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

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CHAPTER 6

Three Activities of Thinking and Their Correspondences to Political Reality

Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream
and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then
wakes up to find that he knows nothing.[473]
Plato

Comprehension ... means the unpremeditated,
attentive facing up to, and resisting of,
reality – whatever it may be.[474]
Hannah Arendt

6.1. INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) criticizes the tradition of political philosophy for looking down on the life of action from the superior life of contemplation, substituting making for acting and thus replacing politics by rule. Her work is rightly understood as an attempt to rehabilitate politics as the exercise of "public freedom" and "acting-in-concert". However, this does not mean that she inverts the traditional hierarchy between action and thought. In fact, she not only provides an alternative interpretation of action, she also provides a novel account of the activity of thinking, against both traditional contemplation and contemporary "thoughtlessness". Thus, her work should not only be understood as an attempt to restore politics, but simultaneously as an attempt to retrieve ways of thinking that are in a certain sense "fit" for politics.

It is usually assumed that Arendt's account of thinking is quite univocal, namely that it is conceived of as a solitary dialogue between me and myself, as exemplified in the figure of Socrates. In this chapter I argue that in fact this is only one of *three* distinct types of thinking that can be traced, almost like literary motifs, throughout her oeuvre. When properly reconstructed, each of them presents a unique alternative both to traditional philosophical contemplation and to recurring forms of "thoughtlessness". I examine each of these ways of thinking in terms of its "fitness" for understanding politics, or its promise to heal the rift between the inner life of the mind and external worldly reality.

In the *first* part of the chapter I reconstruct the fundamentals of Arendt's phenomenology of thought by providing a reading of *The Human Condition* which

[473] Plato, *Statesman*, 277d. Used by Arendt as epigraph in LM1 vii.
[474] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii (Preface to the First Edition, 1950).

shows that her book does not offer a simple inversion of the traditional hierarchy between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Although it remains to a large extent inarticulate, she already offers us some indications of what an alternative to both traditional philosophy and a current lack of thought could look like. She therewith anticipates some of the insights of her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, which contains her most elaborate investigation of human thinking.

In the *second* part I examine the extent to which the Socratic model of thought as the solitary and silent dialogue between me and myself, which produces conscience as its by-product, can assume the role of this alternative. Although there are indeed some indications that Arendt gives a political twist to this model, I demonstrate that she chose not to pursue that path and, contra Dana Villa, that she had good reasons for doing so.

In the *third* part I reconstruct her account of a second type of thinking, which she called "representative thinking". This refers not to the solitary dialogue between me and myself (a duality), but to the imagined and anticipated dialogue with others (a plurality). While the first type of thinking remains a-political, the second may rightly be called political. On its basis, the *citizen*, either in his role of actor or spectator, prepares opinion and judgment, which Arendt considers the two "politically most important, rational faculties" (OR 229).

In the *fourth* part I reconstruct a third type of thinking, called "poetic thinking", which dives for and brings back to the surface the events, experiences, and phenomena that lay hidden within our political concepts. In contradistinction to the second type of thinking, this is not directly aimed at the preparation of opinions or judgments about particular political issues or events, but rather serves as a reminder of the meaning and possibility of political action as such by invoking the spirit of originating that is contained within our political speech or language.

In the concluding section I claim that the three ways of thinking I have reconstructed are rooted in different concerns and that the ways in which they are "fit" for politics vary accordingly. Whereas the solitary dialogue is primarily rooted in a concern for a truthful *self* and will only become political by accident, the other types of thinking are primarily rooted in a concern for the *world*, for its preservation and its renewal. This happens either directly, by *representing* within the mind the manifold perspectives that constitute the world, or indirectly, by invoking the original spirit of the experiences that lie hidden in our political concepts and by thus *praising* the possibilities of politics. I argue that both of these activities of thinking could fulfill the promise of bringing the "men of action" and the "men of thought" together, whose separation since the rise of political philosophy in "the Socratic school" Arendt so greatly laments.

6.2. FROM *THE HUMAN CONDITION* TO *THE LIFE OF THE MIND*: THINKING AFTER CONTEMPLATION AND THOUGHTLESSNESS

At first sight, her book *The Human Condition* (1958) appears to be a rehabilitation of the *vita activa* and of politics as "acting-in-concert". Arendt argues that political

philosophers have always looked down upon politics from the perspective of philosophy, thereby turning politics into rule [*Herrschaft*] and substituting making for acting. In line with this reading, her book has often been interpreted as a sign of romantic nostalgia for the lost Greek *polis* of Pericles' Athens.[475] As I have shown in the previous chapter, what is problematic about this reading is that it thus seems as if Arendt inverts the traditional hierarchy, by putting active life (or *bios politikos*) *above* contemplative life (or *bios theōrētikos*), valuing the aspiration for this-worldly immortality over that for other-worldly eternity. In fact, however, she warns against such "reversals" because they all imply that "the same central human preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men" (HC 17). Arendt claims that this assumption is "not a matter of course", and she makes it explicitly clear that her "use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*" (HC 17).

This leaves room for an interpretation according to which she not only rehabilitates "acting-in-concert", but also the "activity of thinking".[476] In her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, she explains that she herself had planned to call her book 'Vita Activa', but that her publisher opted for 'The Human Condition'. She now calls this a wise decision, and explains that "what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter, namely, *vita activa*, was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective" (LM1 6).[477] Thus, the understanding of active life ran the risk of remaining polemically tied to its counterpart, contemplative life, while it was precisely Arendt's intention to *break* with this binary and hierarchical scheme, as seen in the previous chapter. She expresses her awareness of the fact that this break was already visible in *The Human Condition*, which ends with a sentence that Cicero ascribed to Cato: "never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself" (HC 325).[478] Just as in *The Human Condition* (HC 5) she aims "to

[475] Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xxxix calls this "the standard view".

[476] At some point in *The Human Condition*, Arendt even calls thinking "the *highest* and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable [emphasis added]" (HC 5), which seems to convey the conviction that there *does* exist some kind of hierarchical relation among the human activities, which would contradict her intention mentioned above. In earlier publications she expressed herself in similar terms, for instance when she speaks of thinking as "the freest and purest of all human activities" (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 473) and when she asserts: "the capacity for thought … for thousands of years has been deemed to be the highest capacity of man" (Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', 318). As far as I have been able to ascertain, she no longer uses this manner of expressing herself in *The Life of the Mind*.

[477] This mode of expression suggests that the human capacities of labor, work, action, and thought should primarily be understood as different "perspectives" on reality. For Arendt's account of the perspectival character of the public realm, see chapter 4.

[478] See also LM1 7-8.

think what we are doing"[479]; in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt sets out to think what we are "doing" when we are thinking.[480]

Before showing how *The Human Condition* already clears the road for the recovery of thought,[481] we need to say more about Arendt's claim that thinking has traditionally been subjected to contemplation and making. She carefully distinguishes contemplation as the speechless beholding [*theōria*] of the truth from thinking as the solitary and silent dialogue between me and myself [*eme emautō*], which was described as such for the first time by Plato's Socrates in the *Gorgias*.[482] Arendt claims that what in "the Socratic school" (HC 18, 302) was considered as the *beginning* of philosophy, is the state of speechless wonder [*thaumazein*] in which one finds oneself when one marvels at the miracle of being, that is, the beauty of the eternal cosmos. Analogously, the *end* of philosophy was seen as a state of contemplation of the truth.[483] Thinking, in turn, came to be understood as the most important and direct road to the contemplation of eternal truth, just as in the medieval period meditation was considered as the most important and direct road to the contemplation of God.

Yet, Arendt explains, a source was added which overlaid the first, and which becomes visible especially in Plato's doctrine of ideas. The experience of the philosopher who contemplates the eternal cosmos came to be interpreted after the experience of the craftsman who contemplates the idea or model of the product he wishes to make.[484] As a consequence, the state of speechless wonder that had initially been an *incidental* and *unintended* experience was now replaced by the *sustained* and *deliberate* contemplation of an idea. Thus, the experience of contemplation could be prolonged, as the result of which one came to speak of the "*vita*" *contemplativa*: contemplation as a *way of life*.[485]

From the seventeenth century onwards, Arendt continues, thought was no longer treated as the handmaiden of contemplation – which lost its meaning altogether – but instead became the handmaiden of "doing". This was possible because of the already existing inner affinity between contemplation and fabrication. Yet, Arendt adds, what counted was no longer the model and not even the product of making, but first and foremost its fabrication *process*. Thus, thought was replaced by "reckoning with consequences" (Hobbes), or, as she puts it, "the faculty of deducing and concluding, that is, of a process which man at any moment can let loose within himself" (HC 238).

