

Rethinking Political Foundations with Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin

by

Eno Trimçev

St. Edmund Hall

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ABSTRACT

The problem of understanding political foundations is situated at the nexus between political philosophy and political science. This thesis rethinks founding by asking both the philosophical question of how political order comes into being, and the political science question of how to understand particular founding moments. These two questions stimulate and structure a dialogue between the works of Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin. The approach of founding in all three has a common starting point: they begin from ordinary experience and outline a political science that is mindful of the phenomenality of political life. I show that Strauss's return to ordinary experience is partial. By limiting political life to the normative claims raised in it and submitting them to philosophical judgment, Strauss moves too quickly beyond political phenomena. His account of founding, as a consequence, vacillates between understanding particular founding acts and conceiving the perfect founding moment in abstract thought. Arendt's work decisively shifts the problem on the side of practical understanding. Yet, her ontological account of action as appearance subtly displaces her concern for understanding historical actions. I move away from approaching historical foundations as a mode of appearing in the world, by recovering an account of action as experience. On that basis, I suggest a hermeneutics of experience which approaches foundations in light of the quest for meaning. With Voegelin founding is recovered as a symbol that exists only in the quest of understanding. Founding occurs in the experience of struggle to restore a reality that has become symbolically opaque. This experience is shared by the philosopher and the political actor; therefore to understand moments of founding requires the interweaving, and not separation, of political philosophy and political science. At the end, the quest of understanding founding moments is neither derivative, nor preparatory, but encompassing the philosophical question of how order comes into being.

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1. Introduction

In this thesis I consider from the perspective of political theory the problem of understanding moments of political founding. I seek an answer to two questions that suggest different levels of analysis. First, what is at stake in founding an actual political community? Or how do political orders come into being in history? Secondly, in light of the answer to the first question, how should we understand actual historical founding moments?

To shed light on the interrelation between the philosophical problem of the nature of human order in history and the problem of understanding actual founding moments, I shall draw on the work of three major theorists: Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin. This will enable me to recover the question of founding as one of understanding the interplay of acts and beliefs that result in new political communities. I shall sketch a philosophical anthropology that can think founding events without the ontological remainders of post-foundational political philosophy or the ahistoricism of contract theory. Examining the combination of philosophical and empirical works of these thinkers will allow me to draw conclusions about the nature of founding moments.

1.1. The Problem of Foundings in Political Theory and Political Science

This study has arisen from dissatisfaction with the current state of thinking on the problem of foundings in political theory as well as with the variety of efforts to understand actual founding moments in political science. Purely philosophical efforts to shed light on the matter, useful as they may be in theory, shed little light on actual founding moments. This is not to belittle those whose concerns may be far removed

from the nature of historical events, but it does implicate a conviction that political theorists can engage empiricists fruitfully. Political science, from older historical structuralism to contemporary political science, has been generally unable or unwilling to differentiate founding moments from other events such as revolutions. It avoids speaking of the birth of a new body politic in favor of the idea of incremental development.¹ More current efforts, such as transitology—the comparative study of transitions to democracy—have been a marked improvement as they focus on political process, elite bargaining and the dynamic of transitions to democracy.² But, it too has suffered due to the drive to decontextualize events or abstract from the actions, speeches and deeds of real actors in order to find general laws to guide transitional processes. On the other hand, historical institutionalism explicitly uses the analytic of development as it compares socio-political change over time.³ This may work in the right context, but it has proved quite inadequate at those most unpredictable moments of political action:

¹ Robert V. Edington, “The Ancient Idea of Founding & the Contemporary Study of Political Change,” *Polity*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter, 1974), 163-179.

² Transitology is a field of study with multiple meanings, methodologies, and permeable borders that cannot be praised or dismissed simply. Here I refer to the conventional description of the field which began with Dankwart Rustow’s seminal 1970 article that called for a genetic theory of democratization. It was revolutionized by Juan Linz and again by O’Donnell and Schmitter’s focus on political actors. Despite its vitality, constant expansion and transformation, as the number of transitioning countries increased, transitology slowly lost its paramount position in the field of studying the beginnings of democracy. Its focus on the political process positively distinguished it from predecessors like modernization theory. Yet, it has tended to suffer the cost of seeking generalizable rules by which to explain the genesis of democratic transition. This has meant that the field of studying transitions to democracy is now more open and eclectic than ever before. Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics*, vol., 2, no., 3 (Apr., 1970): 337-363; Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996); Jordan Gans-Morse, “Searching for Transitologists: Contemporary Theories of Post-Communist Transitions and the Myth of a Dominant Paradigm,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol., 20, no., 4 (2004): 320-349; Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and International Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

³ Structuralists explicitly analyze political outcomes through structural analysis. The seminal works are Barrington Moore, Jr. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) and Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

revolutions and the rearticulation of bodies politic. After all the hustle and bustle of applying the very latest methods to contemporary revolutions, what seems to work best is the oldest but by now almost forgotten kind of study of political affairs: political history. This thesis aims to elucidate why and how political history—a Thucydidean kind of political history—matters.

There are three reasons for returning to the problem of foundations in political theory. Firstly, social contract theory as the main theoretical tradition dealing with the problem has necessarily had little to say about foundations in historical time. Secondly, until very recently political theory outside the contract tradition has been relatively silent on the revolutionary tumult of the last two decades since the end of the Cold War. Although much has been written on these events—from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the recent Arab Spring—political theorists have either been missing or have conflated their inquiry with a normative, often emancipatory agenda. Too often they have taken the meaning of events for granted, confining themselves to pronouncing judgement on how matters should proceed and what the end-result should be. I shall argue, by contrast, that it is precisely the meaning of political events that is at stake. It follows that while the renewed theoretical interest on the problem of foundations has been productive within the realm of political theory, it has shed little light on the practical question of how one should actually understand historical foundations. I proceed to explain each of these points in full.

The theoretical tradition that has addressed founding moments most explicitly is contract theory, which has understood the problem of political foundations in what Raymond

Geuss would call the “idealistic” sense.⁴ Criticism of contract theory as ahistorical is inappropriate because it does not aim to give a historical description, but to reveal universal principles of social constitution or a rights-based society, and sometimes to persuade political actors of the cogency of a particular position—whether the cause of monarchy, as in the case of Hobbes, or of a liberal view of justice as fairness, as in the case of Rawls. At any rate, in the words of Sheldon Wolin, its defense “does expose an assumption: namely, that it is possible to talk intelligibly about the most fundamental principles of a political society as though neither the society nor the individuals in it had a history.”⁵ It conceives the emergence of politics from an abstract origin, a state of nature, where human beings are imagined as lonely or rationally self-interested beings whose individuality is rooted in the factual statement: “to be means to be apart”. This is the point of departure for contract theories, which then try to conceive of reasons why these separate beings would freely enter into a social contract. The principles of a rights-based society may or may not be deduced from this contractual relationship. Political dynamics follow from this instrumental choice so as to minimize threats and protect goods. Temporally, choice involves present and future only. The individual in the state of nature, emerging out of a vacuum of meaning, asks: “How do I best improve my (brutish) lot?” A body politic with no past, no memory and no inner dynamic into which one is born takes shape in the philosopher’s mind. Its first principle is equality, and it is no wonder that contractarians spend most of their time arguing about economic development and redistribution—political economy rather than politics.

⁴ Raymond, Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵ Sheldon S. Wolin, “Contract and Birthright,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May, 1986), 181.

Contract theories, then, are necessarily silent on the “sound and fury” of political history, having little to say about actual political ruptures, popular mobilizations, conjunctures of constitutional innovations or the ever unique character of political relationships that make a body politic. Even when they do notice history, they accentuate continuity and legality. Given that contract theory is silent on the problem of understanding historical founding moments, it is intuitively improbable that it can contribute to answering my questions.

The second reason for returning to the problem of foundings is the relative silence of political theory on the anti-communist revolutions of 1989, the break-up of federations and creation of new nation states in the Eastern Bloc space, the “color revolutions” of the last decade, and the ongoing Arab Spring. Are these moments of political founding, partial regime change, or mere tumultuous moments of elite swaps? One would have expected theory to have its say on these most political of moments; instead, as Jeffrey Isaac pointed out, the number of scholarly articles in political theory journals regarding the 1989 events was insignificant.⁶ One of the more powerful arguments that have been advanced by political theorists in defense of their silence is that the theoretical literature emerging from these events is not particularly innovative. But the problem worth investigating may not be the theoretical innovations of a Václav Havel or a György Konrád, but the actual dynamics of political struggle: the coming-into-being of a new body politic. As Isaac points out, the most striking thing is not the disregard for the revolutionary texts of the time, but that political theory “seem[ed] bereft of any

⁶ Jeffrey C. Isaac, “The Strange Silence of Political Theory,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Nov., 1995): 637.

interpretation”⁷ at all. For a form of inquiry that has inherited a birthright of engagement—personal and interpretive—with political events, this silence seems to be unjustified except by the nature of developments within political theory.

While interest in actual events may be relatively scarce, alternative forms of theorizing about foundings have found their way onto the agenda, especially in the last decade.⁸ This work may be divided into two camps: the first rethinks foundings in order to recover an emancipatory dimension of politics judged to be missing in more deliberative or consensual theories of order; the second returns to past texts in order to enrich theoretical understanding of foundings. The first, agonistic camp includes such diverse theorists as Bonnie Honig, Giorgio Agamben, Benjamin Ardit, and Slavoj Žižek. To various degrees, they are interested on actual events or the times we live in. On the whole, while their means are theoretical, their goal is political: they want to challenge the liberal democratic consensus;⁹ expand or change the nature of contemporary political debates;¹⁰ find new ways to motivate action in concert in emergency settings;¹¹ or shed light on problems facing modern societies as a result of profound theoretical

⁷ Isaac, “The Strange Silence,” 641.

⁸ Perhaps Markell is right to attribute this renewed interest to awakening from the slumber of the End of History that characterized the post Cold War moment, and the realization of the different range of problems that entered the political arena in the 1990s—ethnic conflict, immigration, religious fundamentalism, regime change, state-building—which brought back to public attention the basic questions relating to human order. Patchen Markell, *Bound By Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 2.

⁹ Benjamin Ardit, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), chapter 4 & 5; Slavoj Žižek, “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol., 28, no., 2 (2002): 542-566.

¹⁰ Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

¹¹ Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Bruce Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

misunderstandings of our political situation.¹² Actual founding moments, such as the American Declaration of Independence,¹³ are used primarily to raise questions and re-theorize politics in a manner that reverses the perceived anomie of our contemporary political situation. Of course, in the process many theoretical gains are made on the problems of sovereignty, the exception, the role of decision in politics, the nature of political freedom and the politics of recognition. But the problem of foundings is generally used to challenge the existing theoretical or political consensus, and the finest contributions of this literature lie in this area.

The second camp has more straightforwardly theoretical ambitions. It returns to seminal texts of political theory and rereads them to respond theoretically to the issue of founding a new political community. Two representative examples of this group are Oliver Marchart's careful reconstruction of the *political difference* in post-foundationalist texts of French "Left Heideggerians,"¹⁴ and Andreas Kalyvas's productive reading of three Weimar-era scholars to theorize the dynamics of political foundings.¹⁵ Marchart points to the necessity of philosophical engagement with the problem of foundings because of the *difference* between "politics," which operates at the pragmatic level as a particular social system, its acts and institutions, and "the political" as an ontological concept that points to a contingent cause beyond politics and prevents the closure of the social system. Kalyvas, by contrast, advances a more pragmatic

¹² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans., Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), esp. 15-26, 109; Patchen Markell, *Bound By Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹³ Bonnie Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory," *The American Political Science Review*, vol., 101, no., 1 (Feb. 2007): 1-17.

¹⁴ Oliver Marchart, *Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

dichotomy between “normal” and “extraordinary” politics. He puts forward a three-level model of democratic politics where the extraordinary exists prior to (the constitutive moment), within and on the fringes of normal politics. “Extraordinary politics” denotes not an ontological interrogation of “normal politics,” but ontic moments of high levels of collective mobilization and extensive popular support for fundamental changes in the existing constitutional structure:

During these extraordinary moments, the slumbering popular sovereign wakes up to reaffirm its supreme power of self-determination and self-government and to substantially rearrange or alter the fundamental norms, values and institutions that regulate ordinary legislation and institutionalized politics.¹⁶

While Marchart points to the contingency of the actual grounds of any society, Kalyvas paints a broad-brushed theoretical picture of foundational dynamics.

This thesis inscribes in the latter camp of theoretical works on foundings, with one caveat. By contrast with Kalyvas, my intention is not to create a theoretical model of foundings applicable to actual founding moments, to distinguish democratic from non-democratic ones, or to respond to contemporary political challenges.¹⁷ Indeed, it is not intuitively clear to me that such universal and parsimonious models enhance our understanding of actual politics, which seems irreducibly to implicate particular contexts. By contrast with Marchart likewise, I do not seek to clarify the theoretical status of the “absent cause”¹⁸ in any social system, but to think about experiences of founding. While from the standpoint of the recent return to foundings in political theory this thesis is part of the latter camp due to its theoretical rather than political goals, my

¹⁶ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 7-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 296-297.

¹⁸ Marchart, *Political Difference*, 6.

irreducibly “experiential or interpretative perspective”¹⁹ places it at a distance from that grouping.

Nevertheless, the post-foundationalists advance our thinking about politics in the right direction by restoring the autonomy of politics as a mode of being that cannot be reduced to its empirical externals. Through “the political” they have discovered how to theoretically interrogate political experience without transcending it *a priori* and without assuming it static or closed.²⁰ To take Claude Lefort for example, the problem of foundings is to be found in the moment in history when the political reorganizes social reality:

The political is thus revealed, not in what we call political activity but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed.²¹

Here the political is the absent ontologic cause of every particular shaping of the social, while the founding moment is its always partial revealing. The post-foundationalists foster a way of thinking where theory is at the service of understanding political reality; however, the service is rendered in a way that incites theory’s suspicion and distrust of political reality. Politics is seen as that which “necessarily fails to deliver what it has promised,”²² *i.e.* a final ground. If politics always seeks its own closure, and post-foundationalism is the commitment to open up the instances of closure, post-foundationalism is necessarily suspicious of an activity which perpetually fails to come

¹⁹ Lois McNay, “The Trouble with Recognition: Subjectivity, Suffering, and Agency,” *Sociological Theory*, vol., 26, no., 3 (Sep., 2008): 272.

²⁰ Claude Lefort, *Writing. The Political Test* (Durham, N., C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 24.

²¹ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans., D., Macey (Oxford: Polity, 1988), 11.

²² Marchart, *Political Difference*, 8.

through. Post-foundationalism *begins* from a break with politics by imputing a split between politics and its *difference*, and then thinking through the status of this difference. It produces an arsenal of concepts such as “the event” and “the political,” and with them then interrogates political grounds. The ontological status of post-foundationalist concepts is of course “necessarily contingent” and is “only present in its effects”,²³ but this does not erase the suspicion of politics which seeks, without ever attaining, closure. It is not their ontology (for they have none), but their ontologizing that moves post-foundationalist thought in a nuanced way outside the experiences whose meanings it seeks to reveal.

The attitude of suspicion toward politics wedds post-foundationalists to other groups such as the Lacanians, with whom they would otherwise have little in common.²⁴ The patterns of symbolization and meaning that emerge in political experience are viewed with suspicion because it “has the creative power to produce cultural identities, but at a price, the cost of covering over the fundamental nothingness that forms its foundation [...] it is culture, not nature, that abhors a vacuum, above all that of its own contingency.”²⁵ The problem of foundings, even though “demystified” by viewing them as re-symbolizations of socio-political space occurring through political struggle, continues to haunt these schools, whose concern to illumine the impossibility or the threat of closure leads to calls for the student of political events to keep outside, to expose the putative nothingness or contingency of their instituting, *i.e.* to *transcend* political participation. Demystification in this view frames our concerns, yet it also

²³ Ibid., 6.

²⁴ Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁵ Gilbert D., Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan* (Cambridge:: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4-5.

relegates politics to a deficient register of reality defined by lack, or incapacity to deliver. “There is a structural lack in the symbolic, which means that certain points of the real can’t be symbolized in a definite manner [...] The unmitigated real provokes anxiety, and this in turn gives rise to never-ending, defensive, imaginary constructs.”²⁶ Logically, Verhaege concludes, “All human productions [...] can be understood in the light of that structural failure of the symbolic in relationship to the real.”²⁷ But something that is condemned to fail cannot ultimately give an account of itself; cannot be fully legitimate; cannot inspire, and therefore is unworthy of engagement in earnest. It is to be rejected, transcended or manipulated but not understood. This view is more appealing than many of its competitors because it philosophy back to politics, explicitly rejecting any sort of transcendental idealism or ontology as such. Yet, this irreducibility is expelled the moment it is recognized by viewing social meaning as a “trap” or politics as insufficient to account for itself without a pure moment—conceived as a *negativity*, to be sure—that stands outside itself. Stemming from the Heideggerian revolt against instrumental reason, these schools become vulnerable to falling back on a nuanced form of instrumentality *vis-à-vis* political reality.

Clearly, post-foundationalists and Lacanians would object to this. For example, commenting on Lacan, Žižek notes, regarding historical analysis:

Lacan is as far as it is possible to be from any ‘tabooing’ of the real, from elevating it into an untouchable entity exempted from historical analysis—his point, rather, is that the only true ethical stance is to assume fully the impossible task of symbolizing the real, inclusive of its necessary failure.²⁸

²⁶ P. Verhaege, “Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis and Hysteria,” *The Letter*, (1994), 2:60 in Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 71.

²⁷ Verhaege, 61 in *ibid.*, 71.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (London: Verso, 1994), 199-200.

This is another way of saying that in face of the impossibility of capturing the whole, we have no option but to symbolize, however precariously. This symbolization can take one of two paths: the phantasmatic path of repressing the real or closing oneself off from it, or the psychoanalytic path of articulating symbols that remain open to the impossibilities of social reality. But to earnestly engage the world as given to thinking and acting human beings requires understanding how they symbolize the real here, now. To say anything of value about the real—in Lacanian terminology—is to see it from the standpoint of political struggle. The problem is precisely that here the real is posited as an excess beyond symbolization; whence thought gets entangled perhaps inevitably with Stavrakakis’s question: “... how can we [...] approach [...] the real before it becomes reality, before its symbolization?”²⁹ It is not without a tinge of disappointment that he answers: “Well, in fact, we can’t; what we can do, however, is to acknowledge this failure, this constitutive impossibility, within our symbolizations.”³⁰ We are “trapped [...] within the world of social meaning.”³¹ This “world” is where Plato left us when a mysterious being yanked him from his chains and pulled him up out of the Cave into the Sun.³² Piling concept upon concept—cave, chain, fire, ascent, sun—we forgot that in order to say things of value about the so-called ‘cave’ one has to not see it as such. In short, we forgot what we already knew as acting and thinking citizens.

Generally speaking, political theory has either ignored foundings as an autonomous problem in politics or has dealt with it idealistically *via* contract theory, agonistic conceptions of politics or by a radical split between the ontological and ontic orders.

²⁹ Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 86.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. [my italics—E.T.]

³² Plato, *The Republic*, trans., Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 514a-521b.

Either way, the result is a muting of foundings and a theoretical inability to make historical action an object of philosophical thought. This thesis attends to this gap by inquiring into the nature of understanding the most political of all moments, where normal and extraordinary, politics and the political meet.

1.2. Rethinking Foundings: Interlocutors and Approaches

The problem of foundings is an area where political philosophy and empirical study converge. The problem is one of political philosophy *par excellence*: it is the most political of all moments—the moment of sudden upheaval, where social scientific methods seem least capable of explaining what citizens are actually doing. This insight is perhaps best articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau when contemplating the paradox of foundings (or as Bonnie Honig calls it, the paradox of politics):

the effect would have to become the cause; the social spirit which must be the product of social institutions would have to preside over the setting up of those institutions; men would have to already become before the advent of law that which they become as a result of law.³³

Rousseau solved the problem by positing a lawgiver, a *deus ex machina* who invents the body politic and transforms the nature of its members according to the principle or “social spirit” that underlies it.³⁴ This hints at two important aspects of the problem of founding: 1) the body politic needs a social spirit to ground its institutional make-up, and 2) this spirit is of “another order”³⁵ than the goings-on in the body politic. Rousseau’s social spirit is a necessary condition for the practical functioning of the polity, but as it

³³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* trans., Maurice Cranston (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), book II, 86-87. See also, Bonnie Honig, “Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory,” *The American Political Science Review*, (Feb. 2007), 3; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans., Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 15; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1973), 183-4.

³⁴ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 84-86.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

does not belong to the practical world, it is the object of political philosophy. Albeit from a different perspective, post-foundationalism's split between politics and the political is a pale reflection of this early separation in Rousseau.

The problem of foundings, then, has a philosophical dimension. It cannot belong to philosophy alone, however, because pure thought is organized on the principle of inner consistency, which may depart from and is ultimately unaccountable to the real world.³⁶ This feature of thought conflicts with my intention herein to make historical action the object of thought.

Leaving aside that it does not account for political reality, pure thought poses the additional difficulty that it stumbles over the *impasse* that Rousseau first formulated as a paradox. In actual politics the lawgiver introduced to solve the paradox does not exist. Founding acts do not fail due to this paradox; indeed, political experience does not always recognize Rousseau's problem. Yet it has an evident experiential component: Rousseau says that "men would have to already become before the advent of law that which they become as a result of law" suggesting action and change. Where does the founder get his authority to grant or to withhold legitimation?³⁷ How is one "mode of life"—"the existence of a set of implicit norms determining notions of just and unjust, good and evil, desirable and undesirable, noble and ignoble"³⁸—supplanted by a

³⁶ Claude Lefort, *Writing. The Political Test* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000), xl, quoted in Marchart, 88.

³⁷ Sheldon Wolin, "Max Weber: Legitimation, Method, and the Politics of Theory," *Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Aug., 1981), 402.

³⁸ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans., David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 2-3.

different one? The nature of the task is clarified by philosophy, yet understanding founding moments requires making sense of actually experienced events.

At this point, there are two possible approaches to politics. The first, empirical or historical approach is concerned with the particular institutions, actors and events of actual polities, while the second, philosophical approach clarifies the nature of the problem itself. How then does one combine the two in order to understand the *problem* of founding moments in the round?

I contend that rereading the Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin will enable recovering a political science that lies at the crossroads of thought and practical understanding. While they do not provide any final answers on how to study founding moments,³⁹ a political science that makes human experience its point of departure *and* its end begins to emerge. But only the beginnings can be discerned—such a political science⁴⁰ must have an irreducibly *political* character insofar as it must follow from political practice.⁴¹ If it is rooted in the particular and the contextual and its goal is to understand this world of political action, such a political science does not look for *a priori* methods, because it recognizes the attempt to provide such a method as a

³⁹ One of the main points of this work is to show how unrealistic has been the expectation of an *a priori* method.

⁴⁰ I use the term “science” against conventional uses of the term in English to indicate its wider, and less method-oriented meaning in German as *Wissenschaft*. This becomes necessary in order not to interrupt the flow of meaning from the primary texts given the usage of the term, especially in Eric Voegelin who constantly refers to his scholarly activity as “scientific” and himself as a “scientist.”

⁴¹ Wolin’s etymological discussion of the term “methodology” is revealing. He renders it as “the political action (*meta*) which thought takes on the route (*hodos*) to being (*logos*).” Sheldon S., Wolin, “Max Weber: Legitimation, Method and the Politics of Theory,” *Political Theory*, vol., 9, no., 3 (Aug., 1981): 418.

categorical mistake to begin with. This is not aporia, because it knows that there was never anything there.⁴²

While not *prima facie* controversial, some explanation for grouping these three thinkers together is called for. After all, relations between them were never wholly cordial, and their descendants have not always found common ground.⁴³ Crucially, however, all three would have agreed with Voegelin's motives for intellectual work: "[t]hey arise,"

⁴² However, this is not to say that this political science does not have a "methodology" as opposed to a "method" in the manner that Frazer defines it: "a philosophical account of knowledge (epistemology) and reality (metaphysics or ontology), as that is relevant to scientific and scholarly explanation (which also involves logic)." Elizabeth Frazer, "Political Theory and the Boundaries of Politics," *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, eds., David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 176.

⁴³ Relations between Strauss and the other two, as well as between Arendt and Voegelin seem to have been strained at best. On the personal relations between Strauss and Arendt, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt, for Love of the World* (London: Yale University Press, 1982), 98, 169. On the low and condescending opinion of Voegelin on Arendt and of Strauss on Voegelin, see *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, eds., Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 78, 85 and 257 respectively. On the history of relations between Voegelin and Arendt, see Peter Baehr, "Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin," *History and Theory*, vol., 51 (October 2012): 364-380. Voegelin, on the other hand, had a high opinion of Strauss and consistently defended him also from the efforts of American conservatives to appropriate his name for ideological purposes. For their more substantive philosophical "quarrels," see the exchange between Arendt and Voegelin regarding *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in *The Review of Politics*, vol., 15, no., 1 (Jan., 1953), 68-85 and the correspondence between Strauss and Voegelin in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1956*, eds., Barry Cooper and Peter C., Emberley (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University press, 1993). Much less significant for our purposes is Voegelin's review of Strauss's *On Tyranny* and Strauss's response, both conveniently reprinted in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 44-108. For personal and methodological differences between the three, see also Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), chapter 4.

Regarding their intellectual descendants, Straussians have criticized both Voegelin and Arendt for their perceived historicism and rejection of the traditional view of philosophy that Strauss defended. For representative samples of their arguments on Arendt, see Thomas L. Pangle, *Republicanism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 49. For Straussian critiques of Voegelin, see Thomas, L., Pangle, "On the Epistolary Dialogue between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin," *The Review of Politics*, vol., 53, no., 1 (Winter 1991): 100-125, and Stanley Rosen's review of *Order and History* in *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol., 12, no., 2 (Dec., 1958): 257-276. Voegelinians tend to hold Strauss in high regard and simply think that Voegelin either went further or illuminated another facet of human existence in a more powerful manner than Strauss. On the whole, they have sympathized and made common cause with Strauss's revolt against modernity. See for example the Introduction to the edited correspondence between the two thinkers by Barry Cooper and Peter Emberley which concludes with: "the apparent disagreement in terminology and details, then, can be seen as a difference in focus rather than of substance." Cooper and Emberley, *Faith and Political Philosophy*, xxiii. Arendtians, on the other hand, have generally steered away from any sustained engagement with the other two thinkers, perhaps put off by their political conservatism. For a nuanced exception to this rule, see Dana R., Villa, "The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates," *Political Theory*, vol., 26, no., 2 (Apr., 1998), 147-172.

he said, “from the political situation.”⁴⁴ The situation, as Voegelin explained it, was the same for all the three: the turbulent 1920s and early 1930s in Central Europe where the “center [...] gave way” to Communism and Nazism and then exile. This is no idle confession; the work of all three, as will be made clear in this thesis, takes flight from and returns to common experience as the only ground from which thought can arise. The similarities between Arendt and Strauss are deeper—both received an excellent liberal education in the German *Gymnasium* and at university; both were German Jews deeply involved in Jewish thought and politics; both came of age in Weimar; and both studied under Heidegger, whom they revered as *the* philosopher of their times.⁴⁵ By contrast, Voegelin received a more legal, political science and economic training in Vienna, and pronounced himself “cured” of any interest in Heidegger by his encounter with American common sense on his 1924-1927 trip to the United States.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed., Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 93.

⁴⁵ On Strauss’s engagement with Heidegger, see Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy & American Democracy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 91-202. For Heidegger’s influence on Arendt’s thought, see the excellent book by Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: the Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). The story of Arendt’s personal involvement with Heidegger is well known, but it is worth recalling that Strauss too was deeply moved by his encounter with the philosopher. See his autobiographical “A Giving of Accounts” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed., Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 457-465. For a discussion by a number of scholars on Heidegger’s influence on both, see “Discussion,” *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigrés and American Political Thought after World War II*, eds., Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (New York: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1995), 164-171.

⁴⁶ Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 33. Voegelin’s claim is worth mentioning because it has helped obscure the very real affinities between Eric Voegelin and Martin Heidegger—my recovery of a Voegelinian science of politics owes much to these affinities. Although I do not explicitly compare the two, Heidegger has played an important if silent role in my thinking through the implications of Voegelin’s work and when considering what to retain and what to discard from Voegelin’s *oeuvre*. The affinities between the two were first drawn by David Walsh in “Editor’s Introduction,” *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans., M. J. Hanak, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Hereinafter, *Collected Works*) vol., 6 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002). Glenn Hughes also draws the parallel successfully in Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 11-12.

A key part of their common situation was not only the political, but also the intellectual milieu; and it is this common paradigm which opens up the possibility of considering them together.⁴⁷ The intellectual milieu, of course, explains nothing, least of all the direction and conclusions of their thinking. But it does bring into focus the *beginning* of their thought—the one link between them that would allow them to “speak to” one another. That intellectual milieu was phenomenology. That *beginning* was a philosophical anthropology of experience as the absolute starting point of understanding human existence in society. They all viewed political things from the perspective of the citizen because, as McNay puts it, “[i]t is not possible to understand what makes an action political or not, or indeed what disinclines individuals to behave in a political manner in the first place without engaging with their own understandings and interpretations of self and world.”⁴⁸ As the thesis proceeds to unpack each thinker’s answer to our guiding questions, it moves from philosophical anthropology to the nature of politics, founding and the problem of understanding founding moments.

Regarding my own manner of proceeding, it should be evident that I reject the desirability (even possibility) of a partition between the political philosophy and politics; I take to heart Marc Stears’s critique of the case for partition.⁴⁹ In working my way through these texts, I have kept in mind the warning that—

while we clearly do need historical work to get some sense of what a given author was arguing for and what values and commitments were central to his or her understanding of politics (and how he or she understood politics and its proper scope and domain), to reduce that reading to an

⁴⁷ John Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1979).

⁴⁸ Lois McNay, “Feminism and Post-Identity Politics: The Problem of Agency,” *Constellations*, vol., 17, no., 4 (2010), 512.

⁴⁹ Marc Stears, “The Vocation of Political Theory: Principles, Empirical Inquiry and the Politics of Opportunity,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 4, No.4 (2005: 325-350).

analysis of rhetorical strategies in a way that washes out a sense of the values to which an author was committed, is to fail that text both philosophically and historically.⁵⁰

I have tried to follow the movement of thinking of each through their works, beginning from their basic assumptions about human nature and sociality, and on to their ruminations on the nature of reality as such. I have undertaken this with a specific question in view, however—the problem of understanding foundations—since the thought of each invites and responds to a multitude of perspectives. I have striven to replay that thinking in order to find out what the author says regarding my question. I have assumed “the fore-conception of completeness” as Gadamer terms it—that the texts are complete and truthful. However, I have not sought to distil some essence out of the depth of their thought, or discover anything new, or refute what I find.⁵¹ I have endeavored rather to think along with them insofar as possible *in regards to my own question*. At no point have I tried to erase “the insuperable difference between the interpreter and the author.” This means that the culmination of the thesis, a reflection on the problem of a substantive science of politics, is based on Voegelin, but understands him in a way perhaps not wholly aligned with his own understanding. The understanding activity, as Gadamer put it, “is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well,” which ought to culminate in a new understanding “that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other,” by fusing the “horizons” of both author and interpreter.⁵²

⁵⁰ Mark Philp, “Political Theory and History,” *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, David Leopold and Marc Stears, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 141.

⁵¹ Alan Finlayson, “Introduction: Becoming Plural,” *Democracy and Pluralism: The Political Thought of William E. Connolly* (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

⁵² Quotes from Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 294, 296, 304, 305.

Beside this introduction, the thesis consists of six substantive Chapters and a Conclusion. There are two chapters dedicated to each thinker. I always begin with the first part of the problem as articulated in the opening paragraph of this introduction: the conceptualization of foundings in their work. Here I trace how they situate foundings *vis-à-vis* their philosophical anthropology and their understanding of politics as such. I follow up with the second part of the problem, their understanding of actual founding events. In the Conclusion I set out the reconceptualization of the founding problem.

