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The Pearl Diver by Peter Berkowitz

A review of The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin. University of Chicago Press, 365 pp., $30.

I.

According to a common complaint, liberals are open-minded but shallow. The sophisticated version of this complaint adds that liberals are open-minded because they are shallow and shallow because they are open-minded. Being shallow, hard-pressed to understand the intricate play of passion and prejudice in human motivation, liberals flit from opinion to opinion, ingenuously embracing a variety of mutually contradictory and sometimes dangerous perspectives. Being open-minded, committed to giving equal consideration to all points of view, liberals glide quickly over the surface, neither lingering leisurely nor diving deeply into any particular viewpoint. Their open-mindedness forbids them from taking sides and making judgments.

Where the common complaint --- and even more so the sophisticated diagnosis --- goes astray is in its failure to distinguish between the decadence to which liberals are prone and liberalism at its most robust and principled. The blithe open-mindedness that blurs all distinctions is the poor cousin of the vigorous skepticism that draws fine-grained distinctions in order to take a reasoned and responsible stand. And the shallowness that, in flight from judgment, looks through or away from the intricate play of high and low passion in human conduct is the mangled and malnourished remnant of the generosity and the toleration that begin by taking each individual on his or her own terms in pursuit of judgments that are accurate and just.

And yet the pathologies of liberalism are real and recognizable and must be reckoned with. One way of reckoning with them that has been popular among professors is to search for alternatives to liberalism. This search is often fueled by the longing for a politics that restores the depth and the drama of which many intellectuals feel themselves to have been deprived by life under liberalism's dominion. For a considerable number of such professors of political theory and law, the most attractive alternative to liberalism in our day has been provided by the thinking of Hannah Arendt.

Arendt's current ascendancy in academic circles may seem overdetermined. For those hungry for female heroes, Arendt stands out for her important books on a variety of subjects of lasting significance, including the rise of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, the decline of citizenship in the modern age, the lost revolutionary spirit of the American Founding, and Eichmann and the banality of evil. For an academic left that no longer draws moral inspiration or political guidance from the writings and legacy of Marx, Arendt provides a thrilling vision of an intensely participatory politics. And for the many intellectuals who, attracted by the postmodern dream of constant self-creation, have moved from impatience to disgust with the limits that liberal constitutionalism imposes on the pace and the content of change in democratic politics, Arendt enticingly puts resistance, revolution, and radical innovation --- "the capacity of beginning something anew" --- at the very center of citizenship.

Still, to reduce Arendt's ascendancy to the spirit of the times would do an injustice to her powerful, scintillating mind and to the sweep of her accomplishments. She is certainly among the most original and outstanding political theorists of the twentieth century. The impact of her writings is owed not least to the intrinsic interest of her bold and iconoclastic arguments, which present a flavorful mix of historical erudition, philosophical analysis, literary elegance, and moral and political criticism. In the nine books that she published in her lifetime, as well as in numerous articles, essays, and reviews, she pronounced her opinions about ideas and events in a tone of sovereign mastery, as if the accumulated wisdom of human learning were speaking through her; it is a tone that few can muster who did not receive their philosophical training in a German university before the war. Her command of historical fact, the coherence of her theoretical speculation, and the quality of her moral and political judgment were more than occasionally unreliable, but her thinking was always formidable.

II.

Hannah arendt was born in 1906 in Konigsberg, a Prussian port on the Baltic, into a well-to-do Jewish family. She was taught to be proud of being a Jew but was reared without religious observance or Jewish learning. When she was 18, she entered the University of Marburg to study theology. She was dazzled by her teacher Martin Heidegger, and he was dazzled by her. His legend was already growing, and his classes were attended by many destined to exercise a major influence on twentieth-century intellectual life (including Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans Jonas, Karl Lowith, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Strauss). The professor and the student soon began, and maintained for three years, what was to become the most discussed love affair in the history of modern philosophy.

Arendt left Marburg at the end of her first year and completed her formal studies in Heidelberg, under the direction of Heidegger's friend Karl Jaspers. With Jaspers, who became a trusted mentor and lifelong friend, she wrote a dissertation, Saint Augustine's Conception of Love, an ambitious and highly theoretical work that drew on the thought of both her teachers to clarify Augustine's understanding of the human condition.

