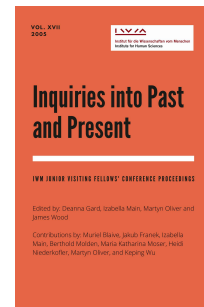


Political Conditions of Philosophy According to Arendt

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In *The Human Condition*, which is probably her most frequently commented upon book, [1] Hannah Arendt rejects the traditional subordination of praxis to theory. Such a step amounts to – and Arendt is quite explicit about it – radical criticism of the whole tradition of Western political thought. With what Arendt wants to replace the traditional hierarchical relationship – or what should be the relation between philosophy and politics according to Arendt – is far less clear.

Arendt's position has been interpreted as a reversal of the traditional hierarchy between theory and praxis[2] or as an attempt to radically disentangle the two activities.[3] Such interpretations strike me as extremely implausible. For one thing, Arendt explicitly states that she does not want to reverse the traditional hierarchy, but rather to abolish it. The underlying concern of *vita activa* is according to her neither superior, nor inferior but simply different from the concern of *vita contemplativa* (*HC*, 17) and neither of the two ways of life can therefore be subordinated to the other. This claim is by no means isolated within the context of *HC* or Arendt's work as a whole. Arendt consistently stresses the fundamental differences between thinking and acting and, especially in *The Life of the Mind*, seems to be suggesting that the two activities belong to utterly different spheres. Thinking is a solitary activity while acting is possible only among others; thinking is concerned with universals while acting deals with particulars.

Arendt's focus on the fundamental differences between thinking and acting lends some credibility to the second interpretation outlined above. Nevertheless, the suggestion that Arendt wants to completely separate thinking and acting, that she maintains that thought can by no means direct or inform action, does not seem very plausible. Most obviously, it would render Arendt's own pursuit of political philosophy meaningless. Apart from that, and more importantly, there are many indications in Arendt's work including *HC* itself, according to which Arendt does not want to radically separate thinking and acting, but rather to establish their relation on a new, non-hierarchical basis. Drawing mostly from *The Human Condition*, this paper argues that thought and action or philosophy and

politics are, according to Arendt, closely interconnected and even interdependent. Arendt's understanding of the relation between thinking and acting is therefore both more balanced and more complicated than it often appears.

The interpreters often approach *HC* as if it were a systematic presentation of Arendt's political theory. Such an approach, however, is misleading. *HC* is not a systematic presentation of Arendt's political theory; it is not "a kind of Arendtian equivalent of Rawls's *Theory of Justice*"[4]. Arendt's thought is highly unsystematic and her own characterization of the essays published in *Between Past and Future*, could be applied to nearly all her writings. To put it crudely, *HC* cannot be a systematic statement of Arendt's political theory, because Arendt never created any systematic political theory. On the other hand, I would argue that *HC* is a much more complex and richer work than is often assumed, concerned not only with political but also with philosophical issues. The prevailing, strictly political reading of *HC* not only fails to do justice to the work, but leads to various misconceptions about Arendt's intentions. Arendt has been accused of being a romantic Graecophile, of being a-historical, of being insensitive to women's and social questions, etc. While I am not particularly concerned with disproving various attacks at Arendt's position, this paper offers a reading of *HC* which renders many of such assaults unsubstantiated.

That the usual reading of *HC* should be strictly political is in a way understandable. Arendt herself points out that the book explores activities that have been classified traditionally as belonging to *vita activa*, while *thinking* – "highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable," (sic!) – "is left out of these present considerations" (*HC*, 5). Thinking, however, is not left out of *HC* completely. As Beiner puts it, "the entire book is *framed* by her critical references to thinking." [5] According to the *Prologue*, Arendt's chief concern in writing the book was not the disappearance of action from the modern world, but rather the danger of disappearance of thought from a world dominated by science and technology: "If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is" (*HC*, 3). To counter this danger, Arendt proposes to "think what we are doing" (*HC*, 5). Arendt returns to thinking in the last paragraph of the work, where she states that "[t]hought is still possible, and no doubt actual, whenever men live under the conditions of political freedom. Unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory-tower independence of thinkers, no other capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact easier to act under conditions of tyranny than to think" (*HC*, 324).

These statements imply that thinking and acting, philosophy and politics are closely interconnected and even interdependent. On the one hand, Arendt suggests that thinking can flourish only under certain political conditions, which she calls the "conditions of political freedom." On the other hand, she implies that thinking can influence action. Neither of these ideas is, in itself, particularly original. The question how to make politics safe for philosophy, how to ensure political conditions for thinking, has been – according

to Arendt's own account – the primary concern of political philosophy since Plato. Plato and his followers, however, would not define these conditions as “conditions of political freedom.” The whole tradition of political philosophy (as Arendt interprets it) on the contrary regarded political freedom as inhospitable and even dangerous for philosophy. That was also the main reason for the traditional claim of supremacy of theory over practice. We must assume that Arendt's understanding of “political conditions of philosophy” is profoundly different from the traditional understanding which she criticizes and that the implied usefulness of thinking for acting is likewise based on different grounds than the traditional claim of supremacy of theory over praxis. In the rest of this paper, I will interpret Arendt's understanding of “political conditions of philosophy.” That is to say, I will attempt to explain why – according to Arendt – thinking can flourish only under the conditions of political freedom.

To answer this question we must first ask what Arendt means by “conditions of political freedom.” Arendt's understanding of political freedom is notably different from the prevailing liberal understanding. Freedom, according to Arendt, stems from human capacity to act, to bring about a completely new and unexpected event or rather to start a new chain of events. While the capacity to act and to be free is given to all human beings, political freedom can actualize itself only under certain circumstances. Action is spontaneous only when it is not enforced by others' will or by necessity. Conditions of political freedom therefore can be described as a double liberation: liberation from the subordination to others and liberation from the care for the necessities of life. Since political action takes place among or between men, another condition of political freedom is the presence of others, who are likewise liberated from domination and from the care for the necessities of life. Political action hence can take place only under certain conditions, in a certain setting, which Arendt calls *public realm*. It is the existence of *public realm* that provides conditions for political freedom and presumably also for thinking.

Before we proceed further and explore Arendt's notion of *public realm* and its possible connection with thinking, one methodological remark is in place. The discussion of public realm and of politics in general in *HC* follows two distinct strands. One of these strands is based on Arendt's discussion of the Greek *polis* and of the Greek understanding of politics. The other strand of the discussion is based on Arendt's own phenomenological analysis of the human condition and of the activities belonging to *vita activa*. In my judgment, the latter – phenomenological – strand of the discussion is far more important than the former one. This is important to underline, because Arendt's interpreters often too easily assume that the Greek *polis* (or at least her somehow idealized version of it) is for Arendt a kind of ideal regime. The matter, however, is more complicated than that. Arendt does not regard the Greek *polis* as an ideal regime. Contrary to the objections raised by her critics, she is aware of the “violent injustice” of slavery and of subjection of women.[6] She also criticizes various other aspects of Greek political practice as well as of the Greek understanding of politics. Nevertheless, for the most part she refers to the Greeks with approval. While the *polis* is not an ideal regime, it is in a certain sense an archetypical or exemplary regime.

Arendt turns to the Greeks (and also to the Romans) because she believes that the study of the Greek (or Roman) understanding of politics can *lead* to authentic understanding of politics. As Villa puts it, “Arendt’s theory of action can be seen as part of a larger project of ‘remembrance.’” The point is not to revive the tradition, or to “revive concepts *qua* concepts, but to ‘distill from them anew their original spirit’, to arrive at the ‘underlying phenomenal reality’ concealed by such ‘empty shells.’”[7] The “Greek” strand of the discussion therefore *serves* Arendt’s own phenomenological analysis. The Greek understanding of politics helps to guide Arendt’s own analysis and provides her with the “material” from which she can “distil anew” the authentic meaning of politics. But the “Greek” strand of the discussion in *HC* also serves to illustrate the more abstract phenomenological strand.

The purpose of this digression was to warn against the temptation of identifying the *public realm* with the *polis*. This being said, we can have a look at how Arendt uses the Greek understanding of politics and more specifically of public realm in her discussion. One of the aspects of the Greek understanding of politics Arendt finds particularly valuable is the clear distinction the Greeks used to make between the *private* and the *public* realm. The activities concerned with the care for the necessities of life (in other words, what we would call *economic* activities) were in Greece confined to the private realm, *oikos* or household, and performed largely by slaves. Household was a sphere of necessity and un-freedom; its members – wife, children and the slaves – lived under domination of the head of the household. Since freedom is incompatible with domination, the head of the household was – within the household – no freer than those subordinated to him. He and he alone, however, could leave the darkness of *oikos* to appear as a free man among his equals on *agora* and to take part in the political life.

As I have already mentioned, Arendt is not an admirer of the slave economy or of the subjection of women. She brings up the clear distinction between the private and the public realm in the *polis* in order to highlight the collapse of this distinction and the subordination of politics to economic and “social” issues in the modern society. The clear separation of the public realm of freedom from the private realm of necessity, however, does not explain why the Greeks, in contrast to the moderns, valued action and public life higher than the economic values and the privacy of the household, nor does it tell us anything substantial about the public realm.

According to Arendt’s interpretation of Pericles’s funeral oration, the Greeks valued action so highly because it offered them a kind of immortality. Politics could not literally transform them into immortal gods, but it provided opportunity for gaining immortal glory. The *polis* then served two functions: first, to “multiply the occasion to win ‘immortal fame’ and, second, to “offer a remedy for the utility of action and speech,” to serve as “a kind of organized remembrance” (*HC*, 197-198). As Tsao points out, Pericles’s belief that the memories of action could survive without the help of “Homer and ‘others of his craft’” is, from Arendt’s point of view, naïve.[8] Arendt herself underlines that memories of action can survive only if they are reified by the work of poets or historians.

We can also assume that Arendt was less obsessed with immortality than the Greeks. Nevertheless, the “immortalizing power” that made action so valuable for the Greeks is closely related to the “revelatory power” of action that Arendt herself underlines.

Action is one of the three “fundamental activities,” which were traditionally classified as belonging to *vita activa*: labor, work, and action. Arendt calls these activities “fundamental” because each of them corresponds to one of the basic conditions of human existence. *Labor* corresponds to the “biological process of human body,” it typically includes production and consumption of food, as well as (sexual) reproduction. Labor is the least free and fulfilling of all human activities. It is performed out of necessity; it is repetitive or cyclical and does not leave any permanent traces in the world. *Work* is the activity that corresponds to the unnatural or worldly aspect of human existence; it produces more or less permanent things (such as cities, works of art, but also furniture) that make up the human world. Arendt therefore ranks it higher than labor. *Action*, that is to say political action, is the highest of the three fundamental activities. Like labor, it does not leave any tangible traces in the world, but insofar as it is concerned with founding and maintaining political bodies, it “creates” history. Action corresponds to the human condition of *plurality*. Plurality, which is the basic condition not only of action but also of speech, “has the twofold character of equality and distinction” (HC, 175). Because men are in a certain fundamental sense equal, they can understand each other and act together. Since each of them is at the same time a distinct and unique individual, they have the need to communicate their distinctness. Human beings make their distinctness apparent, they distinguish themselves as unique individuals, by action.

Human beings have the unique ability to express their distinctness, to communicate not something (for instance fear or hunger) but to communicate themselves, by grace of their ability for *speech*. In HC, Arendt maintains that the primary purpose of speech is such self-expression and not communication, for which speech is “extremely useful,” but which could be just as well if not better carried out by sign-language (HC, 179). Interestingly enough, in *Thinking*, where she characterizes man as a thinking, rather than as a political being, she uses a similar argument to link speech and thinking. Speech is hence intimately connected with both essentially human activities – with action and thought. And since Arendt characterizes man both as a political and as a thinking being, we could say that for Arendt it is speech that makes human beings what they are. [9]

Arendt’s three “fundamental activities” should not be interpreted as some sort of basic categories under which all particular human activities could be subsumed, but rather as ideal types of the possible modes of human comportment to the world. Whether a particular activity should be classified as labor, work, or action depends on the context and circumstances, but most importantly on how the agent through this activity relates to the world and to others. The particularities of the institutional setting are, on the other hand, relatively unimportant. As the examples of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or of the 1956 Hungarian revolution prove, action is possible even under the most inhospitable conditions. The “revelatory power” of action and speech can come to the fore even outside of the institutionalized framework of the *polis*. Or, as Arendt herself puts it: “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the

people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. ... It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicit. ... To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To men, the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all..." (HC, 197-198). *Polis*, as an actual city state "physically secured by the walls around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws" only protects and stabilizes the public space of appearances (HC, 198).

Public realm as a space of appearances, which exists wherever people act and speak together is of course more fundamental than its institutional stabilization by *polis* or any other political regime. As Arendt explains, the term 'public' in this context signifies "two interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena: It means first that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible significance. For us, appearance – something that is been seen and heard by others – as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality" (HC, 50). In the second sense, it signifies "the world itself, insofar as it is common to us all and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (HC, 52).

Appearance, according to Arendt, "constitutes reality." At first glance enigmatic, this statement on the most basic level means simply that I can be sure that what I see really exists, and is not just a product of my fancy, if I know that others can see it as well. But there is more to Arendt's claim than that. Same things may appear differently depending upon the perspective from which they are observed. Especially when such "things" are not tangible objects, but "things" or matters that go on between people. Slavery, for instance, may to one appear as an institution based on natural order, while someone else may perceive it as patent injustice. It is exactly this multiplicity of perspectives, which leads to the multiplicity of opinions that constitutes reality: "Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear" (HC, 57). When people cannot communicate their various opinions – for instance in tyrannies – the worldly reality gets distorted. Even more serious distortion of worldly reality occurs when the plurality of the perspectives itself disappears; this happens in a mass society "where we see all people as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of their neighbor" (HC, 58) or, to a greater degree, under totalitarian regimes, which strive to replace worldly reality with an artificial reality of ideology (OT, 457).

Reality is therefore not constituted by the appearance itself, but by the plurality of perspectives, which must itself become apparent. This happens on a public stage, where people express their opinions on public matters. We could hence say that the existence of the public realm as a space of appearances depends on the existence of the public realm as a stage for political speech and action. Such a formulation however could be misleading, because the two definitions of the public realm – as a stage for political speech and action

and as a space of appearances – refer to two aspects of the same phenomenon. The loss of the public realm does not deprive people only of the conditions of political freedom, but also of the access to the reality of the world. Not because things would somehow mysteriously cease to appear, but because in the absence of the apparent plurality of perspectives the appearances cannot disclose reality: they remain, to put it in Heidegger's terms, mere appearances.

The actors on a public stage express their opinions and thus enable the disclosure of the worldly reality. However, the disclosure of the worldly reality is not, from the actors' point of view, the primary aim of political speech and action. The actors strive to distinguish themselves, to *make themselves appear* among and in front of others as distinct, and distinguishable, individuals. Naturally enough, men usually strive to appear in the best possible light; they try to conceal their vices and pretend virtues they do not really possess, shortly they try to *appear* better than they are. Appearance reveals reality but it can also conceal it. Political action, like stage acting, involves pretension and concealment of the actor behind a mask. Nevertheless, while each actor tries to appear in the best light, it is for the others to judge his performance, to judge who he is. The actor is never fully in charge of the impression his action makes on the spectators. To others, one may appear differently than to oneself – and differently than one would like to appear to them. The same action also appears differently to different spectators, who judge it from their particular perspectives. As we have seen above, it is the plurality of perspectives from which things appear to the spectators, that constitutes their reality. This applies not only to inanimate objects and to “things” that go on between people, but also to people themselves. The analogy between political action and stage acting is therefore imprecise. Behind the mask of appearances that conceal as well as reveal the actor's individuality, there is no real or authentic self. On the contrary, the reality of individual existence becomes constituted only through the revelatory power of action.

Human beings are not simply things that occur in the world, neither are they just specimens of the same species. They are unique individuals who come to the world for a limited span of time. *Who* someone is becomes apparent from what he says and does – not in a particular moment, but throughout his life. By acting and speaking among others, each individual enacts the story of his life. However, “nobody is the author or producer of his own life story” (HC, 184), nobody can control his destiny and/or create his life as a work of art. We are always born into an existing world and our life stories unfold themselves into an already existing “web of relationships.” In other words, the life story is never a one-man act, and while an individual actor controls his part, he has no control over the other actors or over the setting of the stage. In action, each individual enacts his life story and thus reveals himself as an individual (or, more precisely, becomes an individual), but his story, which properly speaking has no author, can be recounted only by others. The reality of an individual existence becomes constituted in the public realm, which is established by the plurality of actors who are at the same time observers. As Arendt remarks, the injustice of slavery and subjection of women in Greece lies also in the fact that the slaves and women, who spent their lives exclusively in the privacy of

household, were deprived of the reality of existence that comes from being seen and heard by others (*OT*, 58). The same deprivation of the reality of one's own existence becomes in the modern society the destiny of nearly everybody.

So far, we have discussed only the first aspect of the "public realm" – the space of appearances. We should now turn to its second aspect – to the "common world." Arendt distinguishes between the world and nature. The world is created by men: it consists of physical things but also of institutions and affairs that go on between men. It provides a Heideggerian[10] referential framework which co-constitutes the reality of things as well as of human existence. The common world also relates people with their contemporaries but also with the past and future generations: "But such a *common* world can survive the coming and going of generations only to the extent that it appears in public" (*HC*, 55, emphasis added). In the absence of the public realm, the world does not literally disappear; however it loses its *common* character, it does not provide the referential framework to the people, who then become "lost" in the world or alienated from it.

Arendt's reflections about the *common* character of the world further corroborate her thesis about the importance of public realm. As we have seen, Arendt maintains that the existence of the public realm is a necessary condition not only of political freedom but also of the possibility of the disclosure of the worldly reality. This assumption, as I shall argue, is the basis of Arendt's claim that thinking can flourish only under the conditions of political freedom. Nevertheless, the two claims are not identical. That will become apparent only when we consider the relation of thought to reality.

Taken literally, Arendt's suggestion, according to which the worldly reality is accessible only under the conditions of political freedom, is implausible, if not absurd. As Arendt herself underlines, political freedom is historically speaking a very rare phenomenon, an exception rather than a rule. That would imply that the worldly reality was accessible only in the handful of truly political communities that have existed. And this conclusion really sounds very implausible – to say the least. Arendt however does not make such a claim – at least not explicitly. She describes *world alienation* as a distinctively modern, historically unprecedented phenomenon. Besides that, the causes of modern world alienation, as Arendt describes them, are far from being purely political. This makes the whole situation even more complicated, since there appears to be a discrepancy between the implications of Arendt's general statements about the public realm and her treatment of modern world alienation.

Above, we have seen that the existence of the public realm in its most fundamental sense does not depend on any institutional setting; it exists *whenever* people act and speak together. I have also argued that the three fundamental activities – labor, work, and action – should not be interpreted as basic categories of exhaustive and exclusive classification of all particular activities, but rather as ideal types of possible comportment to the world. Action can appear even outside of a formally established political framework and presumably it can retain its revelatory power even if it is not *political* action in the narrow sense of the term. Arendt herself brings up the examples of labor or civil rights movements, but also points out that the exchange of the artisan's products at the market belongs to the field of action, rather than production. We can therefore distinguish

between action in the strictly political sense and other modes of action, which I will call “informal action.” Analogously, we can distinguish between public realm in a fully political sense and a “limited public realm,” in which “informal action” takes place. In the modern world, the actualization of informal action and the opening of “limited public realm” have apparently become more difficult than at any time in the past. The question is why the atrophy of public space in the broadest sense reached such an unprecedented level.

Arendt’s account of the genesis of modern world-alienation describes two interconnected but distinct lines of development: the rise of mass society on the one hand and the development of modern science and technology on the other. Both of these lines of development lead to a transformation of the modern man’s comportment to the world and/or to certain conflation of the distinctions between the three fundamental activities that make up *vita activa* as well as between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Mass society, as Arendt uses the term, is the society of late capitalism. Arendt turns around the usual description of such society as a “consumers’ society” and describes it as a “society of laborers” since everything that is to be consumed must first be produced. Arendt of course does not want to imply that hard physical labor is an ordeal of most of the members of the current post-industrial society or that this society spends most of its resources taking care of the necessities of life. Consumers’ society is a society of overabundance and its members obviously do not spend most of their time taking care for the necessities of life. Nevertheless, their comportment to the world is that of *animal laborans*. In the mass society, “all serious activities, irrespective of their fruits, are called labor” (HC, 127) and, more importantly, assume the characteristics of labor. Nearly all people in the mass society work in order to make a living or to multiply their wealth. Modern economy of course produces many, in fact too many, things; nevertheless these things are not durable artifacts but consumer goods with ever shorter life spans. Consumer goods are not produced by creative work of artisans but rather by mechanical (and mechanized) industrial labor. Even the occupation of professional politicians assumes the character of labor. The main task of politics, or rather of administration, becomes managing of the “life process of the society” – in other words of the production and redistribution of the wealth. The tragedy of the mass society is that an overwhelming majority of its inhabitants are not capable of a different comportment to the world than that of the *animal laborans*; apart from labor they are capable only of consumption.

The rise of the mass society led to certain conflation of activities of *vita activa*, and to the establishment of labor as a prevailing, if not the only possible, comportment to the world. The development of modern science, as Arendt describes it, led to a similar conflation – to what she calls a reversal of contemplation and action. Arendt traces the origins of modern science to the invention of the telescope and to Galileo’s subsequent discoveries. Galileo proved by the force of sensory evidence that the Earth rotates around the Sun and not the other way round. Paradoxically enough, his discovery became a mortal blow to the human trust in sensory evidence, for it disproved what anybody can see – namely that the Sun rotates around the Earth. The loss of trust to the senses led to the modern belief that man can understand only what he makes and modern science became more akin to work than to contemplation. The scientists do not observe the reality as it is given to men, but rather

force nature, with the help of special instruments, to give up its secrets under artificial conditions of experiment. Rather than rendering an image of reality as it is given to men, modern science *creates* or fabricates a model of nature as it would appear from an “objective” or “universal” perspective. Nevertheless, modern science in the sense of Newtonian physics still does not lose the character of contemplation completely. It is driven by the ideal of mastery of nature and still aims at rendering a true image of nature.

The reversal of action and contemplation became complete in contemporary sciences (such as nuclear physics or genetics), which Arendt calls “universal science.” Contemporary science enables men to “act into nature” – to start a nuclear reaction, to interfere with genetic processes or to conquer the universe. Contemporary science gives men tremendous, indeed god-like powers, but at the same time has apparently resigned on the ideal of mastering nature or rendering its true image. Universal science, which is concerned more with “acting into nature” (i.e. with understanding and replication of natural processes) than with creating its true image or model, loses the character of fabrication and becomes more akin to action. The action of scientists however lacks the revelatory power of political action. Indeed, rather than revealing reality, universal science conceals it. Laboratory technology enables scientists to experimentally prove the most daring hypothesis. Nevertheless, these experiments prove nothing more than that “man can always apply the results of his mind, that no matter which system he uses for the explanation of natural phenomena he will always be able to adopt it as a guiding principle for making and acting” (*HC*, 287). Science becomes more and more a self-enclosed system, which enables men to create and use technology and to use natural processes, but which does not increase our understanding of the world. Universal science conceals reality in yet another way. The symbolic mathematical language of modern science cannot be “translated” into speech. The universe as contemporary science describes it is literally unimaginable and unthinkable and therefore utterly unintelligible.

Arendt does not claim that science itself would be responsible for modern world alienation, nor does she dispute the validity of scientific knowledge. Rather, she wants to draw our attention to the limitations and the true nature of such knowledge. The problem is not in the science itself, but rather in the trust of modern man in science and in the role science and technology assume in the modern world. While most people do not have a clue about contemporary scientific theories, they believe that science reveals the nature of the universe – that is to say of the world. (In everyday speech people do not distinguish between the world and nature as Arendt does.) From an ordinary man’s perspective, the scientists make up a kind of esoteric society, because they alone understand the secrets of nature or of the world. What the average member of the mass society *does* remember from his science classes is that he cannot trust his senses, that he cannot take reality as it ordinarily appears for granted. He knows, or believes, that the Earth rotates around the Sun and that neither of them is the center of the universe.

For the everyman of mass society who believes that the scientists have privileged access to reality, the world really becomes utterly incomprehensible. He must accept his role in society and with it the “gifts” of the scientists – the technological gadgets he helps to create as a laborer and he uses as a consumer. The politicians and the bureaucrats of the

modern states do not differ much in this aspect from the everyman. Since they themselves do not understand science, they leave the question of how to use the scientific knowledge to the experts – i.e. to the scientists themselves. They are as eager as the everyman to use any technological gadget made possible by science – whether it be a television or a nuclear bomb. Arendt is of course not a conspiracy theorist; the scientists are no more in control about what happens with the products (or rather, by-products) of their work than anybody else. Once these products enter the world, they become incorporated into the life process of the society, which is controlled by its own inner logic.

Arendt wants to remind people that the human world is not identical with nature or the universe as it is described by science. The human world is created and maintained by people and people have to accept responsibility for it. Unless people start using their common sense and stop relying thoughtlessly on the knowledge provided by scientific experts and unless they accept active political responsibility for their world, they will end up as thoughtless slaves of the powerful but meaningless scientific knowledge and of the life process of the society – of the perpetuating movement of the consumer economy. Arendt does not offer any concrete solutions for the problem of world-alienation. Any such solutions must be political; they must arise from the spontaneous action of people acting together and not from theoretical considerations of one individual (*HC*, 5). She can only “think about what we are doing” – reflect about the condition of modern world and about the direction it is heading. That does not mean that Arendt would be an irresponsible intellectual who only criticizes politics but refuses to accept any responsibility or to do anything to change things for better. Arendt tries, or so it seems, to *provoke* people, to make them think about what they are doing and, consequently, to start doing things differently. Perhaps because she wants to provoke people, her reflections are somehow one-sided and excessively negative. The situation is not as bad as she portrays it. The atrophy of the public realm is not absolute and while action and thought are rare in the modern world, they are still possible and actual (*HC*, 324).

So far, we still have not addressed directly the main question of this paper – why thinking, according to Arendt, can flourish only under the conditions of political freedom. We have seen that the existence of the public realm is, according to Arendt, a condition of both political freedom and of the disclosure of reality. I have also suggested that this argument might be the key to the claim, according to which thinking can flourish only under the conditions of political freedom. But the connection between the two claims is much less obvious than it might seem. Arendt agrees with the tradition that thinking is a solitary activity, which transcends the world reality of appearances; she also claims that when we think, we withdraw ourselves from the world of appearances. Why should then the possibility of thinking depend upon the existence of the public realm? In fact, is there not a contradiction between Arendt’s claim that it is the plurality of opinions as they appear in the public realm that constitutes reality and thus transcends the mere subjective appearance and her agreement with the tradition, according to which the appearances get transcended by the solitary activity of thinking?[11] The former claim suggests that reality gets revealed in action and thus makes thinking superfluous. The latter claim, on the contrary, suggests that the possibility of thinking is quite independent from the existence of the common realm.

First of all, while Arendt claims that reality can become apparent only in the public realm, she does not claim that it gets disclosed by action. Insofar as men act, they are concerned with asserting their own opinions. Their aim is to gain recognition, to distinguish themselves above others, whom they regard as competitors. A major, and ultimately fatal, drawback of the Athenian democracy, according to Arendt, was that it was characterized by an “intense and uninterrupted contest of all against all” (*PP*, 82) in which everybody was trying to appear the best of all and nobody paid serious attention to others’ opinions. The reality gets revealed in the public realm of action, but it discloses itself to the spectators, not to the actors. It might hence seem that the task of thinking is to interpret what goes on in the public space and that the philosophers are ‘professional spectators and interpreters’ of politics. But the ‘professional spectators and interpreters’ of the political spectacle are rather poets and historians, who retell the deeds of the actors in the form of a meaningful story and reveal the reality as it becomes apparent in the public realm. The mental faculty that the poets and historians (or anyone else who tries to make sense of the reality as it appears in the public realm) employ is not thinking but judgment (*LM1*, 94). Judgment subsumes particulars under universal rules, while thinking is concerned only with universals. Judgment (or in any case, reflective judgment with which we are concerned here) has to take into account the views of others, while thinking is independent of them (*Ibid.*).

Nevertheless, while thinking transcends reality as it appears in the plurality of opinions, it cannot be entirely independent of it. We could say that thinking takes the detachment of judgment one level further. It is not concerned with the description of the reality as it reveals itself in the public space of appearances, but with the interpretation of its *meaning*. But precisely because thinking is concerned with the interpretation of the meaning of the worldly reality, it must take its bearings from the reality as it discloses itself in the world of appearances (*LM1*, 23). The philosophers strive to transcend the common sense of worldly reality and thinking – which is an inherently solitary activity – withdrawing themselves from the common world. Nevertheless, their reflections must always start from the common experience of worldly reality and the philosophers, if they want to communicate the results of their reflections, must also return to the common world. In fact, they can never completely leave it, since they always remain bound to it by the medium of thought – by speech. While in *HC* Arendt claims that speech does not serve primarily communication but self-expression, in *Thinking* she argues that speech does not serve primarily communication, but *thinking*. Without speech, thinking would not be possible at all (*LM1*, 32, 98). Even when it is not communicated, thinking, the internal dialogue between me and myself, always goes on in speech. Perhaps because its medium is speech, thinking, according to Arendt, is *meant* to be communicated: “[T]hinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think” (*LM1*, 99). Thinking is a solitary business, which is not possible in the presence of others; but if we could not communicate the results of thinking, the faculty itself would disappear (*KL*, 40).

If the task of thinking is to disclose the meaning of reality or of Being, the world of appearances must remain its point of reference. When philosophy “cuts itself off” from the world of appearances completely, it degenerates into either empty metaphysical

speculations or solipsism. In either case, thinking falls back onto itself and philosophy becomes an enclosed, self-referential system which does not tell us anything about the reality or its meaning. That is what, according to Arendt, happened with modern philosophy, which began with Descartes's speculations about the meaning of Galileo's discoveries, in other words, about the meaning of the loss of trust in the senses. The problem is that "with the disappearance of the sensually given world, the transcendent world disappears as well, and with it the possibility of transcending the material world in concept and thought" (*HC*, 288).

By now however, the "disappearance of the sensually given world" has become a problem touching everybody, not just philosophers. At the same time it becomes apparent that what Arendt calls "the subjectivism of modern philosophy," i.e. modern philosophy's radical separation from the world of appearances, leads to a dead-end. Arendt, who in *HC* reflects about the meaning of the scientific discoveries (or, rather, scientific and technological achievements) of her own age, suggests that if thinking wants to become meaningful again, it must take its bearings from the worldly reality or from common sense. The problem is that public space, which constitutes the worldly reality, is itself dangerously shrinking. And, as we have seen, the public realm can be constituted only by political action. Whether and how Arendt's solitary reflections can be conducive to any political action remains unclear. Arendt herself claims that "not ideas but events change the world" (*HC*, 273) and calls the belief that the thoughts of philosophers could influence the development of history "foolish." To answer these questions, we would have to address the second of the two problems identified at the beginning of this essay: how can thinking, according to Arendt, influence action. That, however, is a theme for a separate paper.

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Notes:

1. Canovan, 99.

2. Bradshaw.

3. Villa (1999).

4. Canovan, 99

5. Beiner, 282.

6. “The price for the elimination of life’s burden from the shoulders of all citizens was enormous and by no means consisted only in the violent injustice of pain and necessity. Since this darkness is natural, inherent in the human condition ... the price for absolute freedom from necessity is, in a sense, life itself, or rather the substitution of vicarious life for real life” (*HC*, 120). As Tsao points out, the second of these two sentences is in a way more important than the first one. It implies that this violent injustice is not a necessary price for the ideal regime, since it harms even its perpetrators. However monotonous and un-gratifying it may be, labor is necessary for life and therefore belongs to life. By shifting the burden of labor to the slaves and women, the Greeks deprived themselves of the experience of this aspect of life (Tsao, 117).

7. Villa (1996), 9. For Arendt’s understanding of remembrance see especially her essay on Walter Benjamin *Tradition and the Modern Age* (in *MDT*). Arendt’s “remembrance” is of course closely connected with Heidegger’s project of destruction of history.

8. Tsao, 110.

9. When Margaret Canovan claims that “if sheep could talk, they would be able to use the words to express their feelings and to report information, but they would not be able to discuss anything because they would all have the same point of view” because, according to Arendt, only human beings can express their distinctiveness, she misses the point. If sheep were endowed with speech (as opposed to some kind of sign language), they would be thinking and political animals, just as men. In one of the more obscure passages of *Thinking* Arendt actually claims that all (or at least all higher) animals have a desire to display themselves, to make themselves appear; she also claims that individual specimens perceive the world from different perspectives. (*LM1*, 21)

10. Arendt’s notion of the world draws a lot from the analysis of Being-in-the world from *Being and Time* and Heidegger’s influence on his former student does not stop at that. Nevertheless, Arendt does not simply appropriate Heidegger’s ideas, but often transforms them in a significant way. The question of the relation between Heidegger’s and Arendt’s philosophy is nevertheless very complex and it is impossible to discuss it within the framework of this paper.

11. This is how Canovan puts the problem: “If reality discloses itself in the public arena formed by plural men ... how does this square with Arendt’s own experience that the life of the mind requires withdrawal from the common world?” (Canovan, 115).

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