

***AMOR FATI, AMOR MUNDI: NIETZSCHE AND ARENDT ON
OVERCOMING MODERNITY***

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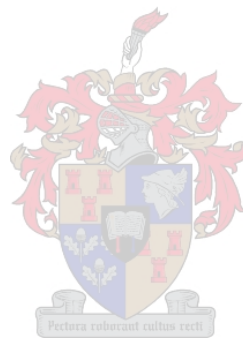
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April 2005

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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ABSTRACT

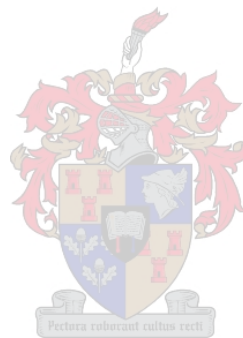
The purpose of this thesis twofold: first, to develop an account of modernity as a “loss of the world” which also entails the “death” of the human as a meaningful philosophical, political or moral category, and second, to explore the possibility of recovering a sense of the world in us and with it, a sense of what it means to be human. This argument is developed by way of a sustained engagement with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt, whose analogous critiques of modernity centre on the problem of the connection between humanity and worldliness.

My argument consists of three parts, each of which spans two chapters. Part one of the thesis sets out the most important aspects of Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s respective critiques of modernity. Chapter one focuses on modernity as a rupture of a philosophical, political and religious tradition within which existence in the world could be experienced as unquestionably meaningful. Following arguments developed by Nietzsche and Arendt, chapter two establishes that the loss of this tradition results in a general crisis of meaning, evaluation and authority that can be designated as “modern nihilism”.

The second part of the thesis deals with what may be called the “anthropological grounds” of the critique of modernity developed in part one. To this end, chapter three focuses on Nietzsche’s portrayal of the human as “the as-yet undetermined animal” who is neither the manifestation of a subjective essence nor the product of his own hands, but who only exists in the unresolved tension between indeterminacy and determination. This is followed in chapter four by an inquiry into Arendt’s conception of “the human condition”, which in turn points to the *conditionality* of being human. What is clearly demonstrated in both cases is that, in so far as the predicament of modernity is incarnate in modern human beings themselves, any attempt at overcoming this predicament would somehow have to involve re-thinking or transcending our present-day humanity.

The third part of the thesis examines the way in which the reconceptualisation of the human as advocated by Nietzsche and Arendt transforms our understanding of “world”. The more specific aim here is to demonstrate that both thinkers conceive of a reconciliation between self and world as a form of redemption. In chapter five I explore their respective attempts to resurrect the capacity for judgement in the aftermath of the death of God as the first step in this redemptive project, before turning to a more in-depth inquiry into the “soteriology” at work in Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s thinking in chapter six. This inquiry ultimately makes clear that there is a conflict between the Nietzschean conception of redemption as *amor fati* (love of fate) and Arendt’s notion of redemption as *amor mundi* (love of the world). I conclude the thesis by arguing that what is at stake here are two conflicting notions of reconciliation: a worldly – or political – notion of

reconciliation (Arendt), and a much more radical, philosophical notion of reconciliation (Nietzsche), which ultimately does away with any boundary between self and world. However, my final conclusion is not that we face an inevitable choice between these two alternatives, but rather that the struggle between these two dispositions is necessary for an understanding of what it means to be human as well as for the world in which our humanity is formed.



ABSTRAK

Hierdie proefskrif ontwikkel in die eerste plek ’n perspektief op moderniteit as ’n “verlies aan die wêreld” wat terselfdertyd ook die “dood” van die mens as ’n betekenisvolle filosofiese, politieke of morele kategorie impliseer. In die tweede plek word die moontlikheid ondersoek om opnuut sin te maak van ons verhouding met die wêreld, en daarmee saam die aard van ons menslikheid. Hierdie argument word ontwikkel by wyse van ’n volgehoue gesprek met die filosowe Friedrich Nietzsche en Hannah Arendt, wie se onderskeie kritiek op moderniteit inspeel op die onlosmaaklike verbintenis tussen menslikheid en wêreldlikheid.

My argument bestaan uit drie dele, wat elkeen weer twee hoofstukke beslaan. Deel een van die proefskrif hanteer die belangrikste aspekte van Nietzsche en Arendt se kritiek op moderniteit. Hoofstuk een fokus op moderniteit as ’n breuk in ’n filosofiese, politieke en religieuse tradisie in terme waarvan die menslike bestaan in die wêreld oor ’n onbetwyfelbare betekenis beskik het. In navolging van argumente wat deur Nietzsche en Arendt ontwikkel word, ondersoek ek in hoofstuk twee die wyse waarop die verlies aan hierdie tradisie uitmond in ’n algemene krisis van betekenis, waarde-oordele en gesag wat deur die term “moderne nihilisme” aangedui kan word.

Die tweede deel van die proefskrif ondersoek die “antropologiese gronde” vir die kritiek wat in deel een ontwikkel word. Met dit ten doel, fokus hoofstuk drie op Nietzsche se uitbeelding van die mens as ’n “nog nie vasgestelde dier” wat nóg die manifestasie is van ’n subjektiewe essensie, nóg die produk van sy eie hande, maar wat slegs bestaan as ’n onopgeloste spanning tussen bepaaldheid en onbepaaldheid. Hierdie bespreking word in hoofstuk vier opgevolg deur ’n ondersoek na Arendt se opvatting van “die menslike kondisie”, wat in die eerste plek wys na die *kondisionaliteit* van ons menswees. Wat duidelik blyk uit beide gevalle is dat, in soverre die probleem van moderniteit in die mens self gestalte kry, die poging om hierdie dilemma te oorkom ’n her-denke of oorstyging van ons huidige menslikheid sal moet inhou.

Deel drie van die proefskrif ondersoek die wyse waarop die herkonseptualisering van die mens soos deur Nietzsche en Arendt beoefen word ons verstaan van “wêreld” transformeer. Die meer spesifieke doel hier is om te demonstreer dat beide denkers gemoed is met ’n versoening tussen self en wêreld wat as ’n soort verlossing getipeer kan word. In hoofstuk vyf ondersoek ek hul onderskeie pogings om in die nadraai van die dood van God ons oordeelsvermoë te laat herlewe as ’n eerste treë in hierdie verlossingsprojek. Hierna verskuif die fokus in hoofstuk ses na die “soteriologie” in Nietzsche en Arendt se denke. Hierdie ondersoek bring uiteindelik ’n konflik aan die lig tussen ’n Nietzscheaanse opvatting van verlossing as *amor fati* (liefde vir ons lot) en Arendt se opvatting van

verlossing as *amor mundi* (liefde vir die wêreld). Ek sluit die proefskrif af deur te argumenteer dat dit hier gaan om twee konflikterende konsepsies van versoening: 'n wêreldlike – of politieke – siening van versoening (Arendt), en meer radikale filosofiese opvatting van versoening (Nietzsche), wat uiteindelik wegdoen met die grens tussen self en wêreld. Die slotsom waartoe ek kom is egter nie dat ons 'n noodgedwonge keuse tussen hierdie twee alternatiewe in die gesig staar nie, maar juis dat die konflik tussen hierdie twee ingesteldhede noodsaaklik is vir ons verstaan van wat dit beteken om mens te wees sowel as vir die wêreld waarin ons menslikheid gevorm word.

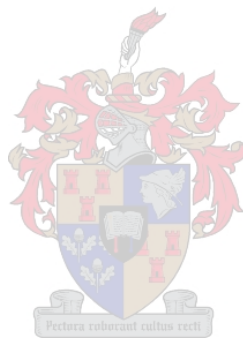


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INTRODUCTION

I call myself the last philosopher because I am the last human being. No-one speaks to me except I myself, and my voice comes to me as the voice of someone who is dying. Let me still commune with you for only an hour, beloved voice, with you, the last trace of the memory of all human happiness; with your help I will deceive myself about my loneliness and lie my way into plurality and love; for my heart refuses to believe that love is dead; it cannot bear the shudder of the loneliest loneliness and it forces me to speak as if I were two.

Do I still hear you, my voice? You whisper when you curse? And yet your curse should cause the bowels of this world to burst! But it continues to live and merely stares at me all the more brilliantly and coldly with its pitiless stars; it continues to live, as dumb and blind as ever, and the only thing that dies is – the human being (Nietzsche, *KSA* 7:19[131]).

For the world is not human just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become human just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse. However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows. [...] We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human (Arendt, *MDT* 32).

Despite the obvious difference in register, the two citations that introduce this thesis articulate the same thought, namely that the concept “human” does not refer to some essential quality inside us, but rather to a contingent feature of our encounter with the world that lies between ourselves and others. While Arendt goes some way in describing the manner in which we impart form to this world and are formed by it in turn, Nietzsche gives voice to the experience of the *loss* of this world. As is clear from the quotation above, this is in the first place an experience of radical loneliness, in which it is impossible to have one’s existence recognised and confirmed by others. My intention in this thesis is, first, to develop an account of modernity as the embodiment of this loss – which also entails the “death” of the human as a meaningful philosophical, political or moral category – and second, to explore the possibility of recovering a sense of the world in us and with it, a sense of what it means to be human. This line of argument is developed by way of a sustained engagement with Nietzsche and Arendt, both of whom offer a critique of modernity that centres on the dissolution of the intimate connection between humanity and worldliness.

Before I clarify the terms of my argument and indicate how it is to be realised in the course of the thesis, it is necessary to address an immediate difficulty that is raised by the proposed pairing of Nietzsche and Arendt. For it might seem highly questionable to want to establish a relation between the self-proclaimed “last anti-political German”, teacher of self-overcoming and solitude, and a political thinker with an express

commitment to political action and citizen equality. Would a genuine concern with both thinkers not precisely preclude any attempt to fabricate an alliance between them? One way of circumventing this difficulty might be to argue that Nietzsche is *really* a political thinker, and, more problematically, that he is some version of a radical democrat. Conversely, one might try to demonstrate that Arendt is *really* a closet Nietzschean – provided, of course, that one takes Nietzsche to be amenable to a modicum of democratic theory. However, such an attempt to force their divergent projects into the straitjacket of mutual consistency would lose more in integrity – and ultimately, in relevance – than it would gain in cohesion. It is not my intention, therefore, to try and merge their respective undertakings into either a watered-down Nietzsche or a spiced-up Arendt, or to cobble together a new political theory out of their different philosophies. Instead of aiming at an ultimate synthesis, my concern in this thesis is with a particular field of inquiry where Nietzsche's thinking finds its analogue in that of Arendt and vice versa. The purpose of this exercise is not to simply show up a few points of similarity, but rather, to illuminate a particular problem from two perspectives that stand in an analogical rather than a dialectical relationship to one another. This analogical relationship does not resolve itself into an ultimate synthesis and is not predicated on a seamless fit between two different fields of reference. On the contrary, this relationship, like any analogy, has an inevitable remainder; something held in abeyance that transcends the relationship with the analogon.¹

Moreover, as will become clear, it is the tension as much as the affinity between Nietzsche's and Arendt's thinking that illuminates the problem this thesis aims to address. This tension relates to the conflictual relationship between two ways of relating to the world, which can be variously described as a conflict between the life of the mind and life in the world, between the thinker and the actor, and ultimately, between philosophy and politics. In the accounts of both Nietzsche and Arendt, our political and philosophical traditions have either treated politics and philosophy as two wholly unrelated enterprises or have tried to resolve the tension between them by collapsing the one into the other. The problem they identify with both of these solutions is that philosophy and politics in all their permutations each takes its meaning from the struggle with its opposite, so that any final resolution of the conflict between them would leave us without a proper understanding of either. As long as the struggle between them is alive, each serves to keep the other in check, and thereby confronts philosophical thinking with the challenge of political judgement, and political thinking with the recognition of the provisionality and groundlessness of all such judgements. It is my contention that Nietzsche and Arendt both

¹ The possibility of an analogical relationship between Nietzsche and Arendt was suggested to me by Lyotard's remarks on analogical thinking in *The Inhuman* (1988: 16-17).

consider modernity to be characterised precisely by the dissolution of this necessary conflict between the philosophical and political relation to the world. Thus Arendt laments that “[i]n the world we live in, the last traces of this ancient antagonism between the philosopher’s truth and the opinions of the market place have disappeared” (*BPF* 235), while remarking later on that “it is only by *respecting its own borders* that [the political] realm ... can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises” (*BPF* 263-4, my italics). Nietzsche in turn offers a telling note that contains the following indictment of modern philosophy: “it *destroys* because there is nothing to hold it in check. The philosopher has become a being who is *detrimental to the community*. He destroys happiness, virtue, culture, and ultimately himself” (*KSA* 7:30[8]).² In the light of this it may be said that the further value of bringing the different optics of Nietzsche and Arendt to bear on the problem of modernity lies in the extent to which the tension between their two perspectives dramatises the very tension that modern life lacks. My intention here is not to allocate fixed sides in this conflict to either thinker. The purpose, rather, is to portray the shifting calibrations of this oppositional relationship at work in both thinkers, the better to demonstrate the complex relationship between their respective analyses of the crisis of modernity, as well as between their respective attempts to re-think the meaning of the human under the conditions of its absence.

At the same time, such a joint reading of Nietzsche and Arendt opens up unexplored avenues in both their thinking that do not readily present themselves for investigation when they are read on their own. In the case of Nietzsche, the pairing with Arendt draws out a concern with the world and worldliness that can to some extent be described as a “political” dimension in his philosophy. In recent years, there has been growing interest in Nietzsche as a political thinker, with an ever-increasing number of commentators who have either hailed him for promoting a version of liberal equality and individual agency,³ a critique of liberal reason,⁴ a self-reflexive critique of political modernity⁵, a “postmodern” democratic politics,⁶ or who have taken him to task for his irredeemably anti-democratic politics.⁷ Although this is indeed an important and relevant area of Nietzsche scholarship, this thesis does not engage with any of these debates

² Nietzsche discusses this tension in various other contexts. See for instance *UM III* for an extended treatment of the opposition between philosopher and polis, as well as *HAH I*: 235, 438, 465. In Arendt’s case, the essay “Philosophy and Truth” in *BPF* provides an extensive account of this tension, as does her essay on “Philosophy and Politics” (1990).

³ Warren (1991)

⁴ Strong (1988), Owen (1992), Ansell-Pearson (1994)

⁵ Conway (1997)

⁶ Hatab (1997)

⁷ Detwiler (1990), Appel (1997). For a much more extensive overview of the political readings of Nietzsche, see the excellent literature review by Siemens (2001).

directly. My interest here is not so much to prove where Nietzsche belongs on the political spectrum or to demonstrate his relevance for current political theory, but to explore the political dimension of his thought in so far as it relates to his broader concern with the worldly practices that shape our identity. This concern relates to the question of how we “become who we are” in relation to the world in which we find ourselves, and it is precisely this field of questioning that is opened up by reading Nietzsche in conjunction with Arendt.

In the case of Arendt, a joint reading with Nietzsche brings to the fore the philosophical underpinnings of her political thought. This claim is not as self-evident as it may seem. Arendt famously denied that she belonged to “the circle of philosophers” and aligned herself instead with the field of “political theory” (*EU* 1-2). Most commentators have taken her at her word, with the consequence that by far the greater part of the secondary literature on Arendt is located within the discipline of political science, while the philosophers who do engage with her work mostly value her writings for their political import (cf. Hull 2002: 34).⁸ However, what is easily overlooked is that Arendt abjured philosophy precisely for *philosophical* reasons (ibid.). She distances herself, first, from a peculiarly “philosophical” attitude of unconcern towards the actual world in which we live and move and second, from a particular way of doing philosophy which involves searching for a singular principle or yardstick by which the world of human affairs can be measured. Against this background, her own project can be seen as an attempt to devise an alternative to a tradition of worldless and even anti-worldly philosophy that locates meaning beyond the world and searches for absolutes when human existence is characterised by plurality and contingency. In so far as the origin of political theory lies in philosophy, as Arendt herself acknowledges (PP 453), it may be said that she presents us with a new way of doing philosophy, which in turn gives rise to a new conception of politics. In my view, it is precisely this alternative mode of philosophising – together with the philosophical reasons for her criticism of traditional philosophy – that a joint reading of Arendt and Nietzsche is able to convey. The point here is not to “legitimise” Arendt’s often unconventional political theorizing with reference to the supposedly “superior” discipline of philosophy, but rather to demonstrate “that Arendt’s political writings, in addition to formulating a political theory, also embody a unique and valuable philosophical perspective” (Hull 2002:

⁸ There are exceptions to this approach, notably Gottlieb (2003), Hull (2002), Taminaux (1997) and, to a lesser extent, Villa (1996) and Disch (1994). Nevertheless, by far the greater part of Arendt scholarship still treats her as a political theorist first and a philosopher second, if at all. Some, like Isaiah Berlin, consider her to be neither. As Bernard Crick recounts, Berlin remarked on occasion that Arendt’s entire oeuvre amounted to nothing more than “[s]heer metaphysical free-association” and “fairy gold” (Crick 1997: 78). I respectfully disagree, and hope that this thesis goes some way to prove Berlin wrong.

3). It should be added that, while a number of Arendt's "Nietzschean moments" may undoubtedly be attributed to the influence of Heidegger, no study of the latter's influence on Arendt has yet provided an exhaustive account of her debts to Nietzsche. Furthermore, despite the flourishing trade in political interpretations of Nietzsche, I am only aware of one other, very recent book that develops a sustained dialogue between Nietzsche and Arendt, in this case in the context of a reflection on ethics (Schoeman 2004). In the light of these considerations, it should be clear that this thesis sets out to explore relatively uncharted terrain, for which reason the arguments and conclusions on offer here should themselves be viewed as tentative and exploratory rather than definitive.

Having devoted some attention to the purpose and value of reading Nietzsche and Arendt together, it remains for me to sketch out the parameters within which such a reading takes place. As we have seen in the opening paragraph, I take the initial point of connection between them to lie in the shared view that modernity can be understood in terms of a "loss of the world". Broadly speaking, this loss might be described as the disintegration of an inter-human realm of "structured sense, and reciprocally, sense [...] structured as world" (Nancy 1997:8) within which each of us acquire a coherent identity; that is to say, in which we become human, as opposed to enduring only as a form of animal life (which of course we always still are). This is indeed the main premise of the thesis, which derives from the analogous critiques of modernity developed by Nietzsche and Arendt in so far as both thinkers examine the problem of modernity through the optics of culture.⁹

My argument proceeds in three stages. The first part of the thesis sets out the most important aspects of Nietzsche's and Arendt's critique of modernity, part two examines what may be called the "anthropological grounds" for this critique, which, as I shall argue, are also the grounds for overcoming the predicament of modernity, while part three deals with Nietzsche's and Arendt's respective visions of what such overcoming would entail. Each of these parts consists of two chapters. In the context of this general framework, the opening chapter of part one sets the scene for the argument to follow by examining the meaning and status of "modernity" in Nietzsche's and Arendt's writings. The first section of the chapter focuses on the time of modernity as falling literally "between past and future", in which the present only exists as a gap or aporia between the "no longer" and the "not yet". I further explore Nietzsche's and Arendt's shared contention that this sense of

⁹ Nietzsche's concern with modernity as general cultural decline and the philosopher as "physician of culture" is well known. Less frequently acknowledged is the important role that the concept of culture plays in Arendt's work, where culture specifically refers to the worldly context within which political action – which is precisely action *for the sake of this world* – can take place. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between politics and culture in Arendt's work, see Canovan: "Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm" (1985).

existing within a hiatus between an inaccessible past and an inconceivable future is bound up with the “death of God”, understood as the failure of the authority of a specific philosophical, religious and moral tradition within which human existence in the world was experienced as unquestionably meaningful. This “death” is portrayed as the disappearance of a fixed measure of the world, which manifests itself in a general sense of chaos, disorganisation and dissolution. The second part of the chapter deals with the specifically modern attempt to bridge the gap between past and future and thus to regain a sense of order in an age of chaos by placing the trust previously reserved for “God” in history, understood as a rational process of development. The chapter concludes by showing that, for Nietzsche and Arendt both, this attempt to locate the meaning of human existence in the historical process is not a way of redeeming the world – and ourselves with it – from meaninglessness. On the contrary, in so far as it seeks to locate meaning outside of all human plurality and particularity, it in fact exacerbates the very meaninglessness it seeks to overcome.

Chapter two examines Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s portrayal of the rupture of tradition as the concomitant loss of a fixed locus of meaning under the rubric of nihilism. The first part of the chapter is devoted to an explication of modern nihilism in its various forms: as a crisis of meaning, a crisis of evaluation, and a crisis of authority, all of which can be said to constitute a general crisis of judgement. The rest of the chapter deals with Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s criticisms of a particular solution to the problem of judgement, which is to shift the ultimate locus of meaning into human beings themselves. I show, first, that Nietzsche and Arendt both view this subjective turn as tantamount to the animalisation of the human and an accompanying descending into barbarism, and second, that they both draw a connection between this subjectification of human life and the rise of modern mass society. This discussion is followed by a consideration of the political consequences of taking this self-same, worldless subject of modernity as the measure of all things. The chapter concludes by demonstrating that this solution to the problem of meaning in a world without God constitutes the ultimate undoing of the very possibility of meaning and with it, the unmaking of the human.

Part two of the thesis is predicated on the view that, in so far as predicament of modernity is incarnate in modern human beings themselves, any attempt at overcoming modernity would somehow have to involve transcending our present-day humanity. My purpose here is to demonstrate that, for both Nietzsche and Arendt, this possibility can only be realised in an attempt to re-think the meaning of the human in the absence of any ultimate measure, whether inside human beings themselves, in the supra-human processes of nature or history, or in an eternal realm beyond the world. To this end, chapter three focuses on Nietzsche’s portrayal of the human as “the as-yet undetermined animal” who is

neither the manifestation of a subjective essence nor the product of his own hands, but who only exists in the unresolved tension between indeterminacy and determination. This argument is developed in the course of a sustained inquiry into Nietzsche's treatment of appearance, action, will to power and fate, which ultimately serves to demonstrate the interrelatedness of self and world that is the condition for overcoming the wordlessness inherent in modernity. Chapter four explores Arendt's inquiry into "the human condition", which points, in the first place, to the *conditionality* of being human. Following roughly the same structure as the chapter on Nietzsche, I examine Arendt's treatment of appearance, action, character, thinking, and willing. This inquiry points to a conception of the human that is predicated on indeterminacy and plurality rather than a fixed and unitary identity, which in turn reflects the indeterminacy and plurality of the world that is the condition of our existence. The overall aim in these two chapters is to investigate Nietzsche's and Arendt's attempts to re-think the human from the other side of the break in tradition, so to speak – that is, without seeking a new absolute that would guarantee the meaning of self and world in advance – in such a way that the fate of the world and the fate of the human are seen to be mutually implicated.

The third part of the thesis examines the way in which this re-thinking of the human transforms our understanding of "world". Since, as I will have argued, the predicament of modernity consists precisely in the loss of the world, both Nietzsche and Arendt set this transformed understanding of world under the sign of "redemption". Chapter 5 prepares the ground for a more extensive inquiry into the meaning of this redemption by examining Nietzsche's and Arendt's respective conceptions of judgement – specifically, their attempts to resurrect or perhaps even reinvent the capacity for judgement – in the aftermath of the death of God. This inquiry makes it possible, in chapter 6, to address the "soteriology" at work in Nietzsche's and Arendt's re-conception of self and world. Here I consider the important notion of a "new beginning" that appears in the writings of both thinkers as part of an overall attempt on both their parts to overcome the predicament of modernity, together with the remnants of the political and philosophical tradition that are part of its unacknowledged substructure. I further argue, however, that there are two different notions of "beginning" at work in Nietzsche and Arendt, which ultimately translate into two different – more, conflicting – conceptions of redemption, which can be characterised respectively as *amor fati* (love of fate) and *amor mundi* (love of the world). My aim here is to demonstrate that what is ultimately at stake in this regard is the inescapable conflict between two notions of reconciliation between self and world: a worldly – or political – reconciliation (Arendt), and a much more radical, philosophical notion of reconciliation (Nietzsche), that ultimately does away with all distance between self and world. I further argue that this conflict springs from the tension between a

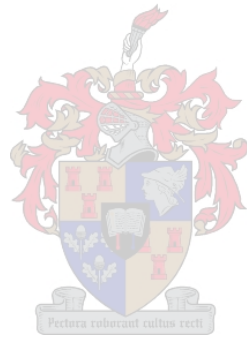
political and a philosophical concern with the world. My intention in this concluding part of the thesis is not to force a choice between these alternatives, but to argue precisely for maintaining the struggle between these two dispositions – the very struggle that has been denied or decided in advance, in their own interests, by philosophers and political theorists from Plato onwards.

Before launching into the thesis proper, a final remark about methodology might be in order. I have already pointed out that the intention with this thesis is not to demonstrate that Nietzsche and Arendt are merely voicing the same arguments in different ways, nor is it to unite their different arguments into a higher synthesis, but to explore the analogy that exists between their respective critiques of modernity as well as their visions for overcoming its central predicaments. Yet for an investigation of this kind to have any value, it has to consist of more than merely pointing out that something about one thinker's argument is "something like" the view espoused by the other. The danger of succumbing to such a "look and point" process is always present in a study such as this that tries to read two thinkers together; it is even more prevalent when the context within each thinker develops his or her thought is ignored, whereby it becomes all too easy to create false equivalences between ideas that arise out of different considerations. These are serious dangers of which I am aware, and which I hope to avoid in the following ways: First, I do not intend to bring the whole of Nietzsche's philosophy to bear on the whole of Arendt's thinking. Instead, I shall focus on a particular problem, which I have described as "the predicament of modernity", and I shall confine myself to exploring their respective arguments in so far as they have bearing on *this* problem rather than arbitrarily picking out points of similarity across the length and breadth of their respective oeuvres. In the second place, I acknowledge from the outset that, even where Nietzsche's and Arendt's thinking do bear on the same problem, they nevertheless approach the problem itself from different perspectives. In Nietzsche's case, the concern with the modern incapacity to conceive of the world in a meaningful way springs from a deeper concern with the self, which Arendt herself describes as a "partisanship for man's soul apparatus" (*LMW* 165). In Arendt's case, the primary concern is with the world that lies between us rather than with any individual place within it. This is not a clear-cut opposition, for, as will become clear in the course of the thesis, the thrust of their respective arguments is precisely that the fate of the world and the fate of the human are mutually implicated. The difference, however, is that for Nietzsche, this interrelation of self and world should be acknowledged *for the sake of the self*, while for Arendt, this is to be done *for the sake of the world*. Stated differently, Nietzsche's concern is with the fate of the self in the world, while Arendt's concern is with the fate of the world in which we find ourselves.

To a significant extent, these differences in perspective have implications for the way in which each thinker analyses the problem of modernity. As we shall see, it has even more profound implications for the way in which each envisages the possibility of overcoming this problem. My intention in this thesis is not to try to overlook these differences, not only because such a negation would result in a much more limited understanding of Nietzsche's and Arendt's own thinking, but also – and more importantly – because it would impoverish our understanding of the problem under investigation. The differences in perspective and emphasis between Nietzsche and Arendt serve to enhance our understanding of the problem of modernity precisely in so far as they demonstrate that it is a problem that does not only play itself out at one level of existence. It is part of the overall aim of this thesis to do justice to the various ways in which the predicament of modernity impacts on our understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to live in the world.

Given this aim, I am not interested in playing Nietzsche and Arendt off against one another, or to correct any perceived deficiencies of one argument with reference to the other. Rather, to borrow a term from Arendt, my strategy can be described as a kind of “visiting” back and forth between these two perspectives without finally settling down in either. In this way, I hope to show the relevance of bringing both these perspectives to bear on the problem of modernity while nevertheless maintaining the distance between them that allows us to understand this problem in different ways. This strategy also allows for a much more nuanced understanding of the tension between “philosophical” and “political” thinking, which plays such an important role in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

PART I: CRITIQUE



CHAPTER ONE

MODERNITY AND THE RUPTURE OF TRADITION

What is attacked deep down today is the instinct and will of tradition: all institutions that owe their origins to this instinct violate the taste of the modern spirit. – At bottom, nothing is thought and done without the purpose of eradicating this sense for tradition. One considers tradition a fatality; one studies it, recognizes it (as “heredity”), but one does not *want* it. The tensing of a will over long temporal distances, the selection of the states and valuations that allow one to dispose of future centuries – precisely this is antimodern in the highest degree, which goes to show that it is the disorganizing principles that give our age its character (Nietzsche, *WP* 65; *KSA* 14.431).

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are in vain (Arendt, *OT* ix).

Introduction

The purpose of this opening chapter is to briefly sketch the most salient features of Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s understanding of “modernity” and to demonstrate why both regard it as a target of criticism rather than mere description. I shall argue here that both thinkers conceive of modernity primarily as a condition of culture that manifests itself both in our beliefs, thoughts and judgements and in our overt practices. This condition can be broadly described as a state of transition in which previous belief structures, commitments and valuations have broken down or are at the point of breaking down and where nothing new has yet emerged to take their place. On this description, to belong to modernity is to inhabit a “decodified” world (Deleuze 1985:142) that seems impervious to any meaningful recodification. The central dilemma that Nietzsche and Arendt identify in this regard – which is also the proper focus of their criticism – is that we have lost our faith in inherited codes of meaning, value or judgement while nevertheless remaining dependent on them for making sense of ourselves and of the world we inhabit.

Against this background, the first section of the chapter examines the time of modernity as falling literally “between past and future”, in which the present only exists as a gap or aporia between the “no longer” and the “not yet”. Here I attempt to show that, by virtue of its self-conscious status as an in-between, modern culture also constitutes a rupture within the tradition of Western self-understanding, and that this problematises the way in which we conceive of both past and future. Following this, I demonstrate that

Nietzsche's and Arendt's account of the central predicaments of modernity is played out against the background of their analogous understanding of and appreciation for the classical age of the Greeks. From the perspective of both thinkers, it is precisely the radical contrast between this age and our own that throws the turmoil, disarray and meaninglessness of modern culture in the starkest relief. By comparing modernity to the Greek understanding of the world and the role of the human within it, it also becomes easier to grasp why both thinkers conceive the modern in terms of a *loss* of the world. The third section considers this loss in relation to the "death of God", which, as I shall show, both Nietzsche and Arendt adopt as the central metaphor for the absence of meaning and consequent chaos and disintegration that characterise life under conditions of modernity. The final part of the chapter focuses on the distinctively modern attempt to employ the idea of history as an abstract process of development as a substitute for the very tradition that was lost, which means, in effect, to replace God with history. My purpose here is to show that, for both Nietzsche and Arendt, this solution to the problematic relation with the past leads to the instrumentalisation and subjectification of human life and a concomitant withdrawal from the world. As a consequence, the sense of disorientation and futility that follows in the wake of the death of God is enhanced rather than diminished. The historical cure, in other words, is merely another symptom of the disease. This inquiry in turn sets the stage for the discussion in chapter two, which focuses on Nietzsche's and Arendt's analysis of modern nihilism.

However, before I embark on the inquiry as set out above, there is an important question that demands consideration. This question concerns the status of Nietzsche's and Arendt's analysis of the modern predicament. Are they intent on chronicling an actual state of affairs or only an event that plays itself out in thought? Are we being offered a coherent narrative of their time (which, in so far as we characterise ourselves with reference to the modern, is also ours), or a highly imaginative *Verfallsgeschichte*, a semi-plausible tale which, to abuse Nietzsche's reference to Epicurus, "might be thus, but might also be otherwise" (WS 7)?

I want to argue here that what Nietzsche and Arendt offer us in this regard is neither factual scholarship nor a speculative history of ideas, but a kind of rewriting or "working through" modernity in the Freudian sense of *Durcharbeitung*. This practice arises in response to a sentiment, an intimation of something – but not a "thing" – that escapes, and continues to escape, one's immediate vision or experience. It does not proceed diachronically, but rather by means of free association which links up different fragments of thought or experience without first trying to fit them into a logical pattern. In

this way, one approaches a sense of something – a scene, a field of experience – which nevertheless cannot be brought under final description.¹

Arendt, in the course of a discussion on Walter Benjamin, offers an intimation of this practice as a way of “thinking poetically”, which deals with “thought fragments” rather than supposed historical fact: “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 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” (*MDT* 203). Their immersion in the element that has hidden them from view has caused these “fragments” to undergo a “sea change”, so that it is impossible for us to discover their original meaning. All that is possible is to consider the forms into which they had been “crystallized”, without being able to relate them to any primal scene, any truth behind their fragmentary appearance.

It is possible to consider Nietzsche’s genealogical inquiry as a related enterprise, in so far as this genealogy multiplies the perspectives on an event or experience and thereby allows that which exceeds any single field of vision, any single perspective, to appear. Yet whatever appears in this way cannot itself be brought under full description. His genealogical investigation therefore doesn’t portray modernity as a complete scene, but rather makes it possible for us to register sensibilities, hints, traces that fall outside the self-descriptions of the age. Approached in this fashion, the modern does not suddenly come to stand before us like an object, but, as Lyotard (1988: 31) writes, it becomes “present like an *aura*, a gentle breeze, an allusion”. When understood in this way, the critique of modernity on offer in Nietzsche and Arendt does not simply perpetuate the particularly modern obsession with bringing itself under stable description, but is more intent on responding to that which exceeds – and inevitably exceeds – all such description.² This way of reading Nietzsche and Arendt does not treat their respective critiques of modernity

¹ I owe this insight in its entirety to Lyotard’s account of Freudian *Durcharbeitung* in the essay “Rewriting Modernity” in *The Inhuman* (1988: 31).

² This understanding of genealogy, although drawing on Lyotard’s account of Freudian *Durcharbeitung*, is in direct conflict with the Lyotard’s views on Nietzsche’s genealogical enterprise. In Lyotard’s Heidegger-inspired account, Nietzsche’s project aims at an ultimate ground behind perspectives: the will to power (Lyotard 1988: 29). Refuting this claim would require a lengthy exposition of the will to power, which is addressed in chapter 3. Suffice to say here that it is possible to understand the will to power, *contra* Lyotard, as the term by which Nietzsche designates the ceaseless struggle between perspectives, which cannot be resolved into a higher unity nor grounded in anything behind or beyond this very struggle. Rather than a diachronic search for a singular and determinable origin behind events, the Nietzschean genealogy thus multiplies the possible origins of any phenomenon and thereby strips the metaphysical assumption of a unitary origin for any phenomenon of its self-evidence.

as attempts to define a phenomenon, but as different, though related ways of facing up to its ethical, political and epistemological challenge (cf. Disch 1994: 140).³

1. The time of modernity

The term “modernity”, in Nietzsche’s description, encompasses the sense of belonging to the “just now”, of existing in a “fragile, broken time of transition” in which it has become impossible to relate the past to the present. To define oneself as a modern is to feel oneself in a kind of interim state, loosened from the authority of the traditions which formerly secured our life in the world, and without recourse to new principles to govern and legitimise our present existence: “Our age gives the impression of being an interim state; the old ways of thinking, the old cultures are still partly with us, the new not yet secure and habitual and thus lacking in decisiveness and consistency. It looks as though everything is becoming chaotic, the old becoming lost to us, the new proving useless and growing ever feebler” (*HAH I*: 248). On this view, to be a modern is to suffer from an incapacity to organise the disparate belief systems, values, commitments and principles that come to us from the past into any coherent semblance of meaning. This means that nothing stands authoritatively for us, neither the cultural products of the past, nor any one of the diverse moral, philosophical, political or religious traditions that vie for recognition in the present (cf. Müller-Lauter 1999: 24). The chaos that follows in the wake of this dissolution of ultimate authority does not operate simply at the level of culture; according to Nietzsche we moderns “ourselves are a kind of chaos –” (*BGE* 224). Modernity is thus in the first place a state of disorganisation or “disgregation” that manifests itself at the level of individual and culture as an inability to integrate the varied, contradictory strains of the past into a coherent framework of meaning.⁴ This dilemma is best described in terms of a disjunction between experience and understanding, which constitutes an inability to make sense of the conditions under which one is constrained to live.⁵ Philosophically speaking, the inadequacy of the conceptual frameworks at our disposal for understanding our most

³ It should be clear from the preceding remarks that the argument in this chapter and in the thesis as a whole is not structured around the contemporary distinction between “modernity” and “postmodernity”. My purpose here is not to portray Nietzsche and Arendt either as “postmodern” critics of modernity or as “reluctant modernists” who criticise the worst excesses of the age so as to prevent the general project of modernity from veering off course. As will become clear, the arguments of both thinkers cut across any artificial dividing line between “modern” and “postmodern”, and I shall follow their lead in this rather than trying to fit them into a conceptual schema that obscures more than it clarifies.

⁴ For Nietzsche’s conception of modernity as “disgregation”, see Müller-Lauter (1999: 28, 41-44).

⁵ For a more extensive treatment of modernity – and particularly modern nihilism – as the disjunction between experience understanding, see Ansell-Pearson (1994: 35) and Strong (1975: 53-86).

pressing experiences places a question mark over the relationship between human cognition and the world it seeks to know. As we shall see, Nietzsche considers much of modern philosophy as an attempt to deny or conceal this apparent failure of cognition, with precisely the opposite result.

Arendt shares Nietzsche's view of modernity as a hiatus between past and future that is at the same time a disjunction between experience and understanding. In order to demonstrate to what extent this break with the past and the sense of the present as a problem have become part of the lived experience of the age she cites remarks by René Char: "Our inheritance was left to us by no testament" (*BPF* 3), and de Tocqueville: "Since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity" (*BPF* 7). In Arendt's analysis, the predicament that finds expression in both of these claims is that of a "failure of memory" (*BPF* 6), which is predominantly a failure to employ the past in order to generate meaning in the present. For her, as for Nietzsche, this dilemma has to do with the fact that it has become impossible to fit our most recent experiences and events into any traditional conceptual scheme. In Arendt's view, meaning is not inherent in events and actions, but is made in the minds of those who inherit and question them. And what has come to dawn on the modern human being is precisely "that he had come to live in a world in which his mind and his tradition of thought were not even capable of asking adequate, meaningful questions, let alone of giving answers to its own perplexities" (*BPF* 9). This incapacity to relate experience and understanding, to capture one's time in thought, leaves experience hanging in mid-air, so to speak, while the mind revolves in its own "internal warfare" (*BPF* 8).

In this sense, the determining experience of modernity is not so much one of being trapped in a meaningless present – although meaninglessness is a key feature – as it is an experience of the *lack* of any present, of existing in a gap, a fissure between past and future. Arendt, in a compelling analysis of a parable by Kafka, offers an account of this gap as existing by virtue of the struggle between past and future, while this struggle in turn only exists by virtue of the insertion of the human being into the unbroken flow of time. The parable as quoted by Arendt reads:

He has two antagonists; the first presses him from behind, from his origin. The second blocks the road in front of him. He gives battle to both. Actually, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this, it must be admitted, would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of

the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experiences in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other (*BPF* 7).⁶

The discussion of this parable is repeated in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (202-205), this time in relation to the section entitled “Of the Vision and the Riddle” in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. The relevant part of Nietzsche’s text reads:

Behold this gateway [...] It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths, they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: ‘Moment.’ (*AZ* “Of the Vision and the Riddle” 2).

Taking her cue from Heidegger, Arendt argues that each allegorical tale demonstrates the way in which “time is only broken up into past and future in the presence of the human being, who at any given moment stands between an origin – birth – and an end – death” (*LMW* 203). The point made in both parables is in fact the same: the sense of past and future, and thus the human conception of time, is conditioned by the insertion of the human being into the world, who deflects the flow of time into oppositional forces and provides a focal point for their struggle (*ibid.*).⁷ This implication here is that the break or “clash” between the forces of past and future exists only for the one who “*himself is the now*” (*LMT* 204)⁸ and thus able to turn in both directions; from an external perspective time remains “a continuously flowing stream of sheer change” (*ibid.* 203), regardless of whether time is conceived as a line or as a circle.

In the light of the preceding analysis, it is possible to understand modernity as the becoming-self-conscious of the “now”; an attempt to give voice to the experience of the aporia of the present from within this break, which that is to say: to grasp the “now” in thought. The difficulty lies in the fact that this attempt is conceived in terms of a framework of meaning that is no longer able to illuminate the experience of the present, which leaves us with “the perplexity of having to deal with new phenomena in terms of an old tradition of thought outside of whose conceptual framework no thinking seemed possible at all” (*BPF* 25). This perplexity is already indicated in Kafka’s parable, which ends with the longing to jump out of the time-bound fighting line between past and future into a timeless position beyond the struggle. For Arendt, this is nothing other than the “old dream which Western metaphysics has dreamed from Parmenides to Hegel of a timeless,

⁶ The original can be found in Kafka, F. ‘HE’. In *The Great Wall of China and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. E. Muir & W. Muir. London: Secker & Warburg, 1946.

⁷ Of course, the Zarathustra parable goes on to voice the idea of eternal recurrence, which Arendt does not address at this point. It is not appropriate to consider this idea in the present context, but it is a question to which I shall return in later chapters.

spaceless, suprasensuous realm as the proper region of thought” (*BPF* 11). What Arendt as well as Nietzsche are concerned to show is that this very tradition of thought has revealed itself to be incapable of devising meaningful questions, much less meaningful answers, in response to the perplexities of a present that is “emphatically, and not merely logically, the suspense between a no-longer and a not-yet” (*MDT* 93). Their respective critiques of modernity can be read as an effort to show that, while our tradition of thought has occasioned its own destruction, every attempt to make sense of the perplexities that engulf us in the wake of its disappearance is still governed by the conceptual categories that derive from this self-same tradition. This problem cannot be addressed by simply telling modern human beings what is wrong in their lives and culture, for, as Tracy Strong points out, “the very manner in which they understand the world will not permit them to understand the problems at hand” (Strong 1975: 31). What is required, therefore, is a changed manner of understanding, which requires in the first place a new kind of thinking. Arendt – possibly recalling a phrase from *Zarathustra* – describes this as “thinking without bannisters” (*Denken ohne Geländer*).⁹ At stake here is an exercise in judgement: an attempt to develop a critical understanding of one’s age and culture without relying on the “bannisters” – that is to say, the uncritical categories of meaning and manifest criteria of judgement – that belong to it.

For Nietzsche and Arendt both, it is possible, at least in part, to let go of the familiar railings by trying to understand the modern in comparison with a form of cultural and political life that is distinctively not-modern. This mode of understanding is animated by Nietzsche’s question: “Everything historical *measures* itself according to something. What does our age have to measure itself against?” (*KSA* 7:29[145]). Following Lyotard, I want to suggest that both thinkers locate the “proper standard of measurement” for modernity in the classical age of the Greeks (Lyotard 1991: 58). For it is in the classical age that one encounters a conception of time and temporality that is radically different from the modern sense of rupture. In the former, “advent and passing, future and past, are treated as though, taken together, they embraced the totality of life in one and the same

⁸ Arendt is quoting Heidegger here. Cf. his *Nietzsche* (1987, vol. 2: 44).

⁹ Arendt uses this phrase in a discussion during a conference on her work. See “Hannah Arendt: On Hannah Arendt” in Hill (ed.) 1979: 336-7. There is a remarkable parallel here with Nietzsche. Compare the following lines from *Zarathustra*: “When the water is spanned by planks, when bridges and bannisters (*Geländer*) leap over the river, verily, those are not believed who say, ‘Everything is in flux’. [...] ‘How now?’ say the blockheads. ‘Everything should be in flux? After all, planks and railings are *over* the river. Whatever is *over* the river is firm; all the values of things, the bridges, the concepts, all ‘good’ and ‘evil’ – all that is *firm*.’ [...] ‘At bottom everything stands still’ – *against* this the thawing wind preaches. The thawing wind, a bull that is no ploughing bull, a raging bull, a destroyer who breaks the ice with wrathful horns. Ice, however, *breaks bridges*. O my brothers, is not everything in flux *now*? Have not all bannisters and bridges fallen into the water? (*AZ* “On Old and New Tablets” 8).

unity of meaning” (ibid.), and thus stands in contrast with the modern sensibility of existing “between past and future”. Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s adoption of this “classical measure” does not signal a desire to return to a former way of life and thought, but to show up some of the most significant – and pernicious – aspects of modernity through the contrast with a cultural condition that is distinctly not modern. In the following section, I shall first discuss what both thinkers consider to be the most important qualities of pre-Socratic Greece, namely their conceptions of time and worldly immortality, before turning to the reasons given by Nietzsche and Arendt for the waning of Hellenic culture. As will become clear, both thinkers are of the view that it is precisely the decline of Greece that gave birth to the moral, political and philosophical tradition that has itself come to an end in modernity, but which nevertheless continues to plague our attempts to understand the conditions under which we are constrained to live.

2. Establishing the measure: the Greeks

In measuring modernity as a form of cultural disintegration against the classical age of the Greeks, Nietzsche and Arendt in the first place have in mind the Greece of the pre-Socratics, although Arendt, unlike Nietzsche, holds Socrates in high regard (like Nietzsche, however, she considers Plato an adversary). For the purposes of the present discussion, the most important difference between the pre-Socratic world-view and our own lies in the former’s sustained concern with individual immortality in the face of an acute awareness of the ever-present undertow of oblivion. This is the knowledge which Sophocles lays in the mouth of Silenus – the old satyr from *Oedipus at Colonus*, half-god, half-goat – who, in response to king Midas’s question about the best and highest thing for mortals, famously answers: “What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon” (*BT* 3). Arendt’s translation of the famous lines reads: “Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came” (*OR* 285, *KL* 23).

The Silenian condemnation of life expresses the Greeks’ awareness of the painful struggle between a single, irreversible and unrepeatable human life and immortal nature, which does not die, but regenerates itself in great seasonal cycles. This conception springs from a particular awareness of human mortality, which is precisely “to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order” (*BPF* 42). When understood in this light, Silenus can be said to voice the insight that there is no eternal counter-force to our human finitude, no permanent barrier against the re-absorption of individuated life into amorphous nature. However, rather than succumb to

resentment against this inexorable condition, the Greeks excelled in the struggle against oblivion. This struggle took the form of a drive to immortalise themselves in great works and deeds, to acquire immortal fame so that the world might retain the memory of an individual life after it has passed from it. In Nietzsche's view, this tension between individuated human life and undifferentiated, deathless nature forms the subject matter of Attic tragedy. It is out of recognition for the eternal battle between these two forces that the Greeks fashioned the myth of the tragic hero, which dramatised "a glorified life based on a will to immortality" (Gambino 1996: 420), and served as a vehicle for remembrance which could establish for the Greeks the kind of "lasting presence in time" that is itself "an illusion of immortality" (ibid.: 417-418). In this way, Greek tragic drama related mortal existence to mythology, and thereby was able to present "even the immediate present" as "*sub specie aeterni*" (BT 23).¹⁰ While Nietzsche portrays the tragic drama as offering redemption from the wisdom of Silenus, in Arendt's account, this redemptive role is played by politics – although it must be said that this is primarily a politics of art and theatre (cf. Euben 2000:154). In Arendt's view, the walls of the Greek polis enclosed a realm of "organized remembrance" (HC 158) within which human beings could show themselves in greatness of word and deed and thereby attain a measure of immortality by entering into the memory of their city. She argues further that the fact that the striving for immortality took precisely this form goes to the heart of the tragic aspect of Greek culture: "on the one hand, everything was seen and measured against the background of the things that are forever, while, on the other, true human greatness was understood, at least by the pre-Platonic Greeks, to reside in deeds and words", which are in fact "the most futile and least lasting activities of men" (BPF 46).

What can be deduced about the Greek concern with greatness, whether portrayed on stage or forming part of the political life of the polis, is that it was bound up with a particular conception of nature and history. In so far as deathless nature constituted a permanent reminder that human life is "merely a continual 'has been', a thing that lives by denying and destroying and contradicting itself" (UDH 6), the striving for immortality was conceived as a struggle against the forces of oblivion inherent in nature. However, in this struggle for immortality nature was not merely an opponent or enemy. Nietzsche is at pains to point out that the Greeks achieved their humanity not by separating themselves from nature, but precisely by acknowledging the extent to which they themselves, in their very involvement in contest and myth-making, were still part of nature (HW in KSA

¹⁰ For an extensive treatment by Nietzsche of the role of struggle or contest in Greek life, both between individuals and between the individual and the "night and horror" that lies behind the shining Homeric myths, see "Homer's Contest" (KSA 1.783-792).

1.783). Arendt argues in turn that, for the Greeks, “[h]istory receives into its remembrance those mortals who through deed and word *have proved themselves worthy of nature*, and their everlasting fame means that they, despite their mortality, may remain in the company of the things that last forever” (*BPF* 48, my italics). This Greek sense of history is therefore intimately bound up with their conception of nature as an immortal domain against which human beings had to measure themselves in their struggle to be remembered, which is the only kind of immortality to which mortals can aspire.

Here we have one of the most significant contrasts between the classical age of the Greeks and the modern age. Nothing could be more different from our modern understanding than this concern with this-worldly immortality and durability. As we shall see, both Nietzsche and Arendt consider it one of the key characteristics of the modern age that it almost completely lacks the passion for lastingness that informed Greek antiquity. In so far as modernity is predicated on the “now”, it is by no means fertile soil for conceiving of works and deeds that are meant to endure either in memory or in the world. A further reason why the Greek world-view is so markedly different from our own is that we moderns have exchanged the practice of “immortalizing” (*athanatizein*) for self-preservation, while, in Greek understanding, it is precisely the concern for securing one’s own existence that results in our disappearing without leaving a trace in the world. From their perspective, there was “no better purpose in life than perishing in the attempt to accomplish something great and impossible: *animae magnae prodigus*” (UDH 9).

I shall return to both of these characteristics of modernity – the lack of concern with durability coupled with an overwhelming concern with self-preservation – later in this chapter and the next. At this point it needs to be acknowledged that, while Nietzsche and Arendt consider Hellenic culture to have remained unequalled in the West since its passing, the extraordinary world of the Greeks nevertheless did come to an end. The reasons for this had to do with a second feature of their conceived relationship between nature and history: the practice of immortalizing only existed in the realm of appearances, and could never guarantee a permanent defence against contingency. Hellenic culture lasted as long as the Silenian wisdom that the Greeks were so good at *not* knowing continued to inform their cultural self-understanding. However, this luminous and vibrant culture came to an end when it sought to overcome this tragic awareness of the fleetingness of mortal life once and for all and establish itself on a purely rational foundation. According to Nietzsche and Arendt, the decline of Greek culture – which encompassed the political life of the polis as well – began with the transition from tragic culture to theoretical culture in an endeavour to find a more permanent cure for the fragility of mortal life. In fact, it was precisely this cure that initiated the destruction of the very thing it wished to preserve. This cure consisted in making the meaning of the contingent world of

human affairs dependent on an absolute truth beyond the world (cf. *BT* 12-15; *BPF* 36-37; *HC* 16, 20). Nietzsche and Arendt both lay the blame for this development at the door of the “theoretical philosophers” who sought an ultimate justification for human existence that would counter the Silenian scepticism about the value of human life on earth once and for all. Nietzsche holds Socrates responsible for this negative development, whereas Arendt distinguishes between the Socrates who refused to flee his city even on pain of death and the Platonic “Socrates”, who is indeed a mouthpiece for the former’s longing for a truth that lies beyond life and death, secure from the onslaughts of time and circumstance (*LMT* 168-9). They are united, however, in their view that the end of the glory days of Greece coincided with the rise of speculative philosophy.

Nietzsche refers in this regard to the “philistinism of the Socratic schools”, in which the philosophical theorist represents “the counter-movement against the old, noble taste (– against the agonal instinct, against the *polis*, against the value of the race, against the authority of tradition)” (*TI* x:3). In Arendt’s account, the philosophers’ break with the pre-Socratic world originated in the belief “that they had found a higher principle to replace the principle that ruled the *polis*” (*HC* 18). This assumption is nowhere more tellingly demonstrated than in Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which the world of human affairs – the inter-human horizon of meaning in which immortality could be won – is described in terms of “darkness, confusion, and deception” from which the philosopher must turn away to discover the truth about the world in the realm of ideas” (*BPF* 17). For Arendt, this anti-worldly turn is the philosopher’s despairing response to the inability of polis-life to secure the meaning of the fleeting words and deeds that appear in it once and for all. Plato’s response consists of devising an ultimate standard that could be imposed on the time-bound, changeable world of human affairs from a point beyond all time and change. To this end, Plato introduces the idea of a “theological god” as supreme measure in *The Republic* (379a). In contrast to the polytheism manifested in the pantheon of Olympian gods, who, as Nietzsche shows, were “shining dream images” which the pre-Socratics interposed between themselves and the terrifying natural world (*BT* 3), as well as vehicles for expressing their “gratitude towards existence” (*BGE* 49), the Platonic god is an attempt to transcend all the tensions and conflicts inherent in Greek polytheism for the sake of a unitary principle of meaning and measurement. In Arendt’s view, this endeavour should not in the first place be construed as an attempt to rationalise the Greek belief system or to devise a new religion. Rather, it represents in a paradigmatic way the philosopher’s response to the *political* problem of securing certainty in the world:

This new theological god is neither a living God nor the god of the philosophers nor a pagan divinity; he is a political device, “the measurement of

measurements”¹¹, that is, the standard according to which cities may be founded and rules of behaviour laid down for the multitude. Theology, moreover, teaches how to enforce these standards absolutely, even in cases when human justice seems at a loss (*BPF* 131).¹²

In Arendt’s view, the tradition of Western thinking about politics – by which she means the words and deeds that relate to the world that lies between us rather than whatever lies inside us – is derived from philosophy conceived as *theōria*: a kind of “actionless seeing and even speechless contemplation” (*BPF* 47). Through such contemplation the philosopher could gain access to the truth, singular and timeless, which could be employed as a fixed measure of the world. With the eclipse of Greek civilization by the Romans and the eventual rise of the Christian Church from the ashes of the Roman Empire, the Platonic transcendent measure was combined with the distinctively Roman conception of authority vested in a sacred beginning to form the Christian doctrine of “the revealed commandments and truths of a genuinely transcendent authority” (*BPF* 127). In Arendt’s account, while the beginning of our tradition of political thought lay in Plato’s turning away from the human world in order to locate philosophy and truth beyond – more, in opposition to – the polis, the end of this tradition, politically, was announced in Marx’s claim that philosophy and its truth ought to be realised in the sphere of human living-together, i.e. society (*BPF* 17). Marx’s views should not be taken as the *cause* of the end, however. His turning away from philosophy as ultimate truth and his insistence on its realisation in the world only became possible in an age in which the belief in eternal standards or a sacred origin had already released its hold over the minds of human beings. The question that must be asked, however, is how this rupture has come about. What has caused the break in our tradition of thought? For an answer, it is necessary to turn to Nietzsche’s account of the death of God – an account with which Arendt explicitly agrees – in which he makes it clear that the break was occasioned by the philosophical tradition itself.

3. The death of God and the rupture of tradition

Nietzsche argues that the distinction between worldly experience and worldless truth as conceived by the theoretical philosopher harbours the logic of its own destruction. In a well-known section in *Twilight of the Idols* entitled “How the ‘Real World’ at last Became a Myth”, Nietzsche traces the logic of Plato’s two-world metaphysics that

¹¹ Arendt acknowledges her debt for this formulation to Werner Jaeger: *Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, Oxford 1947:194n.

culminates in the break with tradition in modernity. In this account, although the realm of ideas is originally supposed to be attainable by “the wise, the pious, the virtuous”, the division between the transitory world of appearance and the eternal realm that lies beyond experience, once instituted, irrevocably severs the two realms and thereby places the latter beyond human reach. The result of this schism is that the realm of unconditional truth gradually becomes a promise rather than an immediately accessible possibility. For a while, this promise of an ultimate truth beyond appearance does retain some moral and consolatory force as the Kantian regulative ideal, even though it is no longer believed to guarantee the meaning of the contingent world. Eventually, however, in the face of the ultimate unattainability of this ideal, even the Kantian consolation has to be abandoned. The awareness dawns that the “real world” – Plato’s “measure of measures” – can no longer offer any justification of the world of human affairs. It is at this point that God, as symbol of an eternal yet unattainable and therefore ultimately irrelevant truth, finally “dies”. This death, first announced by Nietzsche’s “madman in the market place”– who adds that “*We have killed him – you and I*” (*GS* 125) – is the realisation that the metaphysical world is no longer capable of guaranteeing the meaning of the contingent world to which it stands opposed. This insight can be articulated thus:

[O]ne could assert nothing at all of the metaphysical world except that it was a being-other, an inaccessible, incomprehensible being-other; it would be a thing of negative qualities. – Even if the existence of such a world were never so well demonstrated, it is certain that knowledge of it would be the most useless of all knowledge; more useless even than knowledge of the chemical composition of water must be to the sailor in danger of shipwreck (*HAH* I: 9).

Arendt formulates the same insight in these terms: “if anything is dead, it can only be the traditional *thought* of God. And something similar is true of the end of philosophy and the end of metaphysics: not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men of earth have become “meaningless”, but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility” (*LMT* 10). In Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s accounts, this is indeed the central experience of modernity: the realisation that is impossible for an ultimate, theoretical truth to serve as the foundation and justification of human existence in the world. Clearly, the death of God as transcendent idea, as external guarantee of meaning, as measure of the world, cannot leave its opposite intact. Nietzsche warns against thinking that after the abolition of the “real world” we would still be left with the “apparent world” that was originally derived from it (*TI* iv). On the contrary, since the Platonic tradition conceived the measure for human affairs as lying beyond the

¹² This ultimate measure refers to Plato’s concept of the good. In Arendt’s analysis of Plato’s use of this concept, she argues that “[t]he notion must have been that only through the concept of the good do things become comparable and hence measurable” (*BPF* 291, fn. 21).

world, and derived the meaning of the former from the latter, the disappearance of this beyond constitutes the actual disintegration of its opposite. In the absence of the constraints imposed by the Platonic measure of measures and transposed into the commands of a transcendent authority by Christianity, the world seems devoid of any meaning of its own. With the death of what appeared to be the only possible meaning of the world, *all* attempts at making sense of modern experience come to seem equally impossible. In so far as all meaning and order in the world have been tied to an external principle, the loss of that principle – or the inability to continue believing in it – human existence in the world seems to be caught up in unmitigated chaos. With reference to the chaos that characterises modern culture as well as those who belong to it, Nietzsche writes: “*Measure* is alien to us, let us admit to ourselves; what we itch for is the infinite, the unmeasured. Like a rider on a charged steed we let fall the reins before the infinite, we modern men, like semi-barbarians – and attain *our* state of bliss only when we are most – *in danger*” (*BGE* 224).

As we shall see, Nietzsche and Arendt both consider the greatest danger for the modern human to lie precisely in succumbing to this measurelessness, which would indeed signify the loss of the restraining *and* enabling conditions under which we learn to become human. In anticipation of this discussion, which is the proper focus of chapter 2, it is important to consider two related difficulties of the loss of measure that is bound up with the death of God: On the one hand, the break in tradition radically problematises the relationship between modernity and its past. In Arendt’s account, “[i]nsofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition” (*MDT* 193). The death of God, however, inserts itself as the radical disjuncture between past and future, so that the meaning of history becomes a matter of perplexity. This is not to say that we have lost the sense of the past in modernity. On the contrary, Nietzsche and Arendt are at pains to demonstrate that modern culture is characterised by an excessive concern with history. What has been lost is the guiding thread through that past. This difficulty has to do with the chaotic intermingling of various beliefs, judgements and evaluations belonging to various ages and traditions, with none of them being able to exercise an unequivocal claim over the present. As Nietzsche points out: “In the new generation that, as it were, has inherited in its blood diverse standards and values, everything is unrest, disturbance, doubt, attempt; the best forces have an inhibiting effect, the very virtues do not allow each other to grow and become strong; balance, a center of gravity, and perpendicular poise are lacking in body and soul” (*BGE* 208). Under these circumstances, Arendt aptly remarks that “what you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation” (*LMT* 212). The problem that both Nietzsche and Arendt identify in this regard is therefore that modernity suffers

from too many pasts, and therefore has no past of its own. In other words, to be a modern is to be overrun by the philosophical, political, moral and religious traditions that have shaped one's age, but which no longer have any authority over our current beliefs and practices. To lack all ability to integrate that multifarious past into the present is to be pulled in all directions at once, unable to orientate oneself in the world: "I know not which way to turn; I am everything that knows not which way to turn' – sighs modern man" (Nietzsche, *A* 1; see also *TI* ix:50).

The other side of this same problem, which we already encountered in the previous section of the chapter, concerns the relationship of the present to the future – a difficulty that can be phrased in terms of the fate of the drive to immortality. As Nietzsche and Arendt show, the post-Socratic turning-away from the human world meant that the concern with worldly immortality came to be viewed as of secondary value to dwelling in the eternal realm of ideas (a notion that was suitably adjusted and incorporated into the Christian belief structure). However, the Christian version of immortality no longer concerned itself with the world as a durable realm within which an individual life might be remembered. Instead, immortality became an interior quality of the soul, while the world was thought to be as perishable as the body. Eventually, with the dissolution of the belief in the eternal realm as ultimate arbiter of meaning on earth, the concern with immortality, whether of nature, the world or the soul lost its final mooring. Thus Nietzsche writes: "An essential disadvantage which the cessation of the metaphysical outlook brings with it lies in the fact that the attention of the individual is too firmly fixed on his own brief span of life and received no stronger impulse to work at the construction of enduring institutions intended to last for centuries" (*HAH* I: 22).¹³ Arendt expands on this insight in a discussion of the lines by Rilke:

*Berge ruhn, von Sternen überprächtigt;
aber auch in ihnen flimmert Zeit.
Ach, in meinem wilden Herzen nächtigt
obdachlos die Unvergänglichkeit.*¹⁴

In Arendt's account, the poet is here expressing the exact reverse of the pre-Socratic relationship between nature and the mortals who dwell in her. While the ancient

¹³ Consider also: "*Criticism of modernity*. – Our institutions are no longer fit for anything: one is unanimous about that. But the fault lies not in them but in us, Having lost all the instincts out of which institutions grow, we are losing the institutions themselves, because *we* are no longer fit for them. [...] One lives for today, one lives very fast – one lives very irresponsibly: it is precisely this which one calls 'freedom'. That which *makes* institutions institutions is despised, hated, rejected: whenever the word 'authority' is as much as heard one believes oneself in danger of a new slavery" (*TI* ix:39).

¹⁴ From *Aus dem Nachlass des Grafen C.W.*, first series, poem X. Quoted by Arendt in *BPF* 44. In an accompanying note she offers the translation as: "Mountains rest beneath a splendor of stars, but even in them time flickers. Ah, unsheltered in my wild, darkling heart lies immortality" (*ibid.* 285).