[479] Consider also HC 322.
[480] LM1 8: "What are we 'doing' when we do nothing but think?"
[481] As far as I have been able to ascertain, the only other attempt to trace Arendt's scattered reflections on thought in *The Human Condition* is Jonas 1977.
[482] Plato, *Gorgias* 482c, referred to in: HC 76, 76n85, 291, and also in PP 85. She uses the same expression in TMC 442 and LM1 185, but on these occasions she refers to Plato, *Theaetetus*, 189e and *Sophist*, 263e. She also refers to the latter passage in 'Martin Heidegger at Eighty', 52. Her first reference to the "two-in-one" occurs already in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 476.
[483] HC 302.
[484] In LM1 104, Arendt mentions the Platonic notion of "idea" as an example of the decisive influence of the use of metaphors in philosophical language.
[485] HC 302-303.

Seen in this light, we should not be surprised that in *The Human Condition* the activity of thinking – where it is identified with the solitary inner dialogue between me and myself – is carefully distinguished both from "cognition" and "logical reasoning". To begin with, *cognition*, of which we may say that contemplation is but one form, pursues a definite aim, whereas thought "has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results" (HC 170). She calls the activity of thinking "as relentless and repetitive as life itself" (HC 171), thereby anticipating its characterization in *The Life of the Mind* as an "*energeia*",[486] a term that she still reserves in *The Human Condition* for the characterization of action only.[487] In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt claims that the "basic fallacy of the metaphysical tradition" has indeed been to interpret thought on the model of cognition.[488]

Whereas cognition strives for "truth", thought searches for "meaning".[489] That is to say, whereas the former asks "what something is or whether it exists at all", the latter takes its existence for granted and instead asks "*what it means for it to be*" (LM1 57). What science and cognition are after is "*irrefutable* truth, that is, "propositions human beings are not free to reject – they are compelling" (LM1 59). They come in two kinds: "truths of reasoning" and "truths of fact" (LM1 59). Arendt illustrates the difference between "truth" and "meaning" by interpreting the following lines from a poem by W.H. Auden:

> Unpredictably, decades ago, You arrived
> among that unending cascade of creatures spewed
> from Nature's maw. A random event, says Science.
> Random my bottom! A true miracle, say I,
> for who is not certain that he was meant to be?

As the first three lines express, scientifically speaking we "know" that the birth of a human being is nothing but "a random event", i.e. a contingent fact. However, Arendt says, the answer contained in the two lines immediately following, "a true miracle" by no means expresses such "objective" knowledge, but it is a highly *meaningful* proposition.[490]

The second distinction Arendt draws is that between thought and *logical reasoning*, the latter of which she describes as "deductions from axiomatic or self-evident statements, subsumption of particular occurrences under general rules, or the techniques of spinning out consistent chains of conclusions" (HC 171). She considers it to be "a mere function of the life process itself" (HC 172) and

[486] LM1 123, where she refers to Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book 12, 1072b27: "The activity of thinking [*energeia* that has its end in itself] is life." See also LM1 129: "the thinking activity belongs among those *energeiai* which, like flute-playing, have their ends within themselves and leave no tangible outside end product in the world we inhabit."
[487] HC 206, 206n35.
[488] LM1 15.
[489] LM1 14-15, 57-62, 129.
[490] LM1 60-61.

characterizes it as a "playing of the mind with itself" (HC 284).[491] Before the publication of *The Human Condition*, Arendt had already used the notion of logical deduction in order to understand the functioning of totalitarian ideologies,[492] which she characterized as "isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise" (OT 468). Adherents of these ideologies learn nothing from experience: "Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality" (OT 471). As a result, thought, "which as the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the compulsory process of deduction" (OT 473), *emancipates* itself from experience and reality. Arendt explains that when people have lost contact with their fellow men and with worldly reality, they "lose the capacity of *both* experience *and* thought" [emphasis added] (OT 474). To be sure, she draws a careful distinction between "loneliness", which serves as breeding ground for the "ice-cold reasoning" of totalitarian ideologies, and "solitude", which, as we shall see, is actually *required* for the activity of the thinking dialogue of me with myself. Nevertheless, solitude may turn into loneliness when, all by myself, I am deserted by my own self, that is, by my own inner companion.

It is important to note that this earlier notion of the "loss of the capacity of thought" is very similar to what Arendt was later to call "thoughtlessness", described by her in *The Human Condition* (1958) as "the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty" (HC 3). In *Eichmann and Jerusalem* (1963), she famously uses the term "thoughtlessness" to capture Adolf Eichmann's "inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else".[493] In the introduction to *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (1971), she gives the following explanation of Eichmann's "absence of thinking" (LM1 4):

> Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in that he clearly knew of no such claim at all. (LM1 4)

It becomes clear, even on the basis of these few passages, that Arendt's use of the word "thoughtlessness" is by no means equivocal, for the absence of the inner

[491] Note that "life" is used here in a different sense than in the preceding paragraph.
[492] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 468-474; idem, 'Understanding and Politics', 317-318.
[493] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 49. Cf. ibid., 47-48, where she speaks of Eichmann's "almost total inability to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view." See also ibid., 287-288, where she seems to identify his "thoughtlessness" with a "lack of imagination", resulting in a "remoteness from reality".

dialogue between me and my *self* is by no means the same as the absence of the ability to place myself in the perspectives of *others*, neither of which, in its turn, is identical to a complacent use of empty *language*. Hence, if we wish to acquire an adequate understanding of the apparently complex phenomenon of "thoughtlessness", we will first need to acquire an adequate understanding of the multiplicity of Arendt's account of "thought".

What both traditional "contemplation" and contemporary forms of "thoughtlessness" have in common is a certain turning-away from worldly reality. Arendt repeatedly notes that, since the rise of political philosophy, the "men of thought" and the "men of action" parted company, as a result of which "thinking began to emancipate itself altogether from reality, and especially from political factuality and experience" (OR 177).[494] She expresses the hope that the rift may be healed in the modern age, now that the thread of tradition has been broken. At the same time, however, it remains the case that, in order to think, one inevitably *removes* oneself from the external world of appearances. Accordingly, in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt speaks of the "intramural warfare" between man's common sense and our faculty of thought. The former provides us with a "sense of realness", the experience of the world of appearances in its "sheer thereness", while the latter withdraws itself from that world and loses the feeling of realness. As Arendt explains, thought "can seize upon and get hold of everything real – event, object, its own thought; but their *realness* is the only property that remains stubbornly beyond its reach [emphasis added]" (LM1 49).[495] As thinking is by definition "out of order" in this sense,[496] solitary thinkers will always run the risk of becoming lonely "when they can no longer find the redeeming grace of companionship to save them from duality and equivocality and doubt" (OT 476). Nevertheless, Arendt indicates that the activity of *thinking* – as distinguished from the contemplation of cosmic truths and from the subjection to conventional codes or rules of logic – may in a very specific sense be able to retain a relationship with worldly reality. She is looking for a thinking activity that is somehow capable of compensating for its necessarily being "out of order".[497]

In the concluding paragraph of *The Human Condition*, Arendt displays her worries about the grim prospects for thought in the modern world,[498] and comments that this fact "may be irrelevant, or of restricted relevance, for the future of the world; it is not irrelevant for the future of man." (HC 324-5). As we will see, this

[494] Cf. HC 17.
[495] LM1 45-53.
[496] LM1 78.
[497] Curtis phrases Arendt's quest as follows: "Is there something in the thinking experience itself that, when habitually performed, conditions and forms us, something that enables us to be more attentive to the real?" (Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 47), and, more specifically: "if we take seriously the experience of being a self that-is-not-one, feel its pleasures, know its interests and needs, if these experiences become habits crucial to our sense of well-being, do we become more attentive to the claim of reality?" (Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 54)
[498] Arendt claims that "no other human capacity is so vulnerable" and that wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom, "thought is still possible, and no doubt actual", but under conditions of tyranny "it is in fact far easier to act … than it is to think." (HC 324)

distinction between a concern for the world and a concern for man will prove to be important in answering the question of which activities of thinking are suited to healing the rift, for only those types of thinking that somehow *intrinsically* display a concern for the world count as serious candidates.

