus", or philosophy and polemics.

4.7. From "Political" Philosophy to "True" Politics

In order to illustrate Strauss's *de facto decision* in favor of "Platonic" "political" philosophy over "Socratic" "true politics", we turn now to a passage from Plato's *Symposium* in which Socrates engages in a brief exchange with Agathon, the young tragedian, in which the distinction between "the few" and "the many", between "the wise" and "the vulgar", plays a prominent role.

As is well known, in Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates and his interlocutors give speeches about the theme of love [*eros*]. The company of friends is hosted by Agathon, the young and handsome tragedian who won the first price at the tragedy festival which took place the night before. Now that Eryximachus, a physician, has finished his speech, it is the turn of Agathon, who is to be the last speaker before Socrates. Just before Agathon begins, he initiates a brief exchange with Socrates. First, Socrates praises the "successful contribution" of Eryximachus, to whom he says: "If you were there where I am now, or rather, where I shall be perhaps, when Agathon too has made a splendid speech, you would be very worried indeed and in the state of panic I am in now."[397] Then Agathon intervenes:

> "Your praise, Socrates, has a wicked purpose", said Agathon. "You want to make me lose my head at the thought of the audience [*theatron*] having high expectations of a great speech from me." "But I saw your assurance [*andreia*] and confidence", Socrates replied, "when you went on to the platform with the actors and looked straight ahead at that huge audience without being in the least perturbed, and just before your own plays were to be performed too. I should have to be extremely forgetful to think you would lose your head now at the thought of a few people like us." "What do you mean, Socrates?", said Agathon. "Surely you don't think me so obsessed by the theatre [*theatron*] as not to realize that, to anyone with any sense, a small but thoughtful audience is far more terrifying than a

its outlines. The execution must be left to orators or poets." (According to Strauss Plato's *Gorgias* is characterized by the quest for this noble rhetoric.) Cf. Strauss's letter to Kojève, 22 April 1957: "I do not believe in the possibility of a conversation of Socrates with the people …; the relation of the philosopher to the people is mediated by a certain kind of rhetoricians who arouse fear of punishment after death; the philosopher can guide these rhetoricians but can not do their work (this is the meaning of the *Gorgias*)." (OT 275).

[397] Plato, *Symposium*, 194a (translation M.C. Howatson).

> large and thoughtless one?" "Of course not, Agathon," he said. "In your case I couldn't possibly think anything so crass. I know very well that if you were faced with people you considered intelligent [*sophos*] you would take more notice of them than of the general public [*hoi polloi*]. But after all, we too were there in the theatre and were part of the public, so perhaps we are not these select few. However, if you did come across other people who were intelligent, you might well feel ashamed in front of them if you thought perhaps you were doing something wrong – what do you say?" "You're right", he said. "But in the case of the general public [*hoi polloi*], you would not feel ashamed in front of *them* if you thought you were doing something wrong?"[398]

At this point, Phaedrus intervenes and asks Agathon not to reply to Socrates further, for otherwise this "dialogue", as he calls it, will probably go on the whole night.[399]

In my reading of this passage, Agathon turns the distinction implicit in Socrates' suggestion that it is more natural to be afraid of a huge audience than a small one into a *normative* distinction between "the few" and "the many", or between "the wise" and "the vulgar". He suggests that the multitude present in the theatre is not wise (or "thoughtless"), whereas the few people present in his home are wise (or "thoughtful"). Socrates continues by saying that of course he knows that Agathon, *if* he were to be confronted with a few people who are indeed wise, would naturally take more notice of them than of the many. However, Socrates questions whether the *particular* persons present are indeed wise, for, "after all", he says, "*we too were there in the theatre and were part of the public, so perhaps we are not these select few"* [emphasis added]. So we may say that, by questioning Agathon's suggestion that these *particular* "few" who are present are indeed wise, Socrates points to the difficulty of *applying* the general distinction between "the few" and "the many", which always involves a *particular* act of judgment or a *particular* decision by a *particular* person, and which may turn out to be *misguided*.

Of course, one could reply that this will merely have consequences for the (wrong or right) *application* of the distinction between the few and the many, the wise and the vulgar, but not necessarily for the validity of the distinction *as such*, but these things cannot be fully separated, for the problem of the concrete application of a conceptual distinction necessarily *points to* the problem of the validity of the distinction as such. In other words, the fact that a *thumotic* "gentleman" [*kalokagathos*] like Agathon might apply the distinction wrongly, may induce us, Plato's readers, to doubt whether the use of his distinction at all is in fact very salutary or wise. Stated otherwise, we may as well take Phaedrus at his word when he calls this brief exchange a "dialogue", that is, a genuine attempt by Socrates to raise and discuss the *philosophical* question of how to distinguish the wise from the unwise, and, if one is capable of doing so, whether it is justified to

[398] Plato, *Symposium*, 194a-c.
[399] Plato, *Symposium*, 194d.

treat the wise differently than the unwise. In fact, we may read it as a "brief indication" in precisely Strauss's sense: *at this point* in the text, we are invited as readers to "complete" the argument by and for ourselves, that is, to think through the use and validity of the few-many distinction as such.

Strauss's own comments on this passage betray a different stance, however.[400] According to him, the theme of this brief exchange is fear of disgrace before the audience. He asserts that both Socrates and Agathon merely *claim* to fear disgrace, but that in fact they *do not* fear it. He adds that, of the two, only Agathon is found out, since he walks into the "trap" that Socrates had set up for him to reveal that Agathon is in fact less "beautiful", less a "gentleman" [*kalokagathos*] than he appears.[401] Strauss thus clearly reads Socrates' questioning here as an *ironical* device – in Strauss's sense – to unmask Agathon's lack of sincerity, rather than an attempt on Socrates' part to *dialectically* answer the philosophical question mentioned above. In other words, Strauss fails to use this passage to display a "theoretical self-consciousness" of the "deeply hidden structural features" of his own work, viz. his *use* of the few-many-distinction which co-determines his historical influence or "success", whereas he could very well have used this passage to display his intention of recovering philosophy or freedom of thought *by actually exercising it.*

In addition, just as he reads into the text that Agathon *knows* of himself that he does not fear the audience, he reads into the text that Socrates *knows* of himself that he does *not* fear the audience. Yet the text itself remains *indecisive* on this point. It seems, therefore, that it is Strauss himself who *decides* what Socrates' and Agathon's (private) *thoughts* are by in fact lending them his *own* thoughts. His interpretation clearly betrays a preference for the "ironical" Socrates – irony understood here in Strauss's sense of "magnanimity" – over the "zetetic" Socrates which he himself had presented earlier in his 1931 lecture. That is, he is *silent* here about the Socrates who led a life of a "giving-of-account" [*logon didonai*] or of "dialectical" philosophizing, who in this Platonic (!) dialogue may be understood to effectively "deconstruct" the distinction between the few and the many, between the wise and the vulgar, that is, the ontological assumption without which Strauss's whole edifice of "Platonic" "political" philosophy would fall apart.

4.8. CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter we reconstructed Strauss's political philosophy in the sense of his *philosophy* of politics, consisting both of a conception of the political and of "thoughtful" political judgment and decision-making. At the start of the current chapter, however, we noted that such a "propositional" reading is problematic insofar as his work is ultimately not intended to present any *body of knowledge*, but rather to recover a specific *way of life*, viz. the philosophical life, over and against another way of life, viz. the political life. Moreover, in accordance with this

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[400] OPS 153-155.
[401] OPS 155.

intention, his writing is guided by another political philosophy in the "deeper" sense of a *politics* of philosophy, that is, a specific form of political action called "the art of writing between the lines", which is intended to protect and further philosophy as a way of life.

In the second chapter we argued that Popper's writing displays the performative condition of political thinking, without him showing a "theoretical self-consciousness" and without his offering an answer to it. The current chapter argues that Strauss explicitly shows himself to be aware of the problem of the communication of philosophy, or of the possibility of philosophy being misunderstood, but that his way of framing it as the necessary opposition between the few and the many and his way of offering a solution to it in the guise of the "political" philosophy of the art of writing amount to the aspiration of being able to *escape* from this condition. While Strauss recognizes the *situated* character of all writing and reading as a consequence of which every writing will *necessarily* be misunderstood, the practice of the "art of writing" harbors and furthers the assumption or fantasy that this condition can definitely be *overcome*.

In the *first* place Strauss reduces the many different misunderstandings that are possible among human beings to *one* cardinal misunderstanding: that between "the few" and "the many", or between philosophy and society. This in turn can only be regarded as the *cardinal* misunderstanding, on the underlying assumption that "virtue is knowledge", that the philosophical life is the highest way of life.

In the *second* place, the "political" remedy Strauss chose, viz. the "art of writing between the lines", implies a belief in the possibility of neatly distinguishing the philosophical (or "esoteric") intention of his writing from its polemical (or "exoteric") intention, that is, the possibility of occupying an "objective" standpoint from which this dichotomy can be *known* and *mastered*. It is thereby implied that the *source* of the misunderstanding of texts that are written in accordance with the rules of this art, or of mistaking one's "subjective certainty" for "objective certainty", lies entirely with the *reader*, who *thus* turns out to be "uncareful" or "inattentive", while it is implied that the *writer* and "careful" or "attentive" reader are *de facto* incapable of making this mistake and are thus sovereign and immune to failure and criticism. *First*, we argued that this implication would be at odds with the demand that one should assume responsibility for and be ready to give an account of one's opinions, which is inherent in the practice of Socratic "true politics" or "dialectical" conversation that Strauss wished to recover in the first place. *Secondly*, we argued that the presupposition inherent in the "art of writing", that a complete elimination of contingency or "chance" in writing and reading is possible, is at odds with the condition of contingency in which human thought finds itself, especially insofar as it is expressed, the denial of which Strauss himself seemed to reject in his criticism of modern, "Machiavellian", political philosophy.

In sum, whereas Strauss, in contradistinction to Popper, displays a form of "theoretical self-consciousness" of the condition of political philosophy, he

performatively attests to the problematic assumption that it is somehow possible to *escape* from its condition.

The following chapters turn to the political thinking of Hannah Arendt, who tries to think outside the scheme of classical political philosophy – or what she calls "the Socratic school" – to offer an alternative account of the conditions of political thinking, as well as alternative ways of dealing with these conditions. To begin with, she claims that it is not a matter of course that the philosophical life or *bios theōrētikos* is the highest way of life. In fact, she argues, the underlying demand to establish such a hierarchy at all prevents us from acquiring an adequate *understanding* of the phenomenology of human action (including politics) and human thinking (including philosophy). As Chapter 5 shows, she claims that philosophy has interpreted action after the model of *making*, as a result of which it has failed to do justice to the realm of human affairs, which is a realm of freedom and hence of contingency. As Chapter 6 shows, she asserts that philosophy has interpreted thinking after the model of *cognition* and has subjected it to the rules of *logic*, as a result of which it has failed to do justice to the freedom inherent in the thinking activity, as well as its distinctive "political" – that is, *perspectival* – and "poetic" – that is, *metaphorical* – qualities.

PART III

THE PRAISE OF ARENDT:

POLITICS BEYOND PHILOSOPHY AND POLEMICS

CHAPTER 5

Arendt's Recovery of Political Freedom

Les intellectuels ne veulent ni comprendre ni changer le monde, ils veulent le denoncer.[402]
Raymond Aron

Political institutions, no matter how well or how badly designed,
depend for continued existence upon acting men; their conservation
is achieved by the same means that brought them into being.[403]
Hannah Arendt

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that Karl Popper and Leo Strauss present themselves as philosopher and defender of philosophy, respectively, they have come to be accepted as members of the canon of political philosophy to a much lesser degree than Hannah Arendt. This may be regarded as highly ironical, for Arendt is the only one of the three who explicitly *distances* herself from philosophy and its attitude to politics. Precisely because of her incorporation into the canon, it is very important to bear in mind that Arendt explicitly refused to call herself a philosopher.[404] It is my conviction that we will only be able to do justice to her work if we place her critique of (the tradition of western) philosophy in the foreground, and, above all, if we understand that critique correctly.

This chapter reconstructs Arendt's answer to the question "what is political?" or, to be more precise, her conception of the *conditions* of political action, of what makes politics *possible*. Especially instructive is her approach to the question of the founding of political order. In contradistinction to Popper and Strauss, who treat this question in a traditionally *philosophical* manner, viz. as a theoretical search for an "absolute", that is, a principle, criterion, or standard the validity of which is to be established by *cognition*,[405] Arendt interprets it as an originally *political* issue, the answer to which is to be found by the "men of action" themselves, in *practice*, that is, in confrontation with "the frailty of human affairs"

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[402] Aron, *Le spectateur engagé*, 256.
[403] WIF 153
[404] See inter alia Arendt, ' "What Remains? The Language Remains": A Conversation with Günter Gaus', 1,"I do not belong to the circle of philosophers."
[405] Not only Strauss, but even Popper, despite the latter's explicit attempts to distance himself from the traditional way of framing the question as "who should rule?", remains committed to three of its premises: politics is in the end about *rule* (i.e. government or dominion of some over others); there should be *one single criterion* on the basis of which legitimate and illegitimate rule can be distinguished from each other, or one final answer to the question of natural right; it is the task of *philosophy* to find and rationally ground that criterion (principle, standard) and answer.

or “the abyss of freedom”. As such, she proves to be capable not only of phenomenologically *describing* the performative conditions of politics, but also of thereby *praising* its possibility.

In order to find out what we may learn from Arendt about these conditions, we need to take a different approach than the one taken in the previous chapters. In the case of both Popper and Strauss, we started by reconstructing their work, before proceeding with a deconstruction. That is to say, first we searched for their “first principle” or “last word”, and then demonstrated how what their texts *propose* to reject nevertheless remains manifest in what is *enacted* by them. As we have seen in the case of Popper, his texts perform the friend-enemy logic of the closed society, which at the same time they propositionally reject. In the case of Strauss we have seen that his texts perform the modern form of “utopianism”, which at the same time they profess to reject. Thus we learned something invaluable about the conditions of politics which, apparently, we could only retrieve *despite* themselves instead of *thanks to* themselves.

In the case of Arendt, such a deconstruction of what is taken to be the propositional content of her work has already become rather common in the secondary literature. Most critics have not drawn the ultimate consequence of their reading, however, which is to question the validity of the standard propositional reading in the first place. As I show in the *first* section of this chapter, both the standard reading and most of its criticisms assume that Arendt should be interpreted as if she proposes some kind of “solution”. However, it can be demonstrated that this runs counter to her explicitly formulated intention. Only when we take this intention seriously will we be capable of properly reconstructing her conception of politics.

In the *second* section I show that, according to the so-called standard reading of *The Human Condition*, Arendt is understood to opt for “the Greek solution” of *polis* life (as exemplified especially by Periclean Athens) over and above the philosopher’s “traditional substitution of making for acting” (as exemplified by “the Socratic school”) in response to “the frailty of human affairs”. Broadly in agreement with arguments set out by Roy Tsao,[406] I show that in fact the alleged “solutions” both of the Greek *polis* and the philosophers of “the Socratic school” remain tied to the same conceptual framework. According to this framework, which is manifest for instance in Plato’s *Gorgias*, a concern for the individual self (or soul) is placed *above* a concern for the common world, and politics – or at least the *founding* of political order – is conceived as a matter of “making” instead of “acting”. By liberating her work from these remainders of what she considers to be the traditional philosophical outlook, we are able to recover her original intention: to *understand* the conditions of political life.

In the *third* section, however, I argue that Tsao throws the baby out with the bathwater insofar as he claims that Arendt distances herself not only from the Greeks’ exaggerated concern for *individual* immortality, but also from their faith in the lasting power of acting *together*, that is, Pericles’ “supreme confidence that

[406] Tsao, ‘Arendt Against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*’.

men can enact *and* save their greatness at the same time" (HC 205). Although Arendt does indeed acknowledge that, as a matter of *factual truth*, no action can survive its moment without the help of the *homo faber* who "reifies" it, I take her to realize that, *as soon as* we make this assumption of the inevitable "futility" of human affairs into the premise of our *action*, we adopt a *fatalist* stance toward the point and possibilities of human action.[407] According to Arendt, the public realm within which "acting-in-concert" takes place is established by "power" and held together by mutual "promising", which are themselves again forms of "acting", not of "making". Her praise of "faith in and hope for the world" (HC 247) serves as a counterweight to the philosophers' fatalism, which results in "worldlessness".[408] Thus, her work is not only led by the aim of adequately *understanding* the worldly conditions of politics, but also of *praising* the possibilities of politics within that world.

In the *fourth* section I demonstrate how this twofold aim enables her to offer an original approach to what is still regarded as one of the most important questions of political philosophy: under what conditions can we speak of a legitimate foundation of a political order? This question, which still remained implicit in *The Human Condition*, is addressed explicitly by Arendt in *On Revolution* and *The Life of the Mind: Willing*. By assuming the perspective of the "men of action" of the American Revolution – the "founding fathers" – instead of that of the "men of thought", she tries to articulate the dilemmas of confronting "the abyss of freedom" without succumbing to the desire for a "guarantee" in the guise of either a transcendent absolute (God's commands or Nature's laws) or an immanent absolute (History as "made" by mankind).[409] Instead, Arendt tries to acquaint us with the possibility of founding a political order on the basis of the principle of "public freedom" *as it becomes manifest in the performance of the founding act*.

As the *fifth* section shows, Arendt's claim that the American Declaration of Independence was "one of the rare moments in history when the power of action is great enough to erect its own monument" (OR 130) invited criticisms analogous to that of her celebration of Pericles' words quoted earlier. Bonnie Honig and Alan Keenan claim that her attempt to consider the foundation of freedom as a pure "performative" without recourse to any "constative" is bound to fail. However, I show that the interpretations of Honig and Keenan rest on the problematic premise

[407] HC 54: "Worldlessness as a political phenomenon is possible only on the assumption that the world will not last; on this assumption, however, it is almost inevitable that worldlessness, in one form or another, will begin to dominate the political scene."

[408] Arendt finds this fatalism exemplified especially in Sophocles' words "Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came" (*Oedipus at Colonus*, cited by Arendt in OR 281), and in *Ecclesiastes*' "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity … There is no new thing under the sun, … there is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after" (cited by Arendt in HC 204).

[409] In this sense, she offers an alternative to both Strauss (natural right) and Popper (social engineering).

that Arendt's celebration of the American founding is intended either as *factual* statement (the truth of which is historically to be *verified*) or as *normative* judgment (the validity of which is philosophically to be *justified*). I argue that her claim that the Declaration of Independence was an instance of pure political freedom should rather be read as an utterance of *faith* on her part, and, in the final instance, as an invitation to ask ourselves how much faith *we* actually have in the possibility of politics.

In the *sixth* and final section I argue on the basis of Arendt's work that the course of action we will eventually *decide* upon remains *free* in the sense that it cannot be determined on the basis of some fixed and fixing decision procedure: it is in theory "undecidable". Instead, guided by our *judgment* and executed by our *will*, it is carried by our faith grown into a *love* for public freedom as the principle of public freedom. In the secondary literature this crucial role of love (for action, for freedom) is seldom articulated, despite the fact that Arendt explicitly thematizes it in her last work: *The Life of the Mind: Willing*. To conclude, in my reading Arendt's answer to the question of the founding of political order lies both in the actual *performance* of "public freedom" itself, as well as in the participants' continuing *love* for its principle which at the same time becomes manifest in it.

5.2. UNDERSTANDING THE *VITA ACTIVA* WITHOUT THE *VITA CONTEMPLATIVA*

In *The Human Condition*, which is widely considered to be her main work, Arendt famously states that "the greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether." (HC 222) According to Arendt, since Plato (or more broadly, since "the Socratic school"), philosophers have attempted to escape from politics by substituting "making" for "acting", by replacing the "acting-in-concert" of citizens regarded as "equals" [*isonomia*] by the "rule" [*archè, Herrschaft*] of "the few" over "the many" [*hoi polloi*], i.e. by those who on the basis of their true knowledge [*epistēmē*] exercise command over those who dwell in the shadow world of opinion [*doxa*] and obey orders. According to Arendt, Aristotle's famous definition of man as *zoion logon echon*, that is, as *animal rationale* or "rational living being", has traditionally not been understood to refer to a being that possesses the gift of "speech", but rather to a being that possesses the gift of "cognition", the proper use of which enables him either to fully devote himself to the *vita contemplativa* culminating in the contemplation [*theōria*] of the eternal cosmic truth, or to mold the world to his will by the application of knowledge in the form of *technē*.

According to the most common interpretation of her work, and especially also when read in contrast with Strauss, Arendt's work appears as a defense of the traditional counterpart of the *vita contemplativa*, which is the *vita activa*, especially in its "highest" form of the *bios politikos*. She is understood to plea for the "agonal spirit" [*agōn*] of the Greek *polis* that was historically unique in allowing its citizens to compete with their "peers" by means of persuasion instead of violence in order

to achieve immortal fame or “greatness” for their words and deeds. Hence, at first sight, Arendt appears to *reverse* the traditional hierarchy according to which the *vita contemplativa* or *bios theōrētikos* (striving for eternal truth) is ranked higher than the *vita activa,* higher even than the latter’s highest form of life, the *bios politikos* (striving for immortal fame).

What has been called Arendt’s “Greek nostalgia”[410] has been criticized in the secondary literature on (at least) two different grounds. On the *one* hand, it is criticized for its lack of a *moral* basis. In this case, her recovery of the “agonal spirit” (HC 41, 194) is understood as a recovery of tragic life, of the virtue of *andreia* as embodied especially by her example of Achilles.[411] She is criticized for her alleged celebration of an aestheticized conception of politics as an end-in-itself, conducted for its own sake, devoid of (moral) content and purpose. Her plea for “greatness” in word and deed seems to make her an “existentialist” or even “decisionist”, comparable to Nietzsche or even to Carl Schmitt.[412]

On the *other* hand, her conception of politics is criticized for its lack of *realism*. Her emphasis on politics as being conducted “through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” (HC 26) seems to make her a defender of what has come to be called a “deliberative” model of politics.[413] However, critics have argued that this conception of politics is “utopian” in the sense that it is blind to the moments of exclusion, sovereignty, and violence that are inescapably part of politics and remain implicated within her purified conception of politics as “public freedom”, as can indeed be shown throughout her work.[414] For instance, Hanna Pitkin has demonstrated how, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s narrative of the decline of “the political” against the rise of “the social” in fact *performs* the fatalism (the necessity, irresistibility) from which her concept of politics (as freedom, resistability) *claims* to escape.[415]

Yet, as I try to demonstrate, these criticisms presuppose a reading of Arendt according to which it is her intention to advocate a specific way of life and a specific understanding thereof (viz. the *bios politikos*) *above* another way of life (viz. the *bios theōrētikos*), or, to be more precise, to posit a certain decisive, because “highest” principle, which serves as criterion or standard by which to measure reality.[416] This reading is by no means self-evident, however, as is argued, for instance, by Jeremy Waldron:

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[410] See Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xxxix.
[411] HC 25-26, 41, 194
[412] Jay, ‘The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt’; O’Sullivan, ‘Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society’.
[413] HC 25-27. Habermas, ‘Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power’; Benhabib, ‘Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Hannah Arendt’s Thought’; idem, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*.
[414] Breen, ‘Violence and Power: A Critique of Hannah Arendt on ‘the Political’; Keenan, ‘Promises, Promises: the Abyss of Freedom and the Loss of the Political in the Work of Hannah Arendt’.
[415] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Conception of the Social*, e.g. p. 15: “[Arendt] stresses human agency and condemns those who hide it by invoking superhuman entities and forces, yet she herself invokes the social in just this way.”
[416] Cf. Bedorf, ‘Das Politische und die Politik. Konturen einer Differenz’, 16-20.

> we run a great danger if we think of theory – even evaluative theory – as primarily political advocacy or as primarily the laying out of a social or constitutional "wish-list." We should think of it instead, I want to say, literally as political philosophy – a deepening of our insight into the realm of the political and of our understanding of what is involved in making judgments and decisions in that realm.[417]

Although Waldron claims that in principle (almost) all political philosophies can (and perhaps should) be read in the latter way, he mentions the work of Arendt as an exemplary case in point.

When we read her carefully, it becomes clear that Arendt herself explicitly turns *against* such "reversals" of which she mentions Nietzsche's turning Plato upside down as perhaps the best known example.[418] According to her, what this modern reversal shares with the traditional hierarchy is "the assumption that the same central preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men, since without one comprehensive principle no order could be established" (HC 17). However, she claims, this assumption is by no means "a matter of course" (HC 17).[419] Accordingly, she claims that her own 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*." (HC 17) We may now conclude, therefore, that the two main criticisms introduced above presuppose that Arendt does wish to understand and measure reality under one aspect, one "comprehensive principle", viz. the principle of agonal self-display, and the principle of communication free of rule [*herrschaftsfreie Kommunikation*], respectively.