Greeks aspired to immortalise themselves in the remembrance of the world in an attempt to measure themselves against immortal nature, modern sensibility sees nature itself invaded by mortality. Even where immortality might still exist as a concern within the human heart, it has lost any reference to a durable world beyond the self. Thus, given the chaotic, dislocated condition of the modern soul, “[i]mmortality or imperishability, if and when it occurs at all, is homeless” (*BPF* 44).¹⁵

This consideration of the retreat of immortality – which, as we have seen in our discussion of the pre-Socratics, is at the same time a concern with durability and lastingness beyond the immediacy of “today” and “just now” – leads to the heart of the predicament of modernity: the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of conceiving of human existence in the absence of any durable world that relates us to both past and future. In a telling passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche speculates whether the kind of being that would be able to survive and perpetuate itself under these conditions of disintegration and decay would not be one of the utmost mediocrity, with the only value-basis for communal life to be found in a “morality of mediocrity” (*Moral der Mittelmässigkeit*) (*BGE* 262). This mediocrity – literally, falling between measures; being neither good nor evil, high nor low, and remaining indifferent towards these distinctions – stands in contrast with the “noble” sensibility for difference, “delight in the nuances of reverence” the “instinct for rank” that were previously made possible and guaranteed by the authority of a binding tradition (*BGE* 263). The implication here is that with the loss of a previous, authoritative standard of value, it might become impossible to judge the value of anything except by the only remaining standard that is self-evidently available to all: namely the average, the commonplace, and the common. Arendt adds a further dimension to this consideration by suggesting that the levelling down or mediocratisation that is the hallmark of modernity springs from a fundamental disjunction between the traditional “ideas”, which, as transcendent units, had been used to recognise and measure human thoughts and actions, and modern society, which had absolved all such standards into relationships between its members, establishing them as “functional values” (*BPF* 32).

I shall take up the question of the relation between the loss of a concern with durability on the one hand and mediocrity and the functionalisation of value on the other in chapter 2. The present account of the loss of the authority of tradition and the concomitant disintegration of the world would not be complete, however, without considering one

¹⁵ Consider also: “... we became accustomed to the notion of absolute mortality, so that the thought of it no longer bothers us and the old alternative between an individual immortal life in an immortal world and a mortal life in an immortal world has ceased to be meaningful. In this respect, however, as in many others, we differ from all previous ages” (Arendt, *BPF* 74).

attempted remedy for this loss that has itself come to characterise the modern age. In the accounts offered by Nietzsche and Arendt, this is the remedy offered by a philosophy of history that treats history as a rational process of development in which past, present and future unfold themselves according to a definite and determinable logic. This notion of historical development provides a theoretical solution to the concrete problem of uniting the contradictory claims to authority that have proliferated in a world that has lost its belief in a fixed measure beyond the world. Thus Arendt argues that “[t]he thread of historical continuity was the first substitute for tradition; by means of it, the overwhelming mass of the most divergent values, the most contradictory thoughts and conflicting authorities [...] were reduced to a unilinear, dialectically consistent development actually designed to repudiate not tradition as such, but the authority of all traditions” (*BPF* 28).

Both Nietzsche and Arendt demonstrate, however, that this very remedy has proven itself to be the danger of dangers; that, instead of being a remedy for modern chaos and homelessness, this conception of history is directly implicated in the loss of the world, so that we are confronted with the disintegration of the complex of culture by the very means employed to sustain it. In the next part of the chapter I shall focus on the extent to which the adoption of historical development as a standard by which to judge past, present and future has proved to be a cure that, in Nietzsche’s words, “has in the long run produced something worse than that which it was supposed to overcome” (*D* 52).

4. History as substitute for tradition



In order to understand why Nietzsche and Arendt both focus on history as a problem, we should bear in mind that the theoretical philosopher’s turning-away from the world in search of an external measure or yardstick springs from an antipathy towards the contingency, unpredictability and changeability of the world in which human existence is played out. For both thinkers, this is nothing else than resentment towards the world as it is given, precisely *because* it is given rather than made by us and therefore not subject to human mastery. In so far as each of us is a newcomer in a world that is already old, the resentment that drives all attempts to seek the meaning of self and world in an eternal “beyond” has a temporal dimension. Nietzsche and Arendt both argue that it is essentially an “ill will against time and its ‘it was’”, for it is precisely this “it was” that governs our ability to control what *is* (*AZ* II: 20, *LMW* 168). As will become clear in the course of the thesis, the main target of their respective critiques of modernity is precisely this “ill will” in its various forms. In both their views, while the Platonic tradition has lost its validity for us, the resentment from which it originated still informs our attitude towards time and the world. Their respective analyses of modernity can thus be read as two related attempts to

uncover and overcome this resentment in various aspects of modern life.

Nietzsche offers a sustained reflection on this “ill will” towards the past and its consequences for human existence in the present in the early essay entitled “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”. In the course of his meditation on this question Nietzsche bemoans the devastating possibility that “we have all been ruined by history” (UDH 4). Although the remark is aimed at what he considers to be a specifically German historical sensibility, the ruination at issue here provides a useful perspective on the problem of the relationship to the past under conditions of modernity. It is possible to describe this ruination in terms of a digestive complaint that manifests itself in the incapacity either to “have done” with the past or to incorporate it into a living present. In Nietzsche’s account, this digestive incapacity is symptomatic of an underlying disease that attacks modern life like a malignant growth: “it is sick, this unchained life, and needs to be cured. It is sick with many illnesses and not only with the memory of its chains – what chiefly concerns us here is that it is suffering from the *malady of history*. Excess of history has attacked life’s plastic powers, it no longer knows how to employ the past as nourishing food” (UDH 10).

This formulation makes it clear that the malady concerns a present that is conscious of a need to make sense of its relationship to the past as well as of its own incapacity to do so. The need for historical judgement exists in a world that has become “unchained” from the only standard it ever knew how to employ: that of an absolute truth beyond the contingent world in which the judgement is exercised. Nietzsche’s point is that, while the belief in such a supra-worldly measure has been lost, the need for such a fixed standard of judgement has not. It is in this sense that modern life suffers both from its present “unchained” state as well as from the “memory of its chains”. It is a form of life that is caught in the disjunction between experience and understanding, acting and thinking, which, as Arendt points out, deprives our experience of any sense and our thinking of all reality, thereby making both meaningless (*BPF* 25).

However, the argument that an excess of history initiates a crisis of meaning and thus proves dangerous for life does not automatically translate into an argument against the value of history *tout court*. For Nietzsche as much as for Arendt, the human condition is also a condition of historicity. To be human is to be always reminded by the phrase “it was” that our existence is “an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one” (UDH 1); we are inescapably bound to our sense of the past. The malady of history therefore cannot be “cured” by simply doing away with history altogether. What is required here is to re-think our relationship with the past – and with it, our relationship with the world that is in a sense the reification of this past – in a way that would not succumb to the resentment of what was. This is a matter of cultivating a capacity for historical judgement

that would neither be overwhelmed by the force of the past nor seek to suppress or deny it – both of which are strategies informed by resentment – but which succeeded in “containing it, damming it up, bringing it within just limits” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990: 213). In the coming chapters I shall try to demonstrate that Nietzsche and Arendt, in their different ways, are engaged in precisely such an attempt at historical judgement. At this point I first want to explore their related arguments that it is precisely the capacity for historical judgement that is *lacking* in modern human beings, with dire consequences for our ability to make sense of both self and world and thereby to conceive of a meaningful future.

4.1 Nietzsche: against history as process

A well-known phrase from the *Nachlass* summarises Nietzsche’s conception of the cognitive dissonance that follows in the wake of the dissolution of traditional categories of meaning in modernity: “*not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves” (*WP* 5; *KSA* 12:5[71]). In Nietzsche’s analysis, the sense of disenchantment with life under these conditions may engender an ascetic withdrawal from life, or – what has proven to be the danger of dangers – provide the impetus for the development of new systems of rational explanation intended to master the vagaries of human existence once and for all. For Nietzsche, the philosophical project of modernity constitutes precisely such an attempt at mastery, informed by the most complete scepticism regarding the inherent value of the domain of mortal life.

This attempt finds its philosophical expression in the conception of history as “the science of universal becoming” (UDH 4) – a mode of understanding the past and predicting the future that embodies the dual belief in science and in progress. This spurious “science” seems to offer respite from the insecurity of worldly life by subsuming all deeds and events under abstract laws of development. In Nietzsche’s account, the great offender in this regard is a Hegelian speculative philosophy of history (or, one should say: the conception of history as teleology that may be derived from a particular reading of Hegel). The central problem here relates to the emphasis on result, outcome, teleology, which, in Nietzsche’s view, speaks of a desire to tame human activity, and the world sustained by this activity, by subjecting both to a rational principle of development.

In its dialectical emphasis, this doctrine preaches a relentless optimism: our present, transitory existence partakes in the progressive unfolding of the higher aims of history and in this way is guaranteed a lasting meaning. In Nietzsche’s view, however, such optimism springs from an altogether darker source, namely mistrust in life, resentment towards the world in all its transitoriness. In an attempt to suppress this

nihilistic sensibility, the science of universal becoming imposes a hierarchical opposition between *history* – understood as an abstract process of development – and *life*: the arena of contingent human action (UDH 2). Nietzsche’s difficulty with this approach is that it reveres a predictable, but life-negating, teleology at the cost of the unpredictable human deeds that are the worldly basis of history. The problem is not merely one of underestimating the value of action, but of a desire for a complete, all-encompassing framework with which to explain all action and thereby to determine its significance in advance.

For Nietzsche, by contrast, the meaning of a deed is not given in advance, nor can it be deduced from abstract laws. The meaning of the words and deeds through which we appear in the world is contingent upon the judgements of those who bear witness to these deeds. Human *praxis* therefore calls for the capacity for reflective judgement on the part of an interpretative community.¹⁶ Nietzsche criticises modern “scientific” historiography for evading the call for judgement by pretending objectivity, with the historian as passive recorder of the inevitable movement towards the pre-determined goal of all becoming. This approach amounts to nothing more than “admiration for the ‘power of history’ which in practice transforms every moment into a naked admiration for success and leads to an idolatry of the factual” (UDH 6). These sentiments in the historian turn historiography into apologetics, and preclude the possibility of evaluating the beliefs and practices of an age.

It is important to bear in mind that, for Nietzsche, this erosion of the faculty of judgement is directly related to the disjunction between subjective experience and objective knowledge that structures life in modernity. Nietzsche refers to this schism as an “antithesis between an interior which fails to correspond to any exterior and an exterior which fails to correspond to any interior” (UDH 4). Under these conditions, historiography, in an effort to distance itself from mere subjective prejudices, is only interested in the “outer form” of actions and events in order to fit them into a formal structure that determines the course of all things. This formalised science of history takes for granted the schism between content and form, interior and exterior, while positing the overcoming of this divide as the intended (and inevitable) aim of historical development. The problem with this approach to history is that it relegates human action – the “form” in which we appear in the world – to a function within a general process, while turning human agency into the hidden “content” of a subject. For Nietzsche, the outcome of the

¹⁶ Nietzsche’s analysis of monumental, antiquarian and critical history in UDH 2-3 can be said to demonstrate how the meaning of action changes in relation to a specific interpretative community, which impacts, in turn, on the way in which the relationship between the members of such a community is constituted. For Nietzsche’s views on the inherent indeterminacy of action see the discussion in chapter 3, section 1.2. For an account of the various modes of history, see the treatment of historical judgement in chapter 5, section 1.2.

twin problems of the objectification of knowledge and the subjectification of agency is an inability to relate knowledge and experience. However, since we feel ourselves closer to our own experience than to objective and universal truth about experience in general, this distinction leads to a generalised scepticism about all knowledge claims that transcend the subjective and personal. Under these conditions, we are thrown back upon ourselves, turned inwards toward the arena of private concerns. Whoever tried to give voice to this sense of interiorisation would have to proclaim:

[P]erhaps I still have the right to say of myself *cogito, ergo sum*, but not *vivo, ergo cogito*. Empty 'being' is granted me, but not full and green 'life'; the feeling that tells me I exist warranted to me only that I am a thinking creature, not that I am an *animal* but at most a *cogital* (UDH 10).

Tracy Strong (1988: 163) points out that the withdrawal from the world into an unconnected subjectivity constitutes "the actuality of nihilism", in which one can no longer "recognize in oneself the validity of another's judgement". Under these conditions, there is no worldly space in which human beings might appeal to each other, so that whatever claims we might make on one another have no authority over those whom they address. Nietzsche's insight is that such a solipsistic condition leaves the field wide open for various forms of political domination. With the destruction of an inter-human domain that lies between human being rather than above or inside them, there arises the phenomenon of the mass, composed of beings who are "not men, not gods, not animals, but creations of historical culture, wholly structure, image, form without demonstrable content and, unhappily, ill-designed form and, what is more, uniform" (UDH 5). These solipsistic, massified human beings lack the means for either independent experience or reflective judgement, and are therefore malleable by any external force strong enough to direct its subjects. In a prophetic passage, Nietzsche warns that it is only a matter of time before such a force arises, destroying all forms of political community and replacing them with "systems of individualist egoism, brotherhoods for the rapacious exploitation of the non-brothers, and similar creations of utilitarian vulgarity" (ibid. 9).

Arendt endorses Nietzsche's analysis of the relation between the subjective turn and the modern conception of history as process, and goes on to depict the subjectification of experience and agency as a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for the emergence of the political phenomenon of totalitarianism.

4.2 Arendt: Against history as fabrication

In Arendt's account, the modern conception of history as a process of development should be understood against the background of the scientific discoveries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By far the most significant of these was the invention of the

telescope, providing demonstrable proof of the inadequacy of our sensory experience as a basis for certain or even adequate knowledge about the world (*HC* 261, 273).¹⁷ Although this event in European intellectual history seemed to confirm the Platonic notion that we could not trust in the world as we found it and that truth must therefore lie elsewhere, the modern solution to this difficulty departed from Plato and designated the human subject as the locus of certainty. Cartesian philosophy sought to overcome the despair at the possibility of our being at home in a world that mirrored our understanding of it by circumventing our untrustworthy sensory apparatus and locating the fixed point of reference in the mind. This was also the philosophical environment that gave birth to the speculative philosophy of history that found its first prominent proponent in Vico. The latter, in his *La Nuova Scienza* (1725), presented history as an object of human fabrication that was susceptible to comprehensive scientific analysis. In Arendt's account, the apparent attraction of this formalised science of history was that it seemingly only dealt with what we had made ourselves, which meant that its subject matter, unlike the things of the natural world, had to be fully adequate to human cognition. Thus, whereas the natural sciences were seen to focus only on the realm of the given – which, as Galileo demonstrated, may delude our senses – history was conceived as the outcome of our own handiwork, necessarily understood by us, its authors, and therefore capable of rendering certain knowledge.¹⁸

Against this background, it may be said that the modern conception of history arose out of a crisis of confidence in the world as it is given, which was generated in turn by events in the natural sciences. However, while modern science exposed the insufficiency of the human sensory apparatus for an adequate understanding of the world, it also demonstrated our capacity for successful intervention in the world by means of scientific processes. By virtue of its success in mastering the vagaries of nature, the model of the process was introduced into the modern science of history, which meant that historiography was conceived as an account of a process of making aimed at a pre-determined end. As a result, history “was no longer composed of the deeds and sufferings of men, and it no longer told the story of events affecting the lives of men; it became a man-made process, the only all-comprehending process which owed its existence

¹⁷ In fact, Arendt's analysis of the relation between scientific discovery and the emergence of the modern age is more subtle than this. Apart from the invention of the telescope, she also identifies the Reformation and the European discovery of America as constituent events of modernity. She does claim, however, that Galileo's discovery – initially the least explosive of the three events – eventually had the greatest philosophical impact, as it was taken to provide scientific proof of the schism between subjective (accessible) experience and objective (inaccessible) reality. After Galileo, she argues, “[i]nstead of objective qualities ... we find instruments, and instead of nature or the universe – in the words of Heisenberg – man encounters only himself” (*HC* 261).

¹⁸ See Arendt's extensive discussions on Vico in *HC*, pp. 249-299 and *BPF*, pp. 57-58.

exclusively to the human race” (*BPF* 58). Arendt argues further that the rise of this speculative philosophy of history has had profound implications for our understanding of human agency. Since the belief in history as abstract process foundered upon the evidence of action, with its tendency to interrupt processes and disrupt laws, it inclined towards a conception of action as fabrication. For, if “to act” meant nothing more than “to make”, it could reflect the same teleological impetus that operated within the historical process. This would allow the significance of a deed to be deduced from its intended results in the same way that the meaning of history could be derived from its ultimate goal.

At the heart of Arendt’s argument lies the insight that, when the deed loses its meaning as a unique event and becomes a manifestation of the abstract laws of movement, the world as a public space of appearances – the ‘in-between’ which both binds us together and preserves individual identities – withers away. What is left in the wake of the death of appearance is the inner experience of worldless subjects who no longer exercise any claim upon one another. The aftermath of this interiorisation is a general, yet un-shared, experience of loneliness. This retreat into subjectivity that characterises life in modernity should not be understood as opting for the private and individual over and against the public and plural. What remains after the withdrawal from the public realm are not solitary individuals, but uniform components of mass society, characterless and thoughtless, dependent on the processes of logic as a means for generating meaning (*OT* 473). This reliance on logic belongs to the condition of isolation from a reflective community, whereby one becomes mistrustful of the significance of external events as well as one’s inner experiences. In a situation where one’s thoughts and judgements cannot be tested against other perspectives in a realm outside the self, the only trustworthy grounds for making sense of experience are the abstract laws of logic: “the inner coercion whose only content is the strict avoidance of contradictions that seems to confirm a man’s identity outside all relationships with others” (*ibid.* 478).

According to Arendt, the most catastrophic consequence of this loss of the shared world of speech and action and the accompanying migration into the self has been the rise of the totalitarian state. If the destruction of the realm of plurality destroys our capacity for judgement – literally, the capacity to think what we are doing – totalitarianism represents the utter extremity of this reflective bankruptcy. Totalitarian ideology is the ultimate representative of modern thoughtlessness in the sense that it is predicated on the movement from a generalised premise to an inevitable conclusion, which regulate all thought and action in order to render a pre-determined result. In this context, racism, for instance, becomes “the belief that there is motion inherent in the very idea of race”, that this motion has a determined direction and goal and that whatever hinders the achievement of this end ought to be corrected or destroyed (*OT* 479). The most efficient means for realising this

relentless movement is terror, “which seeks to ‘stabilize’ men in order to liberate the forces of nature or history” (ibid. 465). Such stabilisation in turn requires the forceful subjugation of human action – the spontaneous eruption of the unexpected into the realm of logical necessity – to the laws of a supra-human process, whose ultimate goal “is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind” (ibid. 457).

As we have seen, the notion of history as a process of fabrication is based on the assumption that we can only trust in what we have made ourselves. Translated into the political realm, this becomes: we can only trust in a form of human living-together that is the outcome of deliberate fabrication, and which therefore precludes the possibility of non-teleological action. In the context of such fabricated uniformity, political activity makes way for administration and the phenomenon of the mass replaces genuine human plurality. For Arendt, the rise of modern mass society and the phenomenon of totalitarianism, while not causally linked, are nevertheless points on a continuum. Both are symptoms of the same historical malady that chooses the predictability of the historical process, with the concomitant turning away from the world and the retreat into the self, above the contingency of action and judgement.

This relatively brief account of Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s critique of the modern conception of history as a rational process of development can be read as a prologue to the more extensive analysis of modern nihilism and the loss of the human in the next chapter. At this point, the insights derived from their respective analyses of the historical malady may be summarised as follows: Our concern with the past springs from the awareness of our own historicity, the fact that we are inescapably bound to the ineliminable “has been” that informs whatever we are and whatever we might become. Under conditions of modernity, the inherited values, judgements, and beliefs that secure the meaning of the present and orient us towards the future – what Arendt refers to as “the thread of tradition” – have lost their unconditional validity, which means that the relationship with both past and future has become a problem. Nietzsche and Arendt try to show that any attempt to exchange the resultant meaninglessness and chaos of a world without incontestable authority, tradition, or justification for the inevitability and lawfulness of the historical world-process fails to recover the God who has died. Instead, it compounds the modern experience of homelessness and disorientation by reducing human existence to a function within a process, and it matters little whether this process is believed to be a supra-human course of development or the product of our own hands. In either case, it leaves behind “a society of men who, without a common world which would at once unite and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass” (Arendt, *BPF* 89-90). In order to explore the full ramifications of this claim, I shall now turn to Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s account of modern nihilism and the loss of the human.

CHAPTER 2

MODERN NIHILISM AND THE UNMAKING OF THE HUMAN

Final conclusion: All the values by means of which we have tried so far to render the world estimable for ourselves and which then proved inapplicable and therefore devaluated the world – all these values are, psychologically considered, the results of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination – and they have been falsely *projected* into the essence of things. What we find here is still the *hyperbolic naiveté* of man: positing himself as the meaning and measure of the value of things (Nietzsche, *WP* 12B, *KSA* 13:11[99]).

Since I cannot be a world-creating being it could perhaps be my role to be a world-destroying being. [...] This is, in any case, the philosophical basis of modern nihilism, with its origins reaching back into the old ontology; in it, the arrogant attempt to fit new questions and elements into the old ontological framework has come home to roost (Arendt, *EU* 177).

Introduction

The preceding chapter concluded with a brief consideration of modernity as characterised by the subjectification of human life and the concomitant rise of mass society, which amounts to the loss of both self and world. As I have tried to show, this double loss is bound up with the rupture of tradition and the substitution of the spurious certainties of the historical process for the certainties of a tradition that has become lost to us. In this chapter, I shall expand on this account against the backdrop of Nietzsche's and Arendt's treatment of nihilism.

While the first part of the chapter provides an outline of the most important features of modern nihilism, part two deals with the consequences of nihilism for our understanding of the human. This argument is augmented, in part three, by a consideration of the realm of the social as the domain of the collective animalisation of the human. The fourth and last part of the paper focuses on the relationship between nihilism and the modern drive to mastery in so far as this alliance culminates in the deliberate unmaking of the human. The latter focus is also an attempt to think through Arendt's treatment of totalitarianism as the most extreme manifestation of the nihilistic sensibility.

The discussion in chapter one on the time of modernity, the rupture of tradition and the problem of history has already hinted at some of the central characteristics of modern nihilism: nihilism as a crisis of meaning; as the judgement that the world as it is ought not to be, while the world as it ought to be does not exist; as the inability to recognise in oneself the validity of another's judgements. What I propose to do in the first part of this chapter is to situate these characteristics within a more systematic treatment of

the role of nihilism in Nietzsche's and Arendt's thinking. This is no straightforward undertaking, however, for two reasons: In the first place, the term "nihilism" is not widely used in the published writings of either thinker.¹ In the second place, neither thinker always employs the term in a consistent fashion; it retains a polysemic quality in their writings, which makes it difficult to speak of their treatment of nihilism *as such*.

Yet despite these difficulties, it is my contention that, for both thinkers, nihilism constitutes the implicit framework or schema within which the most important dilemmas of modernity play themselves out. As I intend to show, the problem of nihilism forms the often unexplicated, but nevertheless assumed, background for their respective analyses of the modern predicament. My intention in this chapter is therefore to outline this background, without pretending to offer an exhaustive account of nihilism as phenomenon. To this end, the first part of this chapter focuses on three interrelated facets of modern nihilism, which can be summarised under the headings of a *crisis of meaning*, a *crisis of evaluation*, and a *crisis of authority*.²

The use of the term "crisis" here is not accidental. It stems from Arendt's claim that "[i]n every crisis a piece of the world, something common to us all, is destroyed. The failure of common sense, like a divining rod, points to the place where the cave-in has occurred" (*BPF* 178). When referring to "common sense", Arendt does not have in mind a kind of prudential 'reckoning with consequences', but something more along the lines of the Kantian notion of *Gemeinsinn*, which relates to the faculty of judgement.³ Judgement, for Arendt, is only possible with reference to a shared horizon within which our judgements make sense. The point, in other words, is that meaning (*Sinn*) is dependent upon a sense of the world we have in common with others. Considered in this light, the various aspects of nihilism can be brought together under the rubric of "crisis" in so far as each of these is related to the loss of the worldly conditions for anything to have meaning for us at all.

¹ Nietzsche, of course, indicates that he intends to write a "history of European nihilism" as a preliminary to the "revaluation of all values" (*GM* III: 27), and the *Nachlass* contains many preparatory notes for his study on nihilism. It is clear, therefore, that the question of nihilism played an important role in Nietzsche's thinking. The difficulty remains, however, that we do not know which of these notes were intended for publication, and which were only preliminary reflections that were eventually to be refined or discarded. And although Arendt does make use of the term throughout her work, often with reference to Nietzsche, it is not one of the most prominent concepts in her philosophical vocabulary.

² Although I shall discuss them separately, it is important to keep in mind that neither Nietzsche nor Arendt portrays these aspects of nihilism as separate problems. On the contrary, each component of nihilism is parasitical on all the others, which also means that any attempted overcoming of nihilism in one respect would have to overcome nihilism in all these respects. The difficulty, of course, lies in the fact that such overcoming must be effected from *within* the experience of nihilism itself. Nietzsche and Arendt are equally concerned to demonstrate that most of these attempts have merely perpetuated the very crisis they have sought to overcome.

³ Cf. *EU* 21, editor's note.

1. Three facets of nihilism

1.1 A crisis of meaning

In order to understand the characterisation of nihilism as a crisis of meaning, it is important to begin with a consideration of the historical origins of the nihilistic sensibility. For nihilism did not simply spring up in the modern world fully formed, but emerged from the complex interplay of values and beliefs that make up the Western tradition.⁴ Moreover, in reflecting on the relation between nihilism and the tradition, it is important to distinguish between *modern* nihilism as a specific phenomenon of Western culture, and nihilism as a general, though mostly concealed, facet of human experience. As Ansell-Pearson (1994: 203) remarks: “On one, deep level nihilism is something primordial which lies at the origin of the human experience of existence, in the sense that it denotes our recognition that our being-there rests on the possibility of our *not* being-there.” Nihilism in this sense is nothing more than an unstated aspect of thinking the human: the intimation that as mortal beings we exist against a background of nothingness. This recognition is not so much a conscious experience as a forgotten or suppressed incentive for seeking consolation for our transitoriness in the promise of an eternal “beyond”, but also, as we have seen in the previous chapter, for human beings to immortalise themselves in words and deeds worthy of remembrance: *athanatizein*. While pre-Socratic Greek culture existed by virtue of this constant struggle against oblivion, the Platonic “measure of measures”, became dominant in our philosophical, religious and political tradition because it seemed to offer a more permanent counterpoint to contingency. Thus Arendt argues that the power of the Platonic Ideas lies in the fact that they “can be used as measure of human behavior because they transcend the sphere of human affairs in the same way that a yardstick transcends, is outside and beyond, all things whose length it can measure” (*BPF* 109).

Against this background, the central characteristic – which is also the central dilemma – of modernity is that we have lost faith in precisely such an ultimate yardstick, while being unable to return to a way of life that preceded its introduction. Modern nihilism can therefore be characterised as a problem of measure; more specifically, the absence of any given measure against which to establish the meaning of the world in which we are constrained to live. In this sense, the modern human being is confronted precisely

⁴ It must be said, however, that Nietzsche does not consider nihilism as a uniquely Western phenomenon. In his account, Buddhism, for instance, is as much a nihilistic religion as Christianity, although this nihilism finds different expression in the two spheres of belief (see *GM* Preface 5, I: 6, II: 21). Nevertheless, in so far as the problem of *modernity* is bound up with the specifically Western tradition of philosophy, religion, and morality, his treatment of modern nihilism is primarily concerned with this tradition.

with the problem of “creat[ing] meaning of the world and himself in proportion to this world without measure” (Blanchot 1985: 122).

What distinguishes modernity from previous ages is therefore not simply the intimation of the possibility of nothingness that underlies all of human existence, but rather, the consciousness of this nothingness as the unqualified absence of meaning. In the preceding chapter this problem was portrayed in terms of a disjunction between experience and understanding, whereby the conceptual categories we employ to make sense of our experiences fail to illuminate the meaning of the conditions under which we perforce must live. It should be clear by now that this crisis of meaning is bound up with the dual aspect of the break with tradition which both Nietzsche and Arendt portray as constitutive of modernity. For, while the break in tradition involves the dissolution of the belief that the meaning of the world can be guaranteed by a truth beyond the world of human affairs, modern human beings still labour in the shadow of the original belief from which the tradition has sprung: what Arendt terms the “age-old theoretical supremacy of Being and Truth over mere appearance, that is, the supremacy of the *ground* that does not appear over the surface that does” (*LMT* 25). Stated differently, modern nihilism can be understood as the condition under which the theoretical schism between truth and meaning, ground and surface, being and appearance has become manifest at the level of lived experience (cf. *GS* 346). In the words of George Kateb (1984: 151): “The difference between now and then is that there is now a feeling of having become lost, and a self-conscious and deliberate expectation that one should not be lost or have to endure the void of meaninglessness”.

This is not the full scale of the problem, however. As Arendt points out, the spurious schism between being and appearance, ground and surface, is merely the obverse of the conflation of two notions that should indeed be kept separate, namely truth and meaning. In her view, our tradition of philosophical thinking is plagued by “the basic fallacy, taking precedence over all specific metaphysical fallacies, [which is] to interpret meaning on the model of truth” (*LMT* 15). The difference between these two activities can be stated in the following terms: to aim at establishing the truth about any state of affairs is to aim at an end-state, where the truth would be known and questioning would cease, while the quest for meaning is “an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, to try to be at home in the world” (*EU* 308). The latter activity is necessarily unending precisely because it “never produces unequivocal results” (ibid. 307). This also means, of course, that the quest for meaning never allows us to be unequivocally at home in the world. In Arendt’s account, it is precisely the uncertainty and equivocality of this world-directed thinking that prompted Plato to turn away from the world of human affairs in the search for an ultimate truth beyond the world. This kind of truth, however, in so far as it is perceived to be singular,

eternal, and unequivocal, “compels the mind” and thereby brings the thinking activity to an end (*BPF* 107). According to Arendt, in so far as the search for truth in this sense has informed our search for meaning, it has been the seedbed of nihilism. She writes in this regard:

What we commonly call “nihilism” – and are tempted to date historically, decry politically, and ascribe to thinkers who allegedly dared to think “dangerous thoughts” – is actually a danger inherent in the thinking activity itself. [...] But that danger does not arise out of the Socratic conviction that an unexamined life is not worth living, but, on the contrary, out of *the desire to find results that would make further thinking unnecessary* (*LMT* 176, my italics).

Nietzsche goes even further in his reflection on the impetus behind the unequivocal resolve to seek the truth – not meaning – in a world that is characterised by multiplicity and semblance: “Charitably interpreted, such a resolve might be a quixotism, a minor slightly mad enthusiasm; but it might also be something more serious, namely a principle that is hostile to life and destructive. – ‘Will to truth’ – that might be a concealed will to death” (*GS* 344). In the light of this statement, modern nihilism can be understood as the becoming-explicit of this will to death at the moment when the will to truth turns against itself, and thereby reveals its own groundlessness (cf. *GS* 357). The point here is therefore that the drive to absolute, unequivocal truth eventually destroys the possibility of further belief in truth in precisely this sense. Under these conditions, we are faced with the antagonism of *not* valuing what we know, and not being *allowed* any longer to value the lies we should like to tell ourselves (*WP* 5, *KSA* 12:5[71]).

From this it is clear that modern nihilism is bound up with the intimation that truth, as ultimate guarantee of meaning, has fallen away, and that this loss of the Platonic “measure of measures” serves to underscore the meaninglessness of the world of appearances. Stated more succinctly, to be a nihilist means to measure the apparent world in terms of its opposite, *even though one no longer believes in it* (cf. Müller-Lauter 1999: 63). It is in this context that Nietzsche offers the well-known formulation: “A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of “in vain” is the nihilist’s pathos – at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of nihilists” (*WP* 585, *KSA* 12:9[60]). The inconsistency here is that the “in vain” *is* the meaning that the nihilist ascribes to the whole of existence, which seems to be the only meaning possible in the absence of any grounds for truth. In this regard, the nihilistic pathos is inextricably caught up in the metaphysical fallacy that underpins the tradition, whereby meaning is modelled on the basis of truth, and thus conceived as a *final* result of thought. Nihilism, then, is a mode of thinking where meaninglessness has the last word, becomes in fact the “truth” as such.

To summarise: According to Nietzsche and Arendt, nihilism can be understood as

a generalised experience of meaninglessness that originates in a traditional mode of evaluation that has instituted a schism between being and appearance on the one hand, and conflated truth and meaning on the other. In so far as modernity is constituted by the rupture with this tradition, this mode of evaluation has lost its force of legitimation. At the same time, in so far as this still seems to be the only framework in which anything could make sense, this mode of evaluation has not lost its hold over the present. Thus Arendt writes that the “paradox of the modern situation” is that “we have lost our tools of understanding. Our quest for meaning is at the same time prompted and frustrated by our inability to originate meaning” (EU 313). We are thus confronted by the disturbing fact that the sources from which the answers to the most urgent moral and political questions of our time should have sprung have dried up: “The very framework within which understanding and judging could arise is gone” (ibid. 316).

1.2 A crisis of evaluation

While nihilism in the widest sense can be described as the experience of the loss of meaning, there are specific aspects to this experience that bear further investigation. One such aspect that features prominently in the analyses of both Nietzsche and Arendt can be described as a crisis of evaluation. This crisis can be simply formulated as a condition under which “values no longer have value by themselves” (Blanchot 1985: 122). The roots of this dilemma can once again be traced to a moral tradition in which everything had value with reference to some ultimate value that required no further justification. It is this tradition which Nietzsche, in the opening paragraphs of *Beyond Good and Evil*, identifies with the judgement that “the things of the highest value must have another, *peculiar* origin – they cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather from the lap of Being, the intransitory, the hidden god, the ‘thing-in-itself – there must be their basis, and nowhere else” (BGE 2).

In this context, the death of God is precisely the loss of faith in this ultimate value, which leaves everything in human experience without any value of its own. Thus the oft-quoted remark of Nietzsche: “*the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer” (WP 10, KSA 12:9[126]). In fact, this formulation indicates that the problem of nihilism is more complex than the mere sense that nothing is of value to us any longer. The real dilemma is that, while we may continue to hold certain things dear, we no longer seem to have any compelling reason for doing so. Nihilism thus entails the devastating realisation that it has become impossible for us to say *why* we love or hate, loathe or desire; in short, why we value anything at all.

This is not to say that the realisation of the loss of an ultimate aim automatically – or at least immediately – translates into suicidal despair. To an important extent, Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s critiques of modernity are directed precisely against the kind of “coping mechanisms” that modern human beings develop for dealing with – or, more correctly, for suppressing – the very intimations of nihilism. We have encountered one such “mechanism” in the previous chapter, namely the endeavour to understand the value of all things in terms of their function within the historical process. Nietzsche and Arendt identify a further coping strategy in this regard, which is to calculate value solely in terms of its social function. By virtue of this functionalisation of value the question of “why?” is circumvented; value simply becomes identified with its function within society, and thus infinitely interchangeable with whatever else might fulfil the same function:

Values as social commodities have no significance of their own but, like other commodities, exist only in the ever-changing relativity of social linkages and commerce. Through this relativization both the things which man produces for his use and the standards according to which he lives undergo a decisive change: they become entities of exchange, and the bearer of their ‘value’ is society and not man, who produces and uses and judges (*BPF* 32-33).⁵

However, this “functional solution” to the problem of the justification of values merely serves to perpetuate the very nihilism it strives to overcome. For the transformation of all values into social values should not be understood as the transposition of value from the transcendent into the immanent realm, whereby value as such is “saved” by making it immanent to things or experiences themselves. Rather, the functionalisation of value means that value is neither immanent in any person, object or experience in the world, nor is it a transcendent yardstick against which such persons, objects or experiences can be measured; it is simply a function of an exchange process, and it is the process itself that is the sole carrier of value. Arendt here credits Nietzsche with the insight that, once the value of anything and everything is understood solely in terms of its function within a process, any questioning of the process itself – which is indeed the impetus behind Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality – simply results in their dissolution (*BPF* 34). In Arendt’s account, Nietzsche’s intended overcoming of nihilism – his proposed “revaluation of all values” – could follow only upon a “*devaluation* of all values” in this sense, in the course of which he makes his way “through the meandering paths of the modern spiritual labyrinth, where recollections and ideas of the past are hoarded up as though they had always been values which society had depreciated whenever it needed better and newer commodities” (*BPF* 32, 34).

⁵ Arendt’s concern here is not so much that the wrong standard (social function) is used to calculate value, and that this “miscalculation” should be put right by employing the right standard. On the contrary, the problem lies with the assumption of the *calculability* of value as such. In her account, as well as in that of Nietzsche, this is precisely the problem of utilitarianism. For a more extensive discussion of this problem, see sections 2 and 3 below.

In the accounts of both Nietzsche and Arendt, however, the term nihilism does not only stand for a sense of loss of meaning or value. It also, and more chillingly, denotes a deliberate longing for destruction, a will to nothingness. Thus Nietzsche writes: “Nihilism does not only contemplate the ‘in vain!’ nor is it merely the belief that everything deserves to perish: one helps to destroy. [...] The reduction to nothing by judgement is seconded by the reduction to nothing by hand” (*WP* 24, *KSA* 13:11[123]).⁶ From a perspective of nearly a century later, Arendt argues that the twentieth century – specifically the “front generation” that came out of the First World War – has witnessed the ripening of this judgement into a political crisis. In her account, after the Great War, nihilism changed its meaning: “it no longer remained in the quiet realm of mere negation or mere skepticism or mere foreboding despair. Instead it began basing itself on the intoxication of destruction as an actual experience, dreaming the stupid dream of producing the void” (*EU* 110). She argues, however, this will to nothingness did not arise out of mere perversity, but rather out of the “justified disgust” with the “ideological outlook and moral standards of the bourgeoisie”, which manifested themselves in a “whole world of fake security, fake culture, fake life” (*OT* 328).

For Arendt, the “fake world” of the bourgeoisie is precisely the world of the nineteenth-century “cultural philistines” who seized upon cultural products only as “currency” with which to buy social esteem (*BPF* 204 ff.). As such, the bourgeoisie represent the ultimate functionalisation, not only of values, but also of human beings, in so far as they represent a class of people who only have meaning with reference to their social position and function. What is more, the bourgeois class, as ultimate proponents of exchange value, have no sense of the *loss* of ultimate standards of value. In Arendt’s account, they truly represent the triumph of the banausic mentality, according to which everything and anything is judged simply in terms of its utility (*ibid.* 215). This utilitarian mentality goes hand in hand with cultural decay, in so far as the functionalisation of values transforms everything that is produced in the world into commodities that can be exchanged for other commodities. In this way, cultural values “lose the faculty which is originally peculiar to all cultural things, the faculty of arresting our attention and moving us” (*ibid.* 204), and become mere matters of exchange, passing from hand to hand and ultimately being “worn down like old coins” (*ibid.*). Nietzsche speaks in this regard of “a kind of *misused and exploited culture*”, which finds expression in the attempt to produce

⁶ In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche investigates the notion of the ascetic ideal, which, in all its manifestations, constitutes a justification for the withdrawal from the immediacy of experience, and thus acts as a prophylactic measure to prevent this “suicidal nihilism” from drawing its ultimate conclusion (*GM* III: 28). On this view, the ascetic ideal therefore provides the means of survival for a type of life that longs for its own destruction.

“as many ‘current’ human beings as possible, in the sense in which one speaks of a coin as being ‘current’, and, according to this view, the more such ‘current’ human beings a people possess, the happier it will be” (SE 6). It is a mentality, in other words, that considers everything – cultural objects as much as human beings – as currency; that is, as a means of exchange.

These insights raise important questions about the relationship between the rise of society and the decline of culture, which will be further addressed in section 3 below. They are relevant in the present context, however, in so far as they offer a preliminary understanding of the reasons for the disgust with contemporary culture and society which transforms the will to nothingness into the willed production of the void, in which, paradoxically, “[d]estruction without mitigation, chaos and ruin as such assumed the dignity of supreme values” (EU 110). For Arendt, as we shall see, this transformation can also be understood as the manner in which modern nihilism, which Nietzsche still primarily relates to the personal and cultural malaise of his time, comes to acquire political significance within the context of totalitarianism.

At this point, it is possible to summarise the problem of nihilism in relation to values as not so much a crisis of evaluation as a crisis of the *justification* of values: to be a nihilist here is to find it impossible to justify holding anything valuable at all, while nevertheless pursuing such justification with every means available. This is precisely the basic structure of nihilism: “that men continue to pursue in their lives and intelligence that which their lives and intelligence make impossible to attain” (Strong 1975: ix). What the preceding analysis of this problem shows, is that, in a world that has lost all reference to a transcendent measure, the nihilistically determined pursuit of grounds for justification ends in what can only be described as an economic rationale: i.e., where individuals and things are of value in so far as they can be exchanged for something else, the value of which in turn derives from its own exchange potential, and so on and so on *ad infinitum*.⁷ Under these conditions, value is neither transcendent nor immanent in things themselves; rather, it is the process of exchange itself that becomes the carrier of value. However, this tactic offers no escape from the problem of nihilism, but merely exacerbates the problem, which, as Blanchot remarks, consists in the very apprehension that “[e]verything not without value nevertheless has no *absolute* value of its own – there is nothing man can rely on, nothing of any value other than the meaning given to it in an endless process” (Blanchot 1985: 121). Thus, the structure of nihilism as a crisis of evaluation is such that the very attempt to escape it produces it anew. In Nietzsche’s formulation: “Attempts to escape nihilism

⁷ Arendt writes further that, under these conditions, “the ‘in order to’ has become the content of the ‘for the sake of’; in other words, utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness” (HC 154). See also WP 666 (KSA 12:7[1]), BPF 78.

without reevaluating our values so far: they produce the opposite, make the problem more acute” (*WP* 28, *KSA* 12:10[42]).

1.3 A crisis of authority

The perceived absence of a transcendent measure of meaning and value is bound up with yet another dimension of nihilistic sensibility, which is best described as the loss of a transcendent locus of authority. In the accounts of Nietzsche and Arendt, the death of God, in so far as it is a calamity that has “wiped out the horizon” and “unchained the earth from its sun” (*GS* 125), also leaves human beings bereft of any authoritative reference point, any shared ground to underpin their understanding of the world or themselves. For Arendt, this loss of authority “is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed [...] has begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever-increasing rapidity from one shape into another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else” (*BPF* 95). It should be added that Arendt does not claim that we have lost authority in general, but rather a specific form of authority derived from the peculiarly Roman conception of *origin* and *foundation*, which, together with the two other Roman notions of religion and tradition, has formed the horizon of meaning in which Western culture could exist and endure (*BPF* 121 ff.). Nihilism, in this context, means that the *origin* of our values and judgements – the “God” who is the embodiment of an ultimate, utterly transcendent truth – has lost its authority and no longer provides a foundation for our current practices and experiences.

One of the most iniquitous consequences of this crisis of authority is the destruction of the grounds for mutual engagement. What is in question here is precisely the authority of the claims we make on one another, the basis on which we appeal to another’s understanding. If authority in this context can be understood as that by virtue of which something “stands as valid for a person simply by virtue of the person who asserts it” (Strong 1988: 158), the loss of authority under conditions of modernity entails the impossibility of being able to recognize in oneself the validity of another’s judgement (*ibid.* p. 163). This insight is clearly present in Arendt’s own essay on authority, where she writes:

If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. (The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place) (*BPF* 93).

What this argument makes clear is that authority necessarily involves a hierarchy. More specifically, for something – or someone – to stand authoritatively for us, it is necessary that we recognise the right of the other to command a response from us. If one accepts that to be addressed by another is at the same time to be called upon to respond, and that this response itself rests on the recognition of the *legitimacy* of the command, Arendt is saying that such legitimacy cannot be the outcome of a process of reasoning or persuasion, nor of the exercise of power. It depends, rather, on the mutual recognition of a preceding relation between claimant and the addressee. Where nothing stands authoritatively for us, where there is no shared locus of meaning, no common measure, it seems impossible to judge the legitimacy of the claims we make on one another.⁸ This formulation should make clear that nihilism as a crisis of authority also involves a crisis of judgement. More specifically, the loss of any common locus of authority at the same time entails the dissolution of any grounds for judging the validity of the judgements and claims of others.

Once again, the problem in this regard is not confined to the loss of authority *per se*, but extends to the particular strategies which modern human beings have evolved in order to deal with this loss. A joint reading of Nietzsche and Arendt reveals three interrelated responses to this crisis, each of which merely serves to exacerbate the problem it seeks to overcome.

In the first place, it is possible to respond to the intimation of the loss of a transcendent locus of authority by suspending the question of authority altogether, and to reduce mutual understanding to an understanding of the formal processes of argumentation, of “consistency of arguing and reasoning”. In so far as the problem is not simply one of the locus of authority *per se*, but precisely of the foundation for mutual understanding, this solution merely exacerbates the problem. The reason for this is simply that the consistency of and similarity between two processes of argumentation in no way guarantees that one has understood the meaning of another’s address (*BPF* 95-96). The point, of course, is not that meaning is altogether *independent* of the rules of logic, but rather that meaning cannot be *derived* solely from the rules of consistency and non-contradiction. Arendt argues in this regard that meaning requires a world common to both speaker and addressee, not merely a set of formal rules of argumentation which structures their discourse. In the absence of such a common world of “unquestionable

⁸ This should not lead us to assume that either Arendt or Nietzsche seeks a return to an authoritative tradition that would in fact provide the common ground from where we can judge and respond to each other’s claims. As will become clear in the chapters to follow, and is explicitly argued in chapter 5, both thinkers try to re-think the possibility of judgement from within this absence of any ultimate authority, without falling back on quasi-objective process thinking or descending into sheer subjectivity. However, this positive aspect of their respective enterprises will only become clear once we have a proper grasp of their critical analysis of all the ramifications of modern nihilism.

meaningfulness”, what remains are strictly private worlds of meaning, where the only generally valid rule is the rule of consistency: a formal principle to govern any multitude of private terminologies (ibid.).

The central problem with the above-mentioned strategy is that it tries to derive the authority of inter-human engagement from the perceived similarity of the structure of human consciousness, on the assumption that this structure is adequately expressed in the categories of logic. However, it is one of the most important tenets of Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s respective philosophies that there is nothing about the structure of consciousness as such that guarantees mutual understanding. Nietzsche suggests in this regard that consciousness is merely the surface manifestation – or more accurately, an interpretation – of the relationship between the instincts (*GS* 11), and that the kind of mutual understanding based on consciousness is merely the translation of what is individual and actual in each human being into general, average categories, whereby the meaning of what is communicated, the content of the original experience, is lost (ibid. 354). Thus Nietzsche refers with approval to Leibniz’s insight “that consciousness is merely an *accidens* of experience and *not* its necessary and essential attribute; that, in other words, what we call consciousness constitutes only one state of our spiritual and psychic world (perhaps a pathological state) and *not by any means the whole of it*” (*GS* 357). Mutual adherence to the categories of logic, therefore, in no way constitutes an unquestionable ground for mutual understanding, if by understanding we intend something more than the recognition of consistency of argumentation.⁹ On the contrary, the reliance on formal rules of reasoning and argumentation to generate understanding is symptomatic of the crisis of authority rather than a means for overcoming it.

Arendt explicitly agrees with Nietzsche in this regard, and argues that the power of logical reasoning is merely a kind of “brain power” that has its analogue in the “labor power” which human beings develop in our “metabolism with nature” (*HC* 171). Like labour, which is solely aimed at the survival of the “human animal”, so mere “brain power”, which manifests itself in logical processes such as deductions from axiomatic premises, subsuming the particular under a general rule, or generating chains of conclusions, is necessary for the survival of the human organism. As such, it involves a “compulsory process” that bears no relation to any concerns beyond the basic concern with survival (ibid. 172). Here it is tempting to cite Nietzsche’s admonition that logic, like bread and water, might be necessary to us, but on its own is a nourishment that is only fit for prisoners (*GS* 82). The point in both cases is that the mere structure of consciousness or the processes of logic are no substitute for authority; they cannot establish a bridge between

⁹ Nietzsche’s point should be refined here. In fact, the categories of logic do constitute the basis for mutual understanding, but then only at the most superficial level: the level of “herd animal”. See also *GS* 111.

human beings who have become fundamentally mistrustful of the validity of each others' judgements. In the views of both Nietzsche and Arendt, in the absence of a shared horizon of meaning, a common locus of authority, the mere exercise of the faculty of reason or command of the rules of logic is insufficient for generating understanding, in so far as the latter requires a pre-existing relationship between speaker and addressee that has nothing to do with logic. In Arendt's formulation: "The notion that innate reason will automatically relate the same thing to all men perverts the faculty of reason into a purely formal mechanism, a "thinking machine", or presupposes a kind of miracle, which never actually happens" (*EU* 442).¹⁰

A second strategy for dealing with the sense that universal validity and justification have become mere chimeras, is to simply accept that no claim, no judgement, no justification, could transcend the immediate sensations of the subject (cf. *BPF* 52-53). This amounts to an attempt to consider the self as the only remaining source of authority; the only reference point for the validity of judgements. Yet, in so far as the crisis of authority turns on the impossibility for acknowledging the validity of another's judgement, the interiorisation of the grounds for validity exacerbates rather than solves the problem of mutual understanding. Arendt provides us with a perspective on the dilemma of subjective judgement in arguing that "judgement, to be valid, depends on the presence of others. Hence judgement is endowed with a certain specific validity but is never universally valid. Its claims to validity can never extend further than the others in which place the judging person has put himself for his considerations" (*BPF* 221). The point, of course, is that in the absence of others – or rather, in the absence of any authoritative relation with others that transcends the limits of subjective interest – judgements are not only devoid of universal validity (which they never had to begin with); they simply have no meaning at all. The subjective turn is therefore not so much an attempted resolution of the crisis of authority as it is a symptom of this very crisis. As will become clear, Nietzsche and Arendt consider this subjectification or "inner immigration" as *the* most pernicious aspect of modernity, in so far as it holds the most far-reaching consequences for our understanding of both self and world. The discussion in the previous chapter has shown that Nietzsche portrays the subjective turn as predicated on a schism between "inner content" and "outer form", which amounts to the dissolution of the former and the reduction of the latter to an empty shell. This predicament, as well as the serious consequences that stem from it, are examined in greater detail in section 2 below.

¹⁰ Arendt also insists: "If, in these circumstances, we assure ourselves that we still understand each other, we do not mean that together we understand a world common to us all, but that we understand the consistency of arguing and reasoning, of the process of argumentation in its sheer formality" (*BPF* 95).

A third and equally problematic strategy for overcoming the crisis of authority inherent in nihilism, and one that is closely allied to the retreat into subjectivity, is to escape into a spurious objectivity. This objectivity can best be described as a kind of detachment, a removal from the immediacy of subjective experience and thus from the arbitrary judgement associated with the privileging of such experience. On the face of it, a pure, detached objectivity appears to be the diametrical opposite of every form of solipsism or arbitrariness, and therefore an attractive solution to the problem of judgement in the aftermath of the loss of tradition and authority. Nietzsche as well as Arendt are at pains to point out that the purported solution does not lie in offering us new grounds for judgement, but rather in a seemingly honourable way of avoiding the call for judgement altogether. In the place of judgement it offers a principle of non-discrimination, of value-free description devoid of all praise and blame (Honohan 1990: 320). As we have seen in the previous chapter, this stance is clearly demonstrated in the attempt to practise modern historiography as an objective science, of which Nietzsche remarks: “it no longer wishes to ‘prove’ anything; it disdains to play the judge and considers this a sign of good taste – it affirms as little as it denies; it ascertains, it ‘describes’ ...” (*GM* III: 26).¹¹

But this response too, instead of saving judgement, partakes of the very nihilism it tries to overcome. Nietzsche says as much when he points out that it is precisely where the cries of “wherefore?”, “in vain!”, “*nada!*” are heard that one encounters this spurious objectivity (*ibid.*). In other words, to consider refraining from judgement as the proper response to the loss of authority in the modern world is to display the nihilistic assumption that the death of God has made judgement impossible. And yet, without judgement, what are we? Nietzsche offers a compelling image of the objective human being lacking in judgement in a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Whatever still remains in him of a “person” strikes him as accidental, often arbitrary, still more often disturbing: to such an extent has he become a passageway and reflection of strange forms and events even to himself. [...] He has lost any seriousness for himself, also time: he is cheerful, *not* for lack of distress, but for lack of fingers and handles for *his* need [...] If love and hatred are wanted of him – I mean love and hatred as God, woman and animal understand them – he will do what he can and give what he can. But one should not be surprised if it is not much – if just here he proves inauthentic, fragile, questionable, and worm-eaten (*BGE* 207).¹²

¹¹ The same passage goes on to criticise another version of historiography belonging to “armchair contemplatives” who smuggle a suspect idealism into their supposed “objectivity”, with Renan being a case in point (*GM* III: 26).

¹² In another revealing passage, Nietzsche criticises Sainte-Beuve for lacking the power of philosophical vision, and “for that reason rejecting, in all the main issues, *the task of passing judgement, holding up ‘objectivity’ as a mask*” (*TI* viii:3, my italics). See also *WP* 79 (*KSA* 12:9[165]).

Nietzsche seems to imply that the suspension of judgement in favour of detached observation indicates a lack of *character*, a loss of self. Arendt, in an unpublished lecture note, pronounces an equally harsh verdict on the non-virtue or even anti-virtue of objectivity minus judgement: “If you say to yourself in such matters: who am I to judge? – you are already lost” (cited in Young-Bruehl 1982: 339). To suspend judgement, in other words, is to lose oneself – and not only oneself. For, so Arendt insists, it is precisely in judging that we establish a relation with the world beyond the limits of the private self, and the refusal or inability to judge therefore also entails an indifference towards the world. What is left in the wake of this unconcern with the world beyond ourselves is the inner experience of worldless subjects who no longer exercise any claim upon one another. In other words, to suspend judgement is to withdraw from the inter-human domain, and all that remains in the absence of such a common world is either subjective preference that remains incommunicable or, quite literally, nothing.

It should be clear, therefore, that neither the trust in faculty of reason or rules of logic, nor inner immigration and emphasis on subjective experience, nor the suspension of judgement in favour of a purely descriptive objectivity, can counter the crisis of authority that belongs to modern nihilism. On the contrary, all of these failed strategies demonstrate the character of nihilism as *crisis*: as a loss of a piece of the world, of the inter-human domain of meaning that simultaneously relates and separates us. This dilemma reveals something of the way in which the nihilistic sensibility perpetuates itself in every attempt to overcome it. The problem with each of the responses identified by Nietzsche and Arendt is that it starts from the basic premise that “this world is not worth anything and nothing in it is worth anything” (Haar 1985: 14), and therefore only draws the kind of conclusions that are allowed by this premise.

There is a further dimension to this problem, however. Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s portrayals of nihilism as the loss of an external locus of meaning, value and authority, together with the attempts to make good this loss, leads us to ask: if our conception of the human – or, let us say, the value of the human – has for the most part been bound up with the belief in a fixed, external measure of the world, what would be the fate of the human when this belief has become lost to us? Nietzsche gives some indication of the nature of this problem in a passage from *The Gay Science*:

Have we not exposed ourselves to the suspicion of an opposition – an opposition between the world in which we were at home up to now with our reverences that perhaps made it possible for us to *endure* life, and another world *that consists of us* – an inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse and worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either/Or: “Either abolish your reverences or – *yourselves!*” The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be – nihilism? – This is *our* question mark (*GS* 346).

As we have seen, the dual structure of nihilism is such that it involves the loss of the belief in any external ground of measure from which to derive the meaning of our immanent existence, while still suffering from the *longing* for such external standard. The passage from Nietzsche alerts us to the fact that the consequences of this schism between the “true world” and the “apparent” world also play themselves out in human beings as they are now. In the formulation of Müller-Lauter (1999: 64), this schism manifests itself in the antagonism between “the last secret longing for the already destroyed ‘truth’” and “man himself, as he clings to it”. In other words, in the absence of a world of unquestionable meaningfulness, in which we were also unquestionably “at home”, what remains is the world in which we actually exist, but which now appears entirely bereft of meaning; a world that is in no way a home to us, and in which it might be impossible to endure our own existence. If our reverence for ourselves has been bound up with our reverence for a realm of truth and Being in which we no longer believe, it seems inevitable that the loss of the latter would have the most devastating consequences for our self-understanding. Against this background, it is possible to conceive of the experience of modern nihilism as the not-so-secret self-disgust of modern humanity. Nietzsche formulates this problem as our “fatality”: that “together with the fear of man we have also lost our love for him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him. The sight of man makes us weary – what is nihilism today if not *that?* – We are weary of *man*” (GMI: 12).

2. The animalisation of the human

A central *leitmotif* in Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s descriptions of modernity is that the modern human being has undergone an animalisation; in other words, that the human has been reduced to its animal qualities, so that human and animal have come to coincide. Thus Nietzsche claims that the modern European “disguises himself *with morality* because he has become a sick, sickly, crippled animal that has good reasons for being ‘tame’; for he is almost an abortion, scarce half made up, weak, awkward” (GS 352); he denounces “the over-all degeneration of man”; the “*animalization* of man into the dwarf animal of equal rights and claims” (BGE 203), and bemoans the fact that “he has become an *animal*, literally and without reservation” (GM III: 25). Arendt, in turn, sees in the rise of modern society and the processes of modern science the “danger signs that man may be willing and, indeed, is on the point of developing into that animal species from which, since Darwin, he imagines he has come” (HC 322).

The preceding inquiry into nihilism has shown that modern nihilism is characterised as much by an “eclipse of transcendence” (HC 254), as by the longing for a

new reference point to replace the transcendent measure that has been lost. The central problem that both Nietzsche and Arendt identify in this regard is not that modern human beings have devised a new transcendent measure from which the world could derive its meaning, but rather, that they have transposed the ultimate reference point for meaning and value into themselves. The problem, in other words, is that the human has become the measure of the human. In what follows, I shall examine to what extent the adoption of this self-reflexive standard amounts to a form of animalisation.

Arendt provides us with an important entry-point into this problem in her examination of the relationship between the discovery of the so-called “Archimedean point” in the sciences and the specifically modern experience of generalised doubt. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Arendt traces the central position which modern thinking accords to doubt – the position formerly occupied by *thaumazein*: the speechless wonder before all that is as it is (*HC*. 273) – to an event in the natural sciences: Galileo’s invention of the telescope, which effectively demonstrated the ever-present possibility of deception in the realm of sense experience (*ibid.* 260 ff.). In her account, this invention itself stemmed from Copernicus’s attempt to think what had never been thought before, namely to imagine that he was “standing in the sun ... overlooking the planets” (*BPF* 273).¹³ The importance of Copernican thinking is that it transformed what had up to then been no more than a philosophical thought-experiment – the search for a perspective outside the human world from which to understand both the universe and ourselves: a so-called “Archimedean point” – into a scientific pursuit. Galileo’s discovery followed from this, and, according to Arendt, offered demonstrable evidence of the possibilities and power inherent in adopting such an Archimedean perspective, at the same time as it generated despair at the untrustworthiness of our senses in delivering true knowledge of the reality in which we exist. That is to say, Galileo provided proof of “both the worst fear and the most presumptuous hope of human speculation, the ancient fear that our senses, our very organs for the reception of reality, might betray us, and the Archimedean wish for a point outside the earth from which to unhinge the world” (*HC* 262).¹⁴

This formulation makes it clear that the realisation of the Archimedean wish is indissolubly tied to the realisation of universal doubt. The knowledge which this external perspective offers at the same time contradicts the knowledge generated by our senses, so that it seems that the more we know from an “Archimedean” position, the less we know from a worldly perspective. Nietzsche, in an unpublished note, formulates this dilemma thus: “We *know* what the world is: absolute and unconditional knowledge is the desire to

¹³ Arendt is quoting from Bronowski, J. *Science and Human Values*. New York, 1956, p. 22. For other references to Copernicus in the same vein, see *BPF* 56, 275 and *HC* 263-4.

know without knowledge” (*KSA* 7:19[146]). The search for the Archimedean point can be understood as precisely such a striving for unconditional knowledge, which ultimately turns against the knower. Stated differently, it is a striving for an absolute measure of the world, but one which ultimately destroys the measurer. Arendt identifies what she considers to be the superlative formulation of this problem in a line by Kafka: “He found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition” (*HC* 248).¹⁵

The purpose of this section is to follow Nietzsche and Arendt in demonstrating how this destructive power of the Archimedean ideal plays itself out in the modern conception of the human. The first point to make in this regard is that the Archimedean ideal does not only apply to science and the flight from the earth into a perspective located in some other point in the universe. For Nietzsche and Arendt, it is also the dominating ideal of modern philosophy, in so far as it is predicated on the flight from the world into the self. This inward turn, particularly as it is manifested in the thinking of Descartes, can be understood as the immediate philosophical response to Galileo’s attestation that our senses might be deceiving us about the nature of reality. Nietzsche offers an account of Cartesian philosophy as an attempt to locate such an inner Archimedean point in the immediate certainty of the “I think” – a certainty which, so it is assumed, could not be derived from our lying senses (cf. *BGE* 16-17). In this regard, the internalisation of the point of certainty can be understood as an attempt to escape from the trust in our sensory experience, in so far as our senses obscure the “real” world from us. As such, the “moral” of Cartesian philosophy is precisely the “denial of all that believes in the senses, of all the rest of humanity: all of that is mere ‘people’” (*TI* ix:1).

Arendt explicitly supports Nietzsche’s analysis of the Cartesian project (cf. *LMT* 49). In her account, Descartes responded to the shock of Galileo’s discovery by “attempt[ing] to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself” (*HC* 254).¹⁶ This privileging of introspection stemmed from the conviction that, since certainty was not to be had in reality as it is given to our senses, it could only come from what we have made ourselves. The operative assumption of Cartesian philosophy is therefore that in introspection the mind is confronted only with its own product, which, unlike the world that is not of our own making, should in principle be knowable to us:

¹⁴ Nietzsche also recognises a link between the discoveries of astronomy and generalised doubt, specifically the doubt about the status of the human being, and, like Arendt, traces this development to Copernicus. Cf. *GM* III: 25, *WP* 1, *KSA* 12:2[127].

¹⁵ “Er hat den archimedischen Punkt gefunden, hat ihn aber gegen sich ausgenutzt, offenbar hat er ihn nur unter dieser Bedingung finden dürfen.”

¹⁶ Arendt finds further traces of this Cartesian project in Marx’s vision of the ideal society as the objectification of the true being, the authentic subjectivity, of individuals (*HC* 254).

Introspection, as a matter of fact, not the reflection of man's mind on the state of his soul or body but the sheer cognitive concern of consciousness with its own content [...] must yield certainty, because here nothing is involved except what the mind has produced itself; nobody is interfering but the producer of the product, man is confronted by nothing and nobody but himself (*HC* 280).¹⁷

However, both Nietzsche and Arendt argue that, far from protecting the last vestiges of human dignity in an indifferent universe, this “inner emigration” (*MDT* 26) is itself a way of “unlearning” how to be human.¹⁸ In Arendt's account, the flight into the self, into sheer subjective givenness, is accompanied by a “so fearful an atrophy of all the organs with which we respond to [the world] – starting with the common sense with which we orient ourselves in a world common to ourselves and others and going on to the sense of beauty, or taste, with which we love the world” that what remains are beings that have lost the capacity to be fully human (*MDT* 21). “Worldlessness”, writes Arendt, “is always a form of barbarism” (*ibid.*). This is the barbarism of sheer interiority, where whatever lies inside modern individuals bears no meaningful relation to whatever lies outside them. In Nietzsche's thinking, such individuals may be crammed with “the ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions, discoveries of others”, which has turned them into “walking encyclopaedias”, rich in knowledge, but a knowledge that only remains “between the covers”, so to speak, and thus incapable of generating meaning in the world: “so it is that the whole of modern culture is essentially subjective: on the outside the bookbinder has printed some such thing as ‘Handbook of subjective culture for outward barbarians’” (*UDH* 7). Barbarism in this context does not refer to mere “uncultivatedness”. Rather, in so far as culture is our mode of intercourse with the things of the world, barbarism primarily refers to an exclusive cultivation of the self in complete indifference towards the world and the things of the world that lie beyond the self (*BPF* 213).¹⁹

The point that both Nietzsche and Arendt want to make in this regard is that the Cartesian attempt to save us from universal doubt by making the self into the locus of certainty manifests one of the most iniquitous characteristics of the modern condition,

¹⁷ For Arendt, this shift in focus from the world as it is given to us to what we have produced ourselves also indicates a shift in the constellation of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. Whereas pre-modern philosophy still considered the life of contemplation as the highest life, modernity is inaugurated by the rise of the emphasis on making and labouring as expressed in the mentality of *homo faber* and the *animal laborans*. For further discussion of this point, see 3.1 and 3.2 below, as well as chapter 4, section 2.1.

