

# The World as the “Beyond” in Politics

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Wohl dem, der keine Heimat hat;  
er sieht sie noch im Traum.  
Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

## *Introduction*

In this essay I will consider transcendence in relation to politics. My focus here will not be on particular forms of collective organization or legislation, but rather on the conditions for the existence of politics as such. Following Hannah Arendt, I will argue that a necessary condition for politics is a concern with a common world. The world in this sense is the common *interest* (“inter-est”: that which lies between us) that informs political action, but that cannot be reduced to anyone’s *particular* interest. In this sense, the world is the “beyond” of politics from which the call goes out for political action, but which can never be fully embodied in any given action or any specific position in the world. If transcendence can be understood as an openness towards an “outside” or “beyond” that stands in relation to “here” as a promise or appeal, then Arendt conceives of the world as just such a promise or appeal directed at human beings whenever they engage in political action.

In developing this line of argument, I have in mind Wessel Stoker’s heuristic model of “transcendence as alterity” (cf. above p. 8). This conception of transcendence does away with the mutually exclusive opposition between transcendence and immanence without merely collapsing the former into the latter. Such thinking—which Stoker associates with the work of

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<sup>1</sup> “Happy is he who has no home; he still sees it in his dreams.”  
From an untitled poem from 1946. Quoted in Young-Bruehl 2004: 487.

Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray, De Dijn, and Mark C. Taylor—treats transcendence as a beyond that is neither wholly above or outside us nor wholly within our grasp. This beyond makes an appeal to us—always a particular appeal for a particular action or actions issuing from particular persons or events—that nevertheless cannot be exhausted by the appeal itself or by any specific response to it. While the majority of philosophers who work in this tradition are primarily concerned with ethics, it is my contention that transcendence as alterity provides us with a heuristic model for understanding the necessary conditions for political (not merely ethical) action. Implicit in this claim is the view that politics is not merely a subsection of ethics but a practice in its own right, with its own conditions of possibility. This is not an argument from *realpolitik*. The point is simply that an ethical relation to the other is not interchangeable with a political relation to the world. It is this relation that constitutes the proper focus of Arendt's thinking and the subject of this essay.<sup>2</sup>

My argument will proceed in three stages. I will begin by considering Arendt's critical analysis of modernity as the eclipse of transcendence, which entails a loss of concern with the world that lies between us—and hence *beyond* any one of us—and a concomitant rise in concern with what lies *inside* us. For Arendt, this loss goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of politics, of which totalitarianism is only the most extreme example. It is precisely in light of this loss that she seeks to rethink the meaning of the world in its various aspects. This is the focus of the second part of this essay. My focus here is on Arendt's treatment of the human conditions of worldliness and natality insofar as they evoke transcendence as alterity. In the third and final section, I will turn to Arendt's attempt to think, not transcendence as such, but our proper *relation* to transcendence. I argue that she designates this relation with the term *amor mundi*: love of the world. I conclude that Arendt presents us with an understanding of the world as neither a perfect home nor a

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of clarity: I am not concerned here with the *content* of politics. My aim is to consider Arendt's treatment of the world—or, more accurately, a particular conception of the world and our relation to it—as a condition for political action.

domain of radical homelessness but as a dream of home that does not seek its own fulfilment.

*Modernity and the Eclipse of Transcendence*

In his essay, Wessel Stoker argues that transcendence as alterity frequently performs a critical function with respect to culture (cf. above pp. 9-10). Arendt's critical analysis of modernity should be understood in this light. For Arendt, modernity designates a condition of culture that manifests itself in a specific constellation of beliefs, judgements and overt practices. For the purposes of the present argument, I will concentrate on a particular strain of her criticism, namely, that modernity is predicated on a flight from the world into the self. In the context of philosophy, this inward turn can be discerned in Descartes' attempt to locate the source of truth —the Archimedean point, so to speak—in the subject. In Arendt's analysis, this privileging of subjectivity can be understood as a philosophical response to Galileo's proof that our senses can deceive us about the nature of reality. Descartes reacted 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" (Arendt 1958: 254). This privileging of introspection follows from the conviction that, since certainty could not 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: "nobody is interfering but the producer of the product, man, is confronted by nothing and nobody but himself" (Arendt 1958: 280).