6.3. DIALECTICAL THINKING

Never is a man more active than when he does nothing,
never is he less alone than when he is by himself.[499]
Cato

Dana Villa, who is one of the most influential interpreters of Arendt's work, has argued that her work "point[s] to the possibility of a philosophical or Socratic form of citizenship, one that undercuts the dichotomy of philosophy versus politics", of the *bios theōrētikos* versus the *bios politikos*, of 'mere" opinion [*doxa*] versus "true" knowledge [*epistēmē*]. [500] Yet, he claims, Arendt ultimately eschews this possibility by "chastising philosophy (as did Callicles) for its "unmanly" withdrawal from the world" and by her plea for active and "manly" citizenship instead.[501] According to Villa, she thereby betrays her "best insights" and leaves us with "the false alternative between civic republicanism on one hand and philosophical elitism on the other".[502] As a result, he states, "The terms set by the *Gorgias*, and by Callicles in particular, return in all their Procrustean violence."[503] This statement shows that Villa, while presenting Socrates as a figure of mediation between philosophy and politics, leaves the underlying conceptual framework intact. By failing to notice the radical nature of Arendt's critique of "the Socratic school", he fails to see that she had good reasons for rejecting Socratic citizenship as embodying a form of thinking which Villa praises for its being "distanced" and yet sufficiently "worldly".[504]

Villa bases his reconstruction of Arendt's account of "Socratic citizenship" primarily on 'Philosophy and Politics', a lecture she gave in 1954, which she decided not to publish during her lifetime.[505] In this piece she displays an optimism about the civic role of philosophy that is never repeated in her published work. As the trust that she puts in Socratic philosophizing as a binding force in *polis* life is completely absent in her later work, I consider that too much relative weight is

[499] "Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset." See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 476, HC 325, LM1 7-8, 123.
[500] Villa, 'The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates', 149, 165, 150.
[501] Ibid., 164, 165.
[502] Ibid., 149.
[503] Ibid., 165.
[504] Ibid., 149, 167, 164.
[505] It is surprising how much attention this unpublished lecture has attracted, possibly because philosophers and political theorists find some reassuring confirmation in it for their activity being in some sense directly "relevant" or "useful" for the political community, whereas I believe that the utmost they may achieve is that it may be "meaningful".

assigned to this unpublished text.[506] Contra Villa, I argue that Arendt was in fact rather skeptical about the role of philosophy in politics, or, to be more precise, of thinking, not as contemplation but as the dialogue between me and myself.

In 'Philosophy & Politics', Socrates and Plato are being contrasted insofar as in the case of Socrates, thought is not (yet) instrumentalized as a handmaiden to reach a state of contemplation. In contradistinction to Plato, Arendt argues, Socrates did not *oppose* philosophical dialectics (the search for true *epistēmē*) and political persuasion (the assertion of *doxa*), but was instead looking for truth *in* opinion [*doxa*]. She describes this Socratic method of "maieutic" as "a *political* activity, a give and take, fundamentally on the basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth [emphasis added]" (PP 81). This kind of understanding – "seeing the world ... from the other fellow's point of view" – Arendt calls "the political kind of insight *par excellence*" (PP 84).

At some point in Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates says to Callicles: "It is better to be in disagreement with the whole world than, being one, to be in disagreement with myself".[507] Arendt interprets him as saying: "*Because* I am already two-in-one, at least when I try to think, I can experience a friend ... as an 'other self' [emphasis added]" (PP 85). According to Socrates, Arendt explains, being capable of living together with others *begins* with being capable of living together with oneself: *only* he who knows how to live with himself is fit to live with others. As one becomes conscious of oneself in the solitary dialogue between me and myself, one is likely to develop one's conscience: I should be able and willing to live with myself, with my inner companion, with the person who awaits me every time I retreat into the solitude of my own mind. Arendt claims: "The political relevance of Socrates' discovery is that it asserts that solitude ... is ... *the necessary condition* for the good functioning of the polis, a better guarantee than rules of behavior enforced by laws and fear of punishment [emphasis added]" (PP 89). In other words, thinking as a dialogue between me and myself appears to be a *prerequisite* of being able to live in a *polis*.[508]

However, already in 'Philosophy and Politics' itself Arendt expresses her awareness of the limits of thinking in this sense: "Nobody can doubt that such a teaching was and always will be in a certain conflict with the polis, which must demand respect for its laws *independent of personal conscience*, and Socrates knew the nature of this conflict full well when he called himself a gadfly [emphasis added]" (PP 90). It is this observation that Arendt puts at the very foreground in her works on the relation between thinking and politics that she *did* decide to publish. In 'Civil Disobedience' (1970), for instance, she draws a strict distinction between the "unpolitical" conscientious objector and the "political" civil disobedient, or

[506] In Chapter 5 of his book *Socratic Citizenship*, Villa partly revokes his earlier thesis by emphasizing the "exceptional position" of PP within Arendt's oeuvre, and shifting the weight of his interpretation to TMC and LM1. He maintains his ideal of "Socratic citizenship", however.
[507] Plato, *Gorgias*, 482c.
[508] Connect this to Socrates's statement in Plato's *Gorgias*, 521d that *he* is the "true politician".

between "the good man" and "the good citizen".[509] She argues that conscience is primarily interested in the *self* instead of the *world*, which means that "the two-in-one are friends and partners, and to keep intact this 'harmony' is the thinking's ego foremost concern" (LM2 64). As a consequence, she concludes, the conscience is politically unreliable,[510] for, as she observes, not only is it the case that what I cannot live with may not bother another man's conscience, the presupposition that everybody is *interested* in his own self cannot be taken for granted.

To be sure, Arendt adds, the solitary thinker is of course "not *thematically* concerned with the Self but, on the contrary, with the experiences and questions that this Self ... feels are in need of examination [emphasis added]" (LM2 64). Arendt tells us more about the *object* of thought in 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' (1971) and in *The Life of the Mind*, where she claims that Socrates "wanted to bring philosophy down from the sky to the earth and hence began to examine the invisible measures by which we judge human affairs"[511] (LM1 165). His activity of thinking is described by Arendt as a kind of "meditation"[512] or "pondering reflection" on the *meaning* of what we call "concepts", such as happiness, courage, or justice.[513] Each of them is "*something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze* whenever it wants to find out the original meaning [emphasis in original]"[514] (LM1 171). Arendt claims that this examination does not produce any tangible results, however. Socrates called himself a "gadfly" because the result of his thinking is *negative*, and possibly even dangerous, for "it does not create values, it will not find out, once and for all, what 'the good' is, and it does not confirm but rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct" (TMC 445).

Now she has found that the conscience is unreliable and the results of thinking are negative, we might therefore conclude that thinking and conscience are of no political use whatsoever, according to Arendt. However, in fact she does leave some room for a "political" role of (Socratic) thinking. In 'Truth and Politics' (1967) she explains that the *truth* claim of a philosopher – for example Socrates' statement that it is better to suffer wrong than do wrong – appears as no more than one *opinion* among many as soon as it enters the political realm. Nevertheless, Arendt says, there is *one* form of "persuasion" that philosophical truth is capable of without perversion or distortion, which is teaching by *example*: "by setting an example and 'persuading' the multitude in the only way open to him, [the

[509] Only the acting-in-concert of citizens, of which civil disobedience is only one of the many forms, can lead to law-giving in Arendt's sense, viz. as a collective inscription of speech-acts.
[510] About the political unreliability of conscience, see also Arendt, 'Religion and Politics', 383.
[511] In the *philosophical* respect, Arendt claims, Socrates differed from Plato in being concerned with human affairs rather than divine matters. However, for the history of *thought*, she does not regard this difference as decisive: "What matters in our context is that in both instances thought is concerned with invisible things that are pointed to, nevertheless, by appearances (the starry sky above us or the deeds and destinies of men) …" (LM1 151).
[512] In LM2 64 she speaks of a "meditating examination of everything given".
[513] LM1 170.
[514] Cf. TMC 431.

philosopher] has begun to *act* [emphasis added]" (TP 248). This, however, remains what she calls a "borderline experience" for the philosopher.

In her later reflections on thinking (as of 1970),[515] Arendt introduces another way thinking may perform a political role: "Good men become manifest only in emergencies, when they suddenly appear, as if from nowhere, in all social strata".[516] In other words, in case of *emergencies* the thinking activity becomes a form of *acting* in the outer world, for "[w]hen everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because *their refusal to join* is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action [emphasis added]" (TMC 445-6, LM1 192). In these cases, Arendt explains, it is precisely the *purging* element in thinking, the destruction of existing opinions and therewith of authoritative standards of judgment already mentioned, that is political by implication (TMC 446, LM1 192), for:

> If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. (TMC 446, LM1 193)

In other words, by dissolving accepted rules of conduct, the thinking activity makes room for the activity of judging, which Arendt defines as "the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned" (TMC 446, LM1 193). As such, it is "the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly" (TMC 446, LM1 193). In addition, Arendt considers the ability to judge "the most political of man's mental abilities" (TMC 446, LM1 192).