Against such interpretations, I argue that it simply has not been Arendt's intention to advocate one way of life (*vita activa*) over and above another way of life (*vita contemplativa*).[420] She does not analyze the examples of "men of action" such as Achilles or Pericles in order to fortify some kind of *proposal*, but instead to bring to light important *phenomenological* aspects of the conditions of political action.[421] Stated otherwise, the Greek *polis* serves not so much as an *ideal*, but as an ideal*type*.[422]

In Arendt's view, an adequate understanding of the phenomenology of the world of human interaction is removed from sight if we start from the experience that belongs to the way of life of the "men of thought". To be more precise: her

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[417] Waldron, 'What Would Plato Allow', 139. Cf. idem, *Law and Disagreement*, 99-101, in which he speaks of the task of taking into account "the circumstances of politics". Unfortunately, however, he does not spell out what he counts among these "circumstances".

[418] HC 17, 293, LM1 11, 211-212.

[419] Cf. PP 102, LM2 6, 11.

[420] Waldron, 'What Plato Would Allow', 139

[421] As Arendt herself later admitted, *The Human Condition* is indeed a better title than *Vita Activa* (see LM1, 6).

[422] Cf. Arendt's explanation of her use of "idealtypes" during an interview that was held at a conference on her work held in 1972 in Toronto, the transcript of which was published as: Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt'. See ibid., 326, 329. See also Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 716, 771.

critique of the philosophical tradition is in the last instance *not* directed at the theories held by philosophers *about* politics, that is, at their propositions either of a descriptive (verifiable: "what *is* ...?") or of a normative kind (justifiable: "what *ought* to be done?"), propositions with which Arendt may agree (as is often asserted of Aristotle's theory of *praxis* and Kant's theory of judgment) or disagree. Her approach is much more *radical*. It is directed at the *attitude toward* politics that is engendered by the philosophers' activity of thinking itself, an attitude in which the theories they held are ultimately rooted. As she states explicitly in her last work, *The Life of the Mind*: "Both the philosopher's hostility toward politics, 'the petty affairs of men,' and his hostility toward the body have little to do with individual convictions and beliefs; they are inherent in the experience itself" (LM1 84-85). That is to say, the derogatory attitude of philosophy toward politics is not to be understood as being a mere matter of convictions that are held by individual philosophers, but rather as being rooted in the nature of the thinking experience.

According to Arendt, thinking is literally "out of order" – not only because, while devoting oneself to the thinking activity, one needs to abstain from engaging in worldly activity, but also because, while thinking, one is incapable of reaching the *realness* of the outside world of "contingent" phenomena, events, facts. For, by representing the outside world within the mind, thinking necessarily removes itself from the world. This tendency of philosophical life to "forget" the worldly conditions of politics is inherent to the thinking experience itself. As a consequence, the life of the mind harbors the danger of "negating" the worldly conditions of political *freedom* and of instead developing a preference for *necessity* – the standard in comparison to which the worldly reality indeed appears as being "merely" contingent.[423]

5.3. CONDITIONS OF POLITICS I

When we read *The Human Condition* through the lens of Arendt's intention, reconstructed in the previous section, that is, as an attempt to *understand* the specific phenomenology of political reality, her work, including its passages about the Greek *polis* in 'The Greek Solution' (HC §27), will no longer appear as a plea for a specific "solution". As she would say in her later work, Arendt originally wished to call her book *Vita Activa*,[424] but she admits that her publisher had chosen a better title: *The Human Condition*.[425] She expresses her awareness of the fact that the term *vita activa* itself was framed by those who looked down on it: the "men of thought" who naturally preferred the *vita contemplativa*.

It should be emphasized that Arendt expressly speaks about the "human condition" instead of "human nature". She claims that only the first expression enables us to do justice to the feature that human beings are not only a "what" (which is capable of being defined) but also a "who" (which defies definition).

[423] See HC 12-17 and especially LM1 80-92.
[424] The German version of *The Human Condition* (1958) is actually titled *Vita activa* (1967).
[425] LM1 6.

Moreover, it allows us to acknowledge that human beings are never completely determined by their "conditions" in the way they are by their "nature" (their "essence" or *telos*).

Building on this assumption, Arendt is able to present to us what may be called a phenomenology of the world of human affairs, of human togetherness [*inter esse*]. According to her, all action, including political action, is conditioned by plurality, natality, and worldliness. First, *plurality* indicates that not man (in the singular) but men (in the plural) inhabit the world. Secondly, *natality* indicates that by virtue of being born, of being a beginning themselves, human beings are capable of beginning something new in the world. Finally, *worldliness* refers both to the human artifice – the world of tangible objects that are fabricated by man as *homo faber* – and to the intangible "web of human relationships", which is the result of human acting and speaking together. According to Arendt, this "web" is no less real than the world of objective things. It comes into being because human beings not only communicate something (a "what") but also disclose themselves (a "who"), or, in other words, because they not only speak *about* some worldly objective reality but also *to* one another.[426]

The world thus understood coincides with the space of appearances or the public realm, which is the scene of political action. It is characterized by *perspectivity*, which means that the world only becomes common and real to us by virtue of the fact that it is perceived and talked about from different standpoints. Our sense of the real, or of our common world, is endangered or distorted in the following two ways: either when the world is perceived only under *one* aspect – as, for instance, in the case of the conformist force of "public opinion"[427] – or when the disclosing character of acting and speech vanishes because people are only *for* or *against* other people – as, she claims, in the case of modern warfare and propaganda.[428] Thus, Arendt brings in something novel in response to the question of how to make sense of politics. As we have seen, in the previous chapters, Popper and Strauss display a lack of appreciation for the "worldly" character of political life, for the "in-between" which tends to disappear from view when politics is interpreted after the model of either *science / philosophy* – which strives for the cognition of an "objective" "what" – or *polemics* – which reduces the "in-between" to a binary "for or against" – an interpretation that is the result of a *privileging* of the scientific or philosophical perspective and experience over others.

The three human "conditions" mentioned above – plurality, natality, worldliness – result in what Arendt calls "the frailty of human affairs" (HC §26), which manifests itself in four different ways. First, human acting and speaking together is characterized by *boundlessness*, which means that "action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners" (HC 190). Secondly, actions are characterized by their *irreversibility*: what has happened has become part of our reality and cannot be undone, cannot be

[426] HC 182, 183.
[427] HC 58.
[428] HC 180.

"wished away", so to speak. Thirdly, action and speech are characterized by *unpredictability*: all actions are events that appear in the world like miracles, and their singular realness can in no way be anticipated. Fourthly, words and deeds are characterized by *futility*: they will vanish from the world without leaving a trace if they are not noticed, remembered, talked about, and, finally, reified by *homo faber*.

At first sight, *The Human Condition* presents two "solutions" or "remedies" to this fourfold "frailty of human affairs". One of the two, "the traditional substitution of making for acting" (HC §31), is clearly rejected by Arendt. This "remedy", which Arendt claims has been adopted by the greater part of political philosophy since Plato, tries to *escape* from "the frailty of human affairs" and thus from politics by taking refuge in the certainty that is offered by *homo faber*, who, isolated from his fellow human beings, remains master over himself and his doings from beginning to end. The hallmark of this substitution is the concept of "rule" [*archē*, *Herrschaft*], which implies that "the few" who command are strictly separated from "the many" who obey. He who is capable of ruling himself and his own body is regarded as being capable of ruling and is entitled to rule the body politic. Arendt observes: "Within the narrower sphere of political theory, … the notion of rule and the concomitant questions of legitimacy and rightful authority played a much more decisive role than the understanding and interpretations of action itself" (HC 228).

In contradistinction to Strauss, who emphasized the *discontinuity* between the ancients and the moderns, Arendt emphasizes the *continuity* between the ancients and the moderns, in the sense that the underlying paradigm of politics being conceived as a matter of "making", remains dominant throughout the tradition of Western thought. The only reason why the violent implications of this paradigm did not become manifest before modernity, she claims, lies in the fact that the *vita contemplativa* was traditionally still ranked higher than the *vita activa*. Only after the *demise* of the contemplative life were the implications of violence unleashed into the public realm.

As it is clear that Arendt rejects "the traditional substitution of making for acting", it may appear as if she embraces the alternative remedy, introduced earlier as "the Greek solution" (HC §27). This "solution" is especially intended as a remedy against the "futility" of human affairs. It consists in the foundation of the *polis*, which is meant to guarantee immortal fame for the words and deeds of its citizens (HC 196) without the help of the poets, and it seems to be embodied by Pericles:

> The *polis* – if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration – gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them; 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 in future ages. (HC 197)

When we take a closer look, however, it becomes clear that the "remedy" of the philosophers and the "solution" of the Greek *polis* in fact share the *same* assumptions.

For, in the *first* place, the Greek philosophers and the Greek citizens agree with each other in one important respect: for both of them, the foundation of the body politic is a matter of "making" rather than "acting".[429] It is the lawgiver who lays down the law of the *polis* before the "men of action" can start to engage in politics together (HC 194). Arendt calls this an outstanding "symptom" of the "agonal spirit" of the Greeks and claims that as a result, the law "did not command the same loyalty we know from the Roman type of patriotism" (HC 195, PP 82). In fact, the philosophers use the concept of politics-as-making that is already present in the *polis* itself, and turn it into the concept of politics *par excellence*: "To them, legislating and the execution of decisions by vote are the most legitimate political activities because in them men 'act like craftsmen': the result of their action is a tangible product, and its process has a clearly recognizable end" (HC 195). Thus, the individualism of the "agonal spirit" is itself *dependent upon* a concept of the law-(or founding)-as-making. As a consequence, Arendt's alleged affirmation of the agonal spirit would imply an undermining of her own attempt to criticize the substitution of making for acting that results in *worldlessness*.

In the *second* place, the Greek attempt to *assure* "that the most futile of human activities, action and speech … would become imperishable" (HC 197-198) in fact does not leave enough room for the action and speech of succeeding generations. As Roy Tsao has shown, in the German version of *The Human Condition* – which is at points more elaborate and more precise than the English version – Arendt explains that the Greeks aspire to retain the past by preserving it *as an unchangeable present* throughout time, whereas the Romans remember the past *as past*, that is, while retaining a temporal distance from it.[430] In this light, Tsao explains, it becomes clear why Arendt claims that the Greek *polis*' aim "to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence" is not only the cause of "the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens", but also of "the hardly less surprising swift decline of the city-state" (HC 197).

On the basis of these arguments, I conclude that it is precisely the individualist exaggeration or *hubris* that becomes manifest in the "agonal spirit" (PP 82, HC 41, 194, HC 19, 49: *aien aristeuein*) of the Greek *polis* which is the forerunner of what also becomes visible in the case of the philosophers: a concern for the individual self *above* a concern for the world. In other words, Arendt seems to adhere to the framework of Plato's *Gorgias*, in which Socrates uses the concept of the *agōn* from the vocabulary of Callicles, his polemical opponent, in order to transform the citizens' (or politicians') strife against one's fellow human beings (the defense of one's bodily existence and one's honor or reputation) into a strife

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[429] The argument developed here has also been put forward by Taminiaux, 'Greeks and Romans', and by Tsao, 'Arendt against Athens', 108-109.

[430] Tsao, 'Arendt against Athens', p. 113-114. See Arendt, *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, 248-249.

against the lie within one's own soul (the improvement of one's soul).[431] In either case a concern for the world common to us all disappears from view.

In this light it also becomes understandable why Arendt, when introducing the difference between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* in terms of the difference between a concern with "eternity" and a concern with "immortality", respectively, calls this the "shortest, albeit somewhat superficial, way" (HC 18) of indicating this difference. By now, after all, we understand that this binary opposition implies that there is in each case only *one* aspect or "highest" criterion by which the specific way of life is categorized – the demand for which she explicitly *rejects*. Even in the 'Prologue' to *The Human Condition* she makes it very clear that her book is not meant as a plea for a specific solution (let alone the *only* possible solution) to a specific problem, but rather as an attempt "to think what we are doing" (HC 5). In light of her intention to *understand* political action,[432] then, her reconstruction of "the Greek solution" should not be interpreted as a plea for an *ideal*.

If we now read the section titled 'The Greek Solution' (HC §27) against this background, we are drawn to the following passage, at the end of the section:

> The *polis*, properly speaking … is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. "Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*": these famous words … expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearances in the widest sense of the word …. (HC 198)

Here, it becomes explicitly clear that even the "founding" of the *polis* takes place entirely in terms of "acting and speaking together" instead of in terms of making or producing.

Accordingly, Arendt no longer interprets crucial concepts like "freedom" [*eleutheria*] and even *archē* in light of experiences drawn from outside the political sphere, such as that of the household [*oikos*], of despotic regimes or of the *homo faber*, for each of these experiences implies an interpretation of *archē* as the "command" by someone who is isolated from the executors instead of as the "beginning" by a *primus* who remains *inter pares*, who stays first among his peers. Arendt understands political freedom *neither* as the creative freedom of the *homo faber* who, in isolation from his fellow human beings, remains master over himself and his doings, *nor* as philosophical freedom or *liberum arbitrium*, that is, the mental freedom of the will to choose between two given options. According to her,

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[431] Plato, *Gorgias*, 526de, "In particular, in response to your appeal to me, I appeal to you to take up this way of life, to engage in this struggle [*agōn*] which, in my opinion, is as worthwhile a struggle [*agōn*] as you'll find here in this world."

[432] Cf. Arendt, '"What Remains? The Language Remains": A Conversation with Günter Gaus', 3: "I want to understand [*Ich muss verstehen*]."

freedom is first and foremost a *political* phenomenon, that is, a characteristic of action as it appears within the public "space of appearances". It becomes manifest in the guise of virtuosity [*virtú*] in the sense of "the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of *fortuna*" (WIF 153).[433] It is this kind of freedom, which only becomes manifest in action itself, that is regarded by Arendt as the "*raison d'être*", that is the *meaning*, of politics.[434]

5.4. CONDITIONS OF POLITICS II

As we have seen, with Tsao I believe that Arendt does not elevate the Greek "agonal spirit" to the sole aspect by which to understand political action, for as such it would be destructive of "the common world" or "reality". However, in his reading of Arendt Tsao goes one step further, especially when he cites the following passage in which Arendt refers to Pericles for a second time:

> The words of Pericles, as Thucydides reports them, are perhaps unique in their supreme confidence that men can enact *and* save their greatness at the same time and, as it were, by one and the same gesture, and that the performance as such will … not need the transforming reification of *homo faber* to keep it in reality. (HC 205)

Tsao believes that Arendt, because she refers to Pericles *twice*, wants to make a didactic point here.[435] According to him, she tries to tell us that we should not follow Pericles in his confidence that action is capable of "saving" itself, of keeping itself in reality without the help of *homo faber*, that is, without the help of the poet or the lawgiver. Tsao gives two arguments for this interpretation.

In the *first* place he notes that Pericles' trust in the fact that the "men of action" do not need man as *homo faber* to guarantee their remembrance is at odds with statements of Arendt elsewhere in *The Human Condition* where she asserts that all acting and speaking necessarily needs to be "reified" in order to survive (HC 95): "acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all" (HC 173). Indeed, Tsao notes, Pericles himself needed Thucydides to report his words.[436]

In the *second* place, whereas it seems to us that Arendt *laments* the fact that Pericles' words "[have] always been read with the sad wisdom of hindsight by men who knew that his words were spoken at the beginning of the end" (HC 205), Tsao

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[433] Arendt refers to Machiavelli to illustrate her view that action cannot exist without *fortuna* or "chance", while we have seen that Strauss, on the contrary, ascribes to Machiavelli the aim of completely eliminating "chance".
[434] WIF 146, 151, 156. Cf. HC 197.
[435] Tsao, 'Arendt against Athens', 112.
[436] Ibid., 111.

asserts that in fact she means to say that his words should *precisely* be read "with the sad wisdom of hindsight" (HC 205), in spite of her subsequent claim: "What is outstandingly clear in Pericles' formulations … is that the innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word is independent of victory and defeat and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by their consequences for better or worse" (HC 205). Tsao notes that Arendt had claimed earlier that "the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, frequently when all the participants are dead" (HC 192). He argues, therefore, that she cannot possibly intend to say that the meaning of an action "must remain untouched by any eventual outcome". The following statement by Arendt is often used as an example of her seemingly Nietzschean embrace of immoralism: "Thucydides, or Pericles, knew full well that he had broken with the normal standards for everyday behavior when he found the glory of Athens in having left behind "everywhere everlasting remembrance [*mnēmeia aidia*] of their good *and their evil* deeds" [emphasis added]" (HC 205-206). Tsao retorts, however, that in fact the criterion of "greatness", which he identifies with the capacity of action to guarantee its own everlasting remembrance, could hardly be plausible for Arendt, because, he argues, according to her this kind of everlasting remembrance does not exist.

This shows that Tsao in fact *agrees* with Arendt's critics insofar as they state that her Greek conception of politics is "utopian" because it expects too much of politics. However, the difference between him and her critics consists in the fact that they assume that Arendt *agrees* with Pericles, whereas Tsao claims she *disagrees*. As a result, Tsao not only throws away the bathwater, that is, the "agonal spirit" as ideal (which, according to her critics, may or not be a justified ideal), but the baby too, that is, *confidence* in action as the condition for politics. Hence, in fact he substitutes an *exaggerated* expectation of politics ("utopianism") for its opposite: a *lack of* expectations of politics ("fatalism").

In my reading, however, neither of Tsao's two arguments holds. In the case of the *first* argument, Tsao reads Arendt's references to Pericles as propositional claims rather than performative ones, that is, he regards them as *truth* claims, the validity of which may be *objectively* established (either by empirical observation or rational justification), instead of as utterances of trust or *faith*, which may or may not be "proven" true by *performing* them. The textual evidence for the last interpretation is clear: the second Pericles reference mentioned above is directly preceded by Arendt's criticism of the tradition's lack of "trust in the world as a place fit for human appearance, for action and speech" (HC 204). The "melancholy wisdom" of *Ecclesiastes* – "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity…. There is no new thing under the sun, … there is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after" (HC 204) – Arendt regards as the "certainly unavoidable" *result* of this lack of trust in the world, rather than its *reason* or *ground*. This reading is confirmed by what she had said earlier in the same work: "Worldlessness as a political phenomenon is possible only on the assumption that the world will not last; on this

assumption, however, it is almost inevitable that worldlessness, in one form or another, will begin to dominate the political scene" (HC 54).

In reply to Tsao's *second* argument: there is no textual evidence for his claim that Arendt rejects "greatness" and that the meaning of words and deeds remains "untouched" by any "eventual outcome" (HC 205) to the extent that she would claim that the meaning of words and deeds *coincide* with their outcome, i.e. with their victory or defeat. This, after all, would mean that Arendt replaces the alleged criterion of a-moral greatness by the criterion according to which the verdict of History is decisive. Again, this would mean that the criterion of "greatness" is replaced by the criterion of "fate", while in fact the implication of the passage about "greatness" (HC 206) is that there is *no such* single *prior criterion* (such as motive or aim) by which to judge a specific event, as this would inhibit our attempt to adequately *understand* the meaning of an event (or word or deed) as it lies in its *performance*, such as in the case of "*energeiai*" like play acting or flute playing (HC 207).

In my view, it should be regarded as a symptom of Tsao's misreading of the second Pericles passage that he left out the following words on the space of the three periods: "be enough to generate *dynamis* and" (HC 205). By leaving out these words, Tsao suggests that Pericles expresses his trust (merely) in actions of *individual* citizens – that is, the agonist self-display embodied by Achilles – whereas in fact he is (also) talking here about the power [*dynamis*] which is the result of acting *together*. Indeed, Tsao fails to mention that the second Pericles passage is part of a section called 'Power and the Space of Appearances' (HC §28) and can only be properly understood within *this* context. For it is precisely in Arendt's conception of *power* and of "faith in *dynamis* (and consequently in politics)" (HC 205) that a "concern for the world" assumes shape, a concern that disappeared from view in the traditional framework embodied by Plato's *Gorgias* .

Power is described by Arendt as that which keeps the public realm in existence (HC 200, 244): "What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed (what we today call 'organization') and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power." (HC 201) The identity between "political freedom" and "power" is expressed by Arendt at several places in her work when she refers to the following passage of Montesquieu: political freedom "*ne peut consister qu'à pouvoir faire ce que l'on doit vouloir et à n'être point constraint de faire ce que l'on ne doit pas vouloir*", which is rendered by her as: political freedom "can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will" (WIF 161, OR 301-302n17, LM2 199). According to her, the emphasis is on *power* [*pouvoir*]: political freedom exists *only* when an "I will" coincides with an "I can". In political thought, power is usually understood as either *potentia* [*dynamis*, *Vermögen*] or as *potestas* [*archē*, *Herrschaft*], and at first sight it may seem that Arendt prefers the first conception of power, because she claims that power is always a "power potential" (HC 200). However, her conception of power in fact falls outside these two interpretations. What she emphasizes in fact is that power is of a *performative*

nature, which is to say that it always remains dependent on "the unreliable and only temporary agreement of many wills and intentions" (HC 201 – a passage often overlooked). While being a power *potential*, it should nevertheless regularly be *actualized* in order that is does not gradually pass away. However, the important point is that power cannot be *materialized*, it is not "an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength" (HC 200) or like the instruments of violence which can be possessed by man as *homo faber*.

Power, in turn, is held together by *promise*, that is, by the force of mutual promise or contract (HC 245), which Arendt describes as "the only alternative to a mastery which relies on domination of one's self and rule over others; it corresponds exactly to the existence of a freedom which was given under the conditions of non-sovereignty" (HC 244). In fact, promising grants sovereignty a certain limited reality. Precisely because promising is a form of *action* (it takes place within the *public* realm), it enables Arendt to conceive of a form of "redemption" for human action (for "the frailty of human affairs", especially for its *unpredictability*) that is *immanent* to the sphere of action itself, for it avoids the danger both of escaping from human affairs by seeking redemption by means of a *transcendent* foundation in the guise of "divine law" or "natural law", and of escaping from human affairs by regarding human history entirely as the *product* of man as *homo faber*.[437] This is the meaning of Arendt's claim that the remedy against action's predicaments "does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty, but is one of the potentialities of action itself" (HC 237).

Finally, at the end of the section titled 'Unpredictability and the Power of Promise' (HC §34), Arendt makes it clear that every form of action, including power and promising, presuppose faith and hope, two virtues which she claims are not of Greek but Christian origin. It is clear now that Arendt does not stop at a phenomenological description of political action, she also tries to show that acting presupposes *confidence* in acting, which, in turn, is enhanced by acting. Hence, her understanding of political action also implies a *praise* of action.

This twofold aim is beautifully articulated *and* performed by Arendt when she expresses herself as follows: "men, though they must die, are not born in order to die, but in order to begin" (HC 246). As Susannah Gottlieb aptly explains, because Arendt does not use the phrase "for the sake of" here (which would be an expression of meaning) but the phrase "in order to" (which is an expression of utility), Arendt provides an *ontology* (or even a teleology) of mankind, but at the same time she *undermines* that ontology (or teleology) by *ironizing* it in the very same sentence. Thereby, Arendt not only indicates that man's *telos* consists in his being *a-telic* – insofar as he is a beginner, his has an open end – but that this statement in itself, in turn, should not be understood as an ontological (or teleological) *truth* claim either – in the sense that men are born "for the sake of"

[437] Cf. Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 140: "… the very inconspicuousness of Arendt's messianism … allows her to retain the thought of salvation without succumbing either to some form of traditionalism that understands redemption as the act of a transcendent being or to some version of modernism that neutralizes the messianic idea by presenting the redeemed world as a matter of human fabrication."

beginning, that it is their "essential" end to begin – but rather as an utterance of *faith*, which is to be "proved true" by performing it (just as it can be "refuted" by a refusal to perform it).

This would imply that in the end, Arendt's words "*if* we trust the famous words of Pericles [emphasis added]" (HC 197) and her claim that the words of Pericles "are *perhaps* unique in their supreme confidence [emphasis added]" (HC 205) are addressed to *us*, her readers: by emphasizing that no action, and hence no politics, is possible without "trust in the world as a place fit for human appearance, for action and speech" (HC 204), without "faith in and hope for the world" (HC 247), she provides us not so much with a "solution" or "remedy", that is, a *theoretical* answer in the sense of a "first principle" or "last word", which we may "keep on the mantelpiece forever" (Virginia Woolf);[438] rather, she induces us to ask how much trust *we* actually have in action, in the world, in politics, that is, in something which only exists if it is *practiced* by us.

5.5. Founding Freedom I

Based on our reading of *The Human Condition*, we have now established that Arendt would appear to be contradicting herself in answering the question of whether politics is in the final instance conditioned by "acting" or by "making" *only* if it were to be assumed that she is searching for a *theoretical* (i.e. propositional, constative) answer to the question of the foundation of politics. As we have shown, however, this assumption does not hold, since she conceives of the *raison d'être* of politics (that is, of political freedom or of power held together by mutual promising) not as a principle to be *known*, but as a principle to be *enacted*.

What has not been answered yet, however, is the question what "saves" political action *over time*, that is to say, not only for *this* generation of promisers, but for generations to come. In *The Human Condition* we saw the beginning of an answer in Arendt's preference for the Romans over the Greeks, but it is only in *On Revolution* and in *The Life of the Mind: Willing* that she explicitly addressed the question that is left unarticulated in her earlier work:[439] the question of founding freedom in the sense of the establishing of a "lasting institution".