1.3. Outline of the Argument

The dialogue between Strauss, Arendt and Voegelin that takes place in these six chapters has a common starting and ending point. All three *œuvres* begin from the phenomenological return to common experience, and all culminate in a political science seeks to accommodate the phenomenal nature of politics. The endpoint is summed up in Strauss's exhortation: "political science cannot start from seeing the city as the Cave but it must start from seeing the city as a world; as the highest in the world; it must start from seeing man as completely immersed in political life."⁵³ In other words, political science must start from understanding political phenomena in the way citizens understand and justify them. Each of the three find in their own ways that citizens too understand particular phenomena in light of a "whole"—the world—in which they appear. Political science must end on a reflection on that whole—as it is given to citizens in daily life, and to philosophers who follow the light of meaning by way of reason.

⁵³ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 240.

Chapter Two examines Leo Strauss's understanding of politics and political foundations. Strauss's philosophical anthropology makes politics primary, pervasive and architectonic to human life. The materials of politics—the things that make it possible, and of which it is made up—are the speeches and deeds of its participants. By positing politics as a living *activity* that is prior to any sustained thinking about politics, Strauss is able to recover an understanding of political wisdom as practical rather than theoretical, and the perspective of the citizen as the only entry-point into understanding a political world.

Accordingly, Strauss's conception of foundations shifts the problem from an ideal moment to be illuminated by philosophy, to one of political practice. In abstract terms alone, the problem of its occurrence is an impossible one. For Strauss the philosopher, the problem of foundations becomes equivalent to uncovering the forgetfulness instinct in political acts. Citizens act despite being involved in paradoxes and they cover them over by their acts. Philosophers philosophize because of paradoxes, unconcealing them in thought. Strauss restates Rousseau's paradox in the classical term "regime" in such a way as implies a multiplicity of founding moments which cannot be understood apart from their particular contexts.

The re-articulation of the problem of foundations as a problem of understanding a regime brings to light the fissures in Strauss's construct. His philosophical anthropology posits a tension between the particularity of the meaningful attachments intrinsic to the sociality of human existence, and the universality of any statement or reflection about these attachments, as the constitutive tension of politics. This tension is the object of Straussian political science, which attempts to clarify the universal "oughts" or natural

ends immanent in political speeches and deeds. By neglecting an account of political practice, however, Strauss reduces politics to opinion, debate and longing for truth. His philosophical anthropology posits but does not theorize political practice. The peculiar nature of political practice, however, makes the political whole something more—something deeper—than the totality of opinions, myths, and errors which Strauss understands politics to be. In effect, he reduces practical politics to its external products without giving full weight to the nature of the experience that is their condition of possibility. To state it in terms of Arendt’s theory of action, the materials of politics for Strauss are not speeches and deeds, as Strauss seemed to claim, but only (static) speeches. The student of politics begins by considering the city as a world from the citizen’s perspective, but his aim is to transcend the world and contemplate it from a position of nature—a universal, hence apolitical position beyond any and every city.

This leads Strauss into a peculiar contradiction—his axiom of beginning from political life turns out to be a beginning only from its products. His political science confounds actual practice with the traces it leaves behind—the speeches of citizens. Consequently, the prudential nature of political science is vitiated.⁵⁴ How can we earnestly engage Strauss’s call to consider the city as a “world” when his thought moves so quickly beyond it? As if caught in a vice, he advocates a return to practice, arguing for the impossibility of understanding a body politic from the outside, yet elides political action through immediate examination of the normative claims raised in political life.

⁵⁴ I do not mean to say that Strauss was imprudent towards politics in his work—nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, I insist that political science needs to understand theoretically the practical nature of politics in order to defend its autonomy.

Strauss's understanding of actual founding moments reflects this instability, stressing at times its experiential dimension, and at other times the idealist dimension familiar in political philosophy. I show this by analyzing *Philosophy and Law*, where he deals with an actual founding moment: the prophetic founding of the religious community. As an attempt to understand a founding act that has already happened, and the only work of his where politics is more important than philosophy, this is a particularly illuminating work. In my reading he vacillates between a segregation of the life of philosophy, which can contemplate the "esoteric truth" of the community, and a more delicate interweaving of its "esoteric" and "exoteric" truths. Strauss thus sees the possibility of subverting Rousseau's dichotomy between a "social spirit," a construct of pure thought, and its external manifestations in the social institutions of the community. Yet, his concern to save the autonomy of philosophy from politics, and to articulate the philosophical life as the best life according to nature, means that he asserts the segregation more strongly than he can demonstrate. It is in this context that I situate his concept of the "noble lie" as an artifice necessary to mediate between the two realms. I show also *in re* his youthful involvement in Zionism, that he elides the political nature of phenomena by evaluating them with the yardstick of philosophy.

This partial re-articulation of the problem of foundings as one of understanding historical events brings me in Chapter Three to ask how Strauss's political science understands political events. Five principles emerge from this: (1) in order to properly understand a political community, its values and claims must be significant to one's own life; (2) individual political phenomena must be viewed in the context of the whole political order, their condition of possibility, and their end; (3) there can be no *a priori*

answer to the question, “What is political?” The answer will transpire only from a study of the political events and speeches that occur in a society; therefore, (4) the citizens’ perspective—the wisdom of acting men and women—is the unique key to a substantive science of politics; (5) the laws, institutions and events of a political society always point beyond themselves to a society’s regime, which under examination yields a universal claim to what is the best or most just regime. I argue that Strauss is too quick to make the “jump” from the first four points, which depict a practical political science to the last point, which is purely theoretical. Either the act of understanding practice is practical and self-sufficient or it is radically dependent on theoretical contemplation as Strauss, defines it. The Straussian jump subverts the former, and results in a peculiar obscuration of political practice.

But does Strauss’s account, in spite of this shortcoming, yield the potential for an understanding of foundings? To answer this, I examine two accounts of political events in history that build on Strauss’s political thinking: His own commentary on Thucydides’s *The Peloponnesian War*, and an account of the American founding by some of his students. In the first, Strauss displays a masterly understanding of Thucydides, but then censures his account as partial for demurring to speculate on the nature of the best regime. In the second, Strauss’s students attempt no practical understanding of the American Founding but immediately transcend the event through the Founders’ texts toward philosophical contemplation. Nevertheless, Strauss’s quarrel with Thucydides also hints positive answers to the problems of this thesis: by virtue of his firstly dialectical and secondly elliptical account of the war, Thucydides’s inquiry

into the political whole as Strauss presents it becomes an exemplar of understanding political practice.

The Fourth Chapter takes up the work of Hannah Arendt. Arendt completes the Straussian shift of the problem of foundings from philosophical paradox to practical understanding. She provides an original philosophical anthropology that conceptualizes the irreducible nature and meaningful depth of practice or action. In Arendt there is no possibility of understanding political phenomena by contemplating them from the outside—a point asserted but obscured at the same time by Strauss’s move beyond politics. Through what I call her *ontology of appearance*, she recovers our pre-theoretical being-in-the-world. She situates her account of politics within this mode. Of course, a particular act or speech is concerned with some particular goal and occurs in a particular context. But for Arendt, an act or speech is political only insofar as it achieves the ontological qualities of “appearance”: a boundless, miraculous insertion of meaning in the world, revealing the identity of the actor to others. Politics, for Arendt, exists only *in* human appearing in the world.

Her account of political foundings follows from these insights. She defines founding moments as historical examples of her ontology of appearance. Thus, she provides an elegant answer to the first question of this thesis: the philosophical problem of how political order comes into being in history. Further, she links it with the second question of understanding historical foundings by arguing that founding events can only be understood as phenomena. It is Arendt not Strauss who engages in earnest the second part of Strauss’s injunction that “political science cannot start from seeing the city as the

Cave but it must start from seeing the city as a world,”⁵⁵ precisely by refuting the first part of Strauss’s injunction on the necessity of moving beyond the political.

I also show, however, how Arendt gets caught up in a performative contradiction when she seeks to understand actual founding moments. On one hand, her understanding of action demands that acts be judged by their inner principles, for action discloses its meaning performatively. On the other, she judges the American and French revolutionaries by the standards of her ontology of appearance. But, to understand the mode in which all action is made present in history is not the same as understanding *a* particular action. My interpretation of *On Revolution* shows that Arendt constantly moves between her ontology and the events because her preoccupations are philosophical—to refute traditional misconceptions about the nature of appearance and to sharpen her ontological analytic—rather than political—to understand these founding events. I situate the performative contradiction in the concept of “world,” which combines ontological with particular meanings that Arendt fails to distinguish.

Even so, Arendt achieves a great deal: her ontology of appearance shows that the understanding of foundings as a paradox is a fiction, decisively moving the problem away from philosophy. The problem becomes one of understanding foundings. And yet the surreptitious by-product of her thinking is that human events must be understood as extraordinary moments that illumine the ontological qualities of appearance, or else as meaningless times where action withers away into instrumental gestures of strength, need or violence.

⁵⁵ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, 240.

In Chapter Five I vacate this dichotomy by redirecting away from Arendt's ontology to the quest for meaning. I do so by rethinking Arendtian action as the pursuit rather than the disclosure of meaning in the world. First, I show that the dichotomy between action and thinking that Arendt maintains is untenable in her own terms. Then, I show that the *act* of thinking is like action: it is an uncaused movement that constitutes its own principle and is broadly directed toward a non-appearing measure. Thinking and acting are both *the* ways by which human beings quest for meaning; I therefore rethink their seemingly antagonistic relation in Arendt and reconceptualize them as human experience. Then, moving with Arendt beyond Arendt, I rethink action in the terms she uses for thinking, *viz.* metaphysically. Understanding action as experience allows me to conceive the task of political science as a hermeneutics of experience. I then reformulate the problem of hermeneutics in four ways that are anticipated but not fully explored by Arendt: a) Human beings orient themselves in the world experientially. I redesignate Arendt's concept of world using the symbol "reality" to indicate the meaningful depth of human experience that integrates the sensory and suprasensory realms. b) The hermeneutics of experience is expressed in terms of illumination from within, not cognition from without; recognizing, therefore, the appropriateness of Arendt's phenomenological method. c) Understanding experience as the performative quest for meaning illumines the importance of the "non-appearing" ground present in experiential movement. The focus thus shifts from the irreducible contingency of Arendt's miraculous appearances across the whole arc of the participatory movement toward what the movement cannot contain in itself. d) This movement beyond the given renders the structure of the movement transparent by political science. The fact that thinking itself is

an experience that gives an account of itself opens up the possibility of understanding political experiences in the world through the metaphorical language of philosophy.

In the second section of Chapter Five, I refine my argument by discussing her understanding as exemplified in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; by comparing it to Thucydides' hermeneutic movement in *The Peloponnesian War*; and by laying out its advantages over other influential accounts of Arendt's method, especially the strand that interprets her as a story teller. The section concludes with an account of the nature of the understanding activity.

The Sixth Chapter situates Voegelin's thought in the context of the hermeneutics of experience. Juxtaposing Arendt and Voegelin in close dialogue, I deepen this theoretical breakthrough. His philosophical anthropology retains Arendt's view of experience as *energeia*, which contains its meaning in itself, while at the same time it demonstrates the stability and order of experience. Voegelin's seemingly contradictory claim is that reality has a stable, pre-existing structure but reality unfolds only in manifold experiences. Voegelin defends the philosophical ground gained by Arendt's ontology: a) an understanding of political activity as spontaneous, open-ended insertion of meaning into the world; b) the grounding of political thought in human experience and historicity, not in general laws of human behaviour; c) a conception of foundings as beginnings which are wholly new and self-sufficient but do not occur *ex nihilo*. Voegelin does all this without the commitments that adversely affected Arendtian political science—firstly the wall of separation between the political and social realms; and secondly the difficulty of constructing a substantive political science, because for Arendt politics “either exists or does not exist,” which leaves most of human history outside the purview of Arendt's

substantive political science. For Voegelin, a definition of the political cannot be given before dealing with the concrete, empirical materials, for politics is the totality of acts and deeds evoking that order symbolically—politics is *potentially* everything.

Voegelin's philosophical agreement with Arendt on the nature of foundings maintains Arendt's redirection of the problem away from philosophy to the understanding of foundings. In Chapter Seven I situate the conceptualization of the activity of understanding set out in Chapter Five within a "science of order." I respond to two possible objections to my view of understanding *qua* experience: first, how can we tell rational from irrational experience? or how do we save understanding from collapsing into subjectivism and solipsism with internal principles of verification? Secondly, how do we go beyond the speeches and deeds that constitute the event without losing sight of their empirical situatedness?

I first present the science of order as a mode of reflection on the whole arc of the movement of participation. I analyze Voegelin's concepts of "equivalency of experiences", "historiogenesis", and "unoriginal thinking," to illumine how his science remains deeply empirical throughout its reflective movement. These terms allow science to make public its principles of verification, the better to distinguish rational from irrational experiences. Then I introduce his "theory of symbolization" to show how speeches and deeds constitute political events yet simultaneously point beyond themselves. This lends directedness to the act of understanding towards the originary experiences from which the symbols first arose.

In the second section of Chapter Seven, I illustrate my argument with some of Voegelin's early empirical works, when his philosophical reflections had yet to mature. I substitute the term "movement of understanding" for "method" throughout, to reflect that science replicates what Voegelin calls the paradoxical nature of participation in reality. Finally, I return to the problem of foundations in the third section. I reread Arendt's criticism of the American Founders' Declaration of Independence in light of the Voegelinian science of order. First I show that the performative honesty that Arendt requires of the Founders is philosophically problematic, as also Derrida notes. Then I show that philosophy is simply unable to complete the understanding effort on its own. The problem of foundations is not simply the philosophical problem of beginnings, but also that of symbolic articulation of the actual struggle of men and women to restore their relationship with reality—to live in truth. To understand foundations means to let thinking flow in accordance with the Founders' experiences. These provide a broad directedness to the understanding effort as it seeks to stage the founding drama anew by way of its own movement. This, I claim, is the reason for Voegelin's constant recurrence to the problem of foundations. Foundations do not exist *as such* outside the experience of the struggle to restore a reality that has become symbolically opaque—an experience the philosopher shares with the political actor. It is therefore a pervasive problem of thinking and acting, not an autonomous problem to be articulated by philosophy alone. To think founding cannot be to think outside the historical examples of founders and foundations. The problem cannot be "solved" because it is everywhere present. Founding cannot be modeled or defined because it occurs in participation. Herein lies the problem with Strauss's and Arendt's views on foundations: they *defined* founding; the challenge is to think it.

2. The Idealism of Leo Strauss

Allan Bloom, a student of Leo Strauss, begins his account of his teacher aptly: “[t]he story of a life in which the only real events were thoughts is easily told.”⁵⁶ Indeed, a few sentences suffice: raised in an observant orthodox Jewish family, he was “converted” to philosophy at 16 upon reading Plato’s *Laches* in school.⁵⁷ Like Arendt, he had a *Gymnasium* education. He studied at Hamburg, Marburg and Freiburg, where he met many of the giants of his time: Ernst Cassirer, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and others. Like Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin, he was cast into exile by Hitler’s rise to power, but unlike either of them, the impact of political ruin and personal tragedy marked his work in subtler ways. Arendt and Voegelin both addressed sustained scholarly efforts directly to understanding the ruin of the old order and the ascendancy of the modern ideologies that supplanted it, whereas Strauss’s efforts were firmly subordinated to the act of thinking about the “fundamental” (*i.e.*, the ahistorical) problems. The fall of Weimar and the annihilation of German Jewry at precisely the moment when they had been cherishing their greatest secular hopes became for Strauss the springboard into philosophizing.

Bloom is then right to note that nothing in Strauss’s biography explains his thought, except perhaps his motivation for beginning the work: the study of Spinoza whose critique of religion had made assimilation and Zionism—the two modern Jewish responses to homelessness—possible. This led him to Maimonides, which led him on to

⁵⁶ Allan Bloom, “Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899-October 18, 1973,” *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960-1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 235.

⁵⁷ Leo Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss,” Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy, and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed., Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 460.

the Islamic Aristotelians, which led him back to the Greek classics in a peculiar manner. Through discovering the esoteric writings of Maimonides and the Islamic Aristotelians, he was able to break free of the canonical interpretations of the Western tradition and discover novel, even seemingly preposterous interpretations. Preposterous or no, two vast benefits accrued from this process of renewal. The first was a return to ordinary experience and, as Strauss often put it, “the surface of things”; while the second was the diffusion of a spirit of humility with regard to the study of political things.

Strauss’s “deconstruction” of the modern tradition recovered what the layman—as distinct from the philosopher or social scientist—already knew instinctively: the centrality of everyday experience and of the notions that arise from it. By restoring the concrete and the everyday as the entry into thinking about politics, Strauss opened up a way to reflecting upon our world anew—no longer with recondite abstractions and sweeping ideological claims but with the common distinctions we all make use of in daily life: good and evil, vice and virtue, high and low. After Strauss it became possible once again to talk about political relationships without looking “beyond” or “beneath” them for economic determinisms, Freudian instincts, or cultural structures—the apolitical whatnots that supposedly underpin politics. The study of political things began to recover the ground it had been steadily losing in modern times. Herein lay Strauss’s appeal even in his later, most purely interpretive works, such as *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, *The City and Man*, and *The Argument and Action of Plato’s Laws*. There is an innocent piety in these works; innocent in the sense of a simplicity of form and expression that allows any reader to pick up the original texts and Strauss’s interpretation, and follow along to the best of his abilities. At the same time the works

are pious in that their author dwells lovingly on the text, following its dramatic rhythms and arguments wherever it may lead him with a gaiety in earnest that reminds one of Nietzsche minus the high-tension rhetoric. There is something of the devotion of the believer in such longing for wisdom. It is the combination of these two, the primacy of everyday experience and the “gay science” of textual loyalty, that constitute the pedagogic charm of Leo Strauss.

In the two chapters to follow, I shall interrogate Strauss’s *œuvre* respecting the two questions set forth in the introduction of this dissertation. The first chapter will think through Strauss’s answer to the question of the nature of political community or political order so as to situate the problematic of founding moments on this philosophical plane. The second chapter will draw out of Strauss’s philosophy a methodical framework for studying actual historical founding moments. This framework will in part rely directly on, and in part will be inferred from what Strauss has to say about political action, political community, and the Aristotelian study of substantive politics he advocated. This will provide a springboard for considering the work of Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin.

I contend that Strauss’s fundamental stance is to return to experience as the irreducible basis of thinking about politics,⁵⁸ which regains its ancient nobility as the all-pervasive and architectonic human action. Yet Strauss commits a theoretical error in omitting to conceptualize the nature of political practice, confounding practice itself with the sum of

⁵⁸ See also Stanley Rosen, “Wittgenstein, Strauss and the Possibility of Philosophy,” *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary: Studies in the Possibility of Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Robert Pippin, “The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity,” *Political Theory*, vol., 31, no., 3 (Jun., 2003): 335-358; James F., Ward, “Experience & Political Philosophy: Notes on Reading Leo Strauss,” *Polity*, vol., 13, no., 4 (Summer, 1981): 668-687.

the by-products of practice—the myths, opinions and knowledge of a political world. Ultimately, therefore, Strauss cannot study the political for its own sake, as he claims; although rooted in realism, his thought culminates in idealism.

Such is the context in which I tease out Strauss’s conception of political founding. Unsurprisingly, Strauss rejects the idealistic Rousseauian concept of founding in favor of a more classical understanding. The character, decisions, actions and opinions of the founders must therefore be objects of any inquiry of foundings. Yet, by transcending *nomos*—understood as the written and unwritten laws, customs and manners that for the Greeks constituted the domain of politics⁵⁹—Strauss repeats some of the problems of that tradition. However, by reestablishing its centrality as the only route to philosophy, he opens the way to thinking more carefully about the practical nature of founding. Finally, I illustrate the movement of Strauss’s thought beyond politics by reconstructing the only account we have of an immediate political experience: his youthful sympathy for political Zionism.

Before proceeding, a brief digression regarding the difficulty of reading Leo Strauss is apropos. Most of his work consists of commentaries on classical and medieval texts, wherein the author’s voice seems to be submerged in the voices of the authors of the original work. Only in his non-commentary work such as *What is Political Philosophy?* or the essays on historicism, modern social science and positivism does his voice become loud and clear. Yet, as Tanguay aptly puts it, Strauss never ceases “to make his

⁵⁹ Thomas L. Pangle, *The Laws of Plato*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 511, n.1.

presence at all times discreetly felt.”⁶⁰ Its discreetness is such that the reader must know the original works well in order to discern Strauss’s voice. As the original texts that Strauss dealt with—carefully and in the original language—ranged from classical through medieval to the most representative moderns like Nietzsche and Heidegger, this is a monumental challenge. Our task will perhaps be made easier by the fact that, in the words of Kojève, Strauss’s commentaries tell us “not *what* to think [...], but only what to think *about*.”⁶¹ After all, my purpose is not to determine the veracity of Strauss’s interpretation or the method of his reading—controversial and important though they may be—but to understand Strauss respecting the two questions addressed in this dissertation. Since Strauss’s thinking forms a coherent whole, it can be freely interrogated.

2.1. The Realism of Leo Strauss: *Eros*, Politics, and the Practice of Founding

Strauss made the case for a philosophical anthropology in response to Alexandre Kojève’s thesis of a “Universal and Homogeneous State” as the political equivalent to the Hegelian End of History.⁶² He rejects the proposition that we may be satisfied with the universal recognition of every person’s dignity or freedom of opportunity—such self-satisfaction is as miserable and as impossible a vision as Nietzsche’s “last men”, who Kojève thought would populate the “Universal and Homogeneous State”. According to Strauss, such an end-state is neither desirable nor possible. It is undesirable

⁶⁰ Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans., Christopher Nadon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 2.

⁶¹ Alexandre Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Revised and Expanded Edition Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, eds., Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 136.

⁶² Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Revised and Expanded Edition Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, eds., Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 237.

because “last men” cannot reach for the heights, and it is impossible because any great soul who should arise in such an arid landscape would precipitate a negation of the “Universal and Homogeneous State”.⁶³ Regarding the first objection, it is worth noting that it is simply Strauss’s preference that men and women should strive for the heights. Others, perhaps a plurality, may not feel so compelled. For Strauss, an adequate account of the nature of the soul and of why the “Universal and Homogenous State” is contrary to it is sufficient to refute Kojève thesis. This, however, cannot be enough, because all political regimes fall short of what is right by nature, and yet we are not perpetually raising revolution. Only an adequate account of political practice can demonstrate that the end of history will not come to pass.

I shall show, firstly, that Strauss’s philosophical anthropology, as he later elaborated it, provides an account of politics that is rooted in the longings of the human soul. But, secondly, I shall show that this account neglects the peculiar nature of political practice. Strauss makes politics primary, pervasive and architectonic to human life and simultaneously reduces it to little more than opinion, debate and longing for truth. Strauss’s philosophical anthropology does not recognize that politics is something more—something deeper—than the totality of opinions, myths, and errors. Only with Hannah Arendt do we achieve a rounded understanding of politics as practice.

Strauss’s philosophical anthropology puts politics at the meaningful core of human existence. It can be simply stated as: “Man is by nature a social being.”⁶⁴ Complex sociality distinguishes human beings from animals and is manifest in speech and reason.

⁶³ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 236-238.

⁶⁴ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 129.

Without the possibility of speech and reason human life would lose its humanity. Out of sociality arises a tension that roots politics in human nature. If speech is natural to human life, then this entails association with others—conflictual or consensual but, above all, meaningful. Man is born into a given association with others; hence, by nature he grows attracted or attached to particular groups of people.⁶⁵ As reasonable beings, however, human beings reflect on their sociality and association. Out of the fact of sociality there naturally arises an “ought”⁶⁶ which inevitably comes into conflict with “what is”. “All human love is subject to the law that it be both love of one’s own and love of the good, and there is necessarily a tension between one’s own and the good, a tension which may well lead to a break.”⁶⁷ Human existence becomes political once this tension comes to be negotiated. Politics follows from human nature in the interaction between the particular, historical nature of meaningful attachments and the universal claims of reason applied to living within those attachments. Note that this implies that the philosophical impulse, too, understood as an attempt to transcend opinion for knowledge, arises from the same social nature.

This tension between the particular and the universal is the human condition in Straussian terms. Man is a part of the whole into which he is born, but simultaneously he is also whole insofar as he conceives of the whole in his intellect. He is “[open] to the whole”⁶⁸—as it is given to him by virtue of existence. The whole is perceived in “common sense” or the “wealth of meaning, which we have in mind when speaking of

⁶⁵ Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 54. Throughout the dissertation I follow the original texts and use the generic masculine form in order not to interrupt the thought-process.

⁶⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 130.

⁶⁷ Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 35.

⁶⁸ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 39.

the world of common experience or of the natural understanding of the world.”⁶⁹ It precedes cosmology or ontology and requires neither.⁷⁰ To be human is to be “the in-between being.”⁷¹ The tension which urges human beings to be “apart from” and yet simultaneously to “be with” others necessitates a political existence.

For Strauss, therefore, politics is rooted in what Plato called the erotic nature of humanity. Desires and wants are not depoliticized passions to be viewed “objectively” as by science, but emerge from our political relationship with one another and depend on that relationship for their articulation and satisfaction. Human individuality—the fact of existence as a separate being—points beyond itself to that which it is part of. The openness of man to the whole is an attraction to the whole that is simultaneously present and beyond his own individual being. Therefore, for Strauss, every particular thing must be viewed in light of the whole. Human beings even view themselves in light of what is beyond themselves.⁷² To rise above the given is at once noble and natural.

If the tension between the “ought” and the “is” necessitates politics, then politics must be more than a matter of dominance, strength, or rule.⁷³ Politics is central to human life insofar as man understands himself from the whole that is given to him in “common sense.” Political knowledge emerges from and has the same nature as political opinion. If opinion is the uncritical mass of “errors, guesses, beliefs, prejudices, forecasts, and so on”⁷⁴ that citizens hold, knowledge is the more critical opinion held by statesmen and

⁶⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 77.

⁷⁰ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*.

⁷¹ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷³ For an example, see Leo Strauss “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History,” *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 73.

⁷⁴ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 15.

experienced citizens. It is important to note that there is no difference in the nature of opinion and of knowledge. The knowledge or opinion of the political being is a kind of cognitive capacity that deals with and emerges from the ever changing context of political reality. It is earned through experience,⁷⁵ and “cannot be presented as a spectacle in the way in which military and political transactions can be presented. Wisdom cannot be said. It can only be done or practiced. Wisdom can only be seen by indirection, by reflection.”⁷⁶ A political being orients himself in his environment by attuning himself to the wisdom already present and practicing it politically. Strauss’s political knowledge is not unlike Oakeshott’s practical knowledge.⁷⁷ On the one hand, political knowledge is particular insofar as it always deals with particular situations in particular contexts: “all political action [...] is concerned with individual situations, and must therefore be based on a clear grasp of the situation concerned, and therefore often on an understanding of the antecedents of that situation.”⁷⁸ But on the other hand, it has a universal character, because “every political situation contains elements which are essential to all political situations: how else could one intelligibly call all these different political situations ‘political situations’?”⁷⁹

Political wisdom is *participatory* or, to use a term that is more resonant with the tradition, it is practical wisdom. There can be no definition of “the political” prior to experience. Its distinctions and concepts emerge directly from “everyday experience and

⁷⁵ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 14.

⁷⁶ Strauss, “Thucydides,” 91.

⁷⁷ Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 12-15.

⁷⁸ Leo Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History,” *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, 61.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

everyday usage.”⁸⁰ Such knowledge is pre-theoretical—theory *cannot* dispense with it or substitute for it, but only take it as given and think it through. Political things are “things which can only be seen as what they are if they are seen with the unarmed eye, or, more precisely, if they are seen in the perspective of the citizen ...”;⁸¹ hence, the perspective of the citizen is the most relevant: “political men are concerned with what is to be done politically here and now in accordance with principles of preference of which they are aware, although not necessarily in an adequate manner; it is these principles of preference which supply the criteria of relevance in regard to political things.”⁸² It is not the kind of knowledge that is the product of contemplation but of an immersion or dwelling within political life.⁸³

Although political knowledge emerges out of the particular, it has a universal nature. In every action or opinion there is present a universal “ought”: a conception of freedom, equality or justice.⁸⁴ Citizens do not pick and choose between competing conceptions, but understand and articulate them practically. They emerge from experience which points to a natural constitution—a *right* order or way—of being. The irreducible presence of natural ends in political activity is revealed by the fact that we

look up to something or attempt to justify [our] claims and actions in light of something taken, rightly or not, as worthy of imitation. Even the society which is wholly materialistic looks up to materialism. Every human being is what he is by the fact that he looks up to something.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” *What is Political Philosophy?*, 80.

⁸¹ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?”, 25.

⁸² Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968), 205-6.

⁸³ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 240.

⁸⁴ Leo Strauss, “Relativism,” *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 17.

⁸⁵ Strauss, “Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time,” *The Post-Behavioral Era: Perspectives on Political Science*, eds., George J., Graham, Jr., and George W., Carey (New York: David McKay, 1972), 238.

Ends are many and not clearly commensurate or definable. Knowledge of ends is “knowledge of heterogeneity, and in particular heterogeneous ends.”⁸⁶ Yet, as this knowledge is *practical*, the “ought” emerges only on reflection and, for the political being, is never some absolute lodestar by which he measures all that he does. The statesman can only find particular means to particular ends, because he must weave local factors and chance together with principles of right and wrong. Precisely because politics is particular, “[i]t is much more difficult to discern [...] what the statesman-like course of action is than to see what the best regime is and what the ultimate objectives of political life are.”⁸⁷ No problems of principle arise among wise statesman possessed of practical wisdom, only among ideologues following the blueprints of theoretical knowledge. Moderation is almost built into political action.

Before proceeding to consider the Straussian conceptualization of a political founding, let us pause briefly and take stock. For Strauss, politics is the practical holding of opinions or knowledge. It is a practice that requires a peculiar kind of cognition. Political knowledge necessarily presupposes past practice. It provides the context, the means and the ends of particular acts. In this Strauss was a supreme realist. This seems a good starting point for a study of actual founding moments.

Within the foregoing context I place the Straussian account of founding a political community. This is not a straightforward task, for Strauss never really concerned himself with any actual foundings. The American founding, the only one he ever mentions explicitly, is important only to highlight another point altogether—the

⁸⁶ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy,” 39.

⁸⁷ Strauss, “Thucydides,” 99.

forgetfulness of natural right in contemporary America. This is a more important concern than it may seem, for it has inspired many of his students to take a deeper interest in, and has been influential in the revival of substantive studies of the American founding.⁸⁸ Foundings were also discussed in his books on Machiavelli and Plato's *Laws*,⁸⁹ but Strauss never veers far enough from the original texts to discuss founding as a *problem* of political practice.

What Strauss does provide seems to roundly criticize the modern tradition of idealism in favor of classical views. I contend that the net result is an amalgamation that infuses the modern idealism with a classically derived doctrine of experience. In brief, the Rousseauian stance, as Strauss finds it in Machiavelli, is that

virtue can be practiced only within society [...] the founders of society cannot have been educated to virtue: the founder of Rome was a fratricide. Morality is possible only within a context which cannot be created by morality, for morality cannot create itself. The context within which morality is possible is created only by immorality.⁹⁰

Here is encapsulated the paradox of politics raised in the introductory chapter. The problem of founding, from a philosophical perspective, is the forgetfulness inherent in the act itself. Strauss's quarrel with the moderns implicates the lowering of standards he discerns in all Enlightenment philosophy, rather than an effort to understand actual political experience as such.

From his scattered remarks on founding, it is not quite clear what (if anything) Strauss would have posited in lieu of Rousseau. He points out, firstly, that a regime is founded

⁸⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 1-2; 157. See also Thomas West, "Leo Strauss and the American Founding," *The Review of Politics*, vol., 53, no., 1 (Winter, 1991): 157-172..

