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

Cornelissen, W.W.H.

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"

[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

[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,

[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

[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".

[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

[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

[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,

[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".

[472] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 282.