In 1933, Arendt left Nazi Germany for Paris, where she worked as executive secretary of Youth Aliyah, helping young Jews make their way to Israel. Five years later she finished the final two chapters of Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman, a biography that she had begun in Berlin in 1929. At the heart of the matter stood "the Jewish Question," which Arendt analyzed in strictly secular terms. The life of Varnhagen --- a passionate, intelligent woman of the eighteenth century who was enticed by Enlightenment and bourgeois respectability but menaced by anti-Semitism --- embodied the dilemma of the Jew in modern Europe, which was that of a pariah, or member of an outcast class, who seeks to gain admission to high or good society. If the pariah succeeds, she finds herself indelibly marked as a parvenu, seen by all, including herself, as one who has recently arrived and therefore does not truly belong.

In 1941, after the outbreak of war and a brief period of internment in France, Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blucher --- in his youth a rogue and revolutionary socialist and in his maturity an irascible intellectual and, until his death in 1970, a devoted companion to Arendt --- set out for the United States. In New York, she continued her political work for Zionist causes. She also became a regular columnist for the Aufbau, a weekly German-language newspaper, writing frequently on Jewish politics and Zionism; and she contributed articles on politics and ideas to Commentary, The Nation, Partisan Review, and the Review of Politics. In 1946, she was named a senior editor at Schocken Books, a post which not only allowed her to supervise the publication of important works by distinguished authors from abroad such as Kafka and Benjamin and Scholem, but also brought her into regular contact with leading literary figures in America.

It was with the publication of The Origins of Totalitarianism in 1951 (the same year in which she became an American citizen) that Arendt secured her reputation as an intellectual force. In this dense, disorganized, bewilderingly complex, and undeniably brilliant study, Arendt drew on history, political thought, and philosophy to argue that Hitler's Nazism and Stalin's Communism, though mortal enemies opposing each other from opposite sides of the political spectrum, were alike in the most fundamental respect: both were embodiments of a radically new and terrifying form of government.

Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, was an innovation of the modern spirit. It arose, she argued, out of the paradoxical alliance of two dispositions: the Promethean ambition that seeks to bring all the world under human control, and the flight from responsibility that regards human affairs as if they were a function of large, impersonal, ineluctable forces over which men and women have no control. The coexistence of the ambition to control the world completely with the feeling of being at the mercy of uncontrollable forces gives rise, according to Arendt, to governance by terror, which is the essence of totalitarianism. The totalitarian ethos, in which the ruling terrorizers act like cruel, omnipotent gods and the terrorized subjects are reduced to powerless, subhuman victims, receives its purest expression in the creation of concentration camps, which "are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested."

Arendt's account of totalitarianism overlapped with themes in Heidegger's writings and ideas developed by Frankfurt School thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer. Yet Arendt could never have embraced Heidegger's bone-chilling pronouncement in 1935 that "from a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same"; nor did she indulge the Frankfurt School's contempt for the achievements of constitutional democracy. Arendt knew that politics was indispensable, and she was keenly aware that the protection of individual rights was a precondition for justice. Yet she was also convinced that politics aimed at something grander than life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Her study of totalitarianism persuaded her that the understanding of what she came to refer to as our "lost treasure" required the rethinking of the very foundations of politics and human dignity.

Arendt eventually set forth the results of her rethinking in The Human Condition (1958). She agreed with Nietzsche that God was dead, that metaphysics and religious faith could not provide a foundation for human dignity, but she warned that this did not mean that the old contest between the contemplative life and the political life had been decided in favor of the latter. Disavowing any intention of simply reversing the traditional hierarchy by elevating politics above contemplation, she aimed instead to provide a fresh articulation of the internal structure of the vita activa, or the active life.

In the process, she does frequently appear to suggest --- notwithstanding her jarring allusion at the beginning of the book to "the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable, the activity of thinking," and again at the very end to "thinking" as an activity that "as such would surpass" all others --- that the good life for a human being, the life in which the highest and the most human capacities are exercised, is the political life. Yet what Arendt has in mind is not politics as it has come to be understood and lived in the modern age. For the modern age has witnessed the "degradation of politics into a means for something else," be it the exercise of individual liberty, the pursuit of private interest, or the provision for each individual's liberty and private interest by means of laws regulating production and consumption and administering the redistribution of wealth.