⁸⁹ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) and; Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁹⁰ Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?," 41-2.

rather than evolves—human beings take a decision then act accordingly⁹¹—and the problem of founding is a question of political science in its own right. Secondly, a political community is shaped more by convictions about values than instrumental relations, hence to understand foundings requires taking these convictions seriously and making them an object of study. Thirdly, since it was participants who founded, their “deeds and speeches” must be crucial to a study of foundings. For Strauss these speeches and deeds are our only portal into a political world—and reflect the whole world by pointing to the values that animated it. Finally, as political foundings are manifested in speeches and deeds, they must be rooted in human nature. The problem of founding, then, is a problem of political philosophy because it demands an account of human nature.⁹²

Evidently, Strauss moves our thought nearer to understanding actual founding moments; after him founding is no longer an ideal moment as in the modern tradition. But his thought is dense and jumps rather quickly over important points. His reserve may be justified, given his convictions about the practical nature of politics, the impossibility of theorizing systematically about practice, and the immoderation of abstract thought as applied to political affairs. The ambiguity in Strauss’s conception of politics is reflected in his definition of “regime,” one of the key concepts of Straussian political science:

Politeia is ordinarily translated by ‘constitution’ [...] [by which modern men] almost inevitably mean a legal phenomenon [...] yet [...] the classics used *politeia* in contradistinction to ‘laws.’ [...] The *politeia* is rather the factual distribution of power within the community than what constitutional law stipulates in regard to political power [...]. *Politeia* means the way of life of a society rather than its constitution [...] When speaking of *politeia*, the classics thought of the way of life of a community as essentially determined by its ‘form of government’ [...] The character,

⁹¹ Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 29.

⁹² See also Thomas West, “Leo Strauss and the American Founding,” 159; Edington, “Founding & Political Change,” 163-9.

or tone, or a society depends on what the society regards as most respectable or most worthy of admiration [...] When the classics were chiefly concerned with the different regimes [...] they implied the paramount social phenomenon [...] is the regime.⁹³

This extraordinarily rich quote goes to the heart of Strauss's political thought. His concept of regime is a supremely realist one rather than a legalistic ideal: it is the network of social forces and power relations actually holding a community together. It implies that legal institutions may not reflect the power dynamics in the community. But in addition, it is the "way of life" that is interwoven with institutions and power relationships. Rousseau's paradox of politics is restated here. The "way of life" makes possible the "form of government", which then reflexively shapes the "way of life."

However true all of this may be, it seems to deliver us unceremoniously back to Square One. Rousseau articulated his paradox clearly while Strauss passes over it in silence. Perhaps preoccupied with recovering the classics, he shies away from highlighting their unresolved paradoxes. The problematic of founding nevertheless remains: Who determines the regime? Is it a matter of arbitrary will? The Greek practice of founding the *polis* by inviting a man of wisdom to carry it out fits neatly with Rousseau's construct of an Immortal Legislator, who constitutes the fountainhead of the virtue that undergirds the new community. Strauss skirts around the problem also, perhaps, because the classical accounts of founding greatly resemble the idealist view.

The rediscovery of Rousseau's paradox in the classics is not, however, fruitless. Firstly, if politics is a practical craft, the pre-existence of the community making the founding must be supposed. Foundings do not occur *ex nihilo* and are not a mere philosophical problem; they constitute a practical problem embedded in historical time. Secondly,

⁹³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 136.

man's relationship with his fellows is constitutive of his ways of understanding, judging and acting politically. Political knowledge emerges from actual political relations not the other way around. Thirdly, if the founding problem is not one of pure philosophy, it must be situated in the context of the multiplicity of regimes which have been founded. To understand a founding is to understand the political struggles that led to the founding. This means to begin by understanding the actors as they understood themselves, and to end by uncovering the acts of forgetting inherent in every founding. The problem of founding is primarily a problem of understanding. Finally, ordinary experience points to a world where people are always already engaged in (intelligible) relations, hence a science of politics must begin with the fact of power-relatedness. A science of politics cannot be a Cartesian science. These four observations sum up the realism of Leo Strauss's approach to founding moments.

2.2. Theorizing Foundings in *Philosophy and Law*

A careful reading of Strauss yields a conceptualization of the founding problem as it is encountered in history. This is seen in *Philosophy and Law*, the first work to signal Strauss's "Farabian turn" to a political interpretation of Plato.⁹⁴ In this study of the political philosophy of Maimonides and his Islamic predecessors, the prophet is at the same time philosopher *and* statesman, or founder and legislator. He is a founder insofar as he shapes the regime, a legislator insofar as he orders the institutions and power relations for the new community. And he is a philosopher of the highest rank insofar as he divines the truths of revelation. But his wisdom is practical and any theoretical insight

⁹⁴ See Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, chapter 2; Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 36-40.

is at the service of practice. In this work, then, Strauss approximates the three conclusions I drew in the previous section. Of particular interest are the two dense essays (chapters 2 and 3) where he inquires into the nature of the relationship between philosophy and law in medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy.⁹⁵

Before proceeding, a note on the manner I read these two chapters. I provide a figurative rather than a literal interpretation of the text. The “prophet” is not that literal “man” who in the text is actually Moses and the lesser prophets;⁹⁶ instead, he is the ideal type of the statesman in the Platonic sense, since he is the founder, articulator, legislator and representative of the actually existing theologico-political order.⁹⁷ It is important to distinguish this hermeneutic procedure from the debate over Strauss’s alleged esotericism. Neither here nor elsewhere have I assumed Strauss wrote esoterically. The answer to the question of founding must be teased out of Strauss because it is tangential to his own concern with the rehabilitation of Maimonides’s rationalism. To avoid any facile conclusions, I shall follow Strauss’s use of dichotomies like esoteric/exoteric, particular/general providence and human/divine order; dichotomies which he found in

⁹⁵ Note that the term “prophecy” here and “religion” elsewhere (for example in “A Note on Lucretius,” *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*) is used interchangeably with what we have called “common sense”. For Strauss, in accordance with Jewish and Islamic tradition, the political community is constituted out of the Law of the prophecy. Therefore, I use the three terms—religion, prophecy and common sense—to indicate the political community.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 104; 107. The prophet is supposed to have: “(1) a perfect intellect; (2) perfect morals; (3) a perfect imagination; (4) the faculty of courage; (5) the faculty of divination; and (6) the faculty of government (of men).” *Philosophy and Law*, 101. This rather contradicts Strauss’s view of the inevitable fallibility of human beings. Cf. Andrew Patch, “Leo Strauss on Maimonides’ Prophetology,” *The Review of Politics*, vol., 66, no., 1 (Winter, 2004): 83-104.

⁹⁷ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 101, 104,

the medieval enlightenment and which he appropriated throughout his subsequent writings.⁹⁸

Philosophy and Law is pertinent to my question for three reasons. *Firstly*, Strauss stresses the political interpretation of the prophecy. Jewish and Islamic philosophy had to justify itself before the theocratic order and to place philosophy at the service of that order. But as philosophers they could only use unaided reason to justify the Law (prophecy). The philosophical interpretation of order is thus political;⁹⁹ in other words, the problem that Strauss is dealing with is our first question—the philosophical understanding of the genesis of political order. *Secondly*, in the Straussian interpretation of Maimonides *via* Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes, the prophet is the founder of the theological-political order. The conceptualization of the prophet as philosopher-king emerges from a political reading of both Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* by the Jewish and Islamic philosophers.¹⁰⁰ But unlike Plato, they faced the problem of understanding a founding that had already happened. Revelation has already formed the perfect city, which now reason must give an account of. The founding problem is present as a historical rather than purely philosophical problem. *Thirdly*, this is the only work of Strauss where the political way of life is admitted as superior to the philosophical. Contrary to all his later works, where philosophy fulfills human nature and is therefore the highest or most natural activity, in this one politics and statesmanship are the natural

⁹⁸ This is a Straussian interpretative device. For example, Strauss says regarding Averroes consideration of the relationship between philosophy and law: "if philosophy leads to any kind of knowledge of any thing, and the law speaks of this thing differently from philosophy, then the text of the law is in need of *interpretation*; that is, this text is not to be understood literally, but must be understood figuratively." *Philosophy and Law*, 84-5. Thus, if the esoteric/exoteric dichotomy of law in this text makes no sense literally and changes in subsequent texts, then we are duty-bound to interpret the dichotomy.

⁹⁹ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 104. See also Tanguay, chapter 2; Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 38.

¹⁰⁰ For differences and similarities between the two, see Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 125-126; 73-74.

activity.¹⁰¹ To begin with, politics is superior to philosophy because it attains to truths which unaided reason cannot access—most importantly the question of beginnings. Philosophy cannot give an account of how the political whole began and must therefore accept the political sphere’s account of its own founding.¹⁰² To understand foundings calls for knowledge that is bound up more in the nature of politics than in the nature of philosophy. Further, politics is superior to philosophy because the prophet creates the political whole, an awareness of which is the condition for the existence of philosophy. The Law cannot be produced by philosophy because it comes before philosophy and it is essentially a practical problem.¹⁰³ There are intimations throughout the text that philosophy does not step outside of the Cave because it cannot even be conceived outside of the Law. It may be apt to say that philosophy can only *illuminate* not contemplate the law, but Strauss does not explore this productive tension any further.

In a literal reading, Strauss maintains that the political whole has an esoteric or hidden meaning of universally valid truths, and an exoteric façade of useful (political) doctrines,¹⁰⁴ that is a dogmatic reading of the Law to be taught and received *tout court* by the multitude. The esoteric truth is arrived at through interpretation of that part of the Law whose teaching contradicts reason. This esoteric truth cannot be taught to the multitude but remains within the purview of philosophers.¹⁰⁵ One of Strauss’s readers, Shadia Drury, claims that Strauss argues for a hard division between the two truths

¹⁰¹ For example, see Strauss, *The City and Man*, 49; Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” 163-164; Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 122.

¹⁰² Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 66-68; 90-91; 106.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 85..

“whose contents differ widely; one truth for the few, the other for the many.”¹⁰⁶ Drury refers her claim to Strauss’s distinction between philosophical and amateurish readings of Plato’s dialogues put forward in *Exoteric Teaching*. In that text, Strauss claimed that for Plato philosophy presupposes a real conversion from gazing at shadows in the Cave to climbing outside of it. This conversion according to Strauss brings about a difference in “rank” between the two readers, both intellectually *and* morally; hence the amateur must live in a realm of exotericism (noble lies) and the philosopher in a realm of esotericism (truth), “[a]nd there is a difference not of degree but of kind between truth and lie (or untruth).”¹⁰⁷

The divide between the two realms, however, is not necessarily as hard as Drury claims. The conversion happening in Plato’s Cave myth is a spiritual turnabout in the psyche of the budding philosopher. The turnabout ushers in a different mode of perceiving reality (the revealed truth) and, derivatively, a different morality. It is true that the text Drury cites is unclear about how hard the divide between philosophical and political truth is. Pangle too, makes the same point while interpreting a passage of *On Classical Political Philosophy*, whereby “[u]ltimately, political philosophy transforms itself into a discipline that is no longer concerned with political things in the ordinary sense of the term.”¹⁰⁸ Pangle seems to imply that “transformation” or conversion means the divide is a hard one, but I believe the clause “in the ordinary sense” leaves room for a link between the two realms that is a great deal more significant than Pangle realizes. Continuing the quote where Pangle breaks off reveals hints that Strauss did not believe

¹⁰⁶ Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 57.

¹⁰⁷ Leo Strauss, “Exoteric Teaching,” *The Rebirth*, 69.

¹⁰⁸ Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” *What is Political Philosophy?*, 91.

the philosopher is superhuman or dwells in a realm “beyond” the political, although he is surely unique: “Socrates called his inquiries a quest for ‘the *true* political skill,’ and Aristotle called his discussion of virtue and related subjects ‘a *kind* of political science.’”¹⁰⁹ Philosophers do not, then, dwell outside politics. Not only that but even the pre-philosophic considered the purely political men to be “busybodies” that contrasted poorly with the “greater freedom and the higher dignity of the more retired life of men who were minding their own business.”¹¹⁰ Even in his post-*Philosophy and Law* texts where philosophy has clearly gained the upper hand in contrast to politics, Strauss always interweaves philosophy and its truths into politics and its truths. Put another way, philosophers and political beings both dwell in the same human reality; it is just that philosophers do so in a different and cognitively better mode than political beings.

If in Strauss’s later works the esoteric/exoteric dichotomy is not hard and fast, then it should be even less so in *Philosophy and Law* where philosophy serves politics. After all, these two worlds are not unrelated: the Law embodies truth within itself and may guide reason to discover what is already in it.¹¹¹ Esoteric knowledge does not exist independently in a world of its own; it is neither outside of nor transcendent to the Law. Interpretation and literalism—philosophy and law—both lead to a single end: love and fear of God.¹¹² The prophet unites these two in one: he is “teacher and governor in one,”¹¹³ and the source of order in both modes. Prophecy has a practical character that weaves the two ways together and thus the prophet is superior to the mere philosopher or

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 88.

¹¹² Ibid., 90.

¹¹³ Ibid., 120.

the mere statesman. The truths accessed *via* intellect are articulated by him in sensible images *via* the Law. Elsewhere, Strauss develops this dichotomy by naming “general providence” the principle undergirding cosmic order and “particular providence” the rewards and punishments meted out by God to individual persons and acts.¹¹⁴ The goal of exoteric or particular providence is wholly political:

...what concerns the exoteric doctrine of providence—the doctrine of divine reward and punishment—also belongs, and as an exoteric doctrine indeed as such, to politics. For what are exoteric doctrines other than such doctrines of faith that are not true but whose acceptance is necessary for the health of the affairs of the city?¹¹⁵

Read figuratively, the exoteric truth is the truth perceived by the senses—the totality of institutions, discourses, transactions and laws that observably constitute the political whole, the necessary materials of a substantive political science. By contrast, “esoteric” truth is not such as to lie beyond action as some transcendental ground that can be literalized dogmatically in an exhaustive form; rather, it pervades the exoteric. It is the universal claim raised by every particularity. Strauss says in a later text, “every belief that a given policy is preferable is based on reasons which, if duly elaborated, would reveal a belief in what constitutes the best regime.”¹¹⁶ Yet there is a sense, too, that it is not *merely* that (although that alone suffices to constitute it a domain of political philosophy). Strauss is pointing to something that is beyond the reach of Cartesian science. But he is only pointing, and leaves his readers unclear as to the full character of the esoteric in a political sense. It is exactly his lack of clarity on this point that

¹¹⁴ Leo Strauss, “On Abravanel’s Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching,” *Isaac Abravanel*, eds., J. B. Trend and H. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937): 93-129 quoted in Tanguay, *An Intellectual Biography*, 72.

¹¹⁵ Leo Strauss, “The Place of the Doctrine of Providence According to Maimonides,” *Review of Metaphysics*, vol., 57, no., 3 (March 2003), 543.

¹¹⁶ Strauss, “Thucydides,” 98.

necessitates going beyond Strauss in a quest to understand the interweaving of the exoteric and esoteric.

Nevertheless, the discussion so far has advanced the question of founding: the prophecy—or the political community—emerges not from moments of divine irruption where God uses the prophets to found civil order (as theology would have it); rather, it is natural *qua* emergent from human nature.¹¹⁷ Human beings need law before their nature can be exercised but, precisely because it is natural, this law cannot be smuggled in from outside. The law is an intentional construct and simultaneously a spontaneous expression of the universal nature of man. It requires the imaginative or practical wisdom of the statesman and cannot be constructed by philosophy alone.¹¹⁸

Strauss successfully unveils the dichotomies constituting political life, which the practice of politics glosses over: on one hand, the universal inherent in every particular and, on the other, the impossibility and undesirability of submitting the particular to the immoderation of the universal. He concludes that his unveiling justifies transcending the particular to examine the universal free of its particularizing context; in other words, he finds no reason to stop at the phenomena of political life. Hence, his return to the experience of politics proves to be an incomplete return.

For Strauss, the way back to politics lies in the recovery of classical philosophy. On the way back, his thought moves continuously in dichotomies—upper/lower world, ancients/moderns, philosophy/common sense—and takes the side of the upper against

¹¹⁷ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 104.

¹¹⁸ Leo Strauss, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” *Interpretation* vol., 18, no., 1 (Fall 1990), 17-8; Tanguay, *An Intellectual Biography*, 58.

the lower; of the ancients against the moderns; of philosophy against common sense. Strauss does not reject common sense, but he looks down on it from the viewpoint of philosophy which creates its own world of meaning and its own ethic.¹¹⁹ For Strauss the transcendent movement toward the universal that springs from interrogating the particular necessarily transforms the particular into a tableau to be contemplated from a transcendent perspective. But is the question not rather *how* it is that the particular and the universal may be mutually interwoven? While it may be true that all systems of law bear an excess of meaning that cannot be understood by the outward or objective quality of law, it is unclear that the dichotomies can be anything more than a transitory heuristic device. Ultimately, Strauss assumes the wholeness and autonomy of political experience without demonstrating it. This lack of demonstration means that Strauss the philosopher pays insufficient attention to politics.

Strauss's reconstruction of "noble rhetoric"¹²⁰ or "beautiful admonition"¹²¹ follows from this duality. Much of the secondary literature on Strauss revolves around the problem of the "noble lie" and the concomitant relationship between the philosophical and the political life. There are three schools of thought: first, the anti-Straussian school exemplified by Shadia Drury and much of the popular press claim that the rational form of rule that Strauss takes from his return to the ancients is implicitly tyrannical—(*viz.* a philosophers' tyranny)—or, at any rate, deeply anti-democratic.¹²² The second school of thought is more sympathetic, but concludes that Strauss's claims do not hold up under

¹¹⁹ Thomas Pangle, "Introduction," *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, xvi.

¹²⁰ Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Teaching," 68-9.

¹²¹ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 86.

¹²² Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 200.

scrutiny in the end. Strauss's "dirty secret" is either that he is a "closet Nietzschean,"¹²³ or that philosophy is impossible—a truth that must be hidden from the political world for its own salvation.¹²⁴ In this reading, Strauss has exposed the radical relativity of all human cultures or horizons—a claim which if made public would render politics, and thus life itself, impossible. The third school takes Strauss at face value, rejecting the postulate of his harboring a secret teaching—be it Nietzscheanism, the impossibility of philosophy, or his political support for some form of elitism,—and claims that Strauss returns to an esoteric reading of the ancients simply to bring back to life the inner core of classical philosophy, which was concealed by the ancients' own esotericism as well as by the moderns' mistaken readings.¹²⁵ In this reading Strauss does not have a secret teaching because he does not write esoterically, but does believe, as he says he does, in the goodness, superiority and truth of the philosophical way of life.

The demonstration by the Zuckerts that Strauss did not write esoterically puts to rest some of the more extravagant claims, such as Drury's, regarding Leo Strauss. Nevertheless, it does not quite end the quarrel between the two other schools. Strauss clearly voiced to Kojève a belief in universal truth: "I assume, then, that there is an eternal and immutable order within which history takes place, and which remains entirely unaffected by history."¹²⁶ This, however, does not quite refute the alternative that Strauss is a "closet Nietzschean", because the *zetetic*¹²⁷ nature of philosophy entails

¹²³ Laurence Lampert, "Nietzsche's Challenge to Philosophy in the Thought of Leo Strauss," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 58, no. 3 (Mar., 2005), 604.

¹²⁴ Stanley Rosen, "Wittgenstein, Strauss, and the Possibility of Philosophy," *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary: Studies in the Possibility of Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 157.

¹²⁵ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, chapter 4.

¹²⁶ Strauss, "Restatement," *On Tyranny*, 212.

¹²⁷ By the *zetetic* nature of philosophy, Strauss emphasized the *quest* rather than knowledge of the whole. Strauss believed—i.e. had faith—on a perfect truth that may be systematically illuminated by philosophy,

that the transcendental standards Strauss calls for, if they exist, are not fully accessible to the human mind; hence belief in “our” way of life as *the* right way is impossible for a diligent reader of Strauss.

Philosophy is not impossible, but it is dependent on a leap of faith—on a *willed* belief that truth exists, and that the quest for it is the most salutary, most needful, and most human of quests. The Zuckerts cite, as evidence to the contrary, Strauss’s own reasoning that the Socratic knowledge of ignorance makes it “evident” that the quest for knowledge is “the most important thing for us.”¹²⁸ I see no reasoned argument here, merely an affirmation of the Socratic experience of love of truth as the highest love. It is unclear why *this* love, rather than the love of God or country or of another human being, is the most important, the most natural, and the only reasonable way of life. From this it follows that philosophy is first and foremost an experience. In later chapters, I pursue this common link between philosophy and politics so as to move beyond Strauss’s opposition of the two.

It suffices at this point to note that the debate over the “real” motives of Leo Strauss goes in an unfruitful direction. I move away from these concerns by re-examining the “noble lie” not as a key to Strauss’s motives, but through the function that it plays in Strauss’s philosophical construction. In my reading, the noble lie is a necessary concept needed to bridge the Straussian dichotomy between philosophy and politics. Without it, the wholeness of reality to which Strauss is committed breaks down into two realms. In

but admitted that such a truth may never be found. Hence, the importance of philosophy lay in its questing and skeptical nature that revealed the fundamental problems rather than their solutions. See especially Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 121-122.

¹²⁸ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, 152-154.

order to show this I take up his thesis of soft esotericism in *Philosophy and Law*, where esotericism is used to recover the living core of Platonic philosophy as never-ending quest for knowledge. The soft version of esotericism implicates two consequences: (a) a philosophical way of life, which is rather solitary and lived by the standard of coherence. This is contrasted to the political way of life pertinent to all non-philosophers in the realm of opinion, and non-noetic true knowledge. The former leads from radical doubt of all that is given to Socratic knowledge; the latter acts on the basis of the given. The upshot is (b) that the philosophical life through the application of logic, dialectic and reason to politics leads to some truths which are contrary to political wisdom. That does not mean that the two truths are worlds apart, but that they are incompatible: one is constituted by belief; the other by reason. Examples abound, as I have shown in *Philosophy and Law*, or as a cursory reading of *The City and Man* on classical political philosophy suffices to convince.

Since the philosophical and political life are incongruent modes of life, yet in either case man inhabits one world—*this* world,—some conceptual bridge is needed to explain their co-existence in one, human reality. The “noble lie” is precisely the artifice contrived by philosophy—i.e., Strauss—to bridge the gap between the philosophical and the political life.¹²⁹

On the face of it the “noble lie” is a trick that lends authority to the laws of the city, making community possible in spite of the natural injustices inevitably present in every

¹²⁹ See also Larry Peterman, “Approaching Leo Strauss: Some Comments on *Thoughts on Machiavelli*,” *Political Science Reviewer*, vol. 16 no., 1 (Fall 1986), 324.

community.¹³⁰ The hostile commentators on Strauss stress the manipulateness of the lie, whereas his sympathizers stress its “nobility”.¹³¹ Both miss the function of the lie in Strauss’s thought. Even in *Philosophy and Law*, where politics lends philosophy truths it would not otherwise have access to, the relationship between political and philosophical truths is unclear. They are essentially different—one is practical and communal, the other is theoretical and solitary—yet interwoven, therefore some connection *must* subsist between them. Some of the political truths, such as particular providence, are necessary but philosophically untrue. They are affirmed by the prophet for the health of the community. Having therefore a normative character Strauss prefers to emphasize the lie’s nobility, while others, quite naturally, fail to see the nobility of lying. But the truths of philosophy in which the city also partakes in part, are in no way delineated by Strauss. As Strauss’s work matures after *Philosophy and Law*, it becomes clearer that philosophical truth admits no dogmatic content, as philosophy is *zetetic*—a questioning of the particular the better to clarify universal problems which will *perhaps* “never go beyond the stage of discussion.”¹³² As the truths of philosophy are emptied out, and philosophy becomes a pursuit for its own sake, the noble lie loses its significance within Strauss’s thought. In his mature work, it withers away into what all schoolchildren learn from their textbooks. For example, he “exposes” Thomas Paine’s claim that “the foundation of the United States was laid in freedom and justice” by citing the treatment

¹³⁰ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 27; Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 35.

¹³¹ For an example of the former, see Neil G., Robertson, “The Closing of the Early Modern Mind: Leo Strauss and Early Modern Political Thought,” <http://www.mun.ca/animus/1998vol3/robert3.htm>, p. 4 (accessed on July 12, 2011). For a Straussian account of the lie, see Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, 127, 129-131.

¹³² Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 11.

of Native Americans.¹³³ But of course, such a “daring unmasking” of the primordial crime need not await the philosopher at all—the acts of masking and unmasking are in themselves political, and every citizen or amateur historian can carry them out. Under scrutiny, the “noble lie” comes to resemble an empty shell because the transcendental truths of philosophy supposed to lie on the other side of practice have given way to the open-ended practice of searching. The more philosophy comes to resemble politics, the less need there is for the noble lie.

The problem Leo Strauss is that he works in two epistemological registers: in terms of the citizen’s knowledge—very much an illumination of the whole from within—which is figuratively presented, tangible and material, dedicated to the particular, and residing in the imaginative faculty;¹³⁴ but also in terms of the philosopher’s knowledge which, residing in the intellect, is an improvement on the citizen’s knowledge—“[seeing] further afield in the same direction”¹³⁵—and a leap from the particular to the universal. The philosopher’s ways are “wisdom” (demonstrative argument) and “quarrel” (dialectical argument), while the citizen’s ways are rhetoric and knowledge of the senses.¹³⁶ One is not merely an improvement on the other for they are different ways of being in the world.¹³⁷ While both have the same ends—happiness, meaning knowledge of God or illumination of the beyond what is (or what existence naturally points towards)¹³⁸--they remain apart: “The imaginative faculty is flatly *opposed* to the intellect; it grasps only the particular, not the general; in its activity it cannot in any way

¹³³ Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 13-14.

¹³⁴ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 105.

¹³⁵ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” 28.

¹³⁶ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 86.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

free itself from matter, and therefore can never come to know a Form ... liberation from its influence is an indispensable condition of true knowledge.”¹³⁹ Insofar as prophecy and philosophy are bonded by their common ends and prophecy is the condition of possibility for philosophy, prophecy calls on man to overcome the political and dwell simply in wisdom and dialectic. Even in this text where politics seems to be primary, it ends up being secondary: a sensual skin which man must shed to achieve his natural *telos* philosophy.¹⁴⁰ The core of the political truth is, in the end, philosophical truth, but the way to it is not political. This is why Strauss’s understanding of the problem of foundations does not differ from Rousseau’s; both are philosophizing in the abstract even if Strauss *seems* to be thinking about an actual founding event.

Strauss’s account is not problematic because it is dichotomous but because it gives short shrift to the first half of the dichotomy—the political whole or realm of opinion. His view of it is “errors, guesses, beliefs, prejudices, forecasts, and so on.”¹⁴¹ He treats the political as “nothing but” the realm of myths and opinions, but this treatment contradicts his own definition of political action as an ennobling transcendence beyond what is given, *i.e.* received opinions: “society and the whole simply have this in common, that they are both wholes which transcend the individual, inducing the individual to rise above and beyond himself.”¹⁴² What is lacking is a theoretical account of the transcendent nature of political action. Strauss’s salutary shying-away from theorizing action because action is about particulars had the insalubrious effect of ignoring how action evokes and inscribes meaning in the world. Hence actual political action does not

¹³⁹ Ibid., 106-7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 110-111, 112, 119.

¹⁴¹ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 15.

¹⁴² Strauss, “Problem of Socrates,” 164.

prod the Straussian to understand the act, but to examine its effects—myths and opinions. Strauss’s view of politics is at bottom reductionist, for it begins by postulating a world of meaning—not understanding it. But society is not merely shared beliefs and trust, to be treated as if they are just *there*, but a practice by which that *thereness* is simultaneously transcended and actualized. Hannah Arendt supplies the defect through her account of political action. While Strauss established the importance of politics *qua* experience, he is in the end either uninterested or unable to conceptualize “experience”. This is seen clearly in the culmination of *Philosophy and Law*:

Man differs from the animals in that his life cannot be perfect if he lives for himself alone; man can live properly as man only if he lives in community; the existence and the welfare of the human race depends on men’s living in community; community presupposes reciprocal intercourse; this intercourse is not possible without regimen and justice; regimen is not possible without a lawgiver; the lawgiver must be able to address men and to bind them to the regimen given by him; he must therefore be a man. He must not let men abide in their opinions about justice and injustice; for each considers just what is advantageous to himself and unjust what is disadvantageous to himself; consequently the human race is dependent for its existence on such a man; but such a man is a *prophet*. It is therefore impossible that divine providence should not exercise care for this necessity. It is therefore necessary that there actually is (or was) a prophet. He must have characteristics that are lacking in other men, so that these may surmise his superiority and he may be distinguished from them.¹⁴³

The prophet of *Philosophy and Law* is none other than Rousseau’s lawgiver, who founds a political community. The *founding act* has two dimensions in this conception: the first is that the prophet is the crux on which history depends—there is no politics without him. His perfect intellect surveys the eternal truths of governing, what Strauss calls “divine laws,” and his perfect imaginative faculty articulates the truths figuratively that they may be understood and become accepted by the multitude—a combination that makes him more than a philosopher. He is precisely Plato’s statesman, except that the Platonic hierarchy is inverted. Though having a perfect theoretical understanding of the

¹⁴³ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 123.

art of governing,¹⁴⁴ he bases his rule or decision on context inasmuch as the *act* of governing is about the particular.¹⁴⁵ The prophet-statesman's knowledge has to be concrete; meaning that it differs in nature from the philosopher's knowledge, while yet subsuming it.¹⁴⁶ But, in Maimonides as in Plato, the esoteric truth stands behind the particular truths of politics, as it were, informing them. The prophet or the statesman is the perfect man who "sees" the truth *via* the intellectual faculty of contemplation, and then articulates it politically.¹⁴⁷

Strauss's return to ordinary experience, then, restores nobility not to all of politics but only to statesmanship as the term was understood by Plato. Yet Plato's critique of the law in *The Statesman* means that no literal, finite knowledge lies behind the world of action; in other words, no universal knowledge of human affairs is possible. The impossibility of defining theoretically what the prophet-statesman is to do in practice appears far more clearly in Plato than in Strauss's *Philosophy and Law*. Plato skirted around the problem with rhetoric, yet he opened up the breach into which much of Western political philosophy poured. The problem consists of *phronesis* not merely as habitude or common sense (as Strauss seems to imply), but as the irreducibility of human action and its creativity to laws, rules and opinions. Experience remains mute in Strauss perhaps to a greater extent than in Plato.

¹⁴⁴ Plato, *The Statesman*, 2nd ed., trans. J., B., Skemp (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), 293c.

¹⁴⁵ Plato, *The Statesman*, 295a-b.

¹⁴⁶ See Plato's critique of *nomoi* as the critique of the possibility of the rule of philosophers who do not have an eye for the particular, 294a-295b.

¹⁴⁷ Compare, *Philosophy and Law*, 106: "Prophecy in its essence is an emanation emanating from God through the active intellect first to the intellectual faculty and then to the imaginative faculty" with the Athenian Stranger's declaration in the *Laws* that "the sole genuine and good *politeia* will be the one in which the governors authentically possess the just knowledge, are *epistēmōnes*, scientists in the political domain" (293 c). Translated by Castoriadis in Cornelius Castoriadis, *On Plato's Statesman*, trans., David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 118.

The second dimension of the founding act in the quotation above is that “the lawgiver must be able to address men.” This is the closest Strauss comes to theorizing an experiential dimension to the founding act. It means that prior to the founding act there must be men who speak and reason with each other. It also means that the founding act is somehow related to the question of meaning. Strauss never explores this opening, which I shall pursue with Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin.

What seemed at first to be a text that posited politics as the primary and architectonic activity ends up a text that puts philosophy in that position. The evidence looked strong for the former view: politics is philosophy’s condition of possibility; therefore, the philosopher must obey the prophet¹⁴⁸ who, knowing more than the philosopher, is the highest in the natural hierarchy of human beings.¹⁴⁹ Yet the whole work is a critique of the imaginative faculty, of the knowledge of the particular, and of the realm of politics associated with the bodily, which is to be overcome. Strauss’s claim is that the theologico-political order is “the figurative representation of theoretical insights.”¹⁵⁰ This naturally calls for thinking beyond the figurative to the theoretical. Practice is to be left behind because the true concern of the philosopher is the esoteric meaning of the Law.