The precise relationship between thinking and judging, however, still seems obscure, for the merely *negative* result of thinking that exists in the destruction of existing standards of judgment does not tell us if and how thinking can play a *positive* and constructive role in the preparation of judgments. Commentators have paid insufficient attention to the difference between thinking as a *precondition* for the need for reflective judgment to arise at all, that is, the purging effect of Socratic thinking which leads to the destruction of existing standards, and a form of thinking which would seem to be required for the actual

[515] That is, starting with Arendt, 'Civil Disobedience', and running via TMC to LM1.

[516] Arendt, 'Civil Disobedience', 65. Cf. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 37: "What [Socrates] actually did was to make *public*, in discourse, the thinking process – that dialogue that soundlessly goes on within me, between me and myself; he *performed* in the marketplace the way the flute-player performed at a banquet. It is sheer performance, sheer activity" Cf. LM1 187: "the Socratic two-in-one heals the solitariness of thought; its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth."

exercise of reflective judgment.[517] As they have mainly focused on Arendt's *distinction* between the mental faculties of thinking and judging, commentators have overlooked the fact that she uses a distinct motif of *thinking* when she speaks about the faculty of judgment, called "representative thinking".[518] As I demonstrate in the next section, this activity of thinking differs in important respects from thinking as the solitary dialogue of the "two-in-one".

Despite the important role that the solitary thinker may fulfill in emergency situations, we should remain aware of the fact that Arendt kept emphasizing that thinking as such is always "out of order", and that the *solitude* of the philosopher always runs the risk of lapsing into *loneliness*, as a result of which he will lose even his final contact with reality.[519] Although it might indeed be the case that thinking in the sense of Socratic philosophizing is "irrelevant, or of restricted relevance" for the future of the world, that doesn't exclude the possibility of the existence of *other* forms of thinking that *are* relevant in this respect. We found a glimpse of the latter when Arendt described Socrates' way of understanding as "seeing the world ... from the other fellow's point of view" (PP 84). As the next section shows, though, *nowhere* in her published works does she associate this "political kind of insight *par excellence*" (PP 84) with Socrates, whereas the connection she draws with the figure of the statesman remains in place. We examine the extent to which this alternative, or what she was to call "representative thinking", may indeed be capable of bringing the "men of thought" and the "men of action" closer together.

[517] Curtis claims that all that Arendt's thesis that thinking "activates judgment" can bear is that thinkers return to the world in the state of reflective judgment, "although this says nothing about what sort of *response* we will have to that state" (Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 60). I claim that it cannot even bear this, for there is no *guarantee* that the purging of standards will lead the thinker into "the state of reflective judgment". He could also enter the world in a state of *nihilism*, which Arendt calls " the other side of conventionalism". The creed of nihilism consists of "negations of the current, so-called positive values to which it remains bound" (TMC 435). In this sense nihilism may be seen as an ever-present danger of thinking. "But this danger does not arise out of the Socratic conviction that an unexamined life is not worth living but, on the contrary, out of the desire to find results which would make further thinking unnecessary. Thinking is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed" (TMC 435). See also LM1 177.

[518] In part, they are misled by Arendt herself, whose tripartite division of thinking, willing, and judging leads us to forget that "representative thinking", which she links exclusively to "the power of judgment", is nonetheless still a form of *thinking*, even of a distinct kind.

[519] See also LM2 200: "Under exceptionally propitious circumstances that dialogue, we have seen, can be extended to another insofar as a friend is, as Aristotle said, 'another self.' But it can never reach the We, the true plural of action."

6.4. REPRESENTATIVE THINKING

The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato.[520]
Cato

We seem to be left now with the choice between either anti-political (Platonic) rule on the basis of contemplation, or an a-political (Socratic) concern with the self which becomes political only by accident, in case of *emergencies*. But what about *normal* politics? Fortunately, there is second conception of thinking present in her work, which is quite consistent and occurs for the first time in 1958, the same year *The Human Condition* was published. In 'Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio', Arendt says that Jaspers' thought, which is always "related closely to the thought of others," is "bound to be political even when it deals with things that are not in the least political; for it always confirms that Kantian 'enlarged mentality' which is the political mentality par excellence".[521] One year later, in 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing' (1959), she claims that "Lessing's thought is not the (Platonic) silent dialogue between me and myself, but an anticipated dialogue with others ...".[522] Apparently, there is a way of thinking that is *different* from the dialogue of me with myself (a *duality*) by somehow "pointing to" or representing *plurality* more fully.

The first, more elaborate account of this appears one year later still, in 'The Crisis in Culture' (1960), where for the first time she claims that it is Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, in contradistinction to his *Critique of Practical Reason*, that "contains perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant's *political philosophy* [emphasis added]" (CC 219). Kant's law of reason – the categorical imperative – is a principle of agreement with oneself, which Arendt traces back to Socrates's claim, mentioned above, that "Since I am one, it is better for me to disagree with the whole world than to be in disagreement with myself" (Plato, *Gorgias* 482). But Arendt discovers in the *Critique of Judgement* "a different way of thinking, for which it would not be enough to be in agreement with one's own self, but which consisted of being able to "think in the place of everybody else" and which he therefore called an "enlarged mentality" (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*)" (CC 220). This way of thinking, which she also calls "the power of judgment", rests on a potential agreement with others, that is:

> …the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself,

[520] "Victrix causa deis placuit sed victa Catoni" (LM1 216). Arendt also used this line as one of the two epigraphs on the title page of the final part of *The Life of the Mind*, called *Judging*, which she was unable to finish before she died in 1975.
[521] Arendt, 'Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio', 79.
[522] Arendt, 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing', 10. These expressions remind us in part of Arendt's depiction of Socrates in PP 84, quoted above. However, after this essay, which, I repeat, was never published during her lifetime, she associates this motive exclusively with Kant of the third *Critique* and with Homeric impartiality, and never with Socrates.

> but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. (CC 220)

In other words, judgment cannot function "in strict isolation or *solitude*" [emphasis added], for "it needs the presence of others 'in whose place' it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all" (CC 220). Accordingly, the validity of judgment is of a specific kind. Although it transcends that of privately held opinions, it cannot reach *universal* validity either, for it never extends beyond the others in whose place the judging person has put himself, nor is it valid for those who do not judge or for those who are not members of the public realm where the objects of judgment appear. What matters here is that the *perspectives* in whose place I imagine myself to be are those of *actual* members of an *actual* community in which both my fellow citizens and I myself happen to be present.[523]

For the purpose of our examination it is important to note that Arendt considers the capacity to judge, understood in the indicated sense of "the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present", to be "a specifically *political* ability" [emphasis added] (CC 221). She adds that it may even be "one of the *fundamental* abilities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to *orient* himself in the public realm, in the common world" [emphasis added] (CC 221). She claims that it can be identified with what the Greeks called *phronèsis* (or "insight"), that is, with what they regarded as the principal virtue of the statesman as distinct from the virtue of the philosopher, or from wisdom.[524] Whereas the judging insight of the statesman is rooted in "common sense", which "discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world" (CC 221), the speculative thought of the philosopher constantly transcends it. In culture as well as in politics, Arendt claims:

> …it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it. (CC 223)

Similarly, in 'Truth and Politics' (1967), she claims that "to take into account other people's opinions" is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking. Again she explains that political thought is "representative" by referring to Kant's notion of

[523] In her posthumously published *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, she seems to amend her earlier account by stating: "in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one's 'cosmopolitan existence.' When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator" (Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 76).

[524] Cf. HC 91, where Arendt calls *prudentia* "the capacity for prudent judgment which is the virtue of statesmen".

"enlarged mentality" (TP 241). It is significant that she explicitly distinguishes it from *philosophical* thought: "even if I shun all company or am completely isolated while forming an opinion, I am not simply together only with myself in the solitude of philosophical thought; I remain in this world of universal interdependence, where I can make myself the representative of everybody else" (TP 242).