For Arendt, by contrast, politics rightly understood does not set the stage for the achievement of some other, nonpolitical good --- physical pleasure, wealth, honor, or even contemplation --- but rather is a genuine good, an end in itself. Modern ideas --- that each individual is sovereign, that man is the master of nature, that (paradoxically) even when he exercises his sovereignty and displays his mastery over nature man remains in the grips of forces that determine his thoughts and deeds --- conceal features of the human condition that give politics its true significance. And the ills of modern life --- the focus on the satisfaction of material need, the quest for comfort, and the conformism and isolation bred by mass society --- suppress the experiences that nourish the desire for a life in the public realm.

To break free from the "world alienation" which "has been the hallmark of the modern age," it is necessary to understand politics properly, and for that one must study the ancients, especially the ancient Greek polis and those artists and thinkers who experienced politics in

its original and authentic form, recorded its glories, and set down its principles. The Greeks knew what we have forgotten. They knew that politics consists in collective deliberation in the public realm, in the giving of speeches in the presence of one's fellow citizens, in persuading and being persuaded in turn.

To understand politics in its purity, it is necessary to begin from the fact --- which Arendt claims that philosophers since Plato have failed to appreciate --- that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world." This constitutive feature of the human condition, called by Arendt "plurality," means that human beings are alike in that each is unique and irreducible. This shared uniqueness and irreducibility --- otherwise known as individuality --- is connected to another feature of the human condition, which Arendt calls "natality." Natality, "the new beginning inherent in birth," is, Arendt holds, the ground of the distinctively human capacity, "the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting."

But one cannot begin something new alone, and one cannot engage in action by oneself. To act means to act with other human beings, to see and to be seen, to speak and to listen, to disclose one's self and to witness the self-disclosure of others. Still, not every cooperative or collaborative deed counts as "action" in Arendt's construction of the term. In particular, action in the precise sense must not be confused with the two other broad and basic categories that constitute the active life. The first is "labor," which produces the material goods necessary for the maintenance of life. The second is "work," which creates or fabricates the distinctively human world of artifacts and ideas and "bestows a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time." Action, by contrast, which is inseparable from speech, association, and the founding and preserving of political orders, is essentially revelatory: "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world."

Always a precarious achievement, action "needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm." The public realm provides the place where human beings can not merely rise above the drudgery of everyday life, the concern with production and reproduction, with labor and family, but also burst the chains of necessity: "action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and sui generis."

Action is not some sort of individual right that government is obliged to protect, and it is not a good that can be promised equally to all. Action is an accomplishment, and a grand one. The ancient Greek polis, which for Arendt furnishes the paradigm of the public realm, "was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all." Arendt was perfectly aware that everybody cannot be the best. One wishes that she had

explored more fully the practical significance of an obvious implication: many people will not be attracted to or improved in, and some will be humiliated and crushed by, the fierce contest for distinction that constitutes the public realm. Public life cannot be only an agon.

But the strong and the gifted are truly enviable. By acting in concert, by cooperating in the construction of the principles, laws, and institutions that will govern their lives, by publicly telling the story of their deeds and listening to the stories that others tell, citizens --- or the articulate and ardent among them --- can achieve what may be the fullest and finest freedom of which human beings are capable. Arendt's politics even seems to provide the special satisfaction that had been thought to be the peculiar prerogative of philosophy and religion, since the common space that citizens jointly create and maintain somehow permits the disclosure of nothing less than the fundamental character of the world and the essence of the human condition.

It is reasonable to wonder whether politics, as Arendt grandiosely reconstructs it, was ever achieved in the ancient world. One could wonder with greater reason to what extent "Greek thought" and "the Greek world" --- Arendt's euphemisms for her idealizing and idiosyncratic amalgam of Homer, Thucydides, Sophocles, Plato, and Aristotle --- are poetic evocations, or even fabrications. Yet even if this vision of politics as self-realization and self-actualization had never been achieved, or even considered, in the ancient world, one could still ask whether, in the modern age, politics as Arendt construes it is possible or desirable.