¹⁸ This is not to deny that Nietzsche is very often a thinker of solitude, or that his perspective on the problem of modernity is frequently concerned with the fate of our “soul apparatus”. However, as will become over the chapters to follow, this perspective does not amount to taking the interior workings of the subject as a fixed point of reference from where to judge the meaning of the world. On the contrary, Nietzsche's explorations of the “labyrinth of the heart” serve to undermine the notion of a stable subject that somehow stands over and against the world. See chapters 3 and 6 for a more extensive discussion of this point.

¹⁹ In this regard, Nietzsche's *Bildungsphilister* – a term Arendt uses in much the same sense (cf. *BPF* 202) – are paradigmatic of the modern barbarians. For the relationship between modern

namely radical “world-alienation” (*HC* 252). The espousal of an Archimedean point, whether beyond both self and world (Plato) or inside ourselves (Descartes), involves putting oneself at a distance from the world (which is not at all the same as retaining a distance from one’s fellow human beings *within* the world). It trades, in fact, on what Nietzsche identifies as “the juxtaposition of ‘man *and* world’, separated by the sublime presumption of the little word ‘and’” (*GS* 346). For Arendt, this attempt to think outside the limits of a worldly horizon involves the degeneration of “common sense” – originally a kind of the “sixth sense” by means of which all other senses and their private sensations were fitted into the common world – into “an inner faculty without any worldly relationship” (*HC* 283). The loss of this sixth sense is described by Nancy (1997: 5) as the “*end of the sense of the world, which is the end of the world of sense*”. In so far as this loss is happening to us, we find that “[t]here is no longer any sense in ‘a sense of the world’” (*ibid.*). For Arendt, to have lost a sense of the world and thus to fall back on “common sense” as a purely subjective calculation of outcomes, is itself a reduction of the human to the animal: “Here the old definition of man as *animal rationale* acquires a terrible precision: deprived of the sense through which man’s five animal senses are fitted into a world common to all men, human beings are indeed no more than animals who are able to reason, to reckon with consequences” (*HC* 284). Clearly, the migration inwards that is exemplified by Cartesian philosophy may provide us with a kind of certainty that life generally lacks, but it is a certainty that is only fit for animals.

A further aspect of the animalising impetus of the subjective turn in modern philosophy has to do with the *content* of the introspection that is designed to render certain knowledge. According to both thinkers, the sole motivation, meaning, or purpose of existence that can be derived from introspection alone without regard for the world in which these motivations, meanings and purposes are to be played out, is the principle of self-preservation. The point here is that human beings in and of themselves, apart from any worldly relationship, are wholly animal, and therefore share the basic quality of all animal life, which is to enhance their chances of survival by avoiding pain and, derivatively, pursuing pleasure. In the account of both thinkers, the drive to avoid pain itself derives from the basic assumption that life as such, the brute biological fact of existence, is the highest good (cf. *HC* 309, *WP* 35, 260; *KSA* 12:9[107], 10:24[15]). Yet when this means to survival is seen as the sole and all-encompassing principle of human life – which is the only principle that can be wholly derived from introspection – the human is fixed in its animality. This point is underscored by Nietzsche’s claim that, “[a]s long as someone desires life as he desires happiness, he has not elevated his gaze above the horizon of the

subjective culture (which for Nietzsche is always only pseudo-culture) and barbarism, see especially the first two “untimely” essays.

animal, the only difference being that he desires with more awareness what the animal craves out of blind instinct” (SE 5).²⁰ The utilitarian calculation of pleasure and pain for the sake of self-preservation therefore involves the reduction of human life to its lowest common denominator – life itself, in the basic sense of mere survival – which is then elevated to the highest goal of human existence. The problem in this regard is that this utilitarian logic admits of no qualitative distinction; that is to say, it precludes any consideration of the *kind* of life that is to be preserved. And in the absence of such distinction between different modes of existence, according to which some kinds of life are more worth living than others, there is no point in concerning oneself with ways of life that transcend one’s present state. In other words, in so far as self-preservation is construed as an end in itself, human beings are, in a sense, their own prisoners (cf. Van Tongeren 2002). Nietzsche explicitly relates this reduction of the human to its most basic animal qualities to the loss of any conception of transcendence. In this account, the loss of a transcendent reference point outside ourselves has liberated human beings from one kind of absolute determination only to reduce them to another:

Has man perhaps become *less desirous* of a transcendent solution to the riddle of his existence, now that this existence appears more arbitrary, beggarly, and dispensable in the *visible* order of things? Has the self-belittlement of man, his *will* to self-belittlement, not progressed irresistibly since Copernicus? Alas, the faith in the dignity and uniqueness of man, in his irreplaceability in the great chain of being, is a thing of the past – he has become an *animal*, literally and without reservation or qualification, he who was, according to his old faith, almost God (“child of God”, “God-man”) (GM III: 25).

Considered in the light of the discussion up to this point, the utilitarian logic which seeks to paper over the crisis of evaluation that is bound up with modern nihilism, as well as the reliance on the formal structure of consciousness, the reduction of all judgement to subjective preference, and the flight into objectivity that arise in response to the crisis of authority, can all be understood as forms of world alienation and, as such, complicit in the animalisation of the human. It is evident, therefore, that the “eclipse of transcendence” that is signalled by the death of God does not necessarily return human beings to the world of appearances (HC 254). Instead of a worldly horizon of meaning within which it is possible to impart meaning to the human, modernity only knows “a society of men who, without a common world which would at once unite and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass” (BPF 90).

²⁰ Consider also: “It is truly a harsh punishment to live in the manner of an animal, subject to hunger and desires, and yet without arriving at any insight into the nature of this life, and we can conceive of no harsher fate than that of the beast of prey, who is driven through the desert by its gnawing torment, is seldom satisfied, and this only in such a way that this satisfaction turns into agony in the flesh-tearing struggle with other beasts, or from nauseating greediness and oversatiation. To cling so blindly and madly to life, for no higher reward, far from knowing that one is punished or why one is

This formulation should alert us to the fact that the problem of the human is not merely a matter of individual desolation, but that it plays itself out in the realm of modern society. It is this social significance of the dual problem of modern world alienation and the animalisation of the human that constitutes the focus of the following section.

3. The rise of the social

Despite the many differences in aim and approach between Nietzsche and Arendt when it comes to human beings in their collective existence, they share the conviction that modern society is the domain of the collective animalisation of the human being. Stated differently: in so far as modernity is defined by the ideal of a fully socialised humanity, it is also the first age with the collective unmaking of the human as its aim. In the case of both thinkers, this argument is predicated on a sharp distinction between “society” and “culture”. Without attempting to provide an exhaustive account of the concept of culture, I want to argue that both thinkers understand culture as a form of organisation, discrimination and measure, while society is portrayed precisely in terms of disorganisation, dissolution and measurelessness. In this sense, the decline of culture and the rise of society are mutually implicated.

It is also important to distinguish between the descriptive use of the term “society”, as merely the opposite category of “individual”, designating any kind of living-with-others – and “society” or “the social realm” as a specifically modern condition of existence. Briefly stated, modern society can be understood as a collective manifestation of the radical world-alienation that accompanies the transposition of the Archimedean point into the human subject. In the accounts of Nietzsche and Arendt, this collectivity is characterised by uniformity and equalization on the one hand, and by atomisation and loneliness on the other. In both these instances, a thoroughly socialised existence works towards the animalisation of the human.

Before embarking on a more detailed exploration of the two sides of this dilemma, it is important, first, to consider the category of the social under the rubric of delimitation or measurelessness.

3.1 The unnatural growth of the natural

For the purposes of understanding the character of modern society, it is worthwhile to begin with a consideration of Arendt’s definition of society as “the form in

punished in this way, but instead to thirst with the inanity of a horrible desire for precisely this punishment as though it were happiness – that is what it means to be an animal” (UDH 2).

which the fact of mutual dependency 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” (HC 46). In her account, all such activities can be brought together under the heading of “labour”. To labour is to act *only* for the sake of survival, that is, for the sake of life itself. As such, labour does not refer to mere physical exertion. It stands for all activities and concerns that are related to our species existence, the basic “metabolism with nature” that is shared by all organic life. Thus, in the labouring activity, life itself, the sheer fact of our biological existence, is the primary value. Against this background, the social realm can then be understood as the domain in which this biological necessity is accorded the dignity of the highest value. Arendt discovers this tendency in the extent to which “the new social realm transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders; in other words, they became at once centered around the one activity necessary to sustain life” (HC 46).²¹

It is important to note that, for Arendt, the central place accorded to the labouring activity already denotes a later stage in the collective animalisation of the human being. This stage is preceded by the general spread of the utilitarian mentality of *homo faber*, which finds expression in the outlook of the bourgeois “cultural philistine”, who reduces all value to use value, and who treats cultural products as “currency” with which to enhance his social status. Arendt argues that the modern world has seen a shift from “society” in this bourgeois sense, to “mass society”, in which the mass of the population, liberated from exhausting physical labour, but not from the labouring mentality, is incorporated into society.²² This incorporation sees the eclipse of the mentality of *homo faber* by that of the *animal laborans*, for whom not use, but consumption, is the core concern (BPF 198). This shift is no leap, however. On the contrary, mass society is only a large-scale manifestation of traits that are inherent to society as such:

In fact, all the traits that crowd psychology has meanwhile discovered in mass man: his loneliness – and loneliness is neither isolation nor solitude – regardless of his adaptability; his excitability and lack of standards; his capacity for consumption, accompanied by inability to judge, or even to distinguish; above all, his egocentricity and that fateful alienation from the world which since Rousseau is mistaken for self-alienation – all these traits first appeared in good society, where there was no question of masses, numerically speaking (BPF 199).

It should be clear, however, that in criticising the predominance of the mentality of the *animal laborans* and the rise of mass society, Arendt is not denigrating labour as such. In so far as we are first of all living beings, the activity of labour is a necessary response to

²¹ For Nietzsche’s treatment of the tremendous importance accorded to labour and to one’s position as a job-holder as a distinctive feature of modernity, see for instance GS 21, 42, 188, 329.

²² Arendt derives this insight from Edward Shils. Cf. Shils, E. Mass Society and Its Culture. In *Daedalus*, Spring 1960.

the demands made on us by life. The problem, rather, is a problem of limitation, or, more accurately, of a *lack* of limitation. Going back to the Greeks, she offers an account of culture as structured by the boundary between the private and public domain, each of which is the location of specific human activities. Within this structure, the private domain, into which the individual withdraws from the world, is the domain of biological necessity, and thus the proper location of labour (but also of other valuable aspects of human life, such as intimacy and love). The public domain, on the other hand, is the realm in which we appear to one another, not as members of a species or fellow-labourers, but as individuals. Arendt's argument is more nuanced than this, and I shall afford it a more detailed treatment in the following chapters. The important point to grasp in the context of the present discussion is that the specifically modern social realm elevates the very activities and concerns that belong to the private realm to the level of public interest. And, in so far as the domain of the social destroys the boundary between private and public, it removes the limitations that have held the strictly biological concerns in check, so that it becomes a monstrous growth:

The social realm, where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural; and it is against this growth, not merely against society but against a constantly growing social realm, that the private and intimate, on the one hand, and the political (in the narrower sense of the word), have proved incapable of defending themselves (*HC* 47).

The argument, therefore, is not that the private domain exists only in order to conceal all that is shameful from the gaze of the public (although this was very much the Greek understanding of privacy) and that its loss therefore allows others to see what they ought not to see. Arendt offers a more nuanced account on this point: certain aspects of human life can only flourish inside the protective boundaries of the private domain, and others only when they are seen and heard by everybody. With society's destruction of the boundary between public and private, human existence loses the protection of *both* realms, so that the private and intimate become matters of common consumption and therefore shallow or vulgarised, while all genuinely public concerns that are not tied to strictly personal interest – concerns that refer to the world rather than to the self – wither away. While the public realm is the domain of individual distinction, the private realm is the “darker ground” from which we rise into the light of the public, so to speak, but into which we can also retreat from the relentless presence of others (*HC* 71). Without such a private place “to hide in”, human life is robbed of its depth; it literally becomes “shallow” (*ibid.*). Thus, while the social realm arises out of a component of private existence that has burst its bounds, it does not sustain any genuine privacy, and while it seemingly unites human beings in the shared concerns of an immeasurably expanded household, it does not sustain any genuine sense of communality.

In this regard, the rise of the social realm goes hand-in-hand with the radical world-alienation that is a primary characteristic of modernity. If the world designates a realm of “structured sense” that lies between us, but that is nevertheless not identical with any individual place within it, then “society” is precisely the domain that is predicated on the basic sameness of all who belong to it – that is, on our basic biological needs, our species existence. As Arendt writes, “[t]he monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows for only one interest and opinion, is ultimately rooted in the one-ness of man-kind” (*HC* 46). This point harks back to the central insight of the previous section: that any attempt to locate the Archimedean point in the self, to try to derive the meaning of self and world from introspection alone, renders only a sense of the qualities that belong to all animal life, and reveals nothing about the qualities of a specifically *human* life. In so far as modern society is nothing else than this biological life-interest that is expanded beyond all measure, it is a collectivity of worldless subjects, united only by their shared life-interest, and who have no sense for anything – a world, a culture, a politics – that exceeds the limits of this perspective. Stated in even stronger terms: a completely socialised humanity wholly coincides with its animality.²³

It is impossible to consider this degeneration of the human being in the context of modern society without taking into account Nietzsche’s well-known characterisation of “the last man” in *Zarathustra*: “The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small” (*TSZ* Prologue 5). The term “last” here can be understood in two senses: as the most recent, so that the “last man” is a characterisation of the contemporary state of humanity, but also as representing the final stage in the degeneration of the human into animal. In other words, Nietzsche is offering us a picture of a contemporary form of life that is only barely still recognisable as human. In considering the claim that “the earth has become small”, we should recall the essential worldlessness which both Nietzsche and Arendt ascribe to the modern subject. Under these conditions, it is as if everybody simultaneously occupied the same position, without the necessary distances between them that, in Arendt’s terms, simultaneously relate and separate us, thus “prevent[ing] us from falling over each other, so to speak” (*HC* 52). The sociability displayed by this part-human, part-animal is therefore no genuine relationship with his fellows, but a kind of pathological closeness that is nevertheless devoid of any actual

²³ Here it is tempting to suggest that the definition of the human being as a “social *animal*” should be taken quite literally. Arendt refers in this regard to Seneca’s mistranslation of Aristotle’s *zoōn politikon* as *animal socialis*, which substitutes the social for the political. While in the original Latin usage, *societas* still had the overtly political connotation of an alliance between individuals for a specific purpose, it has come to designate a general “society of man-kind”, that is, a society of the human *species*, and not an alliance of persons (*HC* 23-24).

fellow-feeling: “One still loves one’s neighbour and rubs against him, for one needs warmth” (*TSZ* Prologue 5). Nietzsche also identifies a self-contempt combined with a utilitarian impulse in this kind of sociability: “I am not fond of myself”, someone said in explanation of his love for society. ‘Society’s stomach is stronger than mine, it can digest me”’ (*WS* 235). The over-all impression here is of diminished human beings who live in beside each other out of mutual need – more, who live together in morbid proximity – but who have no sense of each other as *other*.

Taking this rendering of “the last man” together with Arendt’s portrayal of modern society as the “unnatural growth of the natural” it is clear that, in so far as the rise of the social entails the decline of the conditions for both private and public existence, it also entails the reduction of human beings to a condition of unequivocal sameness. In this sense, a fully socialised existence goes hand-in-hand with conformity. In Arendt’s view, this conformism is characteristic of the last stage of development of society into a super-family, where the equality of its members resembles the equality of family members before a despotic household head (*HC* 40). In society, this despotic ruler is no single individual or power, but rather a dispersed, “no-man rule” which is no less despotic for the fact that it has no fixed location (*ibid.*). This claim calls for a consideration of the meaning of equality under conditions of modern society.

3.2 *The loss of plurality*

Nietzsche has the last man exclaim towards Zarathustra: “No shepherds and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse” (*TSZ* Prologue, 5). Elsewhere Nietzsche refers to “the instinct of the herd, i.e., that of the *sum of zeroes* – where every zero has “equal rights”, where it is virtuous to be zero” (*WP* 53, *KSA* 13:14[40]). The emphasis in both cases is on the elevation of sameness to a social virtue, and the assumption that uniformity, the very lack of distinction, is the basis of social equality.

What both Nietzsche and Arendt are concerned to show is that the infinite replication of sameness does not amount to equality, if equality is understood as a *positive* virtue in which human beings genuinely consider each other as equals worthy of mutual respect. At most, the enforced conformity that is the hallmark of modern society diminishes everyone to their membership of a species – that is, as representatives of Mankind – and calls this equality. In order to understand the difference between these two kinds of equality, it is worthwhile to consider Nietzsche’s treatment of envy, a phenomenon which, in his account, arises precisely under conditions where there is a general concern with equality:

The envious man is conscious of every respect in which the man he envies exceeds the common measure and desires to push him down to it – or to raise himself up to the height of the other: out of which there arise two different modes of action which Hesiod designated as the evil and the good *Eris* (*WS* 29).²⁴

The difference here seems to lie between a conception of equality that takes the common measure as a standard with which one ought to comply – that is to say, as a standard that *makes* common – and an equality that arises between those who attempt to distinguish themselves from the common measure. Arendt expands on the difference between these two kinds of equality in contrasting the conception of equality that belongs to modern society with the notion of equality that belonged to Greek antiquity. In her account, in modernity it is *society* itself that exerts the equalizing force, that is, it literally makes its members “equal” by enforcing uniformity. In this, modernity stands in marked contrast to antiquity, where *individuals* had to prove themselves equal to one another through contest rather than conformity. Equality in the latter sense was sustained 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 (*aien aristeuein*)” (*HC* 41). In Arendt’s account, it is important to recognise that, for the Greeks, such distinction could only take place in the public realm; that is to say, outside the household sphere of relationships based on love, intimacy and need, and which therefore excluded competition. Moreover, Greek antiquity also considered the private realm to be characterised by the essential inequality between the head of the household and the rest of its members, both family members and slaves. In so far as modern society is precisely the measureless expansion of the household, it retains the structure of a general inequality of all before the household head. The only difference is that this despotic rulership in society is no longer localised in a person, but is really “rule by nobody”. Nevertheless, “this nobody, the assumed one interest of society as a whole in economics as well as the assumed one opinion of polite society in the salon, does not cease to rule for having lost its personality” (*HC* 40).

Arendt argues further that, in contrast with antiquity, where it was precisely the public realm that was reserved for individuality, modern society is characterised by the fact that individuality has withdrawn within (*ibid.* 41). In other words, in the face of the tremendous equalising force of society, modern human beings can only assert a claim to individuality in so far as they are able to remove themselves from the social domain; more, to the extent that they set themselves up in opposition to society as a whole.²⁵ In this sense,

²⁴ Consider also: “The thirst for equality can express itself either as a desire to draw everyone down to oneself (through diminishing them, spying on them, tripping them up) or to raise everyone else up (through recognizing their virtues, helping them, rejoicing in their success)” (*HAH* I: 300).

²⁵ It is possible, I think, to understand Nietzsche’s esteem for solitude and his concomitant disparagement of society as a symptom of and a response to this very problem. For further reference to his treatment of the question of solitude, see chapter 6, section 3.

modern “individuality” is a characteristic of the individual in isolation, whereas the kind of individual distinction known by the Greeks was related to one’s entry into a public realm where one could measure oneself against one’s fellows. This insight should once again alert us to the essential worldlessness of life in modern society: the absence of a shared domain in which one can appear to others in word and deed, but from which one can also withdraw. In so far as contemporary human beings are *always already* in society, they exist in a state of limbo, in which neither appearance – in the sense of distinguishing oneself from others – nor the withdrawal from appearance – in the sense of concealing oneself from others – is strictly speaking possible

Moreover, in so far as the modern notion of equality is predicated on the relations of the household, it also tends to value regularised behaviour above the unpredictability of action. At issue here is the spontaneity of action, the fact that the words and deeds by which we show ourselves to others cannot simply be predicted on the basis of what went before, and do not express any general rule of human conduct. Action, rather, is the eruption of the extraordinary into the realm of the ordinary, and thus exerts a destabilising force on the commonplace.²⁶ It is precisely this subversive quality of action that posits a threat to the stability of the household, and which, for the same reason, must be excluded from society. As Arendt writes:

It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society 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 (HC 40).

The fact of society’s denigration of action and the value accorded to behaviour illuminates a further aspect of the specifically modern condition of equality, namely that it does not only depend on the sameness, but also on the changelessness of its members. Nietzsche argues in this regard that the value accorded to changelessness is indicative of the extent to which the individual is understood in terms of his or her continuing social utility:

Society is pleased to feel that the virtue of this person, the ambition of that one, and the thoughtfulness and the passion of the third provide it with a dependable *instrument* that is always at hand; society honours this *instrumental nature*, this way of remaining faithful to oneself, this unchangeability of views, aspirations, and even faults and lavishes its highest honours upon it (GS 296).

For Arendt, the clearest indication that spontaneous action has been eclipsed by this kind of instrumental behaviour – in which the individual remains changeless with reference to society, or only changes with society, which amounts to the same thing – lies in the rise of economics to the status of full-blown science. The predictive certainty of

modern economic theory, together with its technical tool, statistics, could only be secured under conditions where “men had become social beings and unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior, so that those who did not keep the rules could be considered asocial or abnormal” (*HC* 42). Nietzsche, in an early note, similarly decries the social uniformity which manifests itself in statistical law: “You should have kept statistics in Athens! Then you would have sensed the difference! The more inferior and un-individual the masses are, the more rigorous the statistical law. If the multitude has a more refined and nobler composition, then the law immediately goes to the devil” (*KSA* 7:29[41]).²⁷

What both these criticisms show is that modern society, in so far as it is a collectivity that is bound together neither by mutual distinction or fellowship, but rather by the sameness of needs and behaviour, allows for the significance of an individual life to be derived from supra-individual laws and processes. This functionalisation of the individual, together with the conflation of equality and sameness, point to what Nietzsche as well as Arendt consider to be the principal misfortune of a fully socialised existence, namely the destruction of plurality. It is a central tenet of Arendt’s that plurality – “the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world” (*HC* 7) – is one of the basic conditions of human existence, as opposed to the primary characteristic of our species existence, which is sameness. Plurality, in other words, is the specifically human way of being alive: “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (*ibid.* 8). It is thus the shared condition of plurality that denotes our relatedness to our fellow human beings, but this relation is realised precisely in the extent to which we distinguish ourselves from one another. Arendt derives this conception of plurality from the dual Roman notions of “*inter homines esse*, to be among men”, which stood as a synonym for living, meaning to be “aware of the realness of world and self”, and “*inter homines esse desinere*, to cease to be among men”: the Roman synonym for dying (*LMT* 74; *HC* 7). If we extrapolate from this line of reasoning, it is possible to understand the endlessly replicated sameness that characterise human beings under conditions of modern society as destroying the very quality of plurality that it a condition of our humanity. In this sense, modern, social existence is indeed a kind of death.

Nietzsche takes the same line in this regard, but with added emphasis on the loss of plurality as the loss of *distance* between human beings, which in turn reveals the modern age as an age of decline:

‘Equality’, a certain actual rendering similar of which the theory of ‘equal rights’ is only the expression, belongs essentially to decline: the chasm between man and

²⁶ For a consideration of these features of action, see the discussions in chapter 3, section 1.2 and chapter 4, section 2.2.

²⁷ Consider also: “Statistics does not deal with the great active individuals on the stage of history, but only with the supernumeraries, the people, etc.” (*KSA* 7:29[139]).

man, class and class, the multiplicity of types, the will to be oneself, to stand out – that which I call *pathos of distance* – characterizes every *strong* age. The tension, the range between extremes is today growing less and less – the extremes themselves are finally obliterated to the point of similarity. [...] *Declining* life, the diminution of all organizing power, that is to say the power of separating, of opening up chasms, of ranking above and below, formulates itself in the sociology of today as the *ideal*” (TI ix:37).²⁸

In so far as the lack of distance between individuals is precisely a lack of the necessary boundaries which distinguish individuals from one another, this passage once again alerts us to the measurelessness that characterises modern society.²⁹ For Nietzsche, it is this very lack of measure, and the concomitant “diminution of all organizing power”, that reveals modernity as an age of decline. In this sense, the loss of plurality is bound up with what he calls “this most profound of all modern tendencies – the tendency to implode or explode” (SE 4). Moreover, if we recall Arendt’s assertion that it is precisely the distances between us which together comprise the world (MDT 38), it should be clear to what extent the loss of plurality coincides with the essential worldlessness of modern society.

3.3 Atomisation and mass society

The discussion of Nietzsche’s “last man” in the previous sections has already hinted at a further dehumanising aspect of existence under conditions of modern society, namely atomisation and its correlate, loneliness. What has become clear is that, while society collapses the distances between human beings, the resulting proximity, in which the private and intimate take the place of public interest, in no way constitutes a genuine relationship between individuals. Instead, the social realm offers a kind of collective existence in which individuals, despite their apparent closeness, in fact have no common bond, no sense of a world that encompasses and exceeds their separate existences. Under these conditions, it is indeed possible to speak of a society that is made up of greater and greater numbers of isolated individuals, who, although they share the experience of isolation, nevertheless cannot be said to share in any kind of fellowship.

The point here is that what relates human beings is a world that lies between them, and not the hidden landscape of subjective experience that lies inside them. As Nietzsche

²⁸ Elsewhere Nietzsche claims that “[i]t is not in how one soul approaches another but in how it distances itself from it that I recognize their affinity and relatedness” (HAH II: 251).

²⁹ As will become clear, Nietzsche and Arendt both consider our distance from one another as a precondition for any recognition of relatedness. What is more, both thinkers do not only treat plurality as a matter of the distances and difference *between* individuals, but also *within* them, while emphasising the element of conflict or tension between the elements that make up this plurality. This point will be taken up at various points in the chapters to follow and receives lengthy consideration in the course of the discussion on judgement and worldliness in chapter 5.

and Arendt repeatedly emphasise, there is no road from the inner life of the subject – even if this life is the same in every case – back to the world we share with others. In Arendt’s account, the worldlessness of the individual members of modern society means that “[t]hey are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times” (*BPF* 58). This multiplication of the same experience merely amounts to the limitless expansion of a single perspective, at the cost of the plurality of perspectives that is necessary to sustain the world: “The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective” (*ibid.*). In Arendt’s description, this state of affairs where human beings continue to live together without any reference to a common world constitutes an “atomized society” made up of a collectivity of isolated individuals (*EU* 356).

This claim belongs in the same category as Nietzsche’s own diagnosis of the central disease of modernity. He writes in this regard:

We live in the age of the atom, the age of atomic chaos. In the Middle Ages inimical forces were more or less held together and to some extent assimilated to one another by the church and the strong pressure it exerted. When this bond tears and the pressure subsides, each of these forces rises up against all the others (*SE* 4).

Thus, in so far as modern society is characterised precisely by the subsidence of the unifying pressure, not only of religion, but of an entire traditional hierarchy of evaluation and authority, it displays an impetus towards disintegration and decay. Moreover, in light of the fact that modern existence seems to offer no basis on which to renew any kind of common bond between individuals, this process of dissolution has an unstoppable momentum: “The revolution – the atomic revolution – cannot possibly be avoided: what are the smallest indivisible elements of human society?” (*SE* 4). In this sense, modern society can be seen as a testing ground for the reduction of human plurality to its most basic constitutive elements – a collectivity of “elementary particles”³⁰ for whom “the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them” (*HC* 53).

Like Nietzsche, Arendt attributes an inner momentum to the process of atomisation. In her account, the increasing isolation of individuals results in the formation of the modern masses: “the mass-men who lack all communal relationships” but who “nevertheless offer the best possible ‘material’ for movements in which people are so closely pressed together that they seem to have become one” (*EU* 406). Clearly, then, this

³⁰ Here I have in mind the novel by Michel Houellebecq with the same title, which is indeed a harrowing account of modern existence under conditions of such disgregation or “atomic chaos”. See *The Elementary Particles* (*Les particules élémentaires*), trans. Frank Wynne. USA: Knopf, 2000. The British translation of the title is, appropriately, *Atomised*.

atomisation should be understood as the obverse of the relentless proximity of a fully socialised existence. At the same time, Arendt portrays the increasing isolation of individual elements of society and the consequent formation of the masses in terms of the disintegration of society into “mass society”, which mirrors the shift from the mentality of *homo faber* to that of the *animal laborans*. It should be emphasised, however, that it is society itself, in so far as it is a collectivity based on no common bond, but merely on the replication of private interests, that gives birth to the modern masses. The modern phenomenon of the mass, in other words, is merely a later and more extreme manifestation of the world-alienation characteristic of the social realm.

In considering some of the defining characteristics of the atomised member of mass society, it is helpful to focus once again on Nietzsche’s characterisation of the “last man”. In his account, apart from the uniformity and pathological closeness that characterise this diminished being, the last man is primarily concerned with his own happiness. This happiness has nothing to do with delight in existence, however; it is simply the contentment with minor pleasures: “ ‘One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.’ ‘We have invented happiness’, say the last men, and they blink” (*TSZ Prologue*, 5). Arendt equally identifies the demand for happiness as a dominant concern of the modern member of the masses, in so far as mass society exhibits the mentality of the *animal laborans*. The latter emphasis leads her to posit that the kind of contentment that would constitute happiness for this animalised human being can no longer be achieved. She therefore goes further than Nietzsche in arguing that the modern masses lack the means to the happiness they are seeking with such urgency:

The universal demand for happiness and the widespread unhappiness in our society (and these are but two sides of the same coin) are among the most persuasive signs that we have begun to live in a labor society which lacks enough laboring to keep it contented. For only the *animal laborans*, and neither the craftsman nor the man of action, has ever demanded to be ‘happy’ or thought that mortal men could be happy (*HC* 134).

While the happiness of labour may not be universally available under conditions of modern society, there remains, however, one kind of happiness that is available to the atomised elements of mass society irrespective of all worldly relationships. In Arendt’s account, this is the entirely private happiness related to the “absence of pain” (*HC* 112). This kind of limited happiness should not be confused with either passing “good fortune” or the much more expansive notion of *eudaimonia*, which, in Arendt’s reading, indicates both a lasting state of “living well” and the judgement of a life in its entirety after it has come to an end: to have “lived well” (*HC* 193).³¹ The difference is that both the contingent

³¹ Arendt further argues in this regard that *eudaimonia* “means literally something like the well-being of the *daimon* who accompanies each man throughout his life, who is his distinct identity, but

experience of good fortune and the lasting state of being *eudaimōn* have to do with how a person fares in the world, as well as with how an individual life is perceived by others, while the happiness that is tied to the absence of pain is independent of any engagement with the world and one's appearance to others.

Here one should recall the earlier discussion on the relationship between the drive to self-preservation and the animalisation of the human, in which it emerged that the only experiences available to the human being in the absence of all others are indeed the basic sensations of pleasure and pain, of which pain is primary, and pleasure derivative. It now becomes clear to what extent the concerns and experiences of the elements of mass society partake of this animalisation. This is indeed the relevant point in both Nietzsche's and Arendt's treatment of the happiness belonging to the "last man" and the "mass man": the contentment with small pleasures within the confines of a "regard for one's health" and the concern with the "absence of pain" are no more than the basic concerns of all animal life. In other words, in so far as the isolated members of mass society pursue happiness in this sense they coincide with their animality. It is no accident, therefore, that Nietzsche persistently identifies mass existence as "*herd existence*".

A further consequence of the general emphasis on the gratification of personal needs and the avoidance of suffering for the sake of private contentment is an exclusive concern with the present, and a concomitant disregard for a future that could bring "current" human beings no direct or indirect advantage. In the same passage in which he discusses the "atomic revolution" of modern society, Nietzsche relates the pursuit of happiness to this single-minded attendance to only immediate needs:

They think of themselves with a haste and exclusiveness with which human beings never before thought of themselves; they build and sow for their own day; and the pursuit of happiness is never greater than when the quarry must be caught between today and tomorrow – because the day after tomorrow the hunting season may end forever (SE 4).

This unconcern with the future and emphasis on immediate gratification at the same time evinces an indifference towards any kind of worldly permanence which both precedes and outlasts the fleeting appearance of mortal life. The previous chapter has already examined this problem in connection with the distinctly modern phenomenon of the loss of the concern with immortality. The present consideration shows to what extent this loss is tied to the privatisation and subjectification of human existence and the concomitant rise of mass society. Nietzsche further differentiates between the self-interested pursuit of happiness and the kind of human endeavour that expresses itself in a culture. Specifically, he insists that the purpose of culture is precisely not to guarantee the

appears and is visible only to others" (HC 193). Given the isolation and worldlessness of the modern masses, this state of existence is not only impossible under conditions of modern society; it is inconceivable even as an ideal.

happiness of those who belong to it: “Its aim points beyond worldly happiness; its aim is the production of great works” (*KSA* 7:19[41]).

Arendt similarly distinguishes between the private pursuit of happiness and those works and endeavours and that transcend the life-interest of those with whom they originate. And like Nietzsche, she considers the loss of the concern with permanence and durability to be a distinguishing feature of modernity: “Through many ages before us – but now not any more – men entered the public realm because they wanted something of their own or something they had in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives” (*HC* 55). We have lost the desire for permanence to the extent that the public realm has been taken over – and therefore also undermined – by the concerns of the *animal laborans*. As was discussed earlier, the labouring activity, and the mentality that accompanies it, expresses our basic metabolism with nature, and therefore exhibits the basic rhythm of growth and decay that belongs to all organic life. As such, the *animal laborans* exists in an endless cycle of labour and consumption, which leaves no tangible thing behind (*ibid.* 131). Another way of making this point is to say that the labouring activity in itself – the basic striving to keep alive – does not give rise to any lasting work or memorable deed, and therefore is not worthy of remembrance. Labour, in other words, is a corollary of life as such, and not of a specifically *human* life. Arendt rightly acknowledges that, without labour, we, as living beings, could never survive. However, she goes on to argue that “without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human” (*HC* 135). Yet a durable world that is a precondition for a fully human life is not an unqualified good. Both Nietzsche and Arendt are concerned to show that, under conditions of a perfectly humanised world in which we are perfectly at home, human life might once again *cease* to be human. It is this dilemma that comes under view in the following section.

4. The unmaking of the human

While the animalisation of the human we have examined so far has been bound up with the withdrawal from the world into the self, both Nietzsche and Arendt identify a further, equally dangerous response to the experience of nihilism, namely the drive to transform the world into a work of human hands in which we might finally be at home; that is to say, to remake the world in our own image and thereby redeem ourselves from the alienation, atomisation and homelessness that plague modern existence. In the accounts of both thinkers, this desire translates into attempt to master – more, to fabricate – the conditions of human existence once and for all. Arendt refers to this endeavour as a kind of

“activist or radical humanism that does not compromise on the old claim that Man is the highest being for man, that man is his own God” (EU 439). The impetus that animates this activist humanism is the desire to undo or overcome the given limitations that condition human existence, and thus to transform reality into the authentic expression of human nature:

In this activist humanism, politics appears as the sphere where, through the concerted efforts of many, a world may be built that constantly defies and gives the lie to the human condition; this, in turn, will permit human nature, conceived as that of the *animal rationale*, to develop to the point where it builds reality, creates conditions of its own. Men, then, will move in an entirely humanized, man-made reality, so that the absurdity of human life will cease to exist – not, of course, for the individual, but for mankind in the midst of the human artifice (ibid. 439-440).

In Arendt’s account, this humanising endeavour finds contemporary philosophical expression in the French existentialists’ attempt to “defy God or the gods by living as though the limitations of [their] condition do not exist” (EU 440). Yet this desire does not only play itself out in the personal adventures of Sartre, Malraux and Camus. Far more ominous is the extent to which the desire to master the conditions for human life has found expression in modern science and in totalitarian politics (or, as Arendt would say, the totalitarian destruction of politics). In both cases, this drive to mastery “attempts to change human nature by radically changing traditional conditions”, which, for Arendt, amounts to an attempt to “condition” human beings anew, but now with human beings themselves doing the conditioning (ibid.).

In this last section of the chapter, I shall examine Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s treatment of this drive to mastery in relation to modern science and – in the case of Arendt – in relation to the political horror of totalitarianism. As we shall see, the problem in both cases is not a matter of the withdrawal from the world into the self, but rather of the transformation of the world to conform to human requirements. What will become clear in the course of this inquiry is that this endeavour results in the loss of the human from the other direction, so to speak. That is to say, the attempt to fabricate the conditions for human existence results in the unmaking of the human just as much as the attempt to determine the meaning of the human in complete isolation from the world.

4.1 Modern science and the drive to universal mastery

Nietzsche and Arendt are both concerned to show that the dominant pathos of modernity is not necessarily that of quietism and despair. The death of God and the rupture of tradition do not signal the end of our desire to find a home in the world, but merely suspend all belief that such a home could be the gift of a power higher than ourselves. In the absence of belief in any pre-determined order, meaning and limitation, the world – and

indeed human beings themselves – now appears susceptible to the forming power of human hands in a way that the world, as the eternal text of God, and we, as his creatures, never could. Apart from freeing us from a supra-human indebtedness, the break with tradition therefore also opens the way for the most relentless human mastery based on the assumption that there are no longer any given limits to what human beings may, in good conscience, do: where “nothing is true, everything is permitted” (*TSZ* IV: 9; *GM* III: 24).³² Arendt takes this further by arguing that modernity is not only predicated on the belief that everything is permitted in a moral sense, but also on the conviction that everything is indeed *possible* (BPF 87). Modern technical mastery of nature now means that “we can take almost any hypothesis and act upon it, with a sequence of results in reality which not only make sense but *work*” (*ibid.*). Thus, in a world devoid of divine illumination, human beings have the incentive and, by means of modern science, for the first time also the capacity, to re-make the world in their own image (which is not to be dissociated from the capacity to *unmake* the world in its entirety). This problem is well summarised by Blanchot (1985: 123):

[P]resent-day man believes himself to be definitive, stable in his nature, happy in the small circle closed around himself, resigned to the spirit of revenge; yet, pushed by the impersonal force of science and by the force of that event which liberates him from values, he possesses a power in excess of himself – even without trying to surpass himself in that power. Present-day man is a man of the lowest rank, but his power is that of a being who is already beyond man: how would this contradiction not harbor the greatest danger?

In his fine, if critical, study of Arendt, George Kateb (1983: 163) suggests that the specifically modern drive to mastery is itself an expression of another drive, namely resentment against the human condition as such, in so far as this condition is constituted by limitation. While this resentment can be traced back at least to Plato, through whom it has infected the greater part of our tradition, modernity offers the possibility of doing away with the limitations that give rise to resentment by overcoming this condition once and for all. The means for this overcoming is provided by modern science, which is indeed capable of transforming the world into a product of human hands – something we have made ourselves, and thus can also unmake – to an unprecedented degree.

Like Arendt, Nietzsche traces the drive to mastery to resentment of the limitations that condition human existence. In his account, this resentment finds expression in the ascetic ideal, which he explicitly – although not exclusively – associates with modern science (*GM* III: 24, 25). In so far as scientific endeavour takes its direction from this ideal, it is predicated on a “hatred for the human, and even more of the material, of the senses, of reason itself, a fear of happiness and beauty, a longing to get away from all appearance,

³² This phrase appears only twice in Nietzsche’s published writings, both times in quotation marks. It would therefore be incorrect to assume that he intends this as a straightforward declaration.

change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself”, which is at bottom “*a will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life” (ibid.: 28). Thus, the scientific-ascetic domination of life is in fact and attempt on the part of degenerate life to master the conditions for its own existence once and for all (cf. *GM* III: 13). In Nietzsche’s account, the primary quality of this distinctly modern drive to mastery is that of *hubris*, in the sense of overreaching, exceeding established boundaries, in short: measurelessness:

[M]easured even by the standards of the ancient Greeks, our entire modern way of life, insofar as it is not weakness but power and consciousness of power, has the appearance of sheer *hubris* and godlessness: for the longest time it was precisely the reverse of those things we hold in honor today that had a good conscience on its side and God for its guardian. Our whole attitude toward nature, the way we violate her with machines and the heedless inventiveness of our technicians and engineers, is *hubris*; our attitude toward god as some alleged spider of purpose and morality behind the great captious web of causality, is *hubris* [...]; our attitude toward *ourselves* is *hubris*, for we experiment with ourselves in a way we would never permit ourselves to experiment with animals and, carried away by curiosity, we cheerfully vivisect our souls: what is the “salvation” of the soul to us today? (*GM* III: 9).³³

Here, not only nature and the world, but also the self, becomes the object of experimentation and fabrication. This claim harks back to Nietzsche’s earlier pronouncement in *Beyond Good and Evil* 224 that *measure* is precisely what is most alien to modern human beings. And for Nietzsche, it is in this desire for the infinite and unmeasured, that is, for absolute delimitation, as much as in its animalisation, that modern humanity reveals its utter lack of culture, its barbarism (*BGE* 224). The point here is clear: were this relentless drive to mastery to succeed absolutely, it would not liberate the human from the shackles of its worldly condition, but rather destroy the very limitations that make it possible to conceive of the human at all.

Arendt, in turn, recognises the hubris belonging to its limitless humanization of the world in Heisenberg’s claim that, to look at the world through the optics of modern science is to encounter only oneself (*HC* 261; *BPF* 277). What modern science reveals to us is not so much a “brave new world” stripped of metaphysical error as the product of our own hands. The concern called up in this regard is that a world that is completely, unconditionally human would lack any measure of the human. To encounter only oneself – the products of one’s own hands – in all the world is to lose oneself, for where *everything*

³³ Although the overall tone of the passage is critical – particularly since Nietzsche is contrasting the modern age and culture to that of the Greeks – the present paragraph ends with the question whether this experimentation with *ourselves* does not entail that we “grow day-by-day more questionable, *worthier* of asking questions; perhaps also *worthier* – of living?” (*GM* III: 9). Nietzsche’s own question indicates that he considers it possible that to remain questioning towards ourselves might enhance rather than diminish human existence. This matter receives extensive consideration in chapter 3.

is human, nothing is. One who lives in such an infinitely humanized world is confronted by the experience that, “[t]he moment he wants what all ages before him were capable of achieving, that is, to experience the reality of what he himself is not, he will find that nature and the universe ‘escape him’”; that is, that whatever is not human becomes unrepresentable except by means of the experiments and measuring instruments that are the products of human fabrication (*HC* 288).

The important point with regard to both analyses of the origins and manifestation of the modern attempt at mastering all limitation and contingency is that the intended cure is in fact a perpetuation of the disease. The attempt to completely transform the world into a product of human hands does not overcome the sense of estrangement from and resentment towards the world that is the hallmark of modern nihilism. On the contrary, this strategy in fact perpetuates the original cause of resentment. As Kateb points out, “to be totally immersed in a situation in which everything is man-made and recognizable as the result of human effort successfully achieved is to be cut off from nature, but not to have found oneself or man” (1983: 161). Thus, the attempt to overcome the limitations which worldly existence place on us by transforming the latter into the product of the former can only offer a spurious cure for human beings who suffer from their own humanity: “The extreme of the human is thus unnatural; the abolition of otherness in its otherness, in its strangeness, is the *triumph* of alienation” (*ibid.*).

If, as Nietzsche and Arendt maintain, the human only acquires form and meaning through limitation while at the same time *never* wholly coinciding with any such limitation, it is clear that the modern attempt to humanise the world completely is itself a form of “dehumanisation”. In so far as the world is the context of the limitation and transcendence that constitute the human, this concurrence, this absolute lack of distance between self and world, means in effect that the world ceases to exist for us, and with it, the restraining *and* enabling conditions for becoming human.

For Arendt, it is important to recognise that the dehumanisation that follows from the modern attempt to transform the world into a product of human was not confined to the realm of modern science. The 20th century has seen the same hubris that informs the modern scientific enterprise – the credo that “everything is possible” – manifest itself in the totalitarian project of “fabricating mankind” (*cf.* Villa 1999: 128-129). The present consideration of the problem of the meaning of the human under conditions of modern nihilism would not be complete without a more extensive inquiry into Arendt’s portrayal of totalitarian domination as the most radical expression of the modern drive to mastery over the human condition, coupled with the most extreme disregard for human plurality.

4.2 *Totalitarianism and the fabrication of the human*³⁴

In Arendt's account, the totalitarian phenomenon is predicated on a "radical nihilism", which she understands as "the denial of everything given" (*BPF* 34). This denial springs from the resentment of the limiting conditions which everything that we haven't made ourselves place on human existence, together with the hubristic drive to overcome these limitations by transforming the world into a product of our own hands. While, as we have seen, this mentality animates much of the modern scientific endeavour, it finds its most iniquitous expression in the central idea of totalitarianism: "This is the belief in the omnipotence of *man* and at the same time the superfluity of *men*; it is the belief that everything is permitted and, much more terrible, that everything is possible" (*EU* 354). A further aspect of totalitarian domination, identified by both Nietzsche and Arendt, and already considered in the previous chapter, is a belief in the supra-human forces of Nature or History that has replaced the faith in an authoritative tradition. Totalitarian regimes, then, are animated by the desire to remove the obstacles that hinder the free movement of these forces, whether the relatively durable world of cultural or political institutions or unpredictable human actions (cf. Villa 1999: 129).

Totalitarian rule unites these two seemingly contradictory aspects – the drive to fabricate the world according to a human pattern and to force it into submission to supra-human laws of movement – in the single drive to fabricate mankind in conformity with the laws of Nature or History. In executing this aim, Arendt argues, totalitarian domination depends on terror. It is through the employment of terror on a massive scale that the totalitarian regime "eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the 'parts' for the sake of the whole", and thereby fabricates the very "mankind" that is supposed to be the ultimate aim of these supra-human laws themselves (*OT* 465). In this regard, totalitarian domination can be said to aim at nothing so much as "the 'perfection' of the human species", which at the same time "entails the destruction of humanity, both as a concept and as the phenomenological reality of unique individuals" (Villa 1999: 130-31). This "perfection" entails that human beings be reduced to their membership of a species, while this species "mankind" in turn is transformed into the carrier and embodiment of supra-human laws. In this sense, totalitarianism can be said to aim at the "identification of man and law" (*OT* 462).

³⁴ The muted presence of Nietzsche in this analysis should not be taken as a tacit acknowledgement that his own vision of politics is too dangerous to introduce here. The reason for focusing on Arendt's analysis in this section is simply that Nietzsche simply had no knowledge of totalitarian rule and therefore could have nothing to say on it, except for a number of prescient remarks regarding the dangers that threaten the future, and which I have included here. Furthermore, Nietzsche's own, notorious notion of "grand politics", while certainly anti-democratic, has nothing in common with totalitarianism. While the former is concerned with enhancing distinctions,

The true horror of totalitarianism does not simply lie in the lengths to which it went to realise this aim, but in the extent to which it succeeded. In Arendt's view, "the experience of the concentration camps does show that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal, and that man's 'nature' is only 'human' insofar as it opens up the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man" (OT 454). Arendt is not here insisting on an ontological schism between "human" and "nature". Her point, rather, is similar to that of Nietzsche's: if the specific quality of the human lies in the transcendence of any fixed determination, the camps functioned precisely as "laboratories" which conducted experiments in fixing human beings in their animality (ibid. 458).

For Arendt, this dehumanisation is *the* danger that totalitarianism "lays bare before our eyes" (EU 359). She goes on to add, however, that this danger exists prior to the emergence of totalitarian rule, and would not cease to exist merely because totalitarian governments have been defeated. In her account, dehumanisation is not a characteristic unique to totalitarianism; rather, totalitarian rule contains in crystallised form certain characteristic symptoms or experiences of mass society, all of which entail the reduction of the human to its animal state. What happens in totalitarianism is that the members of mass society are organised for the destruction of their fellows. In this, the totalitarian state eliminates all distance between the ruler and the ruled. This is not to say that Hitler and Stalin were not masters of oppression, but rather, that this oppression was exercised in the name of the masses, and the power of the oppressors came by virtue of the fact that they existed only through the masses and the masses existed only through them (cf. OT 325).³⁵ In Arendt's account, the "masses of co-ordinated philistines" that make up modern society have proved to be far more receptive to coordination, and therefore much better "machines of domination and extermination" than any "so-called professional criminals" (ibid. 337). The only condition for their commission of the "mass crimes" in which the superfluous ones were eliminated from the world was that these acts had to fit into an over-all organisation for which those who committed them were not personally responsible, and that these acts had to be presented to them as "routine jobs" rather than as crimes (ibid.). In this, the masses revealed their origins, not in some dark and barbaric side of humanity that had somehow remained "uncivilised", but precisely in the mentality belonging to those who had been fully incorporated into the social realm – that is, the bourgeois individual whose emergence coincided with the rise of society. As Arendt argues: "the bourgeoisie's political philosophy was always 'totalitarian': it always assumed an identity of politics, economics and society, in which political institutions served only as the façade for private

oppositions and hierarchies – in short, with widening the distances between us – the latter is predicated on the utter destruction of distance, opposition and plurality.

interests” (ibid. 336). The bourgeois individual is the forerunner of mass society in so far as he elevates private interests to the level of ultimate concerns:

What we have called the “bourgeois” is the modern man of the masses, not in his exalted moments of collective excitement, but in the security (today one should say the insecurity) of his own private domain. He has driven the dichotomy of private and public functions, of family and occupation, so far that he can no longer find in his person any connection between the two. When his occupation forces him to murder people he does not regard himself as a murderer because he has not done it out of inclination but in his professional capacity. Out of sheer passion he would never do harm to a fly (*EU* 130).

Arendt links this malleability and susceptibility to mass coordination on the basis of private interests and social function to the loss of judgement. The earlier discussion on nihilism has shown to what extent the modern response to the crisis of nihilism manifests itself in a spurious “objectivity” where everything “outside” oneself is approached without praise or blame, without any attempt to judge its meaning or value. She argues that the success of totalitarian ideology is predicated on this generalised suspension of judgement, in the absence of which it offers an all-encompassing system of explanation that does away with all incalculability, and eliminates “the fortuitousness that pervades reality” (*OT* 351-2). In short, what the ideological propaganda machine offers is the *consistency* of a supra-human law, in the place of the *contingency* that characterises the human experience in the world. In this, it offers the modern masses an escape from “the world in which they are forced to live and in which they cannot exist” by offering them “a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself” (ibid. 353). In other words, totalitarian ideology incorporates the worldless masses into a system of general consistency that excludes the unpredictability, the disturbances, that belong to worldly experience, for the sake of an invented reality in which they are able to feel themselves absolutely at home.

In Arendt’s account, this prospect held out by totalitarian ideology of being at home in a world that mirrors our capacity for understanding it is so compelling precisely because of the pervasive experience of homelessness that afflicts the modern masses. This experience, in turn, is intimately related to two other conditions, namely superfluousness and loneliness (cf. *OT* 475). In the last part of this section, I shall briefly consider each of these aspects of mass society, which, Arendt argues, totalitarianism exhibits in “crystallised” form.

In the first place, the experience of homelessness or uprootedness is directly linked to the atomisation and isolation that are symptomatic of human co-existence under conditions of mass society. The central feature of this atomisation, as we have seen, is the

³⁵ Arendt refers in this regard to one of Hitler’s speeches to the SA: “All that you are, you are through me; all that I am, I am through you alone”. The quote is drawn from Ernst Bayer, *Die SA*. Berlin, 1938, and appears in *OT* 325.

essential worldlessness of those who live next to one another without a common reference point that exceeds the limits of their subjective interests and experiences. Thus Arendt writes: “To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others” (*OT* 457). A fully socialised existence is “homeless” in so far as it lacks both the stable “in-between” of a durable world and the intangible “web of relationships” that emerges in the interaction and communication with others *about* this world (cf. *HC* 187; Taminioux 1999: 167).

The general impetus towards atomisation that is inherent in social existence manifested itself both in the breakdown of European class society and in the collapse of enduring political institutions. In Arendt’s view, the breakdown of the class system created the practical conditions for the emergence of the modern masses: “the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness had been held in check only through membership in a class” (*OT* 317). Under social conditions where human beings only have a definable identity with reference to a clearly defined social position, the breakdown of class society involved the collapse of these functional roles as a stable measure of individual distinction and inter-human engagement.³⁶ The atomised individuals who emerge in the aftermath of this breakdown experience themselves as “homeless” precisely in so far as they lack a clearly circumscribed social role.

Arendt further relates this homelessness to the collapse of enduring cultural and political institutions, which she describes as “the one gigantic mass destiny of our time in which we all participate, though to very differing degrees of intensity and misery” (*EU* 357). The earlier inquiry into Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s critique of mass society has shown to what extent “mass man” or Nietzsche’s “last man” remains indifferent towards the kind of worldly permanence that is embodied in lasting institutions. The point here is that the experience of homelessness does not simply stem from the social conditions in which the unfortunate masses happen to find themselves. Instead, it is inherent in modern human beings themselves, in so far as they lack any concern for establishing anything durable that would exceed the limits of their own life-span. The central problem Arendt identifies in this regard is that these homeless and uprooted human beings, stripped of all common bonds, outside of all relationships, unrelated to any common institutions, are reduced to their own sheer givenness, to the condition of humanity *as such*. Yet, for Arendt, this reduction of the human being to its basic essence, outside of all particular qualities and

³⁶ This criticism should not be taken to imply that Arendt is nostalgic for a *return* to a preceding class society. On the contrary, she argues that class membership itself limited the sense of individual obligation towards the body politic. The disappearance of classes simply meant that even the limited bonds that tied the individual to interests beyond his own immediate needs evaporated (*OT* 314).

relationships, involves a literal unmaking of the human. The radical horror of totalitarianism simply revealed that “[t]he world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human” (*OT* 299), and its organised mass crimes were predicated on the fact that “a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man” (*ibid.*).

In the light of this insight, it is possible to consider the experience of homelessness as a preliminary condition for the second symptom of dehumanisation Arendt identifies in modern mass existence, namely *superfluousness*. While homelessness means not having a secure and stable place in the world, “to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all” (*ibid.* 475). The experience of superfluousness can therefore be understood as the radicalisation of the homelessness that plagues mass society, and, as such, involves precisely the condition of being reduced to the “abstract nakedness of being human”, outside of any common bond or worldly relationship. We have seen already that Arendt locates the *differentia specifica* of totalitarian rule precisely in the extent to which it renders human beings – as opposed to “mankind” as a species – superfluous in this sense (*cf.* Villa 1999: 126). Totalitarianism’s attempt to fabricate a perfected humanity in harmony with the movement of the supra-human laws of Nature or History demands that whatever hinders this project be treated as so much “matter out of place, irrationality, abnormality, waste, sickness, perversity, incapacity, disorder, madness, unfreedom” (Connolly 1988: 13). The terminology hardly matters; the point is that the totalitarian impetus aims at the absolute determination of human beings, and thus at the elimination of the very qualities and relationships that distinguish human from animal existence:

Men insofar as they are more than animal reaction and fulfilment of functions are entirely superfluous to totalitarian regimes. Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous. Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity. Precisely because man’s resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man (*OT* 457).

Once again, Arendt identifies a genealogical link between this aspect of totalitarianism and elements of mass society which preceded the emergence of the totalitarian state. That is to say, the totalitarian attempt to render human beings superfluous for the sake of a perfected species “reflects the experience of modern masses of their superfluity on an overcrowded earth” (*OT* 457). At the same time, it is inherent in the structure of totalitarianism that the end state of a supposedly perfected mankind is never reached. Or rather, in so far as this mankind is nothing but the embodiment of supra-human laws of movement, it is no end state, but only exists in the continuous extermination of those who impede its momentum. In a stark image, Arendt portrays this species mankind as a monster that lives by devouring the superfluous:

From the elimination of harmful or superfluous individuals, the result of natural or historical movement rises like the phoenix from its own ashes; but unlike the fabulous bird, this mankind which is the end and at the same time the embodiment of the movement of either History or Nature requires permanent sacrifices, the permanent elimination of hostile or parasitic classes or races in order to enter upon its bloody eternity (*EU* 341).

It is worthwhile to relate Arendt's portrayal of this devouring monster to an equally harrowing image from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, in which the state – in Arendt's characterisation, the totalitarian state – is depicted as the vehicle for these sacrifices:

All too many are born: for the superfluous the state was invented. / Behold how it lures them, the all-too-many – and how it devours them, chews them, and ruminates! / Indeed, a hellish artifice was invented there, a horse of death, clattering in the finery of divine honours. Indeed, a dying for many was invented there, which praises itself as life: verily, a great service to all preachers of death! (*TSZ*, "On the New Idol").

Both of these passages place death at the centre of their portrayal of either species mankind or an all-encompassing state. Yet the orchestrated murder that characterises totalitarian regimes, however terrible, is only one kind of death. Although totalitarianism engineers the literal "dying of many", Arendt is also – perhaps primarily – concerned with another kind of death, which does not involve the loss of life, but the loss of the human plurality. This death comes about when human beings "cease to be among men" and instead, are pressed together into a single Mankind. We should recall that plurality, for Arendt, is the condition of a distinctly human life, and depends on the distinction between individuals, and not on their essential sameness as a species. This distinction can be safeguarded only in the "in-between" of a common world that nevertheless does not coincide with anyone's place within it. The horror of totalitarian regimes is therefore not only that they destroy human life – to kill someone is, after all, "to bring about what is one day bound to happen to him anyhow" (*EU* 382) – but that they unmake the very conditions under which a life could be considered human at all. In Villa's formulation, "the worst thing, the true *summum malum* [...] is the totalitarian attempt to deprive human beings not only of their freedom and dignity" – and, one should add, of their life – "but of their *world*" (Villa 1999: 144).

This radical worldlessness in turn exhibits a genealogical relation to a third symptom of modern mass existence, which is *loneliness*. In Arendt's account, this is "the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man" (*OT* 475). The point here is not that human beings ought never to be lonely, or that the experience of loneliness is unique to mass society. Arendt considers loneliness, apart from the political role it has come to play in totalitarianism, as one of the fundamental experiences of human life: "we only have to remind ourselves that one day we shall leave this common world which will go on as before and for whose

continuity we are superfluous in order to realize loneliness, the experience of being abandoned by everything and everybody” (ibid. 476). It is this recognition that lies at the centre of the wisdom of Silenus, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, spoke to the Greeks of the ultimate futility of mortal life. Yet, as Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s analysis also showed, Greek culture provided a counter-force to this futility, in so far as it constituted a worldly realm of “organized remembrance” in which an individual life could acquire a measure of lastingness in the memory of his peers.

If culture is bound up with organised remembrance, mass society, for Arendt, designates its very opposite: a state of “organized loneliness” (OT 478), in which individuals are trapped in the subjectivity of their own experience, outside the kind of companionship with others that is only possible in a common world. And it is this situation, she argues, that is one of the foundational experiences of totalitarianism: “What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness [...] has become an everyday experience of the ever growing masses of our century” (ibid.).

Moreover, loneliness in this sense should be distinguished from isolation, in which one withdraws from the common world into the protection of the private sphere, and solitude, in which one is far from all others but therefore precisely together with oneself. In Arendt’s account, both isolation and solitude still take place against the background of a common world, which forms the horizon of one’s thoughts and experiences even though one has temporarily withdrawn from it. Loneliness, on the other hand, involves the complete *absence* of the world, and the concomitant imprisonment within one’s own singularity. And as Arendt argues, to be thus thrown back upon oneself alone is in fact to lose oneself:

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience, are lost at the same time (OT 477).

If we take the condition of plurality, in which one exists at the same time in relation with and distinction from others, to be the specifically human way of being alive, then loneliness, as absolute singularity, signals our most radical dehumanisation. Formulated in even stronger terms: for Arendt, the loneliness of unqualified singularity, as much as the incorporation into species existence, is the realisation of the state of “*inter homines esse desinere*”. Totalitarianism, then, as the simultaneous unmaking of the world and the fabrication of the human, both feeds on the loneliness of the modern masses and breeds an unmitigated loneliness in turn. It is for this reason, and not only because of the

actual murder that takes place under its rule, that totalitarianism stands under the signature of death.

It should be clear at this point that the defining experiences under conditions of totalitarian domination, namely homelessness, superfluousness and loneliness, have their origins in the conditions of modern mass society, which existed prior to the emergence of the totalitarian state. The main drive of totalitarian rule itself to “perfect” the human species by eliminating superfluous individuals and to fabricate a world in correspondence with the laws of logic can be traced back to the nihilistic substructure of modernity: the resentment towards everything given, that is, everything that is not made by human hands and in accordance with human requirements. Nevertheless, it is important not to assume a causal chain from the break in Western tradition, to nihilism, to the emergence of mass society, to totalitarianism. Arendt repeatedly insists on the “unprecedentedness” of the event of totalitarianism itself. The main reason for this insistence is her critical stance towards the historical process-thinking that is itself characteristic of the totalitarian mentality. As was made clear in the discussion at the end of the previous chapter, this kind of thinking views history to be a field of supra-human forces with its own inherent momentum that lead to an inevitable conclusion. Yet she also resists this argument because it transforms totalitarianism itself into a historical inevitability, which deprives us of the impetus to insist: “*This ought not to have happened*” (EU 14).³⁷

This account of totalitarianism is therefore not an account of its causal development from previous events. Arendt aims, rather, to give a historical account of the elements in the past that have become “crystallized” in the political disaster of the 20th century (EU 403). She goes about this by tracing the history of these elements backwards from the event of totalitarianism itself, in the conviction that “[t]he event illuminates its own past, but can never be deduced from it” (ibid. 319). The intention behind this approach is not to reveal the singular nature or essence of totalitarianism, but rather, “to let our attention wander into the interminable connections and similarities which certain tenets of totalitarian doctrine necessarily show with familiar theories of occidental thought” (ibid. 309). In this regard, Arendt offers us nothing so much as a *genealogy* of totalitarianism in the Nietzschean sense of the term (Heller 1999: 23). And for the same reason that Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality should not be read as an attempt to provide a decisive, factual account of the development of moral sentiments, Arendt’s account of totalitarianism should not be read as a historical or sociological treatise which could provide us with a comprehensive set of facts about the events in Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union. Her concern, rather, is to understand how the phenomenon of

³⁷ Cf. Arendt’s letter to Gershom Scholem, 24 July 1963 in *JP* 251.

totalitarianism could have emerged in the modern world, and as such, it is part of a wider critique of modernity itself as the condition for the unmaking of the human.

