

Action, Love, and the World:
An Inquiry into the Political Relevance of Christian Charity
(with constant reference to Hannah Arendt)

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Abstract

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt identifies the central principle that has defined Christian communities since their earliest appearance as “worldlessness.” On Arendt’s analysis, Christianity has always tended to found relations between people on charity, a virtue that, due to its affiliation with the anti-political experience of passionate love, is incapable of serving as the basis of any public realm or common political world. This thesis aims to reconcile the virtue of charity to Arendt’s political vision on the basis of a reconsideration of love’s “worldlessness.” In the first two chapters, I characterize Arendt as a political thinker and provide an account of her ideas of political action and the common world. In the third chapter, I place Arendt’s understanding of the world in dialogue with Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenological account of charity, which dissociates charity from the idea of passion and presents it as an act of will through which one resolves to see past the simple objectivity of the world and to perceive the invisible “flesh” or personhood of others. Charity is “worldless”—and thus crucial to an Arendtian understanding of politics—in the sense that it looks beyond what the world automatically makes present in order to “see” the other person and to invite her voice into the common world of speech and action.

Introduction

To someone interested in the political resources contained within the Christian tradition, the work of Hannah Arendt may seem, at first glance, to be among the least fruitful places to begin one's research. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies Christianity as “worldless,” a term that she uses to convey the basically “unpolitical, non-public character of the Christian community.”¹ On Arendt's reading, the expectation in early Christianity of the end of the world, despite being disappointed in a literal sense, survived in the form of the tradition's characteristic disinterest in worldly affairs and determination to found its communities on relationships of charity rather than any concern of interest to the common public. In “Religion and Politics”—an essay, it should be noted, in which Arendt defends the self-interpretive capacity of religious traditions against the reduction of religion to an ideological “function” of society²—she argues that the political influence unique to Christianity in its earliest manifestations was its redirection of individuals *away* from the political realm, a tendency rooted in its basic loss of faith or interest in public affairs and political institutions. Arendt turns to the Christian attitude towards freedom as a decisive indication of the tradition's “unpolitical” character. In contradistinction to the ancient Greek *polis*, in which the political sphere was assumed to be the condition for freedom,

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 53.

² Arendt's insistence on the specificity of religious phenomena in this essay follows from her critique of the perspective of the social sciences, which, to her, “[identify] ideology and religion as *functionally* equivalent.” To Arendt, the “fundamental assumption of the social sciences [is] that they do not have to concern themselves with the *substance* of a historical and political phenomenon, such as religion, or ideology, or freedom, or totalitarianism, but only with the *function* it plays in society.” Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*. Ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), p. 374. Not only is such an approach complicit with the radical “functionalization of men” in modern society, but it also obscures the specificity of certain phenomena and refuses to take them at their word. As Arendt writes, “from the viewpoint of the social scientist, Hitler and Jesus were identical because they fulfilled the same social function. It is obvious that such a conclusion is possible only for people who refuse to listen to what either Jesus or Hitler said” (p. 378). While in this essay Arendt maintains the posture of a ‘disinterested spectator’ with regards to the substance of religious faith, her insistence on exposing such substance shows that she is neither hostile nor suspicious toward religion *per se*. This essay thus provides the assurance that Arendt's assessment of Christianity is aimed specifically at the political character of Christianity as it relates to her overall project.

for Arendt “the freedom which Christianity brought into the world was a freedom *from* politics, a freedom to be and remain outside the realm of secular society altogether, something unheard of in the ancient world.”³ Such is the kernel of Christianity’s “worldlessness,” for Arendt: its unparalleled attempt to establish a way of life that not only removed itself from political affairs, but was on the whole unconcerned about both the conditions and rewards (freedom chief among them) of a political way of life.

My aim in the present study is to show that the Christian tradition need not be confined to Arendt’s characterization of it as “unpolitical,” and, further, that it can be conceived as providing a valuable resource for the very political vision that Arendt espouses. I aim to sustain this conclusion by uncovering the political relevance of charity, a relevance that, despite the coherence and validity of her reading of historical Christianity, Arendt does not detect in the analysis of charity that she offers. My contention is that charity, which is indeed “worldless” in a sense, has a crucial role to play in preserving the common world in which political life takes place, and hence can be reconciled to Arendt’s own theory of politics.

Though my ultimate aim is to say something about the relation between Christianity and the political realm, I have sought to ground my treatment of this issue in an account of Arendt’s understanding of political action. Accordingly, the first two chapters of my study take up the idea of action and the idea of the world as they are featured in the account of the public realm that Arendt presents in *The Human Condition*. In the first chapter, I characterize Arendt as a political thinker concerned to recover the idea of political action in an age that is becoming increasingly out of touch with it. Arendt’s analysis of the *vita activa* and the human condition to which it corresponds is meant to assert the specificity of action against forces that would obscure and devalue it—forces issuing from the modern glorification of labor and the ancient prioritization of

³ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 373.

contemplation. For Arendt, human existence is originally and irreducibly lived among others, and the failure to recognize the human condition of plurality leads to the subsequent failure to recognize the paradigmatically political activities of action and speech.

Following this initial characterization of Arendt's project, my second chapter offers an analysis of Arendt's idea of human action, characterizing it as an agent's interpretation of the world around her. In acting and speaking, the embodied human agent makes manifest and renders meaningful her unique point of view to others. I aim to show that, while the agent has no control over how her action will be interpreted, nor even "who" she reveals in revealing herself, she can be assured that her action, once it is "inserted" into the web of human relationships, will become part of the common world of human meaning established by all those who participate in public dialogue. From here, I go on to deal with Arendt's notion of the "world," examining its "subjective" and "objective" dimensions, and pointing to the sorts of concerns—the permanence and publicity of the world central among them—that define the political task of taking care of the world.

In my third chapter, I turn directly to Arendt's characterization of Christianity as "unpolitical." I suggest that despite the extent to which historical Christianity has indeed lived up to this characterization, it is possible to dissociate the idea of the "worldlessness" of charity from the idea of its anti-political nature. Such a proposal rests on thinking of love not as passionate flight from the public world, but as the basis for an act of will whereby an agent resolves to see and engage with that which is beyond what the world makes apparent—namely the "invisible" personhood of one's fellow agents. I suggest that charity, conceived via this understanding of love, plays a central role in ensuring that the common world in which human beings gather lives up to its highest dignity as the world in which human actors recognize each other and live

together. As that act by which one allows the other to “appear” in the world, charity can be included among the political virtues by which the common world is created and conserved.

Undeniably, the biblical canon contains numerous passages that appear to justify the Arendtian characterization of the Christian way of life as worldless. Chief among them is Jesus’ prayer to his heavenly father in John 17, concerning his followers: “I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.”⁴ On the basis of this statement, Christian communities have understood themselves to be burdened by the injunction to be *in* the world but not *of* it, generating the challenging tension of having to remain and reside in a world that they feel called ultimately to keep at a distance. My proposed understanding of charity, based as it is on Arendt’s understanding of the common world, promises to be able to open up a line of thinking through which to rethink this tension. As is clear in Arendt’s theory, “the world” has more than one dimension: for her, the “world of things” is different from the political or human world; and while the former in many ways serves as the condition for the existence of the latter, it would be a mistake to erase this difference in thinking about “the world” as a singular concept. To adjust the formula derived from Jesus’ words above: participation *in* the world, which entails an engagement with one’s fellow agents in the mode of political interaction, depends precisely on the fact that one’s fellow agent is not simply *of* the world, that is, reduced to the status of an inanimate, inactive object. To the extent, then, that charity allows for the appearance of persons in the midst of worldly, objective reality, it is possible to think of the Christian injunction to be not (simply) “of” the world as a crucial feature of any genuine political activity.

⁴ John 17: 15-16 NASB

Chapter 1 – The Human Condition and its Political Importance

Arendt's attempt to restore the human capacity for political action to a dignity that, in her estimation, it has not known since the ancient Greek *polis*, is among the main currents of her thought and writing.⁵ George Kateb explains that Arendt's attempt to recover the idea of political action derives its significance in being pronounced "in a culture which she thinks has lost the practice of it, and in which almost all philosophy is united, if in nothing else, in denying intrinsic value to it."⁶ Kateb here makes implicit reference to two basic contexts in which Arendt attempts to assert the specificity of action: first, the predominance in modern culture of scientific "knowledge" and automated labor, and second, the continuing influence of a philosophical tradition that, since its inception, has tended to treat politics as a problem to be solved rather than as a necessary dimension of authentic human existence. The purpose of the present chapter is to introduce Arendt's investment in human togetherness and the sort of activities that it engenders by demonstrating how her understanding of the human condition differs from the ancient philosophical prejudices and the modern social tendencies that her account is meant to resist.

⁵ In the opinion of the ancient Greeks, human existence was made up of two distinct spheres. The first sphere was the private realm of the household (*oikia*), which was comprised of all of the activities that arose out of necessity and utility with respect to biological survival and bare living. The second sphere was the public realm (*polis*), a space of interaction between free and equal citizens, in which one's "specifically human characteristics" could be made manifest in the public discussion of human affairs (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 24). While Arendt in no way recommends any sort of return to this ancient form of life (one entered the free space of politics largely by consigning one's slaves to the duties and necessities of private life), the experience of the *polis* is exemplary for her due to the way that the Greeks, unlike any culture since, "did not overlook but instead took into account the fragility of human affairs," the same fragility that Platonic metaphysical thinking found "intolerable" and attempted to eradicate by submitting the political realm to the rule of *poiēsis*. Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Heidegger and Arendt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 29. For the Greeks, the restriction of all necessity to the household was a necessary condition for the possibility of freedom, that is, the free exercise of political action in the form of "a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 27). The rigid distinction between the realm of political affairs and the realm of mere survival served, in ancient life, to protect the specifically political form of activity—collective deliberation on the common good through speech—from being lost (in the case that there was no longer any place for it) or neglected (in the case that citizens no longer had the time to devote to political things).

⁶ George Kateb, "Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 2, May 1977, p. 143.

I. *The human condition*

In order to understand how Arendt uses the phrase “the human condition,” it is perhaps wisest to begin with what this phrase does not mean. The human condition is not the same as human nature. For Arendt, the question of human nature is, from the perspective of human beings themselves,⁷ more or less unanswerable. She writes that “it is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves—this would be like jumping over our own shadows.”⁸ In asking after static and essential truths about human beings, the question of human nature requires that we “speak about a ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what,’” in which case the human questioner loses the very thing—herself—she wishes to define, since she can neither step outside of herself and examine her essence nor even be said to possess an essence in the first place. In this way, definitions of human *nature* are in fact out of touch with the actual characteristics of human life as it is lived on earth, and it is therefore doubtful whether such essential definitions, were it in fact possible to delineate them, would provide valuable insights into the experience of human beings. Introducing her own approach, Arendt notes that the “sum total of human activities and capabilities which make up the human condition” by no means “constitute essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human.”⁹ To emigrate from the earth to some other planet, for example—which for Arendt would alter the “conditions” of human life unlike any other imaginable event—would, she claims, do nothing to alter the supposed “essential qualities” that

⁷ Since the question of human nature requires adopting a position exterior to humanity from which human beings can appear as a definable object (which obviously no human being can do), Arendt places this question on par with the attempt to define or prove the existence of God: “The question about the nature of man is no less a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 11).

⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

are featured in definitions of human “nature.”¹⁰ In this case, human nature would strangely remain aloof to and unaffected by the most radical of changes in human experience.

Instead of reflecting on the essence or nature of the human, then, Arendt inquires about the human “condition,” or, what for her amounts to the same thing, human *activity*. Accordingly, Arendt’s approach is *descriptive* rather than definitional, as she sets aside the attempt to define “what” a human being *is* and instead analyzes and describes those actions and conditions that characterize human experience, even as they do not “‘explain’ what we are or answer the question of who we are.”¹¹ To inquire about the conditions of human existence is to do nothing other than to “think what we are doing.”¹² As one commentator puts it, Arendt intends to “focus on and describe the phenomenal articulations of active life with respect to what they show from within themselves.”¹³ Arendt’s *The Human Condition* thus constitutes a phenomenological account of “the most elementary articulations of the human condition,” namely those activities that are “within the range of every human being,” ascribing to these activities their own authority in characterizing human life and action.¹⁴ Arendt’s question is not “what are we?” but rather what, undeniably, do we *do*, and what does this mean for us?

The structure of *The Human Condition* as a whole reflects Arendt’s attempt to locate the fundamental conditions of human life and the diversity of human activity as it “shows itself.” Each of the three central chapters (3-5) of the book is devoted to one activity of the *vita activa*. The first chapter, however, contains Arendt’s most succinct account of active human life. Here, Arendt shows explains the correspondence of each activity (labor, work, and action) with one of the conditions of human life, as well as the irreducibility of each activity with respect to the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10-11.

¹² Ibid., p. 5.

¹³ Taminiaux, p. 25.

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 5.

others. To the human condition of “life itself”—that is, of being a living being in the biological sense—corresponds the activity of labor, in which the human body aligns itself with the processes of nature in order to ensure its own biological survival as well as the survival of the species. Labor denotes that sort of physical exertion by which products of consumption are drawn from nature and are then either consumed or left to decay. To the human condition of “worldliness” corresponds the activity of work, in which human fabrication exceeds the processes and demands of biological life and produces an artifactual world of things in which to house the lives of human beings. What is produced through the activity of work—not only crafted objects but also the “common world” in which people live and interact—is durable enough to transcend and outlast the biological processes of growth and decay. As Jacques Taminiaux explains, “by wresting from nature those materials that enable it to fashion things that have no natural equivalent, [work] promotes an artificial environment that protects human beings from nature and ensures a durable dwelling between life and death, stabilizes their life, endows it with continuity and identity—features that could not emerge without the durability of artifacts.”¹⁵ Finally, to the human condition of plurality corresponds the human activity of action. In her initial account of the *vita activa* Arendt does not positively define action, but says only that action is “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter.”¹⁶ Whereas labor converts the matter of natural surroundings into consumable goods, and work forms such matter into the totality of things that makes up the human “world,” action names the dimension of human interaction that takes place beyond these mediating products, which nevertheless sustain such interaction. Though it depends for its existence on the necessities of biological survival and the context of a fabricated world, action surpasses the

¹⁵ Taminiaux, p. 27.

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

products of labor and work as the sole activity through which plurality—the fact of being “among men”—is experienced and negotiated.

For Arendt, it is crucial that human beings remain acquainted with the full array of activities in which they take part in their concrete, active life: firstly, because the internal distinctions and proper ordering of the *vita activa* have tended to be overlooked in the tradition of Western thought,¹⁷ and secondly, because full awareness of the activities born out of the human condition helps to prevent the specificity of action—the “political activity par excellence”¹⁸—from being obscured or ignored. As Margaret Canovan points out, citing Arendt, no attempt to understand the political existence of human beings can be successful without undertaking “a preliminary exercise in clarification ‘to separate action conceptually from other human activities with which it is usually confounded, such as labor and work.’”¹⁹

II. “Contempt” for politics in the philosophical tradition

In pursuing the sort of clarification just mentioned, Arendt states that she uses the term *vita activa* “in manifest contradiction to the tradition.” For Arendt, *vita activa* is a necessarily heterogeneous term; it possesses an internal diversity such that no single activity that follows from “human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something”²⁰ should be confused with or reduced to any other activity. However, the influence of a philosophical tradition that has prioritized certain non-active ways of life has threatened the recognition of this internal diversity (as well as, consequently, the importance of any specifically *political* forms of activity). Arendt

¹⁷ As Margaret Canovan confirms in the ‘Introduction’ to *The Human Condition*, for Arendt, “these distinctions (and the hierarchy of activities implicit in them) have been ignored within an intellectual tradition shaped by philosophical and religious priorities” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. ix).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

indicates that her “contention is simply that the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself and that, appearances notwithstanding, this condition has not been changed essentially by the modern break with the tradition and the eventual reversal of its hierarchical order in Marx and Nietzsche.”²¹ Arendt’s distinctions between labor, work, and action thus do more than provide conceptual ease for her reader; rather, for Arendt, to fail to appreciate the fundamental differences between these activities is to follow a metaphysical-philosophical tradition that treats human action as uniform in placing it in a subordinate position with respect to the non-active way of life of contemplation.

This homogenization and subordination of the active life follows from an attitude of “contempt” toward politics that, for Arendt, has been characteristic of Western philosophy since its inception with Plato.²² On Arendt’s interpretation, the tradition of Western philosophy, “unhappily and fatefully, has deprived political affairs, that is, those activities concerning the common public realm that comes into being wherever men live together, of all dignity of their own,” in many cases treating politics as nothing more than a “necessary evil” that ought to be dealt or done away with as soon as possible.²³ This attitude emerged from Plato’s despair of *polis* life, occasioned by the execution of Socrates by the Athenian court. For Arendt, Socrates’ death signaled to Plato a basic incompatibility between the life of the philosopher and the arena of human affairs or politics. As Arendt writes:

At the beginning... of our tradition of political philosophy stands Plato’s contempt for politics, his conviction that “the affairs and actions of men (*ta tōn anthrōpōn*

²¹ Ibid., p. 17.

²² I should point out that my discussion of Arendt’s (admittedly contentious) view of other thinkers—especially of Plato and Aristotle on the issue of political life—is intended simply as an illumination of Arendt’s own view. A critical appraisal of Arendt’s interpretation of certain thinkers, though certainly called for, falls outside of the scope of the present study.

²³ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*. Ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books), p. 82.

pragmata) are not worthy of great seriousness” and that the only reason why the philosopher needs to concern himself with them is the unfortunate fact that philosophy—or, as Aristotle somewhat later would say, a life devoted to it, the *bios theōrētikos*—is materially impossible without a halfway reasonable arrangement of all affairs that concern men insofar as they live together.²⁴

In Plato’s political philosophy, writes Arendt, “the whole utopian reorganization of *polis* life is not only directed by the superior insight of the philosopher but has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher’s way of life.”²⁵ Politics, which is inescapable insofar as some measure of collaboration is necessary for peaceful coexistence, exists simply to serve the philosophical life, and is consigned to “watch and manage the livelihood and the base necessities of labor on the one hand, and to take its orders from the apolitical *theōria* of philosophy on the other.”²⁶

The homogenization and subordination of the *vita activa* brought on by Greek philosophy are closely related. When action is understood simply as a means by which to secure the possibility of a contemplative life—the *bios theōrētikos*, or rather, “the aiming of a pure noetic consideration of the immutable order of the *physis*”²⁷—the “distinctions and articulations” inherent in a life of action are no longer recognized or valued in their specificity. From the perspective of contemplation, action could be considered useful to the extent that it addressed the needs of the body, provided shelter and a place to live, and ensured the tranquility of contemplation by establishing an “atmosphere of civil peace” among human beings.²⁸ But this characterization of action as a *means* was “prone to blurring the specific phenomenal articulations of active life as it now became conceivable to minimize the importance of active life in general and the activity of citizens in particular, which so far in the Greek world had

²⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 14.