Arendt believed not only that politics in the ancient, exalted sense is in the modern age possible and desirable, but also that for a few brief, splendid moments it has been actual. Her argument in On Revolution (1963) --- which has exercised a tremendous influence on leading law professors celebrating the power of the people, outside of formal procedure, to make constitutional law, and on prominent political theorists championing the communitarian critique of liberalism, and on myriad advocates of participatory democracy --- was that, in the modern era, "public freedom" was attained most spectacularly in the revolution through which the United States of America was founded.

Contrary to what had been supposed by generations of scholars, it was not Lockean liberalism or economic self-interest that gave birth to America. The real parent was the republican political tradition, which taught that virtue consisted in selfless devotion to the common good, that freedom and happiness were inseparable, and that all three were achieved by citizens who participated vigorously in public life.

Arendt found such republicanism in Revolution-era America, where people showed their devotion to the common good, she argued, not in their willingness to give their lives on the battlefield, but in their dedication to the idea of continuous public deliberation about the principles of self-government.

The public deliberation that brings into existence a new order is both revolutionary and the quintessential political act; it constitutes that "new beginning," the essence of action, in which individuals cooperate to create a common world. In contrast to the ordinary understanding, which associated revolution with violence, lawlessness, and war, Arendt sought to show that revolution correctly understood is really the paradigmatic expression of the political good. Indeed, for Arendt, revolution has a fixed purpose: "the foundation of freedom, that is, the foundation of a body politic which guarantees the space where freedom can appear."

Arendt appreciated "the blessings of 'limited government,'" but her thirst for the spirit of revolution left her far from satisfied with them. While the rights or negative liberties that liberalism protects are preconditions for true or public freedom, they must not be taken for the real thing: "the distance between tyranny and constitutional, limited government is as great as, perhaps greater than, the distance between limited government and freedom." Not only does she firmly oppose the limitation of politics to the protection of rights, but such limitation, Arendt vigorously contends, runs contrary to the spirit of "absolute novelty" or radical innovation out of which the United States arose. It is doubtful, however, whether the Founders saw themselves in this way. For while they did indeed understand themselves to be innovators, their innovation, as they understood it, was to form a government based on reflection and reason, and grounded in natural freedom and equality. In the process they also understood themselves to have incurred a debt to traditional ideas and institutions (such as the common law, ancient republican theory, modern natural rights doctrine, and Christianity).

Still, Arendt insists on seeing the Founders' "revolutionary spirit" as the essence of the American Revolution, and she deplores their failure to embody it in "lasting institutions." Of course, as The Federalist makes clear, they had their reasons. They did not reject the need for innovation, but they sought to reconcile it with the need for stability. In the amendment procedures given in Article V, for example, the Constitution provides mechanisms for basic change, but the framers designed them to make fundamental innovation a difficult and drawn-out process, neither lightly entered into nor carried through to completion without careful deliberation and the consent of supermajorities. For Arendt, by contrast, a truly well-constructed regime would seek to make fundamental innovation a routine event, institutionalizing, as it were, permanent revolution.

Arendt's interpretation of America accomplished an amazing reversal. Where left-leaning intellectuals had been eager to see the ideals for which the Revolution was fought and the Constitution was created as a major source of the ills that afflict contemporary American democracy, Arendt's republican reconstruction gave them a new opportunity to look back to the American past and see the Founding era as a height from which we have fallen, a standard for judging the contemporary morass, a goal for revivifying our public life. It was no longer necessary for critics on the left to condemn American popular culture, American material prosperity, and the American preoccupation with individual freedom by appeal to a

disgraced Marxism, or to invoke the abstruse writings of philosophers such as Hegel and Heidegger. Suddenly, thanks to Arendt, constitutional law scholars and political theorists on the left, like their colleagues on the right, could show their patriotic colors by criticizing America in America's name. And this meant that professors on the left, like those on the right, exposed themselves to the charge of lapsing into nostalgia for a past that never existed, of fabricating myths, of abusing history.

In the same year in which On Revolution appeared, Arendt also published Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, her most controversial book. She had been sent to Israel by The New Yorker to cover the trial of the notorious organizer and administrator of the Final Solution, and she produced an account that seemed to stand truth obscenely on its head by denying Eichmann's responsibility and blaming the Jews for the catastrophe that befell them.