But what can we discover through introspection in the absence of any reference to a world beyond ourselves? Arendt argues that 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. Her point is that human beings in and of themselves, apart from any worldly relationship, share the basic quality of all animal life, which is to enhance their chances of survival by avoiding pain

and, derivatively, pursuing pleasure. The 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 actual goal of human existence (cf. Arendt 1958: 309). We see the effects of this kind of reasoning quite clearly in Hobbes—himself influenced by Descartes' inward turn—who indeed takes self-preservation as the guiding force of human reason and consequently reduces all politics to a means of achieving pleasure and avoiding pain.<sup>3</sup>

This flight from the world into the self constitutes the complete immanentization of existence. And, from Arendt's perspective, this negation of transcendence in favour of some kind of "inner emigration" is precisely a way of unlearning how to be human. In her formulation, the modern flight into the self, into sheer subjective givenness, is accompanied by

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. (Arendt 1958: 21)

What remains under these circumstances are beings who have lost the capacity to be fully human.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt writes: "Hobbes's *Leviathan* exposed the only political theory according to which the state is based not on some kind of constituting law – whether divine law, the law of nature, or the law of social contract – which determines the rights and wrongs of the individual's interest with respect to public affairs, but on the individual interests themselves, so that 'the private interest is the same with the publique'" (Arendt 1976: 139). From Hobbes to the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, in all cases the starting point is the inner life of the individual, and the principles according to which society ought to be arranged are those that would best conform to these private desires.

<sup>4</sup> See also Arendt 1958: 284: "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 com-

In Arendt's analysis, the inward turn of modernity is not confined to philosophy but quite visibly plays itself out at the level of society. Modern "society," in her sense of the word, is precisely the domain that is predicated on the basic sameness of all who belong to it. This is the sameness of basic biological needs, of our species existence. Society can therefore be defined as

the form in 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. (Arendt 1958: 46)

In Arendt's 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, and not the world, is the central concern. Against this background, the social realm can then be understood as the domain in which this biological necessity is accorded the highest value. As such, the rise of the social destroys the very concern with the world beyond all strictly biological concerns and hence undermines the distinction between species existence and *humanitas*.<sup>5</sup>

Stated differently, modern society represents the "unnatural growth of the natural" (Arendt 1958: 47). As such, it destroys the world as a human artifice, which is predicated precisely on the delimitation of world and nature. Given that the social realm is nothing more than the biological life-interest expanded beyond all measure, it consists of a collectivity of worldless subjects who are neither together nor separate but merely side by side. The social realm is a kind of collective existence in which individuals, despite their apparent closeness, remain im-

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mon to all men, human beings are indeed no more than animals who are able to reason, to reckon with consequences."

<sup>5</sup> For Arendt's conception of *humanitas*, see section 2 below.

prisoned in their own private experience. While this experience may be multiplied across a great many of them, it is nevertheless not something shared, precisely because it cannot be presented as a matter for deliberation and judgement within a common world (cf. Arendt 1977: 58). As Arendt says, “the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them” (Arendt 1958: 53). 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. There is no road from the inner life of the subject—even if in its basic form this life is the same for everyone—back to the world we share with others.

Arendt argues that, at the centre of the social stands life, while at the centre of the political stands the world, and it is for this reason that an ever-expanding social realm is destructive of politics. She considers this world alienation to be one of the key elements in the emergence of twentieth-century totalitarianism. In her account, the totalitarian phenomenon is predicated on “the denial of everything given” (Arendt 1977: 34)—that is, everything that confronts us as *other* and therefore beyond our control. This denial springs from the resentment of the limiting conditions that everything that we have not made ourselves places on human existence, together with the hubristic drive to overcome these limitations by transforming the world into a product of our own hands. This fabricating mentality extends to human beings themselves: by deploying terror on a massive scale, the totalitarian regime “eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the ‘parts’ for the sake of the whole” in the attempt to fabricate “mankind” in accordance with universal laws that can be fully grasped by human reason (Arendt 1976: 465).