Arendt explains that the *quality* of an opinion "depends upon the degree of its impartiality" (TP 242). This means that one does not "blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else" (TP 241): it is neither a matter of empathy (to try to be or to feel like somebody else), nor "of counting noses and joining a majority" (TP 241). Rather, it is a matter of "being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not" (TP 241); that is, in *worldly positions* that are different from my own:

> The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were *in their place*, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion [emphasis added]. (TP 241)[525]

In his influential 'Interpretative Essay' on Arendt's *Kant's Lectures on Political Philosophy*, Ronald Beiner claims that Arendt leaves this account behind in her later work (from 1971 onwards), and that she no longer focuses on the thought of political *actors*, but *philosopher-spectators* who give their verdict about the performance of the actors.[526] Though he is right that there is a shift in attention (viz. from the judgment of future deeds to that of past ones), this does not mean that she *revokes* her "previous" account, nor that she contradicts it, for what Beiner ignores is the fact that even in her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt employs a strict distinction between the *spectator* and the *philosopher* (LM1 94, 96).[527]

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[525] In TP 247, Arendt gives the famous words from the American Declaration of Independence as her example: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." By saying "we hold", it indicates that "All men are created equal" is not self-evident but stands in need of agreement and consent, or that equality, if it is to be of political relevance, is a matter of opinion and not truth. Their "validity depends upon free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking; and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion."

[526] Beiner, 'Interpretative Essay', 91.

[527] The confusion is most clear in Beiner's interpretation of one of the epigraphs of the third part of *The Life of the Mind* (see Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ii), from Goethe's *Faust*: *Könnt' ich Magie von meinem Pfad entfernen, / Die Zaubersprüche ganz und gar verlernen, / Stünd ich Natur vor dir, ein Mann allein, / Da wär's die Mühe wert ein Mensch zu sein*. Beiner, 'Interpretative Essay', 127, gives the following explanation for Arendt's use of this quotation: "Judgment is rendered not by the collective destiny of mankind [i.e. the verdict of History] but by "man alone," the judging spectator who stands before nature unencumbered by metaphysical dreams and illusions." However, Beiner misses the point: it is the philosopher who finds himself before *nature*, whereas the spectator finds himself in and before the *world*. Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker*, 170, gives the only plausible interpretation: man, standing alone face to face with nature, is not the same as the spectator, who does not judge nature but human affairs, amidst his fellow men.

Whereas the spectator takes the views of others into account (while being impartial and freed from the interests of gain and fame), the philosopher remains solitary. For Arendt, it is decisive that "Kant's spectators exist in the plural" (LM1 96). As a result of his identification of the spectator with the philosopher, Beiner assumes that the actor and the spectator exhibit two different ways of life (the citizen's *bios politikos* and the philosopher's *bios theōrētikos*, respectively) instead of reading them as two different *roles* that the citizen at some point may take upon himself. In my view the distinction between the citizen and the self is more fundamental for Arendt than the distinction between the actor and the spectator, which are two different roles that the *citizen* may assume.[528] Whereas the citizen-actor *initiates* events, the citizen-spectator *judges* them, while both remain bound to political reality or the realm of human affairs.

Furthermore, in 'The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern' (1958), which appeared in the same year as the motif of "enlarged mentality" occurred for the first time in her writings, Arendt connected the very same "long experience of polis life" that taught the Greeks "to *understand* – not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another's standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects" with the impartiality of poets and historiographers (and hence *not* with Socrates' maieutic!). What the "representative thinking" of Kant and the story-telling of Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides have in common is that all of them strive for *impartiality* instead of objectivity.[529]

Indeed, throughout her work Arendt praises the tradition that was inaugurated by Homer, as when she claims that "no civilization, however splendid, had been able to look with equal eyes upon friend and foe, upon success and defeat – which since Homer have not been recognized as ultimate standards of men's judgment, even though they are ultimates for the destinies of man's lives" (TP 263). In other words, our judgment of the meaning of events should not depend on the verdict of history.[530] Indeed, Arendt herself acted in Homer's spirit when she

[528] In fact, we already find evidence for the close connection between these two roles of the citizen in one of Arendt's earlier essays, 'Understanding and Politics' (1954), in which she wrote: "If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action, is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes *the other side of action*, namely, that form of cognition, distinct from many others, by which acting men (and not men who are engaged in contemplating some progressive or doomed course of history) eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists" [emphasis added] (ibid., 391). It should be noted that she does not yet use the word "cognition" in the narrower sense of truth-seeking here, which she started doing from 1958 on. Rather, it should be understood to refer to "thinking" in a general sense.

[529] Arendt, 'The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern', 51.

[530] Arendt usually contrasts Homeric impartiality with the Hegelian conception of history. See Arendt, 'The Concept of History', 51: "Not only does it leave behind the common interest in one's own side and one's own people …, but it also discards the alternative of victory or defeat, which moderns have felt expresses the "objective" judgment of history itself, and does not permit it to interfere with what is judged to be worthy of immortalizing praise." See also LM1 216: "Finally we shall be left with the only alternative that there is in these matters – we either can say with Hegel: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, leaving the ultimate judgment to Success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or as they have

spoke of the Hungarian Revolution as "a true event whose stature will not depend upon victory or defeat; its greatness is secure in the tragedy it enacted".[531]

To summarize this section, opinions, decisions, and judgments are prepared by a type of thinking that is distinctly different from thinking as the solitary dialogue between me and myself. I have tried to demonstrate that despite the fact that *every* type of thinking will necessarily lead to a forgetfulness of *realness*, representative thinking is "worldlier" than the solitary thought of the philosopher who concerns himself with "the essence of everything that is".[532] The former is thematically concerned with the meaning of *real particulars* – political events, experiences, phenomena – that are bound to a specific space and time and that are subject to opinion and judgment, which means that its "region of withdrawal is clearly located within our ordinary world, the reflexivity of the faculty notwithstanding" (LM1 97).[533] What is crucial here, is that the *activity* of representative thinking *enacts* the *plurality* of worldly positions[534] *within* the invisible space of the mind.[535]

6.5. POETIC THINKING

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.[536]
Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene 2

So far we have reconstructed two distinct activities of thinking. Of these, dialectical thinking, the exercise of the inner two-in-one, while itself being a-political, could *accidentally* fulfill a political role by liberating the faculty of

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come into being." Arendt of course chooses Kant, whose concept of judgment she interprets in line with the conception of history of Homer and Herodotus: "the Homeric historian is the *judge*" (LM1 216).

She concludes *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* with the quotation of Cato that I have used as epigraph for this section: *Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni* ("The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato"), just as she concluded *The Human Condition* with that other line of Cato, which characterizes the activity of thinking as the solitary dialogue between me and myself.

[531] Arendt, 'Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution', 5.

[532] Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', 391.

[533] See also LM1 93.

[534] To repeat, Arendt refers not to a *pluralism* of actually held *opinions* or convictions, but to a *plurality* of actually occupied *positions* in the spatio-temporal world.

[535] Cf. Curtis, 'Our Sense of the Real', 115: "Arendt discerned in Kant's work a mode of public thinking suited to respond to and build, in the invisible space of the mind, the world's complex phenomenality or appearingness. Kant's 'reflective judgment' emphatically concerns the world, and it is made possible only through a certain sociability."

[536] WB 193, LM1 212.

judgment. Representative thinking, by contrast, which can be either future-oriented or past-oriented, *intentionally* represents within itself the plurality of (more than two) perspectives that are constitutive for the political world outside. In either case it is not primarily the *object* of thought that determines its "political" character, but the peculiar character of the thinking *activity*.

We might argue, though, that something is still missing. Perhaps we wish to search for a *third* type of thinking which, contrary to the Socratic kind, is indeed primarily concerned with the world instead of with the self, but which, contrary to the representative kind, is not so much involved with the formation of actual political opinions and judgments, but rather with the recovery of the *meaning* of politics as such. Arendt, after all, criticizes our philosophical tradition not only for its inherent lack of attentiveness to the reality and singularity of *events* – which may be compensated by "representative thinking" – but she also refers to tradition's

> lack of *conceptual* clarity and precision with respect to existing realities and experiences [which] has been the curse of Western thinking ever since, in the aftermath of the Periclean Age, the men of action and the men of thought parted company and thinking began to emancipate itself altogether from reality, and especially from political factuality and experience [emphasis added]. (OR 177)

In other words, our philosophical tradition has hindered us from acquiring an adequate understanding and hence appreciation of politics due to its wrong use of certain *concepts*, or its problematic use of *language*. As the previous chapter showed, Arendt argues, for instance, that a specific concept (such as "rule" [*archè*, *Herrschaft*] and "idea" [*idea*]) has been problematically transferred from one context of experience to another (from the household sphere to the political realm and from the sphere of fabrication to the life of the mind),[537] that a specific term (such as "politics" itself) has lost its original meaning (contained in the Greek word *polis*),[538] or, finally, that the "spirit" or "principle" of a specific event (such as the "treasure" of the revolution) has barely found an adequate term at all ("public freedom", "public happiness").[539] Indeed, Arendt asserts that in order for events, experiences, and phenomena to become capable of being remembered and judged at all, they must first be rendered into *words*,[540] a task which she says was always

[537] HC 222; Arendt, *On Violence*, 43. For the use of the word "idea", see the first section of this chapter.
[538] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 15.
[539] Ibid., 5; OR 221-222, 280.
[540] OR 220: "What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in its turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance, and even for sheer reference, arise out of it." Cf. LM1 133: "Without spectators the world would be imperfect; the participant, absorbed as he is in particular things and pressed by urgent business, cannot see how all the particular things in the world and every particular deed in the realm of human affairs fit together and produce a harmony, which itself is not given to

assigned to the *poets*, "whose business it is to find and make the words we live by" (OR 280).[541]

To be sure, what is problematic here is not so much the *carrying-over* of meaning as such, nor the loss of the *original* or "first" meaning per se. Rather, the point is that we lose our *access* to the underlying phenomena and experiences, in the sense not only of adequately *understanding* them, but also of appropriately *praising* their very possibility.[542] Indeed, Arendt laments the fact that the philosophical tradition has lost the notion that "all appearances, inasmuch as they appear … demand recognition and praise", adding that this notion is still present in the reflections of the *poets* (LM2 92).