This understanding of Arendt's analysis was unfair. Although her argument diminished Eichmann's responsibility, it did not exculpate him of crimes against humanity. And although she deplored the judgment and the conduct of many Jewish leaders during the Holocaust, and lamented the failure of the Jews to offer greater resistance --- she speaks matter-of-factly of "the submissive meekness with which the Jewish people went to their death" --- she issued no indictment and places her own description of Jewish conduct in context by adding that "the sad truth of the matter is that ... no non-Jewish group or people had behaved differently." In the presentation of her lacerating judgments, however, Arendt took few precautions to avert predictable inferences or to soften the blow inflicted on many of her readers' understandably open wounds. Even her admiring biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl found her tone "imperious," her choice of words "ill-considered" and "intemperate," and expressed regret that Arendt had "obscured" important moral issues with "needless irony and misquotation."

In a postscript to the revised and enlarged edition of Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt rejected any suggestion that her book was biased or anything other than a "trial report" based on the court proceedings and the historical record. Then, in 1965, Jacob Robinson, a consultant to the prosecution in Jerusalem, published And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight, a massively documented and unrelenting book that reads like a 300-page legal brief. In paragraph after excruciatingly detailed paragraph, Robinson raised grave doubts about Arendt's factual accuracy, her use of key documents, and her understanding of international law. At a minimum, Robinson's criticisms remind us that one of the very features that makes Arendt's political theory distinctive and attractive, the manner in which she wins speculative conclusions from original historical reconstruction, also leaves her work vulnerable, particularly to the charge that she molds or invents history in order to advance moral and political judgments.

What all the doubts raised by Robinson's criticisms cannot erase are the soul-wrenching questions that Arendt compels her reader (even her angry reader) to confront: how modern political life has forged instruments and institutions that provide for the bureaucratization of mass murder, and how individuals in desperate situations can make sincere but wrong judgments about the right thing to do. Indeed, the question of judgment in politics increasingly came to occupy Arendt until her death in 1975. During the last decade of her life, she offered her own defiantly independent judgments on the political crises of the day, producing widely discussed essays on civil rights and civil disobedience, power and violence, truth and politics. She publicly opposed the war in Vietnam, but she insisted, in the face of campus radicalism and the politicization of academic life, that the first responsibility of the university was to maintain intellectual standards.

Her last work, The Life of the Mind, was left unfinished, lacking the concluding third part, "Judging," which was to have followed Part One, "Thinking," and Part Two, "Willing," and was to have brought to a culmination a lifetime of reflection on freedom. Fortunately, remarks scattered throughout "Thinking" and "Willing," as well as ideas developed in her posthumously published lectures on Kant's political philosophy, suggest the likely shape of her argument. It appears that Arendt came to understand judgment as a faculty by which we retrospectively grasp particular deeds and events and, through the stories we construct and the evaluations we render, redeem or immortalize them. Thus Arendt held firmly to the view, which she expounded in The Human Condition, that human beings are essentially storytelling animals who achieve freedom in the act of storytelling by which they make things immortal.

What is left to explain is how a thinker who did more than any other to establish the primacy of public freedom, the separation of politics from morality and philosophy, and "the joys of appearing in word and deed without equivocation and without self-reflection that are inherent in action," inclined at the end toward the view that action must be redeemed or immortalized by fabrication and reflection, and hence that freedom is inseparable from, indeed tantamount to, the life of the mind.

III.

Many would agree with the judgment of Hanna Fenichel Pitkin that Arendt's "primary contribution surely centered on the constellation of three interrelated concepts that she treated as almost synonymous: 'action,' 'politics,' and 'freedom.'" In her eccentrically titled but thoughtfully argued book, Pitkin sets out to defend and to extend Arendt's contribution by disentangling it from what she regards as Arendt's confused use of the concept of "the social," or the attacking blob to which Pitkin's title refers.

Arendt uses "the social" as a term of art. It denotes the forces in the modern age that unleash into the political world activities related to care for the family and the provision of the material necessities of life. These activities, Arendt holds, were originally and rightly

restricted by the ancient world to the private realm, but in the modern age they increasingly become a task for public management. In the modern state, government is transformed into "a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping," simultaneously corrupting the integrity of private and public life.