2.3. The Idealism of Leo Strauss

Strauss gives a theoretical account of the necessity of realism in political philosophy, yet nowhere does he begin from the being of man as he is—an already politically constituted being. Perhaps he never followed this up because his understanding of

¹⁴⁸ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 121.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

politics did not entice him to explore political phenomena. His problem as a political philosopher was the nature of man or the nature of justice. The difference between nature and convention is what posed this question: “[n]ature was discovered by the Greeks as in contradistinction to [...] *nomos* (law, custom, convention, agreement, authoritative opinion).”¹⁵¹ Nature is the object of philosophical inquiry, whereas *nomos* is what human beings know first and, indeed the only thing most of them ever know. Crucially—and this is where Strauss’s realism comes in—the questioning of *nomos* is what leads philosophers to nature. Classical political philosophers

look at political things in the perspective of the enlightened citizen or statesman. They see things clearly which the enlightened citizens or statesmen do not see clearly, or do not see at all. But this has no other reason but the fact that they look further afield in the same direction as the enlightened citizens or statesman.¹⁵²

Strauss never engaged with the practical wisdom of his age, even though he did engage with its most representative theoretical wisdom—Nietzsche and Heidegger. But as Strauss reminds us, *theoria* and *phronesis* are essentially different acts. To engage with the philosophical assumptions of an age—in this case, positivism and historicism—is different from engaging with the *nomos* or events of the age. Strauss views modernity, or any historical point in time, as philosophy expressed in action.¹⁵³ In this he contradicted himself: an “age” is not equivalent to a “thought,” for thought and *praxis* differ essentially. By contrast with the classical philosophers, he hardly ever used a term that was familiar to the contemporary market place.¹⁵⁴ If “political action [...] is concerned with individual situations, and must therefore be based on a clear grasp of the

¹⁵¹ Strauss, “Natural Law,” *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 138.

¹⁵² Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” 27-8.

¹⁵³ Robert Pippin, “The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity,” *Political Theory*, vol., 31, no., 3 (Jun., 2003), esp. 341.

¹⁵⁴ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” 28.

situation concerned,”¹⁵⁵ then Strauss was not at all concerned with political action or particular situations.

In fact, Strauss dealt with a political whole or a political problem only twice: in his reading of Thucydides’s *The History of the Peloponnesian War*,¹⁵⁶ and in his reflections on the contemporary movement of political Zionism.¹⁵⁷ In the first text, he treats of political events twice removed—not only remote in time but also remote in subject-matter, for he concerned himself only with the nature of Thucydides’s narrative of the speeches and deeds in the Peloponnesian war, not the speeches and deeds in themselves. The reason why Strauss never dealt with political events—those that represented the *nomos* that he worked so hard to rehabilitate—is in fact hinted at in his text on Thucydides. For Strauss, political speech is crude;¹⁵⁸ it may be full of glitter and glory but it is destined to be scorned by the wise—not merely the philosophers but even astute observers of political things like Thucydides.¹⁵⁹ Contemplated from above, the glitter and the glory look silly. Extolled by Strauss at first, the nobility of politics ends up dulled because the condition of possibility for the good life is not to be mistaken for the good life itself. Strauss’s realism was the beginning of a journey that transcended realism.

The second group of his texts is more directly relevant because it dealt with a contemporary political problem that appealed to the young Jewish scholar. As he makes

¹⁵⁵ Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History,” *What is Political Philosophy?*, 61.

¹⁵⁶ Strauss, “Thucydides,” *The Rebirth*.

¹⁵⁷ See especially “Preface,” “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 87-136; “Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us,” *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 311-356; Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings: 1921-1932*, trans., Michael Zank (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

¹⁵⁸ Strauss, “Thucydides,” 73.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74-6.

clear in his preface to the English translation of his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Strauss's concern was pre-eminently political: the situation he found himself in as a Jew in Weimar Germany.¹⁶⁰ He viewed Spinoza's critique of religion as the condition of possibility of both modern attempts to solve the problem of Jewish homelessness: assimilation and political Zionism. For the young Strauss, the success of Spinoza's project for liberal politics had nonetheless failed to alleviate the situation of German Jews. Their emancipation, though it invested them with full political rights in theory, had not brought about the expected resolution in practice, with discrimination and anti-Semitism continuing to pervade society. Of the two solutions tried by Jews, assimilation had proved itself to be a *cul-de-sac*. Not only was it incompatible with dignity and self-respect, but at an even more basic level it had left those Jews who had chosen it with "nothing to oppose to hatred and contempt except [their] naked self."¹⁶¹ Only the attempt to establish a national Jewish state could be taken seriously as a solution.

At the beginning of his intellectual life, Strauss was a supporter of political Zionism, the secular Jewish attempt to found a political community out of a religious one.¹⁶² To the end, he maintained that the founding of Israel had "procured a blessing for all Jews everywhere regardless of whether they admit it or not."¹⁶³ This was the political Strauss, however; Strauss the philosopher radically doubted the chances for success of the whole enterprise from quite early on. For Strauss, the success of political Zionism rested on the

¹⁶⁰ Leo Strauss, "Preface," *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

¹⁶¹ Strauss, "Progress or Return," *Jewish Philosophy*, 91.

¹⁶² Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings, 1921-1932*, trans., Michael Zank (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

¹⁶³ Strauss, "Preface," *Jewish Philosophy*, 142.

success of the “progress beyond Zionism [...] effected in a classic manner by a solitary man—Spinoza.”¹⁶⁴ As a political project, Zionism necessarily gives up on a theological resolution to the Jewish problem. This abandonment of Judaism was only made possible by Spinoza’s critique of religion which, Strauss argues forcefully, failed in its own terms as a rational critique. Political Zionism’s break with orthodoxy was thus without adequate foundation—in *philosophy*, that is. The Zionist response to the incoherence of the project was to fall back on cultural Zionism in hopes of shoring up the generic project of a national state with *Jewish* culture.¹⁶⁵ But for Strauss this only postpones the crisis. Cultural Zionism tries to revive Jewish heritage using means that are incompatible with Judaism—means that purport to relieve Jewish suffering through human action in history. Cultural Zionism revives something that not only never existed before as such, but is also inimical to itself, for the Jewish heritage is orthodox: the Law, the miracles, and preparing the heart for the advent of the Messiah. Thus, a consistent cultural Zionism must abandon the Zionist project of founding a secular state and return to orthodoxy: “When Cultural Zionism understands itself, it turns into religious Zionism. But when religious Zionism understands itself, it is in the first place Jewish faith and only secondarily Zionism. It must regard as blasphemous the notion of a human solution to the Jewish problem.”¹⁶⁶ Political Zionism fails in taking for granted Spinoza’s overcoming of Orthodox Judaism. Political Zionism is bound to fail because Spinoza failed. By the time he finished his first book, Strauss wondered “whether an unqualified return to Jewish orthodoxy was not both possible and necessary—was not at the same

¹⁶⁴ Strauss, “Progress or Return,” *The Rebirth*, 230.

¹⁶⁵ Strauss, “Preface,” *Jewish Philosophy*, 143.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

time the solution to the problem of the Jew lost in the non-Jewish modern world and the only course compatible with sheer consistency or intellectual probity.”¹⁶⁷

Even conceding to Strauss a certain amount of rhetorical latitude,¹⁶⁸ this is a strange way to deal with a *political* problem. Without wanting to join the fray on political Zionism, it is important to note that Strauss’s approach to what is essentially a project of political founding is philosophical—and the two are not quite compatible according to Strauss’s understanding of politics and philosophy. Political Zionism is “political” insofar as it is a response or a project *vis-à-vis* the particular situation in which the Jewish community found itself in the nineteenth century. The options seemed to be three: traditional homelessness, assimilation, or the founding of a political community ready for action in human history. It is unnecessary here to argue the reasons for preferring the third option. What is important is that the *nature* of the third option—and the object of Strauss’s critique—is political. As such, it is not an abstract project to be subjected to a test of its analytical coherence, but a concrete response to a particular situation. It arises out of a passionate concern for the security, well-being and dignity of a people that has little to do with the rational correctness of Spinoza’s argument. Its medium is not the treatise but the constitutive deeds and speeches of acting men and women, thinking and acting from a concrete situation. The philosophical standard of coherence fails to capture the reality of political Zionism which by the 1920s had transitioned from a mere program in the heads of a few intellectuals to an actual practice of return, settlements, political debates—in Arendt’s terms, a “world” that was already being built and within which men and women already dwelt. A critique of political Zionism is of course possible and

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 154.

¹⁶⁸ Tanguay, *An Intellectual Biography*, chapter 1.

necessary, but it can be effective only if taken seriously as a political project. Strauss's political sympathy for the founding of a political community conflicts with his philosophical treatment of the founding acts.

This treatment of the problem is inappropriate given Strauss's own understanding of politics and philosophy. A political approach requires a passionate attachment to particularity: a tribe, a group or a community that is already constituted in some manner. A philosophical approach implies an attachment to universality; that is, the truth that exposes the arbitrariness of particular attachments. A political approach requires acting from within a particular context; a philosophical approach requires transcending particular contexts. The medium of the political is public speech, epic poetry, and myth. The medium of philosophy is the treatise.¹⁶⁹ A political response consists first and foremost in a *decision*. A philosophical response consists in exposing the fundamental impossibility of decision—that after all the decisions have been taken, there remains the question formulated anew. This is what Strauss does in his uncharacteristically personal lecture titled “Why we Remain Jews,” in which he rejects all “modern solutions” to the Jewish problem to suggest that Jews learn to live with the human problem—that is, learn to live with persecution. The Jewish problem is not a particular problem to be faced squarely in history, but merely one example of the philosophically intractable situation facing all modern human beings.¹⁷⁰ The reward to young American Jews for turning

¹⁶⁹ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 10-12.

¹⁷⁰ Leo Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?” *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 311-358. There is a third example of Strauss's engagement with a political problem with which he deals philosophically or, in my understanding, inappropriately. In a Jewish-Protestant Colloquium about religious faith in America, all participants were in favor of a revival of faith in the United States. But, the other participants wanted to bring this about by reviving the dizzying variety of religious faiths in the belief that they could exist not only in mutual tolerance but the diversity itself would be beneficial to American society. Strauss thought this view naïve since the idea that a

away from liberalism, Zionism and modernism in general is the opportunity for “heroic suffering,” which is possible only through membership in a community dedicated to something “infinitely higher than itself;” for “it is surely nobler to be victim of the most noble dream than to profit from a sordid reality and to wallow in it.”¹⁷¹ This is the talk of a man who lives in abstractions rather than in the world of citizens.

This does not mean that the philosopher cannot speak to the political community, and Strauss dealt at length with this problem. But it does require a special effort on the philosopher’s part to understand a political whole, not only because the philosopher necessarily looks down on the hustle and bustle of the political—which was not Strauss’s problem in this case, given his passionate concern for the contemporary Jewish situation—but also because it requires Pascal’s “spirit of *finesse*” attuned to the political whole, not merely the “spirit of geometry” reasoning on its coherence. It is a *finesse* that is lacking in Strauss’s analysis; for example, his critique of liberalism from the Zionist perspective falls flat: he argues that liberalism cannot end discrimination because it must allow it in the private sphere, as the racial hierarchy of American society at the time seemed to show.¹⁷² It goes without saying that liberalism proved a great deal more flexible precisely because liberalism is a political practice that constantly reconstitutes

plurality of religions and worldviews can be conducive to social harmony is illogical. His argument is wholly logical: a) every religion is based on a particular truth; b) by definition, there is no room beyond one’s own truth which is truth of the whole; c) therefore it is impossible to respect, let alone work together, with other truths. Thus, for Strauss, a society that contains a multiplicity of religions was impossible. The problem, of course, was that it was possible as the 200 year history of religion in America demonstrates. Strauss’s argument is based on universal logical rather than an attempt to understand *this* particular interweaving of religions in *this* particular setting. For the story, see Shadia B., Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 7-8. For Strauss’s speech, see “Perspectives on the Good Society,” *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 260 ff.

¹⁷¹ Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews,” 56, 61.

¹⁷² Leo Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews,” 317.

itself by dealing with an ever-changing context, rather than a finite set of dogmas which stand or fall based on their inner coherence. Strauss claimed that there is no chance that even the most hospitable form of society could ever fully accept Jews; with the benefit of hindsight, this is problematic at best. His critique of political Zionism is no different. There is no context, no sense of urgency, no sensitivity to the new and dangerous situation which had rendered religious orthodoxy politically obsolete. The argument for sticking with orthodoxy could be made, but only in light of the whole situation facing the Jewish people not just of the errors of Spinoza. His call for a return to orthodoxy in line with the demands of “intellectual probity” consequently sounds politically incoherent: it is a historically motivated call to return unqualifiedly to a timeless, ahistorical position, and a historically motivated call to ignore history is not a serious call. Finally, there is no sense that Zionism was by then a lived experience that could not be jettisoned as if it was a desiccated dogma. Strauss philosophizes about the eternal Jewish problem instead of grappling with the contemporary Jewish problem.¹⁷³ To better understand something of the pre-war Jewish problem in Europe, we must read Hannah Arendt. To understand *the* Jewish problem independent of politics we may read Leo Strauss.

Strauss does not follow his own argument that political philosophy is a politically situated activity except in his care to protect philosophy from while paying due respect to the political.¹⁷⁴ This care toward the political implies looking down on the political or, to put it frankly, not taking it seriously. As a philosopher, Strauss’s object of inquiry is

¹⁷³ Cf. Michael L. Morgan, “The Curse of Historicity: The Role of History in Leo Strauss’s Jewish Thought, *The Journal of Religion*, vol., 61, no., 4 (Oct., 1981): 347-8.

¹⁷⁴ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, 209.

human nature, and that nature as Strauss finds it through the classics is dichotomous. According to the doctrine of classical natural right, a distinction subsists between the needs of the body and the needs of the soul. Leaving aside what this may mean for philosophy—the moderate nature of Straussian thought—what it does mean is that the political is tied to the bodily and therefore ought to be transcended through a life of contemplation.¹⁷⁵ These are not as far apart as they may at first seem; both require justice and dedication to the common good. But the transcendence that makes a human being realize human nature “is the life of the mind.”¹⁷⁶ The dichotomy which Strauss finds at the root of the human condition requires him to turn away from one side of it—politics and the body—toward the other—philosophy and the mind. Both sides are expressions of the erotic nature of humanity, but the implicatedness of politics in the necessary, the particular, and the transitory demands the transcendence of the political.

¹⁷⁵ See also Leo Strauss, “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 13-14.

¹⁷⁶ Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” *The Rebirth*, 164.

3. The Political Science of Leo Strauss: The Incomplete Return to Experience

Political foundings bring into sharp focus the relationship between the philosophical problem of order and the practical problem of understanding those moments when order is constituted in history. In these unique moments politicians encounter philosophy and philosophers encounter political practice. Leo Strauss claimed to have negotiated the tension between theory and practice by weaving together into a single science the quest for philosophical truth and the concern to understand and provide counsel to politics. This chapter examines his solution closely. In the first section, I show that although Strauss did lay the groundwork for a substantive science, contrary to his own claims he did not theorize the political whole as an autonomous realm that could be studied in itself. It turns out that Strauss fails to carry through his return to political experience. The second section considers whether Strauss did enough conceptual work to take us forward along the path he left untraveled by analyzing his reading of Thucydides's *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. In Strauss's interpretation, political phenomena are illuminated through the dialectical movement of Thucydides's reimagining of the war. Yet Strauss rejected Thucydides's understanding. I disallow Strauss's rejection and suggest that his account of Thucydides exemplifies the very weaving-together of philosophy and empiricism that the problem of understanding requires. Finally, I examine the works of Strauss's students on the American founding in order to see whether the substantive science that Strauss opened the door to but never developed, is furthered in their work. I find that here, too, the Straussian opening towards understanding of political phenomena is not exploited.

3.1. The Political Science of Leo Strauss

Strauss's reasons for returning to a classical political science are famously stated in the opening of *On Tyranny*: modern political science is so lacking in basic political understanding that it failed to call a spade a spade when it mattered most: "...when we were brought face to face with tyranny—with a kind of tyranny that surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past—our political science failed to recognize it."¹⁷⁷ What seemed self-evident to many citizens of democracies went unrecognized by the professionals. This could be cured, Strauss claimed, by classical political science. Two premises of the Straussian return bind it to Arendt and Voegelin's work: firstly, the common sense or unscientific understanding of politics that exists prior to scientific corroboration is cognitively of primary importance; secondly, political science must follow from a philosophical anthropology that looks beyond cultural or ideological differences. This second premise follows from the first, more fundamental one. As Strauss put it, "one must start, not from the 'scientific' understanding of political things but from their 'natural' understanding, *i.e.*, from the way in which they present themselves in political life, in action, when they are our business, when we have to make decisions."¹⁷⁸ The first premise recognizes "the fundamental riddle"¹⁷⁹ at the heart of any scientific study of human sociability. The riddle is that all scientific accounts of human reality necessarily presume the truth of that reality. Science relies on the truth of unscientific truth. For Strauss, this is a "riddle" that must be accepted and not solved. It is "fundamental" because if trust in pre-scientific knowledge were lacking, science would be impossible. Political science, then, must aim

¹⁷⁷ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 23.

¹⁷⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 81.

¹⁷⁹ Strauss, "An Epilogue," *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 211.

to illuminate the pre-scientific conception of political things if it is to understand them properly. Strauss claimed his political science was an empirical science.

Common sense knowledge includes abstract concepts and models, which folk also apply to daily life. The difference with science is that the latter constructs its concepts “rationally,” i.e., science is common sense made transparent. Science does this through the mutual illumination of “sense perception,” which is subjected to a “reasoning” process, which is cross-examined in turn by that faculty of critical and self-critical reflection that Strauss, following the Greeks, called “*noesis*.”¹⁸⁰ The results can be demonstrated universally valid and are wholly transferrable across all cultural divides. Science is universal and objective; common sense particular and subjective. Sense perception and *noesis* are coupled with reasoning in order to escape subjectivity, while reasoning mediates the other two lest common sense be lost sight of. Strauss took on the task of giving an account of how science moves beyond common sense knowledge without deteriorating into the Archimedeanism that observes the political world from the outside.

I shall present the principles of classical political science according to Strauss first, and then examine their suitability to an empirical science of politics. As is evident from Strauss’s two premises,

[c]lassical political philosophy attempted to reach its goal by accepting the basic distinctions made in political life exactly in the sense and with the orientation in which they are made in political life, and by thinking them through, by understanding them as perfectly as possible.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ *Noesis* is a kind of “awareness with the mind’s eye as distinguished from sensible awareness” that “is never divorced from sense perception and reasoning based on sense perception.” Leo Strauss, “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (1979): 112.

¹⁸¹ Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” 50.

The political scientist cannot claim to stand outside political life, but must recognize that science is “itself essentially an element of political life.”¹⁸² If political life consists in deeds and speeches by the gamut of partisan groups who all make claims about the common good, the scholar must work with these materials as they are given in actual life. The questions of classical political philosophy “were not specifically philosophic or scientific; they were questions that are raised in assemblies, councils, clubs and cabinets, and they were stated in terms intelligible and familiar, at least to all sane adults, from everyday experience and everyday usage.”¹⁸³ Scientific inquiry is supposed to follow the orientation of political life by examining these claims which political life raises.

What then is the goal of the political scientist? If the scientist cannot step outside political life, then he is a citizen or, at least, *like* a citizen. All citizens are political partisans insofar as they hold some opinion, however vague, about right and wrong applicable to the common good of the body politic. The political scientist shares these concerns. As civil strife is the worst eventuality in politics, his goal must be to move the polity as far from discord as possible. If citizens may be ranked by the degree of practical wisdom they hold—the greatest statesmen at the top, non-citizens at the bottom, then the political scientist ought to umpire between the necessarily conflicting claims of different groups and individuals in the body politic. He is the one who can make an “intelligent decision”¹⁸⁴ giving each position its due. The political scientist as umpire is rooted in political reality; his inner hermeneutical movement reasonably reflects the movement of the political world.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Political science is thus a practical or empirical science because practice is “in principle self-sufficient or closed.”¹⁸⁵ It neither depends on nor can it be derived from theoretical science because “human action has principles of its own which are known independently of theoretical science.”¹⁸⁶ The political scientist gleans the principles of practical wisdom out of public speeches, and finding prudence independent of theory, he defends its autonomy against false doctrines by the application of theory itself.¹⁸⁷ For Strauss, this “complication” lies at the root of modern political scientists’ misunderstanding. Practical wisdom is autonomous yet vulnerable to theoretical attack. This has led the moderns to declare practical wisdom unscientific and to undertake to supplant it with “scientific” knowledge. But as long as man remains the political animal of classical anthropology, prudence cannot be supplanted without detriment to both theory and practice. Prudence needs a scientific theory to defend it, and Strauss means to supply it *via* the recovery of Aristotle and Plato. Thus, having begun by arguing for an empirical political science, he ends up in search of a scientific theory capable of defending practice from theoretical misunderstanding.

Political science is thus divided into two (for Strauss interrelated) forks: one fork seeks to understand practical wisdom; the other seeks a philosophical defense of practical wisdom. The two are interrelated through the figure of the statesman who possesses practical wisdom at its best. He understands his own political world, while simultaneously he is able in principle to handle the affairs of any community across time and space. He is a practical and a theoretical being at once, albeit the latter follows on

¹⁸⁵ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 206.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

the former. Political science is “universally transferrable” insofar as it is a clear and complete account of the perfect statesman.¹⁸⁸ It follows that political science should not be concerned with understanding any particular political event or community, but only with the universal intrinsic to the particular. It approaches politics at “the level of generality”¹⁸⁹ and refuses to descend to the particular. It provides a theoretical defense of practice, not an understanding of it. Practical wisdom is somehow rooted in the particular and emergent from it. Strauss sees no contradiction in this—the ascent of political science from particular to universal empowers it to deal with real events through “commands or decrees or advices [...] which are intended to cope with an individual case”¹⁹⁰ as well as to fashion “the permanent framework” of laws and institutions which are valid everywhere. Although the particular is autonomous in being “a kind of a whole,” it only becomes intelligible in light of the universal. The political scientist’s inquiry into the political makes him a philosopher who conquers the commanding heights above the tumult of practical politics. To frame it in terms of foundings, the inquiry that began by examining a particular founding moment culminates in a philosophic understanding of the founding problem—the founding, as conceived by Plato or Rousseau.

The political scientist’s transformation into the umpire of the first fork of Straussian political science is but a temporary equilibrium on the way to his final transformation into a philosopher. What I am calling the “first fork” proves to be a partial, unstable position that must move toward philosophy. Both inside and outside of political reality

¹⁸⁸ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 27.

¹⁸⁹ Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” 53.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

simultaneously, the umpire finds himself unable to derive any judgments from the dynamics of political reality, and is obliged to turn to natural right. He transforms the problem of understanding political reality into one of contemplating natural right and the ways it intersects with political reality. The umpire becomes a philosopher. Here lies the contradiction at the heart of Strauss's political science: prudence, which is not reducible to "a body of true propositions," is transcended in the quest for an architectonic science—an ideal founding—that elaborates "a 'blueprint' of the best polity"¹⁹¹ for the edification of legislators and men of action. Of course, Strauss is no vulgar idealist: he admits that even if all polities took the advice of political science they would still all look different because the actual institutional and legislative outfit would be a compromise between the universal blueprint and "what is possible in given circumstances."¹⁹² Mere *fortuna* cautions the political scientist against any Procrustean imposition of his blueprint. Such a political science is supposed to transition seamlessly from practical to theoretical knowledge, while also viewing practice in light of theory, following the Straussian maxim:

It is safer to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low. In doing the latter one necessarily distorts the high, whereas in doing the former one does not deprive the low of the freedom to reveal itself fully as what it is.¹⁹³

The Straussian claim, then, is that political science must traverse the particular on its way to arriving at the universal or fundamental problems.

Strauss's jump from practice to theory was hasty or, as he might have said it, no *good* reasons can be found for such a jump. To show this, I shall examine what Strauss means

¹⁹¹ Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," 56.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Leo Strauss, "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion," *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 225.

by philosophy since philosophy is the second fork of political science. It is the inquiry into the “the whole” or the total “articulation” of the parts of the whole which are “God, the world, and man.”¹⁹⁴ As the sum of all existents, the whole is “beyond being” since being as we know it is less than the whole.¹⁹⁵ Knowledge of this whole being impossible, there can be no “unqualified transcending, even by the wisest man as such, of the sphere of opinion.”¹⁹⁶ Philosophy proceeds from “what is” and “is always” through “sense perception,” “reasoning” and “noesis.”¹⁹⁷ Philosophy is political science, for it aims at the same end—knowledge of what is and is always—through a combination of the same means. Philosophy thereby attains wisdom: “a set of objective (sense-based), logically consistent, and certain propositions about all existing things.”¹⁹⁸ Philosophy may always be *zetetic* in nature, but its goal is the “completion of the true system of the true or adequate account of the whole.”¹⁹⁹ Although the dynamo moving the philosopher’s activity is not his conclusions but his desire or *eros*,²⁰⁰ Strauss conceives of philosophy very much in the traditionalist systematic view: it may never reach a systematic account of the whole, but that does not keep its ideal from being just such an account, and it proceeds methodologically as if it *were* within reach.

The longing for a universal system of non-contradictory, objective propositions which capture the essence of the whole leaves the particular far behind: “[f]or a philosopher or philosophy there can never be an absolute sacredness of a particular or contingent

¹⁹⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 122-3.

¹⁹⁶ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, 20.

¹⁹⁷ Leo Strauss, “The Mutual Influence,” 112.

¹⁹⁸ James M. Rhodes, “Philosophy, Revelation, and Political Theory: Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol., 49, no., 4 (Nov., 1987), 1041.

¹⁹⁹ Strauss, “The Mutual Influence,” 117.

²⁰⁰ Strauss, “The Mutual Influence,” 113.

event.”²⁰¹ The political whole which is the whole given to us by virtue of our humanity is not ultimately, for Strauss, a subject in itself, but is dependent on a philosophical articulation of the cosmological question:

[H]umanism is not enough. Man, while being at least potentially a whole, is only a part of a larger whole. While forming a kind of world and even being a kind of world, man is only a little world, a microcosm. The macrocosm, the whole to which man belongs, is not human. That whole, or its origin, is either subhuman or superhuman. Man *cannot be understood in his own light* but only in the light of either the subhuman or the superhuman. Either man is an accidental product of a blind evolution or else the process leading to man culminating in man, is directed towards man. Mere humanism avoids this ultimate issue [...] social science must rather be taken to contribute to the true universal science into which modern science will have to be integrated eventually.²⁰²

It is unclear however why the inquiry into political events must be understood in light of the knowledge of everything. What remains of the autonomy of practice? Is it not possible that the inquiry into the particularly human differs in purpose from the inquiry into the whole? From everything Strauss says it is clear that man’s relationship to the whole, in which he subsists by virtue of his humanity, is of decisive importance. It is less clear that this relationship is illuminated by symbols like “microcosm” and “macrocosm”, which suggest a radical dependency of man as a part within the whole. Undoubtedly, the Straussian jump may have occurred for good reasons: for example, he could have been concerned about the repercussions of our beliefs about the whole on our politics. These beliefs certainly have a tremendous effect on practical politics, because political men will act in starkly different ways depending on which beliefs they hold. The questions about the whole are thus directly relevant to practical politics and Straussian political science remains deeply mindful of the problems of practice. The problem is simply that to understand political phenomena requires an elucidation of the

²⁰¹ Ibid., 111.

²⁰² Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” *The Rebirth*, 7-8. See also Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates.”

nature of understanding as well as of the nature of political phenomena, an understanding that is posited but not fully elaborated by Strauss, concerned as he is about the problem of the whole. The Straussian jump from the study of political phenomena to the study of the whole obscures the status of political phenomena and the manner in which they are to be understood. Strauss is not wrong, but the quickness of his jump dims down what the jump leaves behind: politics as it is, and substantive political science.

For Strauss, practical wisdom is incomplete because it does not raise questions concerning the natural but only the contextual order of human ends. Unlike philosophical questions which are intended to yield a “body of propositions”, practical wisdom deals always and everywhere with the particular. It cannot bear the exactness of philosophy. Raising questions about the natural order is natural to man, but the moment they are raised seriously, philosophy begins to transcend practical wisdom. The philosopher is no longer interested in understanding political phenomena simply. He may be obliged to take an interest in politics or philosophize about it, but he cannot prefer to descend from universals to phenomena in themselves. The true object of Straussian political science is the whole, in light of which the phenomena of political action gain intelligibility, not the particular phenomena. Its wager is that this transcendental movement gives the phenomena their due, *i.e.* understands them.

Our problem concerns the understanding of actual founding moments. Ultimately, this is not the question of Straussian political science although it quickly travels through it as it were. Strauss’s account of the natural principles of action leads to transcendence of “the dimension of political life,” to the realization “that the ultimate aim of political life

cannot be reached by political life, but by a life devoted to contemplation, to philosophy.”²⁰³ It looks beyond any purely human whole to judge events and actions by the principles of coherence: whether the act or deed or speech is coherent with itself and with all things. Having understood politics as the arena of chance and particularity, Strauss did not demand reification of the natural order. But neither does he expand on the means of understanding particular events or actions, for they serve as a springboard to philosophizing.

Implicit in Strauss’s wager that philosophical transcending can understand political life is the insight that the (philosophical) answer to the question “What is virtue?” is amongst the essential principles organizing practical (political) life. Thus, it is no surprise that Strauss privately stated in a letter to Karl Löwith:

I *really* believe [...] that the perfect political order, as Plato and Aristotle have sketched it, *is* the perfect political order [...] [O]ne can show from political considerations that the small city-state is in principle superior to the large state or to the territorial-feudal state. I know very well that *today* it cannot be restored (though maybe tomorrow it can?); but [...] the contemporary solution, that is, the completely modern solution, is *contra naturam* [...] Details can be disputed, although I myself might actually agree with everything that Plato and Aristotle demand (but that I tell only you).²⁰⁴

The radical disconnect between philosophy and politics leads him to a radical conclusion that contradicts his seemingly moderate politics.²⁰⁵ In *On the Intention of Rousseau* the natural hierarchy amongst human beings finds full political expression:

The basic premise of classical political philosophy may be said to be the view that the natural inequality of intellectual powers is, or ought to be, of decisive political importance. Hence the

²⁰³ Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” 91.

²⁰⁴ Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss, “Correspondence Concerning Modernity,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (1982): 107-108. In another letter, he clarifies the structure of the ideal polis: “a *surveyable, urban, morally serious (spoudaia)* society, based on an agricultural economy, in which the *gentry rule*—is *morally-politically* (i.e. but not according to the needs or interests of philosophers) the most reasonable and pleasing.” *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁰⁵ Stanley Rosen, “Wittgenstein, Strauss,” *The Elusiveness*, 144-146.

unlimited rule of the wise, in no way answerable to the subjects, appears to be the absolutely best solution to the political problem.²⁰⁶

As this is incommensurable with political rule in any conventional sense, the natural order ought to be replicated in a “political counterpart, or imitation, which is the rule, under law, of the gentlemen over those who are not gentlemen.”²⁰⁷ Of all the natural facts that might be politically embodied, only one matters for Strauss: the hierarchy of natural types of intellect. Ideally, this would be transposed into political institutions straightforwardly. More realistically, as this natural fact intersects with the other natural fact of a permanent and irresolvable antagonism between politics and philosophy, one ought to seek a more moderate *modus vivendi*, Strauss admits. Taken literally, Strauss’s call for rule by “gentlemen” rather than “philosophers” is very moderate in its ambiguity. However, the moderation is a specious veneer painted over the radically immoderate kernel of his thought, that the universal dignity of mankind, being grounded in “the dignity of the mind,”²⁰⁸ is inseparable from the inequality of intellectual endowments which must therefore find some sort of political expression. The kernel is constituted by an unproductive, irreconcilable dichotomy: on one hand, the theoretical insight that the natural hierarchy based on intelligence is *the* political fault line;²⁰⁹ while, on the other, a political fault line cannot be dictated by theory but must emerge in practice. Any reading of Strauss must take one of the two forks: either emphasize the role of experience and take politics seriously, or pursue wisdom at the expense of

²⁰⁶ Leo Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau,” *Social Research*, vol., 14, no., 1 (1947), 485.

²⁰⁷ Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau,” 486.

²⁰⁸ Leo Strauss, “What is Liberal Education,” *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 8.

²⁰⁹ Strauss leaves no doubt about the politically decisive nature of the epistemic hierarchy at the root of the human condition: the gentlemen disagree with the vulgar, and the philosopher disagrees with the gentlemen. Human beings can politick within classes by deliberating and competing about ends, but *the* political problem—the harmony between the three classes—is a universal and hence philosophical problem. Strauss, “What is Liberal Education,” 12, 14.

politics. Strauss may be put to use in either sense, but not both at once. The choice is unequal for only the latter perspective stays loyal to the totality of Strauss's thought. It is not surprising that the secondary literature on Strauss takes the latter fork, merely gesturing to the former at best. Strauss's *political* reading of classical philosophy brings us to the crossroads: he takes the turn towards philosophy. To take the other turn, to take up in earnest his mysterious commandment that we "must start from seeing the city as a world, as the highest in the world,"²¹⁰ I shall inquire of a thoughtful lover of praxis, Hannah Arendt, in the next chapter.