²⁶ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 84.

²⁷ Taminioux, p. 25.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

incarnated excellence.”²⁹ As a result of this subordination, the term *vita activa* ended up “correspond[ing] more closely to the Greek *askholia* (‘unquiet’), with which Aristotle³⁰ designated all activity, than to the Greek *bios politikos*.”³¹ That is to say, *all* forms of activity—including *praxis*, political action—ultimately became subsumed under the negative designation “un-quiet” (that is, *a-skholia*), since, from the perspective of the contemplative life, which required “an almost breathless abstention from external physical movement,”³² it made no difference what particular disruption arose from among the many kinds of human activity.

Moreover, the homogenization of all of the activities of the *vita activa* contributed to the erasure of the distinction between *praxis* (action) and *poiēsis* (the activity of making), in which case political action as a whole could be regarded simply as a form of *poiēsis*. As a result, politics and political matters could now be approached via “the activity of the artisan, or *technitēs*, who operates in conformity with a preconceived model and seeks to realize it by using adequate means.”³³ The interpretation of political action solely as a form of making replaces political action as an “activity that goes on directly between men” with a kind of craftsmanship in which political organization is ordered and designed in the way that an artist crafts her work—by contemplating one’s model or ideal and working in precise conformity to it.

Arendt’s insistence on articulating the various and necessarily distinct activities available to human beings is rooted in her strict refusal to treat human togetherness as a secondary

²⁹ Ibid., p. 24-25.

³⁰ Arendt’s judgment of Aristotle as ultimately complicit in the philosophical privileging of contemplation over action is significant since in *The Human Condition* Aristotle’s distinction of the *bios politikos* (“the political way of life”) from other kinds of life is used as a guiding example against which is measured the loss of the Greek experience of politics in the development of the social realm and the rise of the modern age. That being said, it is Aristotle’s ability to capture the opinions of pre-Socratic political life that Arendt is interested in. As Arendt says, Aristotle only “formulated the current opinion of the *polis* about man and the political way of life” (*The Human Condition*, p. 27). He is thus, on Arendt’s reading, part of the “Socratic school” (p. 195) that wanted to turn away from politics, and his articulations of the political and other ways of life “is clearly guided by the ideal of contemplation” (p. 14).

³¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 15.

³² Ibid., p. 15.

³³ Taminaux, p. 25.

dimension of human experience, attended to only toward establishing a non-political way of life. For Arendt, politics is not something that human beings, in the mode of *homo faber*, should try to manage by constructing some kind of state according to a conceptual ideal. Politics, for Arendt, “is based on the fact of human plurality,”³⁴ the fact that “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”³⁵ Hence, philosophical accounts of the human condition start off on the wrong foot if they neglect to assign primary importance to the originally “plural” nature of human existence and seek instead to establish truths about ‘man’ in the singular. As Arendt writes in her *Denktagebuch* from 1950 (reprinted in *The Promise of Politics*), “because philosophy and theology are always concerned with man, because all of their pronouncements would be correct if there were only one or two men or only identical men, they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: What is politics?”³⁶ For Arendt, any philosophy or theology of “man” in the singular will operate by “eradicating” the differences between individuals, and then assigning to politics the task of assuring a peaceable coexistence among the individuals that it has manufactured conceptually. But it is a mistake, she thinks, to formulate some idea of “man” without taking into consideration the necessarily plural or political dimension of human experience, given especially that plurality engenders its own species of activity—namely, action—which, properly understood, constitutes one of the most exclusively and authentically human capacities. In the midst of a philosophical tradition that has prioritized non-active forms of life and has tended to treat plurality as an unavoidable but inessential dimension of human experience, Arendt proposes to reassert the full breadth of human activity in a way that bears witness to the fact that—as those who participated in the *polis* fully

³⁴ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 93.

³⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

³⁶ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 93.

understood—a life without political action “has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”³⁷

III. *Arendt on the modern age*

In addition to being directed toward a philosophical tradition that denies intrinsic value to the active life, Arendt’s concern to expose the specificity of action and plurality is also directed toward a modern culture that is dangerously unacquainted with the human capacity for action and the kinds of political experiences (that is, experiences of plurality) on which action is based. As discussed above, Arendt dispenses with the unanswerable question of “human nature,” or of “what” a human being *is*, since the validity of any definition of human “nature” is achieved at the price of its being detached from the actual situations in which human beings find themselves. An account of the human condition, by contrast, since it is ascertained by considering what human beings *do*, is thus more closely attuned to the way in which human beings experience and understand themselves. However, while it is possible to define the human condition with some stability, it is another matter whether the understanding that we have of ourselves is rooted in an *awareness* of this condition. The question of the human condition is thus simultaneously familiar and foreign. It is familiar in the sense that it can be answered simply by analyzing the sorts of activities in which human beings are habitually engaged. The question is foreign, however, in the sense that it is asked in an age in which, as Arendt sees it, the full variety of human activities and the basic conditions of human experience are at risk of becoming stifled or obscured due to certain heedless exertions of human strength and intelligence.

In the Prologue to *The Human Condition*, Arendt characterizes the modern age as one in which human self-understanding has become increasingly and perilously out of touch with the

³⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 176.

conditions of life that emerge as “a free gift from nowhere.”³⁸ The idea that the human condition is “given” to human beings follows from Arendt’s idea that the earth, as the original habitat for human life, is “the very quintessence of the human condition.”³⁹ As inhabitants of the earth, human beings discover certain conditions—listed in full as “life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth”⁴⁰—in the environment into which they are born and in which they cultivate their existence. Such conditions are given in the sense that they are not the work of human hands or minds, but precede, and largely determine, the creative capacities that human beings possess. For Arendt, the increasing tendency in the modern age is to interpret advancements in science and technology as invitations to transcend such conditions: “we have demonstrated even scientifically,” she writes, “that, though we live now, and probably always will, under the earth’s conditions, we are not mere earth-bound creatures.”⁴¹ Arendt interprets the sense of “relief” expressed at the launching of the first satellite into space in 1957 as an indication of a more general “desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth,” and hence to take leave of the earthly conditions in which humans are originally given life.⁴² The modern age is thus one in which the possibility for human artifice to detach human life from the earth and its conditions is not only increasingly possible, but, so it seems, increasingly desirable.

At the same time that she asserts the “given” quality of the human condition, however, Arendt insists that “the human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man.”⁴³ The activities and capacities that make up the human condition “never condition us absolutely;”⁴⁴ rather, it is part of the precise dignity of human beings to be able to

³⁸ Ibid., p. 2-3.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴² Ibid., p. 2.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

produce, interpret, and alter the world around them, and thus to a great extent become the authors of their own condition. “Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort”, says Arendt, “becomes part of the human condition.”⁴⁵ However, this self-conditioning and creative capacity places human innovation at risk of becoming aligned with the desire to escape the earth, and hence being extended beyond or too far afield of those conditions that are given in earthly life. Hence, a profound tension characterizes the conditions out of which human beings act: on the one hand, the earth provides human beings with the capacity to determine the meaning and characteristics of their lives together in their shared environment; on the other hand, nothing can prevent human innovation from reinventing the conditions of life on earth in potentially dangerous and irremediable ways. For Arendt, human existence in the modern age faces the precise danger of being submitted to wholly “man-made conditions,” a situation that, if realized, would mean that, potentially, “neither labor nor work nor action nor, indeed, thought as we know it would then make sense any longer.”⁴⁶

In connection with the human capacity for artifice (that is, the capacity to re-make the natural environment according to human wants and needs), Arendt points out that “for some time now, a great many scientific endeavors have been directed toward making life also ‘artificial,’ toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature.”⁴⁷ The same scientific and technological prowess that made it possible for human beings to insert a humanly produced object into the company of natural celestial bodies is, to an increasing extent, directed to the more general effort of altering the conditions of human life according to possibilities available to us through technology. Arendt admits that there is no reason to doubt our ability to exchange the “earthly” human condition for a wholly artificial one, “just as there is

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 9

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth.” But capability does not necessarily entail desirability. The question, she says, is “whether *we wish* to use our new scientific and technological knowledge in this direction.”⁴⁸ What we are scientifically and/or technologically *capable* of doing may unhinge us from what has been *given* to human beings to do according to the conditions of life found on earth. Thus, the question of how we in the modern age will put our scientific and technological “know-how” to use is thus one of utmost urgency.

This question, moreover, is one of utmost *political* urgency. Political, because a lack of acquaintance with the human condition, firstly, threatens the relevance of the very capacity through which human beings interact with each other (namely, speech) and, secondly, because it threatens to reduce the internal diversity of the active life to one kind of activity—and a decidedly non-political kind of activity at that. In the first place, advancements in science threaten the very intelligibility of language, since “the ‘truths’ of the modern scientific world view, though they can be proved in mathematical formulas and demonstrated technologically, “no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought.”⁴⁹ The danger lies not in scientific advancement *per se*, but rather in the increasing political and cultural dominance of a scientific world in which “speech has lost its power.”⁵⁰ As the mathematical language of scientific and technological “know-how” achieves widespread prominence, Arendt suggests, “it could be that we, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do.”⁵¹ What Arendt is pointing to is more than simply an influx of unfamiliar and technical terminology that must be reckoned with, but rather

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 3. My emphasis.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 3.

the risk that human meaningfulness will come to be dictated by something other than that which occurs between persons. Arendt insists that “whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about,” and so an age in which the self-understanding of human beings is carried out in large part via the “meaningless” language of symbols thus places the very relevance of human speech at stake.⁵² “Men in the plural,” writes Arendt, “that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves.”⁵³ It is this ability to engage meaningfully with one another in speech that is threatened as human life is more and more “adjusted” to the “present status of scientific achievement.”⁵⁴

The advent of automation has, in the second place, placed the modern individual out of touch with the place of labor—and hence all other activities—within the human condition. In Arendt’s estimation, the capacity to answer the necessary demands of life with automated technology, which ostensibly actualizes the age-old desire to be free from the “toil and trouble” of labor, has in fact resulted in the “glorification of labor,” placing the modern age in the ironic situation of wanting to escape the only kind of activity that it knows. “It is a society of laborers,” writes Arendt, “which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this

⁵² The fact that Arendt is not offering a wholesale dismissal of science only reinforces the importance that she places on the political dimension of human existence. It is not science *per se* that is the object of Arendt’s critique; rather, the cultural dominance of science is a threat only to the extent that it detracts from speech, and in particular the kind of speech that accords with plurality—the fact that authentic human life is lived in the presence of others—as the proper source of human meaningfulness. Thus, Arendt admits that “there may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he may be” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 4).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

freedom would deserve to be won.”⁵⁵ Labor has monopolized the self-understanding of the modern individual, especially as she imagines herself in the context of public life. “While we have become excellent in the laboring we perform in public”, writes Arendt, “our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and the private.”⁵⁶ The over-emphasis on the activity of labor in modern culture thus conceals the specificity of political action, in which case human beings are unable to understand themselves as anything other than jobholders, laborers, and/or consumers.

The obscurity of all activities other than labor, “the one activity necessary to sustain life,”⁵⁷ is a product of a more general movement that Arendt identifies as “the rise of the social” in the Western world, a movement that “transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders” in which “all members consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families.”⁵⁸ Whereas, by comparison, ancient Greek life rested on a rigid distinction between the private home or household (in which were addressed the necessities of biological survival) and the *polis* (a freely chosen space of public interaction through speech), the emergence of what Arendt calls “society” blurs the distinction between the public and private realms by making private or “household” matters the exclusive content of public interest. Arendt writes summarily that “society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public.”⁵⁹ In social life labor replaces action as the most readily recognized public activity, just as “public” life is

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

characterized solely by private concerns related to the protection of private property, the accumulation of wealth, and needs pertaining to bodily survival. In this case, politics, far from possessing its own dignity as a distinct way of life, is made into “a function of society,” used simply as a means to regulate and protect the public coexistence of private interests. In this context, Arendt’s analysis of the *vita activa* is meant to reassert the dignity and specificity of political action, in an effort to resist or alleviate “the consequences for human existence when both public and private spheres of life are gone, the public because it has become a function of the private and the private because it has become the only common concern left.”⁶⁰

With respect to trends in human self-understanding such as those just described, Arendt insists that the question of whether we will replace the given human condition with “man-made” conditions “cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians.”⁶¹ In the first place, the question of the relevance of speech, aroused by the dominance of scientific “know-how” confirms the political character of these modern trends. As Arendt says, “wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being.”⁶² In the second place, the rise of the modern form of society, by introducing the activities and concerns of household life into the public realm and obfuscating all human activities other than labor, makes political action virtually unknown and impossible in the modern age. Again, as Arendt writes, “it is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household.”⁶³ Without the capacity to speak and interact via a kind of meaningfulness that

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶² Ibid., p. 3.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 40.

they themselves have been able to generate, it is difficult for human beings to remain acquainted with the condition of plurality in which they live with others on earth. And without awareness of activities other than those pertaining to staying alive and managing one's private affairs, it is not certain that "plurality" will signify anything other than that persons whose concerns are centered on private property and "sheer survival" just happen to share the same physical space.

Arendt's political thought is characterized by her concern to assert the inherent dignity of politics and to set apart action as the human activity that generates properly *human* togetherness and meaningfulness. But how, exactly, is action able to generate these experiences? And in what way does Arendt's emphasis on action clarify the connection between politics and "the world" that she makes evident in her assessment of Christianity? I take up these questions in the next chapter, offering there an account of action as the source of human meaning and as the basis on which the "common world" of human interaction is built.

Chapter 2 – Action and the World

In the previous chapter, I introduced the political relevance of Arendt's account of the human condition and of the *vita activa*. For Arendt, unless plurality—the fact that “not One man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth”⁶⁴—is recognized in its proper place among the fundamental conditions of human life, the meaning and importance of politics will be misunderstood and devalued, just as she thinks has been done in the tradition of Western philosophy since Plato. In a similar way, without full awareness of the necessarily numerous and diverse activities in which humans are able to take part, it is possible for their specifically political activity to be neglected or replaced with other activities. The modern “glorification” of labor and of activities pertaining to “making a living” can distract from or impede the appearance of political action, just as the growing dominance of certain (scientific) cultures in which “speech has lost its power” is liable to prevent persons from recognizing themselves as political beings.

The present chapter attempts to arrive at a more precise understanding of what is lost when human plurality is treated as superfluous. My concern here is to uncover the dimension of human experience that Arendt means to preserve by asserting the relevance of speech and the specificity of action. I explore the connection between Arendt's notions of plurality and action, in an effort to determine how, on Arendt's understanding, the nature of human togetherness and the activity through which such togetherness is elaborated gives rise to the need for a certain type of political space, one that Arendt thematizes as “the world.” The first part of the chapter attempts to arrive at a precise characterization of action. I suggest that action can be understood as the capacity possessed by each human agent to interpret her surrounding reality and to make her unique perspective publicly apparent in speech, and that the affairs that go on “directly

⁶⁴ Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action” in *The Phenomenology Reader* ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 371.

between men” in action thus generate a “world” of distinctly human significance. The second part of the chapter attempts to show how the world produced through action is related to, and largely dependent on, the world of human artifacts that serves as the common point of reference upon which action and speech are centered. On Arendt’s view, human interaction and relationships are sustained by the durability and objectivity provided by the world of tangible objects, since it is only in being anchored to something commonly perceived that the unique identities and interpretations of individuals can be made meaningful to others. Concern for the world of objects—and in particular the permanence and visibility that characterize it—is thus a crucial dimension of the “worldliness” that for Arendt lies at the heart of political concern.

I. *Action as interpretation*

What is action? Arendt says that action is the human activity that corresponds to the irreducible “fact” of plurality. Action possesses a distinctly “political” quality, since it is through their capacity to act that human beings experience and negotiate their lives in the presence of others. As a *political* phenomenon, action is less easily defined than the activities of labor or work. Firstly, action does not strictly speaking correspond to a distinct category “product,” as labor corresponds to objects of consumption and work to objects for use or artworks. The “accomplishment” of action, writes Arendt, “lies in the performance itself and not in an end product that outlasts the activity.”⁶⁵ Related to this idea of action as performance is, secondly, the ephemeral quality of action. Unlike work, for example, whose products take on an existence independent of the processes that produce them, action “goes on directly between men” in such a way that it disappears as soon as such “between-ness” is no longer in effect. Thirdly, whereas the processes through which labor and work are carried out can be anticipated with considerable

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 151.

certainty—the former adopting the cyclical patterns of natural life and the latter being decidedly linear in pursuing a determined end—the “process” of action is entirely uncertain. The “human ability to act,” writes Arendt, is the ability “to start new processes whose outcomes remain uncertain and unpredictable whether they are let loose in the human or in the natural realm.”⁶⁶

As an activity that takes place solely between persons, action is impossible without the existence of some form of community in which it can occur. As Arendt writes, “all human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men.”⁶⁷ Though all of the activities that make up the *vita activa* are “rooted in a world of men,”⁶⁸ neither labor nor work is distorted in any way when undertaken in solitude. But neither do these activities constitute what Arendt identifies as “the exclusive prerogative of man.” Hence, what is most properly human is inextricable from the condition of being together with others. As Arendt writes:

The activity of labor does not need the presence of others, though a being laboring in complete solitude would not be human but an *animal laborans* in the word’s most literal significance. Man working and fabricating and building a world inhabited only by himself would still be a fabricator, though not *homo faber*: he would have lost his specifically human quality and, rather, be a god—not, to be sure, the Creator, but a divine demiurge as Plato described him in one of his myths. Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others.⁶⁹

Action and plurality thus correspond to and depend on each other: one cannot act (nor, therefore, be fully human) outside of the presence of others; nor can plurality, as I intend to show, be fully experienced unless human beings engage in action.

With respect to the connection between plurality and action, Arendt specifies that “plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a

⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 231-232.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22-23.

way that nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives, or will live.”⁷⁰ In this rather enigmatic statement, Arendt indicates that plurality is a sort of being-together in which the common characteristic shared by all participants is precisely their absolute uniqueness, and that this uniqueness is somehow accommodated by action. There would be no need for action, Arendt thinks, if human beings were all the same, that is, “endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model”;⁷¹ were this the case, predictable and programmable forms of activity such as work and labor would suffice, since there would be no need ever to transcend the “laws of behavior.” But human beings do not simply “behave,” as if the “equality” that is achieved in their being-together were a matter of mere conformity.⁷² In the condition of plurality, Arendt insists, human beings are the same precisely by virtue of each person’s irreducible difference from everyone else, and so a specific type of activity is required in order for this irreducible difference to be able to appear.