In these two works, Arendt tries to understand the question of the legitimacy of political order not as it was traditionally approached, that is, as a philosophical, theoretical, search for an absolute principle, but rather as it originally arises as a political, practical matter within the public realm. She provides her understanding of the act of foundation of the American "founding fathers" in the guise of a story told from the perspective of the "men of action" themselves, who act, decide, and judge eye-to-eye with "the abyss of freedom".

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[438] Cf. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 5: "I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer – to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever."
[439] Cf. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 219.

The condition which in *The Human Condition* was, in light of the aim of earthly "immortality", still called "the frailty of human affairs", returns in *On Revolution* and *The Life of the Mind: Willing* as "the abyss of freedom". According to Arendt, we pay the price of contingency for our freedom – again, freedom not understood as the creative freedom of the sovereign *homo faber*, nor as the philosophical freedom or *liberum arbitrium*, but in the sense of public freedom. Every act we have committed, may as well have been left undone, and yet, as soon as we have committed it, it excludes all other acts we *could* have committed. As a result, there is an element of arbitrariness to our freedom. In Arendt's words:

> an act can only be called free if it is not affected or caused by anything preceding it and yet, insofar as it immediately turns into a cause of whatever follows, it demands a justification which, if it is to be successful, will have to show the act as the continuation of a preceding series, that is, renege on the very experience of freedom and novelty. (LM2 210)

In contradistinction to the example of Achilles, where the emphasis lies on "the urge toward self-disclosure" at the expense of all other factors (HC 194), the American founders count as a true example of "public freedom", says Arendt. Their power is held together by "mutual promise", of which she explicitly says: "There is an element of the world-building capacity of man in the human faculty of making and keeping promises" (OR 175). She notes that this "horizontal" contract should be distinguished from the "vertical" contract which consists of the *consent* of the governed to be ruled by their governors (OR 170), for in the latter case the relation of *rule* remains primary.[440]

As public freedom was already in place, then, the question with which the founding fathers were confronted was how public freedom (established by power and held together by mutual promising) can also be secured for *future* generations. In other words, their already existing power needed to be supported by *authority*.

Because every "we" of a political community is to a certain extent contingent (or random), it is tempting to try to escape from this condition of contingency, that is, of possible futility or meaninglessness, by seeking to *justify* itself in terms of the "certainty" or "necessity" granted either by "natural" or "divine" right (truth), or by the verdict of history or progress (victory, success). Arendt asks how we can cope with "the abyss of freedom" without succumbing to the desire to escape from this condition by providing our acting-in-concert with a justification in the name of God, Nature or History, as a result of which our acting-in-concert loses precisely its characteristic of being *freely chosen*. Bonnie Honig aptly phrases Arendt's question as follows: "is it possible to have a politics of

[440] It is likely, therefore, that Arendt would dismiss not only Strauss' return to the question "who should rule?", but also Popper's replacement of this question by "how can we so organize our political institutions that our leaders will be prevented from doing too much harm?".

foundation in a world devoid of traditional (foundational) guarantees of stability, legitimacy, and authority?"[441]

Traditionally, Arendt claims, the answer to this question is framed in terms of the "vicious circle" of Rousseau, who wrote: "The great problem in politics, which I compare to the problem of squaring the circle in geometry … [is]: how to find a form of government which puts the law above man" (OR 183).[442] Thus, the problem of authority rose in the guise of a "higher" law that would guarantee the validity of positive law. As laws were understood as *commandments*, Arendt continues, the founding fathers succumbed to the temptation to anchor the positive law in an absolute, which is why the Declaration of Independence starts with the words "we hold these truths to be self-evident". For, she explains, these words "combine … an agreement necessarily *relative* because related to those who enter it, with an *absolute*, namely with a truth that needs no agreement since, because of its self-evidence, it compels without argumentative demonstration or political persuasion" [emphases added] (OR 192). This formula, she continues, due to its reference to the "self-evident truth" that "all men are created equal", remains on the one hand tied to the traditional Hebrew conception of the law as a compelling command or imperative, while on the other hand combining this absolute with the intrinsically relative "we hold".

However, Arendt claims, "only theoretically" (OR 195) did it seem to be the case that there was no avoiding the problem of the absolute, for what saved the American Revolution was *in fact* neither "nature's God" nor "self-evident truth", but the act of foundation itself, contained in the "we hold". The revolutionaries did not find any clues in the traditional concept of law to understand what they were doing. While looking for precedents they arrived at the Romans, who realized that the stability and the authority of a political community should be derived from its origin. According to Arendt, the authority or legitimacy of a constitution – i.e. the law which holds the *polis* together – should not be derived from an absolute, transcendent source (God, Nature, History), but rather from the initial and "integer" beginning [*initium*, *principium*]: "one is tempted to conclude that it was the authority which the act of foundation carried within itself … that assured stability for the new republic" (OR 199). They learned from the Romans that "the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its capacity to be amended and augmented" (OR 202).

However, the question remains: how to solve "the problem of beginning", for in the case of the Romans the beginning was conceived as something that must have occurred in a distant past (OR 198). They did not conceive of the founding of Rome as an absolute beginning, but they attempted to anchor the "integrity" of their political order by referring to the prehistorical freedom of the era of Saturn (Cronus), that is, in a mythical past. Virgil's famous line from the *Fourth Eclogue*, "*magnus ab integro nascitur ordo saeclorum*", implies that the "greatness" of the

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[441] Honig, 'Declarations of Independence', 98. Cf. idem, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 97.

[442] Rousseau in a letter to the Marquis de Mirabeau, 25 July 1767 (see OR 312n5).

order exists by virtue of its being inspired by a beginning that preceded it. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt laments the fact that "freedom in its original integrity" only survived in political theory in the guise of this prehistoric past (the Age of Saturn or Cronus), or in the guise of a posthistoric future, such as Marx's Realm of Freedom.[443]

However, Arendt notes, the American revolutionaries changed Virgil's words into "*novus ordo saeclorum*", by which they had admitted that they were no longer founding "Rome anew", but founding a "new Rome". Hence, she says, it seemed that the men of the American Revolution, who were aware of the absolute novelty of their enterprise, were caught in something for which "neither the historical nor the legendary truth of their own tradition could offer any help or precedent" (HC 212). And yet, she says, the American revolutionaries might have tried a different reading of Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*. Traditionally, his words were interpreted as the pagan announcement of the birth of Christ.[444] According to Arendt, the American revolutionaries might have interpreted Virgil's words differently, viz. as the affirmation of the divinity of birth as such, or "that the world's potential salvation lies in the very fact that the human species regenerates itself constantly and forever" (OR 211). She claims that this condition of natality, which was articulated by the Christian philosopher Augustine – "*Initium ergo ut esset, hominem creatus est*" – "could have become the ontological underpinning of a truly Roman or Virgilian philosophy of politics" (LM2 216).

Read in this light, the foundation (beginning) carries a principle [*principium*] within itself, by which we are inspired and "authorized", that is, not by its actual *success*, but by its original and originating *meaning*:

> What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world. The way the beginner starts whatever he intends to do lays down the law of action for those who have joined him in order to partake in the enterprise and to bring about its accomplishment. As such, the principle inspires the deeds that are to follow and remains apparent as long as the action lasts. (OR 212-213)

In other words, beginning and principle [*archè*] coincide. Elsewhere, she describes the notion of "principle", which she derives from Montesquieu, as follows:

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[443] LM2 216.

[444] As we have seen in the third chapter, Schmitt's use of Virgil's words as the last sentence of his 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations' are usually interpreted in this way. We have also seen that Strauss, by contrast, re-interprets them as a reference to the "integrity" of philosophical knowledge of nature.

> unlike the judgment of the intellect which precedes action, and unlike the command of the will which initiates it, the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself yet while the merits of judgment lose their validity, and the strength of the commanding will exhausts itself in the course of the act which they execute in cooperation, the principle which inspired it loses nothing in strength or validity through execution. (WIF 152)

According to Arendt, the principle of the American Republic is the spirit of "public freedom", which in turn requires "the interconnected principle of mutual promise and common deliberation" (OR 214), that is, forms of acting-in-concert which simultaneously *concern* the republic (they are *about* public / common affairs) and *constitute* it (they *are* a public / common affair).

5.6. FOUNDING FREEDOM II

Arendt famously praises the American Declaration of Independence as being "the perfect way for an action to appear in words" (OR 130). She claims that "we are confronted with one of the rare moments in history when the power of action is great enough to erect its own monument" (OR 130). These words remind us of her references to Pericles in *The Human Condition*, and we should not be surprised that Arendt has been criticized once more for failing in her aim to purify political freedom from violence, that is, to completely sever the "performative" from the "constative". Just as in the case of her earlier work, her conception of politics is called "utopian" for pushing the violent aspects out of it.

For instance, Bonnie Honig, while referring to Jacques Derrida, claims that in Arendt's own case, too, the constative remains present. It surfaces in her "fabulous faith" that the founding *was* indeed pure:

> Arendt dismisses, among other things, the constative structure of the Declaration of Independence and insists that the pure performative of the declaration was a sufficient guarantor of the authority of the new republic – in order to fill the place with a fabulous faith, the faith that the American founding fathers did not need gods in order to found a legitimate republican politics; hence, neither do we.[445]

In a later article, Honig calls Derrida's deconstructive analysis "franker" than Arendt's "effort to provide us with a far less contaminated origin for democratic politics."[446] In the same vein, Alan Keenan asserts that every "freedom" necessarily implies a "founding", which is why he speaks of "the ultimate failure of Arendt's quest for a foundation that would guarantee an experience of freedom and the

[445] Honig, 'Declarations of Independence', 107.
[446] Honig, 'An Agonist's Reply', 194.

political cleansed of the "nonpolitical" sovereignty and rule".[447] According to him, she merely shifts her answer away from power to promise to authority.

Honig believes that Arendt's notion of "augmenting" provides her with a possibility to escape from this criticism. According to this notion, the authority of the constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be *amended*, by means of which "all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment and increase" (OR 202). However, Keenan argues that this concept merely reiterates the problem:

> authority as "augmentation" attempts to have it both ways: to insulate the political from the threat that the "necessity" of foundation poses to freedom and from the loss threatened by its lack of foundation. Arendt's "augmentation," that is, presents as a smooth, evolutionary process what is instead a much less stable, even conflictual, relationship of freedom and foundation.[448]

In a later article, Honig shifts attention from Derrida's "franker" analysis towards a recognition of the fact that the practice of mutual promising was actually already in place – "*in medias res*" – *before* the founding itself. Yet, she argues, as the occurrence of this already existing "shared reality" was itself a matter of contingency, Arendt saw herself confronted with what Derrida has called "the paradox of exemplarity": in order for a practice to function as an example, it should at the same time be *unique* (contingent), in order for it to be forceful enough; and it should be *not* unique (not contingent), in order for it to bear repeating.[449] The *actual* historical story is "too located and contingent to inspire action in the present", Honig argues, and therefore "Arendt offers a fable of founding instead which seems to dis-count the always contaminated nature of political founding and maintenance."[450]

If we were to follow Honig and Keenan here, in other words, if we were to understand Arendt as offering a "fable" or "example" of pure founding which in fact *misrepresents* the underlying historical reality, her conception of politics would indeed appear "utopian". On the other hand, if we were to expect Arendt to offer a "frank" description of political reality, actually always being "mixed", we would run the danger of ending up with a "fatalist" conception of politics. Both outcomes would be hard to reconcile with what we reconstructed, on the basis of our reading of *The Human Condition* in the first half of our current chapter, as Arendt's intention: that the conditions for the possibility of politics are not so much to be described in a "propositional" fashion – *either* in the guise of a normative political "proposal" or "ideal" *or* in the guise of an ontological description of the eternally recurring "nature" of politics – but rather in a *phenomenological* and *performative* fashion.

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[447] Keenan, 'Promises, Promises', 79.
[448] Ibid., 95.
[449] Honig, 'An Agonist's Reply', 195.
[450] Ibid., 196.

Keenan should be criticized on two important points. As we shall see below, Honig's position is in fact more faithful to Arendt's. In the *first* place, the conception of freedom that Keenan ascribes to Arendt – as a kind of "pure" freedom – is much more similar to her conceptions of freedom as *liberum arbitrium* or as the sovereign freedom of the *homo faber* than to her own notion of political freedom. According to this latter notion, it is *inherent* to freedom that every decision that is actually taken excludes other decisions that might have been taken. However, "exclusion" in this sense, viz. that all actual decisions could have been otherwise, is not identical to the kind of "exclusion" that is inherent to the exercise of "sovereignty" or the use of "violence", as Keenan believes. Rather, exclusion in the basic sense of the contingency of human decisions is merely one of the *conditions* of political freedom (or of action) itself, so it is precisely *part* of freedom.[451]

In the *second* place, on the basis of our reading it is not the case that Arendt, as Keenan asserts, keeps "shifting" the answer to the question of which foundation "saves" freedom – from power to promise to authority – nor is it the case that, as a result, she disregards the fact that "pure" politics is always lost and that this is in fact the insight that she should yield. To the contrary, for her, insight in these ontological regularities of politics counts as a rather trivial truth which is precisely the *point of departure* of her investigation, and not its *outcome*. The "shift" of which Keenan is speaking is not the symptom of Arendt's failure, then, but of the necessary failure of *any theory* to think what is so difficult to think, namely "what we are doing".[452] In Arendt's view, power, promise, and authority are not meant as *philosophical* principles (criteria, standards), but as *practices* of "redeeming" or "saving" political action, in favor of which *we may or may not decide* by *enacting* them. In other words, this criticism once again implicitly and mistakenly assumes that Arendt's utterance that the American founding "is" in fact a matter of pure politics, should be understood as a proposition, that is, a truth claim about which we may achieve *certainty* (either in the guise of historical evidence or some kind of "fabulous faith").

As soon as we realize this, we can also make sense of the fact that there are passages elsewhere in *On Revolution* in which she attests precisely to *the opposite*, viz. that the spirit of the revolution – the principle of the Declaration – is *lost*. In these passages she does not praise the *success* of the revolution, but instead laments

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[451] Kalyvas, 'From the Act to the Decision', 338, provides the correct diagnosis – Arendt fails to fully articulate her own theory of the decision because she remains dependent on her rejection of Schmitt's notion of the decision – but he neglects the fact that Arendt does offer alternatives. In the first place, throughout her work, a notion of the decision may be traced which is not an irrational act of will, but a public act which is irreversible, unpredictable, etc. In the second place, he ignores the crucial role that love fulfills, according to her, in the completion of the will, as we show in the next section.

[452] Cf. OR 223-224: "Terminologically speaking, the effort to recapture the lost spirit of revolution must, to a certain extent, consist in the attempt at thinking together and combining meaningfully what our present vocabulary presents to us in terms of opposition and contradiction."

its *failure*.[453] Far from seeing this as a symptom of an alleged inconsistency in Arendt's work, I propose to interpret these expressions as a sign of Arendt's attempt not so much to establish the "objective" success or failure of the American revolution (or of Pericles' *polis*), but rather to invite us to seek its *meaning*, which cannot be "deduced" by the application of any single criterion of *truth*. What is neglected is the fact that these are expressions of a form of confidence or faith, and, more importantly, of an attempt to induce *us* to examine *our own* confidence or faith, which requires a decision, an intervention on our part.

In contradistinction to Keenan, Honig attests to this in her earlier article. According to Honig, Arendt's account of authority as a practice of augmenting "commits her … to the insistence that we treat the absolute as an invitation for intervention, that we refuse its claim to irresistibility by deauthorizing it."[454] Nevertheless, more could be done to articulate the crucial role of such "commitment" (and of a possible lack thereof) for politics, both within Arendt's *account* of the conditions of political action, and within her *writing*. True, Arendt sometimes suggests that it was a "conceptual necessity" that forced the American revolutionaries to interpret the law as command, just as she had stated at one point in *The Human Condition* that the identity of "ruling" and "beginning" was "linguistically predetermined" in the Greek word *archein* (HC 224). Yet when we take a closer look at the text of *On Revolution*, what attracts our attention is the crucial role of the founding fathers' "confidence" (OR 167), and at some points the lack thereof, as when Arendt speaks of their "despair" (OR 199, 216) and "misgivings" (OR 191). It is no coincidence, therefore, that her book ends with her contrasting two lines of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, the first of which represents the *fatalist*'s stance – better not to be born at all – while the second represents the *confident* stance – "it was the polis, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour" (OR 281). Arendt laments the fact that the first expression is much better known within our tradition than the second, which is why she brings it back into our memory.

5.7. Love of Freedom as Principle of Politics

Arendt's work seems to embody the aim of formulating a political philosophy that does justice to the conditions of politics. As we have seen, she suggests the possibility of developing a "truly Roman or Virgilian philosophy of politics" which recognizes "freedom in its original integrity", the "ontological underpinning" for which is provided by an Augustinian "philosophy of natality" (LM2 110) or a Duns Scotian "philosophy of freedom" (LM2 146).[455]

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[453] The sixth chapter of *On Revolution*, called 'The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasure', is devoted to the failure of the spirit of the revolution to find its appropriate institution . See, inter alia, OR 280.

[454] Honig, 'Declarations of Independence', 108-111.

[455] Indeed, Arendt claims that Augustine's "philosophy of natality" may provide the "ontological underpinning for a truly roman or Virgilian philosophy of politics" (LM2 216), and about the work of

However, she notes, the *fact* of natality "seems to tell us no more than that we are *doomed* to be free by virtue of being born, no matter whether we like freedom or abhor its arbitrariness, are "pleased" with it or prefer to escape its awesome responsibility by electing some form of fatalism" (LM2 217). In other words, insofar as even *these* philosophies can be understood in a propositional, "objectifying" manner, they cannot be decisive in determining *our* answer to the question of whether or not we are indeed "pleased" with our freedom, whether we want to escape from our freedom or be confident that our actions will not be in vain. Recall how, at the end of the third section of this chapter, we decribed how Arendt tries to avoid this kind of fatalist implication of philosophical argument by simultaneously *ironizing* these kind of ontological stances: "men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin" (HC 246).[456]

Yet, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt claims that the impasse may be solved by an appeal to the faculty of judgment,[457] which she describes as "the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly" (LM1 193), or, more precisely, "the faculty that judges *particulars* without subsuming them under general rules" (LM1 192-193).[458] Accordingly, Honig suggests in her earlier article, Arendt's "fable" should not be interpreted as an *authoritative* faith, but as an instance of her *judgment*.[459] Commentators have written more about the third part of *The Life of the Mind*, on judging, which never appeared, than on the other two parts combined, on thinking and willing, which did appear, as if they were searching for Arendt's "last word" about judgment. However, if we take seriously her remarks on the faculty of judgment that appear in 'What Is Freedom?',[460] we have to conclude that according to her, action, insofar as it is free, can indeed be *prepared* by judgment (that is, by the cognition of the right aim by our intellect), but it cannot be *determined* by it. Nor can it be determined by the will, that is, the power to command the execution of judgment, for, she claims, the exercise of the will is a matter of *strength* or *weakness*, not freedom. She concludes: "Action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will …" (WIF 152).

What, then, conditions freedom, makes action *possible*, if not a philosophy of freedom, nor by judgment, or the will? What remains, I argue, is something for which Arendt uses terms like "faith" (HC 205, 247; WIF 168) and a set of closely related concepts such as "trust" (HC 197, 204, 208), "confidence" (HC 205), "good will" (HC 245-246), "hope" (HC 247), and, finally, "love" (HC 324). As we have

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Duns Scotus she says "we meet not simply conceptual reversals but genuine new insights, all of which could probably be explicated as the speculative conditions for a philosophy of freedom" (LM2 145-146).

[456] Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 142.

[457] LM2 217.

[458] Arendt describes judgment as "deciding, without any over-all rules, this is beautiful, this is ugly, this is right, this is wrong …" (LM1 69) and *phronèsis* as "a kind of insight and understanding of matters that are good or bad for men, a sort of sagacity – neither wisdom or cleverness – needed for human affairs" (LM2 59).

[459] Honig, 'Declarations of Independence', 107.

[460] WIF 152.

seen, she writes about "faith in *dynamis* (and consequently in politics)" (HC 247); "trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together" (HC 208); "trust in the world as a place fit for human appearance, for action and speech" (HC 204); "faith in and hope for the world" (HC 247); and, finally, of "the genuine experience of and love for the world" (HC 324).

Although this constitutive role of love for has indeed been recognized in the secondary literature (consider especially Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's famous biography of Arendt, titled *For Love of the World*), it has not been sufficiently worked out theoretically. In my view, the main reason for this consists in the fact that elsewhere in *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes love – that is, love between two *persons* – as an *anti*-political passion, for, as she says, it "destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others" and is thus "by its very nature … unworldly" (HC 242).[461]

However, in *The Life of the Mind: Willing* she gives another, entirely different account of love,[462] which may in fact be understood to serve as an explanation of the constructive and even *crucial* role of love for (political) action.[463] For, whereas the *will*, which floats between *hope* and *fear* in anticipation of the realization of its project and is characterized by strength or weakness, is described by Arendt rather mechanically as the "spring" of action (LM2 101),[464] she calls *love* (of freedom) the "inspiring principle" of action (LM2 203). Drawing upon the thought of Augustine and Duns Scotus, she claims that the will is "completed", that is, "redeemed" by love, that is: it is love that invites the will to cease willing and start acting.[465] Moreover, Arendt suggests that of faith, hope, and love, the last is the most durable:

> What Love brings about is lastingness, a perdurance of which the mind otherwise seems incapable. Augustine has conceptualized Paul's words in the Letter to the Corinthians: "Love never ends"; of the three that "abide" – Faith, Hope, Love – "the greatest" [the most durable, as it were] is love" (I Corinthians 13:8) (LM2 103-104)

We may read her Augustinian account of the conditions for acting in contrast to the moral *intellectualism* of Socrates and perhaps even of Greek philosophy in general,

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[461] Cf. Arendt's account of "compassion" in OR 86, which is very similar.

[462] LM2 95-96, 102-104.

[463] Interestingly, in Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 203-204, 289-290 (in 1952), 459 (in 1953), she mentions love as a *fourth* form of human activity, besides labor, work, and action . On the one hand, this would seem to indicate that love does indeed play a more important role in her understanding of the human *vita activa* than she acknowledges in her published work. On the other hand, her account of love in these few fragments is largely in agreement with her account in *The Human Condition*, where she characterizes love as an unworldly activity.

[464] Cf. WIF 152.

[465] LM2 102: "…the Will is redeemed by ceasing to will and starting to act, and the cessation cannot originate in an act of the will-not-to-will because this would be another volition."

according to which to *know* justice is to *act* justly: "virtue is knowledge".[466] By contrast, consider what Arendt has to say about Augustine: "Men do not become just by *knowing* what is just but by *loving* justice [emphasis added]" (LM2 104) [467] Analogously, we may say that human beings do not become free by *knowing* freedom, but by *loving* it.

What carries the founding of freedom, then, is *love* for the principle of public freedom, which at the same time manifests itself in *performing* it. As mentioned already, the notion of "principle" is derived from Montesquieu,[468] who describes in his *The Spirit of the Laws* principles in this specific sense as "the human passions that set [a form of government] in motion".[469]

A distinctive feature of Arendt's later account of love lies in its being entirely different from the specific political passion that we encountered in the work of Strauss: *thumos*, which in the guise of "anger" or "indignation" remains dependent of what it polemicizes *against*.[470] Stated otherwise, love can be described as a welcoming, *hospitable* passion, whereas *thumos* is primarily an averting, *hostile* passion. Incidentally, our reconstruction of Arendt's conception of love in this sense has provided us with an additional argument against the interpretation of Arendt's notion of "agonal spirit" as a celebration of the tragic life or of courage [*andreia*] as a *thumotic* virtue. Just as her concept of "greatness" should be associated with the concept of a potentially lasting *meaning*, her appraisal of the "agonal spirit" should be understood as an appraisal of courage as the basic readiness to appear in public out of love of freedom,[471] which is the indispensable *performative* prerequisite for politics.

5.8. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, we first return briefly to the work of Popper and Strauss. In the first part of this dissertation we have seen that Popper attests to "*faith* in

[466] Cf. HC 247: "Only the full experience of [the capacity to act, to begin] can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether, discounting the keeping of faith as a very uncommon and not too important virtue and counting hope among the evils of illusion in Pandora's box. It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their 'glad tidings': 'A child has been born unto us.'"

[467] She could have added: nor do men become just by our *making* them just. Cf. HC 188: "The popular belief in a 'strong man' who, isolated against others, owes his strength to his being alone is either sheer superstition, based on the delusion that we can "make" something in the realm of human affairs – 'make' institutions or laws for instance, as we make tables and chairs, or make men 'better' or 'worse' – or it is conscious despair of all action, political and non-political, coupled with the utopian hope that it may be possible to treat men as one treats other 'material.'".