My claim is that, contrary to the Straussian wager, the culmination of political science in philosophy in the way Strauss describes it elides the problem of understanding political things. Let us restate Strauss's claim with its implicit wager:

[T]he adjective 'political' in the expression 'political philosophy' designates not so much a subject matter as a manner of treatment; from this point of view, I say, 'political philosophy' means primarily not the philosophic treatment of politics, but the political, or popular, treatment of philosophy, or the political introduction to philosophy [...] it is ultimately because he means to justify philosophy before the tribunal of the political community, and hence on the level of political discussion, that the philosopher has to understand the political things exactly as they are understood in political life.²¹¹

For Strauss, philosophical knowledge of human things has an inner standard which is the philosophical standard of "consistency"²¹² and an outer standard which provides it with a political justification. If the pathway to philosophy is through the political, then surely the philosopher has understood "political things." That philosophy is *zetetic*, and may never arrive at ultimate standards by which to judge political action, does not change his epistemological position—it simply makes him cautious in the practical application of

²¹⁰ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 240.

²¹¹ Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," 62.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

the results of his own philosophical inquiry. Straussian thought claims that behind every opinion or action in political life lies a philosophical principle that may be cross-examined by rigorous philosophical methods. This is tantamount to asserting that all prudential thought as well as the action is in essence philosophical, so that the *natural* difference between citizens consists in how noetically aware they are of the philosophy they are enacting. But philosophy as Strauss understands it—thought whose inner principle is coherence—is not prudential thought. It is an insular form of thought within which arguments occur and victors are decided. In practice, philosophical positions are merely rhetorical attitudes—as valid as any others. Strauss commits what Stanley Fish calls “the theory mistake” of conflating philosophical convictions or outcomes with the way folk act and behave politically.²¹³ In Straussian political science “belief is fatal to any philosophy.”²¹⁴ Philosophy must abstract from belief to examine the principle underlying it. But beliefs as habits of thought or attitudes and not as abstract principles are essential to political life. Indeed, as Strauss’s political science admits in its undeveloped fork, the beliefs, experiences and acts are of primary importance to the understanding of political events. This is the fork that is pursued in the rest of this thesis.

3.2. The Potentialities of the Thucydidean Case Study

The previous chapter showed that the problem of founding in Strauss shifts away from a problem of pure philosophy—as a paradox; or as a beginning out of nothing; or as a utilitarian construction out of a state of nature—into a problem of historical action. The

²¹³ Stanley Fish, “Does Philosophy Matter?” *The New York Times*, August 1 and August 8, 2011, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/01/does-philosophy-matter/> and <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/08/does-philosophy-matter-part-two/>, accessed on August 08, 2011.

²¹⁴ Strauss, “Preface to Spinoza’s Critique of Religion,” 256.

classical concept of “regime” turns founding into a political event that can only be understood through practical wisdom. In Strauss’s reading of medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy too, founding is taken away from a God. It comes to denote a natural event by means of which human beings are able to exercise their nature. The problem of founding then is equivalent to the problem of understanding actual foundings. At this point, Strauss’s movement beyond political practice in favor of the philosophical life provides little guidance on how to understand founding moments.

Strauss’s stark problematization of philosophy and politics obliges us to weigh two possibilities: either Strauss distorts political phenomena and completely misunderstands their nature, or the undeveloped fork of his political science provides enough groundwork to develop a substantive political science. This section will explore these possibilities by focusing on the only works of Strauss that interpret an effort to comprehend a political event, his works on Thucydides: “On Thucydides’s War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians” in *The City and Man*; “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*; and “Preliminary Observations on the Gods in Thucydides’s Work” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*.

Two more specific reasons persuade us to focus on these texts. Firstly, Strauss is reading someone else’s analysis of a political whole; given the lack of any work dealing directly with actual politics, what Strauss says about Thucydides may illuminate the relationship of his thought to the political whole. Secondly, Thucydides concerns himself with particular political events, not with eternal truths as such. Fortunately, Thucydides is not merely a historian but a *political* historian:

the most political historian, the greatest political historian of all times, the man who has grasped and articulated most fully the essence of political life, the life of politics as it actually is: *i.e.*, not the application of the principles of the Declaration of Independence but the operation of the principles which were operative in the Louisiana Purchase.²¹⁵

For Thucydides “man’s action is either political or nothing.”²¹⁶ His *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is a fine example of what Strauss called approvingly “genuine sympathetic understanding.”²¹⁷ Signing his work “Thucydides the Athenian”²¹⁸ he takes events seriously because as an Athenian he has a stake in the outcome. His attempt to understand the war is on some level an attempt to understand himself. On the other hand, Thucydides does transcend the partial accounts of events by their participants. He performs the miracle of taking on the multitude of citizen perspectives to become “*apolis*, cityless, beyond the city,”²¹⁹ yet all the while never pretending the “neutrality” that warps understanding. Tracing Thucydides’s thought illuminates the position of political scientist as umpire. The umpire position is the crux of a Straussian science of politics, and Thucydides should be the example that illuminates that crux.

This position of umpire, however, is seemingly a paradoxical one—amidst politics yet removed from it; or as Strauss put it,

He looks at political things not only in the same direction as the citizen or statesman but also within the same horizon. And yet he is not simply a political man. We indicate the difference between Thucydides and the political man as such by calling Thucydides [...] a historian.²²⁰

There is thus a pathway leading from being merely political (citizenship) to the study of political events. Strauss’s Thucydides travels that path.

²¹⁵ Leo Strauss, “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History,” *Rebirth*, 75 (henceforth: “Thucydides”).

²¹⁶ Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 41. See also, Clifford Orwin, “Thucydides’ Contest: Thucydidean ‘Methodology’ in Context,” *The Review of Politics*, vol., 51, no., 3 (Summer, 1998): 345-364.

²¹⁷ Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” 10-11. Cf. Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 25.

²¹⁸ Leo Strauss, “On Thucydides’ War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians,” (henceforth, “On Thucydides”), *The City and Man* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1964), 155.

²¹⁹ Strauss, “Thucydides,” 74.

²²⁰ Strauss, “On Thucydides,” 140.

Strauss formulates the metaphor of motion and rest in order to trace Thucydides's turn from citizen to umpire. Since it deals with practical wisdom which "cannot be said [but] can only be done or practiced"²²¹, the path must remain to some degree mysterious. This metaphor illuminates three things that Thucydides's narrative attends to. Firstly, it illuminates the nature of the subject of inquiry. The Peloponnesian war was "the greatest motion"²²² within a larger historical context of rest which allows the umpire to judge it as such. The whole—the larger one framing the event that is the direct object of the inquiry—"is characterized by the interplay between motion and rest."²²³ Secondly, the metaphor illuminates the hermeneutical movement that has to occur within Thucydides as he turns from a partisan to a political umpire. Thirdly, by thinking about Thucydides's hermeneutical turn, Strauss traces a third movement beyond Thucydides that distinguishes the perspective of the umpire—Thucydides—from the perspective of the philosopher—Plato. For Strauss, this third movement shows the incompleteness of the second movement from citizen to umpire.

In Thucydides's text the metaphor of motion and rest illuminates the dynamic of the political event, first and foremost. The direction of the action is rest-motion-rest. The event is characterized as follows: before the event the political situation of the Greeks was "at rest." Greek cities were consolidating their power and wealth, increasing wisdom, and pursuing beauty. This was the period of "the greatest rest,"²²⁴ and it resulted in the "Greekness" we all know today. Two results ensue: firstly, the event may be understood in itself, for within the greatest motion reside the two poles which

²²¹ Strauss, "Thucydides," 91.

²²² "On Thucydides," 155.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 236.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

distinguish it from what occurred before. This inner dynamo is itself made up of a pole of “rest” and a pole of “motion” within “the greatest motion.” On one side stood Sparta, which “cherishes rest” and, accordingly, admires moderation, stability, virtue, preservation, the past, caution; on the other stood Athens, which “cherishes motion” and acts with reckless daring and hope, lives in the present, and is generous, gay, courageous, hubristic.²²⁵ The Peloponnesian War thus contains its own constitutive principle: it forms a whole through its own movement between motion and rest. Secondly, it follows that the War did not spring out of nowhere: part of its uniqueness is its very “Greekness”, a condition that pre-existed the war. The event, although autonomous, points beyond itself to a background that in no way caused it, yet opened the door to it. But this before is not static, either, as it seems at first: before the Greekness that constituted the “greatest rest” came the “motion” of barbarism. Political reality, then, is characterized always and everywhere by the motion-rest dialectic. The event is a whole because it reflects the entirety of human things. The study of the event is then particularly apt for the study of human things in general:

All human life moves between the poles of war and peace and between the poles of barbarism and Greekness. By studying the Peloponnesian war Thucydides grasps the limits of all human things. By studying this singular event against the background of the ancient things he grasps the nature of all human things. It is for this reason that his work is a possession for all times.²²⁶

It is manifest that this dialectic is not necessarily positive: it may constitute growth, as in the movement from barbarism to Greekness, or decay, as in the movement from the peak of Greekness toward the “re-barbarization” of Greece through war.²²⁷ Motion and rest are everywhere constitutive of human_reality but in actuality they are always found in

²²⁵ Ibid., 156. See also, 68-71; 147-8; 162; 211.

²²⁶ Ibid., 157.

²²⁷ Ibid., 156; 159.

some mixed form. What is certain is that the inner dialectic of reality gives it a self-sufficiency that may be grasped in principle by the human mind.

Secondly, the motion-rest metaphor illumines the hermeneutic movement of Thucydides from citizen to umpire. The effort to comprehend is an “innermost process” which constitutes its own principle. It is a “conversion from the peace time view to the war time view,”²²⁸ and represents Thucydides’s education. He moved from “rest”—the partisan position which honors traditions and accepts things unquestioningly—to “motion,” where the past is challenged through the movement of understanding. Thucydides would move in thought between the poles that Greece moved in action:

By the process animating Thucydides’s work we do not mean then a change of his thought of which he was not necessarily aware and which has left traces in his work of which he was not necessarily aware. We rather have in mind that deliberate movement of his thought between two different points of view which expresses itself in the deliberate dual treatment of the same subject from different points of view.²²⁹

This “dual treatment” consists of judging particular deeds or speeches in multiple ways—as it appeared at the time to the participants, but also from the perspective of “the man who surveys the whole war.”²³⁰ Thucydides moves from the actors’ perspective-bound *dokei moi*²³¹ to the umpire position translating the *logoi* of the actors into his own *logos* all while conserving the kinship between his impartial *logos* and the partial *logoi*.²³² The move from citizen to umpire is a dialectical one, which simultaneously conserves and transcends the actors’ viewpoints. The difference between Thucydides’s inner conversion to umpire and the outer conversion of Greece to war is that the inner

²²⁸ Ibid., 162.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid., 163.

²³¹ “It seems to me”—the perspective of the actor which constitutes the event in speech and deed. I use the Greek expression here in order to note the continuation of this thought which becomes central for Hannah Arendt. See Hannah Arendt, “Thinking,” *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1978), 94.

²³² Strauss, “Thucydides,” 95.

conversion is noetic—it is fully self-conscious and made transparent by the reasoning and the words of the proselyte.

Thucydides was to present the “war as it unfolds,”²³³ not simply describing events faithfully in words, but re-presenting it in his narrative. He follows a peculiar method: whilst faithfully reporting the actors’ deeds he improvises their speeches. He had good reason for this, admitting that he could not remember many of the actual speeches *verbatim*, and that others had been reported to him unreliably. Moreover, the fog of war caused many actors to be deeply mistaken about what was happening around them. For these reasons, he decided

to write the speeches himself, keeping as close as possible to the gist of what the speaker had said—writing in each case how the speaking man or body of men ‘seemed’ to him to have said to the highest degree what was appropriate in the circumstances about the subject at hand.²³⁴

To cut short any flights of his own fancy, he hems the speeches in with faithful accounts of the deeds. Despite so seemingly unscientific a method, Thucydides, it may surprise many to know, remained a model of the truthful historian up until the modern era.²³⁵

Does this mean that if Thucydides had had better research materials at hand, he would have reported the speeches rather than improvising them? For Strauss the answer must be “No.” A mere report would have squandered “the presence of the speaker: we would not see him by hearing him; we would not be exposed to him, affected by him, perhaps bewitched by him.”²³⁶ As an event unfolds in history, it exposes its own inner dynamic

²³³ Strauss, “On Thucydides,” 162.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

²³⁵ Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, 45.

²³⁶ Strauss, “On Thucydides,” 165-166.

to the inquiring mind, who must reconstitute it by reason. As Orwin puts it, when Thucydides declares that:

he has '[stuck] as closely as possible' [to the speeches], he does not then mean by it anything as narrow as the proposal of the speaker, or anything as broad as the spirit. He means a train of thought or sequence of arguments, something in what was actually said which must be closely followed to be accurately conveyed.²³⁷

How much Thucydides relied on improvisation was determined by how needful he found it. What is often seen by modern methodologists as a bias was of the essence for Thucydides. Getting to the truth of particular events meant making them present at hand by way of narrative. As the story of the war unfolds in Thucydides's text, so does its truth become ever clearer to the readers.

Thucydides manages his conversion to the umpire position in three steps. The first step concerns the present as given to Thucydides the Athenian. The present grounds understanding of both past and future, because it is what a man begins from.²³⁸ But not everything in the present was seen or heard by him. The present is grasped also through reports and hearsay of things not witnessed directly. The world as viewed by all of the actors may be reconstructed from their speeches, each of which is partial in the dual sense that it deals with just one event within the complex frame of them *and* it expresses the partisan interests of the speaker. It simultaneously reveals and obscures truth. The second step consists of questioning these materials and by this process rising above them. It dispels the obscurity of the partial speeches. This movement beyond his starting point critically depends on the breadth and depth of his own vision,²³⁹ and is the proficient and virtuous act that shatters the world as given in the speeches through

²³⁷ Orwin, "Thucydides' Contest," 354.

²³⁸ Ibid., 350; Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations*, 41.

²³⁹ Orwin, "Thucydides' Contest," 350.

reason. This shattering delegitimizes the symbols and assumptions with which men act in the world by exposing their partiality. It resembles philosophy's movement beyond the world of the particular. It is in this second stage that Thucydides reconstructs the speeches so as to weave them into a single narrative. The third and final step completes the delicate task of illuminating the real causes of the event while yet conserving its rootedness in the real world. The final truth, Thucydides's impartial *logos*, contains the whole multitude of perspectives which provided him with his starting point.²⁴⁰ The new truth, the whole truth is simultaneously the same as and different from the worldly truths given in step one. It is the same in that it does not altogether reject the truth of preliminary standpoints, but it is different in that it rises *above*, it perfects "preliminary truths" *via* the activity of Thucydides's reason:

By integrating the political speeches into the true and comprehensive speech, he makes visible the fundamental difference between the political speech and the true speech. No political speech ever serves the purpose of revealing the truth as such; every political speech serves a particular political purpose, and it attempts to achieve it by exhorting or dehorting, by accusing or exculpating ...²⁴¹

In this Thucydides moves from rest to motion to rest just as Greece moved from peace to war to peace; the dialectic of his thought is bound to the dialectic of the Greek "motion," and is neither mystical nor subjective. It follows from the speeches, which "make manifest the immanifest."²⁴² Truth is immanifest, for it is not located in the partial speeches of the actors but the impartial speech of Thucydides.

The nature of the whole event is revealed in Thucydides's narrative re-staging. Their partial speeches give the participants' "spoken" causes, articulations that purport to

²⁴⁰ Note the use of the Arendtian term "world" by Strauss in "On Thucydides," 240.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 166.

²⁴² Ibid.

explain the reasons for their acts. If Thucydides did not take these manifested causes seriously, there could be no dialectic. They are not superficialities obscuring the true cause, they are constitutive of the true cause: “they are as ‘true’ as the truest cause and in fact a part, even the decisive part, of the latter.”²⁴³ The umpire’s movement beyond the event remains rooted within the event.

The true cause—that Athens compelled Sparta to wage war—is first in the temporal order of events, but in Thucydides’s narrative it emerges last. He first works through the evident causes in the dissensions between Athens and Corinth concerning Corcyra and Potidaea in order to get at the true cause. But the true cause remains “the least mentioned one.”²⁴⁴ Perhaps this is because, if stated bluntly, the true cause becomes a *casus belli* which it most clearly was not; for compulsion, of course, is a common justification for the breaking of treaties or agreements by the violating party.²⁴⁵ The questioning of the evident causes exposes a regression of true but unspoken causes. One could demonstrate that the Spartans feared the ever-increasing Athenian might, but also that the Athenians were increasing their might not just out of *hubris* but also out of a justified fear of Sparta and Persia.²⁴⁶ The true cause is ambiguous because it is not an “efficient cause” like the mechanical laws of nature, but rather a subjective expectation, a calculation induced by a state of affairs. The inference of a true or ultimate cause from the evident, more proximate causes—an inversion of the temporal order—leads backwards in time. One could say, for example, that their “noble sickness”—that peculiarly restless *eros* that animated the Athenian soul—compelled them to push the Spartans into war. However,

²⁴³ Ibid., 174.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 182.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 183.

this only raises more questions.²⁴⁷ *Eros* does not obviously compel anyone to anything. This ‘cause’ invites the scholar to inquire more deeply into why *eros* compelled *this* Athens. The deeper he goes, the greater the speculation and the less causal are the causes unearthed by the inquiry.

The more the umpire pursues the “true causes,” the more philosophical becomes the nature of his pursuit. The more he runs back in the temporal order seeking the cause of causes, the less he deals with the actual speeches and intentions of the participants in the event; but neither can the event be grasped in its entirety by summing the participants’ *dokei moi*. In this final stage of Thucydides’s hermeneutical movement, he must contemplate at rest the final causes which the reconstructive questioning yielded. An example: the disaster of the Sicilian expedition is not divine retribution for the Athenians’ misdeeds in Melos, as many thought at the time, but one outcome of the Athenian habit—which can be unpacked only theoretically—of disharmony between public and private interest amongst Athens’s leading men in the post-Periclean epoch.²⁴⁸

Strauss is not very clear on why Thucydides instructs silently; however, I am now in a position to formulate a hypothesis. Thucydides enables his readers to see the causes for themselves because, unlike the multitude of partial speeches which can be exhaustively treated, the “true causes” can be pointed to and reasoned about, but not formulated in a finite way. The event leads beyond itself in a way that is not perfectly objective, but how far and deep beyond the *dokei moi* inquiring reason should penetrate depends wholly on the inquiring umpire. The illumination of this movement of reason spells the difference

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 225-226.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 198-9.

between storytelling and political science. This question will be at the heart of our inquiry on a substantive political science with Arendt and Voegelin.

Thucydides, then, is concerned with final causes not in the sense of causality: the Peloponnesian War is an event in which the Athenians and Spartans *participate*. The acts of both constitute the event. In participation they reveal their own natures: “the course of the war is the self-revelation of Sparta and Athens rather than the outcome of a strategy.”²⁴⁹ Their “natures” are nowhere to be found “behind” the participatory act; they are revealed only in action.”²⁵⁰ Strauss does not theorize why the participants reveal themselves in the event or why this points to any “unavowed causes” which Thucydides is compelled to instruct silently on; instead, he unweaves Thucydides’s narrative to show that it is so. Arendt will go farther by demonstrating the revelatory nature of political action. Voegelin will go farther still by clarifying the full arc of participatory action and its re-presentation in the movement of understanding. Thus, the example of Thucydides will be understood more fully as this inquiry is completed.

The “unavowed causes” revealed at the peak of Thucydides’s dialectic reveal the problem with Strauss’s reading of Thucydides: they are at cross-purposes with each other—they violate the rule of consistency in philosophy. On the one hand is Thucydides’s praise of Sparta and blame of Athens; on the other is the even deeper—and more “silent”—demonstration by Thucydides of Sparta’s inferiority to Athens. How can Thucydides praise the inferior to the superior? For Thucydides, Sparta is a city at rest, a *status quo* power that seemed to embody Greekness, or at least the rest that was

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 218.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

the condition of Greece prior to the war. But Greekness is “power, wealth, the arts, refinement, order, daring, and even the overcoming of poetic magnification by the sober quest for truth.”²⁵¹ It is “the union of freedom and love of beauty.”²⁵² It is not difficult to show that Athens embodied the elements of Greekness more than Sparta, yet this post-Periclean Athens that was the most brilliant representative of Greekness was also its greatest corruption: the public-spiritedness of the Athenians eventually compelled its best souls, like Nicias and Demosthenes, to look to their own safety from the mob before considering public courses of action.²⁵³ The famed Athenian public-spiritedness failed the city when it was needed the most—in matters of life and death. Thucydides wanted to preserve Athens in a way conducive to the perpetuation of Greekness. His solution was to praise Sparta, partly because Greece and Thucydides are in need of the same inner dialectic that Sparta had to undergo: the peaceful Spartans had “to assimilate themselves to the Athenians in order to overcome the danger;”²⁵⁴ they needed to adapt the daring and innovation of the Athenian spirit to survive. If Greece was to survive not just war but the decay eating away at its Greekness from within, the Athenian way would have to combine with the moderate Spartan way. Ideally, the Athenian spirit would be bounded by the Spartan rest at the end of the dialectic movement. Sparta after the dialectic must resemble Sparta prior to the dialectic *provided* that it became a renewed—an ‘Athenized’—Sparta. Athens is the condition of possibility for the renewal of Greece, but it is Sparta that must carry out this renewal because Athenian energy must be bounded by the orderly rest underpinning civilization. This parallels Thucydides’s

²⁵¹ Strauss, “Thucydides,” 83.

²⁵² Strauss, “On Thucydides,” 156.

²⁵³ Ibid., 199.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 148.

focus on the present (Athens) as the principle which can be put to future use (the Spartan ideal) as well as to illuminate the past (Sparta). Thucydides's "admiration for the Spartan manner"²⁵⁵ then is nothing but admiration for the idea of moderation and piety which the Spartans claim to subscribe to. This admiration would have no leg to stand on if it was not for the Athenian manner that provides the "motion" that allows the idea of moderation to become worthy of admiration. Sparta without Athens is an uninteresting comedy.²⁵⁶

This rather messy "intimating" of philosophic principles made Thucydides problematic for Strauss: he admired Thucydides insofar as his daring dialectic resembled philosophy: "[h]is thought is therefore not radically alien to that of Plato and Aristotle."²⁵⁷ The problem for Strauss is this: "could Thucydides have had a positive reason for stopping on his ascent earlier than Plato?"²⁵⁸ Why should one "intimate" principles that one can boldly make one's theme? Why hint at "elliptical judgments" when one can judge clearly and coherently based on originating principles?²⁵⁹ To answer these questions, Strauss compared Thucydides's text to the third book of Plato's *Laws* that deals with the same issue as Thucydides in his archaeology: the development of Greece from the beginning to the 5th century BC. Not only do the texts share the same object, but the authors exhibit similar judgments regarding Athens and Sparta, making them apt for comparison. Plato traces this decline to poor Athenian choices in governance; Thucydides, however, takes a more "historical structuralist" approach: Athens *had* to

²⁵⁵ Strauss, "On Thucydides," 150.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 225-6.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

become democratic because it *had* to expand its navy because it *had* to confront Persia at Salamis. Despite the conceptual differences, Plato assimilated his position to Thucydides's by claiming that man must deliberate on the common good within very narrow limits due to chance and the role of the gods. As Thucydides approximated Plato's position, Strauss puts forward his key proposition: "[h]ence [Thucydides] cannot deny that it is necessary to raise the question of the best regime."²⁶⁰ Thucydides, however, thought about regimes in their historical context, refusing to wonder about "the best regime simply"—*the* question of political philosophy. Strauss implies that in so doing, Thucydides denied himself the ground for judging the Peloponnesian War, because he denied himself the philosophic perspective from which to understand events. Only philosophy could have given him the standards of evaluation by which he could have attained a clear, lucid and coherent exposition of the "true" or "unavowed" causes of the war. Because he refused to ask the question, he is reduced to "elliptical judgments" and to "intimating" principles.

The onus of course is on Strauss to prove that the transcendental standards of Plato's "best regime" would have helped Thucydides's reasoning. Indeed, it is by no means clear that Strauss himself believed this, although he repeatedly claimed it. The allegation that Thucydides unreasonably evaded bringing up the question of the "best regime simply" is simply not fatal to Thucydides. Firstly, he reached similar conclusions to Plato regarding Greek ills; secondly, his judgments were necessarily elliptical: they enable us to see for ourselves who the Spartans or Athenians were, instead of imposing conclusive argument. To argue them in a philosophically coherent manner would have

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 238.

been to give the event a nature which it has not—a static objective act with clear and finite reasons for all that happened. Thucydides elegantly avoids this error by way of his narrative choices, and for this Strauss is grateful; however, Strauss leaves it theoretically unclear why Thucydides must have done what he did, and his exhortation to overcome Thucydides in the direction of Plato is not at all evidently correct.

Strauss also believed Thucydides left out a fourth reason for the War, which also happens “to be the most noble”: the liberation of Greek cities from Athenian tyranny.²⁶¹ This is articulated in the speeches—it is the reason the Spartans gave for making war on Athens. Strauss reasons thus: (a) if the Greeks had taken this cause seriously it would have guaranteed each Greek city’s freedom from foreign dependency regardless of strength, and put a limit on the excessive recklessness of the strong or the ambitious; (b) this vision is compatible if not congruent with philosophy’s vision of a self-sufficient city with no “foreign relations”; but (c) Thucydides, rooted in things as they are, does not permit himself such an ennobling vision because the reality is such that it favors the natural right of the stronger; hence (d) for Thucydides “the omnipresence of War puts a much lower ceiling on the highest aspiration of any city towards justice and virtue than classical political philosophy might seem to have admitted.”²⁶² This reasoning is strange indeed. Independence, autarky and sovereignty might be good in the abstract, but it means nothing in context. What is more, there is no evidence that Thucydides could not have seen or would not have preferred such a just order. His problem was to understand the event of the war and what it revealed about the nature of the Greeks. The reason Strauss outlines is evident to Thucydides, for it is present in Spartan proclamations. His

²⁶¹ Ibid., 238.

²⁶² Ibid., 239.

sympathy for Sparta proves he was open to Spartan reasoning. But his method transcended this reasoning, declining to take it at face value. In the end, he did not cut the Greeks off from “the highest aspiration” to an orderly society of Greek city-states. Had circumstances become more amenable to such a society, Thucydides would have found no difficulty in subscribing to it. Viewed from the standpoint of political practice, the vision of classical political philosophy is neither unique nor accessible only *via* philosophical reasoning; it is, however, not necessary to the effort to understand actual political situations.

Strauss concludes with the exhortation: “political science cannot start from seeing the city as the Cave but it must start from seeing the city as a world; as the highest in the world; it must start from seeing man as completely immersed in political life”;²⁶³ arguing *both* that political science must start with actual politics *and* transcend it in pure thought. On the one hand, Thucydides illuminated the problems of politics more clearly than the classical philosophers.²⁶⁴ Strauss’s superb reading of Thucydides confirms that his political philosophy allows for the full development of political understanding. On the other, he considers Thucydides not far-sighted or consistent enough. Straussian thought is caught as if in a vice between the phenomenological concept “world” and Plato’s Cave. Strauss grew closer to Thucydides in later life, suggesting the worthiness of politics as a discipline despite tensions with philosophy.²⁶⁵ I have shown that Strauss took the path of the Cave after doing all he possibly could to rehabilitate the world as the

²⁶³ Ibid., 240.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 240.

²⁶⁵ Consider the chronology: Thucydides is largely absent from Strauss’s history of Western thought, then he is predictably demoted to a pre-Socratic and finally accepted as the alternative, or supplement, to classical political philosophy. Emil A., Kleinhaus, “Piety, Universality, and History: Leo Strauss on Thucydides,” *Humanitas*, vol., xiv, no., 1 (2001): 68-95.

starting point for any political inquiry. But the vice is a fiction of his own making; he has not demonstrated that “it is evidently necessary”²⁶⁶ that Thucydides should have Platonized his work; neither has he demonstrated that it is possible to observe the world in the light of the Platonic Sun. Indeed, what Strauss does say about the political whole as a “world” argues against this possibility. Finally, Plato’s diagnosis of the political problems facing Greece is politically radical but not radically unique. What Strauss did show, however, is the centrality of everyday practice to the understanding of political events. His work suffices to discredit the alternative methods of studying political things which abound today.

3.3. The Straussian Accounts of the American Founding

While Strauss’s political science leaves behind politics, there are a number of his pupils whose work treats directly of political phenomena. They are accounts of an actual founding moment that is a direct consequence of the only political act that Strauss launched: the creation of a school of thought with his graduate students at the University of Chicago. Strauss was explicit in his wish “to win the sympathy of the best men of the coming generation—those youths who possess the intellectual and the moral qualities which prevent men from simply following authorities, to say nothing of fashions.”²⁶⁷ As part of this effort, Strauss encouraged many of his students to study the foundations of their own country, assuming that this would allow them to defend that country better.²⁶⁸ His students responded to the maxim that their “primary concern, as political scientists,

²⁶⁶ Strauss, “On Thucydides,” 236.

²⁶⁷ Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 204.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xvii-xx.

should be the study of our own regime.”²⁶⁹ They “hoped [...] to provide samples of a political science rooted in political philosophy as informed by Strauss’s scholarship.”²⁷⁰ This is precisely the first undeveloped fork of Straussian political science. While I certainly do not suggest that an inquiry into Straussian studies of the American founding may serve as a critique of Strauss, a careful probe in this direction may elucidate the problem of founding further. I show that although the nature of the study called on them to understand political phenomena, Straussians look beyond them in the direction of natural right.

In the words of Strauss, “genuinely to understand the value system, say, of a given society, means being deeply moved and indeed gripped by the values to which the society in question is committed and to expose one’s self in earnest, with a view to one’s own whole life, to the claim of those values to be the true values.”²⁷¹ It is precisely these reasons that motivate the Straussian turn towards the American founding. As Americans, by examining the founding moment of their country they “seek [their own] roots...in the spirit of patriotic citizens, scholars, and teachers of future citizens.”²⁷² The scholarly inquiry is political insofar as it is an effort to understand one’s own political community and one’s own self. It is “coming to terms” with one’s own political roots. In the American case they are found in the “constitutive opinions” of the community and particularly “the founding documents of this political order, the Declaration of

²⁶⁹ Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 932.

²⁷⁰ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, 201.

²⁷¹ Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” 11.

²⁷² Thomas L. Pangle “Classical Political Philosophy and the Study of the American Founding,” prepared for the John M. Olin Center conference “Classical Theory and Practice and the American Founding,” June 16-18, 1988. I thank Prof. Pangle for graciously sending me this manuscript.

Independence and the Constitution.”²⁷³ Whatever the final direction of Strauss’s thought, it recognizes that the beginning of thought is political and, as such, a thought that is aware of itself must make transparent its own beginnings.

However, parallel to the quest to understand one’s own, there is an entirely apolitical motivation which in Straussian terms is crucial. As Diamond puts it, “[t]o come to such terms is also in principle the dialectically sound way to begin the educational ascent.”²⁷⁴ This, of course, recalls the Socratic principle that begins from common opinion and “ascends” to the philosophic universe.

The Straussian dialectic through the study of founding is consistent with Strauss’s thought. Given Strauss’s blistering attack on historicism, Straussians ignore historical context. The assumption that the founding moment articulated the character of the American republic brings them to consider its principles as timeless truths. Jaffa exemplarily states the question that guides a Straussian study of such founding principles: “What is worth conserving in our tradition [...] because it is *naturally* or *rationaly* defensible, and not merely comforting and respectable?”²⁷⁵ The principles that are articulated in America’s founding moment are subjected to the test of reason, in order to reject those that do not pass the test. The ascent of the scholar above and beyond “one’s own”, points to the dialectical quality of such an inquiry. In the words of Diamond,

²⁷³ Martin Diamond, “Teaching about Politics,” *As Far as Republican Principles will Admit: Essays*, ed., William A. Schambra (Washington: AEI Press, 1992), 305.