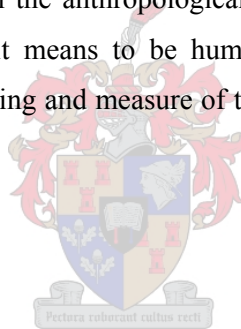
Conclusion

In the light of the discussion up to this point, it should be clear to what extent the problem of the loss of the human under conditions of modernity is primarily a problem of the *measure* of the human. As Nietzsche's and Arendt's arguments have shown, it is nihilism that inaugurates the problem of measure, in so far as it is an experience of the absence of any fixed locus of truth, value and authority against which our interpretations, values and judgements could be measured, combined with the persistent longing for precisely such a supreme yardstick. The main focus of this chapter has been on the paradigmatically modern response to this crisis, as it finds expression in the attempt to transpose the ultimate measure of both self and world – what Arendt calls “the Archimedean point” – into human beings themselves. What Nietzsche's and Arendt's critique of this response has shown is that the only standards of meaning and value that can be derived from the inner experiences of the subject in isolation from the world are the qualities that are shared by all animal life. The further analysis of the rise of the social realm has shown that modern society in no way counteracts this isolation, and therefore does not provide the context in which animal life becomes human life. On the contrary, in so far as the social realm is the domain in which strictly private concerns – specifically, the most basic concern with survival that expresses itself in the activity of labour – become the dominant concerns of all, it is merely the domain of the collective animalisation of human beings. In every case, the reduction of the human to its animal self manifests itself in the loss of orientation towards the world that transcends the limits of our species existence. What this analysis ultimately shows is that, to establish the human being as such, irrespective of all worldly relationships, as the measure of the human renders us only our basic biological givenness; in other words, it is a measure that only reveals to us the extent to which we are animals.

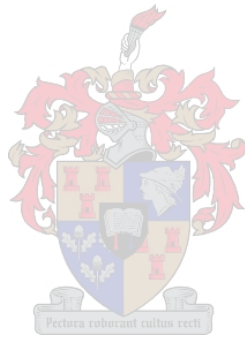
It has also become clear, however, that this reduction of the human into animal does not only manifest itself in the socialised existence of Arendt's “mass man” and Nietzsche's “last man”. It is equally embodied in the drive towards absolute mastery over all limitation that impinges on human existence, on the nihilistic assumption that, where everything is permitted, everything is also susceptible to human mastery. This drive to mastery is embodied in modern science, which strives to transform the world into a product of human hands, as well as, and more iniquitously, in the totalitarian attempt to fabricate mankind itself according to universal laws that can be fully grasped by human

reason. Both undertakings are extreme instances of hubris, understood as the negation of any given limitations that may impinge on human projects. Hubris, in other words, involves the striving to overcome the contingency and conditionality of human existence in favour of an infinitely humanised world. However, as Nietzsche's and Arendt's portrayal of modern scientific endeavour shows, a limitlessly human world that offers no resistance to our projects, that is absolutely familiar to us, denies us any encounter with what we are not, and thus lacks any measure of the human. Arendt's investigation into totalitarianism has further demonstrated that the attempt to fabricate a perfected humanity according to an absolutely human standard merely succeeds in unmaking the human absolutely.

In summary, the discussion in this chapter has demonstrated to what extent both the animalisation and the unmaking of the human under conditions of modern nihilism spring from what Nietzsche calls "the *hyperbolic naiveté* of man: positing himself as the meaning and measure of the value of things" (*WP* 12B, *KSA* 13:11[99]). There are two questions that confront us at this point: First, if Nietzsche and Arendt criticise modernity as the unmaking or animalisation of the human, what is meant by "human" here? This question might be said to concern the anthropological grounds of their critique. Second, how are we to reflect on what it means to be human *without* positing either God or ourselves as the ultimate the meaning and measure of things? It is these two questions that inform part two of the thesis.



PART II: "GROUNDS"



CHAPTER 3

RETHINKING THE HUMAN: NIETZSCHE

Family failing of philosophers. – All philosophers have the common failing of starting out from man as he is now and thinking they can reach their goals through an analysis of him. They involuntarily think of ‘man’ as an *aeterna veritas*, as something that remains constant in the midst of flux, as a sure measure of things. [...] [T]he whole of teleology is constructed by speaking of the man of the last four millennia as of an *eternal* man towards whom all things in the world have had a natural relationship from time began. But everything has become: there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths. Consequently what is needed from now on is *historical philosophizing*, and with it the virtue of modesty (Nietzsche, *HAH I*: 2).

Introduction

Having worked through Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s accounts of modernity as the loss of the human – an account that is itself a “working-through” of a complex of sentiments, intimations and thought fragments rather than an objective history – we now inevitably face the question of how to think the human in the aftermath of the death of God. The preceding analysis of modern nihilism as the loss of a transcendent measure of meaning, coupled with an attempt to make this measure wholly immanent to humanity itself, has demonstrated the extent to which the degeneration of God and the degeneration of the human are mutually implicated (cf. Gillespie 1999: 141-142). It follows from this that modern nihilism, in both its philosophical and political manifestations, inaugurates “a crisis of human being” which ultimately centres on “a momentous decision about what man is to be” (ibid. 144). If we recall Arendt’s conception of crisis as the destruction of a piece of the world we have in common, the loss of a shared horizon of meaning (*BPF* 178), one could argue that what is at issue here is the failure of any common understanding of what it means to be human. Under these circumstances, the very future of the human is at risk – not in the sense of the survival of the species, which is merely a matter of the biological perpetuation of an undifferentiated collective, but precisely in the sense of our *differentiation* from mere species existence. Nietzsche voices his concern in this regard as follows:

Given the dangers threatening our age, who, then, will pledge his services as sentinel and champion of *humanity*, to watch over the inalienable, sacred treasures amassed by such diverse generations? Who will erect the *image of the human being* at a time when all others sense in themselves only the selfish worm and a bovine fear, and have for this reason fallen from that image into bestiality or even into robotic automatism? (SE 3).

In the case of Arendt, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the fact that she follows *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with a sustained reflection on *The Human*

Condition.¹ Clearly, it is the investigation into the distinctly modern phenomenon of totalitarianism as the deliberate fabrication, and thus unmaking of, the human, that prompts the consideration of what it was that totalitarianism sought to destroy. In other words, if the totalitarian imagination concerned itself with the destruction of the notion of “humanity” and remaking it in accordance with specific ideological requirements, Arendt is interested in what it is about the notion of the human that offended the totalitarian consciousness in the first place (Fine 2001: 113).

According to both thinkers, if the problem of modern nihilism is incarnate in present-day human beings themselves, the possibility of overcoming nihilism is inescapably tied to the possibility of transcending present-day humanity. And this possibility depends, in turn, on a radical re-consideration of what it might mean to be human in the absence of an ultimate guarantee of meaning. The purpose of Part 2 of the thesis is to explore Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s respective attempts to effect just such a re-thinking of the human. This inquiry can be broadly described as an investigation into the “anthropological grounds” for the critique of modernity furnished in chapters 1 and 2, which in turn serves as a basis for thinking beyond the predicament of modernity, which is the theme I shall take up in Part 3.

Because of the pivotal role of Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s conceptions of the human within my overall argument, I shall offer a rather detailed interpretation of their respective treatments of the human over the next two chapters, beginning with Nietzsche in the present chapter and moving on to Arendt in chapter 4. What I hope to make clear in the course of this interpretation is that, while diverging in conception and execution, Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s arguments in this regard nevertheless share a number of important features. In the first place, both describe the human being in terms of a becoming, not a substance; a form of *praxis*, not a status. Second, both accounts deal with being – or rather, becoming – human in relation to the world in which this becoming takes place, and which, in turn, also constitutes the world we know *as* human beings. Third, both understand human identity in terms of shifting appearances, a play of masks, which renders it an essential ambiguity. This ambiguity is further underscored by their shared characterisation of the human in terms of plurality or multiplicity, although it should be noted that, for reasons that will become clear in the discussion itself, Nietzsche and Arendt do not understand or apply the notion of plurality in exactly the same way. Finally, against the typically modern assumption that in the absence of any absolute reference point against which to measure ourselves, we simply are what we make of ourselves, both thinkers want to prove the contrary: that ultimately we are not the product of our own hands. Each attempts to show, in a different way, that the meaning of the human is not the final

¹ This point has been stressed by Margaret Canovan (1992).

outcome of a process of fabrication, but that such meaning is bound up with a kind of excess or indeterminacy, which we cannot bring about or control but which is nevertheless a predicate of our humanity.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that while there are a number of important analogies between Nietzsche's and Arendt's accounts of what it means to be human, there is also a very important difference between them. This difference has to do, in part, with the point I raised in the Introduction to the thesis, namely that Nietzsche's concern is ultimately with our "soul apparatus", while Arendt focuses her reflections on the self as situated in the world. As we shall see, this difference is not an absolute one: Nietzsche does also argue that we become who we are in relation to the world in which we find ourselves, while Arendt, particularly in her later work, turns to her attention to our inner life. The real difference has to do with the fact that, when all is said and done, Nietzsche is a far less "humanistic" thinker than Arendt. By this I do not mean to imply that Arendt espouses any kind of humanist doctrine, which would merely be another variation on the theme of locating the Archimedean point within the self. Rather, she remains "humanistic" in the sense that she considers the overcoming of the predicament of modernity to be a possibility inherent in human beings as they are, whereas Nietzsche – at least at times – understands the human being from a perspective that is in some ways already beyond the human. The details of this difference in their thinking will become clearer in the course of our exploration of Nietzsche's conception of the human as the "as yet undetermined animal" in chapter 3 and Arendt's understanding of the human condition in chapter 4. However, the full ramifications of this difference will not become evident until the discussion on their respective notions of redemption in the concluding chapter of the thesis. At this point, my primary concern is to explore the extent to which both thinkers, in their different ways, succeed in rethinking what it means to be human in the absence of any grounding tradition or ultimate guarantee of meaning. It is to Nietzsche's attempt in this regard that I shall now turn.

1. On human becoming

While, like Arendt, Nietzsche equates the death of God with the loss of the authority of the past, this by no means translates into a denigration of history *tout court*. On the contrary, his conception of the human being is precisely a historical one. In fact, he can be said to employ one mode of history as a means of doing battle against another, namely the historical process-thinking that takes present-day humanity to be the culmination of a great chain of development. Nietzsche's counter-argument is well known: the human being has become, and can only be understood as a becoming, not a being. In

other words, Nietzsche does not begin by asking what we *are*, but with how we have become – and are at every moment becoming – what we are. Thus we read in *Human All Too Human*: “Direct self-observation is not nearly sufficient for us to know ourselves: we require history, for the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing” (*HAH* II: 223).

One of the most significant consequences of this view is that it precludes any final definition of human being. Insofar as it is a becoming, human identity is necessarily incomplete, which rules out any all-encompassing perspective on the human as such. Nietzsche not only opposes such definitions from the outside, as it were. He is equally doubtful of any immediate self-understanding provided by introspection. Hence the previous citation continues: “It may be said that here too, when we desire to descend into the river of what seems to be our own most intimate and personal being, there applies the dictum of Heraclitus: we cannot step into the same river twice” (*HAH* II: 223). In a later text we encounter the observation that “all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history can be defined” (*GM* II: 13). And, in so far as human being is precisely such a “semiotic concentration” of an unending becoming, it similarly exceeds any final definition.

The problem that confronts Nietzsche here is therefore how to make sense of human becoming without reifying it into a being. His solution is not to try to enumerate essential human characteristics, but to adopt the crab-like strategy of the genealogist; that is, to trace the network of shifting relations that tell the story of how we have become – and are becoming – who we are. The focus of his inquiry is not on the human being as a fixed and final outcome of a particular genealogy, but rather as a temporary constellation of forces under the rubric of the will to power. I shall expand on this description in section 1.3 below.

While Nietzsche refrains from taking current human beings as the pinnacle of a historical process and thus according them the highest value, his genealogy is not simply a neutral account of human becoming, for three reasons. In the first place, Nietzsche’s genealogy is not merely descriptive, but also takes the form of critique. This critique is primarily aimed at the “hyperbolic naiveté” of the belief a constant, knowing and knowable subject as the still point from where we are able to survey, judge and measure all things (cf. *WP* 12B, *KSA* 13:11[99]). As was mentioned above, Nietzsche argues that this faith in the subject as the fixed measure of the world is based on an unwarranted assumption that present-day humanity represents the *end* in a chain of development, an achieved ideal. His genealogical inquiry is intended to subvert this teleological supposition, and thereby to destabilise the grounds upon which modern day human being is

founded: “[A]ll teleology is built upon speaking of the human being of the last four millennia as something *eternal*, toward which all the things of the world have from their beginning naturally been directed. Everything, however, has come to be; there are no *eternal facts*: just as there are no absolute truths. – From now on therefore, *historical philosophizing* will be necessary, and along with it the virtue of modesty (*HAH I*: 2). This combination of historical sense and modesty results in a critical re-thinking of the human that emphatically does *not* aim “to conserve the human or to preserve the dignity and rights of the human *if the human is taken as a being, not a becoming, with fixed forms and determinate functions*” (Ansell-Pearson 2000: 176).

In the second place, if there is no privileged position outside of human becoming from where we may develop a single, authoritative explanation of how we have become what we are, the genealogist cannot but be implicated in the very history he offers us. For Nietzsche, this is not a failing on the part of the genealogist, but simply a consequence of being the subject of his own investigations. I shall return to this point in the discussion on perspectivism in chapter 5.

In the third place, the genealogical enterprise also has a positive aim. Nietzsche’s fierce criticism of the degeneration of the human under conditions of modernity precisely springs from a sense of “all that which, given a favourable accumulation of forces and tasks, could be *cultivated out of man [der Mensch]*” (*BGE* 203). In the light of this concern, Nietzsche’s attempt to think the meaning of the human beyond the limits of modern nihilism entails a renewed reflection on the “why?” and “wherefore?” of human being. Here one should be careful: Nietzsche remains thoroughly critical of those “teachers of the purpose of existence” (*GS* 1) whose teaching embraces the nihilistic judgement that an existence that lacks any pre-determined purpose is necessarily deserving of condemnation. In Nietzsche’s view, it is this judgement that gives birth to the ascetic ideal – that is to say, an ideal of world-denial, a “will to nothingness”, on the part of those who suffer from their own existence. He argues further that the reason for the predominance of this ideal in science, in religion, in philosophy has been the lack of any counter-ideal (*GM III*: 23, 28). The constructive part of his genealogical enterprise can then be understood as an attempt to point the way to precisely such an opposing ideal, one that would entail an *affirmation* of existence. Another passage from the *Genealogy* offers an enigmatic vision of a future human being who would be the embodiment of such a counter-ideal:

The man of the future, who will redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal but also from that which was bound to grow out of it, the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism; this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision that liberates the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man; this Antichrist and antinihilist; this victor over God and nothingness – *he must come one day*. – (*GM II*: 24).

It is only possible to understand the place of this mysterious figure within Nietzsche's genealogy and to judge its ability to transform our self-understanding after a more wide-ranging inquiry into Nietzsche's account of human becoming. To begin with, I shall examine Nietzsche's depiction of the human as "the as yet undetermined animal", followed by a discussion of his revaluation of appearance, the notion of the will to power, the injunction to "become who you are", and finally the role of fate, limitation and transcendence in fulfilling this command. This last section also offers a reflection on Nietzsche's proposed "new ideal" as a new measure of the human that would overcome the resentment towards the given that is the signal feature of nihilism.

2. The as yet undetermined animal

As we have seen, Nietzsche does not consider humanity as a given, but as a provisional achievement. In order to grasp the various ramifications of this view, it is worthwhile to begin with a consideration of the interplay between human and animal in Nietzsche's thinking. This is not to say that he sketches out a dialectical relationship between two forms of life that could – or should – be resolved into a higher unity. Nietzsche insists on the disjunction between human and animal existence, while maintaining at the same time that the former only has meaning with reference to the latter. The most important formulation of this view occurs in *Beyond Good and Evil* 62, where the human being is described as "the *as yet undetermined animal*".² We have seen in the previous chapter that, for Nietzsche, the distinction between human and animal turns on the distinction between indeterminacy and determination. In contrast with the animal that wholly coincides with itself in the present, "like a number that leaves no remainder" (UDH 1), human existence is "the never to be perfected imperfect" (ibid.). If the "perfection" at issue here is that of a seamless fit between what one is, was and might become, Nietzsche might be said to conceive of the human in terms of an irreconcilable tension between these modes of temporality, and it is this irreconcilable "imperfect" that lies at the root of human indeterminacy.

Nevertheless, as Van Tongeren (2000: 200) points out, this indeterminacy is itself not absolute. The human being is only "as yet" – that is to say, provisionally – undetermined. For nothing can appear in the world as sheer formlessness or indeterminacy; indeterminacy can itself only appear in a particular form. Nietzsche's conception of the human is therefore predicated on the tension or opposition between form and formlessness: the particular quality of the human that distinguishes it from the animal is its

² I owe the insight into the importance of this characterisation for understanding Nietzsche's conception of the human to Paul van Tongeren. For an extensive discussion of the meaning of this formulation in *BGE*, see Van Tongeren (2000: 199-202).

indeterminacy, its excess of meaning, while the human nevertheless only exists as such in so far as it appears under the inscription of a particular meaning.

With regard to the way in which such meaning is imposed, Nietzsche speculates whether the problem of “breed[ing] an animal with the right to make promises” is not “the real problem regarding man?” (*GM II*: 1). This is precisely the problem of creating a modicum of consistency, form, and order out of the formlessness that is the defining quality of the human. Nietzsche describes the capacity to sustain promises in terms of “a real *memory of the will*: so that between the original “I will”, “I shall do this” and the actual discharge of the will, its *act*, a world of strange new things, circumstances, even acts of will may be interposed without breaking this long chain of will” (*GM II*, 1). Thus it is memory – what Nietzsche also calls the “historical sense” (*UDH 1*) – that imposes a certain amount of regularity and predictability upon indeterminacy, and thus enables the human to exist at all.

This insight brings a further nuance to the relation and opposition between the human and the animal. For, it should now be clear, it is memory as much as indeterminacy that distinguishes human beings from animals. While for the animal, “the past really dies” at every moment, so that the animal is fully contained in the present, the human, by virtue of its memory (as well as, of course, the indeterminacy that escapes all historical memory), is never fully contained in the present. However, Nietzsche goes on to argue that unlimited memory would unmake the human in the same way that an absolute lack of memory would: “only by means of the power to utilize the past for life and to reshape past events into history once more – does the human being become a human being; but in an excess of history the human being ceases once again, and without that mantle of the unhistorical he would never have begun and would never have dared to begin” (*UDH 1*). It is necessary, therefore, for there to be a limit to memory. For Nietzsche, this limit is bound up with a certain amount of forgetfulness, and thus constitutes the temporal horizon that is necessary for continued existence of the human (*ibid.*). Moreover, apart from its role in countering the passivity that comes with an excess of memory, forgetfulness serves a further purpose as “a doorkeeper, a preserver of the psychic order, repose, and etiquette” (*GM II*: 1). The implication here is that any determination of the human – the provisional formation of a stable self in the midst of indeterminacy – would be undone if it were possible to know, absolutely, what this self entailed. Not only that: since unconstrained memory would trap us in the past, our entire sense of *present* is dependent upon a measure of forgetfulness (*ibid.*). Of course, complete forgetfulness, in so far as it would preclude our having conception of time altogether, would equally erase the present.³

³ Compare Nietzsche’s description of such time-oblivion among animals in *UDH 1*.

Nietzsche therefore does not designate animal and human as mutually exclusive; nor are they simply points on a continuum. The human, rather, only exists in so far as it is able to create a memory for itself – to become form – *and* retain the animal capacity for forgetfulness. The human is therefore both tied to *and* transcends its animal state. This is not a harmonious duality, however. On the contrary, Nietzsche most frequently characterises being human in terms of opposition and strife. As Gillespie (1999: 143) remarks, the line from animal to human being “is not a mere temporal transition from lower to higher but a continual and unending struggle of conflicting alternatives”.

In his consideration of the struggle between memory and forgetfulness, Nietzsche does not consider memory to originate with the “unhistorical” animal that simply awakens to its capacity for remembrance. Instead, *The Genealogy of Morals* sketches a “prehistory of morals” which portrays the emergence of memory within a social context. Here, in the course of suffering through a long period of violent, painful “mnemotechnics”, the human animal eventually learns to honour contracts made, to discharge its debts towards its creditors (*GM* II: 1-3). In this way, pain functions as the original mnemonic device whereby the as-yet undetermined animal learns to commit itself to a future, to determine itself in a particular direction.

We are no longer in the realm of “pre-history”, however. In Nietzsche’s account, the painful mnemotechnics needed to fashion a human being out of the chaos of animal existence has been eclipsed by a more refined form of cruelty. The problem of giving form to the human has now become a matter of “*educating* a human being to be a human being” (SE 2) [my italics]. More specifically, education (*Bildung*) is the task of “cultivating” (Nietzsche also sometimes speaks of “breeding” or “taming”) the human – that is, to give it form within the horizons of a set of collective valuations, institutions and practices that form part of a particular cultural complex.⁴ Such education is harsh in so far as it must impose form on that which exceeds all form – Nietzsche describes it as “hardly distinguishable from cruelty to animals” (ibid. 6). Yet the purpose of such education is not simply to limit and constrain, nor is it merely a superficial layer of cultivatedness – “artificial limbs, wax noses, or corrective lenses” (ibid. 1) – superimposed upon our animality. Rather, educating the human being to become a human being, understood and practised in Nietzsche’s sense, is a way of imparting form to formlessness without either identifying with a fixed identity, or merely drawing a veil over unmitigated chaos. In his later writings, Nietzsche refers to the kind of formation he has in mind as the art of “imparting style”, which would bring the multiplicity that the human being *is* into a kind of provisional order. In *Ecce Homo* this task is described as “the art of dividing without

⁴ For an analysis of Nietzsche’s conception of “breeding” (*Züchtung*) in relation to education and cultivation in this sense, see Schank (2000).

making inimical; mixing up nothing, ‘reconciling’ nothing; a tremendous multiplicity which is nonetheless the opposite of chaos” (*EH*: ‘Why I am so clever’, 9). This can also be described as a kind of “dancing in chains” (*WS* 140), which comprises, at the same time, both fluidity of movement and self-control, *dynamis* and restraint.⁵

The question inevitably arises at this point of how this provisional order is to be attained and what it would entail – a question of particular urgency in the light of Nietzsche’s repeated characterisation of the greater part of mankind as “the tremendous surplus of failures: a field of ruins” (*WP* 713, *KSA* 13:14[8]).⁶ We have to postpone any possible answer here, however, until we have inquired into two further aspects of Nietzsche’s conception of the human that serve to shed light on the problem of imparting style to oneself: the relationship between appearance and identity, and the will to power.

3. Appearance and identity

In Nietzsche’s account, the death of God, in so far as it entails the loss of the authority of the origin – that is, the dissolution of the age-old trust in the ground of all that appears but which does not itself appear – necessitates a reconsideration of appearance. As we have seen, the disappearance of such ground, the “true world” of metaphysics, could not leave the “apparent world”, as a mere surface reflection of this deeper ground, intact. For this reason, Nietzsche insists that what is required is a reevaluation of appearance *as such*, without reference to any substratum that is not appearance. The focus of this undertaking is therefore on the phenomenal world as the only world that is available to us. He asserts in this regard that “the antithesis of this phenomenal world is not ‘the true world’, but the formless unformulable world of the chaos of sensations – *another kind* of phenomenal world, a kind of ‘unknowable’ for us” (*WP* 569, *KSA* 12:9[106]). In the same vein, we read in the *Gay Science*: “What is ‘appearance’ to me now? Certainly not the opposite of some essence: what could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance! Certainly not a dead mask that one could place on an unknown *x* or remove from it!” (*GS* 54).

It is clear that this reevaluation of appearance must play a central role in Nietzsche’s treatment of the human. Contrary to the position that still understands our changeable appearance in the world with reference to a hidden ground, he offers us a notion of human identity *as* appearance. In this, he is not arguing that the self that is constituted in

⁵ Moreover, “one might remember that dancing is not the same as staggering wearily back and forth between different impulses. High culture will resemble a daring dance, thus requiring [...] much strength and flexibility” (*HAH* I: 278). For a further reference to style and cultivation in this sense, see *GS* 290.

⁶ References to “failures” or those “who have turned out badly” (*der missrathener Mensch*) abound in Nietzsche’s texts. See, for instance, *D* 213, 274, *GS* 359, *GM* I: 11, 12, *GM* III: 14.

appearance is changeable and provisional *as opposed to* a supposedly true self which, though it does not present itself to experience, nevertheless constitutes its actual ground. Nor does he want to partake of the particular kind of cruelty of which he accuses both Kant and “the ascetics of Vedanta philosophy”: “a voluptuous pleasure that reaches its height when the ascetic self-contempt and mockery of reason declares: ‘*there is* a realm of truth and being, but reason is *excluded* from it!’” (*GM* III: 12). Nietzsche’s treatment of the human is therefore resolutely focused on our appearance in the phenomenal world, without trying to take its bearings – either in praise or blame – from any hidden substratum behind appearance.

However, Nietzsche’s insistence on the indeterminacy of human being should alert us to the fact that such appearance is not unequivocal. In particular, we are often conscious of a disjunction between how we appear to others and how we appear to ourselves. If there is not a seamless fit between our private and public appearances, it follows that while we may be revealed to others by appearing in the world, this very appearance also disguises, masks, conceals.⁷ Yet, for Nietzsche, what is concealed, in so far as we are conscious of it, is not any ultimate ground or final truth about oneself, but rather another appearance:

I maintain the phenomenality of the inner world, too: everything of which we become conscious is arranged, simplified, schematized, interpreted through and through – the actual process of inner ‘perception’, the causal connection between thoughts, feelings, desires, between subject and object, are absolutely hidden from us – and are perhaps purely imaginary. The ‘apparent *inner* world’ is governed by just the same forms and procedures as the ‘outer’ world (*WP* 477, *KSA* 13:11[113]).

The most obvious implication here, and one which has recurred throughout our inquiry so far, is that Nietzsche denies us any privileged access to the self. Contrary to the Cartesian doctrine that one’s “inner world” constitutes the Archimedean point of immediate certainty, Nietzsche maintains that this inner world, in so far as it is accessible to consciousness, appears to us in a particular form, a particular organisation of our indeterminacy, and is therefore already an interpretation. That is not to say that this interpretation determines us absolutely, for “[*w*]e are none of us that which we appear to be in accordance with the states for which we alone have consciousness and words, and consequently praise and blame” (*D* 115). Nevertheless, it is impossible to access oneself as the basic text that is the object of interpretation precisely because the intervention of the knower inevitably affects the target of the inquiry. We only “know” ourselves only under certain conditions – in so far as we appear to ourselves in a particular form – or otherwise

⁷ Nietzsche demonstrates this point in a joke seemingly told at his own expense: One might grow an enormous moustache, he muses, merely for the sake of lounging in its shade. To others, however, one might appear as a mere appurtenance of this moustache, with the consequence that one is mistaken for as a military type! (*D* 381).

not at all. In this, says Nietzsche, we are like the somnambulist, “who must go on dreaming lest he fall” (*GS* 54). Thus, in the realm of appearances, which includes both “inner” and “outer” appearance, “the sublime consistency and interrelatedness of all knowledge perhaps is and will be the highest means to *preserve* the universality of dreaming and the mutual comprehension of all dreamers and thus also *the continuation of the dream*” (ibid).

There is a yet a further level to Nietzsche’s argument here. For to “know” that one is dreaming – that is, that one’s knowledge only has bearing on the phenomenal world, and not on any “truth” behind appearance – is not itself a noumenal truth. Nietzsche likens this insight to waking up from a dream but only to the consciousness that one is dreaming, so that, “among all these dreamers, I, too, who ‘know’, am dancing my dance” (*GS* 54).

When considered in this light, identity necessarily remains provisional. For, to stay with the dream metaphor, if our appearance is mediated by the states of consciousness and words at our command, “what we do in dreams we also do when we are awake: we invent and fabricate the person with whom we associate – and immediately forget that we have done so” (*BGE* 138). The point is not that we ought to circumvent this invention and fabrication – Nietzsche does not distinguish between authentic and inauthentic selfhood in this context – but precisely that identity *is* a kind of invention or fabrication that is bound up with appearance. If to become a self is to cast the indeterminacy that characterises our humanity into a particular form, this form simply is how one appears – to others and to oneself. Moreover, although such appearance does not constitute the final truth about ourselves, “[our] *opinion of oneself* [...] which we have arrived at by this erroneous path, the so-called ‘ego’, is thenceforth a fellow worker in the construction of our character and our destiny. –” (*D* 115).

This consideration of the relationship between appearance and identity in Nietzsche’s genealogy of the human would not be complete without inquiring after the *mode* of appearance. In other words, *how* do we appear in the world?; *how* do we become who we are? Two quotations from *Human, All Too Human* may provide some illumination in this regard:

Everyone *possesses inborn talent*, but few possess the degree of inborn and acquired toughness, endurance and energy actually to become a talent, that is to say to *become* what he *is*: which means to discharge it in works and actions (*HAAH* I: 263).

Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum “know thyself”, but as if there hovered before them the commandment: *will* a self and thou shalt *become* a self. – Fate seems to have left the choice still up to them; whereas the inactive and contemplative cogitate on what they *have* already chosen, on *one* occasion, when they entered into life (ibid. II: 366).

Nietzsche is clearly suggesting here that identity – the form in which we appear in the world – involves a kind of *praxis*. On this view, one does not become a self merely by

virtue of conceptualising a character, or by allowing a given psychic reality to take external form – that is to say, precisely *not* by virtue of the Socratic “know thyself”. On the contrary, who one is emerges from how one acts. While we generally assume an extension from “*quality*” to “*act*”, that is, that “one of our *characteristics* leads to action”, Nietzsche maintains that “in reality what happens is that we infer characteristics on the basis of actions: we assume the existence of characteristics because we observe actions of a particular sort” (*KSA* 7.483, 19[209]). Nietzsche thus presents us with a performative account of identity, in terms of which the self is a dynamic formation that is inseparable from its performance, in the same way that the dancer cannot be separated from the dance.⁸

Seen in this light, *not* to perform, to refrain from action, is not a kind of negative freedom, a negation of all identity. Rather, it is the condition under which one is forced to submit to an identity that is imposed from without.⁹ Thus Nietzsche remarks in *Daybreak*: “I have no idea how I am *acting*! I have no idea how I *ought to act*!” – you are right, but be sure of this: *you will be acted upon* at every moment! Mankind has in all ages confused the active and the passive: it is their everlasting grammatical blunder” (*D* 120). Nietzsche skilfully elaborates on this point in his genealogical exposition of master and slave morality in *The Genealogy of Morals*, where he argues that these two modes of evaluation originate in two different experiences of agency. Master morality emerges from an experience of an excess of strength that knows how to vent itself in deeds, and reserves the epithet “bad” for those who lack the capacity for action. Slave morality emerges among those who are incapable of discharging themselves in action, and who sublimate their secret self-disgust in a mode of evaluation according to which the active, commanding human being is evil, power is evil, while the inability to act is seen as a merit, and weakness, the suspension of the will are baptised as “good” (*GM* II: 10). The former mode of evaluation originates with those who act, who give form to themselves, while the secondary, derivative, slavish moral code emerges with those who are *acted upon*.¹⁰

In Nietzsche’s account, it is the latter experience of agency – more precisely, the lack of agency – that gives rise to the distinction between doer and deed, with the former deemed to be independent from and prior to the latter. In contrast to the noble conception of agency in which power, action and happiness are one, slave morality separates the will from what it can do, the intention behind an action from its practical manifestation. This distinction sustains the belief that one remains free to act *without* acting which serves to enhance the *feeling* of power in the face of the absence of its practical manifestation. The

⁸ For a consideration of how Nietzsche’s general critique of the metaphysics of substance leads him to adopt a performative account of identity, see Alan Schrift (1995: 54).

⁹ Cf. Villa (1992: 284).

¹⁰ For further elaboration on the question of agency in relation to master and slave morality, see Owen (1995: 67 ff.).

belief in an independent “doer” who may or may not engage in action is nothing else than the belief in the supposedly “neutral independent ‘subject’”, a determinable cause behind events, which makes possible “the sublime self-deception that interprets weakness as freedom, and their being thus-and-thus as a *merit*” (GM 1: 13). Against this belief in the subject as an fixed and determinable entity behind actions and events, Nietzsche argues on behalf of the recognition that “[a] quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect – more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting” (ibid.). The self is therefore not a substratum behind its manifestation in the world, but is constituted precisely *in* this very driving, willing, effecting: “*L’effet, c’est moi*” (BGE 19).

It is important not to misunderstand Nietzsche on this point, however: his performative account of identity does not imply that self-formation is a merely arbitrary exhibition of activity. Rather, the emergence of identity is predicated on both the dynamics of performance and the constancy of memory, for it is only by remembering what one has done that it becomes possible to sustain a self over time. As the preceding consideration of the interplay between human and animal has shown, he attaches great importance to memory as a means of creating form out of formlessness, that is, moulding a self out of the interplay of disparate forces, actions and effects. Nietzsche describes this in terms of the capacity to sustain promises, which requires “a real *memory of the will* (GM II: 1). In this way, memory imposes a certain amount of order, regularity and predictability – a kind of lastingness – upon the self that is conditioned by our actions. We shall see later that this interrelation of performance and memory takes place in the context of the self as *organisation*, which involves a rank-ordering of the various drives or forces that constitute who we are.

We have also seen, however, that action requires a horizon of forgetfulness in order to commence at all. Once again, Nietzsche links this capacity to forget to the noble disposition, and the burden of unbridled memory to the slavish type. The slavish type is morbidly susceptible to every perceived slight and injury because of a supreme obsession with the “self” behind its appearance in the world. This incapacity of ever “having done” with anything translates itself into what Nietzsche entitles *ressentiment*, from *re*, designating repetition and backward motion, and *sentir*, to feel. To suffer from *ressentiment* is therefore to be doomed to revisit the past, a slave to the memory of former slights and injuries. For one in this condition the past is never really past; earlier sufferings remain eternally present. Small wonder then that this pathological memory finds expression in a constant search for an external cause of this suffering and a desire for revenge towards its perceived perpetrators. In this sense, the psychological state of *ressentiment* is essentially *reactive*: it exists only with reference to that which it is not:

While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is ‘outside’, what is ‘different’, what is ‘not itself’; and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye – this *need* to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself – is of the essence of *ressentiment* : in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all – all its action is fundamentally reaction (*GM* I: 10).

It should be clear, therefore, that these two contrasting moralities – understood as systems of evaluation which determine what has worth for us and what does not – relate to two modes of appearing in the world, one slavish and reactive, the other noble and active. In Nietzsche’s view, the former mode of appearing in the world, which embraces the doer-deed distinction, the belief in an immutable subject, and *ressentiment*, has been the default position for the “majority of mortals” (*GM* I: 13). Nietzsche’s treatment of the noble type, on the other hand, forms part of an attempt to resist this understanding of the self by offering an alternative account of human becoming. In this account, one becomes who one is by appearing in the world in action; one *remains* a self by virtue of memory, which binds one act to another, while the capacity for action, as well as the character that emerges from such action, are both protected by a certain amount of forgetfulness.

We should nevertheless guard against a simplistic understanding of this account of action as the mode of our appearance in the world. Despite the obvious performativity of the Nietzschean conception of being human, this does not directly translate into a straightforward claim that who one *is* follows from, or coincides with, what one *does*. The reason for treading carefully here has to do with the nature of appearance itself. Every appearance, as we have seen, also conceals, so that the one who appears is never wholly present in the appearance itself. This is clearly illustrated in one of the many passages on masks and disguises in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Such a concealed man who instinctively needs speech for silence and for burial in silence and who is inexhaustible in his evasion of communication, *wants* and sees to it that a mask of him roams in his place through the hearts and heads of his friends. *And supposing he did not want it, he would still realize some day that in spite of that a mask of him is there – and that this is well* [my italics]. Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives (*BGE* 40).

This ambiguity of appearance in turn relates to action as the mode of appearance. Contrary to the instrumental view of action that has found its most extreme expression in the historical madness of modernity, Nietzsche views human *praxis* as characterised by unpredictability, provisionality and uncertainty. In his argument, the meaning of a deed is never exhausted in its performance, and to act is to engage with the world without being able to guarantee the meaning of one’s deeds in advance.

Nietzsche’s views on the ambiguity of action, in so far as it relates to the

indeterminacy of appearance and thus of human identity, can be further described in terms of *ambiguity of motivation* and *ambiguity of outcome*. In the first place, contrary to the assumption that the meaning of an act is adequately revealed when traced back to its original motivation – and by implication that the character of the agent is revealed precisely in this motivation – Nietzsche suggests that what appears to ourselves and to others as the motivation for our actions might be the outcome of a struggle between motives, most of which remain unknown to us, and of which we cannot take account beforehand (*D* 129). If our actions cannot be traced back to any “original” motivation behind the deed, they also cannot be taken as an unambiguous depiction of identity. By extension, Nietzsche argues that we should not assume a logical connection between the impetus to act and the nature of the action itself:

I have learned to distinguish the cause of acting from the cause of acting in a particular way, in a particular direction, with a particular goal. The first kind of cause is a quantum of dammed-up energy that is waiting to be used up somehow, for something, while the second is, compared to this energy, something quite insignificant, for the most part a little accident in accordance with which this quantum ‘discharges’ itself in one particular way – a match versus a ton of powder (*GS* 360).

Hence the initial predisposition to act is therefore not directly translated into a particular action; the relationship between impulse and action is metaphorical rather than literal. In Nietzsche’s words: “Stimulus and activity connected: we do not know how this occurs; we do not comprehend a single causality, but we have immediate experience of them. All suffering calls forth an action, eventual action calls forth suffering – the most universal feeling is already *metaphor* (*KSA* 7.484, 19[210]).

In the second place, Nietzsche contradicts the assumption that, regardless of the ambiguity of motivation, the action itself is at least a determinable outcome of whatever obscure process, and may therefore provide an unequivocal account of identity. He argues instead that “our actions shine alternately in differing colours, they are seldom unequivocal – and there are cases enough in which we perform *many-coloured* actions” (*BGE* 215). What is more, not only does a single deed sometimes shine in many colours, but the deeds and works by which we appear in the world often serve to disguise or even “invent” their creators (*BGE* 269). This conception of character as *post facto* invention or fabrication further emphasises the impossibility of inferring a fixed identity from our mode of appearance in the world.

This understanding of the indeterminacy and ambiguity of action demonstrates that the kind of performativity Nietzsche has in mind is far from a straightforward equation of doing and being, or action and identity. This point is further illustrated in section 356 in *The Gay Science* entitled “On the problem of the actor”. Here Nietzsche warns against confusing one’s role for nature; that is, assuming a seamless fit between the self and its

appearance in the world. This assumption precisely denies the contingency and provisionality of all appearance, and thus undermines the very indeterminacy that, for Nietzsche, is the *differentia specifica* of the human. It also forecloses the possibility of acting, and thus appearing, differently from how one has done before. Those who fall prey to this assumption “become victims of their own ‘good performance’: they themselves have forgotten how much accidents, moods, and caprice disposed of them when the question of their ‘vocation’ was decided – and how many other roles they might perhaps have been *able* to play; for now it is too late. Considered more deeply, the role has actually *become* character; and art, nature” (*GS* 356).

However, this criticism should not lead us to take for granted that Nietzsche is advocating a superficial playfulness whereby one assumes and discards roles without discrimination or selection. The same passage, immediately after criticising the identification of character with a single role, a single mode of appearance, also warns against the converse danger of becoming actors and nothing else (*GS* 356). For Nietzsche, to understand oneself as an actor, a role-player, *tout court* is to treat all modes of appearance, all roles, as equally arbitrary. This approach errs on the side of indeterminacy, and forgets the sense in which the human is only “as yet” undetermined, and needs some kind of form – memory, durability – to be imposed upon its formlessness. What is more, Nietzsche argues, one becomes an actor and nothing else at the cost of being an architect of the future, which is a task for which one has to be a stone rather than an actor (*ibid.*). The overvaluing of roles/appearance at the cost of any “memory of the will” thus involves the sacrifice of the future to present indeterminacy. The future is placed at risk precisely because the arbitrary adoption of roles entails the death of the capacity for promising, or rather, the necessary faith in oneself as something more than a mere role-player that is needed to commit oneself to a promise (*ibid.*)¹¹ Given that Nietzsche identifies the real problem and task regarding the human as precisely the breeding of “an animal with the right to make promises” (*GM* II: 1), the overvaluation of indeterminacy, role-playing and appearance therefore also poses a threat to the future of the human. We should recall that Nietzsche criticises modernity for being an age of chaos, characterised by a jumble of contradictory values, roles and beliefs that are tried on and discarded without taste or distinction. It is this disorganisation or “disaggregation” that traps our understanding in the present and prevents any concern for a future that exceeds an individual life-span together with its immediate interests.

It should be clear from the above that Nietzsche is opposed to both complete identification with one’s role or appearance as well as complete indifference to whatever

¹¹ For further criticism along these lines, see *WP* 813, *KSA* 13:16[89]. Paul Patton also offers an excellent discussion of promising in relation to the problem of the actor. See Patton (2000: 179).

role one adopts, whatever appearance one makes. His treatment of action further demonstrates that he does not consider human existence as a fixed status but rather as a site of struggle between form and formlessness, memory and forgetting, durability and indeterminacy. However, our grasp of this conception of the human will remain incomplete until it has been related to one of Nietzsche's most important, if difficult, concepts, namely the will to power.

4. The will to power

For our present purposes, it is best to begin by considering the will to power in relation to the world that circumscribes human becoming. We should be clear on this: since Nietzsche no longer operates with the distinction between the "real" and the "apparent" world, his concern is with the world in which it is possible for us to live – the world of appearances, which circumscribes the conditions under which *we* appear. Thus he writes: "*First proposition*. The grounds upon which 'this' world has been designated as apparent establish rather its reality – another kind of reality is absolutely undemonstrable" (*TI* iii:6). An earlier unpublished note reads: "We *know* what the world is: absolute and unconditional knowledge is the desire to know without knowledge" (*KSA* 9.465; 19 [146]). If what counts as the world for us is merely conditional knowledge, what is the source of this conditioning? *We* are, claims Nietzsche, or rather, our need for a world in which it is possible for us to live. This domain is the phenomenal world that exists for *us*, and which would disappear in the course of any successful attempt to do away with all appearance, fiction, and illusion and to find the unconditional basis of the world-in-itself. In a much later note, Nietzsche asks rhetorically: "Is not the world for us merely a combination of relations under a measure? As soon as this arbitrary measure is lacking, our world *dissolves!*" (*KSA* 9.454, 11 [36]). In this respect, then, the human being can be understood as the measure of the world, but then only as a contingent measure. Our measurements or value-standards do not refer to an original reality, but merely to our contingent positions within – and thus our limited perspectives on – the world of appearances that constitute reality for us. At the same time, such positions and perspectives emerge from the interplay of these perspectives themselves. A note from the *Nachlass* describes this perspectival interplay between self and world as follows:

Every center of force adopts a perspective toward the entire remainder, i.e. its own particular valuation, mode of action, and mode of resistance. The "apparent world", therefore, is reduced to a specific mode of action on the world, emanating from a center.

Now there is no other mode of action whatever; and the "world" is only a word for the totality of these actions. Reality consists precisely in this particular action and reaction of every individual part toward the whole– (*WP* 567, *KSA* 13:14[184]).

Starting from this formulation, it is possible to claim that what counts as the world for us is sustained by the ceaseless, dynamic interplay of forces that operate on one another by way of action and resistance. Will to power may then be understood as the quality (as opposed to “essence”) of irresolvable tension and contest between the constellations of forces that constitute the world. This is precisely the point of Nietzsche’s famed pronouncement that “[t]he world seen from within, the world described and defined according to its ‘intelligible character’ – it would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else” (*BGE* 36).¹² Will to power in this sense “is not a being, not a becoming, but a *pathos* – the most elemental fact from which a becoming and effecting first emerge –” (*WP* 635, *KSA* 13:14[79]). This *pathos* (occasion, passion, suffering) is precisely *not* a state, an entity, the unchanging substratum upon which the changing, apparent world is erected. Rather, the will to power describes the quality of the ceaseless struggle between what Nietzsche calls “dynamic quanta”, each of which only exists by virtue of its relation to all other dynamic quanta (*ibid.*). These power quanta “do not first exist for themselves and then enter a relationship with one another. They exist only in the (incessantly changing) referentiality of all to all” (Müller-Lauter 1999: 15), and it is the mutual struggle or antagonism inherent in this referentiality that conditions the emergence of all events (*ibid.* 13). Strictly speaking, there is no will to power but only *wills* to power that are in ceaseless struggle with one another. The will to power as singular expression therefore “presupposes the plural as given” (*ibid.* 137).

Nietzsche therefore conceives of a relationship between self and world in which individual human beings remain inextricably bound up with the world which both forms and is formed by our interpretations. This embeddedness can be understood as an “*illogical original relationship with all things*” (*HAH* I: 31), whereby every interpretation is neither a function of a self-sufficient subject-identity nor simply causally determined by forces outside the self, but a “quantitative particularization” of the will to power (Müller-Lauter 1999: 133). Nietzsche describes this particularisation as a “complex form of specificity” or “perspective” which, by virtue of its contingent position within a complex of relations can never encompass *all* possible interpretations of the world (*WP* 636, *KSA* 13:14[186]). Thus, in so far as the will to power – i.e. the struggle between power-complexes – is the

¹² As Van Tongeren (2000: 157-158) points out, this pronouncement comes at the end of a long sequences of hypotheses. This means that Nietzsche couches his conception of the world as will to power as the outcome of a series of suppositions and thought-experiments rather than a straightforward truth claim. Van Tongeren suggests that by using terms that emphasise the perspectival or interpretative quality of his argument, Nietzsche actually demonstrates the working of the will to power as the interplay of a plurality of perspectives or interpretations. This suggestion gains further credence when considered in the light of the *Nachlass* note, quoted by Van Tongeren, which reads: “Under the not undangerous title ‘The Will to Power’, a new philosophy, or, to speak more clearly, *the attempt to a new interpretation of everything that happens* has come to light” (*KSA* 11.653, 40 [50]).

play of the world, human becoming is bound up with this play. Contrary to the imputed schism between self and world which runs from Plato to modern nihilism and the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche views human becoming and the world in which this becoming takes place as mutually implicated: “The human being is acquainted with the world to the extent that he is acquainted with himself: that is, its profundity is disclosed to him to the extent that he is amazed at himself and his own complexity” (*KSA* 7.458, 19[118]).

In the light of this posited relationship between self and world it now becomes possible to understand the self, not as a “thing” among other things in the world, but as a particular constellation of forces within the force-field that is the will to power.¹³ This conception of the human as a specific form or “particularisation” of the will to power allows for further elaboration on the tension between form and formlessness, determination and indeterminacy that was touched on in the previous sections.

The first point to emphasise in this regard is that, as a constellation of forces (or “drives”, as Nietzsche sometimes refers to it), the self is not a unity but a plurality. More accurately, Nietzsche advances a variety of “soul hypotheses” in opposition to any kind of “soul atomism” according to which the soul is understood as “something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an *atomon*” (*BGE* 12). These counter-hypotheses include those of a “mortal soul”, “soul as multiplicity of the subject” or “as social structure of the drives and emotions” (*ibid.*). An unpublished note offers a more detailed formulation:

The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? A kind of aristocracy of ‘cells’ in which dominion resides? To be sure, an aristocracy of equals, used to ruling jointly and understanding how to command? [...] *My hypothesis*: The subject as multiplicity (*WP* 490, *KSA* 11:40[42]).

It now becomes clear that Nietzsche ties the indeterminacy of the human precisely to this multiplicity or plurality. This indeterminacy relates to the absence of any fixed locus of control, any directing agent behind the “interaction and struggle” that constitute the self. Since the interplay of multiple power-quantas is not directed by an external agent, it cannot be said to aim at a pre-determined outcome. In this sense, Nietzsche’s conception of the human is profoundly non-teleological. Nevertheless, the absence of any *given* goal does not preclude the positing of a “new ideal” from *within* a particular constellation of forces belonging to the greater force-field that is the will to power. One should therefore not confuse plurality with pure disorder. Nietzsche’s references to “dominion”, “ruling” and “command” in the above quotation should alert us to the fact that what counts as a human

¹³ In the language of complexity theory, the self can be described as an “emergent property” of the will to power as a complex system. For an attempt to reflect on Nietzsche’s conception of the self from the perspective of complexity theory, see Cilliers, De Villiers & Roodt (2002).

being is a particular *organisation* of forces rather than atomistic chaos – sheer indeterminacy. We are rather to conceive of a human being as “a power-quantum that organizes in itself countless power-quanta” (Müller-Lauter 1999: 138).

It is in this sense that Nietzsche understands the human as a becoming: that is, as a provisional form continually emerging from indeterminacy and multiplicity. Given his insistence on the absence of an external locus of authority and identity, this emergence is necessarily a kind of immanent self-formation rather than a way of conforming to a pre-existing measure of selfhood. In this regard, the human being is perhaps best understood as a complex system that organises itself (Cilliers, de Villiers & Roodt 2002: 9). Indeed, Müller-Lauter (1999: 162) describes the notion of form being created from within as “a basic motif in Nietzsche’s thinking”. Gemes (2001: 342) takes a similar line in arguing that, while Nietzsche insists on the dissolution of an external locus of authority, he still leaves room for an “immanent authority”. It is important to understand that such authority does not reside in some “voluntaristic master agent” (ibid.), but is a function of the organisation of the multifarious drives that constitute the self. Thus Nietzsche distinguishes between a “strong” and “weak” will on the basis of the capacity to allow these drives to proliferate without being pulled apart by the tension between them:

Weakness of the will: that is a metaphor that can prove misleading. For there is no will, and consequently neither a strong nor a weak will. The multitude and disaggregation of impulses and the lack of any systematic order among them result in a ‘weak will’; their coordination under a single predominant impulse results in a ‘strong will’: in the first case it is the oscillation and the lack of gravity; in the latter, the precision and clarity of the direction (*WP* 46, *KSA* 13:14[219]).

It is important to keep in mind that the perceived unity or coherence of the self as organisation does not designate its “being”; it has no ontological status: “All unity is unity *only* as *organization and co-operation* – just as a human community is a unity – as opposed to atomistic *anarchy*, as a *pattern of domination* that *signifies* a unity but *is* not a unity” (*WP* 561, *KSA* 12:2[87]). This indicates that the power-quanta that are organised into a semblance of unity are themselves not solid entities. Each such quantum of power is a *perceived* unity that is itself again an organisation of power-quanta, and so on. Thus, to draw on Müller-Lauter once again: “Not only the oneness of an organized domination structure has no such ‘being’, but even the multiplicity of ‘interplays’ in such a structure ‘is’ not, insofar as it is thought of as composed of solid units. [...] There is no ‘individual’, there is no ultimate indivisible quantum of power, that we can reach” (1999: 132).

It should be clear by now that the entire notion of the will undergoes a radical transformation in Nietzsche’s hands. The will to power is not a subset of the general category of the will, traditionally understood as one faculty among others at the disposal of the human subject. Against the notion of an effective, unified will which somehow commands the body, Nietzsche insists, first, that “will can only operate on will, not on

matter” (*BGE* 36), and second, that willing is a complex event that is “a unity only as a word” (*BGE* 19). Willing is always a “willing something”, namely power over other wills who themselves will power.

The event of willing can therefore be understood as a contest between multiple power-quanta, the outcome of which is a temporary relation of domination and subjugation: “in all willing it is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying, on the basis [...] of a social structure composed of many ‘souls’” (*ibid.*).¹⁴ What we generally designate as willing is merely the outcome of the struggle, its *effect*, as it were, and not the exercise of a faculty. It is in this sense that Nietzsche proclaims that “*l’effet, c’est moi*” (*BGE* 19). In so far as the human being only exists as a particular constellation of forces that is the outcome of a struggle, we cannot grasp the struggle that constitutes us. We simply lack the “organs” for such knowledge, and cannot but see “a thousandfold complexity as a unity” (*WP* 523, *KSA* 13:14[144]). For this reason, we remain irrevocably bound to the phenomenal world; there is no way for us to lift the veil of appearance: “However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being” (*D* 119). One should be careful not to read this to imply that there nevertheless exists a noumenal truth about ourselves which we simply cannot access. For Nietzsche, the will to power cannot be separated from the forms in which it appears in the world; it – which is of course no “it” – simply *is* the ceaseless struggle of power-quanta which manifests itself in temporary alliances or quantitative particularisations. There is therefore no ontological reality *behind* appearances, nothing more to grasp than the forms – ourselves included – in which the will to power is manifested. We should thus be encouraged to emulate artists and cultivate “a good will to appearance” (*GS* 107).

On the one hand, therefore, Nietzsche radicalises the indeterminacy of the self to the extent that it becomes impossible to say that it has ontological being. The conception of the self as a particular instance of the will to power allows him to understand the human as a becoming, not a being, and thus poses his opposition to the notion of the unitary subject as the Archimedean point from which to measure all things. On the other hand, however, his emphasis on the self as organisation, as *signified* unity, means that he also opposes the simple acceptance of dissolution and disintegration that is merely the obverse of the desperate faith in the Cartesian subject. Moreover, given his evaluative distinction between noble and slave and his reference to the majority of mortals as “failures”,

¹⁴ Consider also: “No subject ‘atoms’. The sphere of a subject is constantly growing or decreasing, the center of the system constantly shifting; in cases where it cannot organize the appropriate mass, it breaks into two parts. On the other hand, it can transform a weaker subject into its functionary without destroying it, and to a certain degree for a new unity with it. No ‘substance’, rather something that in itself strives after greater strength, and that wants to ‘preserve’ itself only indirectly (It wants to *surpass* itself –)” (*WP* 488, *KSA* 12:9[98]).

Nietzsche clearly does not consider all particularisations of the will to power to be on a par. But on what basis does he distinguish between different ways of imparting form to formlessness, which is to say, between different ways of becoming human? In order to provide an answer to this question, we need to consider the meaning of Nietzsche's injunction to "become who you are".

5. Becoming who/what one is¹⁵

While Nietzsche considers the human in terms of becoming rather than being and emphasises indeterminacy and plurality rather than fixed identity, he gives various indications that a mere collection of drives or power-quanta does not yet constitute a human being. Thus he argues in an unpublished note that "one should not assume in any case that many humans are 'persons' [...] some are multiple persons, most are *none*" (*WP* 886, *KSA* 12:10[59]). This view is even more forcefully expressed in *Zarathustra*:

Verily, my friends, I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men. This is what is terrible for my eyes, that I find man in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field. And when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same: fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents – but no human beings" (*Z* II: 20).

The problem with these fragments of humanity is that they lack any kind of organising or form-giving force that could bind them into a coherent whole. We have seen earlier that Nietzsche envisages such a structuring force in terms of "imparting style" to oneself, which would bring the multiplicity that the human *is* into a kind of provisional order without falling back to a unitary identity. He may therefore be said to distinguish between human types on the basis of their capacity for this kind of self-organisation. We find two such types outlined in *Beyond Good and Evil* 200, where Nietzsche differentiates between those whose weakness make them long for their internal warfare to come to an end and those who manage to sustain the greatest variety of oppositional forces within themselves without falling into chaos (see also *GS* 370). Nietzsche clearly draws a distinction between two modes of being human as a two particularisations of the will to power, one which fails to organise its multiplicity and longs to flee its own disorganisation into "finally attained unity, as a "sabbath of sabbaths", and another which manages to sustain itself in the midst of this struggle and opposition between drives. The latter are described as those in whom, "in addition to [their] powerful and irreconcilable drives, a

¹⁵ In the earlier texts in which the formulation appears, Nietzsche always speaks of becoming *who* one is, whereas the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, his last, autobiographical book, carries the subtitle: "Become *what* you are". I offer an explanation of the meaning of "what" on p. 109.

real mastery and subtlety in waging war against oneself, in other words, self-control, self-outwitting, has been inherited and cultivated too” (ibid.).

These two types emerge under the same conditions, namely in “late cultures” characterised by a multiple and contradictory heritage. These cultures can be characterised as “age[s] of disintegration” when human beings contain in themselves “opposite, and often not merely opposite, drives and value standards that fight each other and rarely permit each other any rest” (*BGE* 200). Thus, in so far as modernity is just such an age of chaos and disintegration, it has a double meaning. On the one hand, as the previous analysis of modern nihilism has shown, it is an age of dissolution that manifests itself in a crisis of meaning, a crisis of evaluation and a crisis of authority. On the other hand, however, this same era of disintegration might in fact prepare the ground for “a richer humanity, which would be impossible without it” (Müller-Lauter 1999: 40). The background to this argument is the recognition that the possibility of overcoming nihilism and thus becoming other than we are depends on us first becoming a problem for ourselves. One might say that, in some sense, we first have to lose ourselves in order to approach the “new beginning” of Nietzsche’s vision.¹⁶ Hence it is precisely in so far as modernity signals a crisis of human being that it harbours the dual possibility of the loss of the human – of “going under” (*untergehen*) in the words of *Zarathustra* – and of “going over” (*übergehen*) into a new mode of existence (*Z* Pr. 4; IV: 13). In Nietzsche’s formulation:

Principle: there is an element of decay in everything that characterizes modern man: but close beside this sickness stand signs of an untested force and powerfulness of the soul. *The same reasons that produce the increasing smallness of man drive the stronger and rarer individuals up to greatness* (*WP* 109, *KSA* 11:34[223]).

The question that exercises Nietzsche in this regard is how the very conditions that threaten the dissolution of the human might also give birth to his new ideal of “a *synthetic, summarizing, justifying man*” (*WP* 866, *KSA* 12:10[17]); the human being of the future, who “liberates the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man; this Antichrist and antinihilist; this victor over God and nothingness” (*GM* II: 24).

We might acquire a preliminary understanding of the conditions of emergence of such a future type when considering it in terms of organisation, style, cultivation and taste – that is, the very opposite of the vices of which Nietzsche accuses modern culture: disorganisation and, following from that, lack of style, cultivation and taste. To begin with, we should remind ourselves of Nietzsche’s understanding of the will as “an affect of command” (*BGE* 19). What we perceive as willing in the world, the will that manifests

itself in action, is the outcome of a struggle between power-complexes in which one such complex has achieved temporary dominion over another or a series of others. This emphasis on command, ruling and obeying suggests that, for Nietzsche, the effective organisation of power-complexes entails some kind of *hierarchy*. We might thus understand organisation in Nietzsche's sense as the establishment of an order of rank (*Rangordnung*) among power complexes by virtue of a "ruling passion" or a "master drive" which subjects other drives to itself without destroying them. The rank ordering of drives thus imposes a degree of limitation or constraint upon the struggle between power complexes, without bringing the struggle to an end. This hierarchical organisation of drives or forces therefore does not describe a static condition, in so far as every form of mastery or command calls up resistance to itself which in turn sustains the struggle (cf. *WP* 966, *KSA* 11:27[59]).¹⁷

We find an early description of this relationship between dominant and subjected drives in the essay on "Schopenhauer as Educator", where Nietzsche muses on the two seemingly contradictory principles involved in "educating a human being to be a human being" (SE 2). On the one hand, the educator must concentrate on developing the one, unique and central strength of his pupil, while on the other developing *all* the latter's abilities and somehow bringing them into harmony with one another. Nietzsche suggests that, far from being at odds with one another, an education according to these two principles would mould human beings of "harmonious wholeness and many-voiced consonance [...] in whom everything – all knowledge, desire, love, hate – strives toward a central point, a root force, and where precisely the compelling and dominating force of this living center forms a harmonious system of back-and-forth, up-and-down movements" (ibid.). This harmony of movements or drives depends on an educator who would "not only discover a central strength, but would also know how to prevent it from having a destructive impact on the other strengths" (ibid.). The task of such an education would then be "to transform the entire human being into a solar and planetary system with its own life and motion and to discover the laws of its higher mechanics" (ibid.). Nietzsche reprises this cosmic imagery in a much later note when he writes: "The wisest man would be the one richest in contradictions, who has, as it were, antennae for all types of men – as well as his moment of *grand harmony* – a rare accident even in us! A sort of planetary motion –" (*WP* 259, *KSA* 11:26[119]). Thus, perhaps the relationship between a multiplicity of drives

¹⁶ The religious symbolism here is not accidental. There is indeed a kind of soteriology at work in Nietzsche's philosophy. I shall deal with Nietzsche's conception of redemption in greater detail in chapter 6.

¹⁷ Consider also: "The drive to approach – and the drive to trust something back are the bond, in both the inorganic and the organic world. The entire distinction is a prejudice" (*WP* 655, *KSA* 11:36[21]).

that struggle against one another can be likened to the constant push and pull of gravitational forces which, far from resulting in mutual destruction, governs the movement of the planets. In the case of human beings, it is this kind of dynamic harmony, in which the greatest variety of oppositional drives or power-quanta are organised in an hierarchical order without destroying one another, that comprises “character”. Stated differently, it is only in so far as one is constituted as this kind of organisation that one amounts to a person, as opposed to remaining a mere arbitrary collection of drives. This may be described as precisely the art of “imparting style” to oneself to which we referred earlier.

Another description of this kind of self-formation that features on more than one occasion in Nietzsche’s writings derives from Pindar’s injunction to “learn to become who you are”.¹⁸ We first encounter this motto, in slightly revised form, in the *Gay Science* 270: “*What does your conscience say? – You must become who you are*”. Later in the same text this brief maxim is given a more extensive treatment:

We, however, *want to become those we are* – human beings who are new, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. To that end we must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be able to be *creators* in this sense (*GS* 335).¹⁹

It is not easy to make sense of this aphorism. On the one hand, Nietzsche seems to exhort us to a kind of free self-creation in the existentialist mode, while insisting on the other that such creation is no more than discovering who one necessarily already is. However, such a reading assumes a binary opposition between free will and determinism that is itself only possible so long as the will is seen as an independent faculty. And, as our preceding examination of the will to power has shown, Nietzsche is far from holding this view. The aphorism begins to render up its sense when we ask in what sense Nietzsche considers our becoming “physicists” to be a precondition for self-creation. Here it is important to keep in mind that Nietzsche doesn’t relate *physis* to a set of natural laws – in fact, he is consistently critical of the essentially mechanistic view of the world as directed by supposedly independent laws of nature – but to the interaction and struggle of power-quanta.²⁰ He seems to be saying that becoming physicists means overcoming the tendency

¹⁸ The phrase appears in the second Pythian Ode, line 72: *genoi’ hoios essi mathōn*, rendered as “Become such as you are, having learned what that it is”. In Pindar: *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, ed. & trans. W.H. Race. Harvard: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997.

¹⁹ See also *AZ* IV: 1; *EH*, “Why I am so clever” 9; *KSA* 10.66: [110].

²⁰ Contrary to the belief in the laws of nature, Nietzsche maintains that “laws are what are absolutely lacking, and every force draws its ultimate consequence at every moment” (*BGE* 22). This is not to say that he simply replaces a view of the world as an ordered whole with a notion of it as anarchistic chaos. His point, rather, is that there is no natural law that predetermines the outcome of the struggle between power-complexes – in that sense the world is “chaos” – while in the course of the struggle the stronger force will necessarily subjugate the weaker: strength will necessarily manifest itself as strength, weakness as weakness. Strength and weakness in turn are not fixed attributes of power-

to be *metaphysicists* – that is, considering the self as a static entity, an Archimedean point, an eternally fixed measure of the world – and instead understanding oneself as a quantitative particularisation of the will to power. It is in this sense that we are to grasp “what” we are. This “what”, in so far as it refers to the will to power, is therefore no fixed essence or final determination. Instead, it may be said to stand for our “*illogical original relationship with all things*” (HAH I: 31). The important point in this regard is that we first need to recognise our embeddedness within the struggle of power-complexes, before it is possible to “create oneself” in Nietzsche’s sense.