[468] WIF 152: "Such principles are honor or glory, love of equality, which Montesquieu called virtue, or distinction or excellence – the Greek [*aei aristeuein*] ('always strive to do your best and to be the best of all'), but also fear or distrust or hatred." See also LM2 201.

[469] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 21.

[470] For Arendt's use of the concept of *thumos*, see WIF 158-159. For her critique of a polemical conception of politics, see her account of Rousseau in OR 77-78.

[471] HC 36, 186-187.

reason", that is, in the problem-solving capacity of (scientific) rationality. In the second part we have seen that Strauss (in his letters) claims that he firmly believes – "*firmitur credo*" – in the truth-achieving capacity of philosophical dialectics [*logon didonai*]. However, both of them seemed to imply that this "faith" is in the final instance "irrational", insofar as their standard of reference is that of theoretical, i.e. propositional, knowledge (either scientific or philosophical). In the end, their categories of the rational and the irrational remain bound to Plato's scheme of the cave (in the *Republic*) and the opposition between dialectics and rhetoric (in the *Gorgias*). As a result, the work of both authors remains vulnerable to the criticism that it is "founded" on an "irrational" decision.

As we have seen, Arendt too attests to a specific faith, viz. "faith in the world". Yet not only is the *object* of her faith different, but, in contradistinction to Popper and Strauss, she allows us to *account explicitly for* the crucial role and the distinct character of this "faith". She regards it as a performative condition of political *action*, which can be conceived of as such only outside the traditional framework of "the Socratic school". When we *act* on this faith we allow the world in its plurality to exist, we welcome it, make it into a meaningful place. Although the strength of our will and the quality of our judgment are important, our action is in the final instance made possible by *love*.

We may now conclude that just as in the case of her Pericles quotations, Arendt's praise of the American Declaration of Independence should preferably not be read as an authoritative claim or proposition (whether descriptive or normative), but rather as an utterance of faith. Whether the actual event in question was indeed "really" an instance of pure politics will ultimately remain undecidable, in the sense that there is no decisive empirical evidence (historical record) or final rational justification (philosophical argument) available that will decide for us, forever and unambiguously, whether that was indeed the case. Ultimately, our verdict rests on our faith grown into love, the presence or absence of which is never completely within our own control.

Arendt differs from the other political thinkers we have examined to the extent that she explicitly acknowledges the conditions of politics are twofold: we not only need a phenomenologically adequate *description* of political reality, that is, of the essentially *performative* character of political action, but this description should somehow also imply a *praise* of the very possibility of political action. Theory, let alone philosophy, is not a sufficient condition for an "integer" political order, for that can be established by *action* only. As Arendt says in *The Life of the Mind: Willing*, the will, as long as it has not yet decided on the course of action to take, is floating between hope and fear. The decision that will finally be taken is conditioned in all kinds of ways, but in the end we are *free* to opt for freedom (the *polis*, public freedom), or fatalism (*Ecclesiastes*, Sophocles). Hanna Pitkin put it as follows:

> no set of facilitating conditions is sufficient to produce action or assure free citizenship. No conceptualization or theorizing can guarantee their remembrance; no institutions can assure their continuation; no type of

> character suffices to make people free agents, because freedom is not something that can be caused, given, or imposed. It has to be taken, chosen, exercised, enacted, if it is to exist at all. Nothing can guarantee its coming into existence except doing it; nothing can make it endure except continuing to do it.[472]

These words imply that Virgil's line "*magnus ab integro nascitur ordo saeclorum*" should in Arendt's case be interpreted in the sense that political order will *only* exist in the "integer", that is, free, spontaneous, *practice* of acting-in-concert, that is, in the actual *performance* of "public freedom". Yet, and this is something that Pitkin does not mention, although she might attest to it, we add that the actual founding of political order is at the same time driven by faith grown into *love* as the inspiring principle of public freedom, a love to which Arendt's writing attests.

Readers who are more inclined to the life of the mind than the life of action may now be disappointed. Arendt's whole work seems to be one big signpost pointing in the direction of action, so it seems that thought is no use whatsoever in politics. In the first place, however, we should realize that her work is of course itself the product of *thought* – albeit the question remains unanswered as to what *kind* of thought exactly. In the second place, we ought to remind ourselves again that Arendt did not intend to reverse the traditional hierarchy between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, so by no means does she want to reject the merits of thought. In fact she wishes to recover the activities of thinking from their having been made subservient to the aim of contemplative cognition. In the next chapter I reconstruct three different motifs of the activity of thinking that can be traced throughout her oeuvre. In each case I examine whether she takes thinking to be sufficiently attuned to political reality, both in comparison to traditional "Platonic" philosophy, and to contemporary "thoughtlessness", the latter of which may be considered as the internal, mental counterpart to the external phenomenon of "worldlessness".

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[472] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 282.

CHAPTER 6

Three Activities of Thinking and Their Correspondences to Political Reality

Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then wakes up to find that he knows nothing.[473]
Plato

Comprehension ... means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be.[474]
Hannah Arendt

6.1. INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) criticizes the tradition of political philosophy for looking down on the life of action from the superior life of contemplation, substituting making for acting and thus replacing politics by rule. Her work is rightly understood as an attempt to rehabilitate politics as the exercise of "public freedom" and "acting-in-concert". However, this does not mean that she inverts the traditional hierarchy between action and thought. In fact, she not only provides an alternative interpretation of action, she also provides a novel account of the activity of thinking, against both traditional contemplation and contemporary "thoughtlessness". Thus, her work should not only be understood as an attempt to restore politics, but simultaneously as an attempt to retrieve ways of thinking that are in a certain sense "fit" for politics.

It is usually assumed that Arendt's account of thinking is quite univocal, namely that it is conceived of as a solitary dialogue between me and myself, as exemplified in the figure of Socrates. In this chapter I argue that in fact this is only one of *three* distinct types of thinking that can be traced, almost like literary motifs, throughout her oeuvre. When properly reconstructed, each of them presents a unique alternative both to traditional philosophical contemplation and to recurring forms of "thoughtlessness". I examine each of these ways of thinking in terms of its "fitness" for understanding politics, or its promise to heal the rift between the inner life of the mind and external worldly reality.

In the *first* part of the chapter I reconstruct the fundamentals of Arendt's phenomenology of thought by providing a reading of *The Human Condition* which

[473] Plato, *Statesman*, 277d. Used by Arendt as epigraph in LM1 vii.
[474] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii (Preface to the First Edition, 1950).

shows that her book does not offer a simple inversion of the traditional hierarchy between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Although it remains to a large extent inarticulate, she already offers us some indications of what an alternative to both traditional philosophy and a current lack of thought could look like. She therewith anticipates some of the insights of her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, which contains her most elaborate investigation of human thinking.

In the *second* part I examine the extent to which the Socratic model of thought as the solitary and silent dialogue between me and myself, which produces conscience as its by-product, can assume the role of this alternative. Although there are indeed some indications that Arendt gives a political twist to this model, I demonstrate that she chose not to pursue that path and, contra Dana Villa, that she had good reasons for doing so.

In the *third* part I reconstruct her account of a second type of thinking, which she called "representative thinking". This refers not to the solitary dialogue between me and myself (a duality), but to the imagined and anticipated dialogue with others (a plurality). While the first type of thinking remains a-political, the second may rightly be called political. On its basis, the *citizen*, either in his role of actor or spectator, prepares opinion and judgment, which Arendt considers the two "politically most important, rational faculties" (OR 229).

In the *fourth* part I reconstruct a third type of thinking, called "poetic thinking", which dives for and brings back to the surface the events, experiences, and phenomena that lay hidden within our political concepts. In contradistinction to the second type of thinking, this is not directly aimed at the preparation of opinions or judgments about particular political issues or events, but rather serves as a reminder of the meaning and possibility of political action as such by invoking the spirit of originating that is contained within our political speech or language.

In the concluding section I claim that the three ways of thinking I have reconstructed are rooted in different concerns and that the ways in which they are "fit" for politics vary accordingly. Whereas the solitary dialogue is primarily rooted in a concern for a truthful *self* and will only become political by accident, the other types of thinking are primarily rooted in a concern for the *world*, for its preservation and its renewal. This happens either directly, by *representing* within the mind the manifold perspectives that constitute the world, or indirectly, by invoking the original spirit of the experiences that lie hidden in our political concepts and by thus *praising* the possibilities of politics. I argue that both of these activities of thinking could fulfill the promise of bringing the "men of action" and the "men of thought" together, whose separation since the rise of political philosophy in "the Socratic school" Arendt so greatly laments.

6.2. FROM *THE HUMAN CONDITION* TO *THE LIFE OF THE MIND*: THINKING AFTER CONTEMPLATION AND THOUGHTLESSNESS

At first sight, her book *The Human Condition* (1958) appears to be a rehabilitation of the *vita activa* and of politics as "acting-in-concert". Arendt argues that political

philosophers have always looked down upon politics from the perspective of philosophy, thereby turning politics into rule [*Herrschaft*] and substituting making for acting. In line with this reading, her book has often been interpreted as a sign of romantic nostalgia for the lost Greek *polis* of Pericles' Athens.[475] As I have shown in the previous chapter, what is problematic about this reading is that it thus seems as if Arendt inverts the traditional hierarchy, by putting active life (or *bios politikos*) *above* contemplative life (or *bios theōrētikos*), valuing the aspiration for this-worldly immortality over that for other-worldly eternity. In fact, however, she warns against such "reversals" because they all imply that "the same central human preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men" (HC 17). Arendt claims that this assumption is "not a matter of course", and she makes it explicitly clear that her "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*" (HC 17).

This leaves room for an interpretation according to which she not only rehabilitates "acting-in-concert", but also the "activity of thinking".[476] In her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, she explains that she herself had planned to call her book 'Vita Activa', but that her publisher opted for 'The Human Condition'. She now calls this a wise decision, and explains that "what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter, namely, *vita activa*, was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective" (LM1 6).[477] Thus, the understanding of active life ran the risk of remaining polemically tied to its counterpart, contemplative life, while it was precisely Arendt's intention to *break* with this binary and hierarchical scheme, as seen in the previous chapter. She expresses her awareness of the fact that this break was already visible in *The Human Condition*, which ends with a sentence that Cicero ascribed to Cato: "never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself" (HC 325).[478] Just as in *The Human Condition* (HC 5) she aims "to

[475] Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xxxix calls this "the standard view".
[476] At some point in *The Human Condition*, Arendt even calls thinking "the *highest* and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable [emphasis added]" (HC 5), which seems to convey the conviction that there *does* exist some kind of hierarchical relation among the human activities, which would contradict her intention mentioned above. In earlier publications she expressed herself in similar terms, for instance when she speaks of thinking as "the freest and purest of all human activities" (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 473) and when she asserts: "the capacity for thought … for thousands of years has been deemed to be the highest capacity of man" (Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', 318). As far as I have been able to ascertain, she no longer uses this manner of expressing herself in *The Life of the Mind*.
[477] This mode of expression suggests that the human capacities of labor, work, action, and thought should primarily be understood as different "perspectives" on reality. For Arendt's account of the perspectival character of the public realm, see chapter 4.
[478] See also LM1 7-8.

think what we are doing"[479]; in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt sets out to think what we are "doing" when we are thinking.[480]

Before showing how *The Human Condition* already clears the road for the recovery of thought,[481] we need to say more about Arendt's claim that thinking has traditionally been subjected to contemplation and making. She carefully distinguishes contemplation as the speechless beholding [*theōria*] of the truth from thinking as the solitary and silent dialogue between me and myself [*eme emautō*], which was described as such for the first time by Plato's Socrates in the *Gorgias*.[482] Arendt claims that what in "the Socratic school" (HC 18, 302) was considered as the *beginning* of philosophy, is the state of speechless wonder [*thaumazein*] in which one finds oneself when one marvels at the miracle of being, that is, the beauty of the eternal cosmos. Analogously, the *end* of philosophy was seen as a state of contemplation of the truth.[483] Thinking, in turn, came to be understood as the most important and direct road to the contemplation of eternal truth, just as in the medieval period meditation was considered as the most important and direct road to the contemplation of God.

Yet, Arendt explains, a source was added which overlaid the first, and which becomes visible especially in Plato's doctrine of ideas. The experience of the philosopher who contemplates the eternal cosmos came to be interpreted after the experience of the craftsman who contemplates the idea or model of the product he wishes to make.[484] As a consequence, the state of speechless wonder that had initially been an *incidental* and *unintended* experience was now replaced by the *sustained* and *deliberate* contemplation of an idea. Thus, the experience of contemplation could be prolonged, as the result of which one came to speak of the "*vita*" *contemplativa*: contemplation as a *way of life*.[485]

From the seventeenth century onwards, Arendt continues, thought was no longer treated as the handmaiden of contemplation – which lost its meaning altogether – but instead became the handmaiden of "doing". This was possible because of the already existing inner affinity between contemplation and fabrication. Yet, Arendt adds, what counted was no longer the model and not even the product of making, but first and foremost its fabrication *process*. Thus, thought was replaced by "reckoning with consequences" (Hobbes), or, as she puts it, "the faculty of deducing and concluding, that is, of a process which man at any moment can let loose within himself" (HC 238).

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[479] Consider also HC 322.

[480] LM1 8: "What are we 'doing' when we do nothing but think?"

[481] As far as I have been able to ascertain, the only other attempt to trace Arendt's scattered reflections on thought in *The Human Condition* is Jonas 1977.

[482] Plato, *Gorgias* 482c, referred to in: HC 76, 76n85, 291, and also in PP 85. She uses the same expression in TMC 442 and LM1 185, but on these occasions she refers to Plato, *Theaetetus*, 189e and *Sophist*, 263e. She also refers to the latter passage in 'Martin Heidegger at Eighty', 52. Her first reference to the "two-in-one" occurs already in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 476.

[483] HC 302.

[484] In LM1 104, Arendt mentions the Platonic notion of "idea" as an example of the decisive influence of the use of metaphors in philosophical language.

[485] HC 302-303.

Seen in this light, we should not be surprised that in *The Human Condition* the activity of thinking – where it is identified with the solitary inner dialogue between me and myself – is carefully distinguished both from "cognition" and "logical reasoning". To begin with, *cognition*, of which we may say that contemplation is but one form, pursues a definite aim, whereas thought "has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results" (HC 170). She calls the activity of thinking "as relentless and repetitive as life itself" (HC 171), thereby anticipating its characterization in *The Life of the Mind* as an "*energeia*",[486] a term that she still reserves in *The Human Condition* for the characterization of action only.[487] In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt claims that the "basic fallacy of the metaphysical tradition" has indeed been to interpret thought on the model of cognition.[488]

Whereas cognition strives for "truth", thought searches for "meaning".[489] That is to say, whereas the former asks "what something is or whether it exists at all", the latter takes its existence for granted and instead asks "*what it means for it to be*" (LM1 57). What science and cognition are after is "*irrefutable* truth, that is, "propositions human beings are not free to reject – they are compelling" (LM1 59). They come in two kinds: "truths of reasoning" and "truths of fact" (LM1 59). Arendt illustrates the difference between "truth" and "meaning" by interpreting the following lines from a poem by W.H. Auden:

> Unpredictably, decades ago, You arrived
> among that unending cascade of creatures spewed
> from Nature's maw. A random event, says Science.
> Random my bottom! A true miracle, say I,
> for who is not certain that he was meant to be?

As the first three lines express, scientifically speaking we "know" that the birth of a human being is nothing but "a random event", i.e. a contingent fact. However, Arendt says, the answer contained in the two lines immediately following, "a true miracle" by no means expresses such "objective" knowledge, but it is a highly *meaningful* proposition.[490]

The second distinction Arendt draws is that between thought and *logical reasoning*, the latter of which she describes as "deductions from axiomatic or self-evident statements, subsumption of particular occurrences under general rules, or the techniques of spinning out consistent chains of conclusions" (HC 171). She considers it to be "a mere function of the life process itself" (HC 172) and

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486 LM1 123, where she refers to Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book 12, 1072b27: "The activity of thinking [*energeia* that has its end in itself] is life." See also LM1 129: "the thinking activity belongs among those *energeiai* which, like flute-playing, have their ends within themselves and leave no tangible outside end product in the world we inhabit."

487 HC 206, 206n35.

488 LM1 15.

489 LM1 14-15, 57-62, 129.

490 LM1 60-61.

characterizes it as a “playing of the mind with itself” (HC 284).[491] Before the publication of *The Human Condition*, Arendt had already used the notion of logical deduction in order to understand the functioning of totalitarian ideologies,[492] which she characterized as “isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise” (OT 468). Adherents of these ideologies learn nothing from experience: “Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality” (OT 471). As a result, thought, “which as the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the compulsory process of deduction” (OT 473), *emancipates* itself from experience and reality. Arendt explains that when people have lost contact with their fellow men and with worldly reality, they “lose the capacity of *both* experience *and* thought” [emphasis added] (OT 474). To be sure, she draws a careful distinction between “loneliness”, which serves as breeding ground for the “ice-cold reasoning” of totalitarian ideologies, and “solitude”, which, as we shall see, is actually *required* for the activity of the thinking dialogue of me with myself. Nevertheless, solitude may turn into loneliness when, all by myself, I am deserted by my own self, that is, by my own inner companion.

It is important to note that this earlier notion of the “loss of the capacity of thought” is very similar to what Arendt was later to call “thoughtlessness”, described by her in *The Human Condition* (1958) as “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty” (HC 3). In *Eichmann and Jerusalem* (1963), she famously uses the term “thoughtlessness” to capture Adolf Eichmann’s “inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else”.[493] In the introduction to *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (1971), she gives the following explanation of Eichmann’s “absence of thinking” (LM1 4):

> Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in that he clearly knew of no such claim at all. (LM1 4)

It becomes clear, even on the basis of these few passages, that Arendt’s use of the word “thoughtlessness” is by no means equivocal, for the absence of the inner

[491] Note that “life” is used here in a different sense than in the preceding paragraph.
[492] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 468-474; idem, ‘Understanding and Politics’, 317-318.
[493] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 49. Cf. ibid., 47-48, where she speaks of Eichmann’s “almost total inability to look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view.” See also ibid., 287-288, where she seems to identify his “thoughtlessness” with a “lack of imagination”, resulting in a “remoteness from reality”.

dialogue between me and my *self* is by no means the same as the absence of the ability to place myself in the perspectives of *others*, neither of which, in its turn, is identical to a complacent use of empty *language*. Hence, if we wish to acquire an adequate understanding of the apparently complex phenomenon of "thoughtlessness", we will first need to acquire an adequate understanding of the multiplicity of Arendt's account of "thought".

What both traditional "contemplation" and contemporary forms of "thoughtlessness" have in common is a certain turning-away from worldly reality. Arendt repeatedly notes that, since the rise of political philosophy, the "men of thought" and the "men of action" parted company, as a result of which "thinking began to emancipate itself altogether from reality, and especially from political factuality and experience" (OR 177).[494] She expresses the hope that the rift may be healed in the modern age, now that the thread of tradition has been broken. At the same time, however, it remains the case that, in order to think, one inevitably *removes* oneself from the external world of appearances. Accordingly, in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt speaks of the "intramural warfare" between man's common sense and our faculty of thought. The former provides us with a "sense of realness", the experience of the world of appearances in its "sheer thereness", while the latter withdraws itself from that world and loses the feeling of realness. As Arendt explains, thought "can seize upon and get hold of everything real – event, object, its own thought; but their *realness* is the only property that remains stubbornly beyond its reach [emphasis added]" (LM1 49).[495] As thinking is by definition "out of order" in this sense,[496] solitary thinkers will always run the risk of becoming lonely "when they can no longer find the redeeming grace of companionship to save them from duality and equivocality and doubt" (OT 476). Nevertheless, Arendt indicates that the activity of *thinking* – as distinguished from the contemplation of cosmic truths and from the subjection to conventional codes or rules of logic – may in a very specific sense be able to retain a relationship with worldly reality. She is looking for a thinking activity that is somehow capable of compensating for its necessarily being "out of order".[497]

In the concluding paragraph of *The Human Condition*, Arendt displays her worries about the grim prospects for thought in the modern world,[498] and comments that this fact "may be irrelevant, or of restricted relevance, for the future of the world; it is not irrelevant for the future of man." (HC 324-5). As we will see, this

[494] Cf. HC 17.
[495] LM1 45-53.
[496] LM1 78.
[497] Curtis phrases Arendt's quest as follows: "Is there something in the thinking experience itself that, when habitually performed, conditions and forms us, something that enables us to be more attentive to the real?" (Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 47), and, more specifically: "if we take seriously the experience of being a self that-is-not-one, feel its pleasures, know its interests and needs, if these experiences become habits crucial to our sense of well-being, do we become more attentive to the claim of reality?" (Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 54)
[498] Arendt claims that "no other human capacity is so vulnerable" and that wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom, "thought is still possible, and no doubt actual", but under conditions of tyranny "it is in fact far easier to act … than it is to think." (HC 324)

distinction between a concern for the world and a concern for man will prove to be important in answering the question of which activities of thinking are suited to healing the rift, for only those types of thinking that somehow *intrinsically* display a concern for the world count as serious candidates.

6.3. DIALECTICAL THINKING

Never is a man more active than when he does nothing,
never is he less alone than when he is by himself.[499]
Cato

Dana Villa, who is one of the most influential interpreters of Arendt's work, has argued that her work "point[s] to the possibility of a philosophical or Socratic form of citizenship, one that undercuts the dichotomy of philosophy versus politics", of the *bios theōrētikos* versus the *bios politikos*, of 'mere" opinion [*doxa*] versus "true" knowledge [*epistēmē*].[500] Yet, he claims, Arendt ultimately eschews this possibility by "chastising philosophy (as did Callicles) for its "unmanly" withdrawal from the world" and by her plea for active and "manly" citizenship instead.[501] According to Villa, she thereby betrays her "best insights" and leaves us with "the false alternative between civic republicanism on one hand and philosophical elitism on the other".[502] As a result, he states, "The terms set by the *Gorgias*, and by Callicles in particular, return in all their Procrustean violence."[503] This statement shows that Villa, while presenting Socrates as a figure of mediation between philosophy and politics, leaves the underlying conceptual framework intact. By failing to notice the radical nature of Arendt's critique of "the Socratic school", he fails to see that she had good reasons for rejecting Socratic citizenship as embodying a form of thinking which Villa praises for its being "distanced" and yet sufficiently "worldly".[504]

Villa bases his reconstruction of Arendt's account of "Socratic citizenship" primarily on 'Philosophy and Politics', a lecture she gave in 1954, which she decided not to publish during her lifetime.[505] In this piece she displays an optimism about the civic role of philosophy that is never repeated in her published work. As the trust that she puts in Socratic philosophizing as a binding force in *polis* life is completely absent in her later work, I consider that too much relative weight is

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[499] "Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset." See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 476, HC 325, LM1 7-8, 123.
[500] Villa, 'The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates', 149, 165, 150.
[501] Ibid., 164, 165.
[502] Ibid., 149.
[503] Ibid., 165.
[504] Ibid., 149, 167, 164.
[505] It is surprising how much attention this unpublished lecture has attracted, possibly because philosophers and political theorists find some reassuring confirmation in it for their activity being in some sense directly "relevant" or "useful" for the political community, whereas I believe that the utmost they may achieve is that it may be "meaningful".

assigned to this unpublished text.[506] Contra Villa, I argue that Arendt was in fact rather skeptical about the role of philosophy in politics, or, to be more precise, of thinking, not as contemplation but as the dialogue between me and myself.

In 'Philosophy & Politics', Socrates and Plato are being contrasted insofar as in the case of Socrates, thought is not (yet) instrumentalized as a handmaiden to reach a state of contemplation. In contradistinction to Plato, Arendt argues, Socrates did not *oppose* philosophical dialectics (the search for true *epistēmē*) and political persuasion (the assertion of *doxa*), but was instead looking for truth *in* opinion [*doxa*]. She describes this Socratic method of "maieutic" as "a *political* activity, a give and take, fundamentally on the basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth [emphasis added]" (PP 81). This kind of understanding – "seeing the world ... from the other fellow's point of view" – Arendt calls "the political kind of insight *par excellence*" (PP 84).

At some point in Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates says to Callicles: "It is better to be in disagreement with the whole world than, being one, to be in disagreement with myself".[507] Arendt interprets him as saying: "*Because* I am already two-in-one, at least when I try to think, I can experience a friend ... as an 'other self' [emphasis added]" (PP 85). According to Socrates, Arendt explains, being capable of living together with others *begins* with being capable of living together with oneself: *only* he who knows how to live with himself is fit to live with others. As one becomes conscious of oneself in the solitary dialogue between me and myself, one is likely to develop one's conscience: I should be able and willing to live with myself, with my inner companion, with the person who awaits me every time I retreat into the solitude of my own mind. Arendt claims: "The political relevance of Socrates' discovery is that it asserts that solitude ... is ... *the necessary condition* for the good functioning of the polis, a better guarantee than rules of behavior enforced by laws and fear of punishment [emphasis added]" (PP 89). In other words, thinking as a dialogue between me and myself appears to be a *prerequisite* of being able to live in a *polis*.[508]

However, already in 'Philosophy and Politics' itself Arendt expresses her awareness of the limits of thinking in this sense: "Nobody can doubt that such a teaching was and always will be in a certain conflict with the polis, which must demand respect for its laws *independent of personal conscience*, and Socrates knew the nature of this conflict full well when he called himself a gadfly [emphasis added]" (PP 90). It is this observation that Arendt puts at the very foreground in her works on the relation between thinking and politics that she *did* decide to publish. In 'Civil Disobedience' (1970), for instance, she draws a strict distinction between the "unpolitical" conscientious objector and the "political" civil disobedient, or

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[506] In Chapter 5 of his book *Socratic Citizenship*, Villa partly revokes his earlier thesis by emphasizing the "exceptional position" of PP within Arendt's oeuvre, and shifting the weight of his interpretation to TMC and LM1. He maintains his ideal of "Socratic citizenship", however.