²⁷⁴ Diamond, “Teaching about Politics,” 305.

²⁷⁵ Harry V. Jaffa, *American Conservatism and the American Founding* quoted in Thomas S. Engeman “Review: Assessing Jaffa’s Contribution,” *The Review of Politics*, vol., 49, no., 1 (Winter, 1987), 127.

[i]n studying [the founding fathers] we may raise ourselves to their level, for achieving their level we may free ourselves from limitations that, ironically, they tended to impose on us, that is, in so far as we tend to be creatures of the society they founded. And in so freeing ourselves we may be enabled, if it is necessary, to go beyond their wisdom.²⁷⁶

The Straussian stance towards America's founding moment consists of the scholar standing over and against the object of knowledge—the ideas and texts of the founding fathers and their political enemies, the anti-federalists..

The principles of the dialectical inquiry become most clear in Thomas L. Pangle. Entering the inquiry in the spirit of “patriotic citizens”, Pangle says, the scholar quickly recognizes that his tradition claims to be founded on rational principles. The understandably patriotic requirement to hold the founders in high esteem implies taking seriously their claim vis-à-vis the rationality of their ideas. Hence, it requires embarking upon “the philosophic enterprise itself” for the Founders put forward claims that purport to be permanently true regarding “morals and politics, [...] justice, [...] God, [...] human nature and what is right by or for that nature.”²⁷⁷ But since the universal claims of the Founders are based on and point to arguments from classical philosophy, while their religious views follow from certain theological worldviews, then the Founders lead to a serious confrontation with the classical and biblical traditions. The true confrontation—the earnest effort to understand the founding—is not the effort to illuminate the creation of that new political world via the deeds and speeches of the men and women that carried it out, but the enterprise of reexamining the permanent fault lines of the Western world:

²⁷⁶ Diamond, Democracy and *The Federalist*,” 18.

²⁷⁷ Thomas L. Pangle “Classical Political Philosophy and the Study of the American Founding,” (prepared for the John M., Olin Center conference “Classical Theory and Practice and the American Founding,” June 16-18, 1988), 4, 5.

Only on the basis of a first-hand familiarity with the leading texts of classical political philosophy can one begin to appreciate both the continuities and the discontinuities, the harmonies and the ruptures, that mark the thought of the Founders. I would hasten to add that the study of the classics with this end in view has as its essential concomitant the study of the Bible, and the Biblical tradition of political theology, both before and after the confluence and resultant uneasy synthesis of the originally very distinct classical (pagan) and Biblical traditions. And I would further insist that *both* these original wellsprings of the West must be seen as the targets of a vast philosophic and theological rebellion in the name of a radically new rationalism spearheaded by Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke. I would characterize America and especially the American Founding as occupying, if you will, a complex field of spiritual and intellectual energy emanating from three centers or poles of radiation.²⁷⁸

This sweeping view of the founding as an entry point to a purely philosophical enterprise is based on two maxims: first, that it is necessary to go beyond the study of politics towards philosophy, and, second, that America stands for modernity and therefore a study of the foundations of the United States ought to bring us towards a study of the philosophical issues at the foundation of modernity.²⁷⁹ This approach to the founding brings Straussians to disregard the eventfulness of the occurrence—i.e., to neglect Strauss’s call to consider politics as a “world.” They do not establish the “wholeness” of the event and perhaps for good reason: Strauss never established it himself, he only postulated it. Witness for example Diamond’s approach. First, he notes that there is a central idea behind every regime.²⁸⁰ He finds that idea to be “equality” which, fortuitously, happens to be also “the political problem for mankind in the present age.”²⁸¹ There is a problem in this line of reasoning: America is not mankind in any real, substantive sense of the word. Straussian reflections on equality and its political nature

²⁷⁸ Pangle, “The Study of the American Founding,” 9.

²⁷⁹ See the overview of Strauss’s view of America and the intra-Straussian debates in Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, chapter 2, chapter 6.

²⁸⁰ Martin Diamond, “The American Idea of Equality: The View from the Founding,” *The Review of Politics*, vol., 38, no., 3 (Jul., 1976), 313.

²⁸¹ Ibid. See also, Joseph Cropsey, “The United States as Regime and the Sources of the American Way of Life,” in Robert H. Horowitz, ed., *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 177.

may make valuable contributions to our philosophical thinking about equality but they go well beyond the substantive problem of founding.

Comparing the Straussian dialectic regarding the American founding with Thucydides's dialectic regarding the Peloponnesian war brings to light that the Straussians *begin* their inquiring activity where Thucydides *ends* his. They do not begin from politics as it actually was in the founding times but from the decontextualized texts of the Founders or their enemies. The founders are statesmen in the classical sense of the term—ideal-typical men who tread on the nebulous border between pure philosophy and the fleeting world of political action. Even the founders' actual vacillation among contrary positions is supposedly a means to the end of working out men's natural ends.²⁸² In the Straussian inquiry—allowing for a great simplification of what is in fact a multiplicity of perspectives²⁸³—there are no accounts of the competing understandings of American citizens, immigrants or slaves—the high and the low, the public and the private, realists and idealists. There are hardly any players that were actually *there*. Instead, there are the founders and their texts, Locke and Hobbes, modernity and classicism. Founders “reply” to the problem of virtue in a democracy or they “solve” the universal problem of governance by shifting the focus away from character to institutions.²⁸⁴ In the words of Pangle, the goal is to judge the Founders' thought by transcending the Founders “up

²⁸² Gary Rosen, *American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999) in K. R., Constantine Gutzman, “Review: Straussians,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol., 60, no., 1 (Jan., 2003), 259.

²⁸³ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, chapter 6.

²⁸⁴ Diamond, *Democracy and The Federalist*, 30, 54 in Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, 212-213.

philosophic and theological heights that were not scaled, or were visited only fleetingly, by the Founders themselves.”²⁸⁵

There is a seeming paradox here: Strauss called for political scientists to become umpires and restore peace to the factional struggle which constitutes the political event. On the other hand, the Straussians have, overall, taken deeply partisan positions in contemporary political debates.²⁸⁶ Have they failed to follow their teachers’ advice? I believe that on the contrary, their strongly partisan positions follow directly from Strauss’s advice. For him, a practical scientist must reach a perspective which “encompasses the partisan perspectives *because* he possesses a more comprehensive and a clearer grasp of man’s natural ends and their natural order than do the partisans.”²⁸⁷ That is, he can judge the often incoherent actions of the partisans from the standards of natural ends. He can judge politics from standards outside of politics. Needless to say, Strauss failed to provide these standards and wisely chose to avoid the public arena. But those Straussians that entered the public fray were liable to take up partisan positions if they stayed faithful to their teacher’s thought. The political results of the philosophical contemplation yield a pronounced positioning, that does not encompass beliefs, but sides with a particular standpoint. What seems like a paradox in fact is not—the umpire is revealed to be but another player in the political struggle.

²⁸⁵ Pangle, “The Study of the American Founding,” 12.

²⁸⁶ Witness, for example, Gary Rosen’s conclusion that the Religious Right is closest to Madison’s understanding of the Constitution in Gary Rosen, *American Compact* in Gutzman, “Straussians,” 263.

²⁸⁷ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 206 (italics are my own—E.T.).

All of this is not to deny the great service the Straussians have done to American studies. The partisan clash with progressive historians on interpreting the founding moment²⁸⁸ has helped reawaken interest on an event which had been flattened by progressivism. They also enhanced the knowledge of the founding—to name but one example, Diamond rebutted the popular view that the Constitution presented a reactionary retreat from the Declaration of Independence arguing that the Declaration was silent on the form of government while the Constitution committed America to democracy.

The example of Straussian studies of the American founding illustrates that when the pedagogic charm of Leo Strauss enticed students towards politics, they understood it as statesmanship. The historical, social and epistemological depths suggested by Strauss's concept of "regime" are not fully exploited. This empties the phenomena of their worldly character. In order to restore it, I move on to Hannah Arendt.

²⁸⁸ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, 214; Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Martin Diamond and the American Idea of Democracy," *Publius*, vol., 8, no., 3 (Summer 1978): 11.

4. Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Action and the Founding Problem

If Strauss's thought reveals inordinately little about his life, Arendt's was prompted by biographical events and constantly returns to them.²⁸⁹ Without suggesting that her thinking was a mere appendage of her experiences, this observation points to a telling difference of perspective between the two: Arendt, even at her most philosophical, attempts to make sense of her situation, while Strauss, even at his most political, philosophizes beyond his. Where Strauss clears the obstacles to an understanding of politics, Arendt undertakes the effort in actuality.

Like Strauss, Arendt attended several German universities and studied with the three great men of German philosophy in the 1920s: Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl and Karl Jaspers. Arendt parted with the apolitical tradition of German *Bildung* after the situation in Germany deteriorated in the early 1930s. She personally partook in Jewish politics in Germany and later in exile in France and in the United States, remaining sensitive to the demands of the political for the rest of her life. Her scholarly work reflected this turn: her first work after her doctorate, a biography of Rahel Varnhagen, tried to shed light on the German Jewish problem through the life story of a woman who straddled both traditions.²⁹⁰ Yet despite her political involvements Arendt was uncomfortable with her own public persona. Her politics proved an augmentation of her thought toward practice, not a break or derailment. Perhaps Arendt's unique promise lies in this constant movement to and fro: not, as in Strauss, to uncover the essential

²⁸⁹ For Hannah Arendt's biography, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

²⁹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

difference between, but the common source of politics and philosophy in human experience.

To be sure, nowhere is this achieved in Arendt's work; indeed, her express teaching does quite the contrary. It is, however, a potentiality that, I believe, ought to be grasped decisively. Appropriately for the theorist of beginnings which escape the intentions of the individual author, in this study her thought is the beginning of a reconciliation of the Straussian tension between politics and philosophy. If Arendt critiques the Western tradition's privileging of the *vita contemplativa* by reversing the traditional hierarchy and privileging (political) activity instead, I shall move with and against her to erase the hierarchy altogether and offer a new "metaphysics of experience" that deepens her hermeneutic of politics. This deepening will point beyond Arendt to the theory of symbolizations of Eric Voegelin.

This is the ultimate outcome, however, not the substance of the next two chapters. In this chapter I show how Arendt treats founding moments within the ontological structure of the human condition. As with Strauss, they constitute an independent problem of political science. Yet, they are also the clearest expressions of political action *as such*: historical events that powerfully illuminate the way man acts politically. For Arendt, they must be understood rather than transcended in the direction of natural right. In order to unpack this, she develops a number of concepts like plurality, world, power and freedom to clarify the nature of political action. A species of that genus, a founding act is an unpredictable, spontaneous outbreak of the action in concert that may constitute a new body politic.

The first section examines Arendt's innovative conceptualization of politics and founding moments within what I call her ontology of appearance. Action is an unpredictable and boundless insertion of meaning into the world and as such inextricably linked to speech. Following Benhabib, I remark that this understanding of action implies two divergent models: one which views action as a performative revealing the essence of the actor and the other; a narrative linking the miraculous performative to the historical context in which it occurs. I show that political acts in general, and founding acts in particular, are for Arendt historical deeds which manifest the ontological structure of human life. The second section evaluates her study of actual founding moments in *On Revolution*. By situating founding acts within her ontology of appearance, Arendt gets caught up in a peculiar paradox: on the one hand, she demonstrates the historical situatedness of political action; on the other, her historical analysis abstracts from historical experience in order to clarify her ontological categories. *On Revolution* pays insufficient attention to her own insight that human existence is historical. This follows from Arendt's failure to distinguish the ontological characteristics of *world-as-appearance* from the historicist, substantive dimension of world which makes possible the constitutive freedom of founding moments. Foundings, so I argue, are moments that put this *world-as-fabrication* at stake. The last two sections illustrate this, showing how her study of actual founding moments illumines her ontological understanding of action as such.

Arendt nevertheless achieves much: she shows how the paradox of founding that has bewitched political thought is a fiction; she situates foundings at the juncture of

philosophy and politics, not in philosophy simply; and she endows human acts with a phenomenological depth lacking in Strauss.

4.1. Politics and the Ontology of Appearance

This section presents Arendt's understanding of politics and founding moments by situating them within her *ontology of appearance*. Firstly, for Arendt, an act is political insofar as it manifests the ontological characteristics of appearance. Secondly, she understands moments of founding as the most luminous historical instances of appearance. Third and finally, having conceptualized foundings as self-legitimizing appearances, she treats them accordingly: founders need not and should not evoke any principles beyond the founding act; instead, they ought to put in words the performative principles inspiring their act, thus providing future generations with an event of origin, a world of meaning into which they may be born and which makes action possible for them. In her account of historical foundings, she modifies her ontological concept of action in *The Human Condition* as a general mode of presencing in the world, to the more historical and particular presences of *On Revolution*.

Arendt's political philosophy arises out of the fact of plurality: "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."²⁹¹ Plurality instigates action and speech which make it possible for a human being to express his *distinctness* to his peers. It is "*the condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life.*"²⁹² The fact of plurality means that human beings are not only distinct, but also equal to one another insofar as they share in the same condition: "we are all the same, that is, human,

²⁹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 7.

²⁹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

[but] in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.”²⁹³ Reminiscent of Strauss, a paradox lies at the heart of human existence, arising from the fact of sociality, or plurality.

Arendt’s account of politics explains how human beings realize their humanity in and through their plural condition. Unlike Strauss who understands politics as the longing of the human soul manifested in social life, Arendt creates an ontological analytic to illuminate the potential of this realization; that is, whereas Strauss finds meaning in human life in the everyday language of the tension between what is and what ought to be, Arendt develops an extensive ontological vocabulary to illuminate the paradox. For Arendt, the real acts human beings do are necessarily particular, physical, or factual. Each person realizes his human essence uniquely: actually and potentially in an infinite number of ways. But the potential of this realization reveals the ontological structure of human existence. Arendt develops her ontological analytic of world, politics, action, power and foundations to manifest the historical, contingent and meaningful depth of human existence.

I call Arendt’s explanation of “the paradoxical plurality of unique beings”²⁹⁴ by the paradoxical-sounding name, ontology of appearance. It is an ontology because it provides an account of our pre-theoretical being-in-the-world. The ontology is of appearances because it reveals the historicity of all existences. The ontology sketches out the universal potentiality, the mode by which human beings make themselves present in the

²⁹³ Ibid., 8.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 176.

world, not a particular presence. Whereas the site of the paradox for both Strauss and Arendt is the same, the theoretical unfolding of that paradox differs radically.

The paradox of plurality becomes manifest in speech and action understood as appearances; their significance lies in something other than physical existence. Ontologically, action is a way of beginning something anew, while speech is a disclosure of who a person is. A speech is not equivalent to an appearance, for it has an irreducibly finite, thing-like character. Yet a speech may be an appearance insofar as it manifests its ontological characteristics as an insertion of meaning in the world that reveals who an actor is in the “theater where freedom appears.”²⁹⁵ Firstly, it is the peculiarly human way of inserting ourselves in the world, by which human beings author, inscribe, evoke or endow their world with meaning. Secondly, a speech is an appearance in being free, *i.e.* it is not conditioned by anything, even the intentions of its author; it is unexpected, against all odds, miraculous. Thirdly, it reveals “actively”²⁹⁶ who the person is to the witnesses of the speech act. This “who” is not an essential finite identity that can be assessed exhaustively, but is “implicit in everything somebody says and does,”²⁹⁷ and ever vulnerable to reinterpretation. Though actually finite, a speech is ontologically “boundless”²⁹⁸ in its consequences and, as such, cannot be measured in any straightforward sense; otherwise a speech would be a mere sign or an act a mere gesture indicating appetites, strength or mute violence. Unique or rare as this may sound, it is not: no one can refrain from appearing in the world without ceasing to be human,

²⁹⁵ Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 137.

²⁹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 190.

for appearance is not conditioned by self-will or the world's restrictions, though it is vulnerable to both. Appearance is *the* human mode of being in the world. Without appearing, we are "literally dead to the world."²⁹⁹

The mode of appearing suggests an ontological space in which human beings appear: "The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action [...] [and] it does not survive the actuality of the movement."³⁰⁰ The space of appearance however, comes into being and withers away in the larger "world." World is what people share in common, a home where they dwell together. Plurality demands "worldliness" *qua* a "capacity to fabricate and create a world."³⁰¹ Arendt explicitly differentiates world from her ontological analytic for world precedes and survives the movement of appearances. It encompasses them by providing them with a space that is the work of our hands and a meaningful context. The world, however, has also an ontological dimension in that it becomes meaningful to human beings through their appearing in the world. I call these dimensions *world-as-fabrication* and *world-as-appearance*, respectively.³⁰² World-as-fabrication is concrete, factual existence, made of the artifice produced by human hands. Objectively, it consists of consumer goods that disappear at the moment of consumption, and use objects designed to outlast human beings who dwell in the world. They lend a sense of familiarity to the existence of those who inhabit it.³⁰³ World-as-fabrication is an orienting space for those who dwell in it,

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 176.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 199.

³⁰¹ Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis of Culture," *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 209.

³⁰² I follow Benhabib's distinction of a space of appearance and public realm. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 123-130.

³⁰³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

opening up the potential of meaningful existence in speech and deed, that is, by making possible the specifically human mode of existence. It is a “material repository of memory,”³⁰⁴ that is to be distinguished from the space of appearance. It allows individuals to connect with a past which is not empirically theirs, and to plan for a future which would be impossible to contemplate otherwise. A dwelling in a physical sense becomes a world-as-fabrication when it outlasts its makers and opens up the possibility of renewal by those who come to dwell in it.

Yet, while world is always and everywhere particular and physical, its importance for Arendt lies in its ontological dimension of world-as-appearance. The memory and meaningfulness of the world is not merely *there* but it is evoked, made present and renewed through human appearance. Although her “world” as such consists of three categories of objects—consumer goods, use objects, and works of art—the category that represents it is the work of art. While utile objects are necessary, helpful and even meaningful parts of our existence, they are liable to disappear once their utility runs out. The work of art, on the other hand, lacks any function in the biological process. In principle it is immortal. The *raison d’être* of the work of art is to appear before human beings for an indefinite time; thus, it is “the worldliest of all things.”³⁰⁵ The principle of world-as-appearance is the permanence or immortality that is the motivation of human appearing as such.³⁰⁶

The work of art emancipates world from its thing-like limitations without negating its facticity as a thing. There is no world-as-appearance without world-as-fabrication, for it

³⁰⁴ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 108.

³⁰⁵ Arendt, “The Crisis of Culture,” 209.

³⁰⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 18-19.

is in a fabricated world that human beings appear to themselves and others and endow the world with meaning. However, it is only through the act of appearing that world-as-fabrication takes on its worldly character. For Arendt, human things qualify as appearances if they are capable of being uncoupled from fabrication or life processes so as to illuminate their character as *energeia*. They are performances whose value stands only within themselves. In a much-quoted line, Arendt says that the meaning of appearances lies “in the performance itself and neither in its motivation or achievement.”³⁰⁷ Men “appear” out of their desire for immortality: appearance is the specifically human movement beyond the mortality of biological life. Immortality as the principle of appearance lends meaning and depth to world-as-fabrication. While this world is a *there*-world, the one everyone is born into, world-as-appearance comes into being in the act of inserting ourselves into the world by virtue of action and speech. World-as-fabrication opens up the question of meaning but is unable to answer it without the ontology of appearance. To reduce world to world-as-fabrication is to negate its ontological dimension, which, as a mode of presencing, sets world beyond measurement.

Politics unfolds within this ontology of appearance. Politics exists in and through appearances—action and speech—thus corresponding to the human condition of plurality. Action and speech are made worldly in two steps: first, when others are present to see, hear and remember them; and secondly, when they are given tangibility

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 206.

to become things in the reification of remembrance.³⁰⁸ In this way Arendt can call the *polis* “a kind of organized remembrance.”³⁰⁹ Yet as they become things, action and speech are emptied of their living spirit and tend to become dead letter. Unless acting and speaking are continuous, world loses its meaning and people revert to mere life or barbarism.³¹⁰ The simultaneity of fabrication and appearance in world implies for Arendt that politics negotiates the tension between reality as “given,” independently of human acts and reality as found nowhere outside of the spontaneous, miraculous beginnings of all human appearing in the world. Since it is in appearing that the “web of human relationships”³¹¹ gains its precarious tangibility, politics cannot be dissociated from its essence as appearing. It is radically contingent inasmuch as it exists only in the act of appearing.

Arendt developed an analytical apparatus to unpack the performativeness of politics which includes concepts like power, freedom, and authority; while the former two are ontological concepts, the latter is not. Power is not a tangible or measurable quantity, but recognizably present only in the act of its constitution. It emerges through “the beginning made by a single person” and ends as “the achievement in which many join.”³¹² The single beginner is the leader who “sets something into motion,” but depends for the success of his act on others, who “join the enterprise of their own

³⁰⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95. I say that the presence of others makes action worldly not in order to suggest that it can happen without the presence of others, but that “[i]t may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them.” Ibid., 177.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 198.

³¹⁰ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 110.

³¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183.

³¹² Ibid., 189.

accord, with their own motives and aims.”³¹³ Leaders and joiners are united by some “agreed purpose,” and the political body thus formed lasts so long as the purpose continues to be agreed. All are doers, peers in a common enterprise, and the leader ceases to be so if the common body is dissolved. The participants have power only in acting in concert. It is evident to all *post factum* that *these* historical actors at *this* particular time had power; however, at the time of action no one can assert this with confidence because the moment of its emergence is unreliable and unpredictable and nothing can be said about its survivability. Power “springs up” uncaused.³¹⁴ It also vanishes and cannot be reconstituted at will.

We may come nearest to a definition of power by comparing it to play: it is made possible by rules or “laws” understood as directives not commands. It happens when people join in irrespective of subjective motives, but then is sustained by its own nature—playfulness. The players’ acts cannot be theorized by positing a subject that acts on the world; instead, they are constituted in the game itself, the rhythm and reality of which draws them in. In Arendt’s words:

[T]he point of these rules is not that I submit to them voluntarily or recognize theoretically their validity, but that in practice I cannot enter the game unless I conform; my motive for acceptance is my wish to play, and since men exist only in the plural, *my wish to play is identical with my wish to live*. Every man is born into a community with pre-existing laws which he “obeys” first of all because there is no other way for him to enter the great game of the world. I may wish to change the rules of the game, as the revolutionary does ... but to deny them on principle means no mere “disobedience” but the refusal to enter the human community.³¹⁵

Power occurs “wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action,”³¹⁶ and so politics exists prior to the formal constitution of the body politic. It is absent entirely

³¹³ Ibid., 177, 222.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 200.

³¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1969), 97. [my italics—E.T.]

³¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.

only in the solitary being outside the condition of plurality. Power is transient, although some polities such as the Athenian *isonomy* or the Roman *civitas* are likelier to foster it.³¹⁷

Power has thus a “potential” character: it is beyond measurement, unreliable and boundless. Of course, it is “about” some worldly objective³¹⁸ and requires the actors’ will and intellect in order to come into existence.³¹⁹ It occurs in a *pre*-fabricated world, and it is concerned with its *re*-fabrication; but this is only how it plays out in historical events. For Arendt, power exists only insofar as its constitutive acts surpass material facts to reveal the ontological structure of human existence. Power is at once fragile and potential—a fragility that consists of dependence on a beginning it cannot will, and an end it cannot control, and a potentiality that consists of coming into being in appearance. Its appearingness opens up the possibility of its ubiquity in human affairs, endowing them with a meaningful depth that goes beyond the sum of mere facts of existence: “Every act that has once made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays with mankind as a potentiality long after its actuality has become a thing of the past.”³²⁰ Power must *begin* to be, but once begun, it cannot be rolled back at will. Strength and violence are opposite to power precisely because they lack its ontological depth. These are essentially instrumental relations.³²¹ From the standpoint of world-as-fabrication, the results of all three may coincide, but only power is meaningful in itself as world-as-appearance.

³¹⁷ Arendt, *On Violence*, 40.

³¹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.

³¹⁹ Arendt, “What is Freedom?” 152.

³²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 273.

³²¹ Arendt, *On Violence*, 44.

This context frames Arendt's analysis of founding moments as the finest historical examples of her ontology of appearance. Founding is an example of "[a]ction, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies."³²² Foundings in the modern world have consisted of revolutions that "constitute[d] an altogether different form of government."³²³ Revolution shares the qualities of action in that it abolishes hierarchical distinctions between individuals by transforming them into peers of a common enterprise that bring about a new state of affairs. This new state ought not to be confused with the imposition of a blueprint, as it emerges from the revolutionary act which "owes its existence to nothing but the organizational impulses of the people themselves." It is miraculous and unpredictable even by the actors, and springs up out of the very pleasure of acting: "the wine of action [...] is the same as the wine of freedom." The act of revolution is "the emergence of freedom." Whatever the felt injustices or the desired solutions, revolution occurs out of want of freedom. In *On Revolution*, she defines freedom as "participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm" or "public happiness." The characteristic of this freedom is to *constitute* new political communities or public realms. Revolutions are distinguished from other actions in that the new game is potentially more enduring because constitution-making lays down the rules in such a way as saves the new game from the unreliability and boundlessness of political action. Revolution is "that space of appearances where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality."³²⁴ It is an act in the historical world-as-fabrication that fundamentally reconstitutes that world.

³²² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7-8.

³²³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1973), 35.

³²⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 35, 257, 29, 33, 133, 29, 32, 128, 234, 33.

As Andreas Kalyvas has noted, Arendt modified the revelatory model of freedom in *The Human Condition* into a constitutive model in *On Revolution* in order to differentiate between revolutions and other acts.³²⁵ As a species of the genus action, revolutionary freedom is defined in two parts: the first highlights its generic features and the second distinguishes it from other members of the genus. The first part situates revolution within the revelatory model of all actions. Here, freedom is the mode of being inherent in appearance: to be free means “to call something into being, which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination ...”³²⁶ Human beings are free only when they are acting. This conception of freedom shares the performative qualities of Arendt’s ontology of appearance. Yet revelatory freedom is also the freedom of an Achilles who initiates acts so glorious, so contrary to the demands of necessity, that they almost require the response of others in speech and deed. But Achilles did not found a body politic. The revelatory model includes acts where the responding world is already constituted. *Revolutionary* freedom must then be distinguished within freedom as such. The second part of the definition gives its “actual content” as “participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm.”³²⁷ The constitutive model incorporates the revelatory qualities, expanding them into concerted action, public deliberation, contestation, and, above all, framing constitutions. It shifts the register from the freedom as a mode of being in the world to the substantive and historical freedom of constituting meaning in a particular public realm.

³²⁵ Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 200-210. See also Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 199.

³²⁶ Arendt, “What is Freedom?”, 151.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

Arendt introduced the concept of authority to explain how revelatory freedom transforms into the constitutive freedom of revolution. Like the world concept, authority is not part of Arendt's ontological analytic. When trying to understand revolutions, Arendt has to work on another register because as historical events, revolutions illumine Arendt's ontology; they are not possible at *any* time or place like appearance as such. Arendt recovers the Roman concept of authority in order to show that founding moments can stabilize the political realm by enabling that "obedience in which men retain their freedom"³²⁸—without recourse to any principle outside the founding act itself. Like all appearances, there is no cause and effect in the revolutionary act; instead—

Even where the loss of authority is quite manifest, revolutions can break out and succeed only if there exists a sufficient number of men who are prepared for its collapse and, at the same time, willing to assume power, eager to organize and to act together for a common purpose. The number of such men need not be great; ten men acting together [...] can make a hundred thousand tremble apart from each other.³²⁹

Revolutions occur when the authority of the old regime has collapsed and human beings by their actions interrupt the ordinary working of the rules of the game to constitute a new game, "the wholly unexpected."³³⁰ When authority is intact, the revolutionary acts of a few seem crimes and are cases of law and order; however, when authority wilts, revolution is transformed into a political act.³³¹

Authority holds the political world together. It is constituted of the collective memory of a past act of founding a world, giving depth to human existence and infusing the body politic with a social spirit. Its loss is "tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the

³²⁸ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 106.

³²⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 116.

³³⁰ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 168.

³³¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 115-6.

world.”³³² The most enlightening example of the constitution of authority is Rome where “[t]o be engaged in politics meant first and foremost to preserve the founding of the city of Rome.”³³³ The authority of its founding gave Rome permanence by binding the living by descent and by tradition to past experiences. Authority as such cannot stop actions deemed to transgress the truth of founding nor can it forbid political acts that run counter to that truth; however, it can lend *gravitas* to acts and words deemed thereby to be inspired by the historical genius of the body politic. Etymology implies authority “augments”³³⁴ the power and persuasiveness of political acts by providing a context of memory in which the act is inserted and practical standards of judgment by which it is politically interpreted.

Since authority as the site of collective memory is not an ontological concept, for Arendt its link with politics is tenuous. Arendt admits it is not a political concept, because it is neither coercive nor even persuasive.³³⁵ Although politics *may* make use of it, as in the case of Rome or the Catholic Church, its natural site is in “prepolitical” activities such as child-rearing and education. Its purpose is to guide the newcomer through “a pre-established world,”³³⁶ and make him fit to author his own humanity. Authority is to Arendtian politics what world-as-fabrication is to world-as-appearance. It shifts the focus from the ontology of appearance to problems of world-as-fabrication like institutions (*e.g.* Roman Senate; American Supreme Court) and practices (*e.g.* narrative; memory). Yet it comes into being and is maintained in existence only through appearing.

³³² Arendt, “What is Authority?” 95.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 120.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

If authority is the concept that allows us to distinguish founding acts from action *per se*, it does so by recontextualizing foundings—from the universal ontology of being in the world to the singular historical memories of founding acts; from the revelatory aspect of existence to the meaningful nature of existences.

The movement from revelatory to constitutive freedom transitions between the two registers of the world concept: from the ontological to the historical and meaningful one. The movement occurs when a few human beings act together to undo the collapse of authority by reconstituting the polity. The act of reconstitution strives to reinvest the world with meaning, and culminates in concerted action to birth a new order that accommodates the always particular or historical “*inter-est*, which lies between people.”³³⁷ Constitutive freedom manifests the characteristics of appearance *and* it comes into play only at specific historical moments of world-as-fabrication. It is a conceptualization of founding acts as such—a philosophical enterprise—but also an indicator of how to understand historic foundings—a hermeneutic enterprise. The American Revolution embodied both registers. The Revolutionaries succeeded in founding a polity by becoming attuned to their own experience of political action. Their problematic “was not how to limit power but how to establish it, not how to limit government but how to found a new one.”³³⁸ They set up a system of checks and balances, horizontally in the Federal constitution and vertically in the federalist principle which created “new centres of power”³³⁹ where citizens and delegates could exercise freedom. John Adams recovered the insight of Montesquieu that “only power arrests

³³⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.

³³⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 148.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

power.”³⁴⁰ Distinguishing power from violence and strength, they maximized the former the better to minimize the latter. Separation of powers did not merely prevent the monopolization of power in a single realm, it also created more power by creating a multiplicity of public realms.

The two registers merge, as it were, in the Declaration of Independence. As Arendt’s ontology of appearance shows, an act need not resort to principles outside itself to be self-legitimizing. In this context, the Declaration was a perfect act: a destabilizing document that opened the door to the stabilization of the new-founded world by uttering the principles which the revolution had brought into being; *i.e.* what the Americans were doing at that moment in time. It was “the perfect way for an action to appear in words.”³⁴¹ Thus, far from falling into obscurity, this founding act engendered follow-up constitutive acts in all the thirteen colonies instead. Arendt approvingly quotes Jefferson that the Declaration was not “aimed at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.”³⁴² The American founders understood what they were doing when they adopted the Declaration in this way. It is as if they reached underneath the theoretical concepts that they were working with in order to found a “worldly, tangible reality”³⁴³ where the human condition could be freely revealed. Maybe just for this reason, their

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 151-152.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 130.

³⁴² Ibid., 130.