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt once again testifies to her critical distance from the tradition of philosophy, indicating that she has "clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today" (LM1 212). She asserts that it was Kant who had discovered the "scandal of reason", that is, "the fact that our mind is not capable of certain and verifiable knowledge regarding matters and questions that it nevertheless cannot help thinking about" (LM1 14). Kant distinguishes intellect [*Verstand*] and reason [*Vernunft*], which Arendt states coincides with the distinction between *knowing* and *thinking*, between the quest for *truth* and the quest for *meaning*.[543] She claims, however, that when Kant famously said that he had "found it necessary to deny *knowledge* … to make room for *faith*", he had in fact denied knowledge only of things that are *unknowable*, and he had made room not for faith but for *thought* (LM1 15, 64). (In other words, we might say, even Kant remained caught within the conceptual framework of Plato's *Gorgias*.)

Arendt notes that the breakdown of tradition seems to result in "a growing inability to move … in the realm of the invisible" (LM1 12). We will need to learn anew *how* to think,[544] therefore, how to settle down in "the gap between past and future", a task for which "we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared",[545] however:

> This small non-time-space in the very heart of time, unlike the world and the culture into which we are born, cannot be inherited and handed down by tradition, although every great book of thought points to it somewhat cryptically …. Each new generation, every new human being, as he becomes conscious of being inserted between an infinite past and an

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sense perception, and this invisible in the visible would remain forever unknown if there were no spectator to look out for it, admire it, straighten out the stories and put them into words."

[541] See also Arendt, 'Bertold Brecht, 1898-1956', 249.

[542] Cf. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, 274-276.

[543] The only attempt I know of to press the originality and importance of Arendt's distinction between knowing and thinking, between truth and meaning, and to develop it further, is Gray, 'The Winds of Thought'.

[544] Cf. Arendt, 'Tradition and the Modern Age', 29-30, CC 204.

[545] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

> infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought. (LM1 210) [546]

In spite of this predicament, Arendt develops a specific account of *how* to think, which she first described in the preface to *Between Past and Future* (1961).[547] Here, on the assumption that "thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings",[548] she formulates the following aim for her "exercises in political thought":

> to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language – such as freedom and justice, authority and reason, responsibility and virtue, power and glory – leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality.[549]

This motif of recovering the original experiences and phenomena underlying the words we live by is reintroduced and further developed, first in her 1968 essay on Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and later in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*. In both cases, Arendt begins by noting that what we are left with is a *fragmented* past, that is, a past that has lost its authority, its certainty of evaluation.[550] In both cases, she quotes Shakespeare – see the epigraph to the present section – in order to metaphorically portray as "pearl diving" a non-traditional way of dealing with the past, a way of thinking which she explains as follows in the last paragraph of her Benjamin essay:

> this thinking, fed by the present, works with the "thought fragments" it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they

[546] Cf. Ibid., 13.
[547] Its subtitle is *Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Consider the following comment in Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 473: "[Arendt] herself once remarked that *Between Past and Future* was the best of her books. She believed in its form: as its subtitle indicates, it contains 'exercises in political thought,' and was thus not systematic."
[548] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.
[549] Ibid., 15.
[550] WB 193, LM2 212.

> waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as "thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*. (WB 205-206)

Commentators have tended to interpret the metaphor of "pearl diving" developed here primarily in the context of Arendt's search for new ways of dealing with the past, and hence they have been inclined to read it as a description of her "method" – a term she herself detested[551] – of "historiography".[552] Yet they failed to pay sufficient attention to the fact that the passage is explicitly presented as explanation of "the gift of *thinking poetically*" (WB 205), the overall aim of the essay being to show that Benjamin, who was "neither a poet nor a philosopher", nonetheless "thought poetically" (WB 156).[553]

Arendt explains that Benjamin understood language as an essentially *poetic* phenomenon, which implies that he did not investigate "the utilitarian or communicative functions of linguistic creations", but rather tried to understand them "in their crystallized and thus ultimately fragmentary form as intentionless and noncommunicative utterances of a "world essence"" (WB 205), and it also implies that he regarded *metaphor* as "the central gift of language" (WB 166). What underlies Arendt's critique of the conceptual framework of tradition is precisely this more fundamental point concerning philosophy's neglect of the *poetic* or disclosing quality of language in favor of its *communicative* function – communication [*Mitteilung*] understood as the mere exchange of propositional content.[554]

We may of course ask whether what she says about Benjamin is also applicable to her. At least the following passage strongly suggests that this is the case, for the example of the word "political" is clearly her own:

> Any period to which its own past has become as questionable as it has to us must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably, thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all. The Greek *polis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence – that is, at the bottom of the sea – for as long as we use the word "politics." This is what the semanticists, who with good reason attack language as the one bulwark behind which the past hides – its confusion, as they say – fail to understand. They are absolutely right: in the final analysis all problems are linguistic problems; they simply do not know the implications of what they are saying. (WB 204)

[551] LM1 211.
[552] Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 93-95, 173; Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 274-278; Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, 9-10, 267.
[553] Cf. WB 166, 205.
[554] Cf. HA 26, 176, 179.

Arendt devotes several chapters to the relation between language and thought in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*,[555] in which she criticizes traditional philosophy's understanding of thought and speech as a mere means for cognition culminating in the speechless contemplation of compelling truth.

To begin with, Arendt points to the close affinity of thought and speech: "*thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think* [emphasis in original]" (LM1 99). The urge to speak is *not* caused by the need to communicate [*mitteilen*], for thoughts do not have to be communicated in order to occur, while they cannot occur without being spoken (whether silently or out loud). Arendt illustrates this by referring to Aristotle's *On Interpretation*. The criterion of speech [*logos*] is not truth or falsehood, but meaning: "speech … is not necessarily *apophantikos*, a statement or a proposition in which *alētheuein* and *pseudesthai*, truth and falsehood, being and non-being, are at stake" (LM1 99).[556] A prayer, for example, is a form of speech, but it is neither true nor false. Rather, the need of reason [*logos*] is to "give account" [*logon didonai*] of whatever may be or may have occurred, which is prompted not by the search for knowledge, but by the search for *meaning*: "The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of *appropriating* and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger" (LM1 100).