[507] Plato, *Gorgias*, 482c.

[508] Connect this to Socrates's statement in Plato's *Gorgias*, 521d that *he* is the "true politician".

between "the good man" and "the good citizen".[509] She argues that conscience is primarily interested in the *self* instead of the *world*, which means that "the two-in-one are friends and partners, and to keep intact this 'harmony' is the thinking's ego foremost concern" (LM2 64). As a consequence, she concludes, the conscience is politically unreliable,[510] for, as she observes, not only is it the case that what I cannot live with may not bother another man's conscience, the presupposition that everybody is *interested* in his own self cannot be taken for granted.

To be sure, Arendt adds, the solitary thinker is of course "not *thematically* concerned with the Self but, on the contrary, with the experiences and questions that this Self ... feels are in need of examination [emphasis added]" (LM2 64). Arendt tells us more about the *object* of thought in 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' (1971) and in *The Life of the Mind*, where she claims that Socrates "wanted to bring philosophy down from the sky to the earth and hence began to examine the invisible measures by which we judge human affairs"[511] (LM1 165). His activity of thinking is described by Arendt as a kind of "meditation"[512] or "pondering reflection" on the *meaning* of what we call "concepts", such as happiness, courage, or justice.[513] Each of them is "*something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze* whenever it wants to find out the original meaning [emphasis in original]"[514] (LM1 171). Arendt claims that this examination does not produce any tangible results, however. Socrates called himself a "gadfly" because the result of his thinking is *negative*, and possibly even dangerous, for "it does not create values, it will not find out, once and for all, what 'the good' is, and it does not confirm but rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct" (TMC 445).

Now she has found that the conscience is unreliable and the results of thinking are negative, we might therefore conclude that thinking and conscience are of no political use whatsoever, according to Arendt. However, in fact she does leave some room for a "political" role of (Socratic) thinking. In 'Truth and Politics' (1967) she explains that the *truth* claim of a philosopher – for example Socrates' statement that it is better to suffer wrong than do wrong – appears as no more than one *opinion* among many as soon as it enters the political realm. Nevertheless, Arendt says, there is *one* form of "persuasion" that philosophical truth is capable of without perversion or distortion, which is teaching by *example*: "by setting an example and 'persuading' the multitude in the only way open to him, [the

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[509] Only the acting-in-concert of citizens, of which civil disobedience is only one of the many forms, can lead to law-giving in Arendt's sense, viz. as a collective inscription of speech-acts.

[510] About the political unreliability of conscience, see also Arendt, 'Religion and Politics', 383.

[511] In the *philosophical* respect, Arendt claims, Socrates differed from Plato in being concerned with human affairs rather than divine matters. However, for the history of *thought,* she does not regard this difference as decisive: "What matters in our context is that in both instances thought is concerned with invisible things that are pointed to, nevertheless, by appearances (the starry sky above us or the deeds and destinies of men) …" (LM1 151).

[512] In LM2 64 she speaks of a "meditating examination of everything given".

[513] LM1 170.

[514] Cf. TMC 431.

philosopher] has begun to *act* [emphasis added]" (TP 248). This, however, remains what she calls a "borderline experience" for the philosopher.

In her later reflections on thinking (as of 1970),[515] Arendt introduces another way thinking may perform a political role: "Good men become manifest only in emergencies, when they suddenly appear, as if from nowhere, in all social strata".[516] In other words, in case of *emergencies* the thinking activity becomes a form of *acting* in the outer world, for "[w]hen everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because *their refusal to join* is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action [emphasis added]" (TMC 445-6, LM1 192). In these cases, Arendt explains, it is precisely the *purging* element in thinking, the destruction of existing opinions and therewith of authoritative standards of judgment already mentioned, that is political by implication (TMC 446, LM1 192), for:

> If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. (TMC 446, LM1 193)

In other words, by dissolving accepted rules of conduct, the thinking activity makes room for the activity of judging, which Arendt defines as "the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned" (TMC 446, LM1 193). As such, it is "the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly" (TMC 446, LM1 193). In addition, Arendt considers the ability to judge "the most political of man's mental abilities" (TMC 446, LM1 192).

The precise relationship between thinking and judging, however, still seems obscure, for the merely *negative* result of thinking that exists in the destruction of existing standards of judgment does not tell us if and how thinking can play a *positive* and constructive role in the preparation of judgments. Commentators have paid insufficient attention to the difference between thinking as a *precondition* for the need for reflective judgment to arise at all, that is, the purging effect of Socratic thinking which leads to the destruction of existing standards, and a form of thinking which would seem to be required for the actual

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[515] That is, starting with Arendt, 'Civil Disobedience', and running via TMC to LM1.

[516] Arendt, 'Civil Disobedience', 65. Cf. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 37: "What [Socrates] actually did was to make *public*, in discourse, the thinking process – that dialogue that soundlessly goes on within me, between me and myself; he *performed* in the marketplace the way the flute-player performed at a banquet. It is sheer performance, sheer activity" Cf. LM1 187: "the Socratic two-in-one heals the solitariness of thought; its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth."

exercise of reflective judgment.[517] As they have mainly focused on Arendt's *distinction* between the mental faculties of thinking and judging, commentators have overlooked the fact that she uses a distinct motif of *thinking* when she speaks about the faculty of judgment, called "representative thinking".[518] As I demonstrate in the next section, this activity of thinking differs in important respects from thinking as the solitary dialogue of the "two-in-one".

Despite the important role that the solitary thinker may fulfill in emergency situations, we should remain aware of the fact that Arendt kept emphasizing that thinking as such is always "out of order", and that the *solitude* of the philosopher always runs the risk of lapsing into *loneliness*, as a result of which he will lose even his final contact with reality.[519] Although it might indeed be the case that thinking in the sense of Socratic philosophizing is "irrelevant, or of restricted relevance" for the future of the world, that doesn't exclude the possibility of the existence of *other* forms of thinking that *are* relevant in this respect. We found a glimpse of the latter when Arendt described Socrates' way of understanding as "seeing the world ... from the other fellow's point of view" (PP 84). As the next section shows, though, *nowhere* in her published works does she associate this "political kind of insight *par excellence*" (PP 84) with Socrates, whereas the connection she draws with the figure of the statesman remains in place. We examine the extent to which this alternative, or what she was to call "representative thinking", may indeed be capable of bringing the "men of thought" and the "men of action" closer together.

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[517] Curtis claims that all that Arendt's thesis that thinking "activates judgment" can bear is that thinkers return to the world in the state of reflective judgment, "although this says nothing about what sort of *response* we will have to that state" (Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 60). I claim that it cannot even bear this, for there is no *guarantee* that the purging of standards will lead the thinker into "the state of reflective judgment". He could also enter the world in a state of *nihilism*, which Arendt calls " the other side of conventionalism". The creed of nihilism consists of "negations of the current, so-called positive values to which it remains bound" (TMC 435). In this sense nihilism may be seen as an ever-present danger of thinking. "But this danger does not arise out of the Socratic conviction that an unexamined life is not worth living but, on the contrary, out of the desire to find results which would make further thinking unnecessary. Thinking is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed" (TMC 435). See also LM1 177.

[518] In part, they are misled by Arendt herself, whose tripartite division of thinking, willing, and judging leads us to forget that "representative thinking", which she links exclusively to "the power of judgment", is nonetheless still a form of *thinking*, even of a distinct kind.

[519] See also LM2 200: "Under exceptionally propitious circumstances that dialogue, we have seen, can be extended to another insofar as a friend is, as Aristotle said, 'another self.' But it can never reach the We, the true plural of action."

6.4. Representative Thinking

The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato.[520]
Cato

We seem to be left now with the choice between either anti-political (Platonic) rule on the basis of contemplation, or an a-political (Socratic) concern with the self which becomes political only by accident, in case of *emergencies*. But what about *normal* politics? Fortunately, there is second conception of thinking present in her work, which is quite consistent and occurs for the first time in 1958, the same year *The Human Condition* was published. In 'Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio', Arendt says that Jaspers' thought, which is always "related closely to the thought of others," is "bound to be political even when it deals with things that are not in the least political; for it always confirms that Kantian 'enlarged mentality' which is the political mentality par excellence".[521] One year later, in 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing' (1959), she claims that "Lessing's thought is not the (Platonic) silent dialogue between me and myself, but an anticipated dialogue with others ...".[522] Apparently, there is a way of thinking that is *different* from the dialogue of me with myself (a *duality*) by somehow "pointing to" or representing *plurality* more fully.

The first, more elaborate account of this appears one year later still, in 'The Crisis in Culture' (1960), where for the first time she claims that it is Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, in contradistinction to his *Critique of Practical Reason*, that "contains perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant's *political philosophy* [emphasis added]" (CC 219). Kant's law of reason – the categorical imperative – is a principle of agreement with oneself, which Arendt traces back to Socrates's claim, mentioned above, that "Since I am one, it is better for me to disagree with the whole world than to be in disagreement with myself" (Plato, *Gorgias* 482). But Arendt discovers in the *Critique of Judgement* "a different way of thinking, for which it would not be enough to be in agreement with one's own self, but which consisted of being able to "think in the place of everybody else" and which he therefore called an "enlarged mentality" (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*)" (CC 220). This way of thinking, which she also calls "the power of judgment", rests on a potential agreement with others, that is:

> …the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself,

[520] "Victrix causa deis placuit sed victa Catoni" (LM1 216). Arendt also used this line as one of the two epigraphs on the title page of the final part of *The Life of the Mind*, called *Judging*, which she was unable to finish before she died in 1975.
[521] Arendt, 'Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio', 79.
[522] Arendt, 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing', 10. These expressions remind us in part of Arendt's depiction of Socrates in PP 84, quoted above. However, after this essay, which, I repeat, was never published during her lifetime, she associates this motive exclusively with Kant of the third *Critique* and with Homeric impartiality, and never with Socrates.

> but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. (CC 220)

In other words, judgment cannot function "in strict isolation or *solitude*" [emphasis added], for "it needs the presence of others 'in whose place' it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all" (CC 220). Accordingly, the validity of judgment is of a specific kind. Although it transcends that of privately held opinions, it cannot reach *universal* validity either, for it never extends beyond the others in whose place the judging person has put himself, nor is it valid for those who do not judge or for those who are not members of the public realm where the objects of judgment appear. What matters here is that the *perspectives* in whose place I imagine myself to be are those of *actual* members of an *actual* community in which both my fellow citizens and I myself happen to be present.[523]

For the purpose of our examination it is important to note that Arendt considers the capacity to judge, understood in the indicated sense of "the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present", to be "a specifically *political* ability" [emphasis added] (CC 221). She adds that it may even be "one of the *fundamental* abilities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to *orient* himself in the public realm, in the common world" [emphasis added] (CC 221). She claims that it can be identified with what the Greeks called *phronèsis* (or "insight"), that is, with what they regarded as the principal virtue of the statesman as distinct from the virtue of the philosopher, or from wisdom.[524] Whereas the judging insight of the statesman is rooted in "common sense", which "discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world" (CC 221), the speculative thought of the philosopher constantly transcends it. In culture as well as in politics, Arendt claims:

> …it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it. (CC 223)

Similarly, in 'Truth and Politics' (1967), she claims that "to take into account other people's opinions" is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking. Again she explains that political thought is "representative" by referring to Kant's notion of

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[523] In her posthumously published *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, she seems to amend her earlier account by stating: "in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one's 'cosmopolitan existence.' When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator" (Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 76).

[524] Cf. HC 91, where Arendt calls *prudentia* "the capacity for prudent judgment which is the virtue of statesmen".

"enlarged mentality" (TP 241). It is significant that she explicitly distinguishes it from *philosophical* thought: "even if I shun all company or am completely isolated while forming an opinion, I am not simply together only with myself in the solitude of philosophical thought; I remain in this world of universal interdependence, where I can make myself the representative of everybody else" (TP 242).

Arendt explains that the *quality* of an opinion "depends upon the degree of its impartiality" (TP 242). This means that one does not "blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else" (TP 241): it is neither a matter of empathy (to try to be or to feel like somebody else), nor "of counting noses and joining a majority" (TP 241). Rather, it is a matter of "being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not" (TP 241); that is, in *worldly positions* that are different from my own:

> The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were *in their place*, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion [emphasis added]. (TP 241)[525]

In his influential 'Interpretative Essay' on Arendt's *Kant's Lectures on Political Philosophy*, Ronald Beiner claims that Arendt leaves this account behind in her later work (from 1971 onwards), and that she no longer focuses on the thought of political *actors*, but *philosopher-spectators* who give their verdict about the performance of the actors.[526] Though he is right that there is a shift in attention (viz. from the judgment of future deeds to that of past ones), this does not mean that she *revokes* her "previous" account, nor that she contradicts it, for what Beiner ignores is the fact that even in her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt employs a strict distinction between the *spectator* and the *philosopher* (LM1 94, 96).[527]

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[525] In TP 247, Arendt gives the famous words from the American Declaration of Independence as her example: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." By saying "we hold", it indicates that "All men are created equal" is not self-evident but stands in need of agreement and consent, or that equality, if it is to be of political relevance, is a matter of opinion and not truth. Their "validity depends upon free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking; and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion."

[526] Beiner, 'Interpretative Essay', 91.

[527] The confusion is most clear in Beiner's interpretation of one of the epigraphs of the third part of *The Life of the Mind* (see Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ii), from Goethe's *Faust*: *Könnt' ich Magie von meinem Pfad entfernen, / Die Zaubersprüche ganz und gar verlernen, / Stünd ich Natur vor dir, ein Mann allein, / Da wär's die Mühe wert ein Mensch zu sein*. Beiner, 'Interpretative Essay', 127, gives the following explanation for Arendt's use of this quotation: "Judgment is rendered not by the collective destiny of mankind [i.e. the verdict of History] but by "man alone," the judging spectator who stands before nature unencumbered by metaphysical dreams and illusions." However, Beiner misses the point: it is the philosopher who finds himself before *nature*, whereas the spectator finds himself in and before the *world*. Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker*, 170, gives the only plausible interpretation: man, standing alone face to face with nature, is not the same as the spectator, who does not judge nature but human affairs, amidst his fellow men.

Whereas the spectator takes the views of others into account (while being impartial and freed from the interests of gain and fame), the philosopher remains solitary. For Arendt, it is decisive that "Kant's spectators exist in the plural" (LM1 96). As a result of his identification of the spectator with the philosopher, Beiner assumes that the actor and the spectator exhibit two different ways of life (the citizen's *bios politikos* and the philosopher's *bios theōrētikos*, respectively) instead of reading them as two different *roles* that the citizen at some point may take upon himself. In my view the distinction between the citizen and the self is more fundamental for Arendt than the distinction between the actor and the spectator, which are two different roles that the *citizen* may assume.[528] Whereas the citizen-actor *initiates* events, the citizen-spectator *judges* them, while both remain bound to political reality or the realm of human affairs.

Furthermore, in 'The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern' (1958), which appeared in the same year as the motif of "enlarged mentality" occurred for the first time in her writings, Arendt connected the very same "long experience of polis life" that taught the Greeks "to *understand* – not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another's standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects" with the impartiality of poets and historiographers (and hence *not* with Socrates' maieutic!). What the "representative thinking" of Kant and the story-telling of Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides have in common is that all of them strive for *impartiality* instead of objectivity.[529]

Indeed, throughout her work Arendt praises the tradition that was inaugurated by Homer, as when she claims that "no civilization, however splendid, had been able to look with equal eyes upon friend and foe, upon success and defeat – which since Homer have not been recognized as ultimate standards of men's judgment, even though they are ultimates for the destinies of man's lives" (TP 263). In other words, our judgment of the meaning of events should not depend on the verdict of history.[530] Indeed, Arendt herself acted in Homer's spirit when she

[528] In fact, we already find evidence for the close connection between these two roles of the citizen in one of Arendt's earlier essays, 'Understanding and Politics' (1954), in which she wrote: "If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action, is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes *the other side of action*, namely, that form of cognition, distinct from many others, by which acting men (and not men who are engaged in contemplating some progressive or doomed course of history) eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists" [emphasis added] (ibid., 391). It should be noted that she does not yet use the word "cognition" in the narrower sense of truth-seeking here, which she started doing from 1958 on. Rather, it should be understood to refer to "thinking" in a general sense.

[529] Arendt, 'The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern', 51.

[530] Arendt usually contrasts Homeric impartiality with the Hegelian conception of history. See Arendt, 'The Concept of History', 51: "Not only does it leave behind the common interest in one's own side and one's own people …, but it also discards the alternative of victory or defeat, which moderns have felt expresses the "objective" judgment of history itself, and does not permit it to interfere with what is judged to be worthy of immortalizing praise." See also LM1 216: "Finally we shall be left with the only alternative that there is in these matters – we either can say with Hegel: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, leaving the ultimate judgment to Success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or as they have

spoke of the Hungarian Revolution as “a true event whose stature will not depend upon victory or defeat; its greatness is secure in the tragedy it enacted”.[531]

To summarize this section, opinions, decisions, and judgments are prepared by a type of thinking that is distinctly different from thinking as the solitary dialogue between me and myself. I have tried to demonstrate that despite the fact that *every* type of thinking will necessarily lead to a forgetfulness of *realness*, representative thinking is “worldlier” than the solitary thought of the philosopher who concerns himself with “the essence of everything that is”.[532] The former is thematically concerned with the meaning of *real particulars* – political events, experiences, phenomena – that are bound to a specific space and time and that are subject to opinion and judgment, which means that its “region of withdrawal is clearly located within our ordinary world, the reflexivity of the faculty notwithstanding” (LM1 97).[533] What is crucial here, is that the *activity* of representative thinking *enacts* the *plurality* of worldly positions[534] *within* the invisible space of the mind.[535]

6.5. Poetic Thinking

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.[536]
Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene 2

So far we have reconstructed two distinct activities of thinking. Of these, dialectical thinking, the exercise of the inner two-in-one, while itself being a-political, could *accidentally* fulfill a political role by liberating the faculty of

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come into being.” Arendt of course chooses Kant, whose concept of judgment she interprets in line with the conception of history of Homer and Herodotus: “the Homeric historian is the *judge*” (LM1 216).

She concludes *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* with the quotation of Cato that I have used as epigraph for this section: *Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni* (“The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato”), just as she concluded *The Human Condition* with that other line of Cato, which characterizes the activity of thinking as the solitary dialogue between me and myself.

[531] Arendt, ‘Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution’, 5.

[532] Arendt, ‘Understanding and Politics’, 391.

[533] See also LM1 93.

[534] To repeat, Arendt refers not to a *pluralism* of actually held *opinions* or convictions, but to a *plurality* of actually occupied *positions* in the spatio-temporal world.

[535] Cf. Curtis, ‘Our Sense of the Real’, 115: “Arendt discerned in Kant’s work a mode of public thinking suited to respond to and build, in the invisible space of the mind, the world’s complex phenomenality or appearingness. Kant’s ‘reflective judgment’ emphatically concerns the world, and it is made possible only through a certain sociability.”

[536] WB 193, LM1 212.

judgment. Representative thinking, by contrast, which can be either future-oriented or past-oriented, *intentionally* represents within itself the plurality of (more than two) perspectives that are constitutive for the political world outside. In either case it is not primarily the *object* of thought that determines its "political" character, but the peculiar character of the thinking *activity*.

We might argue, though, that something is still missing. Perhaps we wish to search for a *third* type of thinking which, contrary to the Socratic kind, is indeed primarily concerned with the world instead of with the self, but which, contrary to the representative kind, is not so much involved with the formation of actual political opinions and judgments, but rather with the recovery of the *meaning* of politics as such. Arendt, after all, criticizes our philosophical tradition not only for its inherent lack of attentiveness to the reality and singularity of *events* – which may be compensated by "representative thinking" – but she also refers to tradition's

> lack of *conceptual* clarity and precision with respect to existing realities and experiences [which] has been the curse of Western thinking ever since, in the aftermath of the Periclean Age, the men of action and the men of thought parted company and thinking began to emancipate itself altogether from reality, and especially from political factuality and experience [emphasis added]. (OR 177)

In other words, our philosophical tradition has hindered us from acquiring an adequate understanding and hence appreciation of politics due to its wrong use of certain *concepts*, or its problematic use of *language*. As the previous chapter showed, Arendt argues, for instance, that a specific concept (such as "rule" [*archè*, *Herrschaft*] and "idea" [*idea*]) has been problematically transferred from one context of experience to another (from the household sphere to the political realm and from the sphere of fabrication to the life of the mind),[537] that a specific term (such as "politics" itself) has lost its original meaning (contained in the Greek word *polis*),[538] or, finally, that the "spirit" or "principle" of a specific event (such as the "treasure" of the revolution) has barely found an adequate term at all ("public freedom", "public happiness").[539] Indeed, Arendt asserts that in order for events, experiences, and phenomena to become capable of being remembered and judged at all, they must first be rendered into *words,*[540] a task which she says was always

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[537] HC 222; Arendt, *On Violence*, 43. For the use of the word "idea", see the first section of this chapter.
[538] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 15.
[539] Ibid., 5; OR 221-222, 280.
[540] OR 220: "What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in its turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance, and even for sheer reference, arise out of it." Cf. LM1 133: "Without spectators the world would be imperfect; the participant, absorbed as he is in particular things and pressed by urgent business, cannot see how all the particular things in the world and every particular deed in the realm of human affairs fit together and produce a harmony, which itself is not given to

assigned to the *poets*, “whose business it is to find and make the words we live by” (OR 280).[541]

To be sure, what is problematic here is not so much the *carrying-over* of meaning as such, nor the loss of the *original* or “first” meaning per se. Rather, the point is that we lose our *access* to the underlying phenomena and experiences, in the sense not only of adequately *understanding* them, but also of appropriately *praising* their very possibility.[542] Indeed, Arendt laments the fact that the philosophical tradition has lost the notion that “all appearances, inasmuch as they appear … demand recognition and praise”, adding that this notion is still present in the reflections of the *poets* (LM2 92).

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt once again testifies to her critical distance from the tradition of philosophy, indicating that she has “clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today” (LM1 212). She asserts that it was Kant who had discovered the “scandal of reason”, that is, “the fact that our mind is not capable of certain and verifiable knowledge regarding matters and questions that it nevertheless cannot help thinking about” (LM1 14). Kant distinguishes intellect [*Verstand*] and reason [*Vernunft*], which Arendt states coincides with the distinction between *knowing* and *thinking*, between the quest for *truth* and the quest for *meaning*.[543] She claims, however, that when Kant famously said that he had “found it necessary to deny *knowledge* … to make room for *faith*”, he had in fact denied knowledge only of things that are *unknowable*, and he had made room not for faith but for *thought* (LM1 15, 64). (In other words, we might say, even Kant remained caught within the conceptual framework of Plato’s *Gorgias*.)

Arendt notes that the breakdown of tradition seems to result in “a growing inability to move … in the realm of the invisible” (LM1 12). We will need to learn anew *how* to think,[544] therefore, how to settle down in “the gap between past and future”, a task for which “we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared”,[545] however:

> This small non-time-space in the very heart of time, unlike the world and the culture into which we are born, cannot be inherited and handed down by tradition, although every great book of thought points to it somewhat cryptically …. Each new generation, every new human being, as he becomes conscious of being inserted between an infinite past and an

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sense perception, and this invisible in the visible would remain forever unknown if there were no spectator to look out for it, admire it, straighten out the stories and put them into words.”

[541] See also Arendt, ‘Bertold Brecht, 1898-1956’, 249.

[542] Cf. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social*, 274-276.

[543] The only attempt I know of to press the originality and importance of Arendt’s distinction between knowing and thinking, between truth and meaning, and to develop it further, is Gray, ‘The Winds of Thought’.

[544] Cf. Arendt, ‘Tradition and the Modern Age’, 29-30, CC 204.