³⁴³ Ibid., 124.

spirit and visions—foremost amongst which was the abolition of sovereignty—never made it across the Atlantic.³⁴⁴

The founding act was an appearance in the world-as-fabrication: in the meaningful context of *that* America. It was about worldly goals and an ever-shifting local context. Its partisans and opponents struggled with each other in particular discursive traditions and made real decisions affecting their world in myriad ways. Politics as a “twofold process of decision and persuasion”³⁴⁵ is meaningless if thought out of historical context. The Declaration and the stories that arose around it created new meaning to accommodate the new governmental structure in an old world. It enabled Americans to look back to the founding moment and thereby retrieve its meaning. It made renewal possible *via* recovery. By creating a Supreme Court, responsible for referring back to the documents of the founding to dispose of cases thereafter, the founders ensured “a kind of Constitutional Assembly in continuous session.”³⁴⁶ Thus, the spirit of the founding was made a real presence, adaptable to the contingencies of posterity.

The exposition of the paradox of founding in the First Chapter determined that the study of foundings lies at the intersection of philosophy and politics. Arendt’s work illumines this intersection. Founding moments *qua* unpredictable events coming “out of nowhere in either time or space”³⁴⁷ are situated within her ontology of appearance. As spontaneous new beginnings, their meaning arises from the performance itself. Each

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 24.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 91.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 200.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 206.

historical founding is a “concrete universal.”³⁴⁸ Arendt’s ontological analytic is no philosophical idealism as is Strauss’s; instead, it is a return to the phenomenal core of politics as experience. Appearance is revealed as a mode of being that negates the desirability of Straussian idealism; wherefore Arendtian thought, like political action itself, does not stumble over the paradox of founding. It does not get trapped in logical paradoxes or in the metaphors of making that befuddle much of the Western tradition. It implies a rethinking of human experience by a political science that is substantive and historically grounded. Foundations, Arendt says, are laid “not by the strength of one architect but by the combined power of the many.”³⁴⁹

4.2. The Ontology of Appearance and Understanding Founding Moments

Having sketched out Arendt’s general conception of foundings, I turn to the problem of studying historical instances of them. From these reflections, it comes as no surprise that Arendt calls for a hermeneutic of politics: the political sciences “in the highest sense are called upon to pursue the quest for meaning.”³⁵⁰ However, turning to her study of founding moments in *On Revolution*, I find that she is not fundamentally concerned with critically understanding the American or French Revolution. Instead, her primary purpose is to analyze them in order to clarify her ontology of appearance and to combat what she viewed as the pernicious influence of the Western tradition of political and social science on our understanding of politics. The critical tools of political history that

³⁴⁸ David Luban, “Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Theory,” in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds., *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 85.

³⁴⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 214.

³⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed., Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 320.

should bring to light “the generative principles” of the form of the social³⁵¹ are not fully developed. The actual stories of foundings are told only partially—only those materials that bring to light her ontological analytic are used. The reader is left convinced of the need for a hermeneutics that respects the phenomenality of events, but uncertain about how to respond to that need. Despite her claims to the contrary, Arendt proved first and foremost a philosopher.³⁵²

Benhabib points out the problem with Arendt’s “phenomenological essentialism”: it “frequently leads her to conflate conceptual distinctions with social processes, ontological analyses with institutional and historical descriptions.”³⁵³ In other words, she failed to distinguish between world-as-appearance—*always there* as a mode of being inherent in plurality, and world-as-fabrication—always a particular world of meaning. World-as-appearance is the ontological ground of her philosophical argument. So long as human beings in the plural exist, it holds true always everywhere, *despite* what particular human beings may actually do. By contrast, world-as-fabrication includes the most tangibly manifest aspects of the world—from the bricks and mortar of *poleis* to institutional forms, cultural expressions and policy debates. It is a concept pointing to the tangible, meaningful artifacts of a society like socio-economic divides, traditional practices, and action goals. It involves the historical goings-on between human beings,

³⁵¹ Claude Lefort, *Writing. The Political Test* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 26.

³⁵² For the opposite point of view, see Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996) and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven.: Yale University Press, 1982).

³⁵³ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, 124.

“which [vary] with each group of people.”³⁵⁴ It is the web of meaning which comes into being in action and speech:

Since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the “web” of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.³⁵⁵

The world-as-fabrication is the condition and outcome of Arendt’s ontology of appearance; human action would be impossible without it.

The secondary literature on Hannah Arendt tends to privilege one or other of the two registers her thought moves between. Aesthetical readings emphasize the performative or virtuous aspect of politics unfolding in the ontology of appearance;³⁵⁶ Aristotelian or narrative readings problematize the meaning and understanding inherent in the second register,³⁵⁷ moved by Arendt’s concern for the “common public world”³⁵⁸ and the intersubjectivity constituting it. Generally, these rely on the late Arendt of *On Revolution*, who stressed the dialogic and narrative side of politics: her writings on

³⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 183.

³⁵⁶ For interpretations of Arendt that stress her association of action with the performative arts, see Sheldon Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political,” *Salmagundi* vol., 60 (1983): 3-19; Dana Villa, “Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action,” *Political Theory*, vol. 20, no. 2 (May, 1992): 274-308; Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Noel K. O’Sullivan, “Politics, Totalitarianism, and Freedom: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt,” *Political Studies* vol., 21, no., 2 (1973): 197; George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Wolin and Kateb criticise Arendt for the undemocratic repercussions of her theory while Honig appropriates it for the purposes of radical emancipatory politics.

³⁵⁷ The most famous examples include Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power,” *Social Research*, vol. 44, no., 1 (1977): 3-25; Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996); Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); James T. Knauer, “Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Political Action,” *The American Political Science Review*, vol., 74, no., 3 (Sep., 1980): 721-733.

³⁵⁸ Lawrence J. Biskowski, “Politics versus Aesthetics: Arendt’s Critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger,” *The Review of Politics*, vol., 57, no., 1 (Winter, 1995), 61.

political judgment as “enlarged rationality,”³⁵⁹ or the importance of meaning and worldly ends for politics in *The Human Condition*.³⁶⁰ This camp disregards the dramaturgical character of action in *The Human Condition*, or seeks to demonstrate the instability of that work, or emphasizes those sections that fit their reading.³⁶¹ The debate between the two camps is wrongly construed insofar as it demands that Arendt’s text move along a single register. As Knauer points out,

What the critics fail to understand is that action is a *combination* of the particular, e.g., goals, and the universal, principles of human association. Arendt’s point is not that action must have no goals but that it cannot be defined in terms of them. The particular ends of action are always transcended by the general principles which give them significance and meaning. Insofar as a universal principle is manifested in a particular act, it becomes possible to judge that act in terms of what Arendt calls the ‘greatness’ of the act, that is, the greatness of the manifestation of principle.³⁶²

Given the exposition of Arendt’s thought in the first section, it is fair to say that her interest in the public world cannot be uncoupled from the ontology of appearance. As Villa remarks, Aristotelian readings cannot explain why action is grasped by analogy with the performing arts or why politics is something more, an excess, beyond economic and social concerns.³⁶³ Appearance simultaneously brings dynamism into the web of meaning and sets a standard for judging the misunderstandings of action, whether by thinkers like Plato, or by actors like the French and American revolutionaries. To focus

³⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Political Significance,” *Between Past and Future*, 197-226; Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed., Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1982).

³⁶⁰ For an interesting reading of *The Human Condition* along these lines, see Roy T. Tsao, “Arendt against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition,” *Political Theory*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Feb., 2002): 97-123.

³⁶¹ Benhabib does the former while Lisa Disch does the latter.

³⁶² James T., Knauer, “Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Political Action,” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 74, no. 3 (Sep., 1980). 725. See also Patchen Markell, “The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê, and Democracy,” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 100, no. 1 (Feb., 2006): 1-14.

³⁶³ Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 11-12.

exclusively on Aristotelian readings is to deprive ourselves of the very heart of Arendt's thought.

The problem of Arendt's ontological thinking is that it operates behind historical acts, as it were, by articulating their mode of being in the world. At this level of analysis, institutions and laws are extra-political tools that frame action rather than the ends of action. Like rules of a game, they facilitate playful activity by standing outside. Arendt's failure to distinguish clearly between the two registers leaves world-as-fabrication, hopelessly entangled in instrumental relations, a potential threat to free action.³⁶⁴ There are historical exceptions: the Greeks, the Romans, a few modern practices in American town halls or Russian soviets. But these are always partial and always fail. The actors are judged by their ability to "understand" their acts, *i.e.* their ability to articulate and enact Arendt's pre-theoretical mode of being. Hardly anyone, it seems, ever fully understood it.

Of course Arendt is deeply concerned about *her* world; however, her diagnoses of the problems of her world, like the advent of totalitarianism (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*) or the forgetfulness of the revolutionary spirit (*On Revolution*), follow from her elucidation of the essence of the world *qua* world-as-appearance. No wonder her historical investigations revolved around "two extreme cases": (a) totalitarianism, which

³⁶⁴ For an analysis that arrives at the same conclusion but via the route of the dichotomy between "politics" and "the social", see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

annihilates appearance, and (b) revolutionary moments, which illumine that structure most brightly.³⁶⁵ Both serve a purpose beyond themselves.

This is precisely what cannot be done if we are to understand political events as phenomena, that is, as “what shows itself, what appears to the eyes and the senses.”³⁶⁶

The constitutive freedom of world-as-fabrication operates in an historical context. While it may *also* reveal who the agents are, constitutive freedom is not in essence revelatory. The actors *must* have specific intentions and/or grievances, and some notion of the means by which to address them. A student of actual moments of founding must account for how a new “web of meaning”—with its violent struggles, ideological debates, charismatic movements—comes to be, and not look for the illumination of ontological concepts in history.

Arendt fails to pursue the hermeneutic implications of the historicity of her thought. For her the world of meaning is just *there*. This is of course true, but founding moments are times when such *thereness* is questioned, when new meanings emerge in political articulation and new institutions in constitutive action, dramatically changing “the process by which human beings form themselves into a society for action in history.”³⁶⁷

But these are also stern times, where mass movements and counter-revolutionary forces wrestle each other in battles of often brute strength. Bullets may not be political but they affect the outcome of the new world struggling to be born. In founding times the world

³⁶⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power, *Social Research*, vol., 44, no., 1 (1977: Spring), 9.

³⁶⁶ Ernst Vollrath, “Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking, *Social Research*, vol., 44, no., 1 (1977: Spring), 164.

³⁶⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 37.

is no longer the world these particular human beings were born into, and inquiring into the nature of foundings means understanding this process of the death and rebirth of the positive, substantive content of the world.

4.3. 'Talking back' to the Tradition: Arendt's Repudiation of Sovereignty and Absolute Beginnings

In *On Revolution* Arendt is primarily concerned with combating the Western tradition's idealistic understanding of political foundings and with recovering the world-revealing experience of political action. She effects the former by performing the latter. In her formulation political founding is "the great problem in politics."³⁶⁸ Her account of founding entails a reconceptualization of freedom such that its site is also the site of the highest possible arbitrariness. She critiques the tradition for neglecting and misconceiving political experience, "solving" problems *via* transcendental principles like sovereignty or beginnings *ex nihilo* from outside actual foundings. For Arendt, both concepts are fictions of a mind that has withdrawn from the world of appearances, misrepresenting the nature of politics in general and foundings in particular.

Arendt's critique of sovereignty is widely covered in the secondary literature: it is anti-political in collapsing the public realm to an instrument of the "general will" of a sovereign. It supplants the free action of peers with vertical rule, shifting the center of the polity from the horizontal web of human relationships, which alone may augment power, to vertical command and obedience which rely on strength not power. Above all, the sovereign is speechless because it is solitary and speech is possible only in plurality.

³⁶⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 183.

³⁶⁹ It commands or compels but cannot persuade. Hence the “hissing or applauding galleries”³⁷⁰ of the French Revolutionary National Assembly: once the *volonté générale* had been identified, no particular delegate could speak his mind.

Arendt’s rejection of sovereignty is not the rejection of a relic that has lost its grip on our minds; it is a notion that continues to pervade our thinking on politics and democratization. Contemporary thinking still views democratization as the passing of sovereignty from an absolute ruler or privileged elite to the people. It is claimed that in a post-absolutist world the people are the sole source of the legitimacy of political authority through elections, referendums, grassroots organizations, even revolution. When the government “strays”, the “people” correct it. Arendt’s discussion of sovereignty reveals the absolutism of the supposedly post-absolutist world.

Perhaps more importantly, the concept of sovereignty is an obscurant veil covering up our own understanding of what it means to act freely. The consequence is that all instances of free acts in modern history have failed to endure by constituting a public space for “the survival of the spirit out of which the act of foundation sprang.”³⁷¹ In this context, Arendt’s thesis on sovereignty adds vitally to a contemporary debate which may rescue *our* freedom from the misconceptions of traditional theorizing.

Arendt uses the two revolutions to illustrate her ideas on sovereignty. The Americans left practically no place for sovereignty in the new polity, she concludes: the insight that sovereignty and tyranny are the same was perhaps their greatest innovation. Americans

³⁶⁹ Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 61-62, 82-85.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁷¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 126.

remained what they were in fact: many individuals and peoples embarking in a common journey without abolishing their plurality: “[t]he word ‘people’ retained for them the meaning of manyness, of the endless variety of a multitude whose majesty resided in its very plurality.”³⁷² This enabled them to reach their second, institutional innovation: creation of the Senate, whose overriding purpose was to host a multitude of opinions to countervail majoritarian public opinion.³⁷³ Public opinion democratically manifests sovereignty: it is the collapse of diverse opinions into one overriding one. For Arendt, this subverts politics not merely because politics depends on debate, but also because opinion formation itself depends on a multitude of opinions; whereas rule by public opinion, like tyranny, soon devolves into (at best) the “sterile negativism” of those strong enough to resist the views of the tyrant.

By contrast, the French Revolutionaries were well versed in political theory, in particular Rousseau, and sought to ground their new republic in “national sovereignty.”³⁷⁴ The sovereignty of the nation was delegated to the deputies of the National Assembly, who proceeded to centralize power. By doing so they turned the revolution back on itself: the very experience that by its nature arises out of men’s assertion of their freedom and is carried out as a concerted free act was throttled by the anti-revolutionary reinstatement of sovereignty. This is exemplified by Robespierre’s turn against the *sociétés populaires*; stamped out, although they embodied the public

³⁷² Ibid., 93.

³⁷³ Ibid., 226.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 24.

spirit of the revolution, as soon as “the great popular Society of the whole French people”³⁷⁵ had been identified as the one source of power, freedom and law.

For Arendt, the concept of sovereignty is particularly pernicious when exploited to “solve” the paradox of founding “through the introduction of a beginner whose own beginnings are no longer subject to question.”³⁷⁶ Sovereignty *fabricates* the paradox of beginning. In modern political theory, sovereignty is laid at the feet of Rousseau’s *volonté générale*, which constitutes the body politic. The concept of sovereignty brought Will—the most anti-political of human inner faculties³⁷⁷—back into the political realm as the iconic notion of that most political of all moments: the moment of constitution. The solution is fictitious because no sovereign creator is available practically. It is also illegitimate insofar as it is anti-political. It is theoretically misleading because it posits an absolute beginning, forged by a sovereign Immortal Legislator. No such beginnings *ex nihilo* exist, and thus the paradox of founding, as conceived by the tradition, does not stand up to scrutiny.

Arendt repudiates the idea of absolute rupture with the past as impossible to conceive.³⁷⁸ If the first question of philosophy is, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”³⁷⁹ this implies that something cannot come from nothing. An answer to a question philosophy cannot answer should not be introduced through the back door in political philosophy under the guise of the lawgiver. For this paradox of beginning Arendt

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 240-241.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 206.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 76, 225; Arendt, “What is Freedom?” 145-147, 151-152. For the repercussions of Arendt’s repudiation of the will on her theory of politics, see Andreas Kalyvas, “From the Act to the Decision: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism,” *Political Theory*, vol., 32, no., 3 (Jun., 2004): 320-346.

³⁷⁸ To think of a beginning *ab novo* is “to think the unthinkable.” Hannah Arendt, “Willing,” *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1977), 208.

³⁷⁹ Arendt, “The Tradition of Political Thought,” *The Promise of Politics*, 55.

substitutes the *self-authorizing nature of action*, which generates its own authority as it “carries its own principle within itself.”³⁸⁰ Invoking the Greek etymological root *archē* meaning “beginning,” she argues that by beginning something new, human beings create their own immanent authority for their acts. This is particularly true of foundings which by definition are free acts *par excellence*. The problem of the arbitrariness of freedom, however, does not go away: “It is in the very nature of a beginning to carry with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness.”³⁸¹ In Arendt the problem of founding is reformulated rather than solved. Political theory must accept the incapability of speculative reason to penetrate the mystery of beginnings.³⁸² It is “existentially inexplicable [...] [a]nd the need for explanation is nowhere stronger than in the presence of an unconnected new event breaking into the continuum, the sequence of chronological time.”³⁸³

The problem of arbitrariness, present in every beginning, is ageless. In Arendt’s ontology of appearance, the founding act inspires consequent acts with no predetermination. It provokes other acts which contaminate one another, giving meaningful depth to the world. The originary principle is rearticulated anew with each beginning. Such a secular theory of beginnings relies on a kind of “blindness”³⁸⁴ on the part of future generations to take up by new acts the threads of meaning that tie them to the founding act. The weight placed on secular shoulders is heavy: newcomers need to

³⁸⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190-191; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 212.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 206.

³⁸² Ibid., 212-213.

³⁸³ Arendt, “Willing,” 208.

³⁸⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 198.

be both sensitive to the principles of their world and blind to the arbitrariness of its foundations. Arendt concedes—

While power, rooted in a people that had bound itself by mutual promise and lived in bodies constituted by compact, was enough ‘to go through a revolution’, it was by no means enough to establish a perpetual union, that is, to fund a new authority. Neither compact nor promise upon which compacts rest are sufficient to assure perpetuity.³⁸⁵

It is for story-tellers and actors to be perpetually open to the truth that originated in the founding act and carried over through generations, binding past, present and future. What solution Arendt gives to the paradox of beginnings lies in the act of beginning itself.

4.4. Arendt’s Method and the Problem of Founding

On Revolution is not so much a study of actual political revolutions as a treatise of political philosophy.³⁸⁶ The study of the American and French Revolutions is a way to clarify her ontological concepts and engage representatives of the Western tradition like Rousseau, the better to refute their understanding of foundings. I base this claim on: a) the structure of *On Revolution*; b) the theoretical gains made by studying the Revolutions (enlarging the definition of freedom to include constitutive freedom, and honing her previous arguments against sovereignty); and c) the relative lack of historical detail for a historical subject. Having worked out her ontology of appearance in *The Human Condition*, she applies it to two revolutions which manifest most clearly that

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 182.

³⁸⁶ There is a rich secondary literature that has pointed out to the ‘conflation of levels of analysis’ in Arendt’s work from the ontological to the actual and back without clearly drawing the boundaries between the two. See Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power,” *Social Research*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1977): 3-25; Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp., 84-85; Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), chapter. 5.

condition. She understood the events by a conceptual apparatus she worked out prior to the events. Arendt's question in *On Revolution* is: how do these events illuminate the human condition? That is, the movement of her thought is not entirely dissimilar to Strauss's who understands political things with an eye to natural right. However, there is a crucial *caveat* to this analogy: whereas Strauss simply transcends political events by examining the normative claims that arise in them, Arendt endows the events with a worldly depth Strauss lacked. Instead of being unidirectional, the movement of her thought goes back and forth between the two registers of appearance and fabrication as the phenomena allow her to refine her philosophical concepts. Consequently, like Strauss's, Arendt's is generally an essentialist account, but, unlike Strauss, the impossibility or undesirability of philosophical idealism comes into view.

Since I covered aspect b) in the previous two sections, I shall now focus first on aspect a)—the structure of *On Revolution*—, and then on aspect c)—the lack of historical detail. Her actual study of the two Revolutions is sandwiched between two chapters that have nothing to do with them: the introduction is dedicated to clearing up a misconception of our times, the conflation of revolution with violence and war. Arendt wants to unravel this “entanglement” by demonstrating that revolutions are related to human freedom³⁸⁷ and unrelated to war. If we misunderstand the ontological status of revolutions, we are bound to make blind policy mistakes like fighting “revolutionary wars”.³⁸⁸ Arendt cites as her motive for studying revolutions the need to respond appropriately to contemporary revolutionary demands.

³⁸⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 12.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

The last chapter returns to our contemporary condition in light of her foregoing analysis. Our condition is worsened by our failure to remember and understand the revolutionary spirit.³⁸⁹ The main reasons for this forgetfulness are two: the errors of the tradition and the failure to theorize the post-Revolutionary American experience. Consequently, we no longer understand ourselves or our destiny. There are self-evident repercussions of this in US foreign policy toward developing countries.³⁹⁰ She also exposes a deeper confusion about our politics: what we call politics is no politics at all:³⁹¹ we can no longer distinguish statesmanship from administration,³⁹² parties, representation and public realms of deliberation,³⁹³ freedom and private rights. The founders fell short of bringing their full experience and practice of revolution to bear on building institutions for the new spirit of public happiness; no way to understand the nature of things is left now “except through memory and recollection.”³⁹⁴ Her second purpose is to tell this truth.

These purposes—honing her ontology of appearance and clarifying contemporary problems—explain the relative lack of historical detail in *On Revolution*. Her thought moves from the events to the ontology of appearance, transforming the understanding of freedom, then returns to actual events. Studying the revolutions checks that her ontological analytic does clarify historical events. She intends her analytic to reveal the nature of experience; it is a powerful tool illuminating those of the American and French founders; yet it becomes the cynosure of her understanding effort.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 221-223.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 216.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 255.

³⁹² Ibid., 274.

³⁹³ Ibid., 236, 247.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 280.

This priority of philosophical over historical concerns has made *On Revolution* unpopular among historians who think they have no use for philosophy,³⁹⁵ and she does omit a slew of historical facts: the influence of classes and religious establishments, the deliberations and struggles in the French National Assembly, the role of foreign powers and the anti-federalist agitations, to mention but a few. But this is no failure, as Arendt is not about analyzing an actual revolution but deploying the experience of revolution to understand freedom. Such a method produces results interesting even to historians; *e.g.* she shows that a revolution did occur in the USA despite denials by social scientists who rely on quantitative methods to measure changes in social conditions.³⁹⁶ Her movement between two registers allows her to see that instead of “institutionalizing spontaneity” by taking their cue from their own revolutionary actions and the institutional practice of the town hall meetings, the American revolutionaries put in place representative institutions to form public views—to turn the hissing and applauding of the general will into reasonable discourse, as it were. The Americans somehow sensed that they were on to something—hence Jefferson’s proposal of a “ward system”³⁹⁷—but they lacked the vocabulary to articulate their intuitions and they looked for inspiration in all the wrong places, in the past histories and books replete with the mistaken concepts of the tradition rather than thinking what they were doing.³⁹⁸ And her distinction between “the social” and “politics”—political from apolitical virtues, promises from intrigues, show how

³⁹⁵ Hobsbawm’s critique is worth quoting: historians will be “irritated, as the author plainly is not, by a certain lack of interest in mere fact [...] a preference for metaphysical construct or poetic feeling over reality.” From the perspective of professional historians, it is difficult to imagine a more succinct formulation of the quarrel between historians and philosophers. Quoted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 403.

³⁹⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 25.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

³⁹⁸ See also Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 218.

poor were the chances of the French Revolutionaries, who inherited no political tradition from Versailles;³⁹⁹ consequently, they suffered from an “ontological” version of Marx’s false consciousness. Such an inference may not be “provable” (in the experimental sense) yet it is consistent with Arendt’s analysis. *On Revolution* does not stand or fall on its historical conclusions, but on the critical analysis of the ontology of appearance and on the evocation of an experience that illumines *our* contemporary situation.

Our inquiry, however, is about understanding actual political foundings, not to use founding moments to grasp a mode of being in the world. Arendt’s ontology of appearance implies that *all* revolutions pervert the true nature of revolution as such, and hardly any historical society qualifies as political except the Athenians, German soldiers in the *Soldatenräte* and other limited, usually short-lived, forms of self-organization. From a philosophical standpoint this may work; it is often philosophy’s task to give warning and perhaps lay out possibilities for attaining what is philosophically desirable.⁴⁰⁰ But this is not the task of studying actual founding moments—understanding the events of founding is.

Claude Lefort is correct when he says that for Arendt politics “either exists or does not exist.”⁴⁰¹ This follows naturally from her method: either a communal form of activity manifests the *appearance* that is politics, or it does not. In the latter case, if the actors think they are doing politics, they are deluded and it is the task of philosophy to show why.

³⁹⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 180.

⁴⁰⁰ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 14.

⁴⁰¹ Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 55.

4.5. Concluding remarks

Like Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt sets out to recover everyday experience. She endows political activity with an autonomy and nobility it had long lacked in philosophical and scientific discourses. Politics is for her *the* activity of the human condition, distinguishing human beings from other living species. Unlike Strauss, however, she does not merely assert the self-sufficiency of practice—she theorizes it. Her ontology of appearance unveils practice as world-revealing, truth-constituting and identity-disclosing. She demonstrates that there is no space outside of experience from which the world or truth might be beheld. Philosophy misunderstands itself if it expects to contemplate wisdom in perfect serenity. It is of the essence of the world that it cannot be transcended. The philosopher, like the citizen, inserts his thought as an appearance in the world.

Arendt situates foundings in this context—luminous manifestations of her ontology of appearance. Her study of revolution shows it retains every quality of appearance as well as historical qualities of its own: it is an act in concert not of a sole agent; it seeks to reconstitute public authority when that authority is weak; and it seeks to build an institutional abode for human appearance.

Founding moments, then, can be seen as among the highest historical expressions of the human condition. Distinctions of hierarchy, wealth, and strength that necessarily divide the body politic in normal times are erased when citizens act in concert. The social processes preventing some from acting in public are dissolved. Human beings cease to labor, lay down their tools, and experience the heady “wine of action.” The ontological

aspects of human existence, customarily obscured by necessity, utility, or the private sphere, shine forth brightly. Human life becomes authentic.

This is particularly relevant to our contemporary age. Revolution has become a constant feature of the modern world because human appearance has given way to the meaningless processes ruling the life of *animal laborans*. Revolutionary acts remind us of a mode of being we have forgotten. The demise of the Roman trinity of religion, authority and tradition has come at a heavy cost, but may also be seen as an opportunity. We are now free to realize that we have nothing but free action to rely on. Should we not recognize this, “[i]t is quite conceivable that the modern age [...] may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.”⁴⁰²

If human appearance discloses its meaning in the act itself, studying politics means engaging in a hermeneutic exercise. But, Arendt claims, our language has forgotten or obscured the meaning of what we do. She sets out to recover or create such a language through a return to classical Greece. Whereas Strauss recovers Greek *philosophy*, she goes back even further, to pre-philosophic Greek experience. Here a surprising role-reversal takes place: Strauss, who transcended political practice, recovered a philosophical language that relies on everyday political speech. The recovery of Greek philosophy results in a language compatible with political practice. By contrast, Arendt’s recovery of the *agora* (or “marketplace”) is transacted in a language wholly foreign to the marketplace. Her ontological analytic does not resemble *any* political language, yet aims to disclose the meaning of politics. Arendt thus recovers experience by ways peculiarly extraneous to experience itself. Her ontology of appearance, to be

⁴⁰² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 322.

distinguished from her *amor mundi*, is distrustful of historical experience. All historical experiences may be ranked by how nearly they approximate her ontology of experience as such. Arendt's thought demonstrates that politics can only be understood from within, while yet moving outside of it.

This instability dictates that whole areas of political experience, from vertical rule to goal-oriented action, be declared non-political. Feudalism, absolute monarchy and representative democracy are consigned to phenomenological darkness. Since all action is intentional,⁴⁰³ politics either exists or it withers away. Yet the problem of understanding political action in its historical situatedness is most acute in founding moments when human beings act *with the objective to change the world*. The fact that they do not *abolish* world does not diminish the fact that moments of founding are moments of struggle for worldly objectives, not merely dramaturgic expressions of the human condition. In order to highlight this problem, let us recall an incident in which Mary McCarthy raised just this issue in a conference with Arendt:

I have asked myself: 'What is somebody supposed to do on the public stage, in the public space, if he does not concern himself with the social? That is, what's left?' [...] if all questions of economics, human welfare [...] anything that touches the social sphere, are to be excluded from the political scene, then, I am mystified. I am left with war and speeches. But the speeches can't be just speeches. They have to be speeches about something.⁴⁰⁴

Arendt's answer was negative: she says that other activities like administration are about "things where the right measure can be figured out,"⁴⁰⁵ but produced no positive answer on what political speeches are about. The answer is in *The Human Condition*—about worldly objective reality.

⁴⁰³ Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 200.

⁴⁰⁴ Quoted in Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 155.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

The answer is somewhere in the meaningful depths of world-as-fabrication. Arendt did not close the door on the pursuit of this question—her ontology was her way of opening that door. In her exposition of authority, a pre-political concept in her ontology of appearance, she notes that

the danger of forgetting [...] would mean that, humanly speaking, we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence. For memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.⁴⁰⁶

Arendt's problem and the problem of this thesis are one: the quest for meaning. I shall now reproblematicize Arendt's answer to this problem by shifting away from her ontology of appearance.

⁴⁰⁶ Arendt, "What is Authority?" 94.

5. Hannah Arendt and the Hermeneutics of Experience

Strauss's classic reformulation of the problem showed that political science must begin from understanding foundings in their historical context, starting from the speeches and deeds of the actors. There can be no question of a method to guide understanding, for the very concept of method presupposes a detachment from the events that denies their practical nature. Arendt's ontology of appearance builds on Strauss by giving foundings *qua* events a meaningful depth they lacked in Strauss. If Strauss's understanding effort transcends the events in favor of natural right, Arendt seeks rather to illuminate foundings from within. In theorizing the practical nature of politics in *The Human Condition*, she shows that no "space outside" exists whence understanding may behold political events; and Strauss's natural right, for Arendt, is precisely a manner of beholding. Arendt confirms Strauss's view on the beginning of the act of understanding but disagrees about its end. Yet as Chapter Four showed, her ontology of appearance, peculiarly, subverts the quest to understand foundings. She sometimes uses events to illumine her ontology rather than *vice versa*. As a result of her ontology, history becomes either the story of the miraculous and meaningful or the non-story of necessity and meaningless processes. It follows that there ought to be not one but two political sciences: one hermeneutic science for the meaningful times of "politics", and another social science for meaningless times—the times of the "the social". Even considering her hermeneutics, it remains unclear how the ontology of appearance serves the understanding of events. If Arendt's thought is to redeem the quest for a hermeneutic of political science, this dichotomy must be overcome productively.

This entails moving beyond debates between aestheticized or Nietzschean *versus* communicative or Aristotelian interpretations of Arendt's work.⁴⁰⁷ The strength of these two interpretative schools is no coincidence; they arise from two great attempts of contemporary thought to rescue human experience from the triumph of modern strategic rationality. Like two promontories jutting up out of the threatening sea of instrumentality, they have a different make-up to the lapping water surrounding them. But their very *raison d'être* as alternatives to the default position undermines them as they are slowly ground down by the gentle but constant waves. If Arendt does not quite fit the interpretation of either, then is instrumental rationality the victor?

My interpretation moves between the Nietzschean and Aristotelian interpretations of Arendt. It is an opening already carved out by some of her interpreters. Patchen Markell for instance notes the sense in which action "involves attention and responsiveness to worldly events."⁴⁰⁸ Taking a very different route *via* Arendt's work on Augustine, Thomas E. Breidenthal finds that despite the indeterminacy of Arendt's conception of freedom, it nonetheless has a *telos* in the world: "the political realm is not the means for freedom to achieve its idiosyncratic ends; rather the polis is the end of freedom."⁴⁰⁹ This space is motivated by neither aesthetical nor dialogic rationality concerns.

⁴⁰⁷ For a critique of aesthetic readings from an Arendtian perspective, see Lawrence J. Biskowski, "Politics versus Aesthetics: Arendt's Critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 57, no. 1 (Winter, 1995): 59-89. For a critique of Aristotelian readings from the same perspective, see Dana R. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory*, vol. 20, no. 2 (May, 1992): 274-308.

⁴⁰⁸ Patchen Markell, "The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê, and Democracy," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 100, no. 1 (Feb., 2006), 2.

⁴⁰⁹ Thomas Edward Breidenthal, *On the Concept of Freedom in Hannah Arendt: A Christian Reassessment*, (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Oxford, Hilary Term, 1991), 35-6.