The totalitarian impetus thus aims at the absolute determination of human beings, and hence at the elimination of the very qualities and relationships that distinguish human existence from animal existence. This renders individual human beings—as opposed to amorphous, malleable “society”—entirely superfluous. At the same time, it is inherent in the structure of totalitarianism that the end state of a supposedly perfected humankind is never reached. Or rather, insofar as this humankind is nothing but the embodiment of supra-human

laws of movement, it has no end state but only exists in the continuous extermination of those who impede its momentum. In a stark image, Arendt portrays the totalitarian society 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. (Arendt 1994: 341)

Totalitarianism, then, is the ultimate embodiment of the loss of transcendence: the negation of a world that exceeds human power in favour of a world in which we always and everywhere encounter only ourselves (Arendt 1958: 261; 1977: 277). This totalitarian striving after a limitlessly humanized world denies us any encounter with what we are not, and thus destroys any measure of the human. In Arendt's famous phrase, "[t]he world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human," and the organised mass crimes of totalitarianism demonstrated very well 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" (Arendt 1976: 299).

Of course, Arendt is not claiming that the world, as defined above, has literally vanished. What concerns her is the loss of a *conception of* and *relation to* the world as a condition of our existence that exceeds our grasp, that does not fully belong to us and that is not a function of our power. Thus, what is at stake in modernity is not the disappearance of the world itself but rather what Nancy (1997: 5) calls the "*end of the sense of the world*, which is the *end of the world of sense*," so that "[t]here is no longer any sense in 'a sense of the world'." It is precisely in order to counter "the end of the world" in this sense that Arendt sets out to rethink its possibility. This is best understood as an attempt on her part to resist the relentless process of immanentization that has characterized modernity.

*World, Natality, Transcendence*

In order to make sense of Arendt's conception of world, it is helpful to start with the distinction she draws between "world" and "earth." This is the distinction between a human construct or artifice on the one hand and the natural habitat in which we, along with all organic life, are able to "move and breathe without effort and without artifice" (Arendt 1958: 2). We inhabit this natural habitat as members of a biological species. The world, however, is the realm in which human beings appear, not as instances of biological life but as individual persons. 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 artefacts conquered over nature but resisting the flux of its cycles" (Arendt 1958: 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 (Arendt 1958: 137).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt's thinking in this regard is undoubtedly informed by Heidegger's conception of world in its ontic and ontological sense. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Arendt is merely importing directly from Heidegger. While both thinkers structure their reflections around the notion of world, worldhood (Heidegger) and worldliness (Arendt), they do so from different perspectives and for different reasons. The primary difference between them is that (the early) Heidegger is concerned with the world for the sake of the self—or then, with the fate of the self in the world—while Arendt is concerned with the fate of the world in which we find ourselves. In her view, "Heidegger's Self is an ideal which has been working mischief in German philosophy and literature since Romanticism" (Arendt 1946: 50). The mischief is the denial of the reality of the world as the domain of political action, in favour of a conception of the world as a medium of authentic self-expression or an object of disinterested wonder (as is the case with the later Heidegger). For a more extensive treatment of Arendt's criticism of Heidegger on this score, see Biskowski 1995: 77-85.