[545] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

> infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought. (LM1 210) [546]

In spite of this predicament, Arendt develops a specific account of *how* to think, which she first described in the preface to *Between Past and Future* (1961).[547] Here, on the assumption that "thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings",[548] she formulates the following aim for her "exercises in political thought":

> to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language – such as freedom and justice, authority and reason, responsibility and virtue, power and glory – leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality.[549]

This motif of recovering the original experiences and phenomena underlying the words we live by is reintroduced and further developed, first in her 1968 essay on Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and later in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*. In both cases, Arendt begins by noting that what we are left with is a *fragmented* past, that is, a past that has lost its authority, its certainty of evaluation.[550] In both cases, she quotes Shakespeare – see the epigraph to the present section – in order to metaphorically portray as "pearl diving" a non-traditional way of dealing with the past, a way of thinking which she explains as follows in the last paragraph of her Benjamin essay:

> this thinking, fed by the present, works with the "thought fragments" it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they

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[546] Cf. Ibid., 13.
[547] Its subtitle is *Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Consider the following comment in Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 473: "[Arendt] herself once remarked that *Between Past and Future* was the best of her books. She believed in its form: as its subtitle indicates, it contains 'exercises in political thought,' and was thus not systematic."
[548] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.
[549] Ibid., 15.
[550] WB 193, LM2 212.

> waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as "thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*. (WB 205-206)

Commentators have tended to interpret the metaphor of "pearl diving" developed here primarily in the context of Arendt's search for new ways of dealing with the past, and hence they have been inclined to read it as a description of her "method" – a term she herself detested[551] – of "historiography".[552] Yet they failed to pay sufficient attention to the fact that the passage is explicitly presented as explanation of "the gift of *thinking poetically*" (WB 205), the overall aim of the essay being to show that Benjamin, who was "neither a poet nor a philosopher", nonetheless "thought poetically" (WB 156).[553]

Arendt explains that Benjamin understood language as an essentially *poetic* phenomenon, which implies that he did not investigate "the utilitarian or communicative functions of linguistic creations", but rather tried to understand them "in their crystallized and thus ultimately fragmentary form as intentionless and noncommunicative utterances of a "world essence"" (WB 205), and it also implies that he regarded *metaphor* as "the central gift of language" (WB 166). What underlies Arendt's critique of the conceptual framework of tradition is precisely this more fundamental point concerning philosophy's neglect of the *poetic* or disclosing quality of language in favor of its *communicative* function – communication [*Mitteilung*] understood as the mere exchange of propositional content.[554]

We may of course ask whether what she says about Benjamin is also applicable to her. At least the following passage strongly suggests that this is the case, for the example of the word "political" is clearly her own:

> Any period to which its own past has become as questionable as it has to us must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably, thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all. The Greek *polis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence – that is, at the bottom of the sea – for as long as we use the word "politics." This is what the semanticists, who with good reason attack language as the one bulwark behind which the past hides – its confusion, as they say – fail to understand. They are absolutely right: in the final analysis all problems are linguistic problems; they simply do not know the implications of what they are saying. (WB 204)

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[551] LM1 211.
[552] Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 93-95, 173; Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 274-278; Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, 9-10, 267.
[553] Cf. WB 166, 205.
[554] Cf. HA 26, 176, 179.

Arendt devotes several chapters to the relation between language and thought in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, [555] in which she criticizes traditional philosophy's understanding of thought and speech as a mere means for cognition culminating in the speechless contemplation of compelling truth.

To begin with, Arendt points to the close affinity of thought and speech: "*thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think* [emphasis in original]" (LM1 99). The urge to speak is *not* caused by the need to communicate [*mitteilen*], for thoughts do not have to be communicated in order to occur, while they cannot occur without being spoken (whether silently or out loud). Arendt illustrates this by referring to Aristotle's *On Interpretation*. The criterion of speech [*logos*] is not truth or falsehood, but meaning: "speech … is not necessarily *apophantikos*, a statement or a proposition in which *alētheuein* and *pseudesthai*, truth and falsehood, being and non-being, are at stake" (LM1 99).[556] A prayer, for example, is a form of speech, but it is neither true nor false. Rather, the need of reason [*logos*] is to "give account" [*logon didonai*] of whatever may be or may have occurred, which is prompted not by the search for knowledge, but by the search for *meaning*: "The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of *appropriating* and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger" (LM1 100).

However, Arendt notes, language is "by no means as evidently adequate for the thinking activity as vision is for its business of seeing" (LM1 100). Language needs to borrow its vocabulary from words that were originally meant to correspond to sense experience, a borrowing which is never haphazard or arbitrary. Arendt claims that all philosophic and most poetic language is metaphorical, which means that the insights contained in it are gained by *analogy*, which is not to be understood in the usual sense of "an imperfect semblance of two things", but of "a *perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things*" (LM1 104). The example she gives is Kant's depiction of the despotic state as a "mere machine (like a hand mill)" because it is "governed by an individual absolute will…. For between a despotic state and a hand mill there is, to be sure, no similarity; but there is a similarity in the rules according to which we reflect upon these two things and their causality."[557] According to Arendt, then:

> All philosophical terms are metaphors, frozen analogies, as it were, whose true meaning discloses itself when we dissolve the term into the original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the first philosopher to use it. (LM1 104)[558]

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[555] LM1 14-15, 57-65, 98-125, 211-213.

[556] Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 17a1-4.

[557] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §59, as quoted by Arendt.

[558] This passage reminds us of her description of Socratic "pondering reflection" on "concepts", each of which is "*something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze* whenever it wants to find out the original meaning" [emphasis in original] (LM1 171). Cf. LM1 174-175. Yet as we have seen in the second section above, in the case of Socrates Arendt emphasizes the *destructive* character of this form of thinking, which poses a *threat* to the *polis*. By contrast, in her reflections on metaphor –

She notes that language is capable of bridging the abyss between the invisible realm of the mind and the visible world of appearances precisely because of its *metaphorical* character: "the mind's language by means of metaphor returns to the world of visibilities to illuminate and elaborate further what cannot be *seen* but can be *said* [emphasis added]" (LM1 109). Accordingly, metaphors are described by her as "the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it" (LM1 109). Moreover, within the thinking process itself they serve as models to guide us among experiences that our bodily senses, with their relative certainty of knowledge, cannot. Finally, the relationship that is expressed in metaphor is *irreversible*, indicating "the absolute primacy of the world of appearances" and providing additional evidence of "the extraordinary quality of thinking, of its being always out of order" (LM1 109). In sum:

> Language, by lending itself to metaphorical usage, enables us to think, that is, to have traffic with non-sensory matters, because it permits a carrying-over, *metapherein*, of our sense experiences. There are not two worlds because metaphor unites them.[559] (LM1 110)

Arendt warns, however, that language, "the only medium in which the invisible can become manifest in a world of appearances", is "by no means adequate for that function as our senses are for their business of coping with the perceptible world" (LM1 112). In other words, although the metaphor may cure the defect, the cure has its dangers too, which lies in "the overwhelming evidence the metaphor provides by appealing to the unquestioned evidence of sense experience" (LM1 112). Arendt suggests that this is the reason why the great philosophers

> have almost unanimously insisted on something "ineffable" behind the written word, something of which they, when they thought and did not write, were very clearly aware and which nevertheless refused to be pinned down and handed over to others; in short, they insisted that there was something that refused to lend itself to a transformation that would allow it to appear and take its place among the appearances of the world. (LM1 113-114)

Arendt draws special attention to Plato's famous claim that "these things cannot be put into words like other things we learn",[560] which she interprets as an implicit

which are entirely absent from her reflections on Socratic thinking – she draws attention to the very *possibilities* of metaphorical language in *reconciling* ourselves with the (political) world in a meaningful way.

[559] See also LM1 187: "As the metaphor bridges the gap between the world of appearances and the mental activities going on within it, so the Socratic two-in-one heals the solitariness of thought; its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth."

[560] Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 341c.

denial of the existence of an *un*written doctrine as well.[561] She claims that it is tempting to read these utterances as "attempts to warn the reader that he was in danger of a fatal mistake in understanding: what were offered him were thoughts, not cognitions, not solid pieces of knowledge which, once acquired, would dispel ignorance" (LM1 114). To explain further, she speaks of "a possible incompatibility between *intuition* – the guiding metaphor for philosophical truth – and *speech* – the medium in which thinking manifests itself: the former always presents us with a co-temporaneous manifold, whereas the latter necessarily discloses itself in a sequence of words and sentences" (LM1 118). There is a natural tension between seeing [*theōria*] and reasoning with words [*logos*], for "nothing expressed in words can ever attain to the immobility of an object of mere contemplation" (LM1 122). Arendt concludes: "Compared to an object of contemplation, meaning, which can be said and spoken about, is slippery; if the philosopher wants to *see* and *grasp* it, it 'slips away'" (LM1 122).

The sight metaphor, inadequate for the characterization of thinking, is manifestly present not only in Plato's notion of "idea", which he took from the experience of the craftsman who creates the model he holds before his eyes, but also in his cave parable, which Arendt calls "essentially poetic". In search, then, of an alternative metaphor for the thinking experience, she arrives at Aristotle's notions of *energeia* (an activity that has its end in itself), of *noēsis noēseōs* (reasoning turning in circles), and, finally, of the very sensation of being alive: "*without thinking the human mind is dead*" (LM1 123). Whereas the cognitive enterprise follows a rectilinear motion, "Aristotle's circular motion, taken together with the life metaphor, suggests a quest for meaning that for man as a thinking being accompanies life and ends only in death" (LM1 124). Since these metaphors indeed relate to no cognitive capacity, they remain loyal to the fundamental experiences of the thinking ego. Arendt admits, however, that they remain quite empty.[562]

Arendt could have returned to her metaphor of the pearl diver, but she did not, possibly due to its being linked too exclusively with her account of how to deal with the *past*. What is even more significant, perhaps, is that something essential is lacking from the figure of the pearl diver (as well as from that of the "collector" and of the "*flâneur*", both of which also figure in the Benjamin essay): the element of *speech*. As we have seen in the case of "dialectical" thinking, the metaphor that

[561] The *agrapha dogmata* which we know about through a remark by Aristotle in his *Physics* 209b15. Arendt takes the notion of an "unwritten" or "esoteric" teaching to be an expression of the conviction that thought (as the quest for meaning) should not be confused with knowledge (as the quest for truth), whereas we saw that Strauss takes it to be an expression of the conviction that *true* knowledge [*epistēmē*] – as opposed to mere opinion [*doxa*] – can only be found by "the few" who are "naturally" capable of thinking for and by themselves, thereby identifying thought with the quest for truth.

[562] Arendt uses Kafka's parable 'He' (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7-13, LM1 202-211) to tell us *where* we are when we think, viz. between past and future instead of in Plato's cave. Only in this specific sense can one understand why she says that this parable offers "a perfect metaphor for the activity of thought" (LM2 209), for it does not yet indicate how to *move*, that is, what we should be "doing" in the gap between past and future.

is used to make sense of the internal, invisible dialogue between me and myself, is actually derived from the external, visible experience of a lively "dialogue" or *conversation* between two close friends.[563] As we have seen in the case of "representative" thinking, the metaphor that is used to make sense of the internal, invisible representation of the standpoints of my fellow human beings, is actually derived from the external, visible experience of the lively *verbal exchange* of standpoints between fellow actors who find themselves confronted with a common issue, or between fellow spectators who find themselves caught up in a common event.[564] Finally, we may suggest that, in the case of "poetic" thinking, the metaphor that is used to make sense of the internal, invisible use of metaphor in order to make sense of the invisible, is actually derived from the external, visible experience of poetry itself, more precisely of the poet who is *singing* the praise of the world.

We may ask why Arendt did not seem to think of this. There is a rather obvious explanation, however: in her vocabulary, "poetry" is linked up with the Greek term *poièsis*, which refers to the activity of work, making, and fabrication, that is, the activity of *homo faber* who, sitting in his workplace, isolated from his fellow human beings, silently uses his material to create his product.[565] In other words, she may have thought that, by explicitly proposing the making of poetry as a metaphor for thought, she would have reiterated precisely the traditional interpretation of the activity of thinking in terms of the element of the contemplative vision of an idea, which is inherent to the experience of making. Indeed, in *The Human Condition*, in the section titled 'The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art', she asserts that writing poetry involves "the same workmanship which, through the primordial instrument of human hands, builds the other durable things of the human artifice" (HC 169).

Yet, in the very same section, another, perhaps more promising understanding of "poetry" starts to emerge. Here, Arendt calls music and poetry "the least 'materialistic' of the arts because their 'material' consists of sounds and words" – note her use of quotation marks here – and she adds that the workmanship these arts demand is "kept to a minimum" (HC 169). Moreover, after having suggested that the durability of a poem is not so much caused by the fact that it is written down, but by "condensation", she speaks of poetry as "language *spoken* in utmost density and concentration [emphasis added]" (HC 169), the German word for condensation being "*Verdichtung*", for density "*Dichte*", both of which resonate in the German verb "*dichten*", and not in the English expression "to *make* a poem".

Arendt does not explicitly identify the activity of "condensation" with the use of metaphor, but she may have had it in mind. One page earlier, she refers to a poem by Rilke to illustrate the "veritable metamorphosis" a work of art is capable

[563] Cf. PP 82-86.
[564] Cf. LM1 93.
[565] According to Markell, Arendt's concept of "work" is in fact richer in meaning. See Markell, 'Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of *The Human Condition*'.

of bringing about, being more than mere reification, more than a matter of mere "making" (HC 168). Consider especially the second stanza, which simultaneously articulates and performs the power of metaphor in "calling" the invisible:

> Here is magic. In the realm of a spell
> the common word seems lifted up above…
> and yet is like the call of the male
> who calls for the invisible female dove.[566]

We may say that it is the *singing* poet who uses the power of metaphorical language to give *meaning* to what appears, and thus to *praise* its existence.[567] In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt claims that the ancient Greek notion that "all appearances, inasmuch as they appear … demand recognition and *praise*", cited at the beginning of this section, served as "a kind of philosophical justification of poetry and the arts" (LM2 92).

To conclude this section, we may say that "poetic thinking" is Arendt's way of undoing the meaninglessness of the world. By realizing that language is essentially *metaphorical* and thus capable of connecting the invisible life of the mind with the visible worldly reality, it establishes or re-establishes that connection, either by diving for the original and originating experiences that lie hidden within our inherited words or by finding and making words that adequately capture novel experiences. Although only representative thinking is "political" in the proper sense of the word, insofar as it helps us to orient ourselves *within* the world, we may now say that, by "thinking poetically", we enable ourselves to *appropriate* or *re-appropriate* that world in the first place. Therein we may find an alternative to the "distanced" and yet "worldly" citizenship that Dana Villa was seeking, and which he (mistakenly, I believe) identified with the "philosophical citizenship" of Socrates.[568]

6.6. Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that Arendt rejects the "Platonic" conceptualization of the specific character of and difference between philosophy and politics. In her view, they have been interpreted as "cognition" and "rule", respectively, led by the analogy with the activity of the solitary craftsman who, in his workplace, fabricates the "idea" he contemplates before his inner eye. As a result, the phenomenal specificity of both thinking and acting was lost. Acting together results in events that constitute the space of appearances, the public realm, the stubborn "realness" of which will forever remain outside the reach of thought. And yet, all thinking activity is concerned with the quest for the meaning of actions, of worldly phenomena including those of politics – an activity from the endlessness of which

[566] Translation John J.L. Mood. Arendt cites the German original only.
[567] LM1 143, LM2 92, 185-6
[568] Villa, 'The Philosopher versus the Citizen', 149.

we cannot escape by appealing to the certainty either of the compelling evidence of truth or untruth (in the case of Science, logic, and philosophy understood after the model of contemplation), or to the certain verdict of victory or defeat (in the case of History).

We raised the question of whether Arendt leaves room for ways of thinking that are somehow capable of bridging the gap between thought and action, between our inner mind and the outer world – while still doing justice to their mutual differences, to thought's always necessarily being "out of order". Throughout her oeuvre we have traced three motifs of thinking which could count as suitable candidates for living up to this task: (i) dialectical thinking; (ii) representative thinking; and (iii) poetic thinking.

As has been shown, one way of distinguishing these three types of thinking is to look at the difference in the *objects* with which they are concerned. The *first*, dialectical thinking, which is connected to the exemplary figure of Socrates, is thematically concerned with the meaning (or "essences") of concepts (or "ideas"), such as happiness, courage, justice, etc., which serve as invisible standards for our conduct. In itself, this type of thinking is an expression of the Socratic conviction that an unexamined life is not meaningful, and what underlies it is a concern with the harmony of the inner *self*. The *second*, representative thinking, which Arendt links to the tradition of ancient historiography, to the Greek notion of practical wisdom [*phronèsis*], and to Kant's third *Critique*, is concerned with the meaning and desirability of particular (political) *deeds* and *events*. The *third*, poetic thinking, which she associates with Benjamin, is concerned with the meaning and appropriateness of the words we live by. In contradistinction to the first, these last two types of thinking are not concerned with (the integrity of) the self, but with (the integrity of) the *world*: the second by judging which "works and deeds and words" (HC 19) that world is to be constituted by, and the third by naming and praising it.

The extent to which these ways of thinking can be said to be "fit" for politics should in the final instance be determined by another way of distinguishing them, viz. according to the nature of their inner *activity*. The *first* type of thinking – the conversation of the dual two-in-one – is a manifestation of worldly plurality in the self, however limited. However, *only* in case of emergencies – *accidentally*, as it were – does this duality act as a corrective to a loss of plurality in the real world of politics. The *second* type of thinking, which leads to the formation of judgment, opinion, and decision, is inherently "worldly" insofar as it *intentionally* represents within the mind the plurality of perspectives of the political realm in which one happens to find oneself. Hence, in contrast to the first type of thinking, it is genuinely "at home" in the world of political reality. This is also true of the *third* type of thinking, which tries to render, retain, or retrieve the "spirit" of the phenomena, experiences, and events that are contained within the words and concepts that we shape and are shaped by. Because thought is essentially discursive (conducted in *speech*), and by virtue of the fact that our language is essentially poetic or *metaphorical*, the visible world of appearances is introduced within the

invisible life of the mind. Thus, by "thinking poetically", we may achieve a form of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, a form of *meaningfulness*, if only for a brief moment in time.

We may say that by her drawing corresponding distinctions between thinking and knowing and between acting and making, Arendt breaks with the classical "Platonic" scheme of the *Gorgias* in which "rational" philosophy and "irrational" politics are played off against each other and hierarchically ordered in relation to each other, and in which both turn out in the final instance to be concerned with the individual *self* rather than with the common *world*. Accordingly, Arendt's approach to the problem of political thinking, of how to *understand* the *political* while doing justice to the peculiar nature of both activities, as well as to that of thoughtful politics, is to be distinguished from the approaches of both Popper and Strauss, who respectively conceive of science and philosophy as *privileged* approaches to the world which culminate in "rational" and "true" *knowledge* of that world. According to Arendt, however, this conception forms the necessary premise for the possibility of manipulating, "making" and, finally, "ruling" that world.

We have argued, contra Dana Villa, that Arendt is bound to reject the first, Socratic, dialectical form of thinking as a model for political thinking, because of its *self*-oriented character, because of its embodiment of a limited form of plurality, and because of its merely *negative* results, which together make it essentially *a-political*. To be sure, the politically lacking aspect of Socratic thinking was also recognized by Popper (see chapter 2) and Strauss (see chapter 4). Popper stated that Socrates was rather interested in the "personal" than the "institutional" dimension of the open society. Strauss stated that Socrates was insufficiently aware of the danger to the law of the *polis* that is posed by free philosophizing. Their respective *answers*, however – the scientific politics of institutional reform and the philosophical politics of exoteric writing – remain tied to the "Platonic" substitution of cognition for thought.

The kind of "thoughtful politics" we were looking for, that is, sound political judgment and decision-making, seems to be embodied especially in Arendt's notion of representative thinking, for it actively retains the plurality of perspectives out of which the political realm is constituted by "representing" them within the mind. Although its value of "impartiality" – rather than that of "objectivity" – is also defended by Popper (see chapter 1), his conception of rationalism, of "reasonableness", or of "listening to each other", ultimately remains *instrumental* to the pursuit of *knowledge*. The former acquires its value and meaning *in light of* the value and meaning of the latter. As a result, Popper subordinates the perspectival or worldly quality of political reasoning to its cognitive aspect. We have also encountered a recovery of practical wisdom [*phronèsis*] in the case of Strauss (see chapter 3). However, as his prudent statesman is in the last instance modeled after the contemplative philosopher, he also downplays the perspectival or worldly quality of political reasoning, which

becomes manifest, for instance, in his claim that it is the task of the historian to strive for "objective" judgment.

Arendt's notion of poetic thinking, finally, seems to come closest to an answer to our question of how to understand the political as such and at all. In order for representative thinking to operate, that is, in order to be able to form judgments, opinions, and decisions about actual political events, they need to be rendered in *words*. Arendt emphasizes the essential role of the *metaphorical* character of our language in giving *meaning* to the world, in reconciling ourselves with the world. Popper, by contrast, was shown to be incapable of giving account of the analogical and metaphorical traces within his own use of language, since both the "essentialist" view of language he polemicizes against (i.e. the view according to which each word has its intrinsic, "original", referent) and the "nominalist" view of language he embraces (i.e. the view according to which language users choose the referent of a word at will) presuppose that the communicated meaning of our concepts is or can at some point be fixed and hence mastered. As a result, he fails to see the way the "poetic" quality of language is effectively operating within his own writing, for instance in his crucial metaphor of "social engineering" (see chapter 2). In contradistinction to Popper, Strauss does acknowledge the poetic quality of language (see chapter 4), but since he considers it to be "ministerial" to its philosophic quality, he, too, sticks to the presupposition (or at least the fiction) that the meaning of our words is ultimately to be mastered completely. Arendt's notion of poetic thinking allows us to acknowledge that our thought, due to the metaphorical character of language, is itself intrinsically *worldly* by its capacity of "carrying over" the visible into the invisible and vice versa. So if we declare this dimension of language to be "irrational" or at best "ministerial", our most intimate possibility of appropriating the world and meaningfully connecting to it would be *lost*.

CONCLUSION

The better we understand what politics is, the better we will be able to act politically. That is to say, the better we know how to orient ourselves within the political domain, the better we will be able to take adequate political decisions and make sound political judgments. Yet, as we noted at the beginning of this dissertation, at first sight it would seem that political philosophy has little to teach us about the nature of politics in this sense. Not only does it tend to accept a certain conception of politics as given – usually its being restricted to the domain of government in liberal-democratic states – it also tends to interpret politics in its own image, viz. as a kind of rational discussion that is merely not rational enough. Insofar as it does not first raise the question "what is political?", it runs the risk of providing us with an uncritical and perhaps even a distorted picture of political reality, whereby it fails to acquaint us with political reality as a realm of contingent human interaction of which our actions, decisions, and judgments are part.

We also noted that political philosophy is usually understood as a *theoretical* enterprise, that is, as the pursuit of propositional knowledge. As a result, there is a tendency to neglect the fact that it is itself, at least insofar as it expresses itself in speech or writing, also a *practice*. As such, it is part of the same domain as all other human interaction, including politics. Hence, there seems to be no way to determine "from the outside" where the practice of philosophy ends and where the practice of politics begins. In common with all human actions, political-philosophical writings may therefore have a certain impact in reality that is neither expressly intended nor foreseen. The *propositional* content or intention of a certain political-philosophical text may be contradicted by its *performative* implications. These implications may be due to the various *assumptions* that people who are going to *act* on the theory are bound to make, and to the various uses of language which escape from the explicit argumentative reasoning of a text, but which nevertheless fulfill a constitutive role in it, such as *analogical* and *polemical* forms of reasoning. A political philosophy should somehow take this into account if it wishes to contribute to an adequate understanding of politics and if it wishes to teach us how to act politically in a thoughtful way.

Given this condition of political philosophy, we raised the following, tripartite question: (i) how can we philosophize (think) about politics (action) in such a way, (ii) that it takes into account the specific characteristics both of politics (as a form of action) and of philosophy (as a form of thinking), and (iii) that it prepares us for the exercise of what may be called 'thoughtful politics', that is, taking adequate political decisions and forming sound political judgments, and choosing the right courses of political action?

Instead of embarking on a systematic, straightforward for / against argument to answer these questions, we embarked on a study of the propositional contents *and* the performative meanings of instances of political-philosophical

writing, thereby aiming to give due consideration to the fact that, generally speaking, texts are not only read and do not only become influential "thanks to themselves", that is, in accordance with the propositions, theories and *arguments* that are put forward in them, but that they are also read and that they also become influential "despite themselves", that is, in accordance with their *action*, with what they "do". Although the actual historical 'influence' achieved by a text may be indicative of its performative meaning, they do not entirely coincide, for the historical circumstances and institutional settings in which a text is received will vary from time to time, while its inner structure remains the same.

The works of Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt have been studied in particular, all of whom aimed to re-think the relationship between philosophy and politics, or between thought and action, and all of whom have proposed and used different strategies to deal with this relationship, especially in discussion with its "Platonic" conception. By digging for the "deeply hidden structural features" (Raymond Geuss) of their writings – hidden assumptions that are "realized" by acting on them, analogies drawn in them, polemics staged by them – our aim has been to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics, and thereby of the conditions of political understanding – how to *make sense* of politics – and of thoughtful politics – how to *act* politically, how to take decisions and make judgments within the political realm.