Like the mysterious blob from outer space featured in any of a number of kitschy science-fiction films of the 1950s, the social as depicted by Arendt silently and implacably grows and spreads and dehumanizes all whom it touches. That is Pitkin's thesis. And the blob, I mean "the social," includes socialism as well as capitalism, mass society, public opinion, the bureaucratic state, and technology. It robs individuals of their humanity, transforming them into materialistic, philistine, conformist automatons. The social figures most prominently in the argument of The Human Condition, where it functions as an antithesis to politics; but something like it is already evident in The Origins of Totalitarianism, depriving individuals of agency. And it can be seen in the argument in On Revolution that concern for "the social question" --- the attention, motivated by pity, to the plight of the poor --- derails the revolutionary spirit by introducing nonpolitical considerations into the quintessentially political action.

It is difficult to imagine a hostile critic examining more effectively than Pitkin the flaws in Arendt's concept of the social, for hostility would inhibit the acquisition of the mastery of Arendt's texts that Pitkin displays at every turn. The most damaging difficulty, from Pitkin's point of view, is that in appealing to a mysterious, invisible force that tyrannizes human conduct, Arendt contradicts her central idea that human beings, endowed with the capacity to start afresh, to undertake the unexpected and to perform the unprecedented, can always defy the ideas and institutions that prescribe their conduct and resist the routines that tell them how to behave.

But is this a difficulty in Arendt's thought or in the world? For what is made by man --- deliberately or inadvertently, in short order or stretching across millennia --- is not, for that reason, under human control. Some things are easier made than unmade. Many speeches are simply uttered but hard to retract. Countless deeds are readily done and then must be endured because they cannot be revoked.

In her final chapter, Pitkin reasonably recommends an "unmythologized" understanding of the social, according to which it denotes the "absence of politics where politics belongs, a condition in which a collectivity of people --- for whatever reason --- cannot (or at any rate do not) effectively take charge of the overall resultants of what they are severally doing." Also reasonable, if anticlimactically conventional, is Pitkin's ending admonition to overcome the social by rousing ourselves to engage in the reform of institutions, the cultivation of character, and the clarification of the ideas that define and deform the age.

In attempting to account for the role that the social blob plays in Arendt's political theory, Pitkin suggestively explores a considerable variety of factors, but she leaves unexamined a simple hypothesis whose explanatory power surpasses that of those she considers at length. It is that Arendt's account of the social, or the ills of modernity, is shaped by her view of politics, freedom, and action, or what she takes to be the best in the human condition. It is certainly understandable in a book that sets out to save Arendt's "lost treasure" that Pitkin should keep her distance from the hypothesis that the features that she finds most worthy in Arendt's political theory produce and nurture what she finds least worthy. But it is not acceptable, for it is always possible and really quite common for a theory, like the man who is his own worst enemy, to need saving from itself. Indeed, Arendt's understanding of politics suffers from a monism that suppresses the variety of ways of being human, and an idealism that denigrates the dignity of everyday life, and a sensationalism that obscures the very historical experiences and seminal books whose lost treasure Arendt seeks to recover.

Notwithstanding her celebration of "plurality," or the fact that we always live among others who like us are irreducibly unique individuals, and notwithstanding the importance that she attaches to "natality," the human capacity for spontaneity and innovation, Arendt's account of action tends toward a monism which holds that politics alone expresses individuality and brings freedom (except in The Life of the Mind, where the monistic tendency moves in the opposite direction). The trouble is not so much with the ideas of plurality and natality but with the obvious fact that neither really has anything to do with Arendt's claims that the good life is the political life and the political life consists in public deliberation. In fact, the premise of plurality is more compatible with the view, typical of liberal modernity, that there are many goods and many good ways of life, and certainly too many worthwhile and admirable human endeavors to permit an ordering that enshrines at the top of a hierarchy a single conception of human happiness or excellence.

As for natality, it proves nothing about our capacity for those "new beginnings" that Arendt believes to be constitutive of human beings and of politics: ants and aardvarks also "appear in the world by virtue of birth." More importantly, the capacity for beginning something altogether new is not rooted in birth or in mortality. It is rooted in reason, as Nietzsche explains in The Gay Science in a magnificent (and sadly neglected) aphorism that he entitles "Long Live Physics!" To truly make new beginnings, and to make of ourselves new beginnings, it would first be necessary to "become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world." Having sized up the world as it really is, and having understood the power of necessity and the laws that it prescribes, we could then determine what is in our power, what laws it is open to us to give to ourselves.

At the same time, despite her criticism of Platonic idealism, in particular the tendency in Plato's philosophy to deprecate political life in favor of the life devoted to knowing the eternal and unchanging ideas, she idealizes politics in such a way as to degrade not only ordinary life but also politics as it is experienced by most citizens, officeholders, and statesmen. It is not just that, in her view, politics is a rare achievement. She goes further, and argues as if the

term should be reserved for the ideal, which she treats as essentially eternal and unchanging. In this, Arendt's idealism inflicts a harsher condemnation than Plato's philosophy on the world of change and appearance. Plato, while searching for justice in its perfect form, still recognized justice in its imperfect, empirical instantiations and in the various one-sided opinions about it that men held. But Arendt prefers not to soil the good name of politics by lending it to those shadows and simulacra --- wheeling and dealing, negotiating and compromising, managing and administering --- that divert the practitioners of governance in contemporary liberal democracy.

And while she undertook an extended search for the grounds for judgment in the public realm, Arendt exacerbates the problem of distinguishing right from wrong by sensationalizing the meaning of politics. One way she sensationalized it was by allowing into the meaning of politics only that which is sensational. Politics is the realm in which each citizen, like Homer's Achilles, strives to be "the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words." Another is by forcing the texts and historical episodes that she adduces on behalf of her understanding of politics to proclaim the sensational meaning that belongs to its essence.

Consider a particularly egregious example of Arendt's sensationalizing distortion. In The Human Condition, she quotes a fragment from Aristotle's Ethics to illustrate the Greek belief in the primacy of politics and the indispensable role of public life in allowing individuals to approach immortality. In this passage, however, Aristotle proclaims precisely the opposite:

> ... we should try to become immortal as far as that is possible and do our utmost to live in accordance with what is highest in us. For though this is a small portion of our nature , it far surpasses everything else in power and value.... A life guided by intelligence is the best and most pleasant for man, inasmuch as intelligence, above all else, is man. Consequently, this kind of life is the happiest.

Contrary to what Arendt suggests in The Human Condition (though consistent with what she came to argue almost two decades later in The Life of the Mind), what Aristotle actually says in the Ethics is that politics, though serious and honorable, is toilsome and decidedly inferior in seriousness and freedom to thought, and therefore we should, as much as it lies in us, strive to live a contemplative life. So far did Arendt take her sensationalizing that Adolf Eichmann, who proclaimed that he would go to his grave laughing for having killed six million Jews, becomes in her analysis sensationally ordinary.

Together, the monism, the idealism, and the sensationalism that inhere in Arendt's concept of politics encourage the construction of the social as a kind of catch-all category into which to dump the melange of responsibilities which government has assumed in the modern world but which, according to Arendt, do not belong to the essence of politics. So what accounts for the exaggerations and the mythologization that deform Arendt's concept of politics?

A part of the explanation is the characteristic vices that many European emigre intellectuals of Arendt's generation brought to the effort to understand the United States: an intolerance for the imperfections of democratic politics and a reflexive contempt for bourgeois or popular culture. A less remarked upon but also significant part of the explanation, however, lies in Arendt's peculiar understanding of the thinker's vocation.

In her essay on her friend Walter Benjamin, Arendt described a type of thinking that many scholars have persuasively and approvingly identified as capturing Arendt's own approach to the study of intellectual and political history:

> Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past --- but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living --- as "thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," and perhaps even as everlasting Urphanomene.

This is a masterful evocation of an indispensable intellectual type. As an ideal for thinking about the past, however, it is a calamity. In practice, pearl diving, or what Nietzsche called monumental history, provides (as he warned in Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life) a license to make the past say what you please, and it will serve scholars --- especially scholars with "inartistic natures" --- as an excuse to prefer whatever pretty, glittering objects first meet the eye and happen to lie within easy reach.

How can we know, in advance of investigation, that the shiny pearls and the colorful coral created by the action of the sea and time on the lost original objects are more precious and beautiful than the objects in their original condition, before they suffered exposure to the elements? What of the pearl diver's indifference to those objects which, owing to chance or to their shape and weight, get buried on the sea bottom and can only be recovered through tedious, time-consuming excavation? And what finally of those treasures of the past that, in sinking to the depths, break apart and require for proper appreciation not only recovery but patient reconstruction?