This specific type of activity, of course, is what Arendt labels *action*. In acting, human beings transcend the predictable, automatic, and anonymous processes in which they are otherwise involved and, by asserting their uniqueness in a public context, generate a distinctly human “meaningfulness” in their interactions with each other. As a *unique* actor, each person’s interaction with others is simultaneously a revelation of the unique ‘who’ that he or she is, a

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷² For Arendt, the tendency to treat human activity as a kind of behavior, the patterns of which can be studied and predicted scientifically, is a consequence of the rise of the category of “the social,” which regards unexpected and spontaneous acts as statistically irrelevant. “Society,” she writes, “expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 40). The “normalization” of human agency—which excludes the possibility of action—is a result of the collapse of the public realm in the emergence of society. In the case of the Greek city-state, one achieved equality by expressing one’s individuality in public, among a community of one’s peers. This equality is altogether different from the equalization inherent in the form of the social, by which matters of individual distinction are considered publicly irrelevant. “Society *equalizes* under all circumstances,” writes Arendt, “and the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual” (Ibid., p. 41, my emphasis).

revelation that bears witness not to an identity that precedes one's interaction with others, but rather to the unique perspective through which one apprehends the reality of the world. The kernel of Arendt's view, I contend, is that plurality, as a human condition, and action, as a specifically human capacity, correspond to each other and require each other, because it is only in acting in the presence of others that the specific uniqueness of human beings—both what is uniquely human and what is unique about each individual actor—can be realized, manifested, and made to contribute to the human experience of meaningfulness.

In substantiating this characterization of action, I want to develop a point I made briefly in the first chapter. Human existence, as discussed, is a conditioned existence. The possibilities for and characteristics of life on earth have been given to human beings, preceding both them and the capacities that they develop. In her account of the human condition, Arendt takes seriously the extent to which human beings are subject to forces outside of their own agency. That being said, human beings possess the capacity to participate in the very formation of these conditioning forces. As Arendt writes, “in addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things.”⁷³ At one level, this self-conditioning power indicates the activity of work, that activity through which human beings manipulate the provisions of nature in order to produce a human world of things which serves as the artificial habitat of human life. At another level, however, Arendt makes a much broader claim about human creativity. She writes that “whatever *touches* or *enters into a sustained relationship with* human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence.”⁷⁴ That is, things are drawn into the human

⁷³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9. My emphasis.

condition by virtue of the simple fact that they “touch,” or rather, *come into contact with*, human life. Everything that human beings encounter is, by virtue of this very encounter, given a specifically human “character” or significance. Thus, while “the impact of the world’s reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force,”⁷⁵ it is possible to say, reciprocally, that the “impact” of human existence on worldly reality is “felt” by the world as an *interpretive* force. Things become the condition of human existence not only because human beings produce them, but also because, in apprehending them as part of their world, human beings bestow meaning onto them, establishing relations between things and giving them a significance that would not emerge apart from human interpretation. “Because human existence is conditioned existence,” writes Arendt, “it would be impossible without things”; however, “things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.”⁷⁶ In sum, the totality of things that serves as a condition of human life assumes significance as a specifically human “world” through the interpretive capacities of human beings.

How does the human capacity to interpret the world and bestow meaning onto things fit into Arendt’s account of the *vita activa*? It is immediately clear that labor does not introduce any distinctly human “character” into the world. The absorption of the laborer—and, more specifically, of his *body*—into the processes of degeneration and regeneration of the life cycle ensures, within the domain of “life itself,” the “inability of the human agent to stand apart from his environment and achieve a human identity.”⁷⁷ Work cannot be so readily dismissed, since the activity of fabrication (*poiēsis*) bears witness both to the specifically human need for a durable

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷⁷ Kateb, p. 144.

world⁷⁸ in which to live and the specifically human form of innovation by which this world is erected. Yet the “man-made world of things,” as Arendt calls it, does not itself possess the means by which to transcend the instrumental and utilitarian nature of the processes by which it is produced. Rather, this artificial world “becomes a *home for mortal men*, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions, only inasmuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use.”⁷⁹ For Arendt it is true that human life is impossible unless it is “housed” within a world of durable artifacts, through which the ephemeral quality of labor’s product and the futility of human action⁸⁰ can be resisted and stabilized. Yet the transformation of this world of things from a “heap of unrelated articles” into a *home* for all human beings requires a kind of activity beyond simply those pertaining to the production of objects for use. To commit to the metaphor, a house becomes a home only insofar as a certain physical, fabricated space is lived in, that is, insofar as the house that is “made” becomes the condition for the emergence of a kind of meaningfulness and interaction that *poiēsis* alone could not generate. Hence, despite the necessary stability that they provide human life, the activity of work and the world it produces are not themselves the origin of human meaning and interpretation. As Arendt writes, “in order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on

⁷⁸ In the absence of work or fabrication, human life remains subject to the repetitive processes that characterize all struggles for the preservation of biological life. Being alive, explains Taminiaux, means being subject to a law of cyclical desire, in which one engages in the painful bodily effort (labor) necessary for addressing a certain lack, which, once satisfied, only gives rise to a new lack (p. 26). The products of labor, since they serve only to nourish and sustain the body, do not endure; they are produced both *by* and *for* the body, and hence cannot truly be said to become distinct from bodily struggle. Work, in contrast, “produces, in the sense of both making and manifesting, a stable region of durable things beyond the circle of the eternal return of the same” (Ibid., p. 27). Work has a linear character, by which a plan (definite beginning) is established and carried out in the fabrication and realization of a pre-conceived product (determinable end). Unlike labor, the products of work are thus distinct from the processes that give rise to them; fabricated objects are *used* by human beings rather than simply consumed. Altogether, the world of fabricated objects adopts a durable existence beyond the cyclical processes of life, allowing human existence to participate in activities beyond simply that which “life itself” demands.

⁷⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 173. My emphasis.

⁸⁰ “Life in its non-biological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech, both of which share with life its essential futility” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 173).

earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced.”⁸¹

In what particular way do action and speech turn the “world of man-made things” into a human “home?” In what way do they introduce a uniquely human significance into the realm of natural and artificial objects? Addressing this question requires a fuller understanding of the human condition of plurality. “Human plurality,” writes Arendt, “the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction.”⁸² Plurality is not the same as multiplicity; it does not indicate simply the “plural” quality of a number of entities, but rather the fact that human togetherness is an *experience* of being one among others, in which otherness is experienced as a *distinctness* with respect to everyone else. To make her point, Arendt distinguishes between mere otherness and distinctness: while distinctions are inevitable in accounting for the otherness between things (e.g., why *this* chair is not *that* one), the simple multiplication of the “same” object (on an assembly line, for example) produces objects that, while “other” to each other, are precisely not *distinct* in her use of the word.⁸³ Between human beings in plurality there persists, by contrast, a unique kind of distinctness. Arendt writes that “in man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness.”⁸⁴ Human beings can partake in a unique form of uniqueness because human beings possess the ability to take their own distinctness upon themselves in the mode of *expression*. “Human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique

⁸¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 173-174.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

beings” for the simple reason that “only man can express [his] distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something.”⁸⁵

Human uniqueness is a matter of self-distinction, a distinction that one takes upon oneself and somehow expresses. Further, this distinction is *absolute* (recall that in plurality “nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives, or will live”). While human beings are able to distinguish themselves according to a variety of different frameworks—one’s physical characteristics, talents, social roles, family, etc.—what distinguishes each person absolutely for Arendt is her natality, the fact of her entrance onto the world stage through birth. Like plurality, natality conditions the entire spectrum of human activity. Arendt says that “all three activities [of the *vita activa*] and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality.”⁸⁶ Yet, the conditioning effect of natality is most fully brought to light through action: whereas labor and work are both necessary for human existence between birth and death, “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”⁸⁷ More than simply being provided for,⁸⁸ human natality is activated through the newcomer’s capacity to act and to perform

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 176. Taminioux powerfully sums up this specifically human form of distinctness: “Every living species multiplies itself into a manifold of individual organisms of which each one is distinct from other organisms, but human beings alone have the ability to take upon themselves the naked fact of their distinction or alterity, they alone have the capacity not merely of being different, but of differentiating themselves. In other words, their birth inaugurates in them the power to express and render manifest not only what they are as representatives of living species or the bearers of general capacities required for poetic activities, but also *who* they are in their exclusive, non-reproducible, singularity.” (Taminioux, p. 28)

⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 8.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸⁸ Making provisions for natality constitutes the specific relation of natality to labor and work. As Arendt writes, “labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time... Labor and work... are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers.” Action “has the closest connection with the human condition of natality” because, rather than simply providing for or

something new. One's natality, one's "having-been-born" is a condition in the sense that, in entering the world through the singular event of birth, one is poised, through one's own initiative, to make a singular, new, and unexpected contribution to the world. Arendt writes that "the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world."⁸⁹ Natality names the fact that the unanticipated and unrepeatability quality of one's birth characterizes one's capacity to act in general. Arendt writes that a "sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities," since the "new beginning" through which each person enters the world constitutes the original "impulse" out of which she will act for the duration of her life.⁹⁰

Yet, natality on its own does not account for the entirety of human uniqueness. Arendt writes that "because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action."⁹¹ However, the singularity of one's birth can be recognized as *uniqueness* only if it is inserted into the company of those with respect to whom one is unique, that is, if it "appears" to and is observed by others. But for uniqueness to "appear" and be made meaningful for others, it is necessary for there to be a common medium which all participants are able to understand and cope with. Here, Arendt clarifies the twofold character of plurality as equality and distinction: plurality can become a site of distinctness only if it is at the same time a site of equality, since the accomplishment of natality—the manifestation of a uniqueness that remains meaningless, if not non-existent, outside the presence of other actors—requires a set of

preserving the possibility of natality, it is only through action that one in fact adopts the character of a "newcomer" (*The Human Condition*, p. 8-9).

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 178.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 8-9.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 177.

common terms (language) in which distinctness can be revealed and made meaningful.⁹² In this way, action born of natality requires the “accompaniment of speech”⁹³ in order for the “plurality of unique beings” to be truly activated. As Arendt says (imposing a measure of conceptual rigidity onto what is in reality a fluid intersection of two human conditions), “if action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals.”⁹⁴

Speech, therefore, “actualizes” human plurality. Through speech, the unique natality of each person is transformed into a meaningful uniqueness. In being put into words, human action becomes more than simply a matter of initiative or “impulse,” but takes on the form of a unique interpretation, insofar as one’s action gives voice, in the presence of others, to the singular perspective from which one apprehends the world. Though she does not use the language of interpretation in this case, I submit that Arendt’s discussion of “the disclosure of the agent in speech and action”⁹⁵ is best understood as an account of the interpretive capacity of the human agent, insofar as every act performed in the world is equally an interpretation of it. The disclosure of the agent, far from indicating the insertion of an isolated, pre-formed identity into the world, or granting outward “expression” to some “inner” self, indicates rather the way in which the public revelation of each actor’s unique interpretation generates a “world” of human meaning in the community of co-actors.

⁹² In other words, if human beings were not distinct they would not *need* to make themselves understood to each other in speech and action; however, if they were not equal in some way they would not be *able* to achieve such communication (cf. *The Human Condition*, p. 175).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149. It is true that while Arendt does associate uniqueness with action and beginning, her specific discussion of the distinct sort of distinctness to which human beings are privileged is found in the context of plurality and the revelation of such distinctness to others. Hence it seems justifiable to say that plurality is the specific human condition that corresponds best to the uniqueness of human beings.

⁹⁵ This is the heading of section 24 of *The Human Condition*.

But why should an understanding of action as interpretation favor this turn to the idea of a “world” of human meaning rather than to the idea of self-expression? In order to explain this, I want to make some remarks about action with respect to the identity of the agent, and then connect these remarks to what Arendt identifies as the “frailty” of action. To be sure, for Arendt human uniqueness is a sort of *expressed* uniqueness, one in which one’s natality is taken upon oneself and disclosed publicly. As Arendt says, “through [speech and action] men *distinguish themselves* instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men.”⁹⁶ Being a unique human agent is a matter of taking the initiative to reveal oneself to others through speech and action. Whereas one’s physical appearance in the world as a body is enough to disclose (inactively) “the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice,” it is only by “acting and speaking [that] men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”⁹⁷ It is through one’s words and deeds that the revelation of an identity, the “disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is” takes place.⁹⁸ As an answer to the question “who are you?”, each of my acts bears witness to the fact that a given act is *mine*, and hence reveals “who” I am—not simply my “gifts, talents, and shortcomings,”⁹⁹ but the singular identity that only I can embody—to those others who are present and able to recognize me as unique.

Whereas both speech and action are capable of revealing “who” someone is, Arendt makes clear that speech, due to its closer “affinity” to the revelation of the “who” of the

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 176. My emphasis.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 179.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 178.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 179.

individual actor, plays a crucial role in ensuring that disclosure of the agent is not lost.¹⁰⁰

“Without the accompaniment of speech,” she writes, “action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible.”¹⁰¹

While the disclosure of the acting subject is the primary dignity of action, only speech can ensure that action does not, by becoming subject-less, fail to transcend the artifice or instrumentality characteristic of fabrication:

Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.¹⁰²

Speech ensures that an act is recognized as more than simply a visible event or an anonymous “achievement,” but rather as the act of a unique, human¹⁰³ actor. The accompaniment of speech thus ensures the revelatory quality of action and, in so doing, accomplishes action’s interpretive potential. Made meaningful in the form of the spoken word, action not only discloses “who” I am, but simultaneously makes apparent the unique point of view from which I see the world.

¹⁰⁰ It is for this reason that Arendt suggests that “many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 178).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 178-179. To be sure, Arendt is not suggesting that every single act of a human being must immediately be accompanied by an interpretive word for it to be agent-disclosing; rather, such interpretation can (and perhaps most often does) take place after the fact, as the actor identifies herself with a certain action or set of actions by speaking about them. In any case, it is crucial that, at some point, one’s deeds are rendered in words, whether, for example I “announce” what I intend to do, own up to what I have done, or even express remorse about a course of action that I regret.

¹⁰³ Insofar as they are made to “accompany” each other, action, reciprocally, has a similar “humanizing” effect on speech. The disclosure of the agent in speech and action ensures that speech, insofar as a “beginner” acts, does not deteriorate into “mere talk,” that is, “simply one more means toward the end” (*The Human Condition*, p. 180). While innumerable forms of fabrication, achievement, or instrumentality are carried out through words, the disclosure of the agent, when it is accompanied and completed by speech, ensures that speech is a precise manifestation of *praxis*.

In following Arendt's account of the disclosure of the agent in action and speech, one must recognize that the agent's self-disclosure is in no way governed or engineered by the agent herself. Speech and action disclose one's unique 'self', but they are not—or at least not successfully—disclosed according to the intentions of the self, even though the spoken interpretation of one's deeds is something that one often takes on as an intentional task. This point is crucial for an understanding of plurality: while it is true that plurality gathers together the unique perspectives of its participants, one has no control over *how* one's speech and action will be interpreted by others. Since the unique identity that one discloses is most properly understood as a *result* of the appearance of one's action in plurality, one can never truly predict or manage the ultimate significance of one's action, nor the identity that one's action discloses. As Arendt writes,

[The] disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this “who” in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more likely that the “who,” which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself.¹⁰⁴

The disclosure put into effect by action is not one that can be deployed at will. What one intends to communicate in offering one's words and deeds “almost never” matches up with the way that one appears to one's observing company. I can take initiative in acting, as Arendt insists, but “who” I am cannot be decided by me; rather, my identity is most properly a matter of the specific way in which, through speech and action, I appear to others in plurality. For Arendt, human identities are forged through the acts they perform in the presence of others, since “the disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 179.

an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.”¹⁰⁵ In this “web” of observing “co-actors” and prior actions, those words and deeds that betray who a person is “[emerge] as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact.”¹⁰⁶ Arendt’s use of the idea of a “life story” expresses the sense in which the acts that one performs are meaningfully “narrated” in one’s interactions with others, and hence solidified into a recognizable and unique identity. But the idea of a story also allows her to make an important qualification with respect to human agency: “although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story.”¹⁰⁷ That is, the disclosure of “who” I am, though it rests on my initiative, unfolds in such a way that the ultimate significance and character of my identity is out of my control. As Serena Parekh writes, “Arendt denies the existence of a stable, core sense of self... but insists that we require others in order to understand who we are.”¹⁰⁸ No matter how sure I may be of myself in the solitude of thought, and no matter how determined I may be to “express”¹⁰⁹ a certain version of myself, “who” I am is ultimately a product of plurality, that is, a product of the way in which my words and deeds become meaningful in being heard and seen by others.

¹⁰⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁸ Serena Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity: A Phenomenology of Human Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 71.

¹⁰⁹ Kateb provides a helpful commentary on Arendt’s use of the word *expression* to characterize the self-disclosure of the human actor. He writes that “Arendt has no patience with the idea of self-expression, either in the realm of action or in that of craft or art. Action, like anything creative, is not an emanation or an unconditional unfolding, but an uncertain initiative in a preexistent and largely unpredictable world. The actor changes himself and the world as he acts. He shows himself and others that he is more than he knew” (Kateb, p. 150). In other words, Arendt does not fetishize the unencumbered “expression” of a “core” self that subsists beneath one’s immersion in society, which one then attempts faithfully to display. As will be discussed below, the agent herself has virtually no control over how she will be ‘disclosed’ to and recognized by others. Hence, the connotation contained in the word *expression*, that I “express” an inner essence of my own devising in public, is an inaccurate picture of what Arendt means by the disclosure of the agent.

The disclosure of the agent in action and speech thus seems to be affected by a certain “tragic” quality: one has no control over whether one’s appearance to others is in any way similar to how one intends to speak and act and, hence, disclose oneself. Generally, the desire to assert one’s unique position in the world—to act in the world, to put one’s perspective into speech—does not itself ensure that one’s speech, action, or unique perspective is automatically suitable for the world it enters. Every act in the world is equally an interpretation of it, and there is no telling how the unique interpretation that one offers (which, as action, possesses the precise character of unexpectedness) will unfold in the realm of human affairs. Since it necessarily enters a plurality of observers and co-participants who cannot refrain from judging and being affected by it, human action, says Arendt, is necessarily boundless, unpredictable, and irreversible. Action is *boundless* because every action, since it enters a “preexisting network of relations and speech acts,”¹¹⁰ gives rise to the response of other actors, that is, to new actions that can “never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners.”¹¹¹ Not only can I not predict what new relations my action will establish nor which “limitations and boundaries” my action will cut across, but action establishes no limitations for itself by which its boundlessness could be reined in. Action is *unpredictable*, not simply because its consequences are impossible to determine in advance, but because, as Arendt says, so long as the actor is alive and participates in plurality, the full significance of any act included in the “story” of the actor’s life cannot be determined; only through the “backward glance of the historian” can the significance of one’s deeds be accounted for definitively, and this only once the actor’s life has ended.¹¹² Finally, action is *irreversible*, due to the fact that “once you begin an action, you

¹¹⁰ Taminiaux, p. 29.