In Part I, we saw Karl Popper criticizing the "closed society" and its approach to politics, called "utopian social engineering", for its elimination of our individual freedom and responsibility for decisions. Instead, he proposes to adopt the approach of "piecemeal social engineering", which belongs to the "open society" and prepares legislation by democratic government. We argued, however, that due to Popper's *logical* separation of facts and values, he runs the danger that the *ends* that this social technology (as choice of the most efficient and effective means of solving social problems by institutional reform) is supposed to serve, are ultimately arbitrary. In the end, Popper himself admits that rational political decision-making and judgment rest on an "irrational faith" in reason. To prevent this conclusion, we argued, Popper requires a broader, more all-encompassing conception of rationality, on which he does in fact draw – an attitude of "reasonableness" or "listening to others" – but which he cannot vouch for on the basis of his narrower, falsificationist conception of scientific rationality (Chapter 1).

Instead, we noted that Popper draws several *analogies* between the formulation of moral and political proposals and that of scientific propositions, thereby bestowing on politics the aura of certainty derived from scientific methodology, most notably in his pointing to the compelling appeal of the elimination of avoidable human suffering. However, we demonstrated that Popper's *propositional* defense of a politics of rational discussion, which finds support in the *analogy* between politics and science, is contradicted by his *performance* of the *polemical* friend-enemy conception of politics, which he

invokes in the name of the urgency to defend the "open society" against the "closed society" (Chapter 2).

We concluded that Popper would seem to require some form of theoretical self-consciousness of his theory also being a *practice*: (i) his theory makes use not merely of *logical* reasoning but also rests on the use of *analogical* reasoning, which in fact appears to be constitutive for the 'validity' of Popper's proposal for piecemeal social engineering, and (ii) his theory is embedded in the performance of a fierce *polemic* against the enemies of the open society, which in fact contradicts that proposal. Moreover, he requires a broader conception of *politics*, which encompasses the phenomenon of the exercise of government power or rule – the presence of which he appeared to self-evidently presuppose as a necessary evil – as well as the apparently inevitable possibility of a friend-enemy struggle between political societies. Finally, he requires a conception of *philosophy* that is not reduced to methodology but allows for the rationality of other forms of language than pure falsificationism, especially for the rationality of value judgments.

In Part II we saw that Strauss seems to meet all three of these demands. He identifies philosophy not with scientific methodology but with philosophical dialectics, which ascends from *opinions* – among which is the *law* of the polis, which is the authoritative opinion par excellence – that turn out to contradict each other, in order to replace them by true *knowledge* of nature. We saw that the philosopher ultimately looks down on the city, because it cannot live up to the demand of truth, the demands of what is right by nature and not merely right by convention. Strauss identifies the political with the sphere of the *law* of a "city" or "civil society", which, as a closed society, commands unconditional obedience from its citizens, at least in case of *war*. This does not mean, though, that we have to choose between philosophic life, the life of reason [*logos*], which amounts to an escape from politics, and political life, the life of "spiritedness" [*thumos*], which then seems to be condemned to a lack of rational standards for political decision-making and judgment. Strauss leaves room for some form of rational guidance for politics. According to his reconstruction of the classical teaching of "natural right", thoughtful politics consists in the "dilution" of what is right by nature by what is right by convention, as in the case of the Platonic philosopher-lawgiver, and in deciding in concrete political situations which end is the most "natural" one, be it the "higher" or the more "urgent" end, as in the case of the Aristotelian statesman. In either case, decisions in practice (i.e. in concrete, "existential" situations) cannot be directly "deduced" from theory (i.e. the knowledge of a hierarchy of ends) (Chapter 3).

We saw that Strauss distinguishes another, "deeper" form of politics, which, he claims, is required for the communication of the philosopher with the political community. He thereby displays a "theoretical self-consciousness" of the political condition of philosophical writing, including his own. As the philosophical search for the truth is at odds with the political community upholding the authoritative opinion of the law, the philosopher is required to use a specific

form of *political* writing, called "the art of writing between the lines" to prevent him from being misunderstood by "the many" and to stimulate "the few" to start philosophizing. We argued, however, that this manner of writing, when *performed*, affirms certain hermeneutical and ontological assumptions that rest on the fiction of being able to completely *master* the political conditions to which the expression of philosophical thought is subject, and thereby to *escape* from them (Chapter 4).

Although Strauss offers both a conception of philosophy and a conception of politics that is broader than Popper's reduction of the first to scientific methodology and the latter to rational discussion with a view to democratic legislation, Strauss's theory and practice, both of "thoughtful" politics and of "political" philosophy, imply an overestimation of the possibilities to control the meaning of language and human interaction, due to a lack of appreciation for the contingency that is inherent to both.

Part III turns to the work of Hannah Arendt, who starts precisely with a recognition of the contingent character of human interaction, or its *freedom*. As we have seen, on the basis of her account of the human conditions of natality and plurality, she criticizes the tradition of philosophy for having attempted to *escape* from politics by substituting it with rule. In her view, the *raison d'être* of the political is public freedom, which is realized by the acting-in-concert of citizens who appear within the public realm. Public freedom is in no way capable of being "guaranteed" by a theoretical justification in terms of either a transcendent absolute (the laws of God or the truth of Nature) or an immanent absolute (the success of History). Instead, she emphasizes that politics continuously requires action and *confidence* in action out of *love* of freedom (Chapter 5).

However, this does not mean there is no role for thought in Arendt's case. On the contrary, against the traditional reduction of thought to contemplation (or cognition) and against contemporary forms of thoughtlessness, Arendt recovers three types of the activity of thinking. The first of these, "dialectical thinking", or the inner dialogue between me and myself, is politically unreliable, since by itself it cannot establish the plural "we" of the political, or at best only in emergency situations, when its inner two-in-one becomes an example of plurality, despite itself, and however limited, within the outer world. The second type, "representative thinking", is political in the normal sense that it prepares for political decision-making and judgment by "representing" within the mind the various perspectives on a specific public matter. The third type, "poetic thinking", is political at a remove, for, by taking into account the inherently metaphorical character of language, it is able to criticize common political-philosophical language for its lack of correspondence to actual phenomenal reality. By diving for forgotten phenomena and experiences that lie hidden in our language, or by developing new conceptual vocabularies, it enables us to make ourselves at home again in the political world (Chapter 6).

Although Arendt's work *could* be interpreted as if she performatively invokes the impossibility of politics against which she propositionally advocates its

possibility, her manner of writing somehow resists this reading. Rather than offering a "solution" or establishing a "hierarchy', it *performs* the plurality and perspectivity – the "in-between" – of human interaction, whereby we, Arendt's readers, are invited to examine our own worldly position and test our own confidence in politics.

On the basis of our reading of the writing of these three authors, we are able to argue the following in answer to the question we raised in the introduction, which we recalled at the beginning of this conclusion, viz. how to philosophize about politics in such a way, while taking into account the specific character both of philosophy and politics, that we may be able to act politically in a thoughtful manner.

In the first place, we argue that a political philosophy should possess or develop a realistic or adequate understanding both of politics (as a form of action) and philosophy (as a form of thinking), for which it is at least required that it should not accept uncritically what is generally called "political" (as that which is restricted to the government or the state) and towards what is generally called "philosophical" (as the rational justification of propositions in terms of their truth value or legitimacy).

We saw that Popper adheres to a fairly common sense picture of politics. His term "political" self-evidently refers to the exercise of "power of man over man" as embodied by the state or the government in liberal democracies. Normal politics appeared to consist in the "solving" of social "problems" in a manner that is as "rational" – i.e. "scientific" – as possible. We also saw that exceptional politics – the polemical defense of "the open society" against its enemies or of democracy against dictatorship actually *practiced* by Popper – tends to fall outside his conception of politics, or is at least not accounted for in his conception of "piecemeal social engineering". Strauss, on the other hand, includes the element of "closure" in his conception of the political when he refers to the "fact" that a political order is held together by the law of a regime that is "authoritative" and demands obedience from its individual citizens, and to the "fact" that every political society, being a "closed society', stands in potentially inimical relations with other "closed societies". In his case, politics seems to consist in the self-preservation (or existence) and, if possible, self-improvement (or excellence) of such a society. We may say that Popper somehow *presupposes* the unity or order of a political community within which the "piecemeal social engineering" takes place (the reform of *society* by means of *state* policy and legislation), whereas Strauss explicitly tries to *understand* the *raison d'être* of the unity or order of a political community, of a "city" or "civil society" [*polis*] in the first place. He does so in terms of the "natural" end of human excellence or virtue [*aretē*] in answer to the question of the right way of life, the highest virtue – the philosophical pursuit of knowledge – being trans-political, the political virtues *par excellence* being "freedom" (i.e. independence from other cities) and "empire" (i.e. the exercise of

hegemony over other cities). From Arendt's perspective, finally, one may note that Popper and Strauss identify politics with "government" or "rule" [*Herrschaft*], whereas she identifies politics with the performance of "public freedom", that is, with citizens acting together in a public realm constituted by contingent human interactions, i.e. by unique "events" which might as well not have occurred, but which, once they have become part of the realm of human affairs, can no longer be "wished away". She argues not so much that it is possible to establish within this realm a politics completely purified of "rule", i.e. of the "vertical" relation of command and obedience, or completely purified of polemics, i.e. of the formation of groupings which are merely for or against each other. Rather, she wishes to prevent the understanding of politics and of related terms such as "power" and "authority" in terms of rule or in terms of polemics, rather than in terms of the acting-in-concert of political "equals", from undermining our love of freedom, our faith in the possibility of "horizontally" establishing and maintaining a realm of public freedom together.

Regarding philosophy, we saw that Popper identifies philosophy with the *methodology* of science, which provides *logically* valid criteria by which to distinguish scientific from pseudo-scientific propositions. He also draws on a broader conception of philosophy, viz. the Socratic "reasonableness" of "listening to each other". This conception permits a restricted form of rationality for value statements – viz. of arbitration or compromise – whereby it oversteps the boundaries of strictly falsificationist scientific reasoning. In addition, Popper makes ample use of *analogical* reasoning – explaining the "rationality" of moral and political reasoning by way of analogy with scientific reasoning – but the "rational" status of this way of reasoning remains unaccounted for in his work. By contrast, Strauss explicitly recovers the Socratic form of philosophical dialectics *against* the deductive method of science. Philosophical dialectics "ascends" to the truth by "speaking through" mutually contradictory opinions about the "what", that is, the "nature" or "essence" of things, especially the human things, such as "virtues", which, as they are "in speech" rather than "in deed", cannot be "deduced" from any factual account of human nature. Finally, Arendt criticizes the tendency to identify philosophy with contemplation, or, more generally, to identify thinking with cognition, to which both Popper and Strauss in fact adhere. According to Arendt, cognition strives for *truth* – i.e. to know "what" something is and whether it exists at all – whereas thinking strives for *meaning* – to "ponder" or to "think through" what it *means* for something to exist. Moreover, she claims that the activity of thinking always remains "out of order" in the sense that the mind can never "reach" the actual realness of the things and events that make up the external world. Of the several motifs of thinking that can be traced throughout her oeuvre, her own way of thinking is best captured by her notion of "poetic thinking", which acknowledges that all conceptual language is metaphorical, that is, all words we use to refer to the invisible 'concepts' of the mind – such as the concepts 'politics' and 'idea' – are derived from sense-experience, from our experience of the visible, phenomenal world. Thus, it is precisely the *metaphorical*

character of thought that allows us to "reconcile" ourselves with the external world of appearances. As such, Arendt's conception of speech or language is richer than that of Popper and Strauss. While Popper acknowledges the rationality of propositional language only and tends to believe that it is possible to eliminate or at least greatly reduce the influence of the meaning of metaphorical or "poetic" language, Strauss allows for the existence of the "poetic" use of language, but he tends to presuppose that the meaning of this type of language can be *mastered* entirely by the speaker or writer in question and made "ministerial" for the philosophical pursuit of truth.

In the second place, we claim that a political philosophy should possess or develop some degree of theoretical self-consciousness that it is also a practice, at least insofar as it expresses itself in speech or writing, and of the implications thereof for (i) the validity or status of its propositions or theory, and for (ii) the influence of its "deeply hidden structural features" on actual politics.

In the case of Popper, we noted a lack of such awareness. We demonstrated that, despite himself, his proposal for a "rational" politics of piecemeal social engineering rests on analogical reasoning, that is to say, on the analogy of politics with science, and that his proposal is even contradicted by his performance of a polemical conception of politics. Only on *two* occasions in his work does he seem to acknowledge that thought – especially spoken or written thought – is a *practice*: when he characterizes the decision to adopt an attitude of rationalism as an "*act* of faith" and when he praises, for once, the "*manner* of writing" of Plato's earlier dialogues for being the embodiment of rational argumentation. By contrast, Strauss's oeuvre may be considered a persistent attempt to think through and remedy the repercussions of the fact that philosophical writing is not only a form of theory but also of practice. We saw that he presupposes that the political predicament of philosophy can be *overcome* by employing a cunning art of writing. However, the underlying conception of a "natural" opposition between philosophy and politics, between "the few" and "the many", implies a *binary* picture of human interaction that is simply unrealistic: in practice, readers cannot be so neatly divided into two classes that any "misunderstanding" that was not foreseen by the writer can be forestalled. Finally, Arendt displays a theoretical self-consciousness of writing insofar as she acknowledges that any ontological assumption about political reality, i.e. any statement of fact about the nature of the political that is claimed to be "objectively" true in theory, such as an account of the nature of politics in terms of "rule", will be "proved true", will be *realized* in practice, as soon and as long as people *act* on that assumption. In that sense, even the theoretical proposition that human beings are born to be free may be understood in practice to imply that we are *doomed* to be free. In order to provide an antidote to this ineradicable interpretative option, Arendt chooses to speak of the human "condition" rather than human "nature", whereby she aims to keep the "end" of human beings to a certain degree *open*, i.e. "undecidable" in theory. She provides a *phenomenology* of the political which at the same time embodies a *praise* of the

continuous possibility of political freedom: she writes about political phenomena and experiences in such a manner that the capacity of human beings spontaneously to start something new is not merely described but also invoked.

In the third place, a political philosophy that fulfills these two demands of taking into account the specific nature of philosophy (as a form of thinking) and politics (as a form of acting), and of possessing some kind of theoretical self-consciousness of its own performative condition, should be able to assist us in understanding what we are doing when we wish to act politically in a "thoughtful" way, i.e. when we wish to make adequate decisions and issue sound judgments within the political realm.

In the case of all three authors, the form of "rational" or "thoughtful" political action they offer is developed against the background of the traditional model of Socratic dialectics or "true politics". We saw that Popper proposes an approach to political decision-making and judgment called "piecemeal social engineering". We argued that piecemeal social engineering in itself presupposes a narrow conception of rationality in terms of the choice of the most effective and efficient means to realize already chosen ends. Popper's strict dualism of facts and values implies that there is no way rationally to establish the legitimacy or illegitimacy of ends. In order to avoid the inevitable result that decisions and judgments are merely "personal", "*ad hominem*", or "arbitrary", Popper adopts the stance of negative utilitarianism, that is, the need to relieve human beings of avoidable suffering as the only urgent and hence universally valid goal for public policy. Furthermore, the framework into which Popper's form of "rational" politics fits is from the very start that of the "open society", within which the sphere of the government or the state as the *normal* political realm has already been established. Only in case of *emergency*, i.e. when the open society's existence and form of government are threatened by its enemies, may one have recourse to violence instead of reason.

However, what remains out of sight is the possibility of a rational choice of *positive* values in case the elimination of avoidable suffering has already been realized. We saw that Popper's broader notion of Socratic rationality, in the sense of "reasonableness" or "listening to each other", embodies a form of "impartiality" in decision-making and judgment that is more promising in this respect than the *deductive* choice of one single criterion only – viz. negative utilitarianism – for all politics. Popper nevertheless suggests that Socrates himself was more interested in the character formation of persons than in institutional reform. Be that as it may, this form of rational discussion would seem to be the only alternative Popper has to offer for scientific reasoning and its technological application (in case of normal circumstances) on the one hand, and polemical struggle (in case of emergency) on the other.

In contradistinction to Popper, Strauss does not exclusively identify politics with the sphere of what we could call "normal" politics, for he is constantly aware of the fact that a political society lives potentially at war with other political

societies. Moreover, he rejects Popper's separation of facts and values, instead acknowledging the possibility of rational discussion of values – or of "virtues" – as embodied by Socratic dialectics, the outcome of which may be the establishment of a specific "hierarchy of ends". These two elements together result in the suggestion of forms of "thoughtful" politics that move between philosophy (or the *escape* from politics) and polemics (or a total *immersion* in the urgent struggle for the survival of a political community or "city"). Especially Strauss's account of the "Aristotelian" form of practical wisdom or *phronèsis* of the statesman offers an answer here. In "normal" circumstances the "city" should strive for "normal" justice, that is, distributive and commutative justice. In "exceptional" circumstances, however, the city should strive to protect its own existence against the enemies of the city, be they internal or external. Although the existence of a hierarchy of ends – that is, of the ends of justice – is acknowledged, Strauss adds that there is no way to universally determine beforehand what constitutes a "normal" situation and an "exceptional" situation. This is to be decided by the statesman on the spot, the moral education of whose character is therefore to a certain extent decisive.

What is problematic, however, is Strauss's claim that there is a "natural" decision in every situation – based on "a full consideration of all the circumstances" – which can afterwards be "objectively" established by the competent judgment of the historian. We may doubt whether this is right, though, due to the finite character of human knowledge (recognized by Popper) and the contingent character of human interaction (recognized by Arendt).

Finally, Arendt's notion of what we have called "thoughtful" politics is informed by her account of the public realm. She claims that the public realm or the world common to us all is perspectival in character, which is due to the human conditions of natality – being capable of beginning something new by virtue of being born into the world – and plurality – appearing as distinct and unique individuals by virtue of the fact that not man, but men inhabit the world. Hence, we saw her reject Socratic thinking – the soundless and inner dialogue between me and myself – for its lack of plurality in the political sense. Rather, thinking becomes truly "political" to the extent that it is capable of "representing" within the mind the various perspectives that the people involved may have on an actual public affair. Thereby, she argues, a citizen-actor or statesman may arrive at an "impartial" decision regarding a specific course of political action – Arendt also uses the concept of *phronèsis* here – just as a citizen-spectator or a historian may arrive at an "impartial" judgment about past political events. In contradistinction to Strauss, Arendt identifies the Greek phenomenon of *phronèsis* with this form of "representative" thinking, and she claims that the more perspectives on a common affair that are taken into account, the more "valid" the actual decision or judgment of that affair will be.

This concluding summary is not intended as a definite "answer" to the question of what political philosophy is or should be like, let alone a practical "proposal" for actual political decision-making and judgment. Rather, the aim has

been to demonstrate what can be learned from the political-philosophical writings of Popper, Strauss, and Arendt and the manners of political thinking that they embody, should we be interested in acting politically in a thoughtful manner.

SAMENVATTING

Naarmate we beter begrijpen wat politiek is en hoe ze werkt, zullen we beter in staat zijn om politiek te handelen. Anders gezegd, hoe beter we weten hoe we ons binnen het politieke domein moeten oriënteren, des te beter zullen we in staat zijn om goede politieke beslissingen te nemen en de juiste politieke oordelen te vellen. Op het eerste gezicht lijkt de politieke filosofie ons over politiek in deze zin niet zoveel te kunnen leren. Niet alleen vertoont zij de neiging één bepaalde opvatting van politiek als vanzelfsprekend te vooronderstellen – meestal begrijpt zij politiek als datgene wat betrekking heeft op de uitoefening van overheidsgezag in democratische rechtsstaten – ook is zij geneigd om politiek op te vatten naar haar eigen evenbeeld, namelijk als een vorm van rationele discussie die alleen nog niet rationeel genoeg is. Voor zover de filosofie niet allereerst vraagt wat politiek *is*, loopt zij echter het risico ons een onkritisch en vertekend beeld van de politieke werkelijkheid voor te houden, als gevolg waarvan ze ons niet vertrouwd maakt met de politieke werkelijkheid als specifiek domein van menselijk handelen zoals dit geconstitueerd wordt door politieke handelingen die worden verricht, politieke beslissingen die worden genomen en politieke oordelen die worden geveld.

De politieke filosofie beschouwt zichzelf meestal in de eerste plaats als een theoretische bezigheid, die gericht is op het formuleren van in proposities te vatten kennisaanspraken. Wat door dit zelfbeeld echter aan het oog wordt onttrokken, is het feit dat de filosofie, op zijn minst voor zover ze zich uitdrukt in woord en geschrift, zelf ook een praktijk is. Als zodanig maakt zij deel uit van het domein van alle menselijk handelen, waartoe ook het politieke handelen behoort. Het lijkt dan onmogelijk om "van buitenaf" uit te maken waar de praktijk van de filosofie eindigt en waar die van de politiek begint. Evenals menselijke handelingen kunnen politiek-filosofische geschriften een bepaalde weerslag hebben binnen de politieke werkelijkheid die niet expliciet bedoeld of voorzien was. De in proposities vervatte inhoud of bedoeling van een politiek-filosofische tekst kan op gespannen voet blijken te staan met de performatieve implicaties van diezelfde tekst. Deze implicaties bestaan bijvoorbeeld in aannamen die mensen doen zodra ze naar de tekst gaan handelen, of in vormen van taalgebruik die buiten het expliciete argumentatieve betoog van de tekst vallen maar er niettemin een dragende rol in vervullen, zoals het gebruik van analogieën en polemische redeneerwijzen.

Als vertrekpunt voor deze dissertatie dient de aanname dat een politieke filosofie op de een of andere manier rekening zou moeten houden met haar eigen performatieve conditie indien zij een bijdrage wil leveren aan een adequaat verstaan van politiek en indien we van haar willen leren hoe we op een verstandige manier aan politiek zouden kunnen doen. De volgende, drieledige vraag staat centraal: (a) hoe kunnen we op zo'n manier aan politieke filosofie doen dat zij (b) rekening houdt met de specifieke kenmerken van zowel politiek (als een vorm van handelen) als filosofie (als denkactiviteit) en (c) ons toerust voor het bedrijven van

wat we aanduiden als “verstandige” of “bedachtzame” politiek, dat wil zeggen het nemen van goede politieke beslissingen, het verrichten van de juiste politieke handelingen en het vellen van de juiste politieke oordelen?

In plaats van een systematische argumentatie te bieden in antwoord op deze vragen, worden in dit proefschrift de propositionele inhouden en performatieve betekenissen van een aantal politiek-filosofische oeuvres bestudeerd. Daarmee wordt recht gedaan aan het feit dat teksten in het algemeen gesproken niet alleen gelezen worden en invloedrijk worden “dankzij zichzelf” – dat wil zeggen, in overeenstemming met de proposities, theorieën en argumenten die erin vervat liggen –, maar dat ze tevens invloedrijk worden “ondanks zichzelf” – dat wil zeggen, in overeenstemming met hun handelingen, met wat ze blijken te “doen”. De performatieve betekenis van een tekst kunnen we weliswaar op het spoor komen door de feitelijke historische “invloed” van deze tekst te bestuderen, maar performatieve betekenis en historische invloed vallen niet volledig samen. Terwijl de historische omstandigheden en de institutionele omgeving waarin een tekst wordt gerecipiëerd van tijd tot tijd verandert, kan de inwendige structuur van een tekst ook op zich worden bestudeerd.

In het bijzonder worden in dit proefschrift de werken bestudeerd van Karl Popper (1902-1994), Leo Strauss (1899-1973) en Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). Deze drie auteurs hebben alle de verhouding tussen filosofie en politiek (of tussen denken en handelen) opnieuw doordacht. Ook hebben zij alle drie strategieën voorgesteld en toegepast om met deze verhouding om te gaan, in het bijzonder in discussie met de “Platoonse” conceptualisering ervan. Door de “diep verborgen structurele kenmerken” (Raymond Geuss) van hun geschriften aan het licht te brengen – de erin verborgen aannames die “verwerkelijkt” worden zodra mensen naar hun teksten gaan handelen, de analogieën die erin worden gebruikt, de polemieken die erin worden gevoerd – levert het proefschrift een bijdrage aan een verstaan van de verhouding tussen filosofie en politiek, en van de condities van het politieke denken enerzijds – hoe politiek te begrijpen – en van verstandige politiek anderzijds – hoe politiek te handelen.

In Deel I wordt de kritiek uiteengezet van Karl Popper op de “gesloten samenleving” en haar houding ten aanzien van politiek, genaamd “utopische maatschappelijke hervorming”, die volgens hem onze individuele vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid voor beslissingen wegneemt. Popper stelt voor om in plaats daarvan de methode toe te passen die volgens hem eigen is aan de “open samenleving”, te weten “democratische sociale hervorming” of “stapsgewijze sociale technologie”, die bestaat in het op wetenschappelijke wijze vaststellen van de meest efficiënte en effectieve middelen om door middel van institutionele hervorming maatschappelijke problemen op te lossen. Echter, zo wordt beargumenteerd, door toedoen van zijn strikt logische scheiding van feitelijke en normatieve uitspraken loopt hij het risico dat de bepaling van de doelen die deze sociale technologie geacht wordt te dienen, uiteindelijk willekeurig is. Popper geeft inderdaad toe dat het nemen van rationele politieke beslissingen en het vellen van rationele politieke oordelen uiteindelijk berust op een “geloof” in de rede dat op

zichzelf "irrationeel" van aard is. Om de moreel-relativistische consequentie van deze positie te vermijden heeft hij een bredere opvatting van rationaliteit nodig. Daarop doet hij in feite wel een beroep – hij spreekt van een houding van "redelijkheid" of van "naar elkaar luisteren" – maar tegelijk kan hij deze opvatting niet verantwoorden op basis van zijn smallere, falsificationistische opvatting van wetenschappelijke rationaliteit (Hoofdstuk 1).