The pearl diver is an indispensable intellectual type because the past is indeed rich in objects that, having suffered a "sea-change," have become beautiful and valuable. But the pearl diver, as Arendt depicts him, is also a dangerous intellectual type, because he stands for the view that pearls are the only riches that the past has to offer. The pearl diver keeps buried treasures buried.

The stories that Arendt constructs about nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, the ancient Greeks, and the founders of the United States may indeed be "rich and strange." But are they true and just? Without the work of time- consuming excavation and patient reconstruction, Arendt --- to say nothing of the acolytes who tarnish her legacy both by treating her thought-experiments as if they were authoritative findings, and by imitating her practice but without her learning or her virtuosity --- may on occasion pass off as "everlasting Urphanomene" what are, in comparison to the splendor of the overlooked originals, little better than cheap costume jewelry.

IV.

Hannah Arendt's potent ideas were often divided against themselves. Both her political theory and her reputation are rife with paradox. She was a devoted student of the history of thought and of politics who played fast and loose with philosophical texts and the historical record. Her admirers celebrate her originality and fierce intellectual independence, which they see demonstrated in her comprehensive indictment of the philosophical tradition from Plato to Nietzsche for its rigid, blinkered, politically pernicious quest for absolute truth; but in reality Arendt recycles Nietzsche's and Heidegger's charges against the philosophical tradition and leaves those charges as unsubstantiated, as poorly grounded in her work as they were in the work of her often unacknowledged authorities. She prized independence of mind and stressed the need for openness to the unexpected, but somehow she knew for a certainty that God is dead and that the cosmos is unintelligible, bereft of an objective and universal moral law. She was an irrepressible political moralist who, in her major contribution to political theory, taught that greatness and not goodness was a standard for action in politics. For all her tenacious efforts to retrieve an appreciation of the internal articulations of the practical life, she indulged a romantic fascination with the spontaneous and the new that never allowed her to make peace with the mundane. And she was a thinker of rare gifts whose most influential theoretical writings sought to restore the forgotten dignity and grandeur of politics, but in the process she elaborated so exalted an ideal of citizenship that it made political life as we know it in liberal democracy look feeble and squalid.

Arendt's writings have enriched political theory and, more generally, intellectual life in America. She brought to her inquiries a knowledge of the history of European ideas and politics of which most professors trained in America could only dream. She offered a comprehensive account of the scourges to humanity that took shape in Europe in the nineteenth century and convulsed the world in the twentieth century. Facing a liberal imagination that had grown smug and sluggish, she provided critics with an enticing vision of a pure and exhilarating politics, a vision of the peaks and the valleys of human life that the liberal tradition had fallen into the habit of obscuring, disparaging, or falsifying. And yet Arendt's own theorizing obscured, disparaged, and falsified elements of political life and the human condition, particularly those elements in which the liberal tradition had acquired a special competence.

Arendt failed to show how her wisdom might be used wisely. For she tended to think in terms of stark alternatives, and she constantly invited her readers to take sides and to choose one way or the other: politics or the social; republicanism or liberalism; action or thinking. To be sure, she occasionally qualified the antitheses, but not consistently or convincingly enough to demonstrate how her oppositions could be woven into a more comprehensive whole, and to explain why such weaving would be worth the effort.

Our political life as well as our political theory stand to benefit from a few lessons in the ancient art of weaving. This is not to say that one must go to school with Plato, for whom weaving is a frequent metaphor for the art of politics. What is important is to cultivate a certain spirit. The spirit I have in mind is nothing very fancy, but it does make demands. It is a spirit that is skeptical, generous, and tolerant. It is open to the variety of ways of being human without closing its eyes to the powerful human propensity to inhumanity. It learns to live with many opinions and practices of which it cannot wholly approve, both out of respect for human diversity and appreciation of human frailty, which together make it reluctant to entrust the individuals who administer the state with the power to enforce morals. It takes truth wherever it finds it and expects to find some part of the truth just about everywhere. By rights, such a spirit deserves to be called liberal. One could find much in it that deserves to be called Socratic. The main thing is to appreciate that such a spirit is a ground of our freedom, a compass for navigating the always treacherous and occasionally majestic waters of politics, and a vital support of our dignity as human beings.

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