However, Arendt notes, language is "by no means as evidently adequate for the thinking activity as vision is for its business of seeing" (LM1 100). Language needs to borrow its vocabulary from words that were originally meant to correspond to sense experience, a borrowing which is never haphazard or arbitrary. Arendt claims that all philosophic and most poetic language is metaphorical, which means that the insights contained in it are gained by *analogy*, which is not to be understood in the usual sense of "an imperfect semblance of two things", but of "a *perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things*" (LM1 104). The example she gives is Kant's depiction of the despotic state as a "mere machine (like a hand mill)" because it is "governed by an individual absolute will…. For between a despotic state and a hand mill there is, to be sure, no similarity; but there is a similarity in the rules according to which we reflect upon these two things and their causality."[557] According to Arendt, then:

> All philosophical terms are metaphors, frozen analogies, as it were, whose true meaning discloses itself when we dissolve the term into the original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the first philosopher to use it. (LM1 104)[558]

[555] LM1 14-15, 57-65, 98-125, 211-213.
[556] Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 17a1-4.
[557] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §59, as quoted by Arendt.
[558] This passage reminds us of her description of Socratic "pondering reflection" on "concepts", each of which is "*something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze* whenever it wants to find out the original meaning" [emphasis in original] (LM1 171). Cf. LM1 174-175. Yet as we have seen in the second section above, in the case of Socrates Arendt emphasizes the *destructive* character of this form of thinking, which poses a *threat* to the *polis*. By contrast, in her reflections on metaphor –

She notes that language is capable of bridging the abyss between the invisible realm of the mind and the visible world of appearances precisely because of its *metaphorical* character: "the mind's language by means of metaphor returns to the world of visibilities to illuminate and elaborate further what cannot be *seen* but can be *said* [emphasis added]" (LM1 109). Accordingly, metaphors are described by her as "the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it" (LM1 109). Moreover, within the thinking process itself they serve as models to guide us among experiences that our bodily senses, with their relative certainty of knowledge, cannot. Finally, the relationship that is expressed in metaphor is *irreversible*, indicating "the absolute primacy of the world of appearances" and providing additional evidence of "the extraordinary quality of thinking, of its being always out of order" (LM1 109). In sum:

> Language, by lending itself to metaphorical usage, enables us to think, that is, to have traffic with non-sensory matters, because it permits a carrying-over, *metapherein*, of our sense experiences. There are not two worlds because metaphor unites them.[559] (LM1 110)

Arendt warns, however, that language, "the only medium in which the invisible can become manifest in a world of appearances", is "by no means adequate for that function as our senses are for their business of coping with the perceptible world" (LM1 112). In other words, although the metaphor may cure the defect, the cure has its dangers too, which lies in "the overwhelming evidence the metaphor provides by appealing to the unquestioned evidence of sense experience" (LM1 112). Arendt suggests that this is the reason why the great philosophers

> have almost unanimously insisted on something "ineffable" behind the written word, something of which they, when they thought and did not write, were very clearly aware and which nevertheless refused to be pinned down and handed over to others; in short, they insisted that there was something that refused to lend itself to a transformation that would allow it to appear and take its place among the appearances of the world. (LM1 113-114)

Arendt draws special attention to Plato's famous claim that "these things cannot be put into words like other things we learn",[560] which she interprets as an implicit

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which are entirely absent from her reflections on Socratic thinking – she draws attention to the very *possibilities* of metaphorical language in *reconciling* ourselves with the (political) world in a meaningful way.

[559] See also LM1 187: "As the metaphor bridges the gap between the world of appearances and the mental activities going on within it, so the Socratic two-in-one heals the solitariness of thought; its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth."

[560] Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 341c.

denial of the existence of an *un*written doctrine as well.[561] She claims that it is tempting to read these utterances as "attempts to warn the reader that he was in danger of a fatal mistake in understanding: what were offered him were thoughts, not cognitions, not solid pieces of knowledge which, once acquired, would dispel ignorance" (LM1 114). To explain further, she speaks of "a possible incompatibility between *intuition* – the guiding metaphor for philosophical truth – and *speech* – the medium in which thinking manifests itself: the former always presents us with a co-temporaneous manifold, whereas the latter necessarily discloses itself in a sequence of words and sentences" (LM1 118). There is a natural tension between seeing [*theōria*] and reasoning with words [*logos*], for "nothing expressed in words can ever attain to the immobility of an object of mere contemplation" (LM1 122). Arendt concludes: "Compared to an object of contemplation, meaning, which can be said and spoken about, is slippery; if the philosopher wants to *see* and *grasp* it, it 'slips away'" (LM1 122).

The sight metaphor, inadequate for the characterization of thinking, is manifestly present not only in Plato's notion of "idea", which he took from the experience of the craftsman who creates the model he holds before his eyes, but also in his cave parable, which Arendt calls "essentially poetic". In search, then, of an alternative metaphor for the thinking experience, she arrives at Aristotle's notions of *energeia* (an activity that has its end in itself), of *noēsis noēseōs* (reasoning turning in circles), and, finally, of the very sensation of being alive: "*without thinking the human mind is dead*" (LM1 123). Whereas the cognitive enterprise follows a rectilinear motion, "Aristotle's circular motion, taken together with the life metaphor, suggests a quest for meaning that for man as a thinking being accompanies life and ends only in death" (LM1 124). Since these metaphors indeed relate to no cognitive capacity, they remain loyal to the fundamental experiences of the thinking ego. Arendt admits, however, that they remain quite empty.[562]

Arendt could have returned to her metaphor of the pearl diver, but she did not, possibly due to its being linked too exclusively with her account of how to deal with the *past*. What is even more significant, perhaps, is that something essential is lacking from the figure of the pearl diver (as well as from that of the "collector" and of the "*flâneur*", both of which also figure in the Benjamin essay): the element of *speech*. As we have seen in the case of "dialectical" thinking, the metaphor that

[561] The *agrapha dogmata* which we know about through a remark by Aristotle in his *Physics* 209b15. Arendt takes the notion of an "unwritten" or "esoteric" teaching to be an expression of the conviction that thought (as the quest for meaning) should not be confused with knowledge (as the quest for truth), whereas we saw that Strauss takes it to be an expression of the conviction that *true* knowledge [*epistēmē*] – as opposed to mere opinion [*doxa*] – can only be found by "the few" who are "naturally" capable of thinking for and by themselves, thereby identifying thought with the quest for truth.

[562] Arendt uses Kafka's parable 'He' (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7-13, LM1 202-211) to tell us *where* we are when we think, viz. between past and future instead of in Plato's cave. Only in this specific sense can one understand why she says that this parable offers "a perfect metaphor for the activity of thought" (LM2 209), for it does not yet indicate how to *move*, that is, what we should be "doing" in the gap between past and future.

is used to make sense of the internal, invisible dialogue between me and myself, is actually derived from the external, visible experience of a lively "dialogue" or *conversation* between two close friends.[563] As we have seen in the case of "representative" thinking, the metaphor that is used to make sense of the internal, invisible representation of the standpoints of my fellow human beings, is actually derived from the external, visible experience of the lively *verbal exchange* of standpoints between fellow actors who find themselves confronted with a common issue, or between fellow spectators who find themselves caught up in a common event.[564] Finally, we may suggest that, in the case of "poetic" thinking, the metaphor that is used to make sense of the internal, invisible use of metaphor in order to make sense of the invisible, is actually derived from the external, visible experience of poetry itself, more precisely of the poet who is *singing* the praise of the world.

We may ask why Arendt did not seem to think of this. There is a rather obvious explanation, however: in her vocabulary, "poetry" is linked up with the Greek term *poièsis*, which refers to the activity of work, making, and fabrication, that is, the activity of *homo faber* who, sitting in his workplace, isolated from his fellow human beings, silently uses his material to create his product.[565] In other words, she may have thought that, by explicitly proposing the making of poetry as a metaphor for thought, she would have reiterated precisely the traditional interpretation of the activity of thinking in terms of the element of the contemplative vision of an idea, which is inherent to the experience of making. Indeed, in *The Human Condition*, in the section titled 'The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art', she asserts that writing poetry involves "the same workmanship which, through the primordial instrument of human hands, builds the other durable things of the human artifice" (HC 169).

Yet, in the very same section, another, perhaps more promising understanding of "poetry" starts to emerge. Here, Arendt calls music and poetry "the least 'materialistic' of the arts because their 'material' consists of sounds and words" – note her use of quotation marks here – and she adds that the workmanship these arts demand is "kept to a minimum" (HC 169). Moreover, after having suggested that the durability of a poem is not so much caused by the fact that it is written down, but by "condensation", she speaks of poetry as "language *spoken* in utmost density and concentration [emphasis added]" (HC 169), the German word for condensation being "*Verdichtung*", for density "*Dichte*", both of which resonate in the German verb "*dichten*", and not in the English expression "to *make* a poem".

Arendt does not explicitly identify the activity of "condensation" with the use of metaphor, but she may have had it in mind. One page earlier, she refers to a poem by Rilke to illustrate the "veritable metamorphosis" a work of art is capable

[563] Cf. PP 82-86.
[564] Cf. LM1 93.
[565] According to Markell, Arendt's concept of "work" is in fact richer in meaning. See Markell, 'Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of *The Human Condition*'.

of bringing about, being more than mere reification, more than a matter of mere "making" (HC 168). Consider especially the second stanza, which simultaneously articulates and performs the power of metaphor in "calling" the invisible:

> Here is magic. In the realm of a spell
> the common word seems lifted up above…
> and yet is like the call of the male
> who calls for the invisible female dove.[566]

We may say that it is the *singing* poet who uses the power of metaphorical language to give *meaning* to what appears, and thus to *praise* its existence.[567] In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt claims that the ancient Greek notion that "all appearances, inasmuch as they appear … demand recognition and *praise*", cited at the beginning of this section, served as "a kind of philosophical justification of poetry and the arts" (LM2 92).