The world, in Arendt's sense, can therefore be understood as 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. The artefacts that constitute the world are not only material objects but also laws, institutions, stories, histories, poems, and plays: all of them more or less durable creations that distinguish human existence from sheer nature.<sup>7</sup> The world in this extended sense can be understood 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). Moreover, our relations with one another, as well as our judgements about one other, are always mediated by the world in both senses of the word. As Arendt's so memorably formulates it:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (Arendt 1971a: 29)

On this view, every one of us sits at a different place around the same table, closer to some and further from others, but nevertheless related to one another on the basis of the very table—that is, the world—that lies between us. In terms of this conception, it is not that the world belongs to us, so that we might therefore make of it what we will, but rather that we belong to the world we have in common with others but that transcends anyone's particular place within it.

For Arendt, then, a life is not yet human merely by virtue of biological birth. Our humanity is not seated in the naked fact of existence, or in a set of species characteristics, but precisely in our distinction from one another—and this distinction is only possible within "a framework where one is judged by one's ac-

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<sup>7</sup> See also Arendt 1994: 20: "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."

tions and opinions" rather than by one's membership in the human species (Arendt 1976: 294). To occupy such a framework is precisely to inhabit a world, as opposed to merely living on earth. In a startling reworking of the message of the gospels, Arendt suggests that we become human precisely by 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. (Arendt 1958: 176-77)

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 on to 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. (Arendt 1958: 177)<sup>8</sup>

Arendt's remarks on birth and beginning should be understood in the context of her conception of the human conditions of natality and mortality. Birth and death are, of course, primarily natural occurrences, in keeping with the overall metabolism of nature, whereby living organisms come and go, grow and decay. However, natality and mortality are specifically *human* conditions, in so far as they presuppose a durable and relatively permanent world that precedes our arrival on and departure from this earth (cf. Arendt 1958: 96). It is only in

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Arendt 1958: 9: "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."

the frame of such a common world that we appear as persons—that is, that we acquire personas—as opposed to remaining instances of a species. Arendt likens this persona to the Greek *daimon* or guardian spirit that accompanies each of us throughout one's life but, because he or she is always looking over one's shoulder, is not recognizable to oneself. One's *daimon* appears only to others in the context of a public realm:

This *daimon*—which has nothing demonic about it—this personal element in human beings, can appear only where 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, manifest in it is what the Romans called *humanitas* (Arendt 1970: 76).

Later in the same passage, she describes this *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. Such a venture is only realized in active engagement with the world, *for the sake of the world*, and not merely for the sake of human beings in the world.

The concluding passage to the discussion on action in *The Human Condition* relates this notion of praxis to the redemptive power of natality:

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. (Arendt 1958: 247)

There is a messianic aspect to Arendt's thinking here, insofar as it centres on a redemption that is to come. Nevertheless, the religiosity on display here should not be mistaken for an unre-

solved longing for a God who has withdrawn from the world. In this regard, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of a non-eschatological or “inconspicuous” messianism on Arendt’s part (Gottlieb 2003: 140)—or, as Stoker would have it, a “messianism without a messiah and a religion without religion” (cf. above p. 26). What is more, 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 self. 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 2:11, which reads: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (King James Version) As Gottlieb (2003) and Dolan (2004) both point out, Arendt seems rather to have Isaiah 9:6 in mind: “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 everyday, miraculous possibility of human beings beginning something new *in* the world. In this way, Arendt establishes a relationship between the world that lies beyond the limits of any single life and the new beginning that *is* each individual person born into the world. The world is a “beyond” that only exists by virtue of immanent words and deeds, while nevertheless remaining irreducible to any one of these. She therefore does not conceive of transcendence in opposition to immanence, in which respect her thinking accords with Stoker’s model of transcendence as alterity.

It is important to recognize, moreover, that Arendt’s emphasis on natality is not a denial of mortality. It is, however, a denial of mortality as the principal fact of human existence. In this regard, Arendt deliberately places herself in opposition to a long line of philosophers from Plato to Heidegger who had made mortality into the central problem of philosophy. Arendt does not counter the emphasis on death in the name of life, which is indeed always on its way towards death, but in the name of our capacity to interrupt the natural course of things, to begin anew. She writes:

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* (Arendt 1958: 246; italics mine).