5.1. The Quest for Meaning: Arendt's Action in the Light of Thinking

In this section I rethink Arendt's conception of action *via* her work on thinking in order to understand politics in light of the quest for meaning which is the task of political science according to Arendt. In the process, I bypass the project of rescuing political action from the deadening effect of instrumentality and move away from her ontology of appearance which I found wanting in Chapter Four. For Arendt, thinking and acting are incommensurate modes of being. The former is a metaphysical movement, carried out in solitude that negates the public realm, while the latter is a dramaturgic movement, inspired by the presence of others that occurs the public realm. Action has the quality of visibility and is an expression of man's urge toward self-display.⁴¹⁰ It is defined as appearance and the basis of her ontology. Arendt saw thinking and acting as contrary ways of pursuing meaning. I shall rethink this contrarian relationship based precisely on their common effect—the quest for meaning. In order to do so, I establish an analogy between thinking and acting in Arendt's work and I re-describe action and thinking as experience rather than appearance. I argue that this movement with and against Arendt is an interpretation that stays faithful to her thought.

In this first section I argue, firstly, that the dichotomy between these two ways of experience is untenable. Secondly, I show that thinking as *energeia* is *like* action: it is an uncaused movement constituting its own principle, broadly oriented to a non-appearing end that cannot be comprehended as a whole. Action reflects the characteristics of thinking, and so can be rethought in terms suited to thinking, *i.e.* metaphysically.

⁴¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking," *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978), 19-29.

Thirdly, I shall rethink the quest for meaning in the metaphysical terms Arendt herself uses to describe thinking.

Understanding action as experience by means of the analogy with thinking enables conceiving the task of political science as a hermeneutics of experience. In the second section I argue the act of understanding political events resembles thinking because of their broad directedness towards an absolute principle. Understanding reconstitutes historical events through the principles of its own movement. I first trace the movement of Arendt's understanding in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by comparing it to the secondary literature on her "method," and to Thucydides's hermeneutic movement in *The Peloponnesian War*. I then reconstruct conceptually the movement of understanding as such. In closing, I shall make two points that lead the inquiry on to Eric Voegelin: the need for a theory of symbolization to avoid mistaking speeches and deeds for the experiences at their source, and the need to interweave the act of understanding as sheer *energeia* into a science of order which embeds the act of understanding in the contextual order in which it occurs.

There is no question that Arendt's work is an effort to rescue *experience* from the Charybdis of traditional metaphysics on one side, and the Scylla of modern rationality on the other, by proving that the quest for meaning is central to human life. With the urgency demanded of the times, Arendt maintained that only a life free from both the blueprints of reason and the compulsion of necessity, a life open to the possibility of venturing forth to begin something new, is a properly human life. What has rather escaped notice is that two ways of life are proper to man: the actor who ventures forth in

action, and the philosopher who ventures forth in thought. Human experience thus has two kinds, although only one, action, forms “the central concept of political science.”⁴¹¹

To be sure, Arendt did not always sharply maintain this dichotomy.⁴¹² In a 1972 conference in Toronto for example, she drew a parallel between thinking and the insertion of meaning in the world when she said, “[p]utting the story into shape is a form of thought.”⁴¹³ Yet, even then she immediately reverted to the dichotomy, rejecting traditional claims that thinking is also acting. The dichotomy for her is anchored in the opposition between thinking and common sense. She defined common sense to be the sixth sense “that fits into reality as a whole our five strictly individual senses and the strictly particular data they perceive.”⁴¹⁴ It inserts every new appearance in the context in which it appears, thus making it meaningful. It is the condition of possibility that human beings *may* act in that the meaningful context furnishes the incentives that repel or attract the participants, who respond in speech and deed.⁴¹⁵ By contrast, thinking takes the attention of human beings away from what is happening about them in the world, making them “absent-minded.”⁴¹⁶ It is not only inattentive and so apolitical, but

⁴¹¹ Arendt, “The Tradition of Political Thought,” *The Promise of Politics*, 45. Arendt meant to keep the two separate, and the secondary literature has followed her distinction. See Arendt, “Thinking,” *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 6. For an example of the secondary literature, see Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 103.

⁴¹² For a catalogue of instances of similarity between political action and philosophy in Arendt, see Margaret Canovan, “Socrates or Heidegger? Hannah Arendt’s Reflections on Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research*, vol., 57, no., 1 (Spring: 1990): 135-165

⁴¹³ Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” *Hannah Arendt: the Recovery of the Public World*, ed., M. A. Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 303.

⁴¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 208.

⁴¹⁵ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol., 1, 51.

⁴¹⁶ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol., 1, 53. In this analysis I deal only with what Arendt calls “meditative” thinking as opposed to the contemplative and the deliberative or calculative. Arendt, “Thinking & Moral Considerations,” 431.

the act of thinking “derealizes”⁴¹⁷ what common sense made real. Thinking *moves* at the moment of withdrawal from the world of appearances by the thinking ego toward the non-appearing infinite, beyond all knowledge, all remembrance and all seeing “with the mind’s eye.”⁴¹⁸ This “invisibility” renders it “the extreme opposite to the eminent, the blazing visibility of action.”⁴¹⁹ It subjects common sense to a radical doubt for which it is poorly equipped. Thinking can impact our orientation in the world of appearances only in a roundabout way, by preventing us, through judgment, from joining in an evil enterprise “when the chips are down.”⁴²⁰ But generally thinking is “out of order” when viewed from the perspective of the world of appearances. In Jonas’s words, man moves in two realms opposed to each other: “man in the plural and man in the singular, or man in the world and man with himself.”⁴²¹ Or as Kohn notes, “the split between thinking and acting is radical and complete.”⁴²²

By the same token, common sense is also out of order from the perspective of thinking. Thinking wishes the body and the City away,⁴²³ and flees into a “region”⁴²⁴ that does not belong to the world of the senses. Thinking deals in universals while human beings orient themselves among particulars in the sensual realm. Whenever thinking has tried to impose its own order on the world of appearances, it has always floundered, unable to produce an opinion to compete with other opinions. The thinker then has two choices:

⁴¹⁷ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol., 1, 49. See also Glenn, J. Gray, “The Winds of Thought,” *Social Research*, vol., 44, no., 1 (Spring: 1997): 47.

⁴¹⁸ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 424.

⁴¹⁹ Hans Jonas, “Acting, Knowing, Thinking: Gleanings from Hannah Arendt’s Philosophical Work,” *Social Research*, vol., 44, no., 1 (Spring: 1977), 39.

⁴²⁰ Arendt, “Thinking & Moral Considerations,” 446.

⁴²¹ Jonas, “Acting, Knowing, Thinking,” 28.

⁴²² Jerome Kohn, “Thinking/Acting,” *Social Research*, vol., 57, no., 1 (Spring: 1990), 124.

⁴²³ Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research*, vol., 57, no., 1 (Spring: 1990), 93.

⁴²⁴ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 23.

either isolate himself in the ivory tower of his own mind, or work contrary to common sense, negating the very nature of appearances. According to Arendt, the Western philosophical tradition chose the latter, attempting to impose thinking's blueprints on the world. The one philosopher who went against the grain was Socrates,⁴²⁵ and common sense handed him the hemlock.

Since thinking distorts man's orientation in the world, Arendt declared political experience to be independent of thought. In the "intramural warfare"⁴²⁶ between thinking and common sense, she takes the side of the latter.⁴²⁷ If thinking is "the other side of action,"⁴²⁸ and a threat to action, then "[t]hought [...] is omitted from [her] reconsideration of the *vita activa*."⁴²⁹ The upshot is that Arendt has to aestheticize her account of action as the mode in which human beings orient themselves in the world for to focus on the quest for meaning would have to include thinking.⁴³⁰ But as I noted in the previous chapter, this premise boxes Arendt into a peculiar abstract standpoint whence only the extreme cases may be understood, either the miraculous (*On Revolution*) or the disastrous (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*): "The meaningfulness of

⁴²⁵ Even Socrates, the thinker that best maintained the link with common sense, achieved nothing positive in common sense terms. Instead, he simply negated the assertions of common sense thus paralyzing his interlocutors from acting.

⁴²⁶ Arendt, "Thinking & Moral Considerations," 425.

⁴²⁷ Arendt may have also been accustomed to maintain this dichotomy which was popular in the view of German *Bildung* which located freedom in the inner life in opposition to politics—Arendt worked with this cultural dichotomy by empowering the political side without demolishing the scales itself. See W. H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: 'Bildung' From Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁴²⁸ Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Essays in Understanding*, 321.

⁴²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 324.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 206. For the fullest account of the "political-ontological stakes" of Arendt's theory of action see Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). As he rightly points out, Arendt's efforts to tame the resulting agonism through Kant "does not employ 'external' measures: the appeal she makes is not to reason or dialogue but to *taste*." Dana R. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and the Aestheticization of Political Action, *Political Theory*, vol., 20, no., 2 (May, 1992), 288.

everyday relationships is not disclosed in everyday life but in rare deeds, just as the significance of a historical period shows itself only in the few events that illuminate it.”⁴³¹ This all but consigns the rest of historical existence to a lower register of reality for which social science may be sufficient in our times. Hence Arendt’s heroic and disarming despondency:

Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances, and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.⁴³²

But this call for free thinking provides little consolation, for if the phenomena have sunk out of history—and with them the remembrance so crucial to politics and understanding—there can be no freedom from the banal grip of social science.⁴³³ Arendt talks of the possibility of understanding the “wonder of appearance,” but where are the appearances whose story may be told? In “dark times” human life loses its ontological depth and therefore its capacity to *provoke* understanding. In the Epilogue of *The Promise of Politics* Arendt speaks of a metaphoric desert and a life-giving oasis of philosophy and art, ever vulnerable to the encroaching desolation.⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 45.

⁴³² Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), 9.

⁴³³ For Arendt, this is a statement of fact rather than simply a judgment following her analysis of the human condition. Witness, for example, Arendt’s reproach to John Dewey: “only a great scholar living in the ivory tower of common sense could be so completely unaware of the fact that certain categories of men today are far worse off than any slave or serf ever was.” Can these “categories of men” possibly be capable of anything more than behavior? If the answer is “no” then social science is more than sufficient to study them. Or: “To understand the nature of totalitarianism [...] is [...] almost identical with understanding the very heart of our own century.” Quotes in Hannah Arendt, “The Ivory Tower of Common Sense,” and “Understanding and Politics,” *Essays in Understanding*, 195, 324.

⁴³⁴ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed., Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), xxxi.

Such is the unsettling horizon of the aesthetic account of human orientation in the world. The “political-ontological stakes”⁴³⁵ of Arendt’s theory of action unwittingly yield an ontological perspective—an ideal mode of being in the world—whence to survey the quest for meaning. This perspective threatens man’s understanding of his quest by moving outside it and it countervails Arendt’s basic teaching about political science. The dichotomy of action and thought simultaneously upends the traditional hierarchy of thought over action and replicates its error. The tradition has been placed in a *camera obscura* to yield its own upside-down image.

The dichotomy undergirds Arendt’s attack on tradition’s overvaluation of the *vita contemplativa*. Positing the same tension between philosophy and politics as Strauss, she “solves” it in favor of politics (unlike Strauss). But the dichotomy itself pushes her to commit similar errors in reverse: if the traditional problem is the one-sided mislocation of truth in metaphysics, relocation on the side of the *vita activa* just perpetuates the risk that the quest for meaning may be evacuated from human life. The risk is not relative weight, but the scales which weigh one quest *against* another.

As the truth of the *camera obscura* is the phenomenon of light refraction not the refracted image, so the truth of Arendt’s thought lies in its unfolding rather than in its “results”. Her inversion of the thought-action hierarchy hides the concern that runs like a red thread through her philosophical writings: to understand how human beings orient themselves in reality. As a “living experience,”⁴³⁶ thought must show man as a whole, not divide him in two realms. Arendt hypothesizes that “[b]ehind the opposition of

⁴³⁵ Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 12.

⁴³⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 324.

world and soul, there must be a unity that makes the correspondence possible, an ‘unknown law.’”⁴³⁷ Not only is there quite possibly a harmonious whole, but man moves in it with the whole of his being, which indicates the integrity of human experiences. That Arendt cannot articulate this whole hints that it cannot be articulated as if it were just *there*, but not necessarily that it should not be taken into account.

A careful examination of Arendt’s texts shows her initial antinomy of thinking and acting to be untenable. The dialogue between Arendt’s own several writings elicits the inseparability of both activities in practice. At one moment she writes:

The quest for meaning is ‘meaningless’ to common sense and common-sense reasoning because it is the sixth sense’s function to fit us into the world of appearances and make us at home in the world given by our five senses; there we are and no questions asked.⁴³⁸

Elsewhere, though, she has common sense giving us a “sensation of reality” so as to move about the world.⁴³⁹ It is thus intrinsic to the quest for meaning, not merely its condition of possibility. If action is a free insertion of meaning into a pre-existing web of meaning in which man is already thrown, thinking is also the human way of fashioning a “home on earth [...] the only reality he can be sure of.”⁴⁴⁰ If thinking is a break from appearances, it is no less a being-in-the-world too. Just as action—as an *acting on* common sense—is a break from its own condition of possibility, so thinking is a miraculous venturing-forth that real-izes common sense while challenging its complacency.

⁴³⁷ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 108. For Arendt, there must be a harmonious order. Ibid., 144.

⁴³⁸ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 59.

⁴³⁹ Sandra K. Hinchman, “Common Sense & Political Barbarism in the Theory of Hannah Arendt,” *Polity*, vol., 17, no., 2 (Winter, 1984): 317-339.

⁴⁴⁰ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 205

These hints from Arendt's text indicate the limits of the dichotomy between thinking and action. I proceed on to the analogy between them. If thinking arises from "genuine experience,"⁴⁴¹ then the experience of thought ought to show similarities with the experience of action. To begin with, Arendt defines thinking as an experience that constitutes its own space analogically to action's constituting its own space of appearance. The public realm precedes action as a web of meaning or, in the best case, as "a kind of organized remembrance."⁴⁴² Similarly, "our thinking attention" is aroused by "all events and facts by virtue of their existence."⁴⁴³ In an appropriation of Augustine, she premises that memory is a "similar vision within" to what sense perception is "without."⁴⁴⁴ The conditions for thought are thus the same as for action—they only *seem* different because, in thinking, memory is not necessarily triggered by sensory perception. Secondly, like action, thinking is a break from what was going on before in the world. Thirdly, if the distinctive trait of human appearance is the possibility to *choose* how to appear to the world,⁴⁴⁵ thought, too, requires the selective remembering of the objects of thought out of memory as it moves to create something new.⁴⁴⁶ In this sense, neither thought nor action can be explained by what preceded it in common sense or in memory. Finally, action, like "[n]o other human performance,"⁴⁴⁷ requires speech to reveal itself. But action owns no exclusive copyright on speech. Thinking does not come into being without it either: "[o]ur mental activities [...] are

⁴⁴¹ Arendt, "Thinking & Moral Considerations," 423.

⁴⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

⁴⁴³ Arendt, "Thinking & Moral Considerations," 418.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 423-4, n.8.

⁴⁴⁵ "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." Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 34.

⁴⁴⁶ Arendt, "Thinking & Moral Considerations," 424, n.8.

⁴⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

conceived in speech even before communicated, but speech is meant to be heard and words are meant to be understood by others who also have the ability to speak.”⁴⁴⁸ It “is in no way different from men’s need to tell the story of some happening they witnessed.”⁴⁴⁹ If thinking cannot be thought without speech, then it is a kind of performance where speech is essential, and so *implicated in the opposite of a withdrawal from the world*: “The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of appropriating and, as it were, disalienating the world.”⁴⁵⁰ As thinking occurs only in and through speech, so appearing in the world is inscribed in its very nature.⁴⁵¹

Thinking resembles action not only as to the constitution of its own space of appearance, but also as to its performativity more generally. Recall that action has a performative structure insofar as it is an uncaused or miraculous movement whose meaning is contained in the performance itself. Thinking also “[moves] about.”⁴⁵² It moves in the moment of withdrawal of the thinking ego from the world of appearances toward the infinite, beyond all knowledge, all remembering, all seeing “with the mind’s eye.”⁴⁵³ To quote Paul Ricœur, “to the extent that we think, we think eternity. (We might even say that to think *is* to think eternity.)”⁴⁵⁴ The two poles between which thinking moves—the moment of withdrawal from worldly appearances and Kant’s metaphysical realm of

⁴⁴⁸ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 32.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁵¹ See also Jonas, “Acting, Knowing, Thinking,” 41-2; Peter J. Steinberger, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Aug., 1990), 810; Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981), 121-23; Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: the Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), esp., 81-82.

⁴⁵² Arendt, “Thinking & Moral Considerations,” 431.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 424, n.8.

⁴⁵⁴ Paul Ricœur, “Action, Story and History: Re-reading *The Human Condition*” in *The Realm of Humanitas: Responses to the Writings of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 151.

ideas of God, human freedom and immortality of the soul—cannot be beheld or contemplated by thinking as if just *there*. Only in speech can thinking interact with the appearances that provoked it. On the other hand, its end-pole can also be named only symbolically as “the flying spark of fire between two flintstones.”⁴⁵⁵ In what follows I shall designate it by the symbol “Beyond” so as to relate it to a kindred symbol in the work of Eric Voegelin. It is a pole toward which the thinking act pushes out of its own inner principle or even, at times, experiences itself as being pulled. Hence it is “ineffable.”⁴⁵⁶ The Beyond exists in thinking’s experience of attraction beyond itself.

Its performative constitution precludes thinking being judged by its results any more than action; it is “resultless.”⁴⁵⁷ It is a mode of being, or more precisely, a mode of presencing thought-things, not a technique of deliberation or persuasion that can be submitted to rules of logic. It discloses its meaning “when we dissolve the term into the original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the first philosopher to use it.”⁴⁵⁸ In order to understand another’s thinking one must *participate* in the movement of thinking, not dissect it by external tools, for it yields no objective achievement, beholds nothing and aims to persuade none but the thinker himself. Arendt’s text is peppered with terms like “admiration,” “confirmation,” “affirmation,” and “love” to describe the movement of thinking.⁴⁵⁹ All thinking is a confession of a need to go beyond what one

⁴⁵⁵ Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research*, 101.

⁴⁵⁶ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 110.

⁴⁵⁷ Arendt, “Thinking & Moral Considerations,” 426.

⁴⁵⁸ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 104.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, esp. 151; 178.

sees and hears. As such, it needs to be understood, like action, as the *energeia* which generates its own *dynamis* “to keep it in reality.”⁴⁶⁰

Having established that thinking has much the same constitution as action, I now proceed to use Arendt’s understanding of thinking to rethink her understanding of action. Because she describes action in performative terms and thinking in both performative *and* metaphysical terms, I shall reassess her description of action in light of its analogy to thinking. I view both modes of being as ways of questing for meaning, *i.e.* as experiences, rather than as appearances tied down to her ontological analytic in *The Human Condition*. I suggest an understanding of action as a quest for meaning broadly oriented toward the public realm. This differs significantly from the aesthetical interpretations bound up with the amorality of action,⁴⁶¹ the non-sovereignty of the actor,⁴⁶² or the miraculous and contingent nature of beginnings.⁴⁶³ My interpretation shifts the emphasis from the extraordinary or miraculous beginnings of action to the whole of the experiential movement that is thinking and acting; and, consequently, from the ontology of appearance that articulates an ideal mode of being in the world to a hermeneutic of understanding human experience.

Thinking, Arendt tells us, “is a kind of desirous love,” an act in pursuit of “lovable things—beauty, wisdom, justice, and so on.”⁴⁶⁴ For instance, Euthyphro’s claim in Plato’s eponymous dialogue that he is pious inspires Socrates to ask, “What is piety?” In

⁴⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 205.

⁴⁶¹ Dana R. Villa, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 288.

⁴⁶² Bonnie Honig, “Arendt, Identity, and Difference,” *Political Theory*, vol., 16, no., (1988): 86.

⁴⁶³ Bonnie Honig, “Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic,” *The American Political Science Review*, vol., 85, no., 1 (Mar., 1991), 103; Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: the Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp.156-7.

⁴⁶⁴ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 179.

one register this is asked for its utility in the particular context, as Socrates tries to dissuade Euthyphro from prosecuting his own father.⁴⁶⁵ But the dialogue works in another register too—raising the question of piety in general transforms it into a cross between the particular and the universal. This makes the dialectical thought an exact analogue to action. The utilitarian purpose of the question does not preclude the desire it excites to know piety as such. Thinking is the formative relationship between the inquiring mind and the thought thing desired, excited by events in the world. Arendt does not deny that thinking has particular intentions, but she holds that to *understand* the meaning of a thought process requires participating in its formative tension.

The formative relationship that is thought gives direction to the act of thinking. As an attraction toward what is beyond, the relationship is “erotic” in the sense that Socrates (and Strauss) use the term. Augustine had taught Arendt that love is “a kind of motion, and all motion is toward something.”⁴⁶⁶ Thinking, then, like action, is the motion that *begins* from matters as they appear to us—we *see* a happy man or *perceive* a courageous deed. It moves *toward concepts*, such as happiness or courage as such, which are constitutive of our movement in the world, as they are “used to group together seen and manifest qualities and occurrences but nevertheless relating to something unseen.”⁴⁶⁷ The activity itself consists of questioning about the ultimate questions. Happiness “as such,” however, proves to be a “non-appearing measure,”⁴⁶⁸ although its meaning appears self-evident to common sense. Thinking has a *telos* beyond appearances and it

⁴⁶⁵ Plato, “Euthyphro,” *The Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992).

⁴⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed., Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9.

⁴⁶⁷ Arendt, “Thinking & Moral Considerations,” 429.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 429.

moves in a space that is part of the general space in which human beings move *qua* appearance.

Yet from the perspective of the quest for meaning action, too, reflects or parallels thinking's *end* in a non-appearing measure. Even Arendt's paradigmatic example of the man of action, Achilles, would not have carried out his heroic deeds had he not believed that others would give meaning to his action by telling his story.⁴⁶⁹ First Arendt tells us that "the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself,"⁴⁷⁰ then, that action "springs from [...] a principle [...] [which] [...] becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself."⁴⁷¹ Meaning is closely bound to the performative principle that constitutes human action. Actions are meaningful in a peculiar way: not (merely) because of their (particular) consequences but, because of their (general) principles. The excellence of Achilles consisted not in that he made the war easier for the Greeks by killing their scourge Hector. Rather, his venturing forth in the teeth of the prophecy of his death showed the Greeks the gap between glorious conduct as such and their actual performance. In the eyes of the observing Greeks, the Greek army was re-presented not as it was, but as it *ought to be*. His deed was immortal because it carried, in itself, the universal principle of glory unbound.

Just as with thinking, the principle that emerges with the act makes the act broadly *teleological*. The principle directs the action towards the public realm—whether it closes it down or renews it. One misunderstands Arendt's statement that "the end (*telos*) is not

⁴⁶⁹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 134.

⁴⁷⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 206.

⁴⁷¹ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" *Between Past and Future*, 152.

pursued but lies in the activity itself”⁴⁷² if one assumes she rejects a broad directedness to action. What is implicit in *The Human Condition* was explicated if not fully worked out in her posthumous “Introduction into Politics,” where she distinguished “ends” from “goals”⁴⁷³ of action. Ends are the direct aims of action while goals are “never anything more than the guidelines and directives by which we orient ourselves and which, as such, are never cast in stone.”⁴⁷⁴ The goals of action are never actually achieved, as they “go beyond or transcend what is done,” but they set the standard for judging an act “in the sense that every yardstick transcends what it has to measure.”⁴⁷⁵ Unfortunately, Arendt gave this point short shrift, perhaps intending to clarify it later (and later never came).

It would seem that the “goals” of “Introduction into Politics” are none other than the “principles” of *Between Past and Future*, where the principle “springs up” with the act and broadly directs it toward the judgment of others. Action calls for judgment to endow it with meaning; for example, an act that exhibits the principle of equality is one that affirms, enhances or inspires the state of isonomy or “no-rule”⁴⁷⁶ (which is not the same thing as achievement of a legal, social or economic measure extending equal rights in the modern sense). An instance of this kind, I believe, emphasizes the *gerere* (“to bear/see through”) dimension of action in the sense that it emphasizes the finishing of the enterprise. By contrast, principles such as honor or glory spur one’s peers to self-

⁴⁷² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 206.

⁴⁷³ The opaqueness of the text is further exacerbated by the problematic translation. In the original German text, Arendt distinguishes between ends (*Zweck*) and goal (*Ziel*). The meaning of *Ziel* in German is a great deal less direct than the English rendition of “goal.” I owe this point to Rieke Schäfer.

⁴⁷⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” *The Promise of Politics*, ed., Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 193.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁷⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 30.

display or enter the public realm, respectively, featuring the *agere* (“to set into motion/lead”) dimension.⁴⁷⁷ They stimulate others to begin acting. The opposite principles of fear or hatred dissuade them to venture forth in speech and deed, debilitating the public realm. In other words, the “directedness” of the act towards the judgment of others causes nothing, yet it inspires, evokes or evacuates the responses of others, thus thickening or thinning the public realm. The aesthetical readings of *The Human Condition* are thus augmented, not diminished, by viewing action from the standpoint of its performative quest for meaning that Arendt began to develop in *Between Past and Future*. Action is no longer only an extraordinary beginning but also world-affirming or world-denying. The broad directedness of action towards the world indicates the desire of the actor to display his action to the judgment of others. It thus binds up action with world and triggers the stories that augment its meaning in a way no actor can control.

At this juncture the analogy of thinking with action seems to suffer a setback. Action has a finite, objective quality which the infinite, aporetic, resultless activity of thinking lacks. Achilles kills Hector. The Greeks and Trojans behold the deed. Does not the locus of meaning in the act itself, and its directedness-toward-world which has an “object- or thing-character,”⁴⁷⁸ give a finality and a finitude to action that thinking cannot have?

And yet, from the standpoint of the quest for meaning, action does replicate thinking’s endless movement toward the non-appearing measure. We saw that the worldly end of action is to submit oneself to the judgment of others. The beauty of appearances is their criterion of judgment, the universality of which allows action to transcend its functional

⁴⁷⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

use or particular ends. Action is not to be judged by its functional success but “its adequacy or inadequacy to what it should look like.”⁴⁷⁹ The more an action transcends its thing-like character, the more meaningful it becomes; in short, the more it achieves permanence like the work of art.⁴⁸⁰ The act of judging a work of art, for example, has no natural end, for beauty supplies no objective yardstick, so the *meaning* generated by the finite performance is in principle endless.⁴⁸¹ To understand and therefore to give meaning to an act is to move beyond it in the judgments of others, in the stories and other acts it excites in an endless movement. So it is that the acts by which human beings quest for meaning achieve permanence and the actors become immortal. Just as world’s significance is not its object-hood, so action’s significance is not its finite ends.

A close analysis of the usage of “meaning” in *The Human Condition* reveals an odd imbalance resulting from Arendt’s anxiousness to shield action from metaphysical speculation. It is evident that meaning was essential for Arendt, yet in that work she never addressed it as an issue at any length. The term is mentioned 95 times in this work, yet the indexed entry, where meaningfulness becomes topical only once—as an explanation for the insufficiency, viz. meaninglessness of utility—is a gesture toward an unexpected quarter for aesthetic readings. Arendt notes that all societies judge in terms of some ideal that “can no longer be conceived as something needed in order to have something else; it simply defies questioning about its own use.”⁴⁸² This ideal stands beyond all intentions, acts, circumstances and contexts. It is the “non-appearing

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 152; 172-173.

⁴⁸¹ For Arendt, the act of judging an appearance requires distance and “the more important the sheer appearance of a thing is, the more distance it requires for its proper appreciation.” Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” *Between Past and Future*, 210.

⁴⁸² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 154.

measure” that makes life in common possible; otherwise, our intentions, acts and speeches would tear society apart, “[f]or an end, once it is attained, ceases to be an end and loses its capacity to guide and justify the choice of means, to organize and produce them.”⁴⁸³ Arendt abruptly stops here, to return to the problems of *homo faber*, but she reaffirms the significance of these considerations in her “Introduction into Politics” manuscript. There she names the ideal a “principle,” defining it as what “first [moves] human beings to act but [...] also the source of constant nourishment for their actions.”⁴⁸⁴ The ideal is at once strictly historical (being only in participation) and, most importantly, “non-appearing” in the sense that it cannot be described exhaustively.

Tying up all the strings of the argument, thinking is constitutive of human orientation, of human appearing in the world, insofar as it moves in the space between the sensual and its metaphysical Beyond. The concepts toward which thinking tends, but can never fully clarify, are those through the medium of which human beings choose and judge how to appear as actors. They constitute the “unseen measure” that “holds the limits of all things,”⁴⁸⁵ as Solon put it. The drive of actors for permanence means that the ideal act should be the work of art. What is a work of art, however, but a “thought [thing] whose source is in thought’s capacity to reify feelings into appearances for the world.”⁴⁸⁶ Thought and action pose the central problem facing political science: human orientation in reality, or the way human beings sense, understand and move in the world and among each other.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 154-155.

⁴⁸⁴ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” 195.

⁴⁸⁵ Arendt, “Thinking & Moral Considerations,” 430.

⁴⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167-168.

If thinking and acting are analogous modes of being *qua* experience *and* if thinking, like action, makes it possible for human beings to move in the world, *then* I can define experience as such as uncaused movement constituting its own principle with a broad *telos* in a non-appearing measure. It follows that human orientation in reality can be illumined in the terms metaphysics reserves for describing thinking. Arendt's oft-quoted assertion of "the absolute primacy of the world of appearances"⁴⁸⁷ lays the ground for a metaphysics that is not isolated from but dedicated to human experience.⁴⁸⁸ This metaphysics radically depends on plurality, *i.e.* experience of and with others. It does not deny the whole in which all appearing things become manifest, rather it calls man "to become aware of Being's all-pervasive presence in the world of appearances."⁴⁸⁹ The sentence "Being and Appearing coincide" on the very first page of *The Life of the Mind* does not negate being, only the realm apart wherein it is contemplated by professional thinkers. Being does not equal Appearance, it only coincides with it by not being found in a realm outside of it. The end of the two-world theory also ends the hoary, illusory dream of someday constructing a total metaphysical system that will subsume all possible experiencing. It is conceded that Arendt is suspicious of metaphysics and its propensity to eliminate the contingent nature of human existence in favor of a *realissimum* beyond existence.⁴⁹⁰ She steered clear of metaphysics when considering politics, and did not think a metaphysics redux was "very likely or even desirable."⁴⁹¹ Note, however, that the undesirability of it is less convincingly stated than the

⁴⁸⁷ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 109.

⁴⁸⁸ Only her friend, J. Glenn Gray grasped this direction of Arendt's thought. J. Glenn Gray, "The Winds of Thought," *Social Research*, vol., 44, no., 1 (Spring: 1997), 51-52.

⁴⁸⁹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 144.

⁴⁹⁰ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 12.

⁴⁹¹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 10.

likelihood. The project of an Arendtian metaphysics does not undermine her thought but augments it.

This metaphysics of experience may affront a discursive tradition that has either erred on the side of the foundationalist dream or of the peculiar overreaction that is its aesthetical antithesis. Any insistence on metaphysical thinking stands in tension with the role of experience as the beginning *and* end of thinking. But metaphysics must not be rejected just because of fallacies committed in the past. As Arendt put it, “each [fallacy has] its authentic root in some experience.”⁴⁹² We must understand experience not only in its miraculous beginning, but through to its “non-appearing” end “lest we stagger blindly among experiences that our bodily senses with their relative certainty of knowledge cannot guide us through.”⁴⁹³ In the world of practice “mind and body, thinking and sense experience, the invisible and the visible, belong together, are ‘made’ for each other, as it were.”⁴⁹⁴ Such a metaphysics cannot stand apart from experience for it has no realm apart from the human experience of reality in which to dwell. To stay faithful to its own constitutive tension, it must overcome dualistic terminology like sensual *versus* supersensual, visible *versus* invisible.

Political hermeneutics follows from the philosophical understanding of the nature of human experience. Arendt potentiated this by blazing a trail to an epistemology of the *vita activa* which befits this philosophical account. She did this by creatively re-appropriating Kant’s distinction of intellect or knowing (*Verstand*) from reason or

⁴