To conclude this section, we may say that "poetic thinking" is Arendt's way of undoing the meaninglessness of the world. By realizing that language is essentially *metaphorical* and thus capable of connecting the invisible life of the mind with the visible worldly reality, it establishes or re-establishes that connection, either by diving for the original and originating experiences that lie hidden within our inherited words or by finding and making words that adequately capture novel experiences. Although only representative thinking is "political" in the proper sense of the word, insofar as it helps us to orient ourselves *within* the world, we may now say that, by "thinking poetically", we enable ourselves to *appropriate* or *re-appropriate* that world in the first place. Therein we may find an alternative to the "distanced" and yet "worldly" citizenship that Dana Villa was seeking, and which he (mistakenly, I believe) identified with the "philosophical citizenship" of Socrates.[568]

6.6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have argued that Arendt rejects the "Platonic" conceptualization of the specific character of and difference between philosophy and politics. In her view, they have been interpreted as "cognition" and "rule", respectively, led by the analogy with the activity of the solitary craftsman who, in his workplace, fabricates the "idea" he contemplates before his inner eye. As a result, the phenomenal specificity of both thinking and acting was lost. Acting together results in events that constitute the space of appearances, the public realm, the stubborn "realness" of which will forever remain outside the reach of thought. And yet, all thinking activity is concerned with the quest for the meaning of actions, of worldly phenomena including those of politics – an activity from the endlessness of which

[566] Translation John J.L. Mood. Arendt cites the German original only.
[567] LM1 143, LM2 92, 185-6
[568] Villa, 'The Philosopher versus the Citizen', 149.

we cannot escape by appealing to the certainty either of the compelling evidence of truth or untruth (in the case of Science, logic, and philosophy understood after the model of contemplation), or to the certain verdict of victory or defeat (in the case of History).

We raised the question of whether Arendt leaves room for ways of thinking that are somehow capable of bridging the gap between thought and action, between our inner mind and the outer world – while still doing justice to their mutual differences, to thought's always necessarily being "out of order". Throughout her oeuvre we have traced three motifs of thinking which could count as suitable candidates for living up to this task: (i) dialectical thinking; (ii) representative thinking; and (iii) poetic thinking.

As has been shown, one way of distinguishing these three types of thinking is to look at the difference in the *objects* with which they are concerned. The *first*, dialectical thinking, which is connected to the exemplary figure of Socrates, is thematically concerned with the meaning (or "essences") of concepts (or "ideas"), such as happiness, courage, justice, etc., which serve as invisible standards for our conduct. In itself, this type of thinking is an expression of the Socratic conviction that an unexamined life is not meaningful, and what underlies it is a concern with the harmony of the inner *self*. The *second*, representative thinking, which Arendt links to the tradition of ancient historiography, to the Greek notion of practical wisdom [*phronèsis*], and to Kant's third *Critique*, is concerned with the meaning and desirability of particular (political) *deeds* and *events*. The *third*, poetic thinking, which she associates with Benjamin, is concerned with the meaning and appropriateness of the words we live by. In contradistinction to the first, these last two types of thinking are not concerned with (the integrity of) the self, but with (the integrity of) the *world*: the second by judging which "works and deeds and words" (HC 19) that world is to be constituted by, and the third by naming and praising it.

The extent to which these ways of thinking can be said to be "fit" for politics should in the final instance be determined by another way of distinguishing them, viz. according to the nature of their inner *activity*. The *first* type of thinking – the conversation of the dual two-in-one – is a manifestation of worldly plurality in the self, however limited. However, *only* in case of emergencies – *accidentally*, as it were – does this duality act as a corrective to a loss of plurality in the real world of politics. The *second* type of thinking, which leads to the formation of judgment, opinion, and decision, is inherently "worldly" insofar as it *intentionally* represents within the mind the plurality of perspectives of the political realm in which one happens to find oneself. Hence, in contrast to the first type of thinking, it is genuinely "at home" in the world of political reality. This is also true of the *third* type of thinking, which tries to render, retain, or retrieve the "spirit" of the phenomena, experiences, and events that are contained within the words and concepts that we shape and are shaped by. Because thought is essentially discursive (conducted in *speech*), and by virtue of the fact that our language is essentially poetic or *metaphorical*, the visible world of appearances is introduced within the

invisible life of the mind. Thus, by "thinking poetically", we may achieve a form of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, a form of *meaningfulness*, if only for a brief moment in time.

We may say that by her drawing corresponding distinctions between thinking and knowing and between acting and making, Arendt breaks with the classical "Platonic" scheme of the *Gorgias* in which "rational" philosophy and "irrational" politics are played off against each other and hierarchically ordered in relation to each other, and in which both turn out in the final instance to be concerned with the individual *self* rather than with the common *world*. Accordingly, Arendt's approach to the problem of political thinking, of how to *understand* the *political* while doing justice to the peculiar nature of both activities, as well as to that of thoughtful politics, is to be distinguished from the approaches of both Popper and Strauss, who respectively conceive of science and philosophy as *privileged* approaches to the world which culminate in "rational" and "true" *knowledge* of that world. According to Arendt, however, this conception forms the necessary premise for the possibility of manipulating, "making" and, finally, "ruling" that world.

We have argued, contra Dana Villa, that Arendt is bound to reject the first, Socratic, dialectical form of thinking as a model for political thinking, because of its *self*-oriented character, because of its embodiment of a limited form of plurality, and because of its merely *negative* results, which together make it essentially *a-political*. To be sure, the politically lacking aspect of Socratic thinking was also recognized by Popper (see chapter 2) and Strauss (see chapter 4). Popper stated that Socrates was rather interested in the "personal" than the "institutional" dimension of the open society. Strauss stated that Socrates was insufficiently aware of the danger to the law of the *polis* that is posed by free philosophizing. Their respective *answers*, however – the scientific politics of institutional reform and the philosophical politics of exoteric writing – remain tied to the "Platonic" substitution of cognition for thought.

The kind of "thoughtful politics" we were looking for, that is, sound political judgment and decision-making, seems to be embodied especially in Arendt's notion of representative thinking, for it actively retains the plurality of perspectives out of which the political realm is constituted by "representing" them within the mind. Although its value of "impartiality" – rather than that of "objectivity" – is also defended by Popper (see chapter 1), his conception of rationalism, of "reasonableness", or of "listening to each other", ultimately remains *instrumental* to the pursuit of *knowledge*. The former acquires its value and meaning *in light of* the value and meaning of the latter. As a result, Popper subordinates the perspectival or worldly quality of political reasoning to its cognitive aspect. We have also encountered a recovery of practical wisdom [*phronèsis*] in the case of Strauss (see chapter 3). However, as his prudent statesman is in the last instance modeled after the contemplative philosopher, he also downplays the perspectival or worldly quality of political reasoning, which

becomes manifest, for instance, in his claim that it is the task of the historian to strive for "objective" judgment.

Arendt's notion of poetic thinking, finally, seems to come closest to an answer to our question of how to understand the political as such and at all. In order for representative thinking to operate, that is, in order to be able to form judgments, opinions, and decisions about actual political events, they need to be rendered in *words*. Arendt emphasizes the essential role of the *metaphorical* character of our language in giving *meaning* to the world, in reconciling ourselves with the world. Popper, by contrast, was shown to be incapable of giving account of the analogical and metaphorical traces within his own use of language, since both the "essentialist" view of language he polemicizes against (i.e. the view according to which each word has its intrinsic, "original", referent) and the "nominalist" view of language he embraces (i.e. the view according to which language users choose the referent of a word at will) presuppose that the communicated meaning of our concepts is or can at some point be fixed and hence mastered. As a result, he fails to see the way the "poetic" quality of language is effectively operating within his own writing, for instance in his crucial metaphor of "social engineering" (see chapter 2). In contradistinction to Popper, Strauss does acknowledge the poetic quality of language (see chapter 4), but since he considers it to be "ministerial" to its philosophic quality, he, too, sticks to the presupposition (or at least the fiction) that the meaning of our words is ultimately to be mastered completely. Arendt's notion of poetic thinking allows us to acknowledge that our thought, due to the metaphorical character of language, is itself intrinsically *worldly* by its capacity of "carrying over" the visible into the invisible and vice versa. So if we declare this dimension of language to be "irrational" or at best "ministerial", our most intimate possibility of appropriating the world and meaningfully connecting to it would be *lost*.