Arendt is distinguishing here between death as necessity and beginning as purpose. Necessity is simply what *must* inevitably happen to us, irrespective of any action or our part, whereas purpose is bound up with action that transcends necessity. So, if messianic thinking is predicated on a teleological conception of human existence that posits an ultimate aim or end for the sake of which life is to be lived, Arendt is here presenting us with such an end. However, the way in which she conceives of this end subverts the very notion of teleology on which the traditional notion of redemption rests. As Susan Gottlieb (2003: 141) points out, Arendt is saying here 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 radicalize the teleological notion of "in order to," so the ultimate purpose of human existence, its salvific impetus, is precisely "to break out of the order of 'in order to'" (Gottlieb 2003: 141; italics mine). 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 the inevitable ending of all things can only be realized 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 (Gottlieb 2003: 141).

In light of the above, it can be said that Arendt's inconspicuous messianism exhibits precisely what Stoker calls "the messianic structure" of transcendence as alterity—that is, "the formal structure of openness to an alterity in time that entails both a promise and a command" (cf. above pp. 25). The promise, in this case, is simply the promise of a new beginning.

Arendt writes in this regard that “every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only ‘message’ which the end can ever produce” (Arendt 1976: 478-79). The command inherent in her messianism is precisely the command to save the world by making such a beginning—that is, to act, to risk oneself, out of “faith in and hope for the world.”

For Arendt, it is this risking of oneself that is the hallmark of political action. The quality of such action is best expressed by Machiavelli’s concept of *virtù*:

*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. (Arendt 1977: 137)

Arendt thus portrays *virtù* as the active response to whatever claim the world makes on us—that is to say, to *fortuna*—outside of any considerations of self. The call to such response does not depend on us, but on the world; is a matter of fortune, not design. Moreover, whatever our response, it remains subject to contingency. We can never know how any deed will affect the constellation as a whole. Political action is therefore not a matter of achieving command over destiny, but of making a beginning without being guaranteed of the outcome. It is precisely for this reason that Arendt sets her analysis of action under the rubric of “faith and hope.” In the final section of this essay I will examine her treatment of the virtue that completes “faith” and “hope,” namely, “love.”

*Amor Mundi*<sup>9</sup>

If Arendt is concerned to (re)awaken us to a sense of the world as transcendence, the question inevitably arises: What is the appropriate relation or attitude towards the world that concerns us? Her answer is: love. She writes in this regard: "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."<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, in a letter to Jaspers, she remarks that

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*. (Arendt 1992: 264)

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 (Plato's solution) and into the self (the specific solution that characterizes modernity). 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, Arendt's notion of *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 opposes the specifically modern belief that we can only be at home in the world insofar as it conforms to our desires. Her point, in other words, is not that we can be more at home by working harder at making the world coincide with our expectations but rather by choosing to fit ourselves into a world that is not in the first place "for us." Thus, to love the world is in the first place to *choose* the world as one's home:

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<sup>9</sup> For an earlier version of the argument presented in this section, see Roodt 2008: 419-22.

<sup>10</sup> This quotation is from an unpublished lecture entitled "Basic Moral Propositions," container 41, p024560, Library of Congress, cited by Beiner 1992: 173, n. 149.

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." (Arendt 1996: 67)

On the one hand, to love the world is to be concerned with what becomes of it and to act in accordance with this concern. Yet Arendt also presents us with a more radical conception of love that is not merely concern but affirmation. We find this expressed in a phrase that occurs repeatedly in her work: "*Amo: Volo ut sis*" – I love you: I will that you exist (Arendt 1971b: 104). In an early passage, she refers to "the great and incalculable grace of love" that nevertheless does not depend on our "being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation" (1976: 301). Love as affirmation without the need for further justification is the point where the order of "in order to"/"for the sake of" ceases. It is therefore the very opposite of love as possession or assimilation, which only understands the object of love as an extension of the desire of the lover. Moreover, this unconditional affirmation of something or someone cannot be brought about by argument, persuasion or threat. Rather, it is a matter of "grace" and, as such, analogous to the love that God has for human beings rather than the love human beings have for God:

The willing ego when it says its highest manifestation, "*Amo: Volo ut sis*", "I love you; I want you to be"—and not "I want to have you" or "I want to rule you"—shows itself capable of the love with which supposedly God loves men, whom he created only because He willed them to exist and whom he loves without desiring them. (Arendt 1971b: 136)

In the context of the present discussion, we can say that, for Arendt, this kind of love is the proper response to transcendence as alterity. To love the world in this way is to affirm the existence of the otherness of the world without appeal to further grounds. This affirmation should not be understood as a debt we owe the world that, once paid, gives us the right to claim back what the world owes us. There is an asymmetrical relationship between ourselves and the world in that we are *of the world*, but the world is not *of* any of us. In this regard, Arendt's treatment of our relationship to the world is analo-



gous to Derrida's treatment of the gift, insofar as it lies outside the economy of give and take, or the calculation of self-interest (Derrida 1992: 30). In other words, the world is a gift to us that we cannot claim credit for receiving. That is why Arendt speaks of "gratitude" in her letter to Jaspers quoted above: the fact that the world calls up love in us is something to be grateful for precisely because it is not under our control.

Nevertheless, Arendt's advocacy of *unconditional* affirmation should not be equated with *uncritical* affirmation. In her reading of the famous lines that Thucydides attributes to Pericles, i.e. "We love beauty within the limits of political judgement, and we philosophize without the barbarian vice of effeminacy" (Arendt 1977: 214), she praises the role of judgement and discrimination in this earlier Greek conception of love. She concludes her analysis with the rhetorical question:

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? (Arendt 1977: 214-15)

For Arendt, to love is therefore not to refrain from judgement and discrimination. However, this discriminating love is not conditional upon the world conforming to one's own desires. It says, rather: *because* I love the world it matters to me what appears in it, and therefore I will take a stand with regard to the things in it.

As I interpret her here, Arendt's conception of *amor mundi* therefore does not involve the complete identification of the world and human beings—which is to say, the wholesale collapse of transcendence into immanence. This point becomes clearer when we compare the love *of* the world with the love that human beings have for one another *in* the world. In Arendt's account, the most telling characteristic of the latter kind of love is that it, "by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others" (Arendt 1958: 242; cf. Arendt 1970: 21; 1958: 51-52). In other words, 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, retains

the distance between who we are and what we love. She argues in this regard that we should love the world “but ironically, which is to say, without selling one’s soul to it” (Arendt 1970: 14). Perhaps we might say that what is at stake here is a reconciliation with the world precisely in its strangeness; with the extent to which the world transcends all particular desires of our souls, so that we must remain in some sense not at home in it. In the language of the poem cited at the beginning of the essay, *amor mundi* would then be a dream of home that does not seek its own fulfilment.

To summarize, I have argued in this essay that Arendt’s conception of world can be understood as an attempt to think transcendence as alterity. In this case, the “beyond” that makes an appeal on the “here” is the world that lies between us and hence beyond any one of us. The proper response to this call is to act, to begin something new in the world for the sake of the world. The impetus for such response is *amor mundi*. Yet this love is not a gift we bring to the world, but a gift from the world to us. Arendt’s aim is to make us receptive to this gift, were it to come to us.

What, then, are the implications of this conception of transcendence for our understanding of politics? Arendt offers us an understanding of political action as the active engagement with the world, not for the sake of protecting any particular set of interests, but for the sake of the world itself, which is our common interest. The condition for such engagement is love of the world in its “givenness” — without, as she says, selling our souls to it. This understanding of the world renders a conception of political action as a way of being at home in the world that eschews an exclusive commitment to anyone’s particular place within it. To accept that the world is not there for any of us, that it lies beyond our private concerns, while nevertheless making an appeal to us from where we are not, is to accept that politics is predicated on transcendence.

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