Given what we now know about the will to power, such creation should not be understood as creation *ex nihilo*, but as an organisation or rank-ordering of existing drives or power-quanta. Nietzsche explicitly provides an account of this kind of self-formation in response to the question of “how one becomes what one is” in *Ecce Homo: An “organizing idea”* begins to grow “somewhere deep down” and eventually comes to command all “subservient capacities”, training them into a coherent whole without suppressing or shackling them. This organisation involves an “order of rank among [...] capacities; distance; the art of separating without setting against one another; to mix nothing, to ‘reconcile’ nothing; a tremendous variety that is nevertheless the opposite of chaos” (EH, ‘Why I am so clever’, 9). What is more, in so far as such organisation or rank-ordering comprises the separation of and drawing of distinctions between drives, it manifests itself in the art of discrimination, which, for Nietzsche, amounts to “the possession of good taste” (KSA 7.448, 19 [86]).²¹ Hence Nietzsche repeatedly emphasises the *lack* of taste as the signal quality of modern culture and individuals, which manifests itself precisely in the inability to draw boundaries, to distinguish, to set limits. As he notes in the course of an examination of modern decadence: “the claim to independence, to free development, to *laissez aller*, is advanced most heatedly precisely by those for whom no curb *could be too strong* – this applies *in politics*, it applies in art” (TI ix:41). He then goes on to argue that under such conditions – that is, conditions of limitless proliferation in all directions – *pruning* is an essential precondition for the emergence of an individual (ibid.).

Needless to say, for Nietzsche there is no independent self that could preside over such “pruning”; no Archimedean point located in either the “organizing idea” or the “subservient capacities”. Significantly, he speaks of an organising idea “beginning to *grow*

quanta, but are relative to the struggle itself; each only has meaning with reference to the force to which it is opposed at any particular moment.

²¹ In this passage Nietzsche aligns himself with the Greek understanding of taste – in this sense of discrimination – as the basis for wisdom in all its forms. Consider also: “Blessed are those who possess taste, even though it be bad taste! – And not only blessed: one can be wise, too, only by virtue of this quality; which is why the Greeks, who were very subtle in such things, designated the wise man with a word that signifies the *man of taste*, and called wisdom, artistic and practical as well as theoretical and intellectual, simply ‘taste (*sophia*)’ (HAH II: 170).

somewhere deep down” when speaking of this kind of self-formation (*EH*, ‘Why I am so clever’, 9) [my italics]. A much earlier note reads: “Desired result: To reveal *character* in cultivation, not decorative, but rather organic cultivation” (*KSA* 7.708, 29 [191]). The organic metaphor in this context suggests that self-cultivation remains part of a more extensive living system. Rather than portraying self-creation as the project of an autonomous self, Nietzsche offers a conception of self-formation as a (provisional) rank-ordering of an array of forces engaged in mutual struggle within the greater force-field that is the will to power.

Of course one might then ask why, if there is no independent self presiding over such cultivation, Nietzsche sometimes formulates “becoming who one is” as an injunction (e.g. in *GS* 270 and *Z* IV: 1)? Why *should* one become who one is to become anyway, and how can one help becoming who one is? Surely the kind of organisation Nietzsche has in mind would simply happen, or fail to happen, depending on the relations between power-complexes at any particular moment? The beginnings of a solution to this difficulty may present itself if we take becoming who or what you are to mean “learning to relate yourself to who you are” (Van Tongeren 2002: 46). In this, there is a “double dynamic” at work of “acknowledging and influencing”; that is to say: “I learn to know and accept myself, and in that I form myself” (*ibid.*). As our previous treatment of the impossibility of self-knowledge has shown, learning to “know oneself” in this way does not involve capturing any noumenal truth about oneself. The point, rather, is that the very mode of knowing influences – to a large extent, creates – the one who is known and vice versa. Thus, for Nietzsche, to come to “know” the self as an organisation of power-quanta results in a very different understanding of the human – and ultimately a different human type – from “knowing” oneself as a changeless subject.

This interpretation is given further credence by Owen & Ridley (2000: 138), who argue that “the modality of will to power that characterizes human being involves a *rapport à soi*, a relation of the self to itself”. On this reading, Nietzsche’s rank ordering of human types – e.g. noble or slave, strong or weak, the few “geniuses” and the majority of “failures” – can then be understood precisely as a distinction between “typical configurations of the self’s relation to itself” (*ibid.* 140). Thus, if there is no “self” independent of its mode of knowing and relating to itself, the injunction to become who one is therefore precisely an appeal for a particular way of knowing oneself – that is, to know oneself as a configuration of the will to power – which in turn forms the very self that one comes to know. Against this background, we might take Nietzsche to say that one should learn to “know” oneself as will to power so as to become *different* from what one has been while “knowing” oneself as an Archimedean point outside of becoming.

6. Fate, limitation, transcendence

Given this understanding of the self as will to power, there is a fatefulness involved in Nietzsche's account of becoming human. For, while one may learn to "know" oneself as will to power, *whether* one learns to do so or not is *itself* determined by the particular configuration of power-quanta that that one is. Thus Nietzsche writes: "Learning changes us; it does what all nourishment does which also does not merely 'preserve' – as physiologists know. But at the bottom of us, really 'deep down', there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions" (*BGE* 231). Later in the same aphorism he refers to our convictions – that is, "solutions to problems inspiring strong faith in us" – as "signposts to the problem we *are* – rather, to the great stupidity we are, to our spiritual *fatum*, to what is *unteachable* very 'deep down'" (*ibid.*).²²

Nevertheless, this formulation should not lead us to assume that Nietzsche ultimately exchanges his intricate genealogy of human becoming for a straightforward fatalism. I would suggest, rather, that the purpose of this notion of fatefulness is to distinguish his account of human becoming from the idea of the perfectly malleable self which he identifies as the specific pathology of modernity. If we recall the treatment of modern nihilism in the previous chapter, Nietzsche's genealogy of human becoming can be said to apprise us of two specific qualities of the human that have been lost under conditions of nihilism, namely transcendence and limitation. On the one hand, he confronts us with the ambiguity and provisionality of identity, which implies that who one is *transcends* whatever one appears to be at any moment. From this perspective, the human is not a stable point from which to judge the meaning and value of self and world, but a play of masks, an array of shifting appearances, a quantitative particularisation of the will to power. On the other hand, however, Nietzsche also opposes the assumption that in the absence of any predetermined and determinable self we possess limitless power to form ourselves into whatever we may wish, and to fabricate the world in accordance with human requirements. By introducing the notion of a "spiritual *fatum*", he is not arguing that there is a noumenal self that underlies our changing appearances, but that there is a *limit* to our capacity for self-formation and self-mastery – a limit determined by the very struggle of forces by which each of us is constituted. Who one is emerges from the struggle between power-quanta that one cannot grasp and control, precisely because there is no self outside of the struggle.

²² See also *WP* 334, *KSA* 13:14[113]

Fate, in this context, is best understood as a “limit-determination” (*Grenzbestimmendes*) rather than an external force imposed upon an individual life.²³ Understood in this way, one’s fate describes how far one is able to go in attempting to give form to oneself – that is, the fluctuating limit of the self as will to power (cf. *WP* 492, *KSA* 11:40[21]). This limit is not separate from human becoming, but emerges from the actions by which we appear in the world: “fate is only an abstract concept, a force without matter; [...] for the individual there is only an individual fate; that fate is nothing but a chain of events; [...] man, as soon as he acts, creates his own events, determines his own fate” (ibid.).²⁴ Such actions, as we have seen, are not the outcome of autonomous decision on the part of a self-sufficient subject, but are themselves particular manifestations of the will to power. Thus one’s “spiritual *fatum*” is bound up with the very struggle by which one becomes who one is, a struggle in which “every force draws its ultimate consequence at every moment” (*BGE* 22). One cannot command or escape one’s fate as something over and against oneself precisely because it is the limit-determination of this very self.

It is in this respect that Nietzsche’s conception of the human can be read as an attempt to counter the belief in limitless self-mastery that is one of the hallmarks of modern nihilism. Against the hubris that sees the human as an object of fabrication that may be made into whatever we wish, his notion of fate serves to remind us we are not merely the product of our own hands. If, in the final instance, we do not own or command ourselves absolutely, there is a limit to what any one of us is able to become. Indeed, Nietzsche reminds us that “[e]very type has its limits” (*WP* 684, *KSA* 13:14[133]). Nietzsche’s genealogy of human becoming may then be understood precisely as an attempt to trace the limits of the different human types, that is, the different modes of relating the self to itself. Those he typifies as “weak”, “slavish”, “failures” and the like are precisely those who seek to encompass themselves absolutely, so that who they are coincides absolutely with their own self-understanding. Yet, as Nietzsche shows, precisely because they do not recognise any limit to their grasp of themselves, they deny their own complexity and thereby renounce the very indeterminacy that he posits as the distinguishing feature of the human. As we have seen, such commitment to an ultimately

²³ See Nietzsche, F.W. ‘Willensfreiheit und Fatum’. In *Frühe Schriften (Band II)*, ed. H.J. Mette. München: C.H. Beck, p. 60.

²⁴ The more famous formulation of this thought occurs in *The Wanderer and his Shadow* 61, where Nietzsche opposes his conception of fate to the “Turkish fatalism” which sees human existence and fate as two antagonistic forces, in which the latter always wins out over the former. By contrast, Nietzsche insists: “In reality every man is himself a piece of fate; when he thinks to resist fate in the way suggested, it is precisely fate that is here fulfilling itself; the struggle is imaginary, but so is the proposed resignation to fate; all these imaginings are enclosed within fate. [...] You yourself, poor fearful man, are the implacable *moira* enthroned even above the gods that governs all that happens; you are the blessing or the curse and in any event the fetters in which the strongest lies captive; in you the whole future of the world of man is pre-determined: it is of no use for you to shudder when you look upon yourself.”

determinable self, while seeking to safeguard the status of the human, in fact works towards its animalisation. On the other hand, the type that he designates as “nobles” or “masters” acknowledge the struggle which constitutes them without seeking to escape into an Archimedean point from where they may direct or resolve the battle, so to speak. To recognise the limits of self-mastery in this way is to acknowledge the aporia in the self’s relation to itself; to know that who one is necessarily transcends the grasp of the knowing self (cf. *GM* Pr 1; *WP* 492, *KSA* 11:40[21]). And it is this interrelation of limitation and transcendence that ultimately informs Nietzsche’s understanding of the human as the “as yet undetermined animal”.

We have to recognise, moreover, that Nietzsche’s genealogy of human becoming is not a neutral description of general species characteristics, but aims to provide an account of its highest type. In other words, it is imbued with normative force (cf. Van Tongeren 2000: 200). For Nietzsche, to interrogate the meaning of our humanity requires that we measure ourselves against its greatest exemplars – those who command the “mysterious pathos” of nobility: “the craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of ever higher, rarer, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states – in brief, simply the enhancement of the type ‘man’, the continual ‘self-overcoming of man’, to use a moral formula in a supra-moral sense” (*BGE* 257). Thus, contrary to the signal tendency of modernity to take present-day human beings – fragmentary beings in a state of disorganisation and disaggregation – as the ultimate measure of meaning and value, Nietzsche offers a different standard of measurement: “I teach: that there are higher and lower human beings, and that a single individual can under certain circumstances justify the existence of whole millennia – that is, a full, rich, great, whole human being in relation to countless incomplete fragmentary men” (*WP* 997, *KSA* 11:27[16]). It is these great and rare human beings who serve as the “milestones” which signify “how far humanity has advanced so far” (*WP* 881, *KSA* 11:27[16]).²⁵

Nevertheless, the exemplary validity of the highest type should not be confused with evolutionary success. On the contrary, Nietzsche argues that the more complex the type, the greater the number of oppositional forces that constitute it, the more difficult it is for it to sustain itself. For that reason, it is mostly the opposite type that predominates in the affairs of the world.²⁶

²⁵ Elsewhere Nietzsche refers to the “great human being” as “as standard of measurement” (*WP* 750, *KSA* 11:25[349]).

²⁶ With this view, Nietzsche places himself in opposition to the notion that it is precisely the strongest and the best that survive the process of natural selection. For Nietzsche’s arguments against this popular conception of Darwinism, see for instance *GS* 349, *WP* 647, 685 (*KSA* 12:7[25], 13:14[123]).

The richest and most complex forms – for the expression ‘higher type’ means no more than this – perish more easily: only the lowest preserve an apparent indestructibility. The former are achieved only rarely and maintain their superiority with difficulty; the latter are favored by a compromising fruitfulness. [...] the higher type represents an incomparably greater complexity – a greater sum of co-ordinated elements: so its disintegration is also incomparably more likely. The ‘genius’ is the sublimest machine there is – consequently the most fragile” (*WP* 684, *KSA* 13:14[133]).

This should make it clear that the emergence of the highest type is not the inevitable telos of human becoming, but a “lucky stroke” [*Glücksfall*] (*GM* 1: 12; *GM* 3: 14; *BGE* 274). We find a preliminary and still somewhat cryptic description of the type that would embody such a “lucky stroke” in a passage from *The Gay Science*. Here Nietzsche sketches an image of a noble human being “who manages to experience the history of humanity as a whole as *his own history*”, and thus stands heir to the most multifarious genealogy (*GS* 337). While this far-ranging experience would encompass the immense sum of human griefs over the centuries, and as such would be unbearable to almost anyone, Nietzsche’s measure of the human is precisely the one who *could* endure this experience, and not merely endure it, but transform it into a new mode of existence.

[A] person whose horizon encompasses thousands of years past and future, being the heir of all the nobility of past spirit – an heir with a sense of obligation, the most aristocratic of old nobles and at the same time the first of a new nobility – the like of which no age has yet seen or dreamed of; if one could burden one’s soul with all of this – the oldest, the newest, losses, hopes, conquests, and all the victories of humanity; if one could finally contain all this in one soul and crowd it into a single feeling – this would surely have to result in a happiness that humanity has not known so far: the happiness of a god full of power and love, full of tears and laughter, a happiness that, like the sun in the evening, continuously bestows its inexhaustible riches, pouring them into the sea, feeling richest, as the sun does, only when even the poorest fisherman is still rowing with golden oars! This godlike feeling would then be called – humaneness [*Menschlichkeit*]! (ibid.).

The passage as a whole is entitled “*The ‘humaneness’ of the future*”. The inverted commas – as is always the case with Nietzsche – should alert us to the fact that the “humaneness” at issue here is something different from our ordinary understanding of the term. What Nietzsche points to here is not benevolence or compassion as we know it, but an as-yet unfamiliar sensibility that can only be known to one who sustains the greatest inner plurality without being torn apart by the multifarious, oppositional perspectives by which such a character is constituted. This uncanny feeling would necessarily transcend all human experience that is still tied to particular, and therefore limited, perspectives and, as such, it would indeed be “godlike”. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Nietzsche is presenting us with a new version of the God who has died; instead, he is offering us a counter-ideal to the Christian-Platonic mode of valuation that has found its ultimate expression in the last man of modernity: a “new [...] strange, tempting, dangerous ideal” of “a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear *inhuman*” (*GS*

382). Contrary to the conception of humanity as a determinate and thus familiar category of being, Nietzsche's thus hints at a hitherto unknown mode of existence that would transcend the "human, all too human".

Yet if it is to retain the indeterminacy that Nietzsche contrasts to the determinate state of animals, this future ideal cannot signal an end-state, the conclusion of all human becoming. In so far as his new measure of the human transcends humanity as it is now, Nietzsche could perhaps be said to have a teleology, but then a teleology without a telos. Thus, instead of being taken for an achievable human goal, the uncanny ideal of the incarnation of the most extreme plurality is best understood as "a limit to which one can only, more or less, approach" (Van Tongeren 2000: 240). Nietzsche can then be said to measure human types – specifically, to distinguish between different constellations of power-quanta – in terms of their "relative approximation" to this limit (ibid.). Such approximation would not consist in a completed achievement, but in the continuous transcendence of who one is – that is, a particular determination – towards as-yet unrealised configurations of the will to power.

In Nietzsche's later writings, this notion of self-transcendence is exemplified by the enigmatic figure of *Übermensch*. I would argue that this figure does not signify another, "better" way of being human, but a mode of existence that is already *beyond* the human. The *Übermensch* is not the highest human being, nor does it indicate a goal that may be realised in any individual life (there are no *Übermenschen*). Instead, it represents the other side of the limit where the human "goes over" into a new mode of existence, one that is no longer human. On this interpretation, the "highest type" does not refer to the *Übermensch*, but to those who achieve the closest approximation of this limit on *this* side of being human. This understanding of the *Übermensch* as a supra-human mode of existence is borne out by Nietzsche's claim in *Zarathustra*:

The most concerned ask today: "How is man to be preserved?" But Zarathustra is the first and only one to ask: "How is man to be overcome?"

I have the *Übermensch* at heart, *that* is my first and only concern – and *not* man: not the neighbour, not the poorest, not the most ailing, not the best (Z IV: 3).

Assuming this interpretation is correct, what are the implications of this perplexing figure for the attempt to re-think the meaning of the human in the aftermath of the death of God? In the first place, the figure of the *Übermensch* can be understood as the banner under which Nietzsche does battle against the pervasive belief that the "last man" of the modern age is the absolute measure of all things. We should recall that Nietzsche criticises the specifically modern belief that present-day humanity represents a terminus, the achieved goal of world history. As we have seen on several occasions, to understand the human as a completed and determinate form, is to understand the human as *animal*. What has also become clear is that the result of human beings taking themselves to be the

culmination of some all-encompassing process is an almost exclusive concern with *self-preservation*. If we cannot image any mode of existence that transcends our present selves, it follows that we would consider the preservation of ourselves in the present state as the highest good. Yet Nietzsche's genealogy of human becoming aims to demonstrate that to preserve oneself as one is, is in fact to lose oneself – at least, to lose that which distinguishes human existence from undifferentiated species existence. Thus, in opposition to an undifferentiated “mankind” that personifies the basic sameness of all to all within the same species, Nietzsche posits the *Übermensch* as the embodiment of the most extreme differentiation or plurality.

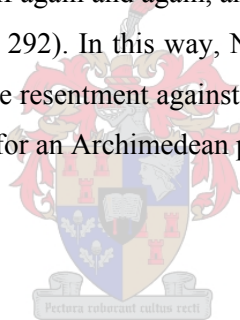
In the second place, the *Übermensch* is a battle-cry against the ascetic ideal. In Nietzsche's argument, this ideal passes judgement on human existence and finds it wanting. It signals a “longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself” (*GM* III: 28) in order to flee into some Archimedean point beyond the transitory world. In this way, it tries to overcome the experience of meaninglessness by locating the meaning of contingent existence precisely in its negation. For Nietzsche, the experience of meaninglessness and consequent world-denial stems, in turn, from a failed attempt at seeking the meaning of the human in itself, in the mere brute fact of existence:

Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human *animal*, had no meaning so far. His existence on earth contained no goal; “why man at all?” – was a question without an answer; the *will* for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny there sounded as a refrain a yet greater “in vain!” *This* is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was *lacking*, that man was surrounded by a fearful *void* – he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning (*GM* III: 28).

As long as we take human existence in its sheer thereness as an end point, with no measure that transcends itself, it necessarily seems devoid of any purpose except that which we share with all living things: the preservation of the species. The ascetic ideal is meant to paper over this void by locating meaning and purpose in the flight from existence, with the implication that the latter is indeed worthy of condemnation. Nietzsche, on the other hand, posits a different aim: “Not ‘mankind’ but the *Übermensch* is the goal!” (*WP* 1001, *KSA* 11:26[232]). Perhaps we might consider this goal to be a measure of the human that is neither absolutely immanent to human beings as they are, nor an eternal principle outside of all contingent existence. Human beings approximate this goal, measure or limit in themselves in so far as they are able to transcend again and again any final determination – *not*, as we have seen, by arbitrarily adopting and discarding roles, but by realising within themselves the greatest possible plurality of perspectives without falling into atomistic chaos. On this view, our humanity is neither a pre-determined status nor something to be made by us, but a site of struggle. In the words of Zarathustra, “Man is a

rope, tied between animal and *Übermensch* – a rope over an abyss. [...] What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is a *going over* and a *going under*” (Z Prologue 4). In fact, the interrelation of the *Übermensch*, transcendence and redemption is still more complex – and problematic – than it has been portrayed here. However I shall postpone further exposition and criticism to the final chapter, where I shall situate it in the context of Nietzsche’s “post-humanist” vision of redemption.

To conclude: Nietzsche’s genealogy of human becoming subverts the conception of the human as a being of determinate form and function, the still point of the turning world, the final measure of all things. This critical enterprise problematises our humanity, but for this very reason makes it possible to think the meaning of our existence anew. Nietzsche goes on to propose that such meaning does not lie outside the world of appearances, but neither is it wholly immanent to any determinate form in which we appear in the world. Rather, one approximates his new measure of the human – which is also a counter-measure to our animalisation under conditions of modernity – to the extent that one is able to overcome oneself again and again, and in this way precisely “coming to” oneself again and again (cf. *BGE* 292). In this way, Nietzsche offers a conception of the human that does not suffer from the resentment against transitoriness that, ever since Plato, has manifested itself in the search for an Archimedean point outside of all becoming.



CHAPTER 4

RETHINKING THE HUMAN: ARENDT

The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man. Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence (Arendt, *HC* 9).

Men not only exist in the plural as do all earthly beings, but have an indication of this plurality within themselves (Arendt, PP 440).

Introduction

Although far from mirroring Nietzsche's conception of human becoming, Arendt shares his view that the human is no immutable essence or biological given, but a contingent achievement. This achievement, moreover, is not a tremendous feat of self-creation. Quite the reverse: we become who we are in relation to the conditions in which we find ourselves. As we have seen in chapter 2, Arendt considers the modern individual to be consumed by precisely the desire to exchange "human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking) ... for something he has made himself" (*HC* 2-3). In her perspective, to the extent that the modern age has seen the progressive fulfilment of this wish, it has not resulted in greater freedom to become whoever we wish to be. On the contrary, the distinctively modern dream of an existence that is entirely of our own making, that is fully calculable, quantifiable, and measurable and therefore carries no resistance within itself, is in fact a dream of a mode of life that is no longer human. In the light of this criticism of modernity, Arendt's inquiry into what she calls "the human condition" can be understood as an attempt to turn our attention back to the *conditionality* of human existence – that is to say, the extent to which human being is *not* merely, or even primarily, what we make of ourselves, but an emergent property of conditions beyond the scope of human mastery.

It is important to understand what Arendt means by "condition" here. In the first place, a condition of human existence can be understood as a limit, boundary, or constraint that serves to mark out a recognisably human life. A human life acquires shape and meaning – becomes the life of *someone* – in the space demarcated by these limits, often also in the resistance to those very limits. These limits or conditions are not absolute determinants of human identity – that is to say, they do not directly make us into who we are – yet in the absence of such conditions we could not begin to be. Arendt identifies two kinds of conditions in this regard. On the one hand, as members of a species who share a certain biological reality with all living things, we belong to the realm of nature, where we

are formed by conditions that we have not brought into being and over which we have, generally speaking, no control. On the other hand, we also belong to a world comprised of human words, deeds and works which we share with a plurality of other human beings. This human world exerts its own conditioning force. However, while this conditioning springs from human endeavour, it is just as little under our command as those conditions that belong to nature.

In the second place, Arendt's allusion to "*the human condition*" – the title of what is arguably her most famous work – can be understood as a deliberate attempt on her part to distinguish her own undertaking from all efforts to define human being in terms of an absolute quality or essence, whether derived from introspection or observed behaviour. The thrust of her argument, in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere, is that human being is conditioned being. In other words, being human is not an absolute state, but conditional upon an encounter with – and thus an openness towards – the world and its limits (*HC* 9). This point can also be made the other way around by saying that a life that knows no limitations, that is unconditioned and therefore *unconditional*, is either not yet or no longer human.

Arendt's argument in this regard has two main components. The first involves mapping out those conditions which, in her view, can be said to have the most "sustained relationship with human life" (*ibid.*); the second involves an exploration of specific human capabilities as they relate to these conditions. As with Nietzsche, Arendt's inquiry is an intrinsically historical one. While the former's genealogical inquiry traces the constellations of the will to power that constitute the different human types, Arendt investigates the interplay of conditions and capabilities whereby we have become – and are perpetually becoming – who we are. The particular conditions Arendt identifies are: the earth, which is the habitat in which we, along with all organic life, are able to "move and breathe without effort and without artifice" (*HC* 2); life itself, which is the biological process that is part of the general metabolism of nature, and which we share with all living things; worldliness, the condition of belonging to a world "which separates human existence from all mere animal environment" (*HC* 2); birth and death, or natality and mortality, understood as our appearance in and eventual disappearance from this human world;¹ and finally, the condition of plurality: "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (*HC* 7).

¹ Birth and death are, of course, firstly natural occurrences, in keeping with the overall metabolism of nature, whereby living organisms come and go, grow and decay, in an endless, cyclical movement. However, for Arendt, natality and mortality are specifically *human* conditions, in so far as they "presuppose a world which is not in constant movement, but whose durability and relative permanence make appearance and disappearance possible, which existed before any one individual appeared in it and will survive his eventual departure" (*HC* 96).

As far as the capabilities that grow out of these conditions are concerned, Arendt begins her consideration of the human condition with an inquiry into those capabilities that are relevant for human beings in so far as we are active in the world. Specifically, her inquiry is directed at three “fundamental human activities”, namely labour, work and action, and their relation to three corresponding conditions (*HC* 7). The activity of labour, in so far as it is primarily aimed at sustaining the biological processes of the human body, is thus examined in relation to the condition of life itself; the activity of work, which is aimed at creating an “artificial’ world of things” separate from nature, is examined in relation to condition of worldliness, while action – the words and deeds that go on between human beings as opposed to the relatively solitary activities of labour and work – is examined in relation to the conditions of natality and plurality (*HC* 8).

Yet Arendt is not claiming that we could acquire a comprehensive grasp of the human by simply adding up the conditions of our existence. The reasons for this are threefold: In the first place, the conditions under which we exist are never entirely under our control. Even in the case of those aspects of human life that belong to the world rather than nature – the words and deeds by which we appear in the world, the works that spring from our hands – we cannot foresee, regulate or calculate the ways in which they might fashion us in turn. In the second place, none of these conditions, both those that belong to nature and those that are bound up with our own doings in the world, condition us absolutely (*HC* 11). Hence even the most comprehensive study of these conditions could never fully explain who we *are*; they do not make up the quiddity of the human. Any attempt to address the essence of the human, to define human nature, so to speak, would mean to treat the human as if it were a “what”, a thing among things. In Arendt’s view, such an attempt would either have to describe human existence solely in terms of animal life – that is, by listing our “essential” species qualities – or construct a “superhuman” solution, in which purported “essential” human qualities and capabilities are reified into a deity. The latter strategy, however, merely renders “the god of the philosophers, who, since Plato, has revealed himself upon closer inspection to be a kind of platonic view of man” (*ibid.*).² Both solutions try to provide answers to the unanswerable, and are therefore merely ways of misunderstanding ourselves:

The problem of human nature, the Augustinian *quaestio mihi factus sum* (“a question have I become for myself”), seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense. 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 (*HC* 10).

² Arendt adds in a footnote: “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” (*HC* 11).

The problem with such attempts to define human nature is not so much that they come up with the wrong answers, but that they try to answer the wrong question. In Arendt's view, the question that concerns us as individuals rather than as members of a species, is not what, but *who* we are – a question that cannot be answered by “the modes of human cognition applicable to things with ‘natural’ qualities, including ourselves to the limited extent that we are specimens of the most highly developed species of organic life” (HC 11).³ Rather than ultimate determinants of human essence – which would make it possible, at least in theory, to provide a final account of our “whatness” – the conditions of human existence are shifting boundary markers within which individual human lives are played out in all their contingency and unpredictability. *Who* one is has to do with this complex, changeable relationship between self and world and therefore cannot be reduced to simple calculation.

The third reason for excluding any straightforward calculation of the conditions under we exist and the capabilities that relate to them is simply that they *do not add up*. Thus, while labour, work, and action – together with the conditions of life, worldliness and plurality – all contribute to shaping a single life, they nevertheless stand in a certain relation of tension or conflict with one another. Arendt's purpose is not to offer a solution to the paradoxical and conflictual relationship that holds for the modalities of the active life and thus to “render the incommensurable commensurable” (Taminiaux 1999: 44). On the contrary, she emphasises – sometimes perhaps over-emphasises – the tensions and oppositions between the modalities of the active life and the conditions from which they spring in an attempt to combat the pervasive tendency in our philosophical tradition to transform one sphere of human existence into a dominant standard against which other, unrelated modes of existence are measured (such as, for example, work being conceived along the lines of labour or action being modelled on work, or the conditions of worldliness and plurality being subsumed under the category of “life”).

Arendt's emphasis on the distinctions and oppositions between the various modes of the active life in turn belong to a higher-level critique of another kind of skewed hierarchy, namely the dominance of the theoretical gaze of the “unworldly” philosopher over “the world of human affairs”. It is a recurring refrain in Arendt's writings that, starting with Plato's repudiation of the polis in favour of the realm of ideas, the *vita activa* has mostly taken its meaning from the *vita contemplativa* of the philosophers (HC 14-16). This has resulted in the former generally being ranked lower the latter, and the realm of contemplation being seen as a welcome escape from the unquiet turmoil and plebeianism

³ As we have seen, Nietzsche turns this view around, but then not to provide a final account of human nature, but precisely to explode the notion of any kind of essential “whatness”, a fixed human nature underlying our appearance in the world.

of the worldly realm. Arendt's intention is not to simply reverse this hierarchy – a move which, as she points out, would leave the conceptual framework in terms of which the original distinction was made more or less intact (*HC* 17) – but to examine the active life on its own terms rather than with the prejudices derived from the *vita contemplativa*. To this end, she proposes “a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears” (*HC* 5), as opposed to an “external” vantage point removed from our worldly experiences. Thus, against the traditional denigration of the active life by philosophers, as well as the “thoughtlessness” which she identifies as one of the most telling characteristics of life in the modern age, Arendt aims at “nothing more than to *think* what we are *doing*’ (ibid., my italics).

While this undertaking generates a new understanding of the active life, it also exhumes the original tension between the active and contemplative life, which can ultimately be construed as the conflict between politics and philosophy. I shall devote considerable attention to the latter conflict at the end of chapter 6. At this point, it is important merely to take note of Arendt's overall attempt to draw distinctions and re-establish tensions between various modes of human existence. This effort on her part to break up the hegemony of specific modes of thinking by emphasising distinctions and oppositions where traditional philosophy has seen only unity and harmony, in turn points to the central place of *plurality* in her thinking. It is this notion of plurality, together with the unpredictability and indeterminacy that it entails, that forms the proper focus of the present chapter. In Arendt's account, one only becomes human to the extent that one appears in a world shared with a plurality of others *and* contains within oneself the very same plurality that marks our existence in the world. In what follows, I shall explore her argument in this regard by focusing, first, on the relation between appearance, action and self-formation in the context of worldly plurality, and second, on her portrayal of thinking and willing in relation to an “inner” plurality.

1. Appearance

Arendt's account of human becoming, like that of Nietzsche, takes place against the background of the implosion of the traditional distinction between (true) being and (false, illusory) appearance (*LMT* 10). At issue, therefore, is how to think the human in the aftermath of the demise of this conceptual schema, without treating the being-appearance distinction as a lost ideal to which our present self-understanding should aspire. Taking her cue from Nietzsche, Arendt develops an understanding of appearance without reference to an ultimate ground that would guarantee its reality. This positive valuation of appearance is not simply a fallback-position in cases where true being is out of reach. On

the contrary, she wants to show that we live – and always have lived – in a world of appearances, in which everything, ourselves included, only has meaning *as* appearance. Hence she argues that, for beings such as us, who enter the world “from nowhere” and who eventually disappear back into this nothingness, “*Being and Appearing coincide*” (LMT 19); there is no “essential” self left over when appearances are stripped away. In this way, Arendt revalues appearance, not as a derivative of being, but as the mode – the only one – in which we exist. It is therefore understandable that she sets her most sustained and wide-ranging reflection on appearance under the lines by W.H. Auden: “*Does God ever judge us / by appearances? / I suspect that He does*”.⁴

To begin with, it is important to recognise that appearance, as Arendt understands it, is not a self-contained occurrence. Appearance is only possible as an event, and only makes sense as a concept, in so far as there are spectators who bear witness to whatever appears. Strictly speaking, there is no appearance as such, there is only appearing *to* others. What is more, if everything in the world can be said to exist only in so far as it appears, and if every appearance presupposes (a) spectator(s), then nothing and no one in the world has meaning in and of itself. Meaning, in other words, is irreducibly bound up with plurality: “nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth” (LMT 19). Appearance is bound up with plurality precisely because “[t]o appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectators” (LMT 21).

Moreover, for living things appearance is not the passive state of being perceived. Instead, Arendt argues that everything that is alive *actively* desires to show itself to others: “To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display which answers the fact of one’s own appearingness. Living things *make their appearance* like actors on a stage set for them” (ibid.). A later passage reads: “*whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched*. It is indeed as though everything that is alive – in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others – has an *urge to appear*, to fit itself into the world of appearances ...” (LMT 29). These descriptions make it clear that appearance cannot be equated with the mere fact of existence. For Arendt, appearance is a kind of *praxis*; it is to actively step onto the world’s stage, to make oneself known to others, rather than passively awaiting their acknowledgement.

The inevitable question that leaps out at us at this point has to do with the *content* of the appearance: If appearance is a kind of self-display, what is the meaning of “self”

⁴ Poem no. 856 in Auden’s *Collected Poems*, 1991. The lines appear as the epigram at the beginning of the section on “Appearance” in Book 1 of *The Life of the Mind*. The discussion in the rest of this section relies heavily on this text.

here? It is tempting to assume that, in the case of human beings, what is presented for appearance is a so-called “inner self”: one’s interior being that most fully defines who one is. Yet Arendt consistently opposes the “metaphysical assumptions and prejudices” that corrupt our judgement of appearances to the extent that we tend to assume – wrongly – that “what is essential lies beneath the surface, and the surface is ‘superficial’” (*LMT* 30). In her view, this metaphysical fallacy is bound up with the “terminological discourse” in which we are forced to reflect on ourselves. In so far as appearance is understood as display, we assume that there must be a pre-existing subject that is the actual *content* of the display. From this assumption it follows that individuality, the uniqueness of a person, is the outward manifestation of a “true” inner self. In contrast to this belief – which, one might have said with Nietzsche, derives from nothing more than our “faith in grammar” (*BGE* 34) – Arendt maintains that “[t]he expressiveness of an appearance ... ‘expresses’ nothing but itself, that is, it exhibits or displays” (*LMT* 30). This claim follows upon her proposition that, “[s]ince we live in an *appearing* world, is it not much more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours would be located precisely on the surface?” (*LMT* 27). If the answer here is yes, then the urge to self-display cannot be understood as the urge to put one’s interior workings on show. Instead, Arendt argues that what is at stake in a living thing’s urge to appear is “displaying and showing, *not its ‘inner self’, but itself as an individual* (*LMT* 29, my italics).

This distinction between the self as an individual and an inner self follows from Arendt’s view that that it is precisely at the level of sheer interiority, rather than in appearance, that we most resemble one another. Even if it were possible to gain access to our hidden interior workings and put them on display, we would discover that, on this level, “we are all alike” (*LMT* 34-5). The reason for this is that any inward-focused investigation which sought to understand the self apart from its appearance to others would uncover only “the functional apparatus of the life process” (*LMT* 29) without revealing anything of the uniqueness of a person. As we have seen in chapter 2, the most basic apparatus of this process is the calculus of pleasure and pain (*HC* 309-311).⁵ In so far as we share this calculus with all animal species, an inquiry into the operation of the “inner self” would therefore simply present us with our basic sameness as a life-form. Arendt argues further that appearance, in so far as it is a translation, interpretation and structuring of our inner workings, rightly serves to conceal the latter from the public gaze:

[N]ot only do appearances never reveal what lies beneath them of their own accord but also, generally speaking, they never just reveal; they also conceal. [...] They

⁵ See chapter 2, section 2, esp. pp. 18-23.

expose, and they also protect from exposure, and, as far as what lies beneath is concerned, this protection may even be their most important function (*LMT* 25).⁶

We should not misunderstand Arendt here. She is not claiming that the self is nothing *but* display, or that whatever “sense of self” one might have is merely a collation of the perceptions of others. Her point, rather, is that any sense of one’s uniqueness as a person depends on the extent to which one is able to *distinguish* oneself from others. And such distinction is not – or not only – a matter of private decision; it demands that one appears on the stage of the world where one may be perceived by and measured against one’s fellows. Arendt therefore establishes an interplay between self and world, individuality and plurality, in so far as one becomes recognisable as a unique and irreplaceable individual on the basis of one’s distinction from a plurality of other individuals. What is more, such distinction is not a mere passive display of given qualities, but a matter of active self-presentation:

In addition to the urge toward self-display by which living things fit themselves into a world of appearances, men also *present* themselves in deed and word and thus indicate how they *wish* to appear, what in their opinion is fit to be seen and what is not (*LMT* 34).

The introduction of an element of choice into appearance – a choice which Arendt considers to be “specifically human”, in contrast to animals which, though driven by the same urge for self-display, do not choose how they wish to appear – should not lead us to conclude that we may therefore make ourselves into whatever we wish. Arendt specifically stresses that it is only “[*up*] to a point [that] we can choose how to appear to others” (*LMT* 34), which indicates that there is a *limit* to our ability to form ourselves. It is helpful to understand this limit in the light of the distinction Arendt draws between the “subjective” and the “personal”. The subjective element in our works and actions can be described as that part of ourselves we are able to grasp and, to some extent, control. She likens this to

⁶ This argument can be situated in the context of Arendt’s negative stance towards psychology. She is famously opposed to psychology as a science, and especially to the modern tendency of understanding a person’s words and deeds in terms of his or her psychological makeup. In her view, psychological investigation never reveals the uniqueness of a person. At most it succeeds in uncovering “the monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness” of our inner drives (*LMT* 35). At first glance, her denigration of psychology appears to stand in direct contrast to Nietzsche’s claim that “psychology is now again the path to the fundamental problems” (*BGE* 23). We have to keep in mind, however, that Nietzsche’s “psychology” is of a particular kind. His investigation into the purported motivations and values that inform many of our beliefs and practices serves to uncover different, often contrary, values and motivations at work behind them. However, the outcome of this investigation is not a revelation of the “real” motivations behind the misleading appearance, but of the impossibility of ever reaching such a stopping-point. This could be described as a subversive psychology, which undermines the belief that there is an ultimate “logos of the psyche” that can be uncovered, either in principle or in practice. The mask may be drawn away only to reveal another mask (*BGE* 278, 289). This is not to say that Arendt’s and Nietzsche’s conceptions of psychology are equivalent. It does mean, however, that the differences between their views are of a different order than a straightforward opposition between an anti-psychology and a pro-psychology standpoint. These more nuanced differences will, I hope, become clear in the course of this chapter.

the creative process that goes into a work which one prepares for publication (*MDT 75-6*). One may be said to be in control of this process to the degree that one is aware of the motivations for embarking on it and the emotions involved in it, capable of conceiving an outcome of the process, directing the body, hand and eye to this end and deciding when this outcome has been achieved. However, once the work appears in public, and provided that it is not a purely academic exercise, “a living act and voice accompanies the work; the person himself appears together with it. What then emerges is unknown to the one who reveals it; he cannot control it as he can control the work he has prepared for publication” (*MDT 75*).⁷ Subjectivity may then be understood as the aspect of ourselves we can lay hold of and which we may form with a view to what we wish to give to the world and how we wish to appear in it. Personality, on the other hand, appears in the work but is not chosen, directed or controlled by the one who creates the work: “Personality is beyond the control of the subject and is therefore the precise opposite of mere subjectivity” (*MDT 76*).

Arendt likens this personality to the Greek *daimon* or guardian spirit who accompanies each of us throughout one’s life, but who, because he or she is always looking over one’s shoulder, is not recognisable to oneself but only to those one meets along life’s way (*ibid.*). For Arendt, as for Nietzsche, we do not fully appear to ourselves, and therefore we cannot wholly choose or control how we appear to others. One may reformulate this once more to say that personality – *who* someone is – only appears on the other side of the limit of what we are able to grasp and control with regard to ourselves. The possibility of such appearance in turn presupposes a shared world, in the sense of a “stage” or a “public space”, in which this unique personality may be recognised by others:

This *daimon* – which has nothing demonic about it – this personal element in man, can only appear where a public space exists; that is the deeper significance of the public realm, which extends far beyond what we ordinarily mean by political life. To the extent that this public space is also a spiritual realm, there is manifest in it what the Romans called *humanitas*. By that they meant something that was the very height of humanness because it was valid without being objective. It is precisely what Kant and then Jaspers mean by *Humanität*, the valid personality which, once acquired, never leaves a man, even though all other gifts of body and mind may succumb to the destructiveness of time (*MDT 76*).

Given that the “valid personality” emerges from the plurality of perspectives that bear witness to one’s appearance in the world, it is not under the control of the one to whom this personality belongs. In this way, Arendt portrays *humanitas* / *Humanität* as the aspect of our existence that transcends our grasp on ourselves, and being human as dependent upon our not being able to finally determine who we are. Later in the same

⁷ The example here is of work rather than action, since it appears in the context of Arendt’s *laudatio* written for Karl Jaspers. I would argue, however, that the argument would hold for action as well, where on the one hand one may be able to grasp (certain) motivations, etc. for a particular action, while having no control of the “person” who appears in the action itself. This point is taken up in the discussion on Arendt’s conception of the will in section 3.2 of this chapter.

passage she describes *humanitas* as bound up with a “venture” into the world – with all the connotations of adventure, daring and risk – that involves one’s life in its entirety (ibid.). In Arendt’s account, such a venture is only realised in active engagement with the world – that is, in *praxis* – and not by sending one’s works into the world in one’s stead. In order to make sense of this claim, it is necessary for us to turn to Arendt’s conception of the active life.

2. The *vita activa*

In the course of an interview in which she revisits the notion of a venture, Arendt distinctly relates becoming a person to acting in the world:

The venture into the public realm seems clear to me. One exposes oneself to the light of the public, as a person. Although I am of the opinion that one must not appear and act in public self-consciously, *still I know that in every action the person is expressed as in no other human activity*. Speaking is also a form of action. That is one venture. The other is: we start something. We weave our strand into a network of relations. What comes of it we never know. We’ve all been taught to say: Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do. That is true of all action. Quite simply and concretely true, because one *cannot* know. That is what is meant by a venture (*EU 22-3, my italics*)

In the light of the link between action and personhood that Arendt establishes in this passage, it may be said that she offers us a performative account of identity according to which it is one’s actions that form the basis of the response to the question: “Who are you?” – a query that, we have already seen, cannot be simply answered by pointing to *what* one is (*HC 80-81*). The distinction between these two answers relates to the difference between one’s membership of a species, possessing the general characteristics pertaining to this species, and human singularity, which expresses itself in the unique life-stories of individuals. *Praxis*, in other words, constitutes the dividing line between biology and biography (Taminiaux 1996: 217).

It is only possible to make sense of this relationship between action and individual identity if we already have some understanding of the differences between action and the other two modes of activity that constitute the *vita activa*, namely labour and work. As mentioned above, part of Arendt’s project is precisely to make explicit the very distinctions and tensions among the three modalities of the active life that have always been irrelevant from the perspective of the *vita contemplativa*. In fact, it is *only* in their distinction from one another that we can properly make sense of these activities themselves and develop a clearer understanding of the ways in which action in all its fragility and unpredictability is bound up with our humanity. I shall therefore begin this section with a brief consideration of the distinctions between labour and work, before

turning to the further differences between labour, work and action that specifically enhance our understanding of the latter.

2.1 Labour and work

The first distinction within the active life that we need to grasp is that between labour and work. Arendt retraces the etymology of these terms in order to show that all European languages retain separate words for these two activities (*HC* 80; also *HC* 94), even though in practice we have come to view them as synonymous. Labour, for its part, springs from the condition of life itself, and is geared towards sustaining life in its basic biological sense. The life that is at stake in labouring is the life of the species, not the unique life-story of a person. Labour is therefore also the most “natural” of all human activities in so far as it participates in the “metabolism of nature”, which swings in an endless cycle of growth and decay, generation and consumption. To labour, in other words, is a matter of producing what we need to consume in order to live, and because the product of our labour is consumed, used up, it must be ceaselessly reproduced. As such, labour is commanded by necessity: it is simply what we must do in order to live.

In deliberate contrast to Marx, Arendt holds out no vision of “liberated labour”. In her account, which she traces back to the ancient Greeks, labouring is *never* free from the demands of necessity. On the contrary, we labour in so far as we are enslaved by necessity. It was precisely for this reason that the Greeks considered the position of the slave, whose entire life had been given over to labour, to be disgraceful: “The slave’s degradation was a blow of fate and a fate worse than death, because it carries with it a metamorphosis of man into something akin to a tame animal” (*HC* 84). Labour embodies the imperative to which all animal life is subject, namely the survival of the species. And for the Greeks as much as for Arendt, “[w]hat men share with all other forms of animal life was not considered to be human” (*ibid.*). In other words, in labour one completely coincides with *what* one is, namely a form of animal life. As Nietzsche would have it, one “disappears entirely into the present, like a number that leaves no remainder” (*UDH* 1).⁸

Apart from its repetitive quality, its subjection to necessity and the animalisation that this entails, a further characteristic of labour that Arendt identifies is its worldlessness: “The *animal laborans* does not flee the world but is ejected from it in so far as he is imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfilment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate” (*HC* 118). Labour is

⁸ Arendt’s appeal to the Greek understanding of labour is not an argument for sharing their disdain for the position of slave, and it most certainly is not a condonation of the practice of slavery. Her point is rather that labouring simply is kind of enslavement, not to others, but to the biological imperatives that command all animal life and which are played out at the most basic level of existence.

estranged from the world in so far as it corresponds to the interior life process of the body, is, in fact, subject to the needs of the body that must be fulfilled if one is to live at all. It is important to understand that these needs are unshareable not because they are unique for each individual, but because they are absolute. For Arendt, experiences can only be shared, that is, become the subject of communication, when it is possible to view them from different perspectives, which depend in turn upon our different places in the world. An experience that is unconditionally the same for everyone cannot be shared precisely because it is experienced from the same place, so to speak. The worldlessness of labour has to do precisely with this unshareable character: it may bind people together in collective activity, but this does not mean that they share anything that lies *between* them; instead, their collective activity is governed by the unexceptional biological imperatives *within* them. And again, as the discussion on Arendt's understanding of appearance has shown, being – or becoming – a person depends on the worldly space between human beings, not on the inner needs they contain.

This characterisation of Arendt's understanding of labour may create the impression that she shares the Greek contempt for labour, and that she therefore merely engages in a simplistic reversal of values which would involve "turning Marx on his head".⁹ Yet, as we have seen, Arendt is concerned with re-discovering the differences and tensions within the *vita activa* that have been overlooked in so far as the active life has been understood from the perspective of the *vita contemplativa*. Her purpose is therefore not to condemn or eliminate labour as a worthless human activity, but to situate the labouring activity *vis à vis* the other modes of the active life. As we have seen in chapter 2, one of Arendt's chief criticisms of modernity is precisely the extent to which labour has become the dominant standard against which all other human activities are measured, so that "we have almost succeeded in levelling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance" (*HC* 118). Nevertheless, this criticism does not mean that she considers labour to be a necessary evil, to be endured because we must and eliminated if we could. On the contrary, Arendt

⁹ This criticism is often levelled against Arendt, particularly by feminist theorists who consider her argument to support the patriarchal denigration of women's labour, or even as a denial of her own femininity inspired by her life experiences as a woman and as a Jew (see for instance Pitkin, 1998, esp. pp. 147-176). Similar claims about Arendt's patriarchal stance towards women's labour are made by Mary Dietz (1991) and Adrienne Rich (1979), to name only two. In my view, such readings generally misunderstand Arendt's argument about labour. It seems to me that the point of her argument is precisely that *no one*, neither woman nor man, should be confined to the sphere of labour alone. She is not claiming that those who live a life of labour are deservedly considered less than human, but rather that they are *undeservedly* condemned to an existence that hardly transcends its animality. Moreover, Arendt's argument is conducted in the context of her criticism of the uniquely modern elevation of labour to the primary mode of human activity, which in effect traps us within our labouring selves. The proper response to this criticism cannot lie in further emphasising the inherent worth and dignity of labour of any kind, but precisely in resisting all attempts to understand the human – women as well as men – exclusively or near-exclusively in terms of labour and consumption.

insists that the “toil and trouble” that belongs to labour cannot be eliminated without losing our understanding of what it means to be alive: “The human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, makes itself felt. For mortals, the ‘easy life of the gods’ would be a lifeless life” (*HC* 120).¹⁰ For Arendt, it is precisely in the ceaseless cycle of labour and consumption that the “life” of life – its elementary force and vitality – is felt and preserved (*HC* 121).

There is still a further reason why Arendt resists the view that burden of labour should be abolished. In her view, it is only in labouring that we are most fully confronted with necessity, and it is only in the experience of our subjection to necessity that the impetus towards freedom can arise: “Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity” (*HC* 121). This description of freedom as something to be won rather than an existing quality of the will suggests that Arendt shares Nietzsche’s understanding of freedom as struggle. In Nietzsche’s words:

How is freedom measured, in individuals as in nations? By the resistance which has to be overcome, by the effort it takes to stay *aloft*. One would have to seek the highest type of free man where the greatest resistance is constantly being overcome: five steps from tyranny, near the threshold of the danger of servitude (*TI ix:38*).

On this view, freedom is not a state, disposition or affect, but only exists in the struggle against opposition; it is not something one can ultimately possess when all opposition has been overcome. Paradoxically, one is only free so long as whatever opposes one’s freedom has not finally been defeated, which is to say that freedom is only possible to the extent that one is not yet free. Freedom, for Nietzsche, is therefore “something one has and does *not* have, something one *wants*, something one *conquers* ...” (*ibid.*). In the light of Nietzsche’s argument we might say that, for Arendt, the practice of freedom in fact demands the burden or “tyranny” of necessity. Indeed, she insists that we are most strongly committed to the struggle for freedom wherever the experience of necessity inherent in the burden of labour is strongest. The converse also holds, however: when labour comes to require less effort, so that the “futility” of labour becomes easier to bear or to ignore, the impulse towards liberation is likely to wane (*HC* 121). This, in Arendt’s analysis, is indeed the bane of the modern consumers’ society, whose members understand themselves almost entirely in terms of labour, but for whom labour has lost the very sense of subjection to necessity, hardship and ultimate futility that might prompt them to transcend the cycle of labour and consumption. Arendt cautions that a society that knows only “effortless

¹⁰ Ironically, it was in fact Marx who held out a vision of our eventual liberation from labour, which, so Arendt argues, would entail nothing else than “a society of laborers without labor” (*HC* 5).

consumption” without the pains of labour “would only increase the devouring character of biological life until a mankind altogether ‘liberated’ from the shackles of pain and effort would be free to ‘consume’ the whole world and to reproduce daily all things it wished to consume” (*HC* 132). Members of such a society would no longer be concerned with freedom precisely because they would lack any sense of resistances to be overcome – that is to say, any sense of necessity and limitation – and would therefore have little or no regard for modes of activity that transcended the narrow limits of their daily existence.¹¹

It should be clear, therefore, that while Arendt does not simply disparage labour or argues for its abolition, she does object to the dominant role it has played – and still plays – within our modern self-understanding. Her (re)description of the active life in *The Human Condition* can thus be read as an attempt to call to mind other modes of human existence that could oppose the all-consuming force of the labouring mentality. It is in light of this attempt that we should understand her characterisation of the second modality of the active life, namely work.

In many respects, work can be understood as the direct opposite of labour. Whereas labour is the most “natural” of all human activities in so far as it corresponds to the biological imperative of survival, work is the most “artificial” in the sense that it involves the fabrication of durable things – artefacts – that are interposed between humans and nature. Whereas the labour of our bodies serves to sustain these bodies themselves, the work of our hands creates and sustains a “man-made world of things, the human artifice [...] which becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and action” (*HC* 173). Finally, while the condition that most closely corresponds to labour is life itself, the condition of work is worldliness. Arendt’s point is that life in the biological sense of the word plays itself out in all living things on earth, but a specifically *human* life on earth is only possible within a world “held in place by a whole set of artifacts conquered over nature but resisting the flux of its cycles” (*HC* 83). Our sense of identity, together with our sense of relatedness to one another, depends, in large part, on our “being related to the same chair and the same table” in the midst of the flux of human existence (*HC* 137).¹²

The difference between the labourer and the worker – a distinction that admittedly sounds strange to modern ears – can therefore be described as the difference between the

¹¹ Arendt makes the telling observation that within a labouring society that no longer experiences labour as a burden, any activity that is not aimed at “making a living” is considered as mere play and accorded the status of a “hobby” (*HC* 127-128)

¹² This is not to say that Arendt only has in mind strictly *manual* fabrication. A poem is as much a work as a monument at the point where they both appear in the world. We speak of a “well crafted poem”, for instance, by which we mean that the poet has succeeded in employing the proper means to achieve a desired result. A “bad” poem would be precisely one in which the means employed to achieve the overall effect fails. Nevertheless, Arendt does argue that the value of works of art transcends any considerations of utility (cf. *HC* 167-170).

animal laborans, who is still part of undifferentiated nature, and *homo faber*, who belongs to the world. Another way of describing this difference is to distinguish between the human being as *consumer* and as *fabricator*. Whereas labour produces only in order to consume – and in this way participates in the natural cycle of growth and decay – the world consists of things that are *used* rather than consumed (HC 136-137). Work therefore involves the fabrication of more-or-less durable use-objects, which, in their relative permanence, structure the world in which undifferentiated life becomes human life. Moreover, while use objects are eventually also destroyed in the very process of using them, Arendt argues that this destruction “though unavoidable, is incidental to use but inherent in consumption” (HC 138).

It therefore seems that Arendt holds work in higher esteem than labour precisely because it is less futile, more durable, and more worldly than the latter. To some extent this is true: since it is work rather than labour that creates and sustains a human world in the midst of indifferent nature, one could well say that the work of our hands is a necessary condition for becoming human, unlike the labour of our bodies, which we share with all animal life. Nevertheless, Arendt does not consider work to be a *sufficient* condition for becoming human. In fact, following the same pattern of argument we have encountered before, she argues that there is something very dangerous in elevating work and with it, the mentality of the fabricator, to the ultimate standard by which all other activities that comprise a human life are judged. Arendt formulates the danger thus: “Man, in so far as he is *homo faber*, instrumentalizes, and his instrumentalization implies a degradation of all things into means, their loss of intrinsic and independent value” (HC 156). In other words, the particular danger she identifies is the universal application of the standard of utility which properly belongs only to the fabrication process: “The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men” (HC 157).

It is important to understand, moreover, that the illegitimate extension of the mentality of *homo faber* to other modes of existence in the world does not spring from the fabrication process itself. Arendt argues instead that “only in so far as the *life process* takes hold of things and uses them for its purposes does the productive and limited instrumentality of fabrication change into the limitless instrumentalization of everything that exists” (ibid., my italics). Stated differently, the means-ends mentality inherent in work only becomes dominant in a world that has already been overrun by the labouring mentality. In so far as the *animal laborans* is caught up in the never-ending cycle of the life process itself, he or she literally consumes and thus destroys all durability, so that nothing in the world seems to be of lasting value (HC 96). According to Arendt, it is

precisely under these conditions that the utilitarian calculation of *homo faber* seems an appealing solution. The problem with this solution to the problem of value is that, in a world without any sense of durability, such means-ends calculation becomes unstoppable: nothing prevents today's end from being turned into tomorrow's means to yet another end, and so on *ad infinitum* (HC 153-4). For Arendt, a world in which the value of any thing and any activity is judged in terms of an outcome that must in turn be justified with reference to some further value, is in fact an entirely *valueless* world. Thus she maintains that the expansion of the attitude of *homo faber* beyond the limits of the actual fabricating process manifests itself in “the instrumentalization of the whole world and the earth, [the] limitless devaluation of everything given” (HC 157).

Clearly, it is not by accident that Arendt and Nietzsche both investigate utilitarianism as a symptom of modern nihilism (see Ch. 2 section 1.2). Moreover, as we have seen, Arendt is highly critical of all attempts to cure the disease of nihilism by positing the human itself as an ultimate end in the belief that “this process of growing meaninglessness where every end is transformed into a means [...] can be stopped only by making man himself lord and master of all things” (HC 157). Perhaps surprisingly, she discovers the supreme expression of this “anthropocentric utilitarianism” in the Kantian formula that every human being is an end in himself and must never be reduced to a mere means. In her view, this claim necessarily implies that *everything else* in the world is a mere means to one who is the ultimate end (HC 155). Considered from this perspective, Kant is the proper heir to Protagoras, who was the first to propose that the human being is the measure of all things, with the implication that “that man is the only thing outside the means-end relationship, the only end in himself who can use everything else as a means” (HC 158).¹³ Arendt further argues that it was precisely because Plato recognised the dangerous implications of the Protagorean view that he sought to locate the final value of all things in the unassailable realm of ideas (ibid.). Nevertheless, the purpose of her critique of labour and work is not to present us with a choice between a utilitarian and a metaphysical conception of value, but to demonstrate instead that such an ultimate measure does not exist, and that its absence is not a deficiency to be remedied, but a condition of our humanity. Her reasons for arguing this will only become clear in the course of an inquiry into action as the third modality of the active life, and which, according to Arendt, is the only mode of existence in the world by which we transcend both the necessity of labour and the utilitarian calculus of work.

¹³ Arendt points out that the Greek version of Protagoras's saying, as quoted by Plato in his *Thaetetus*, actually translates as “man is the measure of all use things (*chrēmata*), of the existence of those that are, and of the non-existence of those that are not”. The relevant point here is that the one who is the measure of all things of *use* is precisely the human as fabricator, user and instrumentaliser, from whose perspective everything that is can indeed only be understood in terms of a means-ends calculus (HC 157-158).

2.2 Distinctions between labour, work and action

The overview of Arendt's treatment of labour and work provides us with a number of signposts for our further inquiry into action. In what follows, I shall focus on the most important differences, tensions and oppositions among the three modalities of the active life in so far as these differences serve to illuminate a specific feature of action.

In the first place it is worthwhile to focus on the different relations to time that obtain for each of these modes of the active life (cf. Taminioux 1997:200; 1999: 44). Labour, in so far as it is aimed at sustaining the life process itself, relates to time as deathless repetition; an endless, natural cycle of becoming and passing away that leaves nothing permanent behind. Work, on the other hand, constitutes a rupture of this cycle in so far as it is a linear process with a definite beginning and a definite end (which does not preclude it becoming a means to yet another end). However, the time experience that holds for the modality of action stands in opposition to both the linear time of work and the cyclical time of labour. It is neither the repetition of what has gone before (as in labour), nor a linear process with a clear beginning and predictable outcome (as in work). In Arendt's account, action has a beginning, but no predictable end. As such, all action is "inherently unpredictable" (HC 190). This unpredictability has to do, in the first place, with what Arendt terms the "boundlessness" and "irreversibility" of action. Action is boundless because the venture into the world involves "act[ing] into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes" (HC 190). Arendt argues that the one who acts in the world appears to a plurality of others as a "newcomer", whose speech and action, taken together, "start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact" (HC 184). The unpredictability of action has to do with the impossibility of keeping the consequences of any act, even the smallest deed in the most restricted situation, within bounds, for the very reason that "one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation" (HC 190). For the same reason, action is irreversible, since every deed sets in motion chains of events and consequences that exceed the control of both actor and spectators and which therefore cannot be undone by anyone. The important point with regard to both the boundlessness and irreversibility of action is that its consequences always transcend the limits of the circumstances under which it is performed.

In Arendt's view, the unpredictability and boundlessness of action have to do with the fact that to act is to insert oneself into a web of human relationships, thereby simultaneously cutting through existing relationships and establishing new ones: "Action [...] no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has

an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (HC 190). This points to a second important distinction between action on the one hand and labour and work on the other, which is that while neither labour nor action requires the presence of others – although neither activity necessarily excludes them – only action depends on others to take place at all. That is to say, only action is bound up with the specifically human condition of plurality. This plurality is not the same as mere otherness – which, in Arendt’s view, is a quality of all things in so far as we can only say what something is by saying how it differs from something else – nor can it be equated with the intra- and inter-species distinction that is characteristic of all living things. Instead, the notion of plurality describes the specifically human form of the difference that characterises all things and the distinctness that typifies the various forms of organic life. In Arendt’s words: “In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the plurality of unique beings” (HC 176). The individual uniqueness that belongs to a specifically human existence is not a passive status; on the contrary, it involves taking one’s distinctness upon oneself, which means in turn to actively *distinguish* oneself from one’s equals. In other words, for Arendt, becoming human – a person rather than a representative of the species – depends on a relationship with others from whom one can distinguish oneself and to whom one can appear in one’s distinctness. This relationship is neither one of warm communality nor overt hostility, but is best described as a kind of “conflicted togetherness” (Peterson 2001: 185) or relatedness-in-distinction. Both of these formulations capture the specific quality of the condition of plurality, namely that “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (HC 8).

For Arendt, then, our humanity is not predicated on a shared essence but on mutual distinction, and action is the mode of such distinction. More accurately, it is a matter of action accompanied by speech, since it is only by speaking of what one does, has done and intends to do that one’s deeds can appear as such rather than as instances of arbitrary behaviour (HC 179). It is precisely in speaking of one’s past, present and future deeds that one offers a response to the question, “Who are you?”, that inevitably arises on the part of those who bear witness to one’s appearance in the world. Arendt describes the role of speech and action thus:

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, 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. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. This is true of no other activity in the *vita activa*. [...] A life without speech and without action on the other hand – and this is the only way of life that in earnest has

renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word – is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men (*HC* 176).

If a life devoid of the initiative of speech and action is *no longer* human, it is also *not yet* human merely by virtue of biological birth. In a startling reworking of the message of the gospels, Arendt suggests that becoming human is a matter of being born again, although in this case by entering rather than renouncing the world: “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” (*HC* 176-7). While this claim turns on a distinction between two kinds of birth – the first, a purely biological event (literally, the product of labour), the second, one’s appearance in the world as a person in speech and action – this “second birth” is not simply a negation or renunciation of the first. On the contrary, Arendt argues that the impetus to step onto the stage of the world and insert ourselves into the web of human relationships “springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. [...] Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action” (*HC* 177).¹⁴ In other words, to appear in the world in action and speech is to exemplify the new beginning that was introduced into the world with one’s original birth. If we were to cast this argument in a Nietzschean format, we might say that to act is to begin something new in the world and thereby *to become who one is*, namely a new beginning. In Arendt’s words, the beginning at stake here is “not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself” (*HC* 177).

With this understanding of action as the new beginning or second birth whereby we become who we are, Arendt can be said to share Nietzsche’s opposition to the distinction between the doer and the deed whereby the latter is considered a mere by-product of the former. As Villa (1996: 86) points out, this distinction springs from a “slavish tendency to take the actor out of the world” which turns the former into an unassailable locus of value and deprives the latter of all meaning. This strategy is predicated on the standpoint of the one who does not act – more, who is incapable of action – and to accept it amounts to “adjusting one’s behavior to the needs of the herd” (*ibid.* 88). When seen in this light, it becomes clear that Arendt tries to develop an account of the human that is free from the slavish-moral-Christian animus against action that has plagued much of our political and philosophical tradition. To this end, she portrays the self as a dynamic formation that depends on the performance itself, so that becoming human entails a kind of *virtuosity*. Perhaps the clearest exposition of this view can be found in her

¹⁴ Consider also: “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new, that is, of acting” (*HC* 9).

discussion of the notion of *virtù* in *Between Past and Future*. Here Arendt is careful to distinguish the Machiavellian treatment of the concept from the specifically Roman notion of *virtus*, which retains connotations of moral character, and the Greek notion of *aretē*, which, in her view, refers to morally neutral excellence. She seems to suggest that the distinction turns on the fact that both *virtus* and *aretē* are qualities that pertain to the individual alone, whereas *virtù* only exists in the interplay between self and world:

Virtù is the response, summoned up by man, to the world, or rather to the constellation of fortuna in which the world opens up, presents and offers itself to him, to his *virtù*. There is no *virtù* without *fortuna* and no *fortuna* without *virtù*; the interplay between them indicates a harmony between man and world – playing with each other and succeeding together – which is as remote from the wisdom of the statesman as from the excellence, moral or otherwise, of the individual, and the competence of experts (*BPF* 137).¹⁵

Arendt thus portrays *virtù* simply as the active response to and engagement with the world as it is given – that is to say, with *fortuna*. I would argue that, in the broadest terms, this is what her conception of action entails: the virtuoso response to whatever claim the world makes on us outside of considerations of mere survival or utility.

Some commentators have argued that this notion of action calls up more problems than it solves. The greatest difficulty encountered by those who read her exclusively as a political theorist is that Arendt considers action to be the proper content of politics, but then fails to give content to this “content”, so to speak, since she refuses to allow “social” or economic considerations a place in political action.¹⁶ At this point I only want to indicate that this criticism – at least in its crude formulation – misses an important aspect of Arendt’s argument. To ask what action is *about* and what it is meant to achieve trades on the very means-ends thinking that she is intent on criticising, in so far as it seeks to understand action in terms of some recognisable object, motivation, or outcome that lies outside itself. Jacques Taminiaux offers a succinct criticism of this teleological conception of action:

It is sometimes asked: But what does this action do? Silly question this is. For the question suggests that ‘living’ as applicable to the unique existence of someone mortal is tantamount to ‘making something’ or that *poiēsis* and *praxis* are identical. *Poiēsis* aims at a product that is external to it, in which it reaches its term, and shares its reproducibility with those general aptitudes required to produce it. *Praxis* has no general product that may be generalized. What action introduces into the world is the *uniqueness* of someone: not the initiative he or she

¹⁵ Villa (1996: 86) sees in this a further connection between Nietzsche and Arendt: “Individuals become who they are, as Nietzsche would say, through action and the achievement of a distinct style of action. Arendt makes a parallel point when she claims that individuals show who they are in virtuosic action”. It would not be mistaken to see something of this notion of *virtù* in Nietzsche’s own conception of action. In fact, he makes repeated, positive mention of the “morality-free virtue” that belongs to the Renaissance, and at one point lists Machiavelli, together with Thucydides, as his “antidotes” to Plato (*TI* x:2). For Nietzsche on *virtù*, see *A* 2, *EH* 2:1, *KSA* 11.475, *KSA* 12.447.

¹⁶ For a small sample of this kind of criticism, see Connolly (1997), esp. pp. 14-20; Benhabib (1996), esp. pp. 138-166, Pitkin (1998) and Schwartz (1989).

has of making something, but the initiative open to the individual of being somebody (Taminiaux 1992: 86).

Here we encounter the third difference between action and the two other modalities of the active life. The difference at issue is that, unlike in the case of labour and work, the new beginning inherent in action is not prompted by any factors outside itself. In other words, action is not forced upon us by necessity, as is the case with labour, nor is not prompted by considerations of utility, as in the case of work (*HC* 177). The absence of any external principle that commands it leads Arendt to argue that action is the realisation of freedom. Here she takes the Nietzschean line that freedom is not a prior possession of the subject, but is only actualised in performance: “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” (*BPF* 153). The freedom inherent in action is thus not understood as *free will*, nor the ultimate realisation of the nihilistic principle that “everything is permitted” and its terrifying modern adjunct: “everything is possible”. As our consideration of *virtù* has shown, freedom is bound up with fatefulness. Freedom is therefore not to do what one wills, but to actively respond to a world that one has not willed into existence. As Hammer (2000: 85) notes, “To appear in the world, though, means that the freedom of beginning occurs always in the context of an already existent world”. Moreover, since the one who acts does not and cannot retain control of the outcome of an action, simply because it is impossible to determine how a single deed will affect the constellation as a whole, the freedom inherent in action has no connotations of mastery. It is not the freedom of one who has achieved command over destiny, but of one who has embarked on a venture in a world which pre-exists his arrival in it and will survive his departure from it.

There is, of course, an unavoidable difficulty that confronts us in this regard. If the freedom Arendt has in mind does not involve any kind of mastery over oneself, while we nevertheless only become who we are by acting in the world, to what extent are we able to form ourselves into the kinds of persons we would like to be? Arendt’s insistence on the inseparability of doer and deed clearly indicates that she does not conceive of a moral agent who remains master of his or her actions. The implication of this view, as Villa (1996: 81) points out, is that action takes place “beyond good and evil”, which is to say, outside of any fixed standards of measurement. In the absence of such standards, how are we to distinguish between better and worse actions? More pertinently, how are we to judge how best to appear – which is to say, to act – in the world? These questions point to the problem of character on the one hand, and the problem of judgement on the other. I shall consider Arendt’s response to the first problem below, and postpone a more in-depth consideration of judgement until the next chapter.

2.3 Action and character

Understanding the relationship between action and character in Arendt, which ultimately has to do with the extent of one's mastery over and consequent responsibility for the human being one becomes, first requires a more careful analysis of the notion of fatefulness. We have already seen that Arendt understands action as the virtuosic response to *fortuna*. The important point in this regard is that action is a response to what has been given, rather than an attempt to form the world into our own image. Considered in this light, it is possible to say that there is a significant part of ourselves that is also given rather than made; a part that may be akin to Nietzsche's "granite of spiritual *fatum*" (*BGE* 231) in that it was neither chosen nor created, but confronts us in its sheer thereness – "a free gift from nowhere", as Arendt is wont to say (*HC* 2-3). When understood in this way, it seems that we ourselves are inescapably part of *fortuna*, and in so far as acting in the world entails a response to *fortuna*, it would presumably involve some response on the part of the self one becomes in appearing to others to the self as it has been given. This interpretation is borne out by Arendt's differentiation between a first birth involving "the naked fact of one's original physical appearance" and a second birth into the world which involves actively taking upon oneself and confirming the basic fact of one's existence (*HC* 176-177).¹⁷ We should not misunderstand Arendt here, however. She is not distinguishing between an initial self that is "given" and a freely chosen second self that is superimposed upon the dark original. Her argument, on the contrary, is that who one becomes depends in part on one's response to the piece of fate one already is, which implies that we *cannot* simply make of ourselves what we wish.

However, despite of Arendt's view that one is formed into a person in part by one's response to the self that has been given, becoming human is not exclusively a matter of the self's relation to itself. Her treatment of *virtù* and *fortuna* clearly shows that who one is ultimately emerges from the interplay of self and world which manifests itself in action. The second point is that the virtuosic response to *fortuna* does not amount to a purely arbitrary display of activity. On the contrary, becoming a person – a distinct and recognisable character – is not a matter of engaging in any action at any time, but of consistently choosing the kind of actions by which one wishes to be known. For Arendt, this means to take upon oneself the injunction: "Be as you wish to appear", not only to others, but also to oneself (*LMT* 37). To live up to this injunction means to consistently display in action the qualities or virtues that you would wish to constitute your "character". This is not a matter of discovering such virtues within oneself and presenting them to the

¹⁷ Elsewhere Arendt speaks of a "given substratum of gifts and defects peculiar to our soul and body structure" (*LMT* 37).

world. Rather, it involves a deliberate choice for specific actions from among the various potentialities for action that the world presents. In choosing these actions and the specifically human virtues they embody (e.g. courage, honesty, loyalty, etc.), we pay them the compliment of being pleased with them: “The compliment implies a promise to the world, to those to whom I appear, to act in accordance with my pleasure, and it is the breaking of the implied promise that characterizes the hypocrite” (*LMT* 36). It is through the continuous enactment of this promise that character or personality emerges, which can only be recognised as such by others on the basis of the “consistency and duration of the image thereby presented to the world” (*ibid.*).

We have already considered the importance Nietzsche attaches to the capacity for promising in the emergence of the human. Arendt shares his belief that it is by promising that we bind ourselves to others and through them, to the future, and thereby manage to achieve a more-or-less enduring identity in the midst of the endless flux of human affairs. Against the belief that individual identity is an expression of an interior essence that bubbles to the surface where it becomes recognisable to others, Arendt paints the interior realm as one of darkness and confusion from which we would never be able to escape were it not for the miracle of promising, which ties us to others in the world and makes it possible to acquire an enduring sense of self: “Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities –” (*HC* 237). Arendt remarks appreciatively in this regard that “Nietzsche, in his extraordinary sensibility to moral phenomena [...] saw in the faculty of promises (the “memory of the will”, as he called it) the very distinction which marks off human from animal life” (*HC* 245). The point here is not that the human, unlike the animal, is master of himself and therefore capable of making promises. On the contrary, by virtue of our embeddedness in human plurality, the capacity for promising is “the only alternative to a mastery which relies on domination of one’s self and rule over others” (*HC* 244).

This interrelation between identity, plurality and worldliness once again underscores Arendt’s insistence that self-formation should not be equated with self-creation. In fact, she specifically criticises modern philosophy for succumbing to “the strange illusion that man, in distinction from other things, has created himself” (*LMT* 37). Character or personality might be a matter of chosen self-presentation as well as an implicit promise to honour this presentation, but the possibilities that constitute this choice do not lie within the self but within the world – although Arendt would concede that the “given substratum of gifts and defects peculiar to our soul and body structure” would constrain one’s decision about *which* possibilities for action in the world are worth

pursuing and which are not (ibid.). Yet, in Arendt's account, we should distinguish between one's chosen self-presentation – how one wishes to appear in the world – and how this presentation is received and interpreted by those to whom one appears. While the one who acts may have some control over the former – and even that, as Arendt reminds us, only *up to a point* – he or she cannot determine the latter. The judgement about the form and coherence of an achieved character is not up to the one whose character is at stake. Rather, if character is sustained by living up to a promise made to the world, it is for the implied recipients of the promise to judge whether or not and to what extent this promise has been kept.¹⁸ What is more, such judgement does not merely involve an overview of individual actions. Character, according to Arendt, can only be understood in so far as it belongs to a coherent narrative: “*Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he was” (HC 186). In fact, for Arendt this is precisely the distinguishing feature of a life that is recognisably human – that it can be recounted and understood as a story:

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zoē*, that Aristotle said that it “somehow is a kind of *praxis*” (HC 97).

The value of such stories is in the first place that they offer a coherent account of the disparate words and deeds that make up a life, which makes it possible to recognise such a life as the life of *someone* rather than as a mere instance of species existence. Yet Arendt attaches still a further value to such biographies in so far as they “render words and deeds as ‘exemplary’, making possible our judgements as they give us models that orient us in the world” (Hammer 2000: 97). For instance, in a characteristically idiosyncratic reading of Augustine's *Confessions*, Arendt argues that the value of Augustine's story *for himself* was not in the first place that it was his own and therefore interesting, but that it portrayed an exemplary possibility for human existence as such:

The individual life is not deserving of attention because it is individual and unique in the modern sense, or because it is capable of a unique development and full realization of its personal potential. It is of value not because it is unique, but because it is exemplary. As my life has been, so can all lives be (EU 26).¹⁹

Arendt's notion of the exemplary validity of certain stories might in turn be understood as an attempt to conceive of a measure of the human that is neither absolutely

¹⁸ As Villa (1996: 92) remarks: “But regardless of discipline, the final judgement about whether style or coherence is achieved – and what *kind* of character is displayed – resides with others – with the audience. Style and character, the marks of an achieved unity, are essentially, *public* phenomena, utterly distinct from whatever feeling of unity the agent may experience himself”.

¹⁹ See also Arendt's discussion of exemplary validity in *LK* 77.

immanent to human beings in advance of their appearance in the world nor utterly beyond the world and thus eternally out of reach. It is a measure, in other words, that is embedded in human plurality and worldliness rather than in an interior essence or a supra-worldly ideal. The relevant insight in the present context is that the significance of an individual life is not only the concern of the person whose life it is; it also serves as an example to others of how a human life might be lived in the world.

Once again, however, we have to guard against seeing this as a matter of an agent deliberately “setting an example”, with the implication that he or she is able to command how this life unfolds. Arendt insists that the story of a life is not the execution of previously scripted performance. On the contrary, the story of a life emerges from the interplay between the one who acts and the world that is both the instigator and the context of his or her action. The meaning of such a life, which is the content of character, is bound up with other lives, other stories, so that no one is master of who he or she is: “nobody is the author or producer of his own life story” (HC 184). Moreover, to participate in the world not only involves acting in it, but also being affected by the actions of others, which means that the one who acts “is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer” (HC 190). It may be said, therefore, that Arendt offers us an image of a world in which everyone who participates in it is always caught in the midst of crisscrossing consequences and stories that emanate from actions over which no one – neither those who committed them nor those who are affected by them – has ultimate control. This image of the world underscores her opposition to actions that posit a sovereign, self-knowing agent behind the deed which “impose upon the self an unwarranted coherence [and] thereby deny the self the opportunity *to seek the coherence appropriate to it* – an identity attainable through the performance of actions worthy of being turned into stories” (Honig 1988: 85, my italics).

Arendt is also aware, however, that because we are *not* masters of what we do, because every one of our actions might introduce entire chains of consequences into the world that we could not foresee and cannot undo, we run the risk of becoming the prisoners of what we have done. More, confronted with the hopeless irreversibility of action, we would never dare to begin. However, in the same way as she conceives of promising as the remedy for the unpredictability of action, Arendt suggests that the remedy for action’s irreversibility is forgiveness: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover” (HC 237). Arendt therefore sketches out a conception of character that depends both on promising, which allows for some continuity between how one has acted and how will act in future, and forgiveness, without

which it would not be possible to transcend one's past actions at all in order to begin something new in the world.²⁰

Nevertheless, these remedies for either the unpredictability or irreversibility of action are contingent rather than absolute, and Arendt ultimately does not leave us with a blueprint for acquiring a lasting human identity. For Arendt, as for Nietzsche, one is always becoming who one is, while who one is never coincides with any given appearance. Her portrayal of the interplay between the one who acts and the context of irrevocable plurality in which the action is played out amounts to a notion of individual character or personality that is best described as an “uncanny self”; that is to say, a self that is “at once our truest and most tangible identity *and* a role we acquire only through a process of radical desubjectivization, [that] is uniquely ours but strangely unrecognizable to us, a self we can neither legitimately disavow nor fully acknowledge” (Dolan 1995: 330). Understood in this way, Arendt may be said to present us with a conception of the self that fits neither a purely performative model nor any kind of essentialism; a self without an Archimedean point, but who – by virtue of its embeddedness in a common world – is nevertheless more than “a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more”.²¹

3. The life of the mind

Our consideration of Arendt's attempt to re-think the meaning of the human will be incomplete as long as it does not account for her inquiry into the other side of the active life, namely the life we lead in our minds rather than in the world. Arendt introduces this further concern at the end of *The Human Condition* by quoting Cato's maxim: “Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself” (HC 325). The relevance of this remark for her own reflections on the meaning of the human is that it springs from an awareness that while we live together with others in a world of appearances, we cannot *only* live with others; we also need at times to withdraw from this togetherness. More than that, a specifically human life is not only a matter of being recognised as such by those to whom one appears in the world; it is also a matter of who one is when one is literally “by oneself” and therefore appears to no one. Despite her insistence that we cannot acquire the unique character that is the signal feature of our humanity in solitude, Arendt does not wish to argue that we lose ourselves entirely when we are not immediately acting and speaking in the world. Her reasons for this are, first,

²⁰ I offer a more intensive discussion of Arendt's notion of forgiveness in chapter 5, section 2, particularly in so far as our capacity to forgive also points to a capacity for overcoming the resentment of the given that is the signature trait of modern nihilism.

²¹ Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, Act 5 Scene 5

that even in withdrawal one still remains oriented to the world of appearances and second, that being “by oneself” is predicated on a kind of inner plurality that is a reflection of the plurality that characterises this world.

This view that worldliness and plurality are as much part of the life of the mind as of the life of action – albeit in different way than in the active life – is a thread that runs through *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt’s last, and uncompleted, work. Just as *The Human Condition* focused on the three modalities of the active life, *The Life of the Mind* is meant to focus on the three modalities of our mental life, namely thinking, willing and judging. The section on judging was never completed, however, while the sections on thinking and willing were not yet prepared for publication before her death. For this reason, both *Thinking*, and to an even greater extent *Willing*, read like provisional explorations rather than her final word on either subject. Bearing this in mind, I shall refrain in turn from pronouncing a final word on Arendt’s understanding of either of these modalities of the life of the mind. For the remainder of this chapter I shall confine myself to a consideration of the role of plurality and worldliness within her treatment of thinking and willing, while postponing any detailed discussion of judging until the next chapter.

3.1 Thinking

If in *The Human Condition* Arendt sets out to think what we are doing, *The Life of the Mind* begins by asking what we are doing when we think. The first part of her answer is that, in so far as thought “occurs in and is spoken by a being at home in a world of appearances” (*LMT* 32), thinking in the first place entails a kind of “translation” of our somatic experiences – the play of sense impressions and nerve stimuli – into the language of the realm of appearances (*ibid.*).²² Echoing Nietzsche’s view on the impossibility of immediate experience, Arendt maintains that we never understand these inner experiences, affects, or passions – the life of the psyche, in other words – in an immediate way. If we were able to encounter them in their immediacy, there would be nothing to say about them, except perhaps that at the most basic level they are the same for everyone. Arendt argues, however, that these indeterminate inner experiences only become recognisable and thus meaningful to us when they have been translated into a specific form, and form is always a matter of *appearance*. Thinking, then, is an exercise, or more precisely an experiment, in translating the formless life of the psyche – “our libininal life”, as Taminioux (1999: 54) would have it – into a form that relates to other appearances in the world. This translation in turn embodies a judgement about what is fit to be seen in the world and what not:

²² Compare Nietzsche in this regard: “The ‘inner experience’ only enters our consciousness after it has found a language that the individual *understands* ... i.e. a translation of a state into states *more familiar* to the individual –” (*KSA* 13:15[90]). The same point is made at length in *GS* 354.

What appears in the outside world in addition to physical signs is only what we make of them through the operation of thought. Every *show* of anger, as distinct from the anger I feel, already contains a reflection on it, and it is this reflection that gives the emotion the highly individualized form which is meaningful for all surface phenomena. To show one's anger is one form of self-presentation: I decide what is fit for appearance" (*LMT* 31).

Moreover, since thinking involves the "carrying over" of these inner experiences from the worldless and wordless life of the psyche to the world of appearances, it is inherently metaphorical. Thus Arendt writes that our thinking "stands in need of metaphors in order to bridge the gap between a world given to sense experience and a realm where no such immediate apprehension of evidence can ever exist" (*LMT* 32).²³

This view of the metaphorical quality of thinking has two important implications for Arendt's understanding of the self. In the first place, it means that our sense of self is not based on an immediate grasp of our inner experiences, but follows from the interpretation and translation of these experiences with reference to the realm of appearances. In other words, our self-understanding – the way in which we *think* about ourselves – is always mediated and metaphorical rather than direct and literal.²⁴ In the second place, in so far as thinking is the translation or carrying-over (*metapherein*) of our somatic experiences into worldly form, it is only possible to understand ourselves so long as we retain the world as a reference point. It is for this reason that Arendt insists that "*we are of the world and not merely in it* (*LMT* 22), and it is precisely to the extent that this worldliness is part of thinking that we are able to temporarily withdraw from the world in thought without losing ourselves. Hence thinking, for Arendt, "is guided not, as it is for Plato, by the recollection of ideas that are removed from the world, but by the remembrance of a world which constitutes us" (Hammer 2000: 95).

Together with the worldliness that she attributes to the thinking activity, Arendt ascribes another feature of human existence in the world of appearances, namely plurality, to the activity of thinking. She introduces her argument to this effect by pointing to the reflexive quality of our mental life, which "testif[ies] to a *duality* inherent in consciousness; the mental agent cannot be active except by acting, implicitly or explicitly, back upon himself" (*LMT* 74). In broad terms, this reflexivity means that the one who thinks is at the same time the subject of his or her own thought operations. In other words,

²³ Arendt also considers thinking to be the wellspring of art, precisely because the operation of thought translates the "mute and inarticulate despondency" of inner feelings into a form that can be seen and heard in the world. As such, thinking "transcends and releases into the world a passionate intensity from its imprisonment within the self" (*HC* 168).

²⁴ Arendt's argument here relies heavily on Nietzsche's view on the impossibility of immediate experiences: "I maintain the phenomenality of the inner world, too: everything of which we become conscious is arranged, simplified, schematized, interpreted through and through – the actual process of inner 'perception', the causal connection between thoughts, feelings, desires, between subject and object, are absolutely hidden from us – and are perhaps purely imaginary. The 'apparent *inner* world' is governed by just the same forms and procedures as the 'outer' world (*WP* 477, *KSA* 13:11[113]).

even though one might be outside the company of all others, in so far as one thinks, one is not “one”, but always at least two. Arendt finds the clearest indication of this duality inherent in thinking in Socrates’ well-known claim that “It would be better for me [...] that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me” (*LMT* 181). Although Socrates speaks of himself “being one”, Arendt points out that “nothing that is identical with itself, truly and absolutely *one*, as A is A, can be either in or out of harmony with itself; you always need at least two tones to produce harmonious sound” (*LMT* 183). Socrates’ claim, which ultimately refers to the self as one – a *unicum* – therefore presupposes a more fundamental duality. Given that Socrates’ remark is in fact a response to the question of why one should refrain from doing evil, his answer indicates that the decision not to commit evil is not made only – or even primarily – for the sake of others, but for the sake of oneself: because one would not want to live with an evildoer.²⁵ For Arendt, the significance of Socrates’ claim is its implicit recognition that “I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness” (*LMT* 183.). This difference refers to the distinction between the co-players in the dialogue between me and myself, “in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers” (*LMT* 185). Arendt wants us to acknowledge that this mental dialogue – which describes the other vital operation of thinking apart from the translation of our immediate sense experiences into worldly form – is only possible in so far as the questioner and respondent are *not* identical:

In brief, the specifically human actualization of consciousness in the thinking dialogue between me and myself suggests that difference and otherness, which are such outstanding characteristics of the world of appearances as it is given to man for his habitat among a plurality of things, are the very conditions for the existence of man’s mental ego as well, for this ego actually exists only in a duality (*LMT* 187).²⁶

²⁵ It is in this context that Arendt expands on her original thesis of the “banality” of the evil associated with Eichmann. In his case, as with thousands of other functionaries under the same or similar regimes, his actions did not spring from any inherent moral depravity or a consistent desire to do evil, but simply – and devastatingly – from an inability to think (*LMT* 5). Eichmann had no compunction about “living with an evildoer” because he had no conception of living *with* himself. In Arendt’s terms, he lacked the “inner plurality” that is itself a kind of remembrance of the plurality of others with whom one shares a world.

²⁶ At this point it is important to acknowledge that, despite their shared description of the plurality of the self, Nietzsche and Arendt differ from one another in so far as the former characterises this plurality primarily as a site of struggle while the latter, in her appeal to the Socratic two-in-one, seems to aim at a more harmonious plurality. However, although there is indeed a difference in the ways in which they portray the relations between the elements that constitute this plurality, we should guard against a one-sided reading of either Nietzsche or Arendt on this point. We should recall that Nietzsche does not advocate a view of the self as a mere unbridled conflict between power-quantas, but speaks instead of a “signified unity” or a “unity of organisation”, who knows “moments of grand harmony” (see SE 2, *WP* 259, KSA 11:26[119]). Arendt in turn does not posit the final agreement of the self with itself as the desired outcome of thought, precisely because such agreement would effectively bring thinking to an end (cf. *LMW* 70). One might perhaps say that, in

Given this “original duality” that is the predicate for our inner life as well as for life in the world, any “fashionable search for identity” is necessarily futile (ibid.). The search for identity, in so far as it is conducted in thought, involves a reflexive doubling back on itself so that that the one who seeks and the one who provides answers to what is sought do not coincide. Arendt here seems to be making the distinctly Nietzschean claim that to seek oneself – on the assumption that there is “a” single, self-sufficient and final identity to be found – is in fact to lose oneself. The problem is not, or not only, that we cannot properly inquire into who we are because we are too close to the subject of inquiry, so to speak, but that our very method of inquiry necessarily dissolves identity into difference and therefore does not produce any definable result. The only solution to the problem of identity, writes Arendt, is therefore “never being alone and never trying to think” (*LMT* 187).²⁷ To engage in thinking is therefore to confront the irreducible plurality of the self. More specifically, thinking humanises the unspecified difference within ourselves, which in turn refers us back to the plurality of the world that is the precondition for thought:

What thinking actualizes in its unending process is difference, given as a mere raw fact (*factum brutum*) in consciousness; only in this humanized form does consciousness then become the outstanding human characteristic of somebody who is a man and neither a god nor an animal. As the metaphor bridges the gap between the world of appearances and the mental activities going on within it, so the Socratic two-in-one heals the solitariness of thought; its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth (*LMT* 187).

It should be clear by now that Arendt has a highly idiosyncratic understanding of thinking. She is particularly insistent that thinking should not be confused with logical reasoning from accepted premises to valid conclusions. The latter is mere “brain power”, which is nothing more than “reckoning with consequences” (*LMT* 7). Thinking is also not the equivalent of “knowing”, or cognition. The latter is the proper domain of the intellect (*Verstand*), which is inspired by the quest for truth, while the inspiration for thinking is the search for meaning (ibid.). While we may indeed thirst after knowledge, Arendt also identifies a deeper need in us “to think *beyond* what we can know” (Bernstein 2000: 283). The main distinction between brain power and cognition on the one hand and thinking on the other is that the “appetite for meaning” that inspires the latter can never be satisfied, which means that thinking ultimately produces no result (cf. *LMT* 62). Arendt does not consider this lack of definable outcome to be a failure; on the contrary, it is a condition for

the case of Arendt, the harmony at issue is the harmony of the most varied counterpoint rather than a harmony based on equivalent tones.

²⁷ Arendt is of the opinion that this is indeed a prevalent “solution” for most members of modern society. In her correspondence with Mary McCarthy over the question of what possible answer one could give to the question “Why shouldn’t I kill my grandmother if I feel like it?”, Arendt writes that the Socratic answer is no longer any good because hardly anyone lives together with themselves in this way. For modern individuals, “alone” simply equals “lonely” (*BFr* 22-3).

thinking at all. In order to begin to think, there can be no pre-set stopping-point for the dialogue between me and myself and no limit that determines the range of this dialogue. For this reason, thinking has a transgressive quality: it does not acknowledge any boundaries to the questions and answers that constitute it, refuses to rest with the given and dissolves all stable meanings and unitary identities. In Arendt's formulation: "No mental act, and least of all the act of thinking, is content with its object as it is given to it. It always transcends the sheer givenness of whatever may have aroused its attention and transforms it into [...] an *experimentum sui tatus*, an experiment of the self with itself" (*LMT* 73-74).

Because thinking is an experiment without end, which in turn stems from a search for meaning rather than the discovery of truth, thinking is always "out of order" (*LMT* 123): it interrupts the normal order of things by refusing to take it for granted, goes against the grain, overthrows boundary-markers, destabilises hierarchies, and undermines fixed identities. For Arendt, this destabilising power of thinking is best described as that of "unfreezing concepts". If we understand the concept as a general category which incorporates any number of particulars by negating the differences between them, thinking uncovers these differences. Arendt makes mention in this regard to Solon the lawgiver, who described the concept as a "non-appearing measure" (*aphanes metron*) "most difficult for the mind to comprehend, but nevertheless holding the limits of all things" (*LMT* 170).²⁸ Arendt argues that it is precisely this hidden measure that Plato later transformed into supra-sensory ideas (*ibid.*). Against this background, thinking can be understood as breaking open the frozen limits of the concept, thereby dissolving its identity, its stability and eventually its authority as a measure of human experience. Drawing on Socrates, Xenophon and Heidegger, Arendt ultimately speaks of "the wind of thought" that swirls around and eventually thaws the petrified conceptual markers by which we steer our lives:

It is this invisible element's nature to undo, unfreeze, as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought. [...] The consequence is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics. These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handily that you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall now stir in you, has shaken you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with each other (*LMT* 175).²⁹

Here it is important to distinguish Arendt's notion of thinking that dissolves certainties and induces perplexities from the business of the "professional thinkers" – the

²⁸ Arendt quotes Solon in Diehl, E. (ed.), *Anthologica Lyrica Graeca*, Leipzig, 1936, fragment 16.

²⁹ This passage seems to call up for a second time Nietzsche's reference to "the thawing wind" in the wake of which "everything [is] in flux", and "all bannisters and bridges [have] fallen into the water" (*TSZ* "On Old and New Tablets" 8). See chapter 1, p. 17.

practitioners of Philosophy in Arendt's pejorative sense of the word – who consider thinking a means to escape the very plurality and perplexities that are inherent in the world of human affairs as well as the life of the mind (*LMT* 3, 13, 77). Plato is of course the primary example of such a “professional thinker” who turned his back on the contingent world and tried to counter the disquiet of thought by making thinking, and thus the quest for meaning, subservient to the intellect and the concomitant search for truth. Arendt argues, provocatively, that we cannot – and should not – trust the professional thinkers with the affairs of the world, precisely because they cast a jaundiced eye on the world and its complexities – including the complexities of the self in so far as we are part of this world – and seek instead truths that “compel the mind” (*BPF* 107).

However, even when thinking is not hijacked by professionals in the Platonic mould, it still seems to stand in conflict with the world of human affairs. More, in so far as a person is both one who thinks and one who acts, this conflict also plays itself out within a single individual. The source of the conflict is that thinking breaks open identities and generates perplexities while the world of acting and speaking human beings depends on relatively enduring, commonly shared concepts and more-or-less stable identities. Hence, though thinking remains oriented towards the world even when withdrawing from it, this orientation does not prevent the one who thinks from questioning and ultimately dissolving the stable concepts that structure human life within a common world. Arendt does not deny this conflict, nor, it seems to me, does she want to resolve it. On the contrary, her re-examination of thinking can be understood, at least in part, as an attempt to re-awaken us to an important and necessary tension in the world and in ourselves that *should not* be resolved – a point to which I shall return in the concluding section of chapter 6.

It should be added here that, while thinking stands in necessary tension with our worldly existence, it nevertheless prepares the mind for another mental activity that is entirely bound up with the world of appearances, namely judgement. Hence Arendt writes that the kind of “midwifery” practised by Socrates has an inescapably political dimension in that it “brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them”, while this destruction itself “has a liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgement, which one may call with some reason the most political of men's mental abilities” (*LMT* 192). While the question of judgement is not our proper focus here, it may be said that, in Arendt's account, to judge is to decide – not once and for all time, but provisionally – how the world should look, what is fit to appear in it and what not. In so far as thinking dissolves all fixed opinions, beliefs or values, it prevents us from forming judgements that seek to make the world conform to any absolute measure. Moreover, to the extent that thinking confronts me with the plurality within myself, it brings me to recognise myself as bound up with the irreducible plurality of the world.

I shall return to this relation between thinking, judging and worldliness in the next chapter. I now want to conclude the present chapter with a consideration of Arendt's treatment of the other faculty that belongs to the life of the mind, namely willing.

3.2 *Willing*

If thinking unfreezes concepts, Arendt's reflection on the will is an admirable demonstration of the thawing wind of thought. She is in agreement with Nietzsche that most philosophers have misunderstood the will in so far as they have treated it as a unitary faculty and the seat of our inner freedom. Arendt's own project can be understood as an attempt to develop an alternative to this "philosophical" conception of the will that is in keeping with her own conception of the plurality of both self and world.³⁰ I am not so much interested here in the steps of Arendt's historical inquiry into the various misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the will. Instead, I shall follow the same strategy as in the case of thinking, which is to situate Arendt's treatment of the will in relation to worldliness and plurality. To this end, I shall confine my discussion to two aspects of her treatment of the will: first, her conception of the will as conflict and second, the relation between willing, action and freedom.

In order to make sense of Arendt's portrayal of the inherent conflict and therefore irrevocable plurality of the will, it is important to understand that she is not setting out to prove the will's existence. Instead, she takes her cue from what she considers to be a recognisable human experience, which is the realisation that willing and being able are not the same (*LMW* 380). For Arendt, this split or conflict between the I-will and the I-can is not an eternal fact of human existence: the ancients had no conception of such a distinction and consequently no conception of the will as a distinct faculty. In her account, the notion of an inner will has a specific historical origin in Paul's discovery that the determination to do the good runs aground on an internal resistance, so that "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15, quoted in *LMW* 65). For Arendt, our Western concept of the will has been decisively shaped by this central notion of Pauline Christianity, namely the hiatus between willing and being able to do what one wills. In her words:

[W]hat we usually understand by will and will-power has grown out of this conflict between a willing and a performing self, out of the experience of an I-will-and-cannot, which means that the I-will, no matter what is willed, remains subject

³⁰ Taminiiaux (1997: 143-4) is right in ascribing a "deconstructive aim" to Arendt's interpretation of the philosophers of the will, in so far as her inquiry "consists first of all in tracing within the texts of the professional thinkers the very marks of a fundamental conflict between the experience of thinking and that of willing, in order to question in the second phase the 'solution' purportedly given to it by those professional thinkers".

to the self, strikes back at it, spurs it on, incites it further, or is ruined by it (*BPF* 162).

It is important to understand that Arendt is not here making a distinction between the doer and the deed. Rather, given her view that we become who we are only in action, she is sketching out a conflict between the self who wills to take the leap into the world through action and the self who only emerges in the performance of the action. Willing is a matter of future aim: the aim to begin something in the world, and since action is *directed* action and not mere arbitrary behaviour, we can only act in so far as we are willing to begin. Yet – and this is the difficulty that St. Paul gives voice to – there is no necessary connection between the will to begin and the act of beginning itself. In Eliot’s memorable phrase: “Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow”.³¹ This unbridgeable gap between willing and performing can be described as “an hiatus marked by contingency – for a moment everything is uncertain” Honig (1988: 90). Arendt herself refers to the “the *abyss* of nothingness that opens up before any deed [...] that cannot be accounted for by a reliable chain of cause and effect and is inexplicable in Aristotelian categories of potentiality and actuality” (*LMW* 207).

To cast this argument in a Nietzschean idiom, we might say that the will only becomes a problem, and consequently a matter for investigation, for those who feel themselves trapped in the abyss between the I-will and the I-can; in other words, those who are powerless to act, in contrast to the “nobles” for whom the I-will and the I-can are synonymous (cf. *GM* II: 10). Arendt certainly seems to think along these lines when she states “men first discovered the will when they experienced its impotence and not its power” (*BPF* 161). In her account, it is also by virtue of this experience that the self for the first time becomes a question for itself, in so far as it forces one to ask: “*Are things that concern only me within my power?*” (*LMW* 63).

To the extent that this question – together with the experience of the conflict between the I-will and the I-can it implies – still resonates with us, we remain the heirs of St. Paul. What is more, Arendt considers the problem of the will to have entered philosophy via this very experience, which at the same time heralded the discovery of the “inner person”, who promptly became the subject of philosophical investigation. In her view, much of this “investigation” has in fact been devoted to covering up the conflict of the will, either by promoting the notion of a perfectly autonomous self who freely determines the outcome of his or her actions, or by seeking to repudiate the will altogether in favour of a higher necessity. Her own inquiry into the will is an attempt to reawaken us to the plurality of the will and the inevitable conflict that lies at its origin.

³¹ T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*.

In order to relate Arendt's understanding of the will to this conception of the self it is important to reflect on the extent to which the will exhibits the same plurality and difference that she ascribes to acting and thinking. We have seen that she locates the origin of our sense of the will in the experience of the conflict between the willing and performing self. However, Arendt also identifies a conflict within the will itself; more accurately, she portrays the will *as* conflict. For her, as for Nietzsche, will only operates on will, and it is this reflexive operation that is the source of the conflict. Arendt makes this clear in her further analysis of the experience of Paul, where she argues that the very act of willing calls up a counter-will that must be overcome in order for the will to assert itself. Hence the experience of Paul hinged on the realisation that "[t]he will always addresses itself to itself; when the command says, Thou shalt, the will replies, Thou shalt *will* what as the command says – and not mindlessly execute orders. That is the moment when the internal contest begins, for the aroused counter-will has a like power of command" (*LMW* 69). For Arendt, this battle between will and counter-will demonstrates that willing is always willing against resistance – a resistance that is called up by the very act of willing itself, and not by any hostile external force: "In brief, the will is impotent not because of something outside that prevents willing from succeeding, but because the will hinders itself. And wherever, as in Jesus, it does not hinder itself, it does not yet exist" (*LMW* 70).

This split in the will that was the signal feature of the conversion experience of Paul was taken up by Augustine, whom Arendt describes as "the first philosopher of the will". While Paul ultimately halted his self-questioning with a "very unphilosophical" appeal to the inscrutable ways of God, Augustine sought to think through the experience in order to come to grips with what he called "this monstrosity [...] The mind commands the body, and is obeyed instantly; the mind commands itself and is resisted" (*LMW* 93). Augustine's conclusion is that the will's resistance to itself is not "monstrous", but necessary: "Since it is in the nature of the will to command and demand obedience, it is also in the nature of the will to be resisted" (*LMW* 95), and it is precisely the will's resistance to itself that is the condition for willing at all. Thus, given that willing (*velle*) necessarily involves nilling (*nolle*); the will that is entirely at one with itself could no longer be called a will at all.

This split in the will is the source of both its impotence and its power. We experience the will as impotent when the resistance that is called up by the act of willing itself is stronger than the will's ability to command, while the experience of the power of the will springs from the will's ability to overcome this resistance. To appeal to Nietzsche once again, willing in this sense is "the affect of command" (*BGE* 19). In fact, Arendt here explicitly draws on Nietzsche's understanding of the will:

In Nietzsche, the point is that he numbers the negative slave-feelings of being coerced and of resisting or resenting among the necessary obstacles without which the Will would not even know its own power. Only by surmounting an inner resistance does the Will become aware of its genesis: it did not spring up to obtain power; power is its very source (*LMW* 162).³²

Arendt further credits Nietzsche with recognising that the impotence of the I-will-and-cannot – which she equates with his notion that “the Will cannot will backward” – is the wellspring of human evil, namely “resentment, the thirst for vengeance (we punish because we cannot undo what has been done), the thirst for the power to dominate others” (*LMW* 168). In other words, on Arendt’s reading, Nietzsche provides an account of *ressentiment*, which in turn lies at the root of the nihilistic evaluation of the world, as originating in the impotence of a will unable to command that which resists it. What is at issue here is the resentment of the past as a given, which therefore cannot be made or unmade according to our will. Since it is the very act of willing that gives birth to this resentment of what *is*, overcoming this resentment would have to involve the transformation of the will itself. According to Arendt, this is precisely Nietzsche’s intention with the notion of Eternal Recurrence, which she understands to be his “final redeeming thought” (*LMW* 170). In her view, the redemption of the eternal recurrence as “thought-experiment” lies in overcoming the will itself, together with its eternal restlessness, by returning to the pre-Socratic, cyclical time-conception and thereby overcoming the misleading assumptions of “cause and effect, intention and goal” (*LMW* 172). These are ultimately assumptions about the efficacy of the will – i.e. the assumption that the world can be changed by an act of will – which in turn fuel the sense of resentment when we find ourselves impotent to change it. The *Übermensch*, in Arendt’s interpretation, ultimately embodies Nietzsche’s vision of one who is able to overcome these fallacies, who is able to calm his will from all its oscillations to a point of stillness where all that is left, all that is needed, is to be a “Yes-sayer” (*ibid.*).³³

I shall return to this very important aspect of Nietzsche’s thinking, together with Arendt’s interpretation of it, at a later point. Suffice to point out here that, while Arendt has an immense appreciation for Nietzsche’s attempt to return us to the sense of wonderment (*thaumazein*) that she considers to be one of the most important human experiences and one that has been ultimately lost in modernity, she nevertheless proposes a more “worldly” redemption of the will. To make sense of her proposal, we should keep in mind that willing

³² In a preceding analysis of Nietzsche’s view of the will as command in *WP* 668 (*KSA* 13:11[114]) Arendt writes: “It is no less characteristic that this commanding thought is directed only very rarely toward dominating others: command and obedience both occur in the mind – in a fashion strangely similar to Augustine’s conception, of which Nietzsche certainly knew nothing” (*LMW* 161).

³³ This analysis obviously leaves out of account the notion of the will to power as I have portrayed it in the previous chapter. This does not invalidate Arendt’s interpretation of the eternal recurrence or the *Übermensch*; it simply means that her interpretation needs to be supplemented. See chapter 5, section 2 for an effort in this regard.

is always a matter of willing (and at the same time nilling) *something*. Stated differently, willing is necessarily concerned with *projects* rather than objects (*LMW* 14), and as such is always directed towards the world as the context within which such projects are to be realised.³⁴ Drawing on Augustine, Arendt then argues that this world-directedness of the will introduces the “footprints” of “sensible things” into the life of the mind, and as such it directs the mind to the world (*LMW* 103). By focusing the mind in this way, “the Will prepares the ground on which action can take place” (*LMW* 101).

Nevertheless, this preparation, which focuses the mind on the world, cannot in itself overcome the conflict between will and counter-will. Ultimately, argues Arendt, the conflict of the will is not redeemed by divine intervention (Paul), by any mental operation (Augustine), or by the repudiation of the will (Nietzsche), but by action alone. This does not mean that she views action as the proper telos of willing or as the inevitable consequence of the mind’s focus on the world. Instead, she argues that the act performs an unforeseen and unforeseeable “*coup d’état*” that interrupts the conflict between *velle* and *nolle* (*LMW* 101), so that “the Will is redeemed by ceasing to will and starting to act” (*LMW* 102). This cessation is not itself an act of will, however, as this would in turn call up its own further resistance and thereby perpetuate the very conflict it is intent on overcoming (*ibid.*). Arendt therefore does not maintain that the conflict inherent in willing can be overcome *in advance* of acting. Instead, she argues that this conflict only ceases in the moment of acting itself, and then not once and for all time, but only for this specific act in this specific instance.³⁵ Since action doesn’t follow directly from the will, it remains ultimately unpredictable, and therefore cannot be encompassed within a general law that would hold for other instances as well. Arendt’s treatment of the will can thus be understood as part of an overall attempt to counter the teleological theory of action, which considers action to be subject to a chain of causality, whether springing from the general processes of nature or history or from the will itself. It is by virtue of their non-teleological, unpredictable quality that all actions can be understood as akin to “miracles” in the sense that they are “interruptions in some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected” (*BPF* 168). Moreover, if we consider that human life in the biological sense – our species existence, in other words

³⁴ As Arendt writes: “Every volition, although a mental activity, relates to the world of appearances in which its project is to be realized.; in flagrant contrast to thinking, no willing is ever done for its own sake or finds its fulfilment in the act itself. Every volition not only concerns particulars but – and this is of great importance – looks forward to its own end, when willing-something will have changed into doing-it” (*LMW* 36).

³⁵ Arendt demonstrates this point with an example provided by Duns Scotus: “ ‘It is possible for me to be writing at this moment, just as it is possible for me not to be writing’. [...] The mental activity in each case does not exclude its opposite. ‘Yet my *act* of writing excludes its opposite. By one act of the will I can determine myself to write, and by another I can decide not to write, but I cannot be simultaneously in act in regard to both things together’ ” (*LMW* 102).

– constitutes precisely such a natural process, then action is the “miracle” that interrupts our metabolism with nature. The will is then not the *cause* of such action, but rather, as Honig (1988: 87) so elegantly describes it, it is “the *midwife* of this second birth. As the ‘organ of spontaneity’, it enables the self to act spontaneously by liberating it from the determinism of the private realm” [my italics].³⁶

This understanding of the will opens up the further question of the relation between willing and freedom. In fact, the greater part of Arendt’s interest in the will can be understood as an attempt to think through the problem of freedom without falling back into the traditional philosophical notion of the *liberium arbitrium*, which entails “a freedom of choice that arbitrates and decides between two given things, one good and one evil” (*BPF* 151). In Arendt’s account, this conception of free will arose on the part of the “professional thinkers” who incorporated Paul and Augustine’s conversion experiences into a system of thought that made the “I-can” irrelevant to willing.³⁷ This solution to the conflict of the will – which is simply to deny the existence of such conflict – arose precisely on the part of those whose sole concern was thinking, and who therefore remained blind to the only possible redemption of the will’s conflict, which is acting. For this reason, the “professional thinkers” conceived of freedom as “a word indicating an *inner* disposition by virtue of which a man could *feel* free when he actually was a slave or unable to move his limbs” (*LMW* 5). And because of this shift from action to an inner disposition, “the ideal of freedom ceased to be virtuosity [...] and became sovereignty, the ideal of a free will, independent from others and eventually prevailing against them” (*BPF* 163). This view of freedom as sovereignty or autonomy not only skews our understanding of the world as a realm wholly outside ourselves which we may or may not choose to enter, but, as Honig (1988: 89) points out, it also “destroys the internal plurality and difference that are as much conditions of action as are the external plurality and difference of the human world of appearances”.

In contrast to this conception of freedom as an inner disposition which facilitates a choice between pre-defined alternatives, Arendt portrays freedom as the human capacity for beginning (*LMW* 158). In her view, this is “the freedom of Brutus: ‘That this shall be or we will fall for it’, that is, the freedom to call something into being which did not exist

³⁶ Compare also: “[S]ince action, taken as the redemption of the inner war of the will, is always a singular appearing in the world – more precisely, the appearance of somebody, a singular ‘who’ which itself is a new beginning, an *initium*, by virtue of its birth – it can be said that will, beyond the *liberium arbitrium* between willing and nilling, is the mental organ of the freedom of spontaneously beginning [...] In short, the will, which is itself groundless for it is a *causa sui*, is the mental organ for what is abysmal and miraculous in human action” (Taminiaux 1999: 55).

³⁷ In this regard, Arendt considers Duns Scotus and Nietzsche to have been the only philosophers who have praised willing as such, in so far as they both understood the will “as a kind of power [...]. That is, the willing ego is delighted with itself [...] to the extent that the I-will anticipates an I-can; the I-will-and-I-can is the Will’s delight” (*LMW* 37).

before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known” (*BPF* 151). Freedom in this sense is intrinsically “political” rather than “philosophical”; in other words, it is not a datum of consciousness or an inner disposition, but a feature of the action that relates us to the world and to the web of human relationships by which the world is constituted. Arendt’s conception of freedom can therefore not be equated with autonomy. In the first place, while she provides an account of the will as the human faculty of spontaneously beginning something new in the world, we have seen that the will is nevertheless not the *cause* of any such beginning. In the second place, Arendt argues that we act into in a world that is already old when we enter it, so that the beginning established by action is always only a *relative* rather than an *absolute* beginning (*LMW* 110). In so far as human freedom is realised in the world that confronts us as a given, there is an intrinsic connection between freedom and fatefulness, which is precisely why Arendt characterises action as the interplay of *virtù* and *fortuna*.

In light of this understanding of the relation between willing, acting and worldliness, and against the background of the preceding inquiry into the *vita activa* and the life of the mind, it should now be clear that, for Arendt, becoming human – a recognisable person rather than a mere agglomeration of species characteristics – is conditional upon and conditioned by the world as it is given to us. That is to say, Arendt provides us with an account of the self that takes the world as its point of orientation. Nevertheless, because this world is constituted by a plurality of individuals who find themselves within a network of shifting relations and unpredictable actions, it cannot be conceived as a new Archimedean point to replace the fixed measure of the human that has been lost. On the contrary, to the extent that we are *of* the world and not merely *in* it, the fate of the human and the fate of the world are mutually implicated.

At this point, we have come to the end of the inquiry into the anthropological grounds for Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s critique of modernity. If modernity can be characterised as the simultaneous loss of the world and the unmaking (or animalisation) of the human, the purpose in Part 2 of the thesis has been to inquire into the meaning of “human” in this critique. We have seen that Nietzsche and Arendt approach the question in different ways, with Nietzsche focusing on the “psychology” and “morphology” of the will to power, while Arendt can be said to develop a phenomenology of our experience of the world. The consequence of this difference in perspective, as I have indicated at the beginning of this inquiry, is that Nietzsche develops a less “humanistic” (which of course does not mean a more “animalistic”) conception of the human than Arendt. This difference will be explored in greater detail towards the end of the third and final part of the thesis.

What is necessary at this point is to grasp the important points of analogy between Nietzsche's and Arendt's treatment of the human in so far as this relates to the possibility of thinking beyond the predicament of modernity. These points are, first, that both conceive of the human as appearance rather than essence, while this appearance is related in turn to acting in the world. In this sense, both thinkers develop a performative account of identity, while nevertheless not positing an "agent" behind the performance. The second point, which follows from the first, is that the human is not a given essence, but a contingent achievement that emerges in the active engagement with the world. Neither thinker locates humanity in the naked fact of existence, or in a set of species characteristics, but precisely in our distinction from one another which in turn involves a certain transcendence of our animality (if animality is taken to refer to our species existence). The third point of importance is that both establish a relation between the plurality of the self and the plurality of the world. Of course, Nietzsche's conception of plurality is much more radical than that of Arendt in so far as he relates this to the force-field that is the will to power. Nevertheless, the important point of correlation between their respective treatments of plurality is that it underscores the fact that neither the self nor the world is a function of human mastery. This is indeed the most significant insight to be gained from a close reading of Nietzsche's and Arendt's attempts to re-think the human in the aftermath of the death of God, namely that the human is no Archimedean point that can replace the external point of reference we have lost. We are not the measure of ourselves or of the world.

However, this insight also calls up a question, for if we are indeed not in any commanding position with regard to who (or what) we are or the world that circumscribes our existence, how then are we to make sense of the conditions under which we find ourselves? Stated in simpler terms: how are we to make sense of the world if we are not in a position to determine its meaning? This question provides part of the background to the Part 3 of the thesis, in which I shall examine the attempts by Nietzsche and Arendt to resurrect – or reinvent – the possibility of judgement in a world of appearances. As will become clear, this consideration of judgement is itself part of a more wide-ranging reflection on Nietzsche's and Arendt's respective attempts to effect a reconciliation with the world, which they both conceive in terms of a redemption.

PART III: REDEMPTION

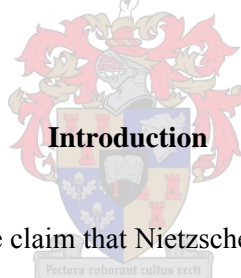


CHAPTER 5

JUDGEMENT AND WORLDLINESS

Insight: all evaluation is made from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture.– Because we forget that valuation is always from a perspective, a single individual contains within him a vast confusion of contradictory valuations and consequently of contradictory drives. This is the expression of the diseased condition in man, in contrast to the animals in which all existing instincts answer to quite definite tasks. This contradictory creature has in his nature, however, a great method of acquiring knowledge: he feels many pros and cons, *he raises himself to justice – to comprehension beyond esteeming things good and evil* [my italics]. The wisest man would be the one richest in contradictions, who has, as it were, antennae for all types of men – as well as his great moments of *grand harmony* – a rare accident even in us! A sort of planetary motion – (Nietzsche, *WP* 259; *KSA* 11:26[119]).

The activity of taste decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it. Taste judges the world in its appearance and in its worldliness; its interests in the world are purely ‘disinterested’, and that means that neither the life of the individual or the moral interests of the self are involved here. For judgements of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man’s life nor his self (Arendt, *BPF* 222).



Introduction

The thesis opened with the claim that Nietzsche and Arendt conceive of the human as a contingent feature of our encounter with the world that lies between us. Chapters 1 and 2 dealt with their shared understanding of modernity as the *loss* of this world and with it, the conditions for making sense of the human. We have seen that at the heart of this loss lies the experience of nihilism, broadly described as a crisis of meaning, evaluation and authority. This three-fold crisis is bound up in turn with what Nietzsche and Arendt both describe as the “death of God”: the loss of faith in an ultimate measure beyond the world that stood as its sole and final justification. To the extent that our conceptions of self and world have been derived from such a supreme yardstick, the loss of faith in such a “measure of measures” destroys the meanings that have been sustained by this faith and by which human beings have traditionally oriented themselves in the world. After the investigation into the specific ways in which the general “measurelessness” of modernity has manifested itself at the level of individual and culture in the first two chapters, chapters 3 and 4 were devoted to Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s respective attempts to provide the grounds for the critique as well as to set the scene for overcoming the predicament of modernity by re-thinking the human in the absence of any ultimate guarantee of meaning. Here our inquiry repeatedly focused on the argument that self and world are not joined

together by a higher-order principle that is external to both, but are mutually implicated. The point, in other words, is that the world is the context within which we become human – that is, in which we acquire specificity, in the sense of a recognisable “character” or “personality”, as opposed to merely existing as instances of a generalised species existence – while it is in the very process of becoming who we are that we also give form to the world. Central to both Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s arguments in this regard is the notion of the irreducible *plurality* of both human and world, so that every identity, every aspect of the world, is characterised by provisionality, unpredictability and indeterminacy and thus transcends our grasp on it.

What concerns me in this fifth chapter of the thesis is the conception of “world” that follows from Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s re-thinking of the human. More specifically, I wish to explore how we are to conceive of our relation to a world that possesses no given meaning, without either falling into complete indifference or seeking to impose a meaning on the world in accordance with our subjective interests. The answer, I want to argue, is bound up with the question of judgement, and with Nietzsche’s conception of perspectival judgement and Arendt’s notion of reflective judgement in particular. If nihilism is the dark side of modelling meaning on a singular, unconditional and therefore non-perspectival truth, then judgement is a way of interpreting the world – and therefore also of conceiving of the human – in the absence of truth, or rather, in the absence of any faith in an ultimate standard of truth against which our actual interpretations can be measured. For both thinkers, what is at stake in judgement is not so much the conditions for acquiring true knowledge about the world as the conditions for experiencing the world as meaningful. The point here is then precisely to show that the dissolution of an ultimate measure of the world does not result in a purely nonsensical world. In Jean-Luc Nancy’s formulation:

[F]or as long as the world was essentially in relation to some other (that is, another world or an author of the world), it could *have* a sense. But the end of the world is that there is no longer this essential relation, and that there is no longer essentially (that is, existentially) anything but the world ‘itself’. Thus, the world *no longer has* a sense, but it *is* a sense (1997:8).

When considered in this light, the exercise of judgement can be understood as the active participation in the sense of the world. For Nietzsche and Arendt, it is only *in* such participation – that is nevertheless the very opposite of an “objective” search for knowledge – that the world has meaning for us at all. That is to say, “judgement has the function of anchoring man in a world that would otherwise be without meaning and existential reality: a world unjudged would have no human import for us” (Beiner 1992: 152). Furthermore, if modernity is characterised by the loss of the world in the face of the very attempt to master it, Nietzsche and Arendt can be said to concern themselves with judgement as a way of participating in the world *without* succumbing to the desire for

mastery. In this regard, judgement should be understood in contrast to the “Archimedean” thinking that has manifested itself both in the Platonic turning away from the world to the realm of ideas and the inward turn of post-Cartesian thought, both of which are in fact driven by a wish for *leverage* (see Disch 1994: 68). As we have seen repeatedly in the previous chapters, this drive to mastery is itself prompted by resentment. On one level, this resentment is bound up with the experience of impotence in the face of a world that is not of our own making (what Arendt designates as the gap between the “I-will” and the “I-can”). In Nietzsche’s terminology, this is the resentment that characterises the slavish mentality, which is aware of its own impotence and rails against it. On yet another level, Nietzsche and Arendt identify resentment as a particular attitude towards time, specifically the antipathy towards its inevitable passing, since this leaves us powerless to hold onto the present or to undo what has been done. This is at the same time resentment of the *past* – of “it was” – in so far as it confronts us as a given that cannot be changed or undone retrospectively. Both of these modes of resentment can be summarised as resentment towards the contingency of human existence and thus towards the contingent world that circumscribes it.

In Nietzsche’s account, both aspects of resentment are bound up a “moral interpretation” of the world, in terms of which the meaning and value of the latter depend on its conforming to a divine blueprint. On the basis of this interpretation, the realisation that the world falls short of this external measure generates the nihilist’s verdict that “the world as it ought to be does not exist, the world as it is ought not to exist” (*WP* 585, *KSA* 12:9[60]). The implication here is clear: “With the *moral* interpretation, the world is unbearable” (*KSA* 12:2[114]). Nietzsche’s notion of perspectival judgement can then be understood as an alternative to this moral-nihilistic interpretation of the world; an alternative, in other words, that does not seek to measure the world *as it is* against the world *as it ought to be*, but concerns itself with the world as it is given.

Arendt likewise wants to get away from the destructive notion that the world has – or should have – a moral meaning. In fact, she argues that the horror of totalitarianism has demonstrated that our inherited moral yardsticks were not only incapable of preventing such catastrophe in the first place but have also proven themselves inadequate for making sense of a calamity of this magnitude. However, rather than taking the line that we have gone wrong in modernity precisely because we have lost a proper grasp on eternal moral principles, Arendt is of the view that what we need is not a return but a new beginning, which in this context means nothing less than learning to think and judge “without banisters”:

Even though we have lost yardsticks by which to measure and rules under which to subsume the particular, a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of

origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality (*EU* 391).

It is this mode of understanding and judgement that is the main concern of this chapter. I aim to demonstrate that Nietzsche's and Arendt's conceptions of judgement are of exemplary interest to us in so far as they constitute a way of relating to the world that does not participate in the resentment of the world as it is, precisely because it is not predicated on a preconceived norm of the world as it ought to be. In other words, it is a mode of understanding that does not suffer from "the insane presumptuousness of man in the face of the world" (*KSA* 12: 2[114]), which derives the meaning and value of the latter from the purely subjective interests of the former. The first part of the chapter examines Nietzsche's notion of perspectivism as the most important aspect of his model of judgement, before turning to Arendt's reinterpretation of Kantian reflective judgement in section 2. As will become clear, what is at issue in both cases is a notion of judgement which, instead of reducing the world to a single meaning (or holding out the promise of such meaning still to come), seeks to understand it in terms of an irreducible plurality of meanings. At the same time, this plurality is not portrayed as mere chaos that defies all meaning but, on the contrary, as the condition for the very possibility of meaning.

This inquiry into judgement can be understood as part of a wider consideration of what I shall call the "redemptive" aspect of Nietzsche's and Arendt's thought. At issue here is a notion of redemption that turns on a reconciliation with the world, which is intended to counter the resentment of what is given rather than made by us that is one of the signal features of modernity. This is the topic of chapter 6, which follows directly from the insights developed in the present chapter.

1. Nietzsche on judgement

1.1 Perspectivism

In the course of a morning dream, Nietzsche has Zarathustra describe the world as "not riddle enough to frighten away human love, not solution enough to put to sleep human wisdom: a humanly good thing the world was to me today, though one speaks much evil of it" (*TSZ* III: 'On the three evils', 1). In the context of an inquiry into Nietzschean perspectivism, this balance – tension would be a better term – between the world as riddle and as solution can also be understood as a tension between a chaotic excess of meanings that results in meaninglessness and the dogmatic belief in a single meaning, or between endlessly shifting perspectives and a single, absolutizing truth. In what follows, I shall

argue that Nietzsche's notion of perspectivism is a way of inhabiting this tension, which is at the same time a way of inhabiting the world.

It should be clear that "world" in this context is neither the true world of Platonic metaphysics nor its opposite: the apparent world whose meaning and justification derives from the former. With the death of God, "world", for Nietzsche, is simply the world of appearances, which is the context within which we appear and which is in turn affected and transformed by our appearance in it.¹ In other words: "The antithesis of the apparent world and the true world has reduced itself to the antithesis 'world' and 'nothing'" (*WP* 567; *KSA* 13:14[184]). The important point in this regard is that, in so far as we are always already *in* the world, it is impossible for any one of us to survey the world as a whole, to grasp the meaning of the world *as such*. In the simplest terms, perspectivism can be understood as an acknowledgment that the ways in which we think, know and act, devise values and hazard judgements are bound up with our particular position within the world. This situatedness constitutes the horizon of our understanding, and since this horizon must necessarily exclude many other possible ways of understanding, no single perspective can claim absolute validity. While every position in the world affords a certain perspective on whatever we encounter of the world, perhaps even several possible perspectives, no one is in a position to command a view of the world in its entirety, and thus to judge it as a whole (it is precisely this judgement that is involved in the Archimedean thinking that both Nietzsche and Arendt want to subvert). More accurately, the world is not an entirety – "neither one nor reducible to one" (*WP* 536, *KSA* 13:15[118]) – but an irreducible plurality, precisely because many (though certainly not all) of these perspectives are locked into an insurmountable opposition. Denying this opposition or forcing opposing perspectives into a higher synthesis does not allow us to grasp more of the world, but simply reduces the scope of our understanding by excluding the oppositional quality whereby the world appears to us in radically different ways.

For Nietzsche, the lack of an ultimate yardstick by which to measure the world means that every judgement is a "perspective evaluation" (*BGE* 34) anchored in a particular horizon and mode of life. More accurately, every judgement has a particular validity that is bound up with a particular perspective, but which cannot claim universal validity. Perspectivism therefore does not do away with the notion of truth altogether. It involves, instead, a recognition that every truth is bound to a particular perspective, or conversely that "every perspective has its particular truth" (Müller-Lauter 1999: 62) which, in the context of other perspectives, again becomes "untruth". Stated differently, the notion of perspectival judgement does not deny the possibility of truth, but rather defends the particularity and provisionality of *every truth* against the demand for a universally valid

¹ See chapter 3, section 1.2

truth *as such*. This is indeed the crux of Nietzsche's well-known opening remark in *Beyond Good and Evil* that philosophers, in so far as they have pursued truth in a dogmatic fashion, have in fact failed to "win" her. It is in this context that Nietzsche accuses Plato of "standing the truth on her head and denying *perspective* itself, the basic condition of all life" (*BGE* Pr). The point here is that negating the perspective character of existence in the world is not to win an ultimate truth beyond all perspective, but precisely to do away with the very conditions for there being truth at all. Nietzsche argues further that the loss of truth paradoxically results from precisely the dogmatic commitment to truth as such. An honest search for "*the truth*" must ultimately reveal that there are many contradictory truth-claims that allow for no final arbiter among them. In other words, it is through the dogmatic search for truth behind the world that truth in the dogmatic sense of the word is ultimately lost (Müller-Lauter 1999: 72).

The consequence of this loss is that there is "no privileged position [...] available from which to discuss the world as if one were not part of it" (Strong 1985: 178). This carries the implication that perspectival judgements or evaluations are a specific mode of engagement with the world, whereby we give form to the world and have our own perspectives transformed in turn. Given what we now know of Nietzsche's emphasis on tension, struggle and opposition, it is to be expected that this dual formation of self and world should not be conceived as a peaceful dialectic that aims at a final, oppositionless synthesis. As Strong (1985: 174) points out, the "operating principle" of Nietzschean perspectivism is the will to power. We have already seen in chapter 3 that will to power may be understood as the quality (as opposed to "essence") of irresolvable tension and contest between constellations of forces. In so far as both self and world is precisely such a constellation of force, they relate to one another by way of action and resistance in both directions, and not by way of mutual harmony. It would be fair to say that what counts as the world for us emerges in the struggle between different perspectives, each of which only exists in the opposition to other perspectives. According to Nietzsche (in *his* perspective, in other words), the world that emerges in this ceaseless struggle among perspectives "is essentially a world of relationships; under certain conditions it has a differing aspect from every point; its being is essentially different from every point; it presses upon every point, every point resists it – and the sum of these is in every case quite incongruent" (*WP* 568; *KSA* 13:14[93]).

Nevertheless, this conception of the world as constituted by the oppositional relations among a plurality of perspectives does not imply that the world is a mere chaotic jumble of incommensurable perspectives and judgements, or that the adoption or rejection of perspectives – that is, judgements pro and contra – are a matter of indifference. This would be a kind of negative perspectivism that sees the absence of truth as an invitation to

meaninglessness. In order to understand what Nietzsche's own, *positive* perspectivism might entail, it is helpful to investigate the distinction Nietzsche draws between a strong and a weak scepticism.²

It should be asserted in the first place that perspectivism is indeed a kind of scepticism that can be contrasted to the dogmatists' adherence to truth as such, which is precisely truth minus perspective. Nevertheless, as with most terms employed by Nietzsche, scepticism does not have a univocal meaning, but is rather what Fiona Hughes (1998: 253) terms a "janus perception" which turns a "doublesided face on the world" (ibid. 259). Strong and weak scepticism may therefore spring from the same experience, but they present radically different faces to the world. The experience they have in common is the coming-to awareness of the death of God, which involves the recognition that there are many possible perspectives on the world and consequently no grounds for the dogmatic belief in a single truth: "There are many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes – and consequently there are many kinds of 'truths', and consequently there is no truth" (WP 540; KSA 11:34[230]). While this formulation indeed expresses the sceptic's attitude towards truth, it is also at this point that strong and weak scepticism part ways. Weak scepticism holds on to the nihilistic view that there is no non-perspectival truth, but there *ought to be*. In simple terms, the weak sceptic is a disappointed believer in truth. When this belief proves to have been in vain, he or she simply withdraws from the struggle between perspectives that constitutes the world. The weak sceptic refrains from all judgement for lack of any final criteria or justification, and thus stands indifferent towards the differences among perspectives, asserting merely that all perspectives are equally valuable or, what amounts to the same thing, equally valueless, since no value could be definitely proven (see Van Tongeren 2000: 149).

Strong scepticism, on the other hand, does not refrain from judgement or commitment, and is by no means a general acceptance of or indifference towards every perspective under the sun. Rather, it is a mode of inquiry, evaluation and judgement that is at the same time a commitment to a particular perspective and a particular judgement *and* a recognition of the provisionality and contested status of all such perspectives and judgements. The strong sceptic therefore does not refrain from judgement in face of the recognition that no judgement could lay claim to general or absolute validity. On the contrary, the strong sceptic is personally committed to the problems they examine and the judgements they make as *their* problems and judgements. In a telling aphorism Nietzsche describes the distinction between this committed attitude of the strong sceptic and the indifference of the weak sceptic in the following way:

² For an extensive analysis of the history of scepticism, as well as the distinction between strong and weak scepticism, see Van Tongeren (2000: 148-154).

‘Selflessness’ has no value either in heaven or on earth. All great problems demand *great love*, and of that only strong, round, secure spirits who have a firm grip on themselves are capable. It makes the most telling difference whether a thinker has a personal relationship to his problems and finds in them his destiny, his distress, and his greatest happiness, or an ‘impersonal’ one, meaning that he can do no better than to touch them and to grasp them with the antennae of cold, curious thought” (GS 345).

From this it is clear that, while the weak sceptic divorces him- or herself from their own questioning and judgement by fleeing into an “impersonal objectivity”, the strong sceptic risks *himself* in his judgements. For Nietzsche, such judgements are more “truthful” (i.e. honest) and therefore “truer” to the character of the world as will to power than the unengaged relativism of the weak sceptic: “I favor any *skepsis* to which I may reply: ‘Let us try it!’ But I no longer wish to hear anything of all those things and questions that do not permit any experiment. This is the limit of my ‘truthfulness’, for there courage has lost its right” (GS 51). Of course, in one sense, “true knowledge” – understood as knowledge that is adequate to the world in itself – is impossible. As we have seen, the world for Nietzsche “is” not a stable entity but is constituted by the ever-shifting struggle among perspectival evaluations that are themselves figures of the will to power. Any attempt to “know” the world already takes place from a particular perspective *in* the world, and, as such, is already part of the struggle and therefore cannot gain a comprehensive view from outside it. However, as Van Tongeren (2000: 168) points out, in so far as these judgements are themselves figures of the will to power, they are also already part of the world that is to be known. Hence, in so far as judgements regarding the world acknowledge their embeddedness in the world – that is, recognise themselves as constellations of will to power that interpret the world from a particular perspective and as such enter into contest with other judgements that take place from other perspectives – they are more “adequate” to the world than forms of knowledge that claim general validity or pretend to a detached objectivity that is nothing more than an unwillingness to risk any judgement at all:

True knowledge, therefore, is possible to the extent to which it realizes and understands this will to power at the same time. The summit of adequacy is reached in a knowledge which recognizes its being only a party in a conflict, without dropping its commitment to that party. Or even better, it recognizes its being only a party in a polymorphic knowledge, which divides itself over conflicting perspectives (ibid.).³

At this point it may be said that the relation which Nietzsche posits between the world and judgement is a radical reworking of the old notion of *adequatio*. With the death of God, truth in the dogmatic sense – as a proper grasp on the world as it is – had to be

³ Ansell-Pearson (2000: 160) makes a further point with regard to this posited relation between truth and perspective: “[Nietzsche’s] analysis shows not that there is simply a relativity of truth but rather that there becomes *a truth of the relative*. This difference is crucial and makes all the difference between Nietzsche and his postmodern heirs”.

given up. Yet, as Müller-Lauter (1999: 66) argues, this surrender of truth in fact led to its transformation: “Previously it had presented itself as that by which the real world is measured; now it submits to the real world as the only standard. By subordinating itself it seeks to correspond with the reality of becoming”. In so far as our judgements are understood as perspectival formulations of the will to power, which are both committed to the particular perspective from which they spring *and* to the plurality of oppositional perspectives, they correspond to the tension between riddle and solution that characterises the world. In a way that recalls Nietzsche’s argument that the possibility of self-understanding depends on the recognition that who one is necessarily transcends the grasp of the knowing self (see chapter 3, section 1.5), the point here is that the adequacy of our judgements about the world depend on our recognition that no judgement could ever encompass the world’s plural and oppositional character. In other words, the adequacy of our judgements depends on the recognition of the *inadequacy* of our judgements. From this it should be clear that “Nietzsche does not leave the criterion of adequacy behind, he radicalizes it” (Van Tongeren 2000: 168).⁴

Part of this radicalisation of adequacy is a radicalised notion of objectivity. We have seen that the weak sceptic flees into objectivity as a way of refraining from judgement in a world that admits of no final criteria.⁵ Nietzsche points to a future “objectivity” – which he places in quotation marks – that should be understood “not as ‘contemplation without interest’ (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability *to control* one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge” (*GM* III: 12). The point here is that in so far as the world is constituted by a plurality of (oppositional) perspectives, the extent of one’s “knowledge” of the world and the adequacy of one’s judgements would depend on one’s ability to understand the world from as many perspectives as possible; that is to say, to incorporate as many possible perspectives into our judgements about the world: “There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity’, be”. In an unpublished note Nietzsche writes: “Task: to see things *as they are!* Means: to look on them from a hundred eyes, from *many* persons!” (KSA 9:11[65]).

⁴ Müller-Lauter (1999: 66) prefers Heideggers’ term “accord” [*Einstimmigkeit*], in so far as this term has a greater connotation of being *part* of the world than the notion of “*adequatio*”, which still carries connotations of truth as likeness, and thus of truth claims as standing “next to” or “above” the sole reality.

⁵ Also refer back to the criticism in chapter 2, section 1.3 of value-free objectivity as a nihilistic strategy that gives up on the very possibility of judgement altogether.

In my view, the reference to “many persons” serves as an indication that this radicalised objectivity is tied to a conception of the self as a plurality. In fact, one might go so far as to say that conceiving of the self as a plurality is a condition for “adequate” judgements about the world. More specifically, the greater the plurality one is able to incorporate into the self the greater would one’s understanding of the world be, not only because one would be able to perceive the world through “more eyes”, so to speak, but also because this plurality would serve as a constant reminder of the conditionality and provisionality of all such judgements – that is to say, of the inability of any single perspective to claim universal validity in face of the multitude of other perspectives that stand opposed to it. To share Nietzsche’s vision of the perspectival quality of our judgements together with the plurality of self and world is to be “compelled to see the greatness of man, the concept ‘greatness’, precisely in his spaciousness and multiplicity, in his wholeness in diversity: [one] would even determine value and rank according to how much and how many things one could endure and take upon oneself, how *far* one could extend one’s responsibility (*BGE* 212).

Nietzschean perspectivism in its sense as strong scepticism is therefore not a form of relativism, which is in fact no more than indifference towards the plurality of the world – towards the world *as* plurality – nor is it a form of subjectivism that simply asserts that we are each of us trapped within our own, limited horizon of being and knowing. It may be argued to the contrary that “Nietzsche shows, perhaps better than any other modern philosopher, how it is possible through perspectivism to think beyond oneself (one has to have more eyes and to expand one’s affective capacities)” (Ansell-Pearson 2000: 160). At the same time, such a perspectivism that is predicated on the plurality of self and world can be understood as Nietzsche’s positive alternative to the drive to master the world once and for all by measuring it against a single truth. As such, it is a way of making sense of the world that does not participate in the resentment of contingency, unpredictability and plurality that has run as an undercurrent through Western thought for more than two millennia. On the contrary, Nietzschean perspectivism involves the affirmation and creative appropriation of these very targets of resentment. This attitude towards the contingent world does not do away with truth and judgement, but transforms each of these notions in ways that remove them from the ambit of dogmatism and resentment, and thereby also transforms our conception of world. Nietzsche acknowledges that we have no way of knowing – in the dogmatic sense of the word – “[h]ow far the perspective character of existence extends or indeed whether existence has any other character than this” (*GS* 374). In other words, he is not dogmatically asserting that there is *only* perspectival knowledge and judgement. Instead, he enters into a contest with existing interpretations, and thereby actively inserts himself in the struggle of perspectives. This participation in

the struggle of interpretations transforms our sense of the world by breaking open the hegemony of self-absolutising interpretations and thereby frees us of “the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner. Rather has the world become ‘infinite’ for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that *it may include infinite interpretations* (ibid.).

At this point, we would do well to remind ourselves that this world of “infinite interpretations” is not a static agglomeration of perspectives, but instead is a becoming world that is constantly emerging out of the struggle among these potentially infinite interpretations. This means that our judgements relating to the world cannot merely concern itself with the present, but that they have an unavoidable historical dimension. For Nietzsche, judgement is not merely a matter of making sense of the world in the present; it is as much concerned with the meaning of the past. This is indeed an important aspect of his and Arendt’s critical analyses of modernity: that the modern crisis of meaning entails an inability to relate the present to the past; that is, to judge the meaning of the past from out of a present that no longer admits of any ultimate standards of judgement. It is precisely this incapacity for historical judgement that has translated itself either into so-called “objective” historiography which “no longer wishes to ‘prove’ anything; [which] disdains to play the judge and considers this a sign of good taste – [which] affirms as little as it denies; it ascertains, it ‘describes’ ...” (*GM III*: 26), or into the conception of history as a supra-individual process of development that we saw criticised in chapter 1. Nietzsche’s attempt to resurrect the possibility of judgement in the aftermath of the death of God can therefore also be understood as an attempt to re-think the possibility of historical judgement that does not fall into either an unengaged objectivism or merely surrenders to the historical world-process.

In what follows I shall briefly sketch out Nietzsche’s own demonstration of perspectival judgement as presented in the essay: “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”.⁶ The main concern in this essay is with historical judgement as the interplay between memory and forgetting, which at the same time demonstrates the inevitable perspectivity of our attempts to make sense of the past.

⁶ In so far as the essay is concerned with the relationship between *history* and *life*, Hughes (1998: 253) remarks that “Nietzsche intends to assert something he thinks has been lost sight of, namely that what is primarily valuable is what is valuable for life. The value of a principle [or a conception of the past] will only be established in so far as it enables us to live well. Nietzsche’s position should not be confused with that of utilitarianism nor with either egoism or hedonism as they are usually understood. His concern is with the ongoing problem of establishing value; a struggle which cannot cease as long as life continues”.

1.2 Perspectivism and historical judgement

Nietzsche's essay on the uses and disadvantages of history for life can be read as a consideration of the relation between the various forms of historical judgement and the modalities of human life, in which he demonstrates that there is not only one way of drawing this boundary, but that different forms of historical judgement establish different cultural conditions for being human – as opposed to being animal, in which sense we exist as undifferentiated life in the midst of life (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe 1990: 212-2). As beings who act and strive, we stand in need of monumental history; in our drive to preserve and revere, we require antiquarian history; as beings who suffer from their past and seek deliverance from their suffering, we desire a form of critical history (cf. UDH 2).

In the first place, monumental history belongs to those who wish to overcome their despair in the present and a concomitant unwillingness to initiate anything new in a world that seems indifferent to all action. In this context, the account of the past is a narrative of heroic struggles and great deeds. Such a conception of history is an ally in the battle against the stultifying tendencies of biological life, which is always only concerned with its own survival. For the monumental historian, the view of the past as a long chain of great and heroic deeds is needed precisely to impart a significance to human existence that exceeds the sphere of the biological struggle to maintain life. Monumental history leads us to “reflect on past greatness” and inspires in its adherents the conviction that “the life of man is glorious thing, and even that the fairest fruit of this bitter plant is the knowledge that in earlier times [some] passed through this existence [...] leaving behind them a single teaching: he lives best who has no respect for existence” (UDH 2). Moreover, to the extent that “it is the belief in the solidarity and continuity of the greatness of all ages and a protest against the passing away of generations and the transitoriness of things” (ibid.), this mode of history holds out the promise of a world that endures beyond the contingent appearance of human words and deeds within it, and is therefore also oriented towards the future. This monumental historian's “engagement with the classic and rare of earlier times” generates the knowledge that “greatness was in any event once possible and may thus be possible again” (UDH 2).

Bearing in mind the discussion in chapter 1, it is possible to consider monumental history, in its concern with greatness, durability and immortality, as the cultural basis of pre-Socratic Greece. However, although both Nietzsche and Arendt appropriate classical antiquity as a measure of what is lacking in modernity, the absolutisation of this standard would engender its own set of problems. For there comes a point where a particular conception of history begins to overwhelm its proponents and becomes a means to the denial rather than affirmation of life. This danger belongs to monumental history to the

extent that the latter operates on the basis of generalisation and abstraction in order to produce its grand effects. Monumental history will therefore “have no use for [...] absolute veracity: it will always have to deal in approximations and generalities, in making what is dissimilar look similar” (ibid.). This generalisation amounts to blindly worshipping grand effects without taking account of the fact that these are always part of a complex network of causes and events and cannot be understood in isolation. Where all attention is focused only on unique events to the exclusion of every consideration of the complex of forces and relations from which they emerged, the past easily degenerates into a mythical construct designed merely to serve the interests of those living in the present.

Nietzsche identifies two dangerous consequences of the past becoming mythologized to this extent. In the first place, it may serve an ideological purpose in the hands of the powerful. Monumental history lends itself to exploitation by the unscrupulous and those in a position of domination who would claim that a contemporary political community could recapture the glories of a mythologized the past. In this way, the memory of past greatness becomes an absolute justification for political actions in the present, and history acquires the character of ideology:

Monumental history deceives by analogies: with seductive similarities it inspires the courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism; and when we go on to think of this kind of history in the hands and heads of scoundrels, then we see empires destroyed, princes murdered, wars and revolutions launched and the number of historical ‘effects in themselves’, that is to say, effects without sufficient cause, again augmented (UDH 2).

The second danger of monumental history relates to its tendency to engender complacency among those belonging to a culture that prides itself on a great and glorious past. For the recognition of historical greatness makes it possible for those who are too weak, too complacent, or simply unwilling to engage in any action in the world to justify their reluctance on the basis that “greatness already exists” (ibid.). In this way, history is imbued with a semi-divine authority and becomes an ultimate standard of value against which nothing new appears to have any value or meaning at all. Where such a view holds sway, it amounts to a sluggish contentment with the given to the detriment of actively creating the future. Both of these attitudes – employing the past as a justification for any action in the present or for the failure to act at all – stifle the cultural life of a people. Monumental history, then, has value to the extent that it inspires greatness and a drive for immortalising both self and world, but it constitutes a danger insofar as it transforms the actual content of the past into an unquestioned mythology.

Antiquarian history, on the other hand, is precisely concerned with the need to preserve and revere what lies in the past. In this case, history functions as a guarantee of political identity by relating the multifarious strands and layers that make up the past of a specific community to a shared origin or foundation. This establishes a sense of kinship or

continuity with previous generations, and grounds communal existence in a shared inheritance. From the perspective of the antiquarian historian, the present and future have meaning and promise to the extent that the past lives and breathes through them:

The history of his city becomes for him the history of himself; he reads its walls, its towered gate, its rules and regulations, its holidays, like an illuminated diary of his youth and in all this he finds again himself, his force, his industry, his joy, his judgement, his folly and vices. Here we lived, he says to himself, for here we are living; and here we shall live, for we are tough and not to be ruined overnight (UDH 3).

In this case, the fleetingness and uncertainty of individual life is mitigated by one's membership of a communal world, whose judgements and artefacts are also one's own. The authority of this shared domain, in turn, is grounded in the long communal history of its members. In this way, a pre-defined, shared history is taken to circumscribe individual and collective identity in the present, and thereby to justify the existence of both. Because of the immense relevance of the past in this context, the antiquarian historian is highly skilled in constructing the most diverse historical events into a coherent narrative of his own culture. Aided by the experience of commonality,

he looks beyond his own individual transitory existence and feels himself to be the spirit of his house, his race, his city. Sometimes he even greets the soul of his nation across the long dark centuries of confusion as his own soul; an ability to feel his way back and sense how things were, to detect traces almost extinguished, to read the past quickly and correctly no matter how intricate its palimpsest may be – these are his talents and virtues (UDH 3).

Antiquarian history, therefore, requires the past, not so much as a spur to action, but as a fixed source of authority which grounds a specific commonality. In this concern with authority and foundation, it is not Greek but Roman in origin, informed by the Roman reverence for the founding of the city.⁷

However, in Nietzsche's account, this mode of historiography poses a danger that is in many ways the reverse of the danger of monumental history. For the undiluted reverence for foundation *as* foundation involves a lack of concern with history as an account of unique, contingent events and a blind reverence for whatever is past simply for the fact that it is past, which results in the mummification rather than the preservation of culture (UDH 3). Such an approach, were it to overshadow all other forms of history, would even harm our conception of the past, as it evinces a complete lack of discrimination between one event and another. For the sake of incorporating anything and everything into a coherent historical narrative, antiquarian history imbues all events with equal importance. This undermines the actual understanding of the past and, what is more, hinders every action that aims to bring about anything new in the world. For any action, to

⁷ Arendt describes the founding of the city as “the sacred beginning of Roman history, adding, as it were, to every single moment the whole weight of the past” (*BPF* 123).

the extent that it cannot immediately lay claim to past justification, “will and must offend some piety or other” (UDH 3), and would therefore be subject to suspicion and repression.

It is evident from these considerations that the modes of remembrance represented by monumental and antiquarian history are indeed valuable for human life – that is, they structure particular conceptions of what it means to *live well* – but only to the extent that each functions within certain limits. In both cases, Nietzsche warns against the dangers of the concern with history degenerating into a “hypertrophied virtue” (UDH Fw) that exercises its stultifying power over the present. This happens when a single interpretation of the past is allowed unconditional validity to the detriment of other possible modes of interpretation and judgement; in other words, when there is nothing to keep it in check.

It is important to keep in mind that what is at issue here is not merely an excess of memory. The dangers posed by both modes of history have as much to do with an extravagant concern with certain specifics of the past as with forgetfulness. What is forgotten – and necessarily forgotten, if monumental and antiquarian history are to have any value for life at all – is the amount of violence, exploitation and injustice underlying the great deeds and civilisations lauded by monumental and antiquarian historiography. Thus, if the affliction of an overwhelming historical sensibility has to do with forgetting such specifics, it can be countered by re-introducing memory – perhaps better designated as counter-memory – into our dealings with the past. To this end, Nietzsche identifies a third mode of historical judgement, namely critical history. This approach to the past exposes the disparate and often shameful origins of the historical narratives proposed by the monumental and antiquarian historians. Critical history therefore runs counter to the general and universal in these historical narratives in favour of what is particular and actual in their accounts. In this sense, it is an undertaking characterised by suspicion of a specific historical narrative, in which “one takes the knife to its roots, [...] one cruelly tramples over every kind of piety” (UDH 3).

This critical interpretation of history as a battleground of usually less-than-noble forces in turn generates suspicion towards any conception of the past which locates the value of individual and communal existence in a supposedly noble origin. What is more, this critical approach, insofar as it is also the study of suppressed affiliations, necessarily implicates the critical historian in the events under investigation. As Nietzsche points out:

It is always a dangerous process, especially so for life itself: and men and ages which serve life by judging and destroying the past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages. For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible to wholly free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them (UDH 3).

Critical history therefore represents the severest form of historical judgement: weighing the hallowed deeds and events of the past on the scales of justice, and discovering the baseness of motives, the violence and intolerance behind authority and greatness. This is a forbidding task, considering that every deed, insofar as it establishes certain options for future life and destroys others, carries a certain amount of injustice in itself. When considered in this light, the aspect of critical history that is of the greatest value for life – its capacity to subvert excessive historical reverence that is fossilised in self-absolutising narratives – is therefore also its greatest danger: like the very modes of historiography it wants to undermine, critical history might destroy the foundations of a culture – not, to be sure, by mythologizing past greatness or a founding event, but by engendering a thorough-going suspicion towards the past. Nietzsche writes in this regard:

Historical justice, even when it is genuine and practised with the purest of intentions, is therefore a dreadful virtue because it always undermines the living thing and brings it down: its judgement is always annihilating. If the historical drive does not also contain a drive to construct, if the purpose of destroying and clearing is not to allow a future already alive in anticipation to raise its house on the ground thus liberated, if justice alone prevails, then the instinct for creation will be enfeebled and discouraged (UDH 7).

It is clear, therefore, that critical history should not be adopted as a facile solution to the problems posed by monumental and antiquarian history. Insofar as history ought to remain in the service of life, we cannot simply exchange all appreciation and reverence for the past for unmitigated criticism. The danger of a purely critical historiography is that it does not necessarily lead its practitioners beyond a straightforward condemnation of the past. Critical history, when practised on its own, is therefore not an ideal paradigm of historical judgement.

The important point to emerge from this examination of the three ways in which history pertains to human beings is that the history of how the present world came to be does not represent a fixed body of events with a determined meaning, nor is it a neutral entity. Nietzsche's analysis of monumental, antiquarian and critical history demonstrates that history is always an interpretation and judgement of past events from the perspective of the present, and given that there is more than one way of inhabiting the present, there is more than one way of interpreting the past. Indeed, it is the very search for an ultimate, unifying perspective on the past that has proven itself unsustainable in modernity, and as such has contributed to the general crisis of meaning, evaluation and authority that characterises the age. Nietzsche seeks to show how different perspectives on the past render different interpretations of it, without seeing to harmonise these different understandings into a single, comprehensive view of history as such. More importantly, his point is that these different modes of historical judgement *should not* be harmonised,

precisely because they are each held in check by the very conflict into which they are locked.

If we now relate Nietzsche's treatment of historical judgement to the remark with which our discussion of perspectivism opened, it may be said that each of these different perspectives on the past represents a particular "solution" to its meaning, and thereby constitutes our present sense of the world. These solutions cannot be assimilated to one another precisely because they are only recognisable – and thus meaningful – on the basis of their mutual distinction and opposition. History would therefore not have greater value for life – in the sense of enabling us to *live well* – by reducing it to a single narrative of progress or decay. On the contrary, such a strategy would in effect force us to understand *less* of the past and of the world in relation to this past. In order to grasp the full ramifications of this view, it is helpful to situate Nietzsche's conception of perspectival judgement in relation to Arendt's notion of reflective judgement. It is to the latter view that I shall now turn.

2. Arendt on judgement

2.1 Reflective judgement⁸

During a conference on Arendt's work, Hans Jonas makes a remark to the effect that judgement becomes impossible unless there remains the possibility of an appeal to an ultimate beyond the immediate plurality of judgements. Arendt responds in the following way:

Now if our future should depend on what you say now – namely, that we will get an ultimate which from above will decide for us (and then the question is, of course, who is going to recognize this ultimate and which will be the rules for recognizing this ultimate – you have really an infinite regress here, but anyhow) I would be utterly pessimistic. If that is the case, then we are lost. Because this actually demands that a new god will appear ... (Arendt in Hill 1979: 312).

Like Nietzsche, Arendt develops a notion of judgement without either nostalgia for an ultimate ground of appeal that might be regained or an extravagant hope for a ground that is yet to come. Her response to Jonas does not only indicate that we would be "lost" in so far as such an ultimate, in the form of a "new god", is unlikely to appear, but also and more pertinently that we stand to be ruined precisely by the faith in such an ultimate. We

⁸ Arendt's most systematic treatment of judgement can be found in her lectures on Kant's political philosophy, which deals specifically with Kant's third critique rather than with his overt political writings. However, as is not uncommon with Arendt, she offers a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Kant, often reading him against the grain. In this way, the *Critique of Judgement* stands here as a foil for her own reflections on judgement, rather than as the core text that is to be explicated. For the specific ways in which Arendt's notions of judgement, taste and critique differ from those of Kant, as well as her "creative appropriation" of these notions, see Disch (1994:154 ff.).

have seen to what extent Arendt considers the Western moral, philosophical and political tradition to have been built on this very faith, which, when put to the test, has proven itself powerless to prevent the worst kind of horror that human beings have perpetrated upon one another and upon their world. The solution to the problem of judgement is therefore not to fall back on this most problematic aspect of a tradition that no longer holds, but to re-think the possibility of judgement in a world without God (in the sense of an absolute that saves us from the need for judgement).

For Arendt, to exercise the faculty of judgement is to concern oneself with the question of how the human world, in contradistinction with nature, is to look and sound – what kinds of things and actions should appear in it, what stories should be told about it (cf. *BPF* 222). To some extent, the world is formed and sustained by our works and actions, but the world only becomes meaningful when these works and actions themselves become the focus of judgement. In other words, it is through judgement that we make sense of the world and thus redeem it from meaninglessness. Yet, paradoxically, this is only possible in so far as the world does *not* possess any given meaning to which our judgements must conform. To judge is therefore not to seek out the final measure of the world, but to concern oneself with the world in the absence of such a measure. Moreover, Arendt shares Nietzsche's view that we can only judge from our particular place *within* the world and not from any Archimedean point beyond it. This means, for her as for him, that every judgement is *particular* judgement because it belongs to a particular horizon of experience that cannot be extended to encompass all the world. Another way of making the same point is to say that Arendt emphasises the irrevocable *plurality* of judgements, precisely because each human being inhabits a different place in the world, which means to inhabit the world in a different way and thus to judge it differently.

It is precisely the different worldly horizon for each of us that comes into play in one's holding and expressing an opinion, which is nothing more than to say how the world appears to one from us from the perspective one inhabits. This is indeed what it means to hold an opinion: "*dokei moi*: 'it seems to me'" (*LMT* 21). It should therefore be clear that, in contrast to the scorn of opinion that runs through much of our philosophical tradition, Arendt does not oppose opinion to truth, or insist that the former is only valid in so far as it is derived from the latter. Instead, she argues that, since we inhabit a world of appearances, the only truth we can know is the truth of our inevitably plural opinions. Given this description, we would be justified in saying that Arendt understands under opinion what Nietzsche understands under perspective. In both cases, it is a matter of the contingent position from where we hazard judgements about the world as it appears to us. The exercise of judgement is thus inevitably tied to opinion (perspective), and it is precisely "on account of judgement that opinion is not the disgrace that philosophers have

traditionally made it out to be” (Beiner 1992: 109). Thus, for Arendt as for Nietzsche, judgement is necessarily related to particular horizons that cannot be subsumed under a single all-encompassing perspective or opinion – which would of course no longer be either perspective or opinion but rather a single truth that “compels the mind” (*BPF* 107).

With this emphasis on particularity and plurality Arendt thus divorces her notion of judgement from any attempt to derive the meaning of the given from universal rules or principles. The faculty of judgement “is the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules” (TM 188-189). In her account, the notion of history as a supra-individual process of development is one, specifically modern, version of this derivation of the particular from the universal. Another example in this regard are the grand theodicies – the justifications of God – of the modern age. Both instances “rely on the argument that, if you look at the *whole*, you will see that the particular about which you complain, is part and parcel of it and, as such, is justified in its existence” (*KL* 32). But this argument is itself driven by the suspicion that life itself, in its very contingency and particularity, stands in need of justification (*KL* 24). In Nietzschean terms, this is nothing other than the moral interpretation of the world, which derives the meaning of *what is* from a higher order principle, and which justifies the particular aspects of the world in terms of the properly constituted whole of which it is part. Underlying this interpretation is resentment towards the world as we find it, which, as finite beings, we can only ever encounter in its particular aspects. As such it is nothing less than a refusal to accept the conditions under which life has been given to us.

Given this correlation between Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s conceptions of judgement, it is not surprising that she demonstrates a similar awareness of the tension between relativism in the face of the irreducible plurality of opinions on the one hand, and the dogmatic adherence to a single opinion on the other. Arendt addresses this tension in the course of her discussion of the notion of critique, which she describes as standing “in a twofold opposition to dogmatic metaphysics on the one hand, and to skepticism on the other. [...] As such, it is a new way of thinking and not merely a preparation for a new doctrine. Hence it is not as though the seemingly negative business of critique could be followed by the seemingly positive business of system-making” (*KL* 32). For Arendt, this “new way of thinking”, which is essentially *critical thinking*, is not a matter of clearing away unjustifiable assumptions in order to determine the generally valid criteria for knowledge about the world. Her concern is not with the question of what can be known, but with the meaning of what we know, which in her view, is not a matter of cognition, but of understanding. To understand, moreover, is neither passive acceptance nor an objective grasp of the facts, but to take stand – to *choose* where to stand – with respect to the matter

at hand. This “taking a stand” is what Arendt means by judgement (see Biskowski 1993: 873). In this context, critical thinking is a preparation for judgement without generally valid criteria. Understood in this way, the critical position from which judgement takes place is not a halfway point between dogmatism and scepticism (in the “weak” sense described by Nietzsche); in other words, it is not a way of being partially committed to an opinion while partially acknowledging the inconceivable plurality of all possible opinions. Rather, critical thinking no longer depends on either of these alternatives. In Arendt’s terms, it is a way of leaving dogmatism and scepticism (in the weak sense) behind, after having thought one’s way through both:

We all start out as dogmatists in one way or another; we are either dogmatic in philosophy or we solve all problems by believing in the dogmas of some church, in revelation. One’s first reaction against this, triggered off by the inescapable experience of *many* dogmas, all of which claim to possess *the* truth is skepticism: the conclusion that there is no such thing as truth, that therefore I may either arbitrarily choose some dogmatic doctrine [...] Or I may simply shrug my shoulders about so profitless a business. [...] The critical position stands against both of these. It recommends itself by its modesty. It would say: “perhaps men, though they have a notion, an idea, of truth for regulating their mental processes, are not capable, as finite beings, of *the* truth (KL 32-33).

This notion of critical thinking bears a relation to Nietzsche’s strong scepticism in the sense that it recognises the impossibility of grasping the truth in the face of the irreducible plurality of truth-claims, while nevertheless refusing to succumb to the “sterile indifferentism” (KL 34) that characterises weak scepticism. Critical thinking, in other words, recognises that the meaning of any phenomenon is not a matter of indifference, but of judgement – that is, of staking a claim for a particular perspective, committing oneself to an opinion, without any guarantee of their general validity. It is this critical thinking that Arendt designates as “thinking without banisters” (Arendt in Hill 1979: 336-7). To expand the metaphor a little, we might say that the role of a banister on a staircase is that it makes it possible to mount or descend more-or-less *unthinkingly*, in so far as it provides an ever-present support – whether or not one is consciously aware of its presence – on which one could fall back at any moment. “Banisterless” thinking is *engaged thinking* precisely because it knows there is no such support. As Lisa Disch (1994: 144) remarks: “Climbing or descending a staircase without a banister can be more taxing and may be more risky than it is without one, but it is not impossible. [...] To call for thinking without a banister, then, is to call for a way of proceeding in which critical categories are not imposed on but inspired by one’s engagement with a phenomenon”.

Having grasped something of the critical thinking that Arendt considers as a preparation for judgement, we need to develop a keener understanding of the operation of judgement itself. We have already seen that Arendt describes judgement as a way of concerning oneself with how the world ought to look. In the Kant lectures and elsewhere,

particularly in her essay on “The crisis in culture”, Arendt explicitly portrays this concern as a matter of *taste*. And in her description, taste – both as one of the five physical senses and as the metaphorical “inner sense” that is part of judgement – is a matter of discrimination: “it says it-pleases or it-displeases. It is called taste because, like taste, it *chooses*” (KL 69). In other words, to exercise one’s judgement with regard to any aspect of the world is in the first place to decide, to choose, whether it “pleases” or “displeases” me. The criteria for this choice are not generally valid, and they are not given in advance. There is no compelling principle that commands that I, along with everyone else, *ought* to be pleased or displeased by something. Nevertheless, while judgement is not an objective, and therefore universally valid, appraisal of a phenomenon in the world, neither is it merely an expression of narrow self-interest or arbitrary preference. For Arendt, as for Nietzsche, the unavailability of universally valid criteria does not automatically translate into the irrevocable subjectivity of all judgements. In so far as judgement is concerned with how the world is to look and sound, it must necessarily engage with the judgements of others, precisely because it seeks to determine the meaning of an already existing world – that is to say, the world as it is constituted by a plurality of existing judgements. In Arendt’s view, there is thus an “intersubjective” element in judgement that moves it beyond the level of individual prejudice: “Judgement, and especially judgements of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgements into account” (KL 67).

But how can judgement that is predicated on taste – which, as Arendt points out, is after all the most private of the five senses – reflect on other possible tastes regarding what pleases or displeases? The answer, which she takes from Kant, is imagination, which is precisely “the ability to make present what is absent” (KL 65). By virtue of imagination I am able to make present to myself the *possible* judgements of others, which means in the first instance judgements different from my own, since they would necessarily take place from a different position in the world, from a different “perspective”. At this point there is clearly a difference between Arendt’s and Nietzsche’s understanding of the relation between any individual judgement and the plurality of other possible judgements which together constitute the world. Whereas Nietzsche emphasises the insurmountable conflict among perspectival judgements, Arendt seems to have a more associational or assimilationist approach, according to which an individual judgement depends on taking other possible perspectives into account and as far as possible incorporating them into one’s own. However, while these two thinkers clearly do diverge on this point, this divergence is far from being a straightforward opposition between an approach that privileges unbridled conflict and one that privileges consensus. In the first place, we have seen that Nietzsche is not only interested in asserting the conflict between interpretations,

but also envisages a “future objectivity” that would incorporate as many possible perspectives into one’s own perspective, which means, in effect, to expand the horizons of one’s own judgement as far as possible without denying the (possible, though not necessary) conflict between the perspectives that one includes within this horizon. In the second place, it must be stated that Arendt does not posit mutual agreement as a normative standard for judgement. This is precisely the point of her response to Jonas: the belief in any criterion that transcends the particularity of judgements would be nothing else than longing for a “new god”.⁹ To make present in imagination the opinions of absent others does not involve coming to a final agreement with these opinions, nor does it comprise “an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others. [That would] mean no more than passively to accept their thought, that is, to exchange their prejudices for the prejudices proper to my own station” (*KL* 43). Contrary to such passive acceptance and assimilation, Arendt conceives of the “enlarged mentality” involved in judgement as “train[ing] one’s imagination to go visiting” (*ibid.*).

The notion of “visiting” is of central importance here. In our everyday understanding of the term, to visit means to leave one’s home to travel somewhere else, but it does not mean to adopt the places of one’s visit as a new home (which would be to emigrate). It only makes sense to speak of visiting in so far as the places one visits are *not* home: if all places in the world were home to us, we would have no sense of visiting anywhere. Visiting, in other words, is to see the world from a place where I am not at home. In Arendt’s metaphorical sense of the term, visiting in imagination means “being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not” (*BPF* 241). Disch (1994: 158) offers the following description of the operation of the visiting imagination:

Visiting should be distinguished on the one hand from the abstract generality of Kant’s account of taste, which is a kind of tourism that preserves a spectatorial distance, and from the immediacy of empathy on the other, which is a kind of assimilationism. In order to tell yourself the story of an event from an unfamiliar standpoint, you have to position yourself there *as yourself*. That is, you can neither stand apart from nor identify with that position.

To visit in Arendt’s sense therefore does not mean to enter into the thoughts and feelings of someone else, or to assimilate someone else’s perspective to one’s own, but to see the world – and oneself, in so far as one is part of the world – differently because of temporarily standing a different place. The point is not that I am thereby moved to abandon my most personal opinions, but rather that I am able to conceive of the plurality of

⁹ This, incidentally, is also why the Habermasian reading of Arendt remains problematic. While Habermas tries to do justice to Arendt’s emphasis on the *public* nature of judgements, in the sense that they have to be communicated to others if they are to have more than purely subjective import, he overlooks the *particularity* of judgements that is bound up with Arendt’s central notion of plurality. For a more extensive discussion on the problems with the “associative” reading of Arendt, see Disch (1994: 87 ff.), as well as Canovan (1983).

perspectives in which the world might appear, and thus of the “contingent truth” of opinions different from my own.

A further implication of this conception of the visiting imagination is that it does not seek to suspend the *distance* between different perspectives. To visit is to travel the distance between home and elsewhere – between one’s own place in the world and somewhere less familiar – but this precisely underscores the very distance that separates these different places in the world. This insight further emphasises the fact that Arendt does not conceive of judgement as a way of assimilating a plurality of perspectives into a single, comprehensive view that would overcome the differences between them. She describes the position of being neither wholly apart from, and thus indifferent to, other positions, nor wholly assimilated to them – which is merely another kind of indifference towards the differences between them – as a kind of “relative impartiality”, which she considers to be “the specific virtue of judgement” (KL 73). This notion of relative impartiality bears a strong relation to Nietzsche’s conception of a “future objectivity”, in so far as both are ways of rendering judgement which takes account of other perspectives – as many other perspectives as possible – without seeking to unite them in a higher synthesis. As Arendt writes: “*impartiality* is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the *melée*” (KL 42).¹⁰ This kind of “impartiality” – which has nothing whatsoever to do with indifference – makes the plurality of the world present to the mind of the one who judges, and to venture a judgement is at the same time to contribute to this plurality. Jerome Kohn (1996: 172) describes this interplay between self and world in the following way: “My own viewpoint becomes increasingly *formed* by considering more and other viewpoints than my own. That is the sense in which the *plurality* of viewpoints and their communication constitutes, for Arendt, human reality and the reality of the human world”.

For Arendt, the best examples we have of the kind of relative impartiality that is the precondition for judgement are provided by poets and storytellers, whom she describes as “historian[s] in a very special sense” (MDT 29), in so far as they succeed in portraying the words and deeds and events that belong in the world – from a plurality of constituent perspectives.¹¹ The reason why Arendt chooses artists as exemplars here has to do with

¹⁰ Elsewhere Arendt speaks of a “*forever vigilant partiality*, which has nothing whatsoever to do with subjectivity because it is always framed not in terms of the self but in terms of the relationship of men to their world, in terms of their positions and opinions” (MDT 29, my italics).

¹¹ It is telling that her collected essays on “men in dark times” focuses mainly on poets and writers – Gotthold Lessing, Walther Benjamin, Berthold Brecht, Hermann Broch, Isak Dinesen, Waldermar Gurian, Randall Jarell – as examples of human beings who were able to “shed some light” on the world at a time when it had become “dark” to the great majority of their fellows, philosophers included.

what, in Kantian terms, can be described as the creative – as opposed to reproductive – operation of imagination. The point here is that the artist is concerned with *possible* rather than *actual* perspectives from which to view the world, and these possibilities are created by the imagination rather than merely reproduced by it. Arendt therefore does not conceive of the critical thinking and “relative impartiality” that is the precondition for judgement as a matter of merely taking into account *known* opinions, but also and more importantly, imaginatively presenting to oneself possible opinions that are not yet known. In other words, the visiting imagination does not only play a reproductive role, but a productive one as well. Disch (1994: 161) argues that in this way “Arendt [...] radicalizes what it means to take particular viewpoints into account by modelling it after the artist, who uses his or her imaginative powers to inhabit a plurality of embedded standpoints, and by introducing the “visiting” metaphor to describe it. Visiting is the alternative that Arendt poses to Archimedean impartiality”.

We may summarise what we now know of Arendt’s conception of judgement in the following way: critical thinking prepares the ground for judgement in so far as it undermines the dogmatic belief that opinion could be derived from a single truth, and in this way focuses our attention on the irreducible plurality of opinions regarding every aspect of the world. This recognition of plurality in turn allows us to distance ourselves to some extent from our own opinions and take the opinions of others into account. This simultaneous distancing oneself from the familiar and incorporating standpoints that are unfamiliar (ibid. 60) – what Arendt terms “relative impartiality” – is made possible by the operation of the “visiting imagination”, which makes present to our “inner sense” other possible viewpoints from here one might form an opinion about the world. To judge, ultimately, is precisely to form an opinion in this way. It is, as we said, a matter of *taking a stand* towards an aspect of the world, and this, for Arendt, means to discriminate between what pleases and displeases me. It is for this reason that judgement can be assimilated to taste, which is precisely the art of discrimination that concerns itself with how the world ought to look. A last point that must be added here is that, for Arendt, the discrimination or choice involved in judgement is in the first place a matter of choosing one’s “company” – the people and stories with which one wishes to spend one’s life. “And this company is chosen through thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, and examples of incidents, past or present” (QM 146). Moreover, our relations with one another in the world are formed around such examples, in so far as each of us is constantly called upon to decide whether *we* are pleased or displeased by the examples chosen by others. It is in this way that the exercise of taste in judgement gives form to the world: “Taste as a principle of ‘organization’ – that is, taste decides not only the question of which things we like or how

the world is to look and sound, but also *who* in the world belongs together [...] We recognize each other by what pleases and displeases” (*BFr* 87).

In Arendt’s account, the facility in choosing one’s examples – that is, in deciding for oneself who and what belong together – is a kind of worldly wisdom as opposed to the unworldly wisdom that she ascribes to the “professional philosophers”, and that is often merely stupidity about the world itself. To be wise with respect to the world is to know “how to choose [one’s] company among men, among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as in the past” (*BPF* 225). This facility in choosing is not governed by a general rules, or by criteria external to the world itself. For Arendt, if there is any criterion at all, it can only be love for the world itself: “the love of the world constitutes the world for me, fits me into it”, in the sense that it determines “to whom and to what I belong”.¹²

I shall return to this notion of love for the world, which plays such an important role in both Arendt’s and Nietzsche’s thinking, in chapter 6. At this point, I briefly want to examine a final aspect of judgement that still needs to be addressed. As became clear in the course of the preceding analysis of Nietzsche’s perspectival judgement, to exercise one’s judgement is not only a matter of determining the meaning of the present; it is equally a matter of taking a stand with regard to the past. That is why Arendt speaks of choosing one’s examples in the present *and* the past. Given that Arendt follows Nietzsche in criticising the modern conception of history which derives the meaning of particular deeds and events from an overall process of development, it is clear that her emphasis on the *particularity* and *plurality* of judgement is geared, in part, towards countering precisely a conception of history that suspends judgement of the past. In what follows, I shall try to explicate some of the most relevant features of her resultant conception of historical judgement.

2.2. Historical judgement

As is the case with Nietzsche, Arendt repeatedly emphasises the historicity of the world. She goes so far as to argue that, if we were to be struck by some unimaginable – or perhaps, in our day, an all-too-imaginable – catastrophe that destroys human civilisation and its *memory*, any “posthistoric” survivors would be in the condition of “prehistoric” peoples, existing without a “human world” or a recognisably “human reality” (*OT* 192; see Kohn 1996: 148). In a sense, then, the world itself, especially the durability of the world, is tied to memory, which in turn becomes reified into history. Hence, if judgement concerns itself with the world, with how it should look and with who and what belong together in it,

¹² This quotation is from an unpublished lecture entitled “Basic Moral Propositions”, container 41, p024560, Library of Congress, cited by Beiner (1992: 173, fn 149).

then it must inevitably concern itself with how the present world has come to be as it is. This inevitable historical element in judgement has to do, furthermore, with the fact that, according to Arendt, it is only possible to venture a judgement regarding the meaning of an event once it has come to an end, or at least once we have gained some distance from it (HC 192). For this reason, judgement is to some extent always retrospective judgement. In so far as the one who judges is removed from the immediacy of action and experience, his or her position resembles nothing so much as that of a *spectator* who gets to see the play from a different, more removed, perspective than the actors who are immediately involved in it. This is not to say that Arendt divides the participants in the world along the line of actors and spectators, ultimately privileging the latter while in her earlier works she still privileged the former. Her argument, rather, is that to the extent that we participate in the world and are concerned with how this participation impacts on the world, we are both actors and spectators: “we act, we observe, we continually interpret the meaning of actions and events, even if we ourselves at times are profoundly involved and interested in them” (Biskowski, 1993: 874). However, the point holds that, unlike action, judgement does require a certain distance from the deeds and events that fall within its focus, and therefore cannot be equated with the immediate reactions of pleasure or displeasure of the one who is caught up in the event itself.

For Arendt, as for Nietzsche, the mode of “spectatorship” is a matter of making sense of the past from out of the present in a way that nevertheless does not suffer from the resentment towards time and its “it was” that has reached its overt manifestation in the modern drive to mastery, and which, as we have seen, is nothing less than revenge against time itself. If resentment and the desire for revenge constitute a “failure to come to terms with the intractability of time” (Beiner 1992: 149), Arendt’s conception of historical judgement may then be understood as precisely an attempt to “come to terms” with time.¹³ For Arendt, this would entail taking a stand with regard to *particular* deeds and events of the past from a position of “relative impartiality” in the sense discussed above, which takes account of different perspectives on the past without subsuming them under a general principle. It would mean, in other words, to refrain from interpreting or justifying contingent deeds and events in terms of an overall process. Here Arendt holds up “the Greek spectator” as an exemplar:

The Greek spectator, whether at the festival of life or at the sight of the things that are everlasting, looks at and judges (finds the truth of) the cosmos of the particular event in its own terms, without relating it to any larger process in which it may or may not play a part. He was actually concerned with the individual event, the particular act. [...] The meaning did not depend on either causes or consequences. The story, once it had come to an end, contained the whole meaning. This is also

¹³ Beiner (1992: 149) identifies a direct link here between Arendt and Nietzsche. Consider: “‘It was’ – that is the name of the will’ gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past” (TSZ II, ‘On Redemption’).

true for Greek historiography, and it explains why Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides can give the defeated enemy his due (*KL* 56).

This regard for the defeated enemy is an important component of Arendt's conception of historical judgement. We encounter the same sentiment in the epigram by Cato on the title page of "Judging", the never-written third book of *The Life of the Mind*, which can be translated as: "The victorious cause pleases the gods, but the defeated cause pleases Cato". Biskowski (1993: 873, fn. 7) interprets these lines to intimate that "[b]y making judgements we also decide with whom we stand". One could perhaps expand on this to say that Cato reminds us that there is *more than one place to stand* with regard to the past, and that the meaning of past deeds and events is not simply measured in terms of success. Even, or perhaps especially, doomed causes retain an exemplary validity for the non-vengeful spectator of the past (see Beiner 1992: 127). The point of the citation from Cato is therefore that victory and defeat are judged differently – they "please" and "displease" us in different ways – depending on the position of the judging spectator. These differences in perspective mean that the victorious and the defeated cause cannot be understood from a single, higher-order perspective that sees the two opposing sides merely as aspects of a single meaning. In this respect, Arendt's argument is analogous to that of Nietzsche, in so far as she maintains that understanding the very plurality of history demands precisely that we refrain from trying to bridge the differences and tensions among its various meanings.¹⁴

The second epigram on the same title page is taken from Goethe's *Faust*, Act V, Scene V, and can be rendered as follows: "If I could banish sorcery from my track / Unlearn the magic spells utterly / And stand before you, Nature, as mere man / Then would it be worth being human".¹⁵ In the context of our general consideration of judgement, one might interpret this forswearing of "magic" as a metaphor for giving up on supra-human or otherworldly principles to which our judgements must conform. As far as our specific treatment of historical judgement is concerned, this would also mean forswearing any notion of history as a supra-individual process of development, the unfolding of a divine plan or the inevitable progressus towards a pre-defined goal; in other words, to do away with history as *superstition*.¹⁶ To look upon the past without the benefit of any belief in the "magic spell" of the past means that there is no ultimate appeal, no final norm, against

¹⁴ The difference between Nietzsche and Arendt on this point is that Arendt still holds out the *hope* of consensus (which is of course still different from taking consensus as a normative standard for judgement). Thus in a letter to Jaspers Arendt refers to a "concept of humanity, which only becomes possible through the ability to 'fight' over the things about which one cannot 'debate', because hope is 'finding agreement among ourselves', even when one cannot finally convince the other" (*AJC* 321).

¹⁵ A facsimile of the title page can be found at the beginning of Beiner (1992).

¹⁶ From *super*: over or above + *stare*: to stand. In other words, a notion of history as a process that stands over and above the world of human affairs and determines its course.

which our individual judgements can be measured. We thus confront the past without any metaphysical comfort that would absolve the individual from the responsibility to judge for oneself. Beiner (1992: 131) summarises the relation between such “non-metaphysical” conception of history and judgement thus: “If history is progressive, judgement is infinitely postponed. If there is an end to history, the activity of judgement is precluded. If history is neither progressive nor has an end, judgement redounds to the individual historian, who bestows meaning on the particular events or ‘stories’ of the past”.

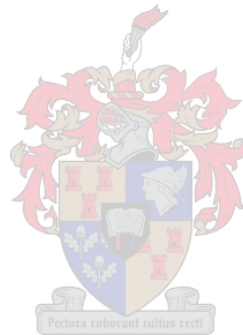
There are three implications of this non-superstitious attitude towards the past. In the first place, as we have seen in our discussion on Nietzsche, whatever meaning the past has for us is always bestowed from the present, and since there is more than one way of inhabiting the present, this meaning would itself be plural, in so far as it arises from different places in the world. No individual historian is therefore the sole arbiter of the meaning of the past, nor is it possible to conceive of a single history that is the sum of all possible perspectives on the past. For Arendt, as for Nietzsche, such a calculation cannot be made, since these perspectives are not reducible to one another.

The second implication has to do with the way in which this conception of the past impacts in turn on our experience of the present, specifically our present-self-understanding. For, as Disch (1994: 186) points out, if we do not conceive of the history of the world as a teleological process, then it is also not possible to have a teleological conception of one’s own life story. To focus on the particularity of the past rather than on general processes also means to focus on the particularity of one’s own past, which therefore cannot be understood as part of a general course of development, or justified with reference to a more meaningful whole of which it is a part. For Arendt, to forswear any teleological conception of history in this way is to enter into a kind of homelessness, in so far as it is precisely the belief in teleology that allows us to feel as if we fully belong where we are: “If we feel at home in this world, we can see our lives as the development of the ‘product of nature’, as the unfolding and realization of what we already were” (RV 4; cf. Disch 1994: 186). The absence of the sense of perfect belonging that accompanies the belief in teleology is not a calamity, however. On the contrary, it is a prerequisite for the “relative impartiality” that characterises Arendt’s conception of judgement. In this regard, one could understand it as the kind of homelessness specific to the visitor, whose perspective on what he or she encounters is informed by the very sense of distance from what is familiar, while the conception of “home” is transformed in turn by the encounter with what is foreign. Under these circumstances, one is no longer unquestionably at home in the world without feeling oneself expelled from it.

Finally, in so far as the forswearing of teleology means that the judgement of the past does not take place under constraint of an existing schema of interpretation or general

rule, the notion of historical judgement that Arendt presents to us is one of “free approval [in which] consideration for the past is without servility” (Taminiaux 1999: 58). This freedom should not be understood as sovereignty, but rather, as we have seen in an earlier discussion, as a kind of virtuosity shown in our encounter with the world as *fortuna*. In this regard, the past does not stand over us as a fixed example that must be imitated or a supra-human process to which our understanding must conform, but as a challenge and invitation to exercise our virtuosity in judgement, and thus to think the meaning of the world anew. In Taminiaux’s words: “the past itself launches an appeal for the invention of the new, i.e., a future way of inhabiting the world” (ibid.).

In the next and last chapter of the thesis I shall examine Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s own attempts at such invention, which both set under the rubric of a “new beginning”. As I have indicated before, this beginning relates to their respective conceptions of redemption, which is the overall concern of chapter 6.



CHAPTER 6

ON REDEMPTION

But home I found nowhere; a fugitive am I in all cities and a departure at all gates. Strange and a mockery to me are the men of today to whom my heart recently drew me; and I am driven out of fatherlands and motherlands. Thus I now love my *children's land*, yet undiscovered, in the farthest sea: for this I bid my sails search and search. In my children I want to make up for being the child of my fathers – and to all the future, for *this* today (Nietzsche, *TSZ*, 'In the land of education')

As long as its spell lasts, the only in-between which can insert itself between the two lovers is the child, love's own product. The child, this in-between to which the lovers now are related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world. Through the child, it is as though the lovers return to the world from which their love had expelled them. But this new worldliness, the possible result and the only possible happy ending of a love affair, is, in a sense, the end of love, which must either overcome the partners anew or be transformed into another mode of belonging together (Arendt, *HC* 242).

Introduction

Our inquiry into Nietzsche's and Arendt's critique of modernity, the grounds for this critique and the preliminary exploration of the possibilities for overcoming the problem has characterised the central predicament of modernity in terms of a loss of the world. As we have seen, this loss is not a matter of the disappearance of our physical environment, but the loss of a framework of meaning within which our existence in the world could be experienced as unquestionably meaningful. Against the background of this description of the problem, the challenge that face both Nietzsche and Arendt on the other side of their critical enterprise, so to speak, is that of effecting some kind of reconciliation with the world. Our discussion in the previous chapter has gone some way in portraying Nietzsche's conception of perspectival judgement and Arendt's notion of reflection judgement as a means of overcoming the very resentment of the contingent world that has been implicated in its loss. This overcoming of modernity is not merely a matter of willingness to judge the world without criteria, however. Rather, the willingness to judge the world on these terms itself depends on a prior reconciliation with the world that is no longer predicated on principles, categories, or "yardsticks" derived from a tradition that has lost its validity for us. Nietzsche and Arendt both conceive of such a new understanding of the world in terms of "redemption". It is this vision of redemption – understood as a reconciliation with the world that allows us in turn to make sense of what it means to be human – that is the topic of this final chapter of the thesis.

Before I set out the structure of the argument, it is necessary to point out that this notion of reconciliation should not lead us to assume that these two thinkers operate out of nostalgia for a previous, inherently meaningful mode of existence to which we ought to return if we could. Nietzsche and Arendt not only recognise that the break in the Western tradition has occurred, but are also of the opinion that it *should* have occurred. As we have seen, both thinkers consider the conditions for nihilism to have been built into the foundations of this tradition itself. Any attempt to overcome the problem of modernity therefore cannot involve a return to the problematic grounds in which it has originated. Moreover, as Tracy Strong points out, while the death of God that initiates the modern crisis of meaning erases the familiar horizons of the world to the extent that the world becomes strange to us – a place where we are no longer at home – it is precisely the recognition of this strangeness that prompts us to a different mode of life, “beyond” our previous existence (cf. Strong 1988: 13). In this sense, modern nihilism is not simply an unmitigated disaster that should be reversed, but the precondition – albeit a dangerous one – for conceiving the world anew. Thus Nietzsche remarks: “It could be the sign of a crucial and most essential growth, of the transition to new conditions of existence, that the most extreme form of pessimism, genuine *nihilism*, would come into the world” (*WP* 112; *KSA* 12:10[22]). Arendt similarly views the loss of the moral, political and philosophical tradition that has defined our sense of the past – and therefore our sense of the continuity of the world – as a double-edged event:

With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined aspect of the past. It could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear (*BPF* 94).

It can therefore be said that for both thinkers, the death of God and rupture of tradition that generate modern homelessness and worldlessness also open up the possibility of learning how to be at home in the world once more. This is not a matter of recreating a past, uncomplicated mode of experience in the present, but of making a new beginning. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s respective conceptions of what such a new beginning that aims at a reconciliation with the world might entail. As such, it is also an exploration of what for lack of a better word I shall call the “redemptive” aspect of Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s thought. The religious language here is not accidental. As I shall argue, this notion of a new beginning has certain religious connotations for both thinkers in so far as it involves a kind of “conversion” or “rebirth”. Nevertheless, this religiosity should not be mistaken for an unresolved longing for a God who has withdrawn from the world. Instead, it is a kind of religiosity that is situated *in* the world and concerns itself with the world. Stated differently, the redemption at issue here is not the redemption

from the world as our philosophical and religious tradition has maintained, but rather the redemption *of* the world from the impulse to seek salvation elsewhere, which is born out of resentment towards what is. As such, it is a kind of salvation that is made possible by the death of God, that in fact follows from the death of God (see Fraser 2002: 30).

To avoid misunderstanding: the argument in the rest of this chapter will not be that Nietzsche's and Arendt's visions of the reconciliation can simply be collapsed into a general account of salvation. On the contrary, it is precisely on the point of what this redemption would entail that the differences between them are the most pronounced. To some extent, this difference has to do with the fact that the structure, though certainly not the content, of Nietzsche's vision of redemption is quite clearly Christian, while that of Arendt is best described as Hebraic. One of the consequences of these different models of redemption is that Nietzsche holds out a much more radical vision of redemption and self-transcendence than Arendt does. In the case of the latter, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of notion of immanent redemption, or "inconspicuous messianism" (Gottlieb 2003: 140) as opposed to the much more conspicuous notion of salvation as transcendence that operates in Nietzsche. I shall argue in section 3 of the chapter that this tension between immanence and transcendence is itself bound up with the tension between the political and philosophical perspective from which Arendt and Nietzsche try to think beyond the predicament of modernity.

These tensions and oppositions between Nietzsche's and Arendt's thinking themselves emerge in the course of the attempt to push the analogy between their views as far as it will take us. I shall therefore not begin by setting out the differences between them, but by considering the specific points of correlation from where these differences eventually emerge. The first of these, as I have mentioned before, is the notion of a *new beginning*. As far as the importance of the concept of beginning is concerned, it is helpful to recall the discussion on the wisdom of Silenus in chapter 1. There we saw that the wisdom that ran through the cultural and political practices of pre-Socratic Greece was in the first place an acknowledgement of the inevitable ruination of the world and of human existence along with it. Plato took Silenus at his word, and consequently sought to overcome this destruction once and for all by locating the origin and purpose of human life *beyond* the world, so that the ruin of worldly things could only be effected upon the body and not upon the soul. The important point for our purposes is that Plato sees death, ending, and destruction as the primary facts of existence, and therefore develops a way of thinking designed to overcome the very possibility of death. In so far as the philosophical tradition familiar to us has mostly lit its fire from Plato's flame, this conception of mortality as the primary fact of human life has been a point of almost universal agreement among philosophers (cf. *HC* 9).

Against this background, I shall argue that Nietzsche and Arendt both try to overcome the Platonic response to Silenian wisdom. The thrust of my argument is that their resistance to Plato's solution to the problem of mortality springs from a shared belief that, although we inevitably succumb to the ruination of time, the meaning of human life does not lie in ending but in beginning. In other words, the central experience of human existence is not death, but birth. More accurately, it is the capacity to be *reborn*, not by giving up the world for the sake of a salvation that lies elsewhere, but precisely by being reborn *to* the world. It is this second birth, which is also an overcoming of one's "old" self and thus akin to a kind of conversion, that lies at the heart of the Nietzsche's and Arendt's notion of a new beginning. As the two quotations at the beginning of the chapter indicate, for both thinkers, the symbol for this beginning is contained in the figure of the child.

The second point of analogy has already been suggested in chapter 5: both thinkers are of the view that, in so far as resentment involves the negation of the world as it is given to us, the overcoming of resentment would involve learning to love the world as it is. In this regard, both thinkers hold out a vision of redemption that is predicated on love. I shall illustrate this point by way of separate inquiries into Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* and Arendt's conception of *amor mundi*. While this inquiry will take the analogy between these two thinkers' conceptions of love and redemption as far as it can go, it will also reveal that it is precisely at this point that the analogy breaks down. This revelation of the tension between Nietzsche's and Arendt's projects in turn provides the incentive for a more wide-ranging reflection on the kind of "philosophical thinking" represented by Nietzsche and the "political thinking" represented by Arendt in section 3 of the chapter. In the two preceding sections I focus, first, on Nietzsche's conception of new beginning and *amor fati*, followed by Arendt's own understanding of beginning and *amor mundi* in section 2.

1. Nietzsche's redeeming thought

In the case of Nietzsche, it is certainly not difficult to discern a "soteriological" impulse in his writings. As the child and grandchild of pastors steeped in the pietistic tradition, who was at one time an intended theologian himself, Nietzsche's writings often read like inspired variations on the basic theme of salvation. Some have even gone so far as to interpret his work as a whole as "a series of experiments in redemption" (Fraser 2002: 2). It is my contention that these various "experiments" can be brought together under the rubric of redemption from resentment. We have seen in the previous chapter that, within the context of Nietzsche's critique of modernity, the targets of this resentment are, first, the contingent world that circumscribes human existence, in so far as it is not of our making

and therefore does not fully coincide with our needs, and second, time itself – specifically the intractability of time, which transforms all that *is* into “it was”. These two aspects of resentment are really two sides of the same coin, for the world does not coincide with our requirements precisely because it is constituted by a past that cannot be undone or reconstituted at will. For Nietzsche, the redemption from resentment towards what *is* can therefore only be overcome in a changed attitude towards what *was*, and thus towards time itself. This view finds expression in a famed remark by Zarathustra: “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’ – that alone should I call redemption” (*TSZ* II: ‘On redemption’). As will become clear, this affirmative attitude towards time and contingency forms the basis of the identification with the fate of the world that Nietzsche designates as *amor fati*. In order to make sense of the latter notion, however, we first have to understand its relation to a new beginning.

1.1 Metamorphosis and beginning

The first point to make with regard to Nietzsche’s conception of a new beginning is that it involves an attitude towards the world that lies beyond both dogmatism and scepticism. In the previous chapter we saw that Nietzsche argues for the overcoming of dogmatism in favour of scepticism. In the case of the latter, he then again distinguishes between weak and strong scepticism, with the former as a kind of relativism or indifferentism and the latter an active commitment to thinking and judging in the world without an appeal to final criteria. However, as I shall argue here, he ultimately believes that even strong scepticism must be overcome if we are to be reconciled with the world. As such, Nietzsche’s vision of redemption does not lie in the arena of epistemology, but rather aims at the overcoming of epistemology.

The most important – and also perhaps the most enigmatic – exposition of this view can be found in Zarathustra’s first speech, entitled “Of the three metamorphoses of the spirit”. The first metamorphosis that is described involves the transformation of the spirit into a camel, who represents “the strong reverent spirit that would bear much [...] feeding on the acorns and grass of knowledge and, for the sake of the truth, suffering hunger in one’s soul [...] stepping into filthy waters when they are the waters of truth, and not repulsing cold frogs and hot toads” (*TSZ* I, ‘Of the three metamorphoses’). The camel takes this burden upon himself and speeds into the desert, where he is transformed into a lion. The latter throws off the burden that was so willingly shouldered by the camel, and thus comes to represent “the creation of freedom for oneself and a sacred ‘No’ even to duty”. Finally the lion, who is still a no-sayer, a rejecter of the burden of his past, but not yet a “Yes-sayer”, overcomes himself in the child:

The child is innocence and forgetting, *a new beginning*, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'. For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred 'Yes' is needed: the spirit now wills its own will, he who had been lost to the world now wins his own world (ibid., my italics).

There exists a plethora of interpretations of this enigmatic tale of transformation that cannot possibly be incorporated into a single analysis. Instead, I shall offer a particular reading of this passage that derives from the earlier discussion on perspectivism and judgement, without pretending that this is in any way an exhaustive interpretation. In the light of said discussion, one might take the camel to represent the *honest* dogmatist, who takes upon himself the burden of the search for truth. Nietzsche does not say what precedes the transformation into the camel, but perhaps we might take this preceding condition to be a kind of "first innocence" before being struck by the problem of truth and the concomitant quest for knowledge – an innocence belonging to a passive, unquestioning acceptance of the world as we find it. It is this passivity that is overcome in the course of the spirit's transformation into a camel, which represents the active concern with truth and knowledge. However, as we have seen on a number of previous occasions, the dogmatic search for *the* truth, for truth at any cost, leads to the discovery of the impossibility of truth in precisely this sense. In Zarathustra's terminology, the search for truth ultimately leads into the emptiness of the "desert". It seems, in fact, that Nietzsche presents us with a radical reworking of the most important lemma of Christian soteriology, namely that "the truth shall set you free" (see Fraser 2002: 46). In his hands this becomes the idea that the pursuit of truth shall set you free *from truth itself*. This is the point at which dogmatism turns into scepticism, which might play itself out in two ways. One might either remain a weak sceptic who secretly longs for a truth one can no longer believe in (something akin to remaining a camel in lion's clothing), or one might prove oneself a strong sceptic who is able to reject the dogmatic conception of truth and acknowledge the perspectival and provisional quality of all our judgements. Nietzsche clearly makes this unconditional negation of every inherited dogmatism, every truth, a condition for the lion's transformation into the child. The child itself, however, is no longer a sceptic in either the strong or the weak sense of the term, but rather represents a *second* innocence – an innocence that seems to have been won through experience – in which both the dogmatic search for truth and the unmitigated suspicion towards truth have been overcome. In this case the figure of the child can be said to stand for one who was "lost to the world" – lost in the "desert" – who, by overcoming scepticism altogether, is reborn into the world and knows it anew.

This interpretation of the three metamorphoses of the spirit in relation to the overcoming of both dogmatism and scepticism is supported by a passage in the prologue to

The Gay Science, in which Nietzsche describes the experience of being reborn through the pain of “great suspicion”:

[F]rom such abysses, from such severe sickness, also from the sickness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one’s skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with gayer senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before (*GS* Pr 4).

This passage is significant in so far as it points out that suspicion or scepticism is not an end in itself, but rather opens up a new way of inhabiting the world that leaves both dogmatism and scepticism behind. This might explain Zarathustra’s description of the child as a “forgetting”: one is only reborn into the world by thinking one’s way through dogmatism and scepticism, but this rebirth necessitates that one becomes *other* than a dogmatist or sceptic – in other words, that one forgets the very dogmatism and scepticism that have brought one to this point – if one is to achieve the second innocence of the child. This interpretation is supported by Nietzsche’s further claim that, having known too well, we must “now learn to forget well, and to be good at *not* knowing” (*ibid.*).

However, having related Nietzsche’s account of the three metamorphoses of the spirit to the stages of dogmatism, scepticism, and an enigmatic position “beyond” both, we have not yet gained any clarity as to what such a “beyond” could entail, apart from involving a new beginning that is itself a kind of innocence and as well as an affirmative stance towards existence. Even more problematic is the question of how we are to achieve this post-dogmatic, post-sceptic perspective if, as Nietzsche makes clear, it is not merely a position that follows logically from scepticism itself, but rather depends on a transformation or “metamorphosis” from one mode of existence to another. If we are to find any answers to these questions, it is helpful to relate his account of the three metamorphoses to the interrelated notions of *amor fati* and eternal recurrence.

1.2 Amor fati and eternal recurrence

We have seen that the Nietzschean figure of the child as a new beginning represents “a sacred Yes”. The question we have not yet asked is: yes to what? What is the object of the sacred affirmation involved in Nietzsche’s vision? The short answer to this question is: *everything*. In order to make sense of this point we need to recall Nietzsche’s account of human becoming in relation to will to power as sketched out in chapter 3, as well as the analysis of perspectival judgement in chapter 5. What these aspects of our inquiry made clear was that in so far as everything that *is* is a mode of will to power – that is, a particular constellation of power-wills – that stands in a relationship of struggle with other power-wills, nothing that exists is self-sufficient or sovereign. Instead, everything

that is (i.e. every constellation of will to power) is related to everything else (i.e. to all other constellations of will to power) through action and resistance. Since everything that is, is constituted by such a struggle between power-wills that are themselves yet further constellations of will to power, this means that everything, ourselves included, stands in an “illogical” relationship with everything else.

The implications of what may be called Nietzsche’s non-foundational ontology of the will to power are not difficult to deduce. We have seen before that Nietzsche diagnoses the resentment that is embedded in our philosophical and religious tradition and which has persisted in modernity despite the loss of the hold this tradition has had on us, as a symptom of the moral interpretation of the world. On this interpretation, the world and everything that belongs in it are to be loved for the sake of some external principle (“creator”, “idea”, “truth”), in so far, but *only* in so far, as it bears the imprint of this higher reality. The predicament of modernity is that we have lost the unquestioning belief in any such ultimate “for the sake of”, which has left the world and our existence within it bereft of meaning. In Nietzsche’s account, overcoming this predicament does not depend on discovering yet another ultimate purpose, such as “progress”, “peace”, “justice”, “universal brotherhood” or whatever new gods we should like to devise for ourselves, but in overcoming the moral interpretation of the world altogether. This overcoming would involve an acknowledgement that “nothing is self-sufficient, neither in ourselves nor in things” (*WP* 1032), which means that everything exists by virtue of everything else and there is no ultimate “for the sake of” to which existence must conform. Nietzsche thus offers a vision of redemption that seeks to overcome the teleological order in terms of which life is to be lived “for the sake of...” and the world exists “for the sake of ...”, both of which reduce the entirety of human existence in the world to a narrow means-ends calculus. This vision is also the polar opposite of resentment, which measures the world as it is against the world as it ought to be and finds it wanting. The point here is that to accept Nietzsche’s vision is to acknowledge that the rejection of any aspect of existence amounts to the rejection of all of it, since there is no way of separating out any aspect of reality from the force-field of power-wills to which it belongs. The converse also holds: to care for anything at all and to will it to exist requires one to affirm the existence of everything that exists:

Have you ever said yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamoured; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, “You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!” then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamoured – oh, then you *loved* the world (*TSZ* IV: ‘The Drunken Song’ 10).

When considered in this light, we might expand on our interpretation of Zarathustra’s tale of metamorphoses to say that the lion’s scepticism involves the rejection

of the moral interpretation of the world – a scepticism towards all “gods”, old and new – whereas the child of the third transformation represents the unconditional affirmation of this eternal referentiality of all to all. The highest form of affirmation that explicitly *wills* the existence of everything that exists in eternal entanglement is love. Nietzsche’s formula for this affirmation is *amor fati* – the love of fate:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in nature, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it – all idealism is untruthfulness in the face of necessity – but to *love* it ... (EH 2: 10).

This attitude towards existence is not a mere passive acceptance of the world as we find it, knowing that it is beyond our power to change its pre-ordained course. Rather, it is to *will* the world to be as we find it, knowing that the whole of our existence – including the very fact of our willing – is bound up with it. On this view, we are manifestly implicated in the fate of the world and the love of fate also means to love the world as our fatality.

The most important point to grasp with regard to this interplay between love and fate is that it embodies a particular attitude towards time. The recognition that every aspect of existence is bound up with everything else makes it impossible to think of time as a series of isolated moments that follow one another in relentless succession. On the contrary, Nietzsche wants to let us see that in every instance resounds all that was necessary for it to exist and all that will follow from its existence. In order to understand the full ramifications of this view, it is necessary to integrate the redeeming thought of *amor fati* with the “vision and the riddle” of the eternal recurrence.

It would be impossible to do proper justice to this much-interpreted – perhaps over-interpreted – concept within Nietzsche’s thinking within a single subsection of a chapter, and I shall not attempt any kind of exhaustive analysis here. What interests me in this regard is the analogy between Nietzsche’s notion of the moment as the coincidence of past and future and Arendt’s conception of the moment as the coincidence of ending and beginning (see section 2.1 below). The passage in which Nietzsche explicitly describes the thought of the eternal recurrence in relation to past and future is entitled “The Vision and the Riddle” in *Zarathustra*, which I have already quoted in chapter 1, section 1. Zarathustra’s description of the road that runs back into the past and the road that runs forward into the future coming together under the gateway “Moment” reads further:

Must not all things that *can* run have already run along this lane? Must not all things that *can* happen *have* already happened, been done, run past? [...] And are not all things bound fast together in such a way that this moment draws after it all future things? *Therefore* – draws itself too?” (TSZ III: ‘Of the Vision and the Riddle’).

To acknowledge that all things are “bound fast” with one another is at the same time to abjure a linear time conception in which the past is irrevocably lost to us and the future always out of reach. Instead, Nietzsche, by mouth of Zarathustra, presents us with a vision of past and future confronting each other in every instant. The “moment”, in other words, becomes the knot to which everything is tied, so that all that has been and all that will be resounds again and again in every instant. With this, we have reached the crux of Nietzsche’s “redeeming” perspective on time. In so far as any soteriology concerns itself with the *telos* of human existence, Nietzsche’s own salvific enterprise presents us with a radical reworking of the notion of an ultimate end. On this interpretation, the *telos* of all of existence lies in every individual moment, each of which embraces everything that was necessary for it to exist and everything that will follow from its existence. In this way, Nietzsche aims to redeem us from a linear time-conception in which the meaning of everything is ultimately lost to time, only to be redeemed by an ultimate purpose outside time itself. One might say that Nietzsche liberates us from teleology precisely by radicalising it, so that the ultimate purpose of existence does not lie beyond the world, but is realised *in* the world in every instant:

Becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions; becoming must appear justified at every moment (or incapable of being evaluated, which amounts to the same thing); the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, nor the past by reference to the present (*WP* 708; *KSA*13:11[72]).

For Nietzsche, the redemption at issue in this perspective on time and becoming in the first place involves the restoration of innocence. If resentment springs from a moral interpretation of the world that locates the value of the contingent world in an extra-temporal purpose in respect to which the world is always deficient, then collapsing this purpose into the world itself restores “the innocence of becoming” (*TI* V: 8; *WP* 552, 765; *KSA* 12:9[91], 13:15[30]). This formulation carries the important implication that the ability to adopt such a “redeemed” perspective on time involves a transformation of the self in so far as the recognition and affirmation of the innocence of the becoming world requires a corresponding innocence in on the part of the one responsible for this affirmation (just as the moral judgement against the world can only issue from those who are already feel themselves corrupted). It is impossible not to recall in this regard Jesus’ exhortation to his disciples: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:13). Despite the distance that divides them, Nietzsche’s conception of redemption has this in common with that of Jesus: both require a transformation from “experience” to “innocence” in order for this redemption to come into effect. It is for this reason that Nietzsche links the “sacred Yes” of *amor fati* to the figure of a child, who is itself “innocence and forgetting” and “a new beginning”. This innocence is not goodness, but rather a perspective from “beyond good

and evil” that no longer weighs and measures the world with reference to an unconditional “ought” to which it must conform. From this extra-moral perspective, the changeable, irreducibly plural world that circumscribes our humanity is *already* redeemed in so far as we *will* its existence in every moment.¹ To extend the religious metaphor, we might say that we are already in the “kingdom of heaven” to the extent that we are capable of such unconditional affirmation of the world as it is. On this view, all distinction between immanence and transcendence dissolves; is and ought coincide. It should therefore come as no surprise to us that Nietzsche writes of the “kingdom of God”: “[it] is nothing that one expects; it has no yesterday and no day after tomorrow, it will not come in ‘a thousand years’ – it is an experience of the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere” (AC 34).

If, within the framework of soteriological thinking, the unconditional affirmation that belongs to *amor fati* is the Nietzschean version of a “the kingdom of God”, the question that confronts us here is how this state of grace is to be achieved. The Christian tradition speaks of a “road to salvation”, which implies that redemption is not an immediate given, but requires one to follow a certain path or undergo a process of testing and purification. Nietzsche’s account of redemption takes a rather similar line, although with radically different results. Löwith (1997: 56) argues in this regard that Nietzsche’s redemptive vision requires one to follow the road to nihilism to its very end. It is only at the point of the most extreme negation, the full immersion in the experience of nothingness that follows in the wake of the death of God, that the “vision and the riddle” of the eternal recurrence could possibly be received and understood. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that it is the thought of the eternal recurrence itself, when it is thought through in all its implications, that intensifies the experience of nihilism to the utmost extreme. The moment of salvation from this state of supreme desolation comes (only) for the one who, in the midst of this experience, is able to turn his perspective around, which is to say, to experience the thought of the eternal recurrence as a blessing rather than a curse. This turning-about operation is literally a conversion whereby one is transformed in such a way as to overcome all resentment, all negation; in which one becomes a nothing but a “Yes-sayer” (TSZ III: ‘Before Sunrise’). From within the actual experience of conversion the question of *how* it is to be achieved more-or-less disappears. To be able to affirm the thought of eternal recurrence is to be already in the “kingdom of heaven”. It is not a matter of a willed decision or a position one could be persuaded to adopt by way of rational argument.

¹ Arendt herself considers the eternal recurrence Nietzsche’s “final redeeming thought” precisely in so far as it proclaims the “Innocence of all becoming” (*die Unschuld des Werdens*) and with that its inherent aimlessness and purposelessness, its freedom from guilt and responsibility. (LMW 170).

In order to make sense of this claim, it is helpful to consider an earlier aphorism in which Nietzsche couches the entire thought of the eternal recurrence in a series of hypothetical questions that test our response to the following thought:

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence ...” (GS 341).

The title of this aphorism is “The greatest weight”, and indeed, the thought of every aspect of one’s own existence recurring eternally, with no aim or purpose, no meaning, no ground, no justification – an existence without hope in anything beyond itself – is the bleakest possible vision of existence in a world without God: “Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale or nothingness: *the eternal recurrence*” (WP 55; KSA 12:5[71]). However, Nietzsche argues further that one who thinks it to its end and is not utterly crushed by this heaviest of thoughts may perhaps be transformed by it:

The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate confirmation and seal? (GS 341).

The notion of “weight” (*Schwerkewicht*) here has a double meaning. While it may certainly reinforce the nihilistic judgement that existence is entirely valueless in the absence of an ultimate value, the thought of the eternal recurrence might also provide a *counterweight* to this experience of nothingness. Hence Nietzsche claims: “To the paralyzing sense of general disintegration and incompleteness I opposed the *eternal recurrence*” (WP 417; KSA 10:24[28]). If the death of God has “wiped away the entire horizon”, “unchained this earth from its sun”, leaving us to plunge in all directions, “straying as through an infinite nothing”, through “empty space” (GS 125), then the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is a way of anchoring us in the world again. If everything that exists is bound up with everything else, with everything recurring in every moment, then every moment of existence becomes infinitely valuable, since to lose any instant would be to lose everything. In this regard, it seems that the “gateway” of Zarathustra’s parable is also a moment of decision, in so far as at every moment one has to choose the perspective from which to view the thought of eternal recurrence: as a weight that crushes or as a counterweight to nothingness, the world’s “new gravity” (Löwith 1997: 57). Again, however, to exercise this choice in favour of affirmation is not a matter of free will, but of grace. Perhaps Nietzsche would say, it is a matter of power: either one is strong enough for such affirmation, or one is not. There is no way of being cajoled or reasoned into it. Nietzsche himself does not give any further reasons for seeing the eternal recurrence in this perspective, nor does he command us to do so; his soteriology is not one of “thou shalt”.

The implication of his argument is rather that to be capable of this affirmation after having experienced the entire “sickness” of nihilism to its fullest extent is to be *already* redeemed:

Whoever has endeavored with some enigmatic longing, as I have, to think pessimism through to its depths and to liberate it from the half-Christian, half-German narrowness and simplicity in which it has finally presented itself to our century [...] may just thereby, without really meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo* – not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle, and not only to a spectacle but at bottom to him who needs precisely this spectacle – and who makes it necessary because again and again he needs himself – and makes himself necessary – What? And this would be – *circulus vitiosus deus?* (BGE 56).

To avoid misunderstanding: one should not mistake the thought of the eternal recurrence for a new categorical imperative along the lines of: live your life in such a way that you can will it to return eternally. In the first place, it is not merely one's own life that is in play here, but *the whole of existence*, the best and the worst of it. We cannot select what to affirm and what to exclude from affirmation. Secondly, precisely because we ourselves are bound up with all that is, we are not the masters of our own lives. We do not stand over and against fate, against the world, freely deciding to form our lives one way rather than another. Nietzsche's concern is with our perspective – affirmative or negating – towards the one reality of which we are part, and this reality is not a static condition or set of facts, but everything that is in its ever-changing relationality of all to all. Nietzsche thus confronts us with the most radical reconciliation with the world that does away with the distance between self and world altogether, as well as with any distinction between “is” and “ought”, instant and eternity, particular and universal. In the words of Eugen Fink (2003: 213): “Man dissolves in universal becoming; the world concentrates itself into man”.

Yet it is precisely at this point in Nietzsche's account of redemption that we begin to run into difficulties. Assuming that we understand Nietzsche here as he means to be understood, it seems that he is presenting us with a conception of redemption that is utterly unrealisable in so far as we still remain human. Who could claim the ability or the willingness for the unconditional affirmation of his or her own existence and will it to return, together with everything else with which it is bound up, for all eternity? More, who would wish for such an ability? And if someone truly did possess the will and the capacity for such unconditional affirmation in the way that Nietzsche describes it, would we still consider him or her to be human?

Nietzsche himself seems to acknowledge that this affirmative vision is something that transcends human existence as we know it. Shortly after Zarathustra's account of the eternal recurrence in “The Vision and the Riddle”, he encounters a shepherd lying on the

ground with a black snake in his throat. Upon Zarathustra's exhortation the shepherd finally bites off the head of the snake and leaps up, transformed, and laughs. This laughter, however, is "no human laughter" (*TSZ 2, 'Of the Vision and the Riddle' 2, my italics*). If we take the black snake as a metaphor for the condition of the most extreme nihilism, negation and scepticism, Nietzsche seems to be implying that the very act of overcoming this condition at the same time transforms one into someone no longer human. Elsewhere Nietzsche evokes the name of the god Dionysus to describe this supreme affirmation that follows upon the most extreme negation, which again emphasises that the vision of redemption that Nietzsche holds out to us is not fully conceivable by us in so far as we are still human:

Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this – to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection – it wants the eternal circulation: – the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements. The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence – my formulation for this is *amor fati* (*WP 1041; 13:16[32]*).

The third and probably most obvious figure of such thinking beyond the human is of course that of the *Übermensch*, which we have already encountered at the close of chapter 3. There I argued that the *Übermensch* represents the other side of the limit where the human "goes over" into a new mode of existence that is already beyond the human. In the light of our present analysis, one could say that the *Übermensch* stands as an enigmatic allusion to the one – who is no longer "one" – who affirms the whole of the becoming reality from the other side of the human. As such, the *Übermensch*, together with the figures of Dionysus and the shepherd who is beyond human laughter indicate that Nietzsche's vision of redemption is a thought, a possibility, that we might approach, but that is not realisable in so far as we are still human, and thus mortal. The common thrust of these different figures of affirmation seems to be that they involve a redemption of self and world that transcends the human condition altogether. In the words of Löwith (1997: 176), Nietzsche seems to seek an "eternalization" of mortal existence that "mismeasures the dimensions of mortal man".

It is also at this point that the analogy between Nietzsche's and Arendt's visions of redemption breaks down. While both thinkers seek to shift the focus away from mortality to natality, from the inevitable end of existence to the miracle of beginning, Nietzsche intensifies and radicalises the new beginning to such an extent that it leaves the human behind. Arendt, for her part, remains a more 'humanistic' thinker than Nietzsche, and, as we shall see, places much more emphasis on the limits and distinctions, and certainly does not want to dissolve the distance between self and world or conceive of a notion of redemption that transcends the human condition. Nevertheless, in pointing out the fissure

that has opened up between these two thinkers, I do not mean to retrospectively invalidate all that has gone before, but rather to set the stage for an exploration of the positive conflict between a philosophical and a political conception of redemption in the last part of the chapter.

In order to develop some understanding of what the other side of this opposition would entail, I shall leave further questions regarding Nietzsche's redemptive vision aside for the moment and turn to Arendt's own, "messianic" account of salvation.

2. Arendt's messianism

2.1 A new beginning

As I mentioned previously, Arendt's vision of redemption can be called an "inconspicuous messianism" as opposed to the more overt language and structure of redemption we find in Nietzsche. Nevertheless, her more inconspicuous vision shares a number of points with that of Nietzsche: first, Arendt's messianism is predicated on the notion of a new beginning; second, it is concerned with the redemption from the resentment against the world that is bound up with a teleological time-conception, and third, the central notion of her conception of redemption is love. I shall examine the first two aspects of this vision in the first part of this section before turning to the notion of love – specifically, the love of the world: *amor mundi* – in the second part.

Arendt, like Nietzsche, describes her vision of redemption in terms of a new beginning. Unlike Nietzsche, however, she does not consider this beginning as a matter of our relation to truth (a "redeemed" perspective beyond dogmatism and scepticism) which in turn structures our experience of the world. Instead she ties her conception of beginning to our experience of the world, which in turn structures our conception of truth. In the course of the discussion in chapter 4, we have seen that this beginning is in the first place (though not exclusively) a matter of action: that is, of inserting oneself into the world of appearances in word and deed. The reason why action is tied to beginning is that action alone among the modalities of the *vita activa* is able to interrupt processes and disturb any existing state of affairs by introducing something into the world that was not heard and seen in it before. Such an interruption of ordinary processes occasions a change in the direction of the course of human affairs, which involves one process coming to an end and the beginning of another. We have seen, however, that the new beginning that comes into the world through action is not in the first instance the beginning of something, but of *someone* (see chapter 4, section 2.2). For Arendt, the one who inserts him- or herself into the world through action becomes "reborn" as *one who begins*, and in this way deliberately

takes upon him- or herself the fact of their original, unwilled beginning in the world: their physical birth. The important point here is that, for Arendt, the capacity for beginning anew is tied to two of the conditions that circumscribe human existence on earth: natality and worldliness – that is, the condition of being born and the condition of being born *into an existing world*. In her view, the birth of every child makes manifest the possibility of a new beginning in a world that will otherwise disappear. As such, the figure of the child in Arendt's vision of redemption stands as the representative of the possibility of beginning in a world of endings: "the antidote to its ruin" (Gottlieb 2003: 137) The concluding passage to the discussion on action in *The Human Condition* ties together the notions of action, the redemptive power of natality and the figure of the child in the following way:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope [...] It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their "glad tidings": "A child has been born unto us" (HC 247).

The reference to natality as "the miracle that saves the *world*" makes it clear that Arendt's vision of redemption is not concerned with the salvation of the soul – that is, with the self in isolation from the world. The worldliness of her messianism is underscored by the intriguing fact that her formulation of the "glad tidings" in the above passage does not in fact appear in the New Testament. The only announcement of the "glad tidings" that occurs in the Gospels can be found in Luke 2:1, which reads: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord". As Gottlieb (2003) and Dolan (2004) both point out, Arendt rather seems to have in mind Isaiah 9:6: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given". This unstated "editing" of the Gospels can be seen as way of avoiding the attribution of divine status to the child, who remains a representative of "the possibility of redemption in 'this' world" (Dolan 2004: 606). The figure of the child in Arendt is therefore not *itself* a messianic figure: a saviour. Rather, the figure of the child stands as an ever-present reminder of the everyday "miraculous" possibility of beginning something new in the world.

It is this insistence on the interrelation of natality and worldliness that sets Arendt's vision of existence so strongly against the Silenian claim that "best is not to be born, second best is to die soon". Her opposition is not directed at the recognition of the inevitability of death that underlines the Silenian view, but at its assumption about the value of being born. Arendt writes in this regard:

The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-

present reminder that *men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin* (HC 246, my italics).

These lines point the way to what Dolan (2004: 608) calls Arendt's "redeeming perspective on time". If soteriological or messianic thinking is predicated on a teleological conception of human existence which posits an ultimate aim or purpose for the sake of which life is to be lived, Arendt is here presenting us with such a purpose. However, the above-quoted passage makes it clear that the way in which she conceives of the end of human existence in fact subverts the very notion of teleology on which the traditional notion of salvation rests. As Gottlieb (2003: 141) points out, Arendt is saying that "the *telos* of human life is precisely not to reach an end – either in the sense of achieving a purpose or coming to a conclusion. On the contrary, the end is to begin". In his way, Arendt can be said to radicalise the teleological notion of "in order to" by extending it to encompass all of human life, so that the ultimate purpose of human existence, its salvific impetus, is precisely "*to break out of the order of 'in order to'*" (ibid., my italics). To achieve this purpose is to be redeemed. Nevertheless, it is a redemption that does not entail a finally achieved state of grace. On the contrary, since the redemption from time and its "it was" can only be realised in a contingent beginning in a contingent world, it must be re-enacted again and again.

One might argue in this regard that, for Arendt, the world exists as a fragile network of such beginnings, so that the end of the world – though not of life on earth – would truly have come when there is nothing new under the sun (cf. Gottlieb 2003: 146). That is to say, the world exists as long as human beings take the fact of their own beginning upon themselves by inserting themselves into the world in word and deed. We have already seen that Arendt considers this insertion into the world to be a "second birth" in which one distinguishes oneself from one's undifferentiated species existence and becomes a person in the world among other persons (HC 176; see chapter 4, section 2.2). In light of our analysis of reflective judgement in the preceding chapter, I would suggest that judgement constitutes the reflective aspect of this rebirth. To be "reborn" into the world as a person is also to be born into a plurality of opinions. Judgement, in its capacity as critical thinking and "visiting imagination", is the faculty for taking account of these opinions; for testing one's own *doxa* – how the world seems to one from the place one occupies in the world by virtue of one's birth – against other opinions. Arendt's emphasis on beginning also casts further light on her insistence that the judgements by which we make sense of the world should remain directed at deeds and events in their particularity and plurality. The point here is that it is precisely by treating these deeds and events merely as outcomes of a general process or as manifestations of a single, underlying

principle that we deprive them of their uniqueness as beginnings and ourselves of the quality of *initium*.

The final aspect of Arendt's redeeming perspective on time has to do with her understanding of the significance of ending. Thus *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which can indeed be read as an account of the end – in the sense of radical breakdown or failure – of a particular moral, political and philosophical tradition, concludes with these lines:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only “message” which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – ‘that a beginning be made man was created’, said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man (*OT* 478-9).

The relevant point of this passage is that it reinterprets the meaning of ending from the perspective of beginning. If the resentment towards the world in its contingency springs from the awareness of the inevitable ending of all temporal things, one might then take Arendt to suggest that the “redemption” from this resentment would mean to understand the end that comes to all things *not* as a “dead end”, a terminus, but as an end that also contains the possibility of a beginning within itself. To understand the world and time from this perspective is not to fall back on a facile comfort in the face of inevitable ruin. Even less is it to justify destruction in the name of beginning something new. The point, rather, is that the appearance of every human being in the world – the insertion of a new beginning the course of things – deflects the flow of time into past and future. It is precisely by virtue of this position “between past and future” that we are capable of conceiving of a new beginning out of that which has come to an end. This way of relating ending to beginning can be understood as an attempt on Arendt's part to counter the view that time is merely a succession of endings which thereby strips existence in the world of all lasting significance. To call upon Eliot once more: “Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / Every poem an epitaph. And any action / Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat / Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.”²

This ever-present possibility of beginning anew is of course no guarantee that such beginning would be possible, even less that it is inevitable. It is precisely for this reason that Arendt sets her discussion of the condition of natality under the rubric of “faith and hope”. Nevertheless, it is precisely this “faith and hope” in the promise of beginning that arises out of every ending that constitutes Arendt's redeeming perspective on time. In what follows, I shall attempt to complete this perspective by focusing on the virtue that completes “faith” and “hope”, namely “love”. This discussion will also serve to cast

² T.S. Eliot: “Little Gidding” (1963).

further light on some of the tensions between Nietzsche's and Arendt's conceptions of redemption that have already emerged in the first section of the chapter.

2.2 *Amor mundi*

In a letter to her old teacher Jaspers, Arendt writes: "I've begun so late, really only in recent years, truly to love the world ... Out of gratitude, I want to call my book on political theories [the book that would become *The Human Condition*] *Amor Mundi*" (AJC 264). In light of the discussion in previous chapters, it is possible to understand "world" in this formulation as "an artifice arising between men and women, continuously affected by what they do to flourish and endure, and also by the ways they think in order to become reconciled to their existence" (Kohn 1996: 147). In so far as the world is an "artifice", it can be distinguished from the earth, which harbours the world but is not identical with it, and from nature. Unlike nature, which is the context of all living things – ourselves included – by virtue of our membership of a species, the world is the realm in which human beings appear, not as instances of biological life, but as individuals. In this sense, the world is a space of appearances, in which we appear to one another in our distinctness rather than in our sameness as members of a biological species.³ This "space" is not only constituted by the durable things we fabricate and by which we surround ourselves, but also by the fragile network of relations that spring up between human beings when we engage in action and judgement.

What would it mean, then, to love the world in all these facets? More importantly, perhaps, why *should* we love the world in any of them? We can begin to answer these questions by recalling Arendt's remark that it is love of the world that fits me into it, in so far as it determines to whom and to what I belong (see chapter 5, section 2.1). Translated into rather pedestrian terms, one might take this to mean that to love the world is to care about what becomes of it, and it is precisely this concern that gives weight to one's choices about to whom and to what one belongs. A second meaning that presents itself is that to love the world is to choose the world – as opposed to an "otherworldly" realm – as one's home: "In choosing what to love, we choose what kind of being we are: a worldly, that is, perishable, being or an eternal, nonperishing being. We choose a home for ourselves, and thereby choose our own mode of being as inhabitants of one or the other of these two worlds" (Beiner 1996: 272).

³ It is in this sense that Arendt sometimes speaks of "the public realm". Initially, this term specifically indicated the space for politics. However, it is gradually subsumed by "world" in her later writings, while the latter term expands to include much more than in its original meaning as the domain of work. Thus Arendt states in a late interview that "I comprehend ["world"] now in a much larger sense, as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives and which must look presentable. In which art appears, of course. In which all kinds of things appear" (EU 20).

Beiner's remark comes in the course of an exposition of Arendt's reading of Augustine. In fact, any attempt to make sense of the notion of *amor mundi* must do so against the background of her interpretation of Augustine, as it is from him that she draws her concept of love as well as the problem of our "estrangement" from the world. The most important idea she takes over from Augustine is that in birth we enter a world that is "strange" to us because it exists before us. At the same time, we are also strangers to the world; "newcomers" to a play that is not of our own making, and for whom there are no scripted parts. In this way, there is certain "fatedness" to our existence, in so far as we cannot choose the world into which we are born ourselves (cf. Hammer 2000: 99). In this sense the world is not a home to us, but an unfamiliar environment in which we, as newcomers, perforce must live.⁴ For Augustine, the estrangement from the world is not something to be overcome, but rather cultivated, since our "true home" is not in this world, but with God (cf. Beiner 1996: 280). For Arendt, however, the question is not how to escape the world into which we enter as strangers, but how to reconcile ourselves to it. In her dissertation on Augustine, Arendt makes much of the notion that our being *in* the world does not yet make us *of* the world (*LA* 66); the mere fact of our being-here does not yet make "here" into home.

In Arendt's analysis, it is precisely the inability to reconcile ourselves to the world that precedes us and will outlast us – a world that therefore does not coincide with our specific arrival in it – that has led to the twofold flight from the world into an eternal realm (which is also Augustine's solution) and into the self (which is the specific solution that characterises modernity). In the context of our present discussion, one might argue that both of these flights are merely two different manifestations of an underlying resentment towards a world in which we are not perfectly at home. Against this background, *amor mundi* can then be understood as a way of reconciling ourselves to the world by fitting ourselves into it – that is to say, by making ourselves at home where we are not. In this regard, Arendt's argument is diametrically opposed to the notion that we can only be at home in the world by fabricating – which generally means: by destroying and remaking – the world in accordance with human needs and interests. Her point, in other words, is not that we can be more at home if only we work harder at making the world conform with our requirements, but rather by choosing to fit ourselves into a world that is not in the first place "for us". Thus we return to the point made above: to love the world is in the first place to choose the world as one's home: "it is through love of the world that man explicitly makes himself at home in the world, and then desirously looks to it alone for his good and evil. Not until then do the world and man grow 'worldly'" (*LA* 67).

⁴ Arendt points to Augustine's understanding of "the particular strangeness in which the world as a 'desert' (*eremus*) pre-exists for man" (*LA* 67).

But what exactly does Arendt mean by love? We have already described love as care, understood as a sense of concern. That is: to love the world is to be concerned with what becomes of it, and to exercise one's judgement, one's taste, in accordance with this concern. Yet Arendt also presents us with another conception of love that is not merely concern, but – and here we again pick up Nietzsche's footprints – affirmation. This conception derives from Augustine's treatment of the will; specifically, his solution to the problem of the endless conflict between willing and nilling. On Arendt's interpretation, the solution comes through the transformation of the will into love, which Augustine describes as "the weight of the soul", and which stills the conflict in the will, not by forcibly suppressing the counter-will, but by directing the mind to the object of love. Love here is a kind of "coupling agent" that adds "weight" to the soul and thereby arrests its fluctuations (*LMW* 103). In our terms, we might say that love exerts a kind of "gravitational pull" that pulls the conflicting parts of the soul in the same direction (cf. *LMW* 95). Arendt points out that this transformation of the will into love does not do away with the will's power for assertion and denial, but rather bends or pulls the will in the direction of assertion: "there is no greater assertion of something or somebody than to love it, that is to say: I will that you be – *Amo: Volu ut sis* (*LMW* 104). In Arendt's interpretation, this assertion requires no further justification. On the contrary, love is the point where the order of "in order to" ceases. Thus, in a much earlier passage that also cites Augustine's phrase, she writes of "the great and incalculable grace of love" which nevertheless does not depend on our "being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation" (*OT* 301). In the light of this remark, it becomes clear that Arendt conceives of love as the very opposite of possession or assimilation, both of which only understand the object of love as an extension of the one who loves. More pertinently, this affirmation of something or someone cannot be brought about by argument, persuasion or threat. Rather, it is a matter of "grace".

If we assume the love of the world to entail precisely such an affirmation without ultimate justification, as I am doing here, we can begin to see how *amor mundi* stands in contrast to resentment. To resent the world as it is given springs precisely from wanting the world to be *other* than it is, or from the view that the world has not provided one with a good enough reason for loving it. As in the case of Nietzsche's vision of *amor fati*, Arendt also fails – or refrains – from providing such reasons. As Villa (1997: 184) argues: "for Arendt it is hardly a question of theorizing ourselves into a more 'worldly' form of existence." To make the point in a rather pedestrian way, we might say that Arendt recognises, as Nietzsche does, that we cannot be argued into love; it can only be stated as a possibility to which we either do or do not respond. This might also be the relevance of her

reference to “gratitude” in the Jaspers letter quoted above. The fact that the world calls up love in us is something to be thankful for precisely because it cannot be willed.

Nevertheless, while both Arendt and Nietzsche understand love in this sense of affirmation without an appeal to further grounds, which in both thinkers stand as the counter-force resentment, there is an important difference between their respective approaches. Whereas, as we have seen, Nietzsche conceives of *amor fati* as the *most extreme* affirmation of everything that is, to the point of wishing its eternal recurrence, I would suggest that Arendt’s conception of love is best understood under the two-fold banner of discrimination and moderation. The text in which this view comes to fore most clearly is in her discussion of the Greek attitude towards the love of beauty in the essay entitled “The Crisis in Culture”. In an analysis of the famous lines which Thucydides attributes to Pericles: “We love beauty within the limits of political judgement, and we philosophize without the barbarian vice of effeminacy” (*BPF* 214),⁵ Arendt emphasises the role of judgement and discrimination in this conception of what it means to love. While her concern in this passage is to show that the Greeks distinguished themselves from the barbarians on the basis of their polis-experience, the relevant point for our own discussion lies in the rhetorical question with which she concludes her point: “Could it be [...] that love of beauty remains barbarous unless it is accompanied by [...] the faculty to take aim in judgement, discernment, and discrimination, in brief, by that curious and ill-defined capacity we commonly call taste?” (*BPF* 214-5). If we apply this remark to Arendt’s conception of love of the world, we might say that, while she has in mind an affirmation of the world as one of the conditions under which life has been given to us, this is nevertheless not an uncritical affirmation. That is to say, it does not refrain from asking whether any aspect of or appearance in the world “pleases” or “displeases”. This discriminating love is not conditional upon the world conforming to one’s own wishes (see the discussion on “relative impartiality” and “visiting imagination” in chapter 5). It says, rather: *because* I love the world it matters to me what appears in it, and therefore I shall take a stand with regard to the things in it. One might bring the two concepts of love that we have encountered so far – care and affirmation – together by saying that, for Arendt, the extremity of the love of the world, which would indiscriminately affirm the world in all its aspects, is tempered by the care for the world – which is of course itself a kind of love – and that this care expresses itself in judgement and discrimination.

As I have interpreted her here, Arendt’s conception of *amor mundi* retains the distance between self and world that Nietzsche’s notion of *amor fati* dissolves. This does not mean that she conceives the self as in any way independent of the world, but rather that

⁵ This is Arendt’s translation of what is more commonly rendered as “Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to extravagance; our love of the things of the mind does not make us soft” (Thucydides II, 40).

she considers this distance as a precondition for acting and judging, as well as resisting certain actions and judgements, *for the sake of the world*. This point can be emphasised further by comparing the notion of the love of the world with Arendt's treatment of the love that human beings have for one another *in* the world. In her account, the most telling characteristic of the latter kind of love is that, "by reason of its passion, [it] destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others' (*HC* 242; cf. *MDT* 21, *HC* 51-2). That is to say, our love for one another *in* the world is essentially "worldless" precisely because it destroys all distance between the lovers. Arendt's notion of *amor mundi*, by contrast, is not only a love of the world; it is a love that is essentially "worldly".

This understanding of what Arendt means by loving the world casts a different light on her concern with our "reconciliation" with the world. Certainly, this reconciliation stands as a counterpart to the resentment that has fuelled the "world alienation" characteristic of modernity (*HC* 254), but it nevertheless does not involve a complete identification of self and world. For Arendt, to love the world does allow a measure of reconciliation with it, "but ironically, which is to say, without selling one's soul to it" (*MDT* 14). One might say that to grow to love the world involves a reconciliation precisely with the strangeness of the world, and with the extent to which we remain in some sense not at home.⁶ The point about loving the world in Arendt's sense is not to counter what amounts to an indiscriminate (or thoughtless) rejection of the world with an indiscriminate love of it, but to learn to love the world in judging what "pleases" and "displeases" within it.

As to the question of why we *should* aim for such an "ironic reconciliation" with the world through love, the answer is more difficult. Arendt herself never couches her thinking in terms of any kind of moral imperative. Perhaps the rationale for her argument is that the predicament of modernity – not only the break in tradition and generalised crisis of meaning at the level of our thinking about the world, but the horror of totalitarianism, which is a kind of fabrication of meaninglessness at the level of actual political experience – did not arrive out of nowhere. Instead, these events are "crystallizations" of certain aspects of the very tradition that has come to an end in modernity. One of these aspects, to which Arendt returns again and again in her writings, is the sense of resentment of the world as it is given, in so far as the world in its "givenness" does not coincide with our specific needs, longings, interests and hopes. We may then take the thrust of her argument to be that the overcoming of this resentment – and with that, the predicament of modernity – would only be possible if we learn to love the world in its givenness, without, as Arendt says, "selling one's soul to it". This argument is not yet an instruction manual for *how* we

⁶ See the discussion on homelessness and the "visiting imagination" in chapter 5, section 4.

are to learn to do this. At best, Arendt's writings on this topic are an attempt to persuade by example.

A last point to be made with regard to Arendt's conception of *amor mundi*, as well as our preceding engagement with her thinking on the human condition, is that she remains a political thinker – that is to say, a thinker of the *polis*, the arena of human affairs. It is therefore not surprising that she cites with approval Pericles' reference to loving beauty within the limits of political judgement. The relevant point in this regard is that the world – the space of appearances that lies between us – can exist only on the basis of certain limits and conditionalities. (As Arendt points out in *HC* 64, the original meaning of the *polis* was that of a *wall* or a fence). To think politically, which is precisely to concern oneself with the world as this “in-between”, is therefore to think in terms of limits and boundaries, to draw distinctions, to discriminate – not because excess, lack of discrimination or unconditional attitudes and actions of any kind are somehow morally reprehensible, but because they threaten the world. The background to this kind of thinking is the recognition that an excessive, indiscriminate love of the world can bring it to ruin as much as indiscriminate hatred, in so far as this radical affirmation prevents us from taking a stand against anything; from saying: “This ought not to have happened; this must not be allowed to happen”. To put it rather simply: the world of human affairs, which is not a thought-experiment but the context in which we speak and act together with our fellows, cannot survive if we do not set limits to what might happen within it. This is precisely Arendt's point about totalitarianism: that its aim was not simply to commit murder on an unprecedented scale, but to destroy human plurality and with that, the world in all the senses we have described it above. In light of events such as these, to say: I affirm the world and everything in it unconditionally, I will it to be as it is, is to affirm the world's destruction.

If Arendt is a “political” thinker for all of these reasons, Nietzsche can certainly be said to be a “philosophical” one. This does not mean that he remains indifferent towards the world, which is indeed another family failing of many philosophers, but rather that he is driven to think beyond the very concern with limits that characterise political thinking. Philosophical thinking, as exemplified by Nietzsche, is radical and endless; it is not bound in advance by any limit beyond which we may not think. We have seen that this does not only hold for the limit or boundary between self and world that Arendt still wants to maintain, but even for the limits of the human condition itself. It is my contention that the differences between these two kinds of thinking account for the differences – more specifically, the conflict – between Nietzsche's and Arendt's conceptions of redemption that we have encountered in this last chapter of the thesis.

However, I certainly do not want to argue that Arendt presents a legitimate way of thinking about the world and our place within it and Nietzsche an illegitimate one. Even less do I want to maintain that to be “for” Arendt is to be “against” Nietzsche, or vice versa. My aim in the last remaining section of the thesis is to think through the tension between the two ways of thinking about the world, not only to show that the tension itself is more complicated than it might appear at first glance, but also to demonstrate the importance of retaining both perspectives on the world, standing in precisely this conflict with one another.

3. Thinking philosophically, thinking politically

It is characteristic of Nietzsche’s thinking that he entertains a thoroughgoing scepticism, not to say antipathy, towards politics as embodied in the state. One of the most sustained reflections on the distance between philosophy and politics occurs in the essay on “Schopenhauer and Education” in the *Untimely Meditations*. It is a recurring refrain in this text that one who is driven by the *furor philosophicus* cannot afford to be drawn into the *furor politicus*; that the one can only be indulged at the expense of the other (SE 7). Moreover, according to Nietzsche, where the concern with politics has the upper hand within a state, it will necessarily interfere with other, more important concerns: “All states in which people other than politicians must concern themselves with politics are badly organized and deserve to perish from this abundance of politicians” (ibid.). Nevertheless, this scorn for what he frequently refers to as “petty politics” does not translate into an indifference towards the question of how we are to conceive of our relations with one another in the world, as is attested to by the many contributions on the theme of the “political Nietzsche” to which I referred at the beginning of the thesis. However, these readings are mostly concerned with the *political implications of his philosophy*, such as his understanding of conflict and contest, his criticism of essentialism, his pluralisation of the self, etcetera. The point here is that Nietzsche’s attitude towards the political – both in its limited form as the administration of interests within a state as well as in the sense in which it concerns us here, namely as that which relates to the world of human affairs – remains the attitude of a philosopher: one withdraws from the world in order to think, and for whom the fact of this withdrawal is taken up into the content of his thinking. In contrast to this, the “political thinking” that Arendt espouses is occasioned by our experiences in the world and remains cognisant of the fact that we are ultimately *of* the world. In so far as this world is not an eternally fixed entity, but a fragile space of words and deeds, endings and beginnings, political thinking concerns itself with the limits, distinctions and conditionalities that are prerequisites for living in the world.

When characterised in this way, it seems inevitable that philosophical and political thinking would stand in some kind of tension with one another. In Arendt's view, which she has worked out in a number of texts, of which the most significant is the essay entitled "Philosophy and Politics", the conflict between these two kinds of thinking can be traced back to the original conflict between the philosopher and the polis. I shall follow Arendt's argument here, as in my view it ultimately provides us with a valuable conceptual framework from within which to understand the difference between her and Nietzsche's conceptions of redemption, as well as between the general perspectives from which they approach the problem of modernity.

In Arendt's account, the conflict between the philosopher and the polis is co-equivalent with the emergence of philosophy as a distinct mode of questioning. The conflict did not arise because the philosopher and the citizens had radically different and incompatible interests, but precisely because a philosopher – Socrates – wanted to make philosophy relevant for the polis (PP 443). This is an important point to grasp, as it has bearing on the way in which we understand the general conflict between philosophical and political thinking, as well as the conflict between Nietzsche's and Arendt's conceptions of redemption. In none of these cases is it a matter of different concerns or focal points that somehow stand in opposition to one another. Rather, it is a matter of conflicting perspectives and approaches to one and the same concern. The conflict between the philosopher and the polis arises over the question of what is good for the polis – that is, the common world which we share with one another rather than our private places within it. As far as the original conflict is concerned, Arendt's point is not that Socrates himself wanted to play a political role, but that he wanted to help citizens in discovering the truth of their own *doxa*; that is, to discover the truth in the different ways in which the world opened itself to each of them (PP 433). In this way, he wanted to help his fellow Athenians to become better citizens, who were more truthful regarding their own opinions. However, this Socratic enterprise carried a particular danger for the citizens and the polis, and it was this danger that became the source of the conflict between them. The danger in Socrates' attempt to help the citizens of Athens think through their *doxai* lay in the fact that, to really think these opinions through to the end is to realise that they are ultimately groundless. To state the point in Nietzschean terminology: to discover the truth of one's own *doxa* is to discover that there is no truth. Arendt writes in this regard:

The search for truth in the *doxa* can lead to the catastrophic result that the *doxa* is altogether destroyed, or that what had appeared is revealed as an illusion. This [...] is what happened to King Oedipus, whose whole world, the reality of his kingship, went to pieces when he began to look into it. After discovering the truth, Oedipus is left without any *doxa*, in its manifold meanings of opinion, splendor, fame, and a world of one's own. Truth can therefore destroy *doxa*, it can destroy the specific political reality of the citizens. Similarly, from what we know of Socrates' influence, it is obvious that many of his listeners must have gone away, not with a

more truthful opinion, but with no opinion at all. The inconclusiveness of many Platonic dialogues [...] can also be seen in this light: all opinions are destroyed, but no truth is given in their stead (PP 442).

By reason of this destructive impact on the opinions by which we navigate in the world, the philosopher indeed poses a danger to the polis, not only for the Athenian citizens of Socrates' day, but for all of us in so far as we are inhabitants of the world and not dwellers in the realm of ideas. For without any trust in our opinions – what Arendt refers to as our “common sense” – it is not possible to live together in the world. Nietzsche understands this very well: “Without untruth there can be neither society nor culture. The tragic conflict. Everything that is good and beautiful depends on illusion: truth kills – indeed, it kills itself (insofar as it recognizes that its foundation is error)” (KSA 7:29[7]). It is perhaps not by accident that he lays the soliloquy on loneliness that I have set at the beginning of the thesis in the mouth of Oedipus (KSA 7:9[131]). What Oedipus as “the last philosopher” and “last human being” learns is that philosophy is the loneliest of all enterprises precisely because it destroys all *doxa* – opinion, splendor, fame, and a world of one's own – and thereby destroys the precarious grounds for all human togetherness.

However, in Arendt's account there is also a second way in which philosophy and the opinions of the world are in conflict with one another, which can be characterised in terms of a conflict between wonder and common sense. The conflict here has to do with the origin of philosophical questioning versus the origin of the opinions by which we navigate in the world. In simple terms, the difference is that philosophical thinking originates outside the world of human affairs – which of course does not mean that this thinking does not concern itself with the latter – while opinions originate in the world we share with one another. Arendt argues that the original experience that gives birth to the philosopher's questioning is the experience of *thaumazein*: “the wonder at everything that is as it is” (PP 449). This experience is not wonder at any particular thing in the world which subsequently calls up the wonder at everything else. Rather, the philosopher's *thaumazein* is a kind of “shock”, in which “Man in the singular, as it were, is for one fleeting moment confronted with the whole of the universe, as he will be confronted again only at the moment of his death” (PP 450-1). Arendt recognises this moment of shock in Nietzsche's description of the philosopher as “a man about whom extraordinary things happen all the time” (PP 450). Nietzsche himself refers to the philosopher as “a human being who constantly experiences, sees, hears, suspects, hopes, and dreams extraordinary things; who is truck by his own thoughts as from outside, as from above and below, as by *his* type of experiences and lightning bolts” (BGE 292). At issue here is not so much the content of philosophical thinking itself, but the original experience that gives rise to this mode of thinking and questioning. This experience does not itself originate in the world of human affairs in the course of speech and action, but springs from a wonder that is itself a

kind of astonishment, a bolt of lightning, “a flying spark between two flint stones” (PP 451). This “spark” is neither an ultimate truth that can be grasped, nor an immediate understanding of anything at all. The only result of this experience can be expressed as: “Now I know what it means not to know; now I know that I do not know” (PP 449). And for Arendt, ever an admirer of Socrates, it is this pathos of not-knowing that is the origin of the ultimate questions of philosophy.

At the same time, however, it is the very experience of wonder that leads to these questions that brings the philosopher in conflict with the “common sense” of the world, “which takes it for granted that there is something rather than nothing and proceeds to make assertions, form opinions, organize things” (Dolan 2000: 273). The difficulty here is twofold. In the first place, this experience of *thaumazein* strikes the human being in his or her singularity, and therefore leaves him or her permanently at odds with the world in so far as the latter is the realm of plurality, which only exists in the endless play of opinions. In the second place, this moment of wonder is not an experience *in* the world that springs from any particular thing within it. As a confrontation with “all that is”, it is an experience that is “speechless”; that is to say, it cannot be translated into the “common sense” language of everyday speech without sounding like “non-sense” (PP 451).

Understood in this way, the difference between the philosopher and the *polis* is not, as Plato maintained, that the one has access to a higher-order truth and that the other does not, but that the philosopher is prepared to endure the pathos of wonder – the very experience of *not* knowing the answer to anything that is – which cuts away the ground from all opinions, dissolves all limits, questions all certainties, undermines all identities that operate in the world of human affairs. This conflict between the experience of *thaumazein* and worldly opinion of course also plays itself out within the philosopher himself, for, as Arendt points out, “the philosopher, although he perceives something that is more than human, that is divine (*theoin ti*), remains a man, so that the conflict between philosophy and the affairs of men is ultimately a conflict within the philosopher himself” (PP 444). In an unpublished note Nietzsche concurs with this view: “It is impossible to be a philosopher for oneself alone. For as a human being he has relationships with other human beings: and if he is a philosopher, he must also be a philosopher in these relationships” (KSA 7:29[205]).

And what then of the “political thinker”, who does not perceive what is more than human, but instead trains his or her thinking on the realm of human affairs? Perhaps one might say that such a thinker takes the side of opinion against the questioning of the philosopher, and the side of common sense against the shock of *thaumazein*. The reason for taking sides in this way is that philosophy, because it recognises no limits to the questioning of our opinions and thinks beyond “common sense”, is ultimately destructive

of the world in so far as the latter exists by virtue of opinion. This does not amount to an argument against philosophy, but an argument against philosophy becoming the sole perspective from which to judge the world of human affairs. Nevertheless, the situation of the political thinker in Arendt's sense is not as straightforward as it may appear. As Arendt herself acknowledges, any kind of thinking, whether or not it places the world at the centre of its deliberations, is a kind of withdrawal from the world. When we think – which does not mean to calculate, deliberate, or to know – we are not longer “in” the world, so to speak, but rather inhabit an “eternal present” or “standing now” outside the immediate fray of the world of human affairs (*LMT* 210-11). Moreover, as we have seen in the discussion in chapter 4, Arendt describes all thinking, not only philosophy, as a “thawing wind” that breaks open certainties, destabilises identities and reveal the groundlessness of all opinions (see chapter 4, section 3.1). Clearly, then, the opposition between philosophical and political thinking is not simply an opposition between thought and thoughtlessness, or between unlimited questioning and unexamined opinion. I would argue, rather, that it is a difference between a mode of thinking that springs from an unlimited wonder at all that is and one that springs from the wonder at the world in its particularity. It is this difference in origin and orientation that accounts for Arendt's emphasis on limits, discrimination and distinction which Nietzsche ultimately seeks to transcend.

At this point, it is worthwhile to revisit the two conflicting conceptions of redemption presented by Nietzsche and Arendt in the light of our analysis of the difference between philosophical and political thinking. I would suggest that Nietzsche's vision of the eternal recurrence and *amor fati* is best understood as an attempt on his part to capture something of the original philosophical experience of *thaumazein*. That is to say, his notion of a reconciliation with the world that dissolves all boundaries between self and world, immanence and transcendence, is an attempt to effect a return to something of the original “shock” or “flying spark” of wonder at everything that is as it is. Since, as we have seen, this experience of wonder does not originate in the world where we live together in the manner of speech, it is a thought that is indeed incommunicable and ungraspable, but Nietzsche is not somehow “at fault” for this. We will not be able to make sense of this vision of redemption as long as we treat it as an opinion among other opinions that must somehow compete with them for our allegiance. From a “common sense” perspective, Nietzsche's vision of Dionysian affirmation and *Übermenschlichkeit* indeed seems like “non-sense”, but this is not the perspective from which Nietzsche addresses us. He is not trying to persuade us to change our opinion about the world; he is trying to convey an experience of wonder before which all resentment of what is, all difference between self and world, all wanting anything different, even opinion itself, disappears. As such, it is indeed a vision of something – which is of course no “thing”, but a sensibility, an

experience, a thought-event – that lies beyond the human condition. In so far as we as we try to understand what Nietzsche is saying from *within* this condition, we are bound to misunderstand him. It is only to the extent that we are able to imagine the experience from which his vision of redemption springs that we might grasp something of what this vision itself would entail.

This understanding of the background to Nietzsche's thinking also throws new light on the conflict between his conception of redemption and that of Arendt. The main point for consideration here is that this conflict should not be couched in terms of an "either-or". It is not a matter of a head-on confrontation over the "right" way to overcome the resentment of the world, but rather of different perspectives that stand in tension with one another that cannot be resolved in one direction or another. There are two reasons why this conflict cannot and should not be resolved. In the first place, the conflict does not merely lie between two ways of thinking about the world or between two thinkers themselves; it also exists within ourselves. In so far as we are both "of the world" and therefore formed by as well as constitutive of the world's plurality *and* singular beings who at times withdraw from the world, both kinds of thinking – and thus both conceptions of redemption – are of relevance to us. As beings who live with others, we need to learn to love the world "within the limits of political judgement". However, in so far as we are not only with others, but also with ourselves, we may hope, in a rare moment, to be struck by the "flying spark" of Nietzsche's "Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection". Perhaps we might say that, to experience both kinds of reconciliation with the world – which nevertheless cannot be reconciled with one another – is to realise the "uncanny difference within us" (GS 369) which both Nietzsche and Arendt, in different ways, consider to be constitutive of our humanity.

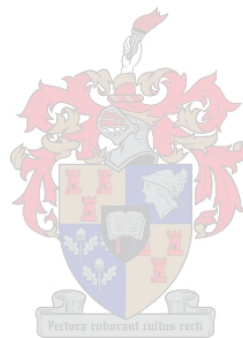
The second reason why the conflict between these two notions of reconciliation with the world should not be resolved is that it is precisely by way of the conflict between them that each keeps the other in check. We have already seen that the kind of thinking and questioning that spring from the philosopher's initial experience of wonder are destructive of the world because they undermine the very opinions by which the world opens itself to us. As such, this questioning destroys the conditions for human living-together in the world in so far as the latter depend on the provisionality and plurality of opinions. Moreover, as we have seen, the unconditional affirmation of all that is and of the world as part of that one reality also undermines the conditions for taking a stand with regard to anything *in* the world, which in its own way can be equally destructive. However, there is a danger to the world from the side of common sense and opinion as well. To exist in a wholly immanent world in which it is generally taken for granted that there is something rather than nothing, in which opinions are never confronted with their own

groundlessness and where the flying spark of wonder never halts us in our tracks is a world that has been reduced to the kind of organised living-together that both Nietzsche and Arendt denigrates as “the life of society”. As Dolan (2004: 273) puts it: “When the tension between common sense and the wonder at being is destroyed, we enter the bleak realm of the ‘social’, of programmed life and poll-tested politics”. This socialised existence is not a form of reconciliation with the world; it is, instead, an indifference towards it, which no longer cares to ask whether we are “at home” in the world or not, “pleased” or “displeased” with what appears in it. In our own time, it is perhaps this indifference, far more than the explosive events of the death of God and the despair of nihilism, that indicates that the world has become lost to us. In light of this insight, it is my contention that a joint reading of Nietzsche and Arendt such as has been attempted in this thesis confronts us with the importance of retaining the conflict between wonder and common sense, loving the world in unconditional affirmation and loving it within the limits of political judgement, not only for the sake of the difference that we are, but also for the sake of the world to which we belong.

This is also my answer to the question of whether such a joint reading of these two thinkers provides us with a convincing resolution to the problem of modernity. In so far as this problem centres on the loss of the world as a framework of meaning and a focus of concern, which in turn leaves us unable to make sense of what it means to be human, Nietzsche’s and Arendt’s respective projects can be said to aim at restoring our sense of the world in the absence of any given meaning. Reading them together furthermore demonstrates that the world is not only a space in which things appear that call upon us to exercise our judgement and discrimination, to draw boundaries, to resist; it is also our “fatality”, in so far as we exist by virtue of the world and the world by virtue of ourselves.

As far as their respective visions of reconciliation with the world are concerned, we have seen that neither thinker provides a clear-cut account of *how* we are to acquire the redeeming perspective on time and world that is the content of redemption. The most each can do is confront us with a possibility for thinking beyond the world-alienation that has characterised our tradition of philosophy and politics. Whether we choose to explore this possibility is not, however, a matter of further philosophical or political argumentation. It is at this point that Nietzsche hints at conversion while Arendt speaks of grace. In this, there is something in the work of both these thinkers that is perhaps best described as a kind of religiosity without God. It is this religiosity that characterised the Greeks whom Nietzsche and Arendt so admire, and it is precisely this sensibility that has been lost in the world-alienation that has characterised philosophy and politics ever since. While it is impossible for us to become “Greek” again, Nietzsche and Arendt seem to hold out the possibility of discovering – or inventing – the analogue of the Greek experience in

ourselves: “That singular command / I do not understand, / *Bless what there is for being,* / Which has to be obeyed, for / What else am I made for, / Agreeing or disagreeing?”⁷



⁷ W.H. Auden: “Precious Five” (1976), quoted by Arendt in *LMW* 92 and 186.

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List of abbreviations

References to Nietzsche's texts consist of the abbreviated title followed by the relevant paragraph number, while in the case of Arendt case the number after the abbreviation refers to the page number. When either the paragraph or page number is preceded by a P, the citation is taken from the preface of the work in question. In Nietzsche's case, references to the unpublished notes from *The Will to Power* are accompanied by the proper reference to the critical edition of his works. In certain instances I have made minor alterations to the translated versions of Nietzsche's texts.

Texts by Nietzsche

- KSA* *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. G. Colli & M. Montinari. München / Berlin: DTV / De Gruyter, 1988.
- A* *The Antichrist*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.
- BGE* *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- BT* *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1967.
- D* *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- GS* *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1974.
- HAH I* *Human, All Too Human Vol. I*, trans. G. Handwerk. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995.
- HAH II* *Human, All too Human Vol. II*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- HW* Homer's Wettkampf. In *KSA* 1.783-792.
- NW* Nietzsche Contra Wagner. In *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. & trans. W. Kaufmann, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.
- TI* *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.
- UM* *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- UDH* "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *UM*
- SE* "Schopenhauer as Educator" in *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. R.T. Gray (new translation of *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*). Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995.
- TSZ* *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.
- UW* *Unpublished Writings from the Period of 'Unfashionable Observations'*, trans. R.T. Gray. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- WP* *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.
- WS* The Wanderer and His Shadow. In *HAH* Vol. 2.

Texts by Arendt

- AJC* *Arendt-Jaspers Correspondence 1926-69*, ed. L. Kohler & H. Saner, trans. R. & R. Imber. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- BPF* *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

- EU *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, ed. J. Kohn. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.
- BFr *Between Friends. the Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*, ed. C. Brightman. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995.
- HC *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- JP *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. R. Feldman. New York: Grove Press, 1978.
- LK *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- LA *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. J.V. Scott & J.C. Stark. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- LMT *The Life of the Mind, Vol. 1: Thinking*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1971.
- LMW *The Life of the Mind, Vol. 2: Willing*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1971.
- MDT *Men in Dark Times*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
- OR *On Revolution*. London: Faber & Faber, 1963.
- OT *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976.
- PP Philosophy and Politics. In *Social Research*, Vol. 57 No.1, 1990, 427-454.
- QM Some Questions of Moral Philosophy. In *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2003.
- RV *Rahel Varnagen. The life of German Jewes*. London / Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- TM Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture. In *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2003.

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