In plaats van expliciet zijn toevlucht te nemen tot een breder begrip van rationaliteit, blijkt Popper gebruik te maken van verschillende analogieën tussen morele en wetenschappelijke rationaliteit, of tussen de formulering van morele en politieke uitspraken enerzijds en van wetenschappelijke uitspraken anderzijds. Daarmee tracht hij het aura van zekerheid dat eigen is aan zijn wetenschappelijke methodologie over te dragen op het domein van de politieke besluitvorming. Dit komt onder meer tot uitdrukking in de door hem gebruikte analogie tussen de dwingende kracht van de deductieve weerlegging enerzijds en de dwingende kracht van het morele appèl tot het wegnemen van menselijk lijden anderzijds. Daarnaast wordt aangetoond dat Poppers propositionele verdediging van een politiek van rationele discussie, waarvoor hij ondersteuning zoekt in de analogie tussen politiek en wetenschap, nu juist wordt tegengewerkt door de polemische vriend-vijand-opvatting van politiek die hij opvoert in naam van de urgent geachte verdediging van de open samenleving tegen haar "vijanden" (Hoofdstuk 2).

In de eerste plaats concluderen we dat Popper een zeker "theoretisch zelfbewustzijn" (Raymond Geuss) dient te ontwikkelen van het feit dat zijn theorie ook een praktijk is. Zijn theorie maakt niet alleen gebruik van logische redeneervormen maar berust uiteindelijk op het gebruik van analogische redeneervormen die *de facto* constitutief blijken te zijn voor de "geldigheid" van Poppers voorstel voor stapsgewijze sociale technologie. Ook is zijn theorie ingebed in een felle polemiek tegen de vijanden van de open samenleving, waarmee hij in feite een andere vorm van politiek *beoefent* dan de politiek van rationele discussie die hij *voorstaat*. In de tweede plaats stellen we daarom dat Popper een bredere opvatting van politiek nodig heeft, één die meer omvat dan rationele discussie alleen en die recht doet aan het feit dat politieke beslissingen kunnen worden afgedwongen, desnoods met geweld (ook in een democratische rechtsstaat). De aanwezigheid van het overheidsgezag wordt door hem als zijnde een "noodzakelijk kwaad" weliswaar *verondersteld*, maar ze wordt door hem niet *gedacht*, zoals ook de kennelijk onvermijdelijk aanwezige mogelijkheid van een vriend-vijand-strijd tussen politieke samenlevingen door hem niet wordt gedacht. In de derde plaats stellen we dat Popper een opvatting van filosofie nodig heeft die haar niet reduceert tot wetenschapsmethodologie maar die ruimte laat voor de rationaliteit van andere vormen van taalgebruik, in het bijzonder die van normatieve taaluitingen.

In Deel II wordt uiteengezet dat Strauss' werk op het eerste gezicht aan al deze drie eisen tegemoet lijkt te komen. Hij identificeert filosofie niet met wetenschappelijke methodologie maar met filosofische dialectiek, die volgens hem "opstijgt" van opinies die elkaar blijken tegen te spreken – met de wet als meest gezaghebbende

“opinie” – naar ware kennis. Volgens Strauss kijkt de filosoof uiteindelijk neer op de politieke samenleving, omdat de laatste niet is opgewassen tegen de eisen van de waarheid, van wat waar is van nature en niet alleen bij wijze van conventie. Strauss identificeert het politieke met de sfeer van de wet en het regime van de politieke samenleving die als gesloten samenleving onvoorwaardelijke gehoorzaamheid kan eisen van haar burgers in geval van oorlog. Dit betekent echter niet dat we de keuze hebben tussen slechts twee alternatieven: ófwel het filosofische leven, het leven van de *logos*, dat uitmondt in een *ontsnapping* aan de politiek, ófwel het politieke leven, het leven van de *thumos*, anderzijds, dat voor altijd *gespeend* lijkt te zijn van hogere rationele standaarden voor het politieke beslissen en oordelen. Strauss laat enige ruimte voor rationele standaarden voor het politieke handelen: volgens zijn reconstructie van de klassieke leer van het “natuurrecht” bestaat “bedachtzame” politiek in het “verdunnen” van wat van nature juist is met wat bij wijze van conventie juist is en in het in concrete politieke situaties beslissen welk doel het meest “natuurlijk” is, namelijk ofwel het “hoogste” doel, ofwel het meest “urgente”. Desalniettemin kunnen praktische beslissingen (beslissingen in concrete, “existentiële” situaties) volgens hem nimmer één-op-één worden “afgeleid” uit theoretische kennis (kennis van een rangorde van doeleinden) (Hoofdstuk 3).

Naast politiek in deze zin onderscheidt Strauss een andere, “diepere” vorm van politiek, die volgens hem bestaat in de communicatie van de filosoof met de politieke gemeenschap. Door aandacht te schenken aan deze vorm van politiek laat hij een zekere mate van theoretisch zelfbewustzijn zien van de politieke condities van het filosofische schrijven, ook van zijn eigen schrijven. Aangezien de filosofische zoektocht naar waarheid volgens Strauss op gespannen voet staat met de gezaghebbende “opinie” van de wet en de publieke opinie van de politieke gemeenschap, is de filosoof volgens hem genoodzaakt om een speciale manier van politiek schrijven te hanteren, “de kunst van het tussen de regels schrijven” of “exoterisch schrijven”. Deze manier van schrijven moet enerzijds voorkómen dat de filosoof door de “menigte” wordt misverstaan en er anderzijds zorg voor dragen dat potentiële filosofen worden gestimuleerd om zelfstandig te gaan filosoferen. Echter, zo beargumenteren we, zodra deze manier van schrijven in de praktijk wordt gebracht, worden bepaalde hermeneutische en ontologische aannames gedaan die de fictie in het leven roepen dat het mogelijk zou zijn om de performatieve condities waaraan de expressie van het filosofische denken per definitie onderhevig is, volledig te beheersen en daardoor aan die condities te ontsnappen (Hoofdstuk 4).

Hoewel Strauss’ opvattingen van filosofie en van politiek breder zijn dan die van Popper, die filosofie reduceert tot wetenschapsmethodologie en politiek tot rationele discussie met het oog op democratische besluitvorming, impliceren Strauss’ theorie en praktijk van “bedachtzame” politiek (praktische wijsheid) en van “politieke” filosofie (de kunst van het schrijven) een overschatting van de mogelijkheid om de betekenis van de taal en van het menselijk handelen te

beheersen. De contingentie die aan beide eigen is, wordt door Strauss onvoldoende erkend en gewaardeerd.

Deel III van deze dissertatie betreft het werk van Hannah Arendt. Zij vertrekt in haar denken juist vanuit de erkenning van het contingente karakter van menselijke interactie. Op basis van haar fenomenologie van de menselijke condities van nataliteit en pluraliteit bekritiseert zij de filosofische traditie vanwege haar poging om te ontsnappen aan politiek door deze te vervangen door bestuur of heerschappij. De bestaansreden van politiek is volgens Arendt publieke vrijheid, die gerealiseerd wordt door burgers die samen handelen en in de publieke ruimte verschijnen. Het (voort)bestaan van publieke vrijheid kan volgens haar op geen enkele manier worden “gegarandeerd” door een theoretische rechtvaardiging in termen van ofwel een transcendent absolutum (Goddelijk recht of Natuurrecht) of een immanent absolutum (het succes van de door mensen gemaakte Geschiedenis), maar vergt dat we steeds opnieuw handelen, hetgeen op zijn beurt weer vertrouwen in het handelen veronderstelt uit liefde voor de vrijheid (Hoofdstuk 5).

Hoewel Arendt grote nadruk legt op het handelingskarakter van de politiek, betekent dit niet dat ze geen enkele rol weggelegd ziet voor het denken. In haar werken kunnen drie denkmotieven worden getraceerd die in aanmerking zouden kunnen komen als alternatief voor wat zij beschouwt als de traditionele reductie van het denken tot contemplatie (of cognitie) en voor moderne vormen van onbedachtzaamheid. Het eerste motief betreft de activiteit van het “dialectische denken”, of van wat Arendt omschrijft als de innerlijke dialoog van mijzelf met mijzelf. Volgens haar is deze activiteit politiek onberekenbaar, aangezien ze uit zichzelf niet het meervoud van het politieke “wij” in het leven kan roepen of aangezien ze dat op zijn best alleen in noodsituaties kan, wanneer haar inwendige twee-in-één, ondanks zichzelf, een voorbeeld van (weliswaar nog steeds beperkte) pluraliteit wordt *in* de wereld. Het tweede motief betreft het “representatieve denken”. Volgens Arendt is deze vorm van denken “politiek” in de normale zin van het woord, voor zover ze ons voorbereidt op het nemen van politieke beslissingen en het vellen van politieke oordelen door in de menselijke geest de verschillende perspectieven te “representeren” die kunnen worden ingenomen op een publieke zaak. Het derde motief betreft het “dichterlijke denken”. Deze denkactiviteit veronderstelt dat we ons bewust zijn van het intrinsiek metaforische karakter van de taal, hetgeen ons in staat stelt om gangbare politiek-filosofische taal te onderzoeken op haar overeenstemming met de daadwerkelijke verschijningswijze van politieke gebeurtenissen en ervaringen. Door oorspronkelijke gebeurtenissen en ervaringen “op te duiken” die verborgen liggen in onze begrippen en door nieuw conceptueel vocabulaire te ontwikkelen (nieuwe metaforen en analogieën), stelt deze manier van denken ons in staat om ons de politieke werkelijkheid (opnieuw, en meestal voor even) eigen te maken (Hoofdstuk 6).

Hoewel Arendts werk evenals dat van Popper en Strauss kan worden geïnterpreteerd alsof het op performatief niveau precies de onmogelijkheid van politiek oproept waartegen het op propositioneel niveau nu juist strijdt, constateren

we dat haar manier van schrijven zich hier in hogere mate tegen verzet dan in het geval van de andere twee auteurs. In plaats van een “oplossing” te bieden of een “rangorde” te vestigen, *voert* Arendt de pluraliteit en perspectiviteit – het “tussenin” – van het menselijk handelen *op*, waardoor wij, haar lezers, worden uitgenodigd en uitgedaagd om onze eigen positie in en ten aanzien van de politieke wereld te bepalen en de vraag te beantwoorden in hoeverre we er zelf vertrouwen in hebben dat het zin heeft om politiek te handelen.

Op basis van deze lezing van het werk van de drie auteurs, beargumenteren we in de conclusie wat van hun politiek-filosofisch schrijven geleerd kan worden in antwoord op de aan het begin van deze dissertatie geformuleerde drieledige vraag.

In de eerste plaats stellen we dat een politieke filosofie een realistisch of adequaat verstaan van politiek en van filosofie dient te ontwikkelen. Daarvoor is het op zijn minst vereist dat zij niet onkritisch accepteert (a) wat in het algemeen “politiek” wordt genoemd (dat wat beperkt is tot de sfeer van de regering of staat) en (b) wat in het algemeen “filosofisch” wordt genoemd (de rationele rechtvaardiging van proposities in termen van hun waarheidswaarde of legitimiteit).

Popper verstaat onder politiek het door middel van “stapsgewijze sociale technologie” voeren van overheidsbeleid ter oplossing van maatschappelijke problemen. De politiek van de verdediging van “de open samenleving” tegen haar vijanden, die *de facto* door Popper wordt beoefend, valt strikt genomen buiten dit eerste begrip. Terwijl Popper de eenheid van de politieke orde waarbinnen de “stapsgewijze sociale technologie” wordt toegepast, impliciet vooronderstelt, tracht Strauss de bestaansgrond van die politieke eenheid zélf te denken. Hij doet dit met verwijzing naar het “feit” dat een politieke orde bijeen wordt gehouden door de wet van een gezaghebbend regime dat gehoorzaamheid kan afdwingen van zijn burgers en naar het “feit” dat iedere politieke samenleving een “gesloten” samenleving is die potentieel op vijandige voet staat met andere “gesloten” samenlevingen. De bestaansgrond van politiek is volgens hem in ieder geval het zelfbehoud (existentie) van de betreffende samenleving en indien mogelijk ook haar zelfverbetering (voortreffelijkheid of deugd). Politieke vrijheid wordt hier gedefinieerd als onafhankelijkheid van andere politieke samenlevingen en politieke macht als hegemonie over andere politieke samenlevingen. Terwijl Popper en Strauss politiek beide identificeren met de uitoefening van overheidsgezag of “heerschappij”, identificeert Arendt haar echter met de uitoefening van “publieke vrijheid” door burgers die samen handelen in een publiek domein dat op zijn beurt ook wordt geconstitueerd door gezamenlijk handelen. Dit betekent geenszins dat zij stelt dat het mogelijk is een politiek domein te stichten dat volledig vrij is van “heerschappij” en polemiek – van de “verticale” verhouding van bevel en gehoorzaamheid en de vorming van groepen die zich louter voor of tegen elkaar opstellen –, maar dat het denken van “vrijheid” en “macht” in termen van “soevereiniteit” en “heerschappij” het vertrouwen ondermijnt in de mogelijkheid van het stichten en onderhouden van publieke vrijheid.

Filosofie wordt door Popper geïdentificeerd met de methodologie van de wetenschappen die logisch eenduidige criteria vaststelt aan de hand waarvan de wetenschappelijkheid van uitspraken kan worden getoetst. Echter, de "geldigheid" van zijn eigen theorie blijkt afhankelijk te zijn van vormen van rationaliteit die buiten zijn eigen opvatting van strikt wetenschappelijke rationaliteit vallen: (a) de Socratische bereidheid om open te staan voor andermans argumenten en (b) het gebruik van analogieën. Strauss verdedigt nu juist de Socratische, filosofische "dialectiek" tegen de reductie van filosofie tot methodologie. Het dialectische gesprek vertrekt vanuit onderling tegenstrijdige uitspraken over het "wat" van de dingen om tot ware kennis te komen. Voor zover menselijke voortreffelijkheid of deugd veeleer "in woord" dan "in daad" bestaat, kunnen we alleen tot kennis van de menselijke deugden komen door ons te richten op onze uitspraken erover. Ondanks deze onderlinge verschillen, hebben Popper en Strauss met elkaar gemeen dat zij filosofie beschouwen als een streven naar in propositionele taal gevatte kennis. Volgens Arendt is het denken echter niet gericht op *kennis* – vaststellen "of" iets is en "wat" iets is – maar op *betekenis* – bedenken wat het betekent "dat" iets is. Enerzijds kan het denken de dingen en gebeurtenissen niet vatten in hun concrete *realiteit*, maar anderzijds leert Arendts motief van het "dichterlijke denken" ons dat het denken niettemin toegang heeft tot de uitwendige wereld der verschijnselen dankzij het metaforisch en analogisch karakter van de taal: alle woorden die we gebruiken om te verwijzen naar de onzichtbare "begrippen" van onze geest zijn ontleend aan de zintuiglijke ervaring van de buitenwereld.

In de tweede plaats stellen we dat een politieke filosofie een zekere mate van theoretisch zelfbewustzijn dient te ontwikkelen, hetgeen wil zeggen dat zij dient te beseffen dat zij, op zijn minst voor zover zij zich in het spreken of schrijven uitdrukt, tevens een *praktijk* is. Ze dient de implicaties van deze conditie te doordenken voor (a) de status of "geldigheid" van haar proposities of theorie en (b) de mogelijke invloed van haar diep verborgen structurele kenmerken op de politieke werkelijkheid.

Popper toont een gebrek aan bewustzijn van het feit dat zijn voorstel voor een "rationele" politiek van stapsgewijze sociale technologie (a) blijkt te *rusten* op de analogie tussen wetenschap en politiek en (b) wordt *tegengesproken* door zijn polemische beoefening van politiek. Hoewel Strauss' oeuvre kan worden beschouwd als één grote doordenking van en remedie tegen de gevolgen van het feit dat filosofisch schrijven niet alleen de beoefening van *theorie* is, maar zelf ook een *praktijk* is, veronderstelt hij dat de politieke conditie van filosofie kan worden beheerst door de beoefening van een speciale schrijfkunst. Echter, de hieraan ten grondslag liggende opvatting van een "natuurlijke" tegenstelling tussen filosofie en politiek, tussen "de enkelingen" en "de menigte", impliceert een binair beeld van menselijke interactie dat geen rekening houdt met haar contingente karakter. Arendt toont een theoretisch zelfbewustzijn van het schrijven voor zover ze toegeeft dat iedere ontologische aanname over de politieke werkelijkheid, iedere feitelijke bewering over de aard van het politieke die voor "waar" wordt gehouden

(zoals de theorie die stelt dat politiek bestaat in de uitoefening van "heerschappij"), "waargemaakt" zal worden, *gerealiseerd* zal worden zodra en zo lang mensen naar deze ontologische aanname handelen. Om een tegengif tegen deze onvermijdelijke interpretatieve mogelijkheid te bieden, schrijft Arendt op een manier over politieke verschijnselen en ervaringen die het vermogen van mensen om in vrijheid iets nieuws te beginnen niet alleen *beschrijft*, maar ook *in het leven roept*.

In de derde plaats inventariseren we de manieren waarop een politieke filosofie, indien ze voldoet aan genoemde twee eisen van (a) het recht doen aan de specifieke aard van filosofie en politiek en (b) het ontwikkelen van een zekere mate van bewustzijn van haar eigen performatieve conditie, ons inderdaad kan toerusten voor het bedrijven van een "verstandige" of "bedachtzame" vorm van politiek. In hun ontwikkeling van een opvatting van zo'n "rationele" of "bedachtzame" vorm van politiek handelen zetten alle drie de auteurs zich uiteen met het traditionele model van Socratische dialectiek als "ware politiek".

Poppers voorstel voor een politiek van stapsgewijze maatschappelijke hervorming behelst het op wetenschappelijke wijze vaststellen van de meest effectieve en efficiënte middelen ter realisatie van bepaalde politieke doeleinden. De legitimiteit van deze doeleinden is echter niet op wetenschappelijke wijze bepaalbaar. Om de consequentie te vermijden dat de keuze van doeleinden louter "persoonlijk" of "willekeurig" is, opteert Popper voor een negatief utilisme, dat de noodzaak van de verlichting van vermijdbaar menselijk lijden als enig universeel doel van overheidsbeleid erkent. Dit raamwerk voor "rationele" politiek valt geheel binnen de sfeer van de normale politiek van de open samenleving. Alleen in het uitzonderlijke geval van de noodzaak van de verdediging van het voortbestaan van de open samenleving mag er gekozen worden voor geweld in plaats van de rede. Als alternatief voor deze keuze voor enerzijds de rationaliteit van de *wetenschap* en haar technologische toepassing (in het geval van "normale" omstandigheden) en anderzijds strijd of *polemiek* (in het geval van "uitzonderlijke" omstandigheden) zou Poppers begrip van Socratische rationaliteit – of "redelijkheid" – kunnen fungeren, die een vorm van "onpartijdigheid" nastreeft in het beslissen en oordelen die meer flexibiliteit toelaat dan het louter deductieve criterium van het negatief utilisme, en bovendien de mogelijkheid openlaat van de "redelijke" vaststelling van positieve waarden zodra de staat met zijn doelstelling van het wegnemen van vermijdbaar lijden eenmaal gevestigd is. Deze vorm van redelijkheid past echter niet binnen Poppers meer strikte opvatting van wetenschappelijke rationaliteit. Bovendien stelt Popper dat de Socratische redelijkheid zich beter leent voor persoonlijke (morele) vorming dan voor institutionele (politieke) hervorming.

Strauss verwerpt Poppers scheiding van feiten en waarden en erkent de mogelijkheid van een rationele discussie over waarden – of deugden – zoals belichaamd door de Socratische dialectiek, waarvan de uitkomst kan bestaan in het vaststellen van een "rangorde van doeleinden". Daarnaast vertrekt Strauss in tegenstelling tot Popper niet van een opvatting van politiek als rationele discussie, aangezien hij zich er van bewust is dat een politieke samenleving potentieel in

oorlog leeft met andere politieke samenlevingen. Deze twee elementen samen resulteren in de suggestie van een vorm van "bedachtzame" politiek die zich begeeft tussen *filosofie* (of de ontsnapping aan politiek) enerzijds en *polemiek* (of een volledige onderdompeling in de urgente strijd om het voortbestaan van een politieke samenleving) anderzijds. Vooral Strauss' weergave van de "Aristotelische" opvatting van praktische wijsheid [*phronēsis*] is instructief: in normale omstandigheden moet de politieke samenleving streven naar rechtvaardigheid in de gewone zin (verdelende en vereffenende rechtvaardigheid), maar in uitzonderlijke omstandigheden dient de politieke samenleving te streven naar de bescherming van haar eigen voortbestaan tegen haar interne of externe vijanden. Hoewel Strauss de mogelijkheid van het vaststellen van een dergelijke rangorde van doeleinden lijkt te erkennen, voegt hij toe dat het niet mogelijk is om voor eens en altijd uit te maken wat het verschil is tussen een "normale" situatie en een "uitzonderingstoestand". De beslissing daarover wordt genomen door de politicus ter plekke, wiens morele vorming daartoe doorslaggevend is. Wat problematisch te noemen is aan Strauss' opvatting van "bedachtzame" politiek, is zijn claim dat er in iedere situatie een "natuurlijke" beslissing bestaat die gebaseerd is op een volledige inachtneming van alle omstandigheden, een beslissing die na afloop door de historicus "objectief" zou kunnen worden vastgesteld. Gezien het eindige karakter van het menselijke kenvermogen (erkend door Popper) en het contingente karakter van het menselijk handelen (erkend door Arendt), moeten we betwijfelen of dit realistisch is.

Arendts notie van wat we "bedachtzame" politiek noemen, ten slotte, wordt geïnformeerd door haar claim dat het publieke domein of de wereld die we delen perspectivisch van karakter is, en wel dankzij de menselijke condities van nataliteit – we zijn in staat om iets nieuws te beginnen doordat we zelf een begin zijn (geboren zijn) – en pluraliteit – we verschijnen als van elkaar verschillende en unieke individuen doordat de wereld niet door *de* mens bewoond wordt, maar door mens*en*. De denkvorm van de Socratische dialectiek, de stilzwijgende, innerlijke dialoog tussen mijzelf en mijzelf (twee-in-één), wordt door Arendt als a-politiek beschouwd vanwege haar nog altijd gebrekkige pluraliteit (meer-dan-twee). Denken wordt eerst werkelijk "politiek" voor zover het de diverse perspectieven die mensen hebben op een publieke zaak of op de gemeenschappelijke wereld "representeert" in de geest. De burger-actor of politicus kan op basis daarvan tot een "onpartijdige" beslissing komen ten aanzien van een voorgenomen politieke handeling, zoals de burger-toeschouwer of historicus tot een "onpartijdig" oordeel kan komen over politieke gebeurtenissen uit het verleden. Deze beslissingen en oordelen zijn niet *wetenschappelijk* of *filosofisch* "objectief", noch puur *polemisch* of "partijdig". Arendt gebruikt evenals Strauss de Aristotelische term *phronēsis*, maar in plaats van te verwijzen naar een waardenhiërarchie stelt ze dat de "geldigheid" van een beslissing of oordeel groter wordt naarmate er in de voorbereidende denkactiviteit meer verschillende gezichtspunten op een bepaalde publieke kwestie worden "gerepresenteerd".

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Cornelissen participated in the PhD program of the Dutch Research School for Practical Philosophy and he spent the fall term of 2007 as a Visiting Scholar at the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago. From 2009 until 2013, he served as Assistant Professor (universitair docent) in philosophy of law at the Faculty of Law of VU University Amsterdam, where he taught, developed, and coordinated several courses. Since 2012, he has been a research affiliate of the Centre of Political Philosophy at Leiden University. During the academic year 2013-2014, he holds the position of Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. He is interested in interpreting political phenomena and understanding the phenomenon of politics, the possibilities and limitations of philosophy for doing both, and the relation between thinking and writing.

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LEO STRAUSS

CM	*The City and Man*
NRH	*Natural Right and History*
OPS	*On Plato's Symposium*
OT	*On Tyranny*
PAW	*Persecution and the Art of Writing*
NCP	'Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*'
CPP	'On Classical Political Philosophy'
WIPP	'What Is Political Philosophy?'

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LM2	*The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing*
OR	*On Revolution*
CC	'The Crisis in Culture'
PP	'Philosophy and Politics'
TP	'Truth and Politics'
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