¹¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 190.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

can never undo what you have done, nor can you break the chain of events that you began.”¹¹³

Each of these qualities makes action a highly precarious enterprise, one that human agents cannot take up without putting themselves at risk of enduring some misunderstanding, committing some offense, and/or making some mistakes.

Hence, action is prone to result in certain “calamities,” since actors cannot determine in advance how their self-disclosure will be interpreted by others, nor the relations and chains of events their action will produce. As Arendt writes, the “unpredictability of outcome is closely related to the revelatory character of action and speech, in which one discloses one’s self without ever either knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals.”¹¹⁴ The realm of plurality, though it is the sole context in which action and speech are possible, is marked by what Arendt calls the “frailty of human affairs,” that is, those uncertainties and “frustrations” that have “given people since Plato the desire to substitute fabrication for action.”¹¹⁵ Arendt writes that “it has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents.”¹¹⁶ Such substitution generally “amount[s] to seeking shelter from action’s calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end.”¹¹⁷ In such cases, the realm of human affairs is taken up as it were in the mode of craftsmanship; politics is fabricated according to “a clearly recognizable end”¹¹⁸ or *theōria*, and the

¹¹³ Parekh, p. 72.

¹¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 192.

¹¹⁵ Parekh, p. 72

¹¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 220.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

responsibilities of one or a few individuals to rule and make laws are considered more legitimate than the unencumbered play of speech and action.

For Arendt, however, neither human beings nor the relationships they establish between each other should be treated with this sort of mastery. To do so would be to destroy the capacity for politics to reveal “who” an individual is, that is, to be a space in which persons can interact with each other according to their unique identities. Arendt writes that “the impossibility... to solidify in words the living essence of a person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech... excludes in principle our ever being able to handle [human] affairs as we handle things whose nature is at our disposal because we can name them.”¹¹⁹ An understanding of politics that would accommodate the indefinite character of human individuality must embrace the unruly character of action, since it is this unruliness that allows action to measure up to the human capacity to perform the unexpected. In short, for Arendt, something distinctly human is liable to be lost when the unruliness or unexpectedness of action is taken to be a problem to be solved *by* political activity rather than as part of the specific dignity *of* political existence. When the self-disclosure of human agents no longer takes place, both action and speech become detached from the unique “who” that they are meant to reveal, and are instead applied as means to other ends in a system of instrumentality, in which case no uniquely human interpretation or significance can emerge and transcend the world of fabricated things. “In these instances,” writes Arendt, “action has lost the quality through which it transcends mere productive activity, which... has no more meaning than is revealed in the finished product and does not intend to show more than is plainly visible at the end of the production process.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 181-2.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 180.

Arendt further discourages the temptation to replace action with fabrication by pointing out that several of the most effective remedies to the uncertain nature of human action are found in the “potentialities of action itself.”¹²¹ She writes that “the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what one was doing—is the faculty of forgiving.” Though they can never be undone once they have entered the “web of the acts and words of other men,”¹²² actions can certainly be given new significance. In this way, forgiveness does not erase my misdeeds, but rather eliminates the power that they and their consequences have to constrain my capacity to act. Arendt writes that “trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action’s constant establishment of new relationships within the web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly.”¹²³ Further, Arendt writes that “the remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises.”¹²⁴ When I make a promise, I hold myself accountable to a predictable and specified course of action, which, since it is understood and agreed upon by others, installs a measure of stability for all parties as they anticipate the future together. Neither forgiveness nor the making of promises, it must be noted, can be applied to human affairs as a form of rule. In addition to being remedies to action’s frailty, both forgiving and promising are themselves types

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 236-237. Michael Janover points out that, typically, Arendt’s references to the uncertainty and “frailty” of action in the political is never a final analysis of its character, but rather a step along the way either to uncovering its fullest potential, or to accounting for the tendency to substitute fabrication for action. As he writes: “It is notable that when writing of human beings acting into nature, through techno-scientific processes, Arendt emphasizes the hazardous unpredictability, the risky uncertainty, of action, whereas when writing of action as the quintessential political faculty, unpredictability is twinned, and largely subordinated, to the creative spontaneity of action. Her affirmation of the human capacity for action is really an affirming of action joined to speech.” Michael Janover, “Politics and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” in *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, ed. Anna Yeatman, et al. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), p. 32.

¹²² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 188.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 240.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 237.

of action (and, more specifically, of speaking). Arendt says that “the boundlessness of action is only the other side of its tremendous capacity for establishing relationships,”¹²⁵ and so as ways of forging, stabilizing, and restoring human relationships, promising and forgiving possess the same character of unexpectedness as all form of action. Both types of action, finally, are impossible outside of the context of plurality, and both, therefore, indicate ways in which human action is able to resolve or prevent misunderstandings and misdeeds that take place in the interaction and conflict of interpretations.

II. *The common world*

For Arendt, the human condition of plurality is necessary for the revelation of the unique identity of each human actor. Only where action is fulfilled in speech can a human agent, in the presence of others, meaningfully disclose her singular interpretation of the world (the singular perspective to which she has access as a “natal” being). But plurality does not provide for the disclosure of the agent in such a way that she can expect her “self-expression” to unfold successfully according to her intentions. Nor does the condition of plurality provide its participants with some readymade solution for the frailties of action. Human plurality is inherently—and ineradicably—uncertain and dangerous. What *can* be expected from plurality, however, is the emergence of a common “meaningfulness” among persons—that is, a “world” of human significance made up of the collecting-together of the perspectives and interpretations of human actors and speakers. Thus, while I can never be sure “who” my action reveals, nor whether it will be received according to my intentions, I can always be certain that, as I act and speak in the presence of others, I contribute to the formation of a common world of human meaning.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 191.

For Arendt, this common world is the “product” (to borrow a word from the domain of work) of action. She writes that “wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted.”¹²⁶ Though Arendt often uses the term “world” to refer to the totality of things fabricated by human work, it is in acting and speaking together that human beings ensure that this world can become what it was “always meant to be,” namely a “home” in which a specifically *human* form of interaction and meaning-making can take place.

Arendt offers an example of what she envisions with respect to the common world in *The Promise of Politics*. Through an account of Socrates’ dialogical practice, she here provides a glimpse into the kind of experience that was undervalued by the Platonic emphasis on contemplation. For Socrates, as Arendt explains, the common world is the product of *dialegesthai*, of “talking something through,” a situation in which each individual brings her unique point of view (or *doxa*, opinion) to bear on that which is commonly apprehended:

To Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, “of what appears to me.” This *doxa* had as its topic... comprehension of the world “as it opens itself to me.” The assumption was that the world opens itself up differently to every man according to his position in it; and that the “sameness” of the world, its commonness (*koinon*, as the Greeks would say, “common to all”) or “objectivity” (as we would say from the subjective viewpoint of modern philosophy), resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world—and consequently their *doxai* (opinions)—“both you and I are human.”¹²⁷

Arendt’s invocation of the Socratic vision of dialogue is not surprising given its resonance with her understanding of action and plurality. Indeed, the “formulation in speech” of my perspective on the world “as it opens itself to me” is indeed nothing other than action, conceived of as my distinct interpretation of the world made meaningful to others. Further, Socratic dialogue

¹²⁶ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 106.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

exemplifies the twofold character of plurality (equality and distinction), since, as is evident, participants in the dialogue achieve a certain equality or commonness between them, as each one submits her distinct perspective or “what appears to me” to the common conversation conducted through a shared language. This Socratic experience thus teaches that the world experienced in common (the “same,” “objective”) is that entity that “thrusts” itself between individuals when genuine human togetherness is achieved in plurality, through action. But this sense of the common world as the “product” of action only unveils part of what Arendt intends to make clear. On the other side of things, Arendt insists that action in fact *depends upon* the pre-existence of a common world, since it is only against the background of what is shared by all that one’s point of view and identity can be made apparent and meaningful. Not only, as I mentioned previously, does the fabricated world allow human beings to save themselves from the futility and cyclical decay of natural life, but this world is also essential in preserving the very humanness of action, “providing,” as Margaret Canovan writes, “a solid background against which the significance of each individual life will be visible. Without such a stable human world our lives cannot form significant stories, but only be part of the endless flux of nature.”¹²⁸

Arendt’s introductory discussion of the world in *The Human Condition* is situated within a broader analysis of the two basic meanings of the term “public.” The idea of the public realm (I will address its twofold meaning shortly) is central to Arendt’s thought since, as she insists, not only action but also freedom is impossible outside of a public space. As Arendt writes, invoking the attitude of the ancient Greek *polis*, “because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called

¹²⁸ Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 82.

glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.”¹²⁹ Human action cannot be considered free, on Arendt’s understanding, unless it appears publicly in such a way that one’s natality can be recognized by others and hence interpreted as “my” action.¹³⁰ Arendt can hold this view simply because, for her, action and freedom are identical. As she writes, “the appearance of freedom, like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act. Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same.”¹³¹ Far from being an internal faculty possessed by the subject,¹³² freedom is rather a way of characterizing the ontological status of one who acts in the public world. Hence, the possibility for human actors to act and be free depends upon the establishment and preservation of a public arena in which action can appear, since, “without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance.”¹³³

¹²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 180.

¹³⁰ By comparison, the anonymity of labor is essentially connected to its necessity, that is, its characteristic *unfreedom*. Biological survival requires that the human being be absorbed into the cycle of nature, subject to the repetitive processes of generation and decay. Where the cycle of life reigns, therefore, no unexpected action of an agent can be expected to emerge and be recognized as such.

¹³¹ Arendt, “What is Freedom?”, p. 151.

¹³² In “What is Freedom?”, Arendt explicitly rejects the notion of freedom as a “possession” of the human psyche that preexists its appearance in the realm of public recognition. Far from being an internal, non-public phenomenon, freedom is originally an experience undergone in a public space in which one’s words and deeds are witnessed by others. As Arendt writes, “in spite of the great influence the concept of an inner, nonpolitical freedom has exerted upon the tradition of thought, it seems safe to say that man would know nothing of inner freedom if he had not first experienced a condition of being free as a worldly tangible reality” (p. 147). Freedom is primordially an experience of the world, and, more specifically, an experience of a world characterized by both the distinctness and the equality of human plurality. As Arendt writes, freedom can be understood either “as the freedom to depart and begin something new and unheard-of or as the freedom to interact in speech with many others and experience the diversity that the world always is in its totality” (*The Promise of Politics*, p. 129). Of course, these two understandings are ultimately identical (taking initiative in acting and speaking with others are two sides of the same coin, as discussed above), and, further, both bear witness to the connection between freedom and publicity. If to be free is to act, as Arendt insists, then freedom is as dependent on the presence of others as is action. Before it can be conceptualized and internalized at all, therefore, freedom emerges as the experience of acting in a world populated by other actors who hear and witness one’s words and deeds.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 147. The understanding of freedom as an essentially “worldly” phenomenon is central among the aspects of ancient Greek thought with which Arendt grounds her own understanding of politics. She writes that “what all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to *polis* life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a prepolitical phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organization, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity... and to become free” (*The Human Condition*, p. 31). For an account of Arendt’s belief that freedom “develops full only when it... appears in political action in a worldly space,” see Kateb, especially p. 147-148.

But the notion of “the world,” or, “the common world,” is in fact the second of two “closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena” that Arendt associates with the term “public.”¹³⁴ She writes in section 7 of *The Human Condition* that this term “means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.” Even more strongly, Arendt explains that “for us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality.”¹³⁵ This definition of “the public” as that which appears and is seen and heard by many allows Arendt to make an important point regarding her understanding of reality. For Arendt, what counts as “real” in human experience is not necessarily the same as that which human experience delivers most intensely or powerfully. Indeed, a sharp difference in kind runs between realities that are publicly apparent and relevant and those that, despite their possibly overwhelming influence, cannot be introduced into the public realm (or rather, when they are, they destroy the public realm). As Arendt writes, “compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape fit for public appearance.”¹³⁶ Hence action, the actualization of which is accomplished in speech, contributes to the fabric of the public realm, insofar as in speaking and revealing themselves human beings introduce something new into the sphere of reality. As Arendt says further:

Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before. The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves, and while the intimacy of a fully developed private life, such as had never

¹³⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 50.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

been known before the rise of the modern age and the concomitant decline of the public realm, will always greatly intensify and enrich the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings, this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men.¹³⁷

Being brought into the sphere of “reality,” or rather, being *realized* in action and speech, constitutes the qualitative definition of the term “public.” But when it is a question of what the public realm *is*, rather than what it *is like to be* public (seen and heard), it is clear that for Arendt the answer is: the common world. She explains that “the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.”¹³⁸ As another name for the public realm, “the world” therefore signifies nothing less than the space in which action (and freedom) is possible. And, as Arendt’s initial description makes evident, the notion of the common world can be understood in two ways:

The world... is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.¹³⁹

The idea of the common world, Arendt says, is related to the fabricated artifact, the work of human hands, *and* the affairs that take place among the inhabitants of the world, the non-artificial interaction that takes place in, but is not reducible to, the world of things that are made. As Parekh explains, “the common world is both concrete (the result of fabrication) and ephemeral (the result of action).”¹⁴⁰ Both of these aspects of the common world are crucial to Arendt’s thought, since it is only with respect to how they relate to and support each other that Arendt’s idea of the common world can be understood in full. For Arendt, then, the idea of “the

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁴⁰ Parekh, p. 69.

world” implies not only the sort of human activity that takes place in it (“living together”), but also the material “stuff” in and through which this activity takes place (the “things” that relate and separate human beings).¹⁴¹

Kateb writes that “political action looks to the creation or conservation or augmentation of a suitable world for itself, a polis or other entity, which is the scene and inspiration and source of meaning for political action.”¹⁴² Action, as I have argued, is an interpretive activity that requires a public “scene” in order to be realized and made meaningful. As Arendt says, “action and speech need the surrounding presence of others no less than fabrication needs the surrounding presence of nature for its material.”¹⁴³ But it is reciprocally true, as Kateb points out, that action is itself able to create, conserve, and augment the very public space that is its condition. Hence, any concern to preserve the revelatory and distinguishing qualities of action unfolds into a concern to preserve the structures of publicity that make action possible. This idea—that action, as a political activity, takes care of action—grounds Arendt’s statement in *The Promise of Politics* that “at the center of politics lies concern for the world, not for man—a concern, in fact, for a world, however constituted, without which those who are both concerned and political would not find life worth living.”¹⁴⁴ To be political is to be concerned about whether the world is a suitable place for political beings. This is not a concern for the untroubled entry of “man” into some political realm to which he is not native, but is rather a concern that the

¹⁴¹ Both aspects of the world, further, are present in the example of Socratic dialogue. As is clear there, the realization that “the same world opens up to everyone” is accompanied by the further realization that “both you and I are human,” in other words, the realization that my participation in the common world acquaints me with other human beings whose humanness—and hence, whose right to participate in the public constitution of reality—is equal to my own. The world, in short, is the common terrain on which I interact with other persons. But this nature of this terrain itself also has a share in the meaning of the world. That is, the commonness of the world achieved in spoken dialogue is related to—and depends on, as I will explain—the “objectivity” of the material things that populate the world that human beings share.

¹⁴² Kateb, p. 142.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 106.

world would be a space of publicity in which the very formation and disclosure of human identities can take place. Moreover, as I intend to show in the following, the political task of creating and taking care of the world can be understood with respect to both senses of the world, that is, both human *affairs* and human *artifacts*. And while the “affairs” of human togetherness are of primary importance with respect to Arendt’s political thought, the world of artifacts and material objects plays a crucial role in ensuring that the world functions as the public realm.

Arendt identifies the world as an “in-between,” an entity or set of entities that mediates human interaction, and serves as the common “table” around which human beings gather together. Following the twofold significance of world, however, Arendt identifies both an “objective” and a “subjective” kind of in-between. In the first place, alongside her emphasis on the identity-revealing capacity of action and speech, Arendt recognizes that “most action and speech is concerned with [the objective] in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, the disclosure of my unique identity and perspective most commonly takes place as I speak with others about the shared objects in our midst. As Arendt writes, “action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively ‘objective,’ concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests.”¹⁴⁶ The objective world of things—not only of natural things but also, and especially, of things fabricated by human work—“lies between people and can therefore relate and bind

¹⁴⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 182.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

them together,” and in so doing serves as the material context for human interaction.¹⁴⁷ This world “houses” human life by providing, not only the stability, but also the objectivity without which human beings would not be able to communicate or orient their movement within the common world as a whole.

The world of artifacts and tangible things is, hence, a necessary element for genuine human interaction in plurality. But it is this plurality itself, the interaction of words and deeds that make up the “affairs” of public human life and meaning that constitutes the second, “subjective,” in-between. Arendt writes that

since [the] disclosure of the subject is an integral part of all, even the most “objective” intercourse, the physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men’s acting and speaking directly *to* one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the “web” of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.¹⁴⁸

This intangible “web” of relationships constitutes the ongoing network of spoken meaningfulness that unites individuals and is that into which the agent inserts herself when she acts. This network makes human natality present; in it, the acts of unique persons appear and are made real, according to the first meaning of the term “public” (being seen and heard). This subjective dimension of the world gives the world its human character as the distinctly human conversation that takes place and is made possible by the mediation of the common, tangible “table” that exists between people.

This conversation has its own way of creating and conserving the common world. It creates the world by “overlying” the artifactual world with a layer of human meaning, by

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 182-183.

transforming the totality of fabricated (and natural) objects into a place of human significance. As Michael Janover writes, “work builds a world of things, but only action and speech can *disclose* the world, by constituting the shared space of meanings, memories and stories.”¹⁴⁹ The world, in its human character, is “disclosed” when it becomes the location of action, when human beings are related and separated by what they share physically and objectively in such a way that such physicality and objectivity are the occasion for a common effort in constituting the significance of the world. The “subjective” in-between may thus be more accurately understood as the “intersubjective” world, the world that is formed when a plurality of “subjects” contribute to the meaning of what is shared in common. As Parekh suggests, “the term intersubjectivity evokes Arendt’s sense of commonality, the fact that [the] world exists *between* people.”¹⁵⁰ This intersubjective effort has two basic accomplishments: first, by disclosing the world in action and speech it determines the very meaning of the world of objects: the conversation table, as the tangible reality around which human beings are gathered, is so designated by virtue of the human conversation that arises because of it. Secondly, and more immediately, intersubjectivity provides the occasion for each human agent to lend his or her voice to the deliberation about political affairs. As Kateb writes, “there is only one mode of political action, only one form of freedom in the world, the direct participation of diverse equals in the conversation pertaining to public business.”¹⁵¹ For Arendt, as Kateb explains further, political action is characterized by its participants’ prioritization of that which is established together with others over the destiny of her own singular point of view. He writes that Arendt “sees no dignity in doing what one thinks one ought to do [what one wills], apart from what one’s equals think. What matters is not that others agree or disagree with oneself, but the collaboration with others in the common task of

¹⁴⁹ Janover, p. 30.

¹⁵⁰ Parekh, p. 70.

¹⁵¹ Kateb, p. 160.

deciding what to do after all have directly expressed divergent opinions.”¹⁵² Of course, as the foregoing discussion of action should have made clear, one does not enter public discussion with anything other than one’s unique point of view, one’s *doxa*. Hence, one’s engagement in the public realm is a matter of negotiating the integration of one’s singular interpretation into the common conversation, a task that, given the “frailty” of action summarized above, is fraught with dangers and uncertainties. It is for this reason that Arendt stresses the importance of forgiveness and making promises, two specific forms of action that are able to conserve the web of human relationships by allowing human actors to recover from action going awry and also prepare against the uncertainty of future action.

In her understanding of politics as concern for the world, it is clear that Arendt’s primary concern is the humanly disclosed world, the web of human relationships in which human agents are able to interact with each other freely, disclosing their unique identities in the shared project of establishing the significance of common reality. As Janover explains, “it is this human world of speech and action that Arendt is most concerned can dwindle away under the behavioral impact and regularization of mass societies, or yet more fearfully may be deliberately expunged by totalitarian regimes.”¹⁵³ The collaboration of equals in the realm of public appearance must be protected both from deterioration into the anonymity of the social realm and the desire to manage or govern the realm of human affairs in the mode of fabrication. To take these threats to the human world in turn, Arendt writes that “it is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action.”¹⁵⁴ Society, though the term implies a multitude of individuals who exist in the same place, is not “public” in the sense that Arendt understands the term. Society imposes

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 159.

¹⁵³ Janover, p. 30.

¹⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 40.

upon individuals an “unnatural conformism,”¹⁵⁵ gathering people together in such a way that erases, rather than allows for, the appearance and realization of action and agent-disclosure. The introduction of fabrication into the public realm—which totalitarianism exemplifies in the most extreme way—follows from the desire to mitigate (if not eliminate) the “frailty” and unexpectedness of action (and freedom) by attempting to organize human togetherness according to some apolitical ideal.¹⁵⁶ But this approach to politics equally excludes the possibility of action (and hence the emergence of the human world), since, as Parekh explains, it operates by “seeking to ‘make’ a state or a political community rather than engendering a space in which people are able to act and disclose themselves.”¹⁵⁷

Despite the importance that Arendt assigns to the intangible, “human” world, it would be a mistake to conclude that the other sense of the world—the “objective” in-between—is excluded from Arendt’s understanding of politics as concern for the world. Despite the priority of agent-disclosure in action and speech in Arendt’s thought—“to dispense with this disclosure, if indeed it could ever be done, would mean to transform men into something they are not”¹⁵⁸—the web of human relationships that constitutes the “subjective” world between persons can never wholly be separated from its objective counterpart. As Arendt makes clear, most of our speech and activity as human beings takes place with respect to material things, and the majority of the self-disclosing acts that we perform arise as the “inevitable” result of our affairs among such things, rather than as a result of our explicit intentions.¹⁵⁹ Hence, the material and artifactual world of objects features centrally in the human experience of being and acting in the world, and

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁵⁶ For Arendt, as noted earlier, this is a tendency that reaches back to the inception of Western philosophy. As she writes: “Plato and, to a lesser degree, Aristotle, who thought craftsmen not even worthy of full-fledged citizenship, were the first to propose handling political matters and ruling political bodies in the mode of fabrication” (*The Human Condition*, p. 230).

¹⁵⁷ Parekh, p. 72-73.

¹⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 183.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 183.

therefore forms a central part of any political concern for the world. As Arendt's metaphor of the table makes clear, human beings cannot be thought to do anything (live, act, speak, converse) *together* without the relation and separation of something entirely tangible and objective. The world, if it is to be a public realm in which human action can appear and be realized, depends upon the existence of and proper engagement with worldly objects:

The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible."¹⁶⁰

The tangible objects that populate the environments in which human beings live play an essential role in allowing such environments to achieve the status of a public realm. We know already that an essential feature of publicity is the fact of appearance, the fact that something is seen and heard in the presence of others. It is precisely this experience of publicity that the objects of the world provide for. To the idea of reality as appearance Arendt adds the idea of "sameness in diversity," that is, the idea that an object—and more precisely, what it means to the human community—achieves reality when it is perceived from and spoken about from a number of diverse perspectives. What, in the mode of solitude, the individual experiences as an external obstacle is not truly a "real" object, insofar as it has not yet had its significance confirmed and supplemented by other perspectives. As Arendt says, "only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear."¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 52-53.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 57.

This understanding of reality characterizes the public realm not only as a realm in which things appear, but also as a realm in which such appearing things are spoken about. The reality of worldly objects relates and separates individuals: the common object or set of objects that brings them together in conversation allows each speaker to voice, and hence actualize, his or her distinct perspective in the public domain. As Arendt writes,

If someone wants to see and experience the world as it “really” is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and links them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk *about* it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against one another. Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides.¹⁶²

For Arendt, in short, “living in a real world and speaking with one another about it are basically one and the same.”¹⁶³ Human beings constitute the reality of the world in speaking about it; as stated above, the intersubjectivity of the ongoing human conversation determines the significance of the objective terrain in which human beings live. But what should not be overlooked here is the extent to which that objective (and tangible, material) terrain serves as the occasion for intersubjectivity and speech. While objects are meaningless, “mute” entities until human action bestows significance upon them, it is equally true that there would be no occasion for action—which requires the presence of others—unless human beings had not already been gathered together by the objective in-between. For this reason, Arendt is unable to discuss the basic character of human life in public without making reference to the “relating and separating” function carried out by objects that are seen from a variety of different perspectives:

Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one’s own position with its attending aspects and

¹⁶² Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 128-129.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

perspectives. The subjectivity of privacy can be prolonged and multiplied in a family, it can even become so strong that its weight is felt in the public realm; but this family “world” can never replace the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators.¹⁶⁴

The world, as an objective and tangible reality, is created not only through the human activity of work, which crafts and produces the artifacts that house human life, but also through speech, and, more specifically, the common task of talking about the world with others. Just as in the case of the “subjective” web of human relationships, the manner in which the objective world is created gives rise to a certain kind of world conservation—namely, the effort to preserve the permanence or durability of the world. Canovan writes that “where there is a stable world of objects and institutions each man, looking at it from his own point of view, will supplement every other man’s point of view, providing them all with a rich and concrete sense of reality: and, above all, the objective world will provide a standard against which to judge the subjectivity of private imaginings.”¹⁶⁵ The reality of the world that is created through work and through public conversation stands against the private subjectivity of intimate life and thought, serving as the point of reference at which some “common ground” can be achieved between people. But this “standing against” is possible only insofar as the world is “stable,” that is, insofar as what is produced by human activity is able to solidify into tangible reality and take on an existence apart from the fleeting character of speech and action. Unlike the products of labor and fabrication, the “products” of action and speech,¹⁶⁶ which “constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs” do not outlast their momentary manifestation in the public world; “they lack”, Arendt says, “not only the tangibility of other things, but are even less durable and more futile than what

¹⁶⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 57.

¹⁶⁵ Canovan, p. 83.

¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the words and deeds generated by speech and action are not properly “products,” since it is characteristic of the product of work to outlast the processes that give rise to them (Arendt recognizes this in a passage quoted above when she says that the subjective in-between cannot be “solidified” into any tangible objects).

we produce for consumption.”¹⁶⁷ Hence, the tangibility of the world is important to its ability to “relate and separate” individuals, not only as that which is seen in common, but also as that which is durable enough to safeguard action by providing a material context into which action can be inserted and made to endure.

A political concern that the world would be a place for human action must therefore be a concern not simply about the possibility for the present manifestation of action, but also a concern that the objective terrain of human interaction, as a *permanent* reality, will transcend the momentary quality of speech and action:

[Action and speech] themselves do not “produce,” bring forth anything, they are as futile as life itself. In order to become worldly things, that is, deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts or ideas, they must first be seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things—into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents, and monuments. The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.¹⁶⁸

It turns out, therefore, that the human activity of work is central to the effort, not simply of creating, but also—and more directly—of conserving the human world. As Canovan writes, “in work, of which the creation of works of art is the paradigm case, man strives to create something that will outlive him, to add another permanent object to the human artifice.”¹⁶⁹ Work is politically relevant insofar as the solidification or materialization of action and speech into a tangible object places into shared reality a meaningful artifact that will inevitably contribute to the character of the world in which other persons live—not only those in my presence, but those who will enter the world in the future.

¹⁶⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 95.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁶⁹ Canovan, p. 84.

Further, the stability or durability of these artifacts ensures that the world as it exists presently will transcend the lifespan of the individual actors who have produced it, and thus provide a public realm for the next generation of actors. Here, Arendt connects the notion of worldly permanence with the understanding of publicity as appearance: the meaningfulness that human beings bring into the world through acting can be made tangible and permanent only insofar as it first appears in public, that is, is seen and heard and understood as meaningful by others. Only then can the words and deeds of human beings be reformed according to the objective visibility that marks its tangible and permanent reality:

Without... transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no public realm, is possible. For unlike the common good as Christianity understood it—the salvation of one’s soul as a concern common to all—the common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time.¹⁷⁰

If the common world is not treated as the tangible, enduring stage on which the action of the human species is performed, it can all too easily come to be treated simply as a place that must be “passed through,” perhaps on one’s journey to a perfected polity in the world to come. Of course, as individual persons we can only exist in the world for a short time; however, Arendt’s point is that our participation in the world while we are here is truly political and worldly only if we resolve to take care of the world, to assure that it appears and gives rise to human action, and that it outlasts the lives of individual actors as the sole medium in which human politics is possible.

¹⁷⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 55.

For Arendt, the primary dignity to which human beings can lay claim is their capacity to act, their capacity to introduce something new into the network of human affairs. Action is an inherently public phenomenon, and hence requires a certain public context—a common “world”—in which it can appear meaningfully as the unique interpretation of each human actor. Arendt conceives of the task of politics as the task of participating in and taking care of the public realm that gives rise to action. To be political is to possess a “love for the world,”¹⁷¹ that is, to be concerned for the common world in which action can take place, and thus to work to ensure that the world effectively relates and separates those who share it. As I have shown in this chapter, political concern for the world must align itself with the basic characteristics of the world—not only the “subjective” web of words and deeds, but also the “objective,” tangible, and durable things that serve as the material context for human interaction. Beyond the ongoing commitment to speak with one’s fellow actors, therefore, “political action can take place only where there is a common commitment to the reality, beauty, and sufficiency of the world—of the world ‘out there.’”¹⁷² In other words, love for the world is complete only where there is a concern for the tangible reality of the world, a concern to value and preserve those elements of the world that house human interaction—its permanence, visibility, and capacity to relate and separate individuals.

It is on the basis of the close connection (if not equivalence) between the concern for politics and the concern for the “reality, beauty, and sufficiency” of the objective world that Arendt characterizes Christianity as “unpolitical” in *The Human Condition*. For Arendt,

¹⁷¹ James Bernauer writes that “the all-absorbing passion of Hannah Arendt’s life was a love for the world which exhibits itself in a relishing of human action’s promise and in a respecting of the political structures which make action possible.” James Bernauer, “The Faith of Hannah Arendt: *Amor Mundi* and its Critique—Assimilation of Religious Experience” in *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer, S.J. (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), p. 1-2.

¹⁷² Kateb, p. 142.

Christianity is “worldless” insofar as Christian communities fail to find fulfillment (“relation and separation”) in the realm of public affairs and thus fail to be concerned about the world as a permanent home for human actors. I want to suggest, however, that to hold the Christian tradition accountable solely to the objective or “thingly” dimension of the world runs the risk of overlooking the unique political contributions that this tradition does offer. As my third chapter will demonstrate, the existence and proper functioning of the common world rests on both its tangible objectivity and the extent to which human actors are able to recognize and interact with each other *beyond* the horizon of objectivity. As I will show, the Christian virtue of charity plays a central role in allowing the common world to transcend its objectivity and become a “home” for human actors and speakers.

Chapter 3 – The political worldlessness of charity

The foregoing analyses of action and the common world have identified certain ways in which love or concern for the world may take shape. On Arendt's understanding, the world is created as it is disclosed—in its particular human character—in speech, as human actors speak directly to each other about their affairs in common and about the objects and reality that exists between them. The world is conserved according to its twofold character: “subjectively,” human agents are able to answer the frailty and uncertainty of their affairs together by forgiving each other and by making promises; “objectively,” they are able to answer the futility of action and speech by solidifying their words and deeds into tangible objects, thus ensuring the permanence of the world as the terrain for human politics.

In this third chapter, I claim that the Christian virtue of charity should be included within the full understanding of love for the world. This proposal will run against the grain of a predominant reading of Arendt's understanding of Christianity, according to which Arendt interprets Christianity to be an entirely “worldless” movement. Without meaning to dispute Arendt's characterization of Christianity historically, I suggest that Arendt's understanding of charity—Christianity's definitive political virtue—as an ultimately apolitical phenomenon is informed by a particular understanding of the worldlessness of love, an understanding that leaves little room for the possibility that worldlessness—or something like it—has any relevance for the public realm of human action. Drawing on a phenomenological treatment of charity by Jean-Luc Marion, I attempt to show that the specific worldlessness of Christian charity does not make it wholly “un-worldly,” but rather allows it to give rise to the recognition or appearance of that which does not appear on the horizon of *strict* worldliness, that is, the objectivity characteristic of the world of things. As Marion makes clear, genuine engagement with other persons, as much

as it depends on the orientation (relation and separation) of the objective world, depends additionally on the will to see what is objectively *invisible*. Charity's political relevance is found, therefore, in its ability to negotiate the relation between the objective (visible, tangible) and subjective (invisible, intangible) dimensions of the common world outlined by Arendt.

I. *Arendt on Christianity*

The Christian tradition is instructive for Arendt in that it vividly exemplifies the link between politics and concern for the world, albeit in an entirely negative way: in no other tradition, she thinks, has there emerged such a clear and determined attempt to establish a community of believers according to a shared disinterest in the affairs related to the common world. As a result of its worldlessness, the Christian tradition has developed a distinctly “unpolitical, non-public character,”¹⁷³ so much so that it is featured in Arendt's analysis as one of the clearest examples of the institutional *failure* to be concerned for the world and for the political conditions of action.

As Arendt sees it, the incompatibility between the public realm and Christianity has its origin in the earliest Christian communities' eschatological hopes regarding the end of the world. Though disappointed at the level of their literal meaning, such hopes would nevertheless go on to characterize Christian communities from then on:

[The] well-known antagonism between early Christianity and the *res publica*, so admirably summed up in Tertullian's formula: *nec ulla magis res aliena quam publica* (“no matter is more alien to us than what matters publicly”), is usually and rightly understood as a consequence of early eschatological expectations that lost their immediate significance only after experience had taught that even the downfall of the Roman Empire did not mean the end of the world.¹⁷⁴

On Arendt's interpretation, even though the “immediate significance” of this early Christian expectation was lost, the political spirit of Christian communities remained one in which the

¹⁷³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

secular affairs of public politics were of little import to the believer and hence could be ignored without consequence. But because Christian existence remained communal, there needed to be some means by which to keep the community together without requiring believers to participate in public affairs or in issues of common concern. On Arendt's account, this communal bond amounted to a provisional form of human togetherness, one that could sustain a community of believers while also keeping them separate from the ultimately "doomed" things of the world. The emphasis on charity as a political bond thus secured Christianity as the unique originator of a kind of communal "worldlessness:"

Historically, we know of only one principle that was ever devised to keep a community of people together who had lost their interest in the common world and felt themselves no longer related and separated by it. To find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world was the main political task of early Christian philosophy, and it was Augustine who proposed to found not only the Christian "brotherhood" but all human relationships on charity. But this charity, though its worldlessness clearly corresponds to the general human experience of love, is at the same time clearly distinguished from it in being something which, like the world, is between men: "Even robbers have between them [*inter se*] what they call charity." This surprising illustration of the Christian political principle is in fact very well chosen, because the bond of charity between people, while it is incapable of founding a public realm of its own, is quite adequate to the main Christian principle of worldlessness and is admirably fit to carry a group of essentially worldless people through the world, a group of saints or a group of criminals, provided only it is understood that the world itself is doomed and that every activity in it is undertaken with the proviso *quamdiu mundus durat* ("as long as the world lasts").¹⁷⁵

For Arendt, the Christian resolution to "find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world" is evidence for the fact that, though the expectation of the imminent destruction of the world was short-lived, the political attitude of the tradition nevertheless continued to be characterized by a belief in the impermanence of the world and everything done and produced in it. "Worldlessness as a political phenomenon," writes Arendt, "is possible only on the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 53

assumption that the world will not last,”¹⁷⁶ and so the Christian desire to replace engagement in worldly, public affairs with relationships based on charity bears witness to the underlying Christian belief that nothing of lasting significance is to be found among the things of the world. Beyond simply a lingering eccentricity, the lack of concern for the permanence of the world is for Arendt the basic characteristic grounding Christianity’s incompatibility with the public world and political activity. As Arendt writes, “only the existence of a public realm and the world’s subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence.”¹⁷⁷ Arendt’s point is that without a strong commitment to the permanence of the world, it is unlikely that one will conceive of one’s action as contributing to the enduring public realm in which the action of all persons is housed. While there is no doubt that action undertaken on the assumption of the impermanence of the world still takes place *in* the world, the point is that such action is not undertaken *for* the world. To act out of love for the world as the public realm is to work for the permanence of the world: “If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men.”¹⁷⁸

How, then, does a community of religious believers sustain their existence in the world without having to respect, take part in, or even believe in its permanence? Arendt’s answer, as shown above, is the communal bond of charity. Charity, for Arendt, is a specific type of “in-between,” one devised for the specific aim of keeping a group of people together for whom participation in the world is a useless venture. Keeping her account of worldlessness close to her own terminology for the common world, Arendt explains that members of the Christian “brotherhood” subscribed to the principle of charity because they no longer felt related and

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

separated by the world. Their existence did not appear to them to depend on their participation in affairs of common concern, nor in any effort to establish or preserve the public realm. Yet, just as in the case of a band of criminals (who want to remain close-knit while being entirely unaffected by ‘the public world’), some sort of “fidelity to the cause” is necessary in order for the group to remain held together in its abstention from the public realm. Charity acts as a substitute for the in-between of the world, since, though it can never give rise to the kind of publicity and durability necessary for sustaining a common world, it is able to unite a community on a smaller scale. Arendt likens charity to the sort of bond that exists among family members, through which one can enjoy a close-knit community of one’s intimate companions without paying attention to the affairs that exceed the familial sphere. Early Christians preferred the model of the family, Arendt reports, because family relationships “were known to be non-political and even antipolitical,”¹⁷⁹ a preference that confirmed the basically non-political character of Christianity through the ages. As Arendt concludes, “a public realm had never come into being between the members of a family, and it was therefore not likely to develop from Christian community life if this life was ruled by the principle of charity and nothing else.”¹⁸⁰

How, exactly, does charity serve as this substitute in-between? Thomas Breidenthal explains that for Arendt charity is “intentionally paradoxical,” in that it is “a political principle which functions to prevent political life from occurring.”¹⁸¹ Charity unites people *against* political life, that is, against the visibility and permanence necessary for the enduring existence of a public realm. Arendt’s most telling explanation of the paradoxical nature of charity occurs midway through the long passage cited above: “though [charity’s] worldlessness clearly

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁸¹ Thomas Breidenthal, “Jesus is My Neighbor: Arendt, Augustine, and the Politics of Incarnation,” *Modern Theology* 14:4 (October 1998), p. 490.

corresponds to the general human experience of love, [it] is at the same time clearly distinguished from it in being something which, like the world, is between men.” It is this sentence, I submit, that holds the key to Arendt’s understanding of the Christian “political” principle of worldlessness. Simply put, charity both is and is not like love. Taking the difference first, Arendt thinks that charity, while it no doubt may originate from a feeling of love, is able to solidify in a sort of world “out there,” that is, a commonly beheld entity unto itself that, however minutely and fleetingly, can serve as the quasi-public context in which such persons’ action can be recognized by others. Love, by contrast, is simply a “passion of the heart,” an intense emotion that exists only in private intimacy. While love is commonly spoken about as being between persons, no “in-between” can emerge from the experience of love strictly speaking; love, as a passion, resides only in the intense feeling that lovers have for each other. Arendt insists that love is *inherently* worldless, and that it cannot endure in the “bright light” of the public realm. Love, for Arendt, “can only become false and perverted” when it is introduced into the public realm and made to unite people together politically.¹⁸²

Despite the difference between charity and love with respect to their “in-betweenness,” the basic “correspondence” between the two that Arendt points to cannot be erased, since it is precisely by virtue of this correspondence that charity’s power to unite people together fails to measure up to the togetherness of the common world. Charity, though it is able to establish a provisional community of believers united against the public realm, is ultimately condemned to the worldlessness that it shares with the experience of love. This element of charity becomes clearer once Arendt’s understanding of love is explored in more detail. As she writes,

¹⁸² The full quotation is as follows: “Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 52).

...love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation and an unequal clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions. Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others.¹⁸³

Given what has been said in previous chapters about the terms Arendt uses to describe the web of human relationships—namely, the network of words and deeds in which human actors reveal their unique identities to each other—it would *appear* that love is quite suited for the task of political interaction: love, Arendt claims, is unparalleled in its power to reveal to the lover “who” the beloved is. But such power is not due to love’s political efficacy. That is to say, following its inherent worldlessness, love is revelatory of a person in a way entirely different from the way in which actors reveal who they are in the public forms of action and speech. As just discussed, between love and all manners of publicity there exists a basic repugnancy: love, for Arendt, so epitomizes the “shadowy” (but intense) passions that characterize private life that love is “killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public.”¹⁸⁴ As her citation of William Blake illustrates (“Never seek to tell thy love / Love that never told can be”), the passion of love cannot be spoken, but rather exceeds the common medium of speech in which things can be made sensible to others. But love is nevertheless a kind of rapture (Arendt writes about being under the “spell” of love), and as such is powerful enough to “expel”¹⁸⁵ lovers from the public world and turn them towards one another as the sole object that has captured their attention. Thus, the power and essential worldlessness of love can do nothing but destroy the in-between of public human interaction, consuming the lover with an attraction to the beloved that can be neither spoken about nor truly manifested in public.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 51-52.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 242.

Love achieves a vision of the other that is more powerful, but equally more immaculate, than that which can be supplied in the world. This is possible because, as Arendt makes clear in the passage above, love sees past the particular ways in which the beloved has acted or manifested herself in the world. Love is not concerned with *what* the other person is (what things she has done, what identity she has accumulated in the context of public interaction); rather, love *disregards* what the world says about the beloved, and indeed loves *who* she is “to the point of total unworldliness.” Despite the benefits that love may bring,¹⁸⁶ it is clear that love is thus incompatible with political action, since in overlooking the action of the other person, the lover chooses to overlook the very worldly terrain in which human action is carried out and is made meaningful. As shown in earlier chapters, political action, and the disclosure of the agent that goes along with it, depends on a certain level of distance between people; that is, the world can relate individuals together only insofar as it simultaneously separates them, placing between them both the stock of tangible things and the network of words that are spoken about these things. Love, attending to “who” the beloved is *despite* the way in which she shows herself in the world, “abolishes [the] distance between people, the ‘in-between.’”¹⁸⁷ Drawing people together into the privacy of a consuming passion, love is the enemy of the public world in which speech and action take place. As Arendt writes, love, “by its very nature, is unworldly,” and hence is “not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.”¹⁸⁸

Though charity puts love into practice in a community, it does not thereby detach itself from the sort of vision of other persons (or more accurately, *the* other person, the sole beloved)

¹⁸⁶ The immediate context of Arendt’s discussion of love is the Christian assumption that forgiveness can occur only on the basis of love, that is, only on the basis that one is willing to overlook, and thereby forgive, *what* a person has done (in the world) and love them solely for *who* they are (in spite of their worldly actions).

¹⁸⁷ Kateb, p. 161.

¹⁸⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 242.

achieved in the passion of love. Arendt's reference to Augustine in the passage on the worldlessness of charity makes it clear that she has Augustine's concept of *caritas* in mind, which, in her dissertation on Augustine, Arendt herself connects to the idea of love of one's neighbor.¹⁸⁹ To be charitable, to love one's neighbor, is to adopt a deep form of concern for that person's well-being. Charity entails a desire to do good to or for the other, a desire issuing from the ethical obligation to seek the benefit of one's neighbor. The continuing presence of the unworldliness of love in charity shows itself in the precise manner in which charity unites a community. Just as passionate love apprehends and desires the beloved despite what the beloved has done in the world, so charity organizes a community around the principle that one should seek to do benevolence toward the other, prior to any consideration of the other as a fellow actor in the worldly realm of public affairs. Hence, charity redeploys the world-destroying passion of love in the form of *compassion*, a communal bond that replaces the resolution to act in concert with the other with ethical obligation to take care of the other. Charity achieves its pristine vision

¹⁸⁹ See Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 93. As Lauren Swayne Barthold explains, Arendt's treatment of Augustine's notion of *caritas* in her dissertation is far more nuanced than the reference to *caritas* in *The Human Condition* might imply. Whereas in the latter text *caritas* is associated more or less solely with the worldlessness of love's passion, in her dissertation Arendt "wants to draw out Augustine's notion of *caritas*, the pure and truly freeing love of God, or eternity, and to show the way in which it also implies a love of the world." Barthold, "Towards an Ethics of Love: Arendt on the Will and St. Augustine," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (2000), p. 11. Barthold points out that love has a two-sided character for Augustine, involving both a renunciation and an affirmation of the world as it overcomes the problem of the conflicted will. In this way, the Augustinian notion of neighborly love serves as a kind of prototype for Arendt's own understanding of love of the world. As Barthold writes, Augustinian love "is foundational to Arendt's concept [of love] because, on an (Arendtian) Augustinian view, true love implies a double movement: first withdrawing from the world and turning to oneself (or to God, or to one's source), and then returning to the world in order to love one's neighbor" (Ibid., p. 12). Barthold's essay thus reminds us that the Augustinian notion of love of neighbor may have a more worldly orientation than is presented in my characterization of it below. An extension of the present study could thus seek to determine the extent to which my own proposal about the political relevance of *caritas contra* Arendt in fact has precedence in her own study of Augustine. That being said, it is not as though Arendt's remarks in *The Human Condition* detach charity from all worldliness whatsoever, or that they imply that charity precludes love of one's worldly companions in any meaningful sense. Indeed, Arendt's point in this text seems to be that Christian charity has operated historically to establish a kind of worldly "in-between." The world of charity, however, is quite unlike the common world of politics: hence, the political relevance of neighborly love remains ambiguous until one determines whether one loves (that is, cares for) the neighbor because she happens to appear among the entities that populate the world, or because one is concerned about whether this neighbor—in acting and speaking—is able to contribute to the world and its meaning.

of “who” the other is by treating her—and indeed everyone in the community—first and foremost as a recipient of ethical concern, a person whom one must care for regardless of the words and deeds that they insert into the world as a political agent.

Breidenthal provides helpful elaboration on the tension between the ethical concern of charity and political action by highlighting the specifically Christian significance of neighborly love. He affirms that “the love Arendt has in mind is infinite regard for the neighbor; the in-betweenness of this love is a function of the fact that this infinite regard is in each case mediated by the believer’s infinite regard for Jesus.” Christians, Breidenthal continues, “become a people by resolving together to keep the neighbor’s infinite need in view.”¹⁹⁰ In other words, communities founded on Christian charity are organized according to the like-minded commitment to love others as they would love Christ (or as Christ’s love for them inspires them to do). But while this common commitment to love in terms of one another’s “infinite need” is enough to unify the group, it ultimately treats political interaction as secondary to social or economic concerns. That is, from the Christian point of view, individuals cannot engage politically with one another until it is assured that each person is provided for in terms of the necessities of life. As Breidenthal explains, “the Christian vision cannot be satisfied with anything but perfection—the inclusion of every neighbor in the dance of the city of God, and hence the eradication of everything that stands in the way of such inclusion, including poverty and scarce resources.”¹⁹¹ But in making political interaction dependent on the eradication of all economic or biological need, the love of one’s neighbor thereby postpones political life until all such needs are alleviated. In this way, as Breidenthal explains, ethical concern for economic well-being can in fact become the enemy of the political:

¹⁹⁰ Breidenthal, p. 494.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

The ethical, inasmuch as it denotes the infinite claim of the neighbor upon me in his need, runs at cross-purposes with the political, which depends on the mutual enjoyment of a freedom that can only come when economic lack is held sufficiently at bay.... Politics depends on surplus, even if it is only a surplus of courage and nonchalance about survival, but the absolute demands of ethics, which are impossible to fulfill, consume the surplus on which politics depends.¹⁹²

So long as the concern for the infinite need of the neighbor is prioritized over politics, political action may *never* occur. The need of the other person is infinite primarily because she is, prior to being a political being, a living being who is attached to the life cycle of survival and necessity. Economic needs pertaining to survival are thus never wholly eradicated; rather, they are simply managed, and, in the case of political action, they are managed in such a way that there emerges an excess of time and energy (a “surplus”) that can be expended on political matters. Yet, the ineradicable presence of need in all human beings ensures that it is always possible to address one’s neighbor ethically—and not simply the neighbor that is closest at hand, but any and all of those neighbors who populate the earth and call out in need. Hence, the prioritization of the ethical over the political is always an available disposition. Of course, once this disposition is taken up, one need not wait for the surplus to be consumed by ethical striving for political action to be put in jeopardy; from the beginning, political interaction is foreclosed, since, as Breidenthal suggests, “the neighbor who emerges [in neighborly love] is no longer to be viewed as a candidate for political fellowship,” but rather “is to be loved as an object of compassion.”¹⁹³ That is, compassion, despite the power with which it directs the lover toward the beloved, can approach the other only as a passive “object” to whom I owe an ethical debt, and not as a unique agent who appears before me through that action that she performs in the public world.

I should stress that the foregoing is by no means meant to be a critique of the ethical or compassionate disposition. Rather, my aim is simply to show how charity, understood as a

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 493.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 494.

modification of passionate love, is able to sustain a particular form of community while simultaneously neglecting (if not altogether opposing) the worldly conditions for political action and public togetherness. Similarly, Arendt's own account of Christian worldlessness in *The Human Condition* is not meant to be a critique of the Christian tradition, but rather an attempt to account for Christianity's uniqueness in developing the only political principle aimed specifically at allowing for a "freedom *from* politics." What Arendt's text teaches is that not every form of human relationship is properly political, and that some of the most powerful experiences that are possible between human beings can in fact be very much anti-political. Further, Arendt makes clear the decisive influence of the notion of the world, that is, the way in which the political character of a given community—and specifically, whether or not action is possible within it—is defined by the extent to which its members are concerned about whether they are related and separated by a common world. With Christianity, as Arendt interprets it, we are offered an example of what to expect when the concern for the common world of relation and separation is dropped from the "political" repertoire.

II. *The "other-less" passion of love*

In ascribing to Christianity the "political principle" of worldlessness, and thus arguing for its basically "unpolitical, non-public" character, has Arendt thereby pronounced a final word on the political resources contained within the Christian tradition? In other places, where she looks to later moments in the development of Christianity, Arendt appears far more prepared to recognize the positive political influence of Christianity.¹⁹⁴ However, the analyses offered in *The Human*

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, Arendt's essay "What is Authority?", in which, discussing the moment in which "Rome's political and spiritual heritage passed to the Christian Church," she describes how "the Church was eventually able to overcome the antipolitical and anti-institutional tendencies of the Christian faith... which are so manifest in the

Condition with respect to the Christian virtue of charity seem to portray Christianity solely according to its original “antagonism” toward public affairs.¹⁹⁵ But should such an account serve to characterize all that is available in the Christian tradition with respect to political virtue? The remainder of this chapter attempts to answer this question in the negative—not, however, by challenging Arendt’s identification of charity as the core political principle for Christianity, but rather by embracing the notion of charity and extending the analysis of it in order to expose its a political potential. I want to show that charity can serve as an ally in the project of taking care of the world, and that it is precisely *by virtue* of its worldlessness (or something akin to worldlessness) that charity can be such an ally. As Jean-Luc Marion’s analysis of human interaction implies, the full inclusion of all human perspectives in the common world (he does not use these terms) often depends on a certain “worldless” or “unworldly” concern, that is, the resolution to see the potential action of one’s fellow agent where such action has *not yet* appeared or become manifest in the network of words and deeds. Such a resolution is consistent with the way in which Arendt conceives of political interaction, since its aim is to ensure that the world of human affairs is never closed off to that which may appear, that is, to the agent whose unique interpretation has not yet been inserted into the “world” as the totality of human perspectives. Charity, on Marion’s account, is an act of will that sees persons in their invisibility,

New Testament and in early Christian writings, and seemingly so insurmountable”. Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 125.

¹⁹⁵ Breidenthal connects Arendt’s discussion of charity in *The Human Condition* to those aspects of her dissertation that expose the Augustinian view that the immediacy and priority of one’s devotion to Christ renders all political relationships provisional and indirect (Barthold’s essay, discussed in a previous footnote, assures us that “non-worldly” elements of Augustine’s view are not the only ones that Arendt’s study draws out). To be sure, Breidenthal does note the fact that Arendt eventually moves away from the blanket characterization of Christianity as repugnant to politics: “while the dissertation understands Augustine’s heaven to be free of political interaction as this world is cursed with it, the Augustine and, more generally, the Christianity of Arendt’s later works looks for a kingdom of God in which interaction with the neighbor will finally come into its own” (Breidenthal, p. 492). Yet one need not imply from this shift in attitude that Arendt departs from the analysis of Christianity in *The Human Condition*. Breidenthal insists that Arendt’s “new take on Christianity does not lead to a revision of the charge that Christianity is inherently anti-political,” insofar as Christianity does not ascribe to worldly political activity a dignity of its own (Ibid., p. 492).

that is, sees them through—that is, beyond—what is strictly speaking “visible” in the world. To the extent that the world, as Arendt understands it, depends on visibility or appearance, some measure of charity is necessary to ensure that the world of visible things gives rise to the appearance of persons, of speakers and actors. In this way, charity is decisive in preserving the open-ended character of plurality, taking care, as it does, to ensure that the present appearance of the world is always subject to reinterpretation by another voice.

The basic point being made in the following is that since Arendt thinks of love ultimately as a private, worldless passion that draws lovers out of the world, she is unable to recognize the public relevance of charity as a sort of “worldless” vision of other persons. For Arendt, charity is of a piece with the passion of love, establishing communities on the bonds of mutual compassion. Marion, by contrast, attempts to distinguish love from passion altogether. Passion, for Marion, indicates a form of subjectivity closed in on itself, fixated solely on its own desire. It denotes, therefore, not the powerful unity of two lovers against the world (the epitome of love, for Arendt), but rather the total loss of the other in a consuming narcissism. Hence, passion signals the *absence* of love, insofar as the other or beloved is reduced to the object through which the “lover” is acquainted with her own desire. Among the consequences of Marion’s approach is the fact that charity can be reunited with the experience of love without reducing either to private passion. Love—as charity—grants access to the other in a way that passion cannot, constituting thereby the foundation for the interaction of human agents. Yet—and this cannot be overemphasized—the dissociation of passion and charity does not erase, but rather *reforms*, the worldlessness of love. Whereas passion’s worldlessness draws persons *away* from the common world altogether, the worldlessness of charity operates in the space between the two senses of the world that Arendt uncovers, ensuring that what is properly called “the world” (the tangible,

visible reality around and within which human beings are gathered) is able to give rise to that which is not—that is to say *more than*—worldly, namely the intangible and invisible network of human interaction.

The basic aim of Marion’s essay “What Love Knows” is to assert, against its “devaluation” in modern life, the exclusive power of the Christian virtue of charity to grant access to the other, to provide knowledge of the other person *as a person*. “Only love,” Marion writes, “opens up knowledge of the other as such.”¹⁹⁶ Only love makes it possible to see and hence engage with the other as a person capable of action and with her own point of view, rather than simply as one among many objects of desire. Marion’s proposal rests on carefully distinguishing love as a kind of *knowing* from other mistaken (or at least incomplete) uses of the term “love.” Of particular prominence among such mistaken understandings of love is love as a “passion of the soul,” a conception that has dominated not only the philosophical understanding of love but also the understanding of love in contemporary culture. Marion defines a passion as “a perception provoked by the body (hence irrational) that affects the soul (and thus merits the title of perception), in such a way that the soul attributes it to itself (and not to its body or to other bodies).”¹⁹⁷ In passion, an originally bodily affectivity achieves the status of a perception, insofar as the conscious subject (“the soul”) identifies itself as the site of this affectivity. While the “irrationality” of this bodily affection ensures that the subject cannot arrive at any “clear and distinct idea” about it, it is ultimately true that what the subject perceives is *itself*. Here, what is rationally unfathomable is not thereby foreign: passion indicates a kind of “closed subjectivity,” one that possesses better knowledge of its own affectedness than it does of whatever other thing

¹⁹⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 160.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

has affected it. As Marion writes, “passion masks the other and only makes use of him in order to mark the subjectivity that it affects.”¹⁹⁸

Marion insists that if love is conceived as a passion, then it, “like all the other passions... thus becomes a confused perception, absolutely governed by the subjectivity it affects.”¹⁹⁹ In passion, though I am affected by a beloved that is other to me, this other is wholly inscribed within the movement of my own subjectivity. Love in this case, becomes self-love, since what I love is not the other as such; rather, the content of my passion is simply my own struggle to reconcile my irrational, bodily affectivity with my self-knowledge. Marion illustrates the solipsism of passionate love by drawing on the understanding of love as the unity of lover and beloved into a harmonious whole. Love is seen here as an “act of the will, by which the *ego* unifies itself with an object,” yet in such a way that love “above all loves nothing that differs from itself.”²⁰⁰ The specificity of the other does not matter, so long as there is some object on which the *ego* can exercise its desire. “In such a love,” Marion concludes, “what is missing, along with knowledge, is the other himself. In the best of all cases, the other... merely provides the occasion for a union of will that is irrational (by virtue of passion) and solipsistic (by virtue of the primacy of subjectivity). Love is defined by its ignorance of the other.”²⁰¹

This inability to gain genuine knowledge of the other is more than simply the misfortune of passion (and love conceived therein); rather, the unavailability of the other is the condition of possibility for this passionate affectivity. The confusion of passion, the private drama of self-love, depends on the other being kept at a distance, and is therefore erased as soon genuine access to the other is reached. In Marion’s words,

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 157.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 157.

passion is born of the desire, the imagination, the timidity, the admiration, the audacity—of he who loves; it grows all the more its object stays away, unavailable, missing—in short, does not appear, and indeed, is not. Reciprocally, passion ceases as soon as its object becomes, for the first time, visible as such: when *she* at last shows or offers herself, the principle of reality that she puts into motion defuses a passion that, precisely, fed itself solely on her unreality.²⁰²

Marion claims that this paradox—that love as passion can survive only where its object remains unavailable—“announces the fate reserved for love in present day public life,” which, though it has seen the “proliferation of objects deemed able to awaken love, or at least to provoke desire,”²⁰³ is marked by a precise inability to arrange a genuine encounter between lovers. Hence, an inflated obsession with love may in fact bear witness to the very disappearance of the real object of love. As Marion suggests, “it is necessary that objects be reduced... to their representation and their image, so that they are able to offer themselves as widely as may be wished to desires; this imaginary availability thus calls for a real unavailability.”²⁰⁴

For Marion, the most telling, and indeed most troubling, instance of such a reduction is the tendency for other persons to be “submerged by their image” or representation, for all intents and purposes *absent*, save for their physical manifestation as a bodily object:

We love by sight, just as one knows by sight, namely as one “knows” when one does not know. Whence the obscurity of bodies. Certainly, we have no trouble seeing objectifiable bodies, consumed and caught in the sex trade, and soon, indeed, in the health trade; but such bodies become, within this trade, substitutable, exchanged, replaced; they are not able, and neither do they claim, to give body to anything at all, other than a diffuse despair. For a body to give body, it is not enough for one to be able to incorporate with him; it is necessary that he himself assume a body, or better, that he become incarnate.²⁰⁵

The language of incarnation and “giving body” not only illustrates the failure of passion to measure up to love (in the sense of a genuine encounter between two persons), but it also

²⁰² Ibid., p. 157.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 157-158.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 158.

provides an indication of how Marion conceives of the possibility for true acquaintance with others. What is more, the conditions that Marion outlines for such acquaintance are very close to the terms Arendt uses to describe the disclosure of the agent in the public sphere of human interaction. To recall, Arendt writes that “with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.” In acting, human beings transcend the simple physicality of their existence and become recognizable as persons, as agents in possession of a unique human perspective. Such transcendence, it turns out, is the precise accomplishment that Marion reserves for what he calls incarnation—namely, “the possibility for a body of the world (physical) to invest itself with the passive capacity for affection.”²⁰⁶ Incarnation denotes the capacity of a body to bear witness to that which embodies it, the “passive,” sentient consciousness that, in Marion’s vernacular, is alone “worthy of the name flesh.”²⁰⁷ Whereas the “objectifiable” body cannot “give” anything other than the simple physicality with which it appears, the incarnated body is recognized as an embodied affectivity, that is, it is a body that can “affect itself with (feel) another than itself.”²⁰⁸ I am incarnated insofar as I, through my body, can feel and be affected by the body of the other; reciprocally, the other that I feel is not simply a body, but is herself incarnated, capable—so far as I can tell—of being affected by me. This ability to see (to recognize, to love) the other as a person capable of feeling, rather than simply as an object, is precisely what the experience of passion cannot deliver. Passion requires that the other be held at bay, that she remain the object of self-love, and hence that the body of the other remain disincarnated, unable to “give” body, to give flesh. And because, Marion concludes, love is equated with passion in modern life,

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 158-159.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 158.

flesh is missing from the situation in which contemporaneity has placed love (or what stands for love). Bodies lack flesh, and this is why bodies cannot accede to any other whatsoever, nor propose themselves as real others—as bodies of flesh. Without flesh, no body can accede to love, for it remains unaffected by another person, or even any sort of other. Restricted to bodies without flesh, contemporary eroticism slides inevitably into solipsism, an eroticism without other.²⁰⁹

III. *The political relevance of charity*

For Arendt, love, by reason of its passion, draws the lovers out of the world and into a private intimacy in which each appears to the other in an idealized form. Marion pushes this privacy to its limit, showing that passion is not simply worldless, but indeed *other*-less, since the beloved is idealized only where it is excluded from the closed subjectivity in which passion is aroused. In this way, Marion sees to its completion the tendency for love to destroy the worldly in-between that Arendt points out. Yet the key difference between these thinkers in this regard is that Marion attributes this destructive tendency to passion alone, thus keeping open the possibility for love to be thought anew, free from its connection to the worldlessness of passion. Thus freed, love becomes for Marion the privileged virtue through which “knowledge of the other as such” can be expected—a re-imagining of love that equally “recovers the function of charity.”²¹⁰

This recovery has two steps: first, Marion provides a detailed argument for the need for a certain type of “good will” if there is to be a recognition of the other as a *person*—as truly other, as embodying a uniquely human perspective, as a body with “flesh”—in a world otherwise populated with objects. Second, he shows how this resolution of the will attains knowledge of the other through a kind of worldlessness (or rather what I will interpret as worldlessness): whereas for Arendt the reality of the common world rests on both the tangibility and appearance of that which constitutes it, for Marion the capacity for the common world to acquaint persons

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 158-159.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

with each other rests on the resolution to see the invisible other beyond the horizon of objectivity and visibility. This worldless good will is what Marion identifies as charity.

Essential to Marion's first step is his conclusion that the objective world, though a necessary feature of human community, does not on its own suffice in delivering knowledge of the other. Marion takes as his point of departure Husserl's understanding of intersubjectivity as proposed in *Cartesian Meditations*. The basic picture that Marion derives from Husserl is one in which an individual subject discovers the presence of other subjects in the world "by analogy" to its own experience, that is, by noticing phenomena in the world that appear to perceive and be affected by the world in the same way that the subject itself does. Initially, the individual subject finds itself altogether "alone" in the world, in the company solely of other objects that it has "constituted through and through" by its intentional gaze. "In knowing [these objects]," writes Marion, "I know other things than myself... but I do not know another I or alter ego."²¹¹ This solipsism is broken by the appearance of a specific kind of phenomenon that is not strictly equivalent to the objects that are constituted by the subject—namely, the subject's own body. The subject recognizes that its body "is the only physical (material) body that not only is able to feel aware of itself... but itself *feels*."²¹² The body "has the status of flesh: it experiences, it feels, and it alone can do this."²¹³ This realization has two elements: not only is the embodied subject self-aware in the sense that it can "feel" *itself*, but the subject further recognizes that its capacity to be affected (its "flesh") constitutes its original relation to the world as a whole. As Marion writes, "the affections are given to me, along with my flesh; which is to say, I am given the very world that lies beyond the objects that I constitute."²¹⁴ Recognizing its own embodiment thus

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 161.

²¹² Ibid., p. 161.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 161.

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 161.

teaches the subject that its power to constitute objects in the world is in fact situated within a much broader and more basic experience of being *affected by* the world. It is this fundamental affectivity that grounds the “analogy” by which the subject is led to suppose the presence of other persons. As Marion explains,

in this enlarged world, I discover phenomena that behave as if they found themselves affected in the same manner as myself. In reasoning by analogy, I can suppose that they feel, experience, undergo affections, aim intentionally, constitute objects, and so forth. Respecting these analogies, I come to the conclusion that these phenomena, while remaining physical (material) bodies of the world, as such objectifiable, redouble themselves with a flesh that feels and is affected. In this sense, by analogy to my “I” properly reduced, I see others appear in their incarnated bodies.²¹⁵

By analogy to my own behavior, in short, I am led to assume that what appears to my sight as nothing more than a physical body (object) is in fact the site of conscious subject similar to me, a body with “flesh” that both bestows meaning upon and is affected by the world that we share.

Though Marion accepts this basic Husserlian picture as his point of departure, he does not think that it ultimately succeeds in delivering knowledge of the other. Marion argues that where “reasoning by analogy” is the privileged path to the other, the “flesh” of the other person remains foreign, that is to say, invisible: the subject “does not end up with direct recognition of the other; the other’s flesh in effect remains *merely inferred* from his visible behaviors, by analogy with my flesh and my behaviors.”²¹⁶ Such inference does not amount necessarily to true recognition: though I may assume the presence of another consciousness because the other “looks like” me (or rather, her *behavior* does), this by no means entails that our observing gazes intersect and confront each other. In simply reasoning by analogy, I am able to move about my world without ever crossing paths with another perspective with which I must engage or to which I must answer, since all that has been added to the world is some phenomena which I can

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 162. My emphasis.

suppose are other persons, based on the familiar way in which they are affected by the objects of the world.

Though the approach to the other by analogy does not arrive at intersubjectivity, it does, as Marion says, deliver “a new figure of objectivity” to the subject’s experience of its surrounding world.²¹⁷ As he writes, “reasoning by analogy in effect allows me to confirm, verify, and complete my constitutions of objects (always limited to my intentional lived experiences) by others’ constitutions of the assumedly same objects: our concomitant constitutive variations reinforce the objectivity of the objects.”²¹⁸ The inference of the presence of the other alters my acquaintance with the objects around me. That there is another person that appears to take up (feel, perceive, interpret) the objects in my world in a way analogous (though not identical, nor even harmonious) to my taking it up awakens me to the fact that I am not the sole governor of the meaning or reality of the objects in the world. Indeed, the world is “objective” only insofar as it is apprehended and confirmed by perspectives other than mine. Yet this realization does not draw me closer to the other: though the constitution of the reality of objects is evidently a shared process, I am nonetheless most directly and assuredly acquainted with this shared reality of *objects*. I “know” the other only through the objective reality that we establish together: Marion opts to call this process “interobjectivity,” insisting that, though it marks an advance from the subject that constitutes the world alone, it does not truly succeed in establishing a direct encounter between persons. Here, not just simple objects but “even the other is inscribed within objectivity,” he writes, “though it be indirectly.”²¹⁹

Here, we cannot avoid noticing that what Marion calls “interobjectivity”—the coincidence of my constitution of objects with the other’s constitution of objects—is virtually

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

identical to the conditions of the common world spelled out by Arendt. As I discussed in chapter 2, for Arendt, public life is possible only where there exists an objective (and in many cases tangible) medium that, in being apparent to all, serves as the common point of reference by which the unique perspectives of persons can be related together and made meaningfully distinct. Here, I need only recall the crucial role played by objectivity in establishing a common world that relates and separates human agents: as Arendt writes, “under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the ‘common nature’ of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object.”²²⁰ For Arendt, there can be no common realm unless there is “sameness in utter diversity,” that is, unless objects in the world are perceived in common such that they become the points of reference in which each distinct human perspective is given a share in making reality. Without the “objectivity of objects,” to borrow Marion’s phrase, nothing is held in common between persons, and there can be no properly political action.

Despite their congruence on the theme of objectivity, however, there is a decisive difference in emphasis between Arendt and Marion. For Arendt, the objective world is tied necessarily to the public nature of meaningful action. The importance of objective reality in uniting human beings together leads her to emphasize both appearance and permanence as essential features of the common world. For Marion, while the horizon of objectivity is no doubt the most immediate and foundational terrain on which my experience of the other takes root, he treats it as simply a step along the way to a more “direct” experience of the other. What is significant for this present study is that Marion understands this more direct and emphatic experience of the other to be delivered precisely by charity; hence, his attempt to look beyond

²²⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 57-58.

what Arendt cherishes most takes place by thinking anew about that which Arendt would quite readily pass over (namely, love as a political virtue).

Yet, it is not as though Marion would dispense with what Arendt calls the common world. Rather, his view that “interobjectivity” can do no better than acquaint persons with each other by inference causes him to specify just how persons who inhabit this world can ensure that what can be *inferred* is not simply *ignored*. Nothing is problematic, in and of itself, about the fact that my experience of the other is generally mediated by some worldly object; indeed, the idea that human relationships require the mediation of some in-between is among the basic political realities that Arendt points out. Yet a question here arises: if I am not already mindful of the others with whom I share the world, will the object(s) that I am more directly acquainted with lead me to a recognition of them as a unique person? Will the objective world and the totality of tangible objects that “relates” human beings (to invoke Arendt’s terminology) guarantee that human beings will be properly “separated,” that is, revealed to each other in their distinctness? For Marion, it is not certain that interobjectivity, which at best leads individuals to infer each other’s presence “by the concordances and correspondences between [the] two sets of flesh,”²²¹ offers no guarantee that such inference, let alone a more direct recognition of other persons, will take place. There is no guarantee, in other words, that the artifactual world will necessarily give rise to the world of human affairs. Consequently, something beyond the presence and common apprehension of objects is required for there to be any recognition of the other as “flesh,” as a person. As Marion writes,

There is no need, in any case, to appeal to... extremes in order to invalidate reasoning by analogy; day in day out, we each experience its fragility; it is enough for us to admit that we do not recognize equally in every supposedly human body a flesh, or a fellow flesh, or a flesh that could be set alongside our own; daily life even frequently demands that we be economical in recognizing the bodies of others as flesh: working,

²²¹ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, p. 162.

moving about, doing business, and the like all require that I waste the least amount of time and attention possible in observing carefully whether the bodies that interfere with my own are worthy, or not, of the analogical status of flesh. There is nothing ordinary, economical or, therefore, uniformly exactable about the recognition of incarnation... [We] can thus conclude that reasoning by analogy infers the flesh (and thus the humanity, the personhood) of the other from my own flesh on only one condition—that I will it, and will it well.²²²

What Marion means by “fragility” here is not the same as what Arendt implies with the phrase “the frailty of human affairs”—namely, the boundlessness and unpredictability of the action that enters the network of human interaction. What is fragile, on Marion’s account, is the possibility for action to occur *in the first place*, that is, for the other to be recognized as a human agent, rather than simply as one more means toward a greater “economical” or instrumental end. And while there are innumerable “extreme” examples of the failure to recognize others in full (past suspicion about the humanity of “savage” peoples, the denial of personhood in genocides, etc.), habitual inattention to the flesh of the other is among the most common elements of practical living. What Marion means to say, then, is that my recognition of the other as a “fellow,” as a person whose perception of the world is equal to mine, whose affectedness by the world is as unique as mine is, cannot be reasonably expected to occur automatically, even where I am assured (by my own inference) of the presence of others in my vicinity. My recognition of the other as an incarnated body takes place only insofar as I actively *will* to see persons. As Marion writes, “the phenomenality of the other does not precede my (good) will with regard to him, but instead is its result.”²²³

The second step of Marion’s “recovery” of the notion of charity elaborates on this necessary will to see others as enfleshed persons, and attempts to derive this notion of will from the experience of love. Marion’s particular interpretation of the Christian overtones of charity

²²² Ibid., p. 163.

²²³ Ibid., p. 163.

allows him to give an initial indication of its political significance. Whereas the theological virtues of faith and hope are oriented, respectively, towards the “past requisites of Revelation” and “Revelation’s obligatory future,” the virtue of charity is oriented toward “the *here and now* of Revelation, the instant ceaselessly proposed anew, in which we are able to see whether and to what extent we are becoming disciples of Christ.”²²⁴ Specifically, charity confronts the believer with the question of whether, in the present moment, she is able to love like Christ, the “One who enables us to love.”²²⁵ For Marion, “charity manages the present,”²²⁶ confronting the believer with the immediate and inescapable task of loving the neighbor. As a model for the enactment of charity, Marion turns to the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan. Whereas conventional interpretations of this passage focus on the “compassion” of the Samaritan for the downtrodden traveler (thus making this passage exemplary of the sort of neighborly love characterized above), Marion reads the passage as an example of the operation of the will in recognizing persons as such (and not simply persons in need). As he writes, “what I will organizes itself into the following alternative: either I do not love him and I pass by him by going around him (Luke 10:31-32); or I ‘approach him and, seeing him, am unsettled (Luke 10:33).”²²⁷ Whenever I am drawn to infer the presence of the other, I am confronted with a choice: I can either refuse to “see” him (and hence fail to love him), or I can accept to be “unsettled” by the other, to allow him to appear to me. Before this encounter becomes a question of whether I will act ethically, it is a question of whether I will relinquish my comfortable reign over the meaning of the world and recognize the other as a site of another human perspective. What the world of objects can merely set the stage for is accomplished solely by my charitable will, that is, my will

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 154.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 155.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 154.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 166.

to invite another point of view into the arena of common meaning. As Marion writes, “in order for the other to appear to me, I must first love him.”²²⁸

To witness the specific accomplishment of charity, it is necessary to think through how this experience of becoming “unsettled” plays out in one’s interaction with the world. Keeping his analysis close to the theme of objectivity, Marion claims that “charity in effect becomes a means of knowledge²²⁹ when our concern is with the other, and no longer with objects.”²³⁰ For Marion, charity marks the detachment from the horizon of objectivity altogether, allowing for a vision of that which “will never therefore become for me an available and constitutable object,”²³¹ namely, a unique other person seen beyond the physicality by which she is made objectively present. Specifically, what distinguishes others from objects is the fact that “the object regards us not, while the other does.”²³² Wholly available to my constitution, an object is nothing other than the site at which my own concerns, interests, and desires are actualized in the world. The object that “opposes” my desiring gaze is in fact not opposite to me at all, but simply reflects my own desire and “regard” back to me. In contrast, “the other,” writes Marion, “modifies from top to bottom the rules for the exercise of the gaze.” Among all phenomenal realities, the other alone “opposes a gaze to my gaze; he no longer passively reflects my gaze, like an eventually unfaithful object of my desire, but always as its faithful mirror; he responds to

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 164.

²²⁹ I should clarify that the “knowledge” of the other that Marion refers to is in no way like the knowledge of the other’s “core” or “true” self, the internal essence of a person that resists being expressed in the bright light of the public. It is not a kind of knowledge that seeks to eliminate the public media (objects, speech, the common world) through which interaction is possible. Marion’s concern, as is clear, is with the *appearance* of the other person, that is, the possibility for the other (along with me) to enter the public sphere of human communication, thus transcending the simple objectivity with which we are otherwise (and most often) concerned. In this way, Marion’s concern is similar to Arendt’s concern for the disclosure of the agent in public through speech and action, a situation, we might be reminded, that confirmed the public and communal formation of an individual’s identity, thus dismissing any notion of the preexistence of any “core” self that could ever be “known” by anyone. What Marion means by “knowing” the other, therefore, is the resolution to recognize the presence of a person and, consequently, a distinct perspective to which the world uniquely appears.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 164.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 164.

²³² Ibid., p. 164.

my gaze not with a reflection of my own, but with another gaze.”²³³ The other alone issues a “counter-gaze,” a desiring perception of his own that, when I notice it noticing me, disturbs my mastery over a world so far comprised of objects. The appearance of the counter-gaze dismantles my self-certainty, causing me to ask “what do *they* think of me, of what I am saying?” This counter-gaze is thus the first of my experiences to “arise, meddle with, and install itself in my consciousness,”²³⁴ awakening me to the fact that not just objects but also *my own action* is subject to the perception and judgment of another person.

But not every experience of the other has this unsettling effect. Not only is the inference of the other by analogy not guaranteed, but, as Marion reports, “everyday life accustoms me, without a doubt happily, to living before a crowd of other gazes, without any of them bothering me or taking hold of me.” Indeed, practical life to an extent necessitates that I ignore the unique personhood behind the several “gazes” that I encounter, and resign “to see them as simple objects (which they nevertheless are not), to be unaware of them as such, to hold to purely functional relations in regard to them: the unseen gaze of the employee, of the salesclerk, of the cop, and so forth.”²³⁵ What is it, then, that allows the counter-gaze to “unsettle” me? What decides whether I will overlook the other for the sake of some “functional” end or whether I will be put on “trial”²³⁶ by the other, convinced that his is a perspective to which I am answerable? Confronted with this alternative (the same one as in the parable of the Good Samaritan), I am faced with nothing other than a decision about what *I* will do for the other. As Marion writes, “either I refuse the counter-gaze of the other and thereby hold him in place as an object... or I

²³³ Ibid., p. 165.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 165.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 165.

accept not only the moral law and the face of the other,²³⁷ but above all that there is an other and that his counter-gaze is as valuable as my own.”²³⁸ That is, the other’s gaze becomes a *counter-gaze*—a perspective not simply other to mine but indeed equal to my own—only where I accept it as such. In general, the instances of otherness that I experience in the world, which most often appear to me as factual realities and obstacles with which I must cope, are easily incorporated into the desiring and intending gaze through which I pursue my ends in the world. Recognizing the other as personal and equal while allowing her to remain *other* requires that I *accept* the other as such and resolve not to overlook her. “To accept the other’s face,” writes Marion, “or better, to accept that I am dealing with an other (and not an object), a face (and not a spectacle), a counter-gaze (and not a reflection of my own), depends uniquely on my willing it so.”²³⁹

I have been suggesting that charity is politically efficacious by virtue of the sort of worldlessness that characterizes it, and that charity thus adds to an understanding of political concern for the world something that Arendt is unable to anticipate in making “worldliness” the fundamental condition for political activity. In substantiating this claim, I want to begin with a passage from George Orwell’s short memoir titled “A Hanging,” which, as I see it, illustrates charity as an act of will that determines to see the counter-gaze of the other beyond—or more precisely *through*—that which is physically and objectively manifest. Here, Orwell recounts the startling experience of suddenly recognizing that the condemned prisoner that he sees being lead to the gallows is in fact, like himself, the site of a unique, human perspective on the world:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw

²³⁷ The priority of the will over these other options follows from Marion’s conviction that nothing about the simple (that is, physically and objectively present) phenomenality of the other nor my rational obligation to some moral law will guarantee that I will see another gaze. My acceptance of the other follows neither from the simple visibility of the “face” of the other (since I make a habit of ignoring the flesh of the many faces that I encounter day to day) nor from my understanding of a moral code (which presupposes a understanding of “the person”).

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working—bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming—all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less.²⁴⁰

We should notice here a significant resonance with Arendt’s understanding of the world and its ability to relate and separate individuals. As Orwell reports, his recognition of the humanity of the prisoner carries with it the realization that he and the prisoner are seeing and understanding “the same world.” Orwell’s statement that there would be “one world less” upon the death of the prisoner bears witness to his realization that the world is constituted and characterized according to each of the perspectives to which it presents itself, and that the loss of one such perspective will alter the entire world, insofar as the world *as it appears to* the prisoner (to invoke Socrates’ notion of *doxa*) would be eliminated from the common conversation. Moreover, it is clear that Orwell’s recognition of the personhood of the prisoner was mediated by a tangible reality, the puddle around which the prisoner “reasoned” his way. Orwell and the prisoner are thus “related” together by the worldly presence of this puddle, and in such a way that presents to Orwell the “unspeakable wrongness” of removing from the world a human voice or perspective that would otherwise be “separated” (that is, revealed in its uniqueness) by it.

But Orwell’s account also resonates with Marion’s analysis. Not only does Orwell infer the presence of another person by analogy to his own rational manner of coping with the world, but this inference also allows him to recognize the “flesh” of this prisoner, to see the particularly human affectivity of this person through the simple physicality (“skin,” “nails,” “organs”) that

²⁴⁰ George Orwell, *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000). p. 16.

more immediately presented itself. Here, we must ask: was it a guarantee that Orwell would be confronted with the “unspeakable wrongness” of the act of execution, based on the precise way in which he recognized the prisoner’s personhood? Did the physical (the prisoner’s bodily movement) and objective (the puddle) realities that constituted the shared world of all who were present suffice to acquaint Orwell with the prisoner’s humanity (his flesh, his gaze)? Evidence suggests that one should answer “no” in both cases. Indeed, Orwell, according to his memoir, is alone in his particular response to witnessing the prisoner; his companions treat it as a routine procedure (indeed, an amusing one!), themselves being entirely ignorant of the humanness of the condemned man. Further, as Marion suggests, there is no need to appeal to extreme cases in order to be ensured of the fact that the familiar or analogous way in which other human bodies take up the same objective reality (puddles, tables, city streets, consumer goods, offices, etc.) habitually fails to produce an awareness of other’s counter-gaze.²⁴¹

What, then, *does* account for the sort of vision of the other person exemplified by Orwell? What allows one’s perception of worldly objects, including the behavior of physical human bodies, to give rise to a vision of a possible counter-gaze, a vision of a unique personhood that (even where he does not literally look at me) assures the perceiver that he is not alone in his constitution of the world? Already we can expect that some resolution of the will is necessary in being able to see *past* the body to the person. But what sort of resolution, exactly? A resolution, I contend, to be “worldless” in one’s visions, to see what is not visibly present or real, but rather to “unsettle” the visible world in such a way that the invisible personhood of the other can “appear.”

Charity, to recall, “manages the present.” The question of charity arises in the immediate moment in which one is confronted with the option either to refuse or to accept the counter-gaze

²⁴¹ Not to mention that capital punishment is not necessarily understood by all as an extreme case.

of the other person. I am charitable insofar as I resolve to see another person through the physicality in which they present themselves—a presentation not of my own doing, and one that I could quite easily have ignored. I love insofar as I will to accept the other, and accept to “see” her. In this way, it is clear, charity manages the present in the second sense of the word: that is, charity ensures that the other person is “presented” to me. As Marion writes, only my decision to accept rather than to refuse the gaze of the other “can transform an object into a personal other, only this conversion of the gaze can give rise to the uncontrollable freedom of the counter-gaze, of another gaze, in short, of the gaze of another person. Only charity... *opens the space* where the gaze of the other can shine forth.”²⁴² Only charity ensures that I see that which is visible in a non-objective sense, that which “regards” and challenges me in the way that objects do not. Of course, this “shining forth” of the other’s gaze puts me on “trial,” as mentioned above, acquainting me with the particularity of my own gaze insofar as the other interrogates me. What I accept, therefore, is the fact that I am not alone in my interpretation of the world, and that another person has an equal share in “understanding the same world” as I do. But, as Marion explains, this vision of the other’s gaze is only possible where I resolve to take leave of the visibility of this “same world” that she and I share. As he writes, “a gaze is not truly accomplished unless, beyond objects, it sees a counter-gaze—which is to say, unless it sees a naught of object... a pure invisible.”²⁴³ That is to say, I “see” the other only insofar as my perception moves past the objective things that appear in the world (and indeed make up this world itself) and is resolved to see that which is not worldly (neither visible, nor indeed tangible). The “final paradox,” as Marion identifies it, is that

the gaze of the other is not seen, at least as an object; strictly speaking, it remains invisible—we do not look anyone in the whites of the eyes, but rather in the blackness

²⁴² Ibid., p. 166. My emphasis.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 167.

and the emptiness of the pupil, in the only “spot” on their body where there is simply a void to see; we face up to the other in his gaze insofar as he remains invisible; but this invisibility, as such, reaches us more than everything of the other’s that is visible; it is the other’s invisibility that weighs on us, gazes upon us, and judges us, frees us or constrains us, loves us or hates us. And it is this invisibility that we love or hate, because from the outset we have very much willed it, or not.²⁴⁴

Whereas the otherness of objects is found in their visible presence as a constituent of the objective world, the otherness of persons is found in their invisibility, that is, in their transcendence of the simple presence of objects and their inability to be governed or constituted in the way that objects are. The appearance of other persons in their invisibility thus requires that the subject’s constitution of the world as he sees it be disturbed. To recognize the presence of another perspective in the world is to accept that another (perhaps challenging, but certainly unexpected and unique) interpretation of the “same” object is possible, and indeed always possible insofar as new perspectives can always be added to the totality of those which make up the significance of the world. Charity, the will to accept the other who may “love,” “hate,” “judge,” or “free” me, thus amounts to a will to keep the world open to the emergence of a new point of view, a will that “unsettles” my singular interpretation of the world as it preserves the public or communal character of the constitution of the world. In the moment in which I face the alternative (do I refuse or accept this other person?), my decision to be charitable is a decision to invite into the world a point of view that, on the basis of its natality, has the capacity to alter the very meaning of the world as it has so far been established. As Marion writes, “it is up to me to set the stage for the other, not as an object that I hold under contract and whose play I thus direct, but as the uncontrollable, the unforeseeable, and the foreign stranger who will affect me, provoke me, and—possibly—love me.”²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 167-168.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 166-167.

“Charity,” Marion writes, “empties its world of itself in order to make a place for him who is unlike it.”²⁴⁶ Charity accomplishes a kind of worldlessness insofar as it destabilizes the current constitution of the world in order to open a space or “set the stage” for a new interpretation that the world has not yet seen. Charity is worldless in the sense that it resolves to see beyond what the world of relation and separation makes present. But insofar as the relation and separation of the world is meant to give rise to human interaction, it is clear that charity’s worldlessness plays a crucial role in ensuring that such interaction is achieved in this world. It is only through a charitable will to see persons as fully enfolded in Marion’s sense that something similar to what Orwell recounted is possible, namely the ability to “see” an invisible human perspective where only pure physicality or objectivity is made present. On its own power, the objective world cannot generate genuine experience (or knowledge, in Marion’s sense) of the other, since what appears in this way (the physical body of the other included) too easily remains at the level of objectivity, owing to my tendency to constitute objects (and, no doubt, the world itself) solely according to my desire and interest. Only through an act of will can I resolve to see beyond what is visible in an objective sense, allowing for the appearance of the entirely unanticipated, unrepeatable, and invisible perspective of the other. This is the “unsettling” love of charity: the will to see what the world has not yet made apparent, and to see to it that that the world of appearing *objects* is able to become the site of the appearance of other *persons*.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 167.

Conclusion

This thesis seeks to add the Christian virtue of charity to a list of political virtues that are able to play a role in Hannah Arendt's political vision. In attempting to make this addition, I take my cues from Arendt's own analysis of political space, which, as presented in *The Human Condition*, contains a powerful and unequivocal statement about the "worldless"—and hence the "unpolitical" and "non-public"—character of Christianity. I attempt to destabilize the equation between the designations "worldly" and "political," showing that the particular worldlessness of charity can in fact be conceived of as offering a crucial contribution to the proper constitution of any political or public space. It is my contention that Arendt too closely associates charity with the experience of passionate love, and is thereby led to consign the Christian tradition to the anti-political worldlessness that she perceives in the experience of love's passion. In proposing an alternate understanding of charity, I draw on the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, whose account of charity altogether disentangles it from the idea of passion and re-imagines it as an act of will by which one establishes a genuine encounter with others as persons. Through the act of charity, one resolves to see the invisible "flesh" or affective personhood of the other person in the midst of the objects of the world that much more readily and automatically appear. Charity is thus worldless in the sense that it looks beyond what the world makes present in and of itself, in order to "see" the other person and to invite her voice into the common conversation.

I argued above that Arendt's notion of the world had two basic senses: first, the "human" world, disclosed through the action and speech of those human actors that collaborate publicly; and, second, the "world of things," made up of the tangible objects and artifacts that serve as the material context for human interaction. Among Arendt's primary concerns as a political thinker is that the world of things would give rise to the human world of action and dialogue. As

discussed in my first chapter, Arendt is at pains to restore the dignity and specificity of human action against both the philosophical prejudices and social tendencies that threaten to degrade and obscure it. But, as Arendt writes at the end of her discussion of work in *The Human Condition*, “in order to be what the world was always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech.”²⁴⁷ For Arendt, the world is both the product of and condition for human action: there can be no “home” for human beings without a world of artificial and tangible things that is able to “house” the intangible flux of action and speech that takes place between persons.

In order to demonstrate the importance of the world of things for Arendt’s political vision, I sought to show, in my second chapter, how the realm of objectivity (the material objects that make up “the world,” strictly speaking) plays a crucial role in establishing relationships between persons. For Arendt, it is not possible for persons to have any sort of meaningful interaction unless they are oriented around a common, visible centre, a material object or set of objects that, apparent (and hence “real”) to all, can serve as the commonly apprehended point of reference. Without an objective world that both “relates and separates” them, human beings are at risk of remaining “together” simply in the physical sense, sharing the same physical space while remaining wholly isolated from one another in terms of who each person is and how each person would disclose themselves in acting. In order to avoid this most un-political of situations, Arendt asserts the importance of the common world, and identifies certain of its qualities that, on the basis of its objective character, ought to receive special attention in any effort to preserve and stimulate the political realm. First, the world must be preserved as a *public* space, not only in the sense that one’s words and deeds should be displayed in public, but also that the visible objects of the world that appear to all should become the commonly perceived reality that give occasion

²⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 173.

to the public display of action. Second, the world must be preserved as a *permanent* or *durable* space, since there can be no political realm unless there is an enduring material reality into which the inherently futile words and deeds of human agents can be solidified.

But concerns for the publicity and permanence of the world do not on their own constitute the “concern for the world” that Arendt identifies as the meaning of politics; or rather, the worldly *conditions* for political interaction do not themselves guarantee that such interaction will take place. Here, we might recall that the common world in which human action takes place is made up of nothing other than the sum total of the numerous and diverse perspectives that are brought to bear on it and the tangible objects that appear within it. As Jean-Luc Marion’s discussion of objectivity points out, my experience of “interobjectivity,” in which I am made aware of the fact that my world is shared with other beings similar to me, does not necessarily translate into an experience of intersubjectivity, in which the commonly beheld medium of objects serves as the occasion for my encounter of another person. Here, the political relevance of charity as a kind of “worldlessness” is revealed: in resolving to see the invisible “flesh” or personhood of the other, I engage with the visible and objective things of the world in order to make visible that which can appear—and indeed, can *only* appear—“through” such things, the unique perspective of the other with whom I act. In the last analysis, then, the role of charity in the public realm is to see to it that this realm can be a place for the appearance of natality. To recall Arendt’s basic vision, she says that “with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.”²⁴⁸ In acting, we as individuals transcend the original and immediate physicality of our existence on earth and enter the human world, “inserting” our natal self into this world “by beginning something new on our own

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

initiative.”²⁴⁹ Yet Arendt’s account of action, provocative though it is, seldom departs from this emphasis on taking initiative for oneself, leaving open such questions as the one of Orwell’s prisoner, whose ability to “insert” himself into the world was altogether taken away. Is it possible that the appearance of natality rests not simply on the fact of one’s birth, nor even the initiative of the agent, but also on the resolution of political beings to invite their fellow actors into the human world? Such a resolution, according to Marion, is the essence of Christian charity. In willing the other’s appearance as an act of charity, one “sets the stage” for the other, “unsettling” one’s gaze on the world, thus preparing not only himself, but also the world that he constitutes, for the appearance of another human perspective. Such a perspective is properly *human* and *other*, though, only insofar as I cannot predict, control, or speak for it; in this way, I am unsettled insofar as the meaning of the world is no longer up to me alone, but is rather produced as I cope with the unexpected action of those around me. Charity, the will to see others, thus resists the stagnation or closure of the world, ensuring that the world is continually prepared for the unexpectedness of human natality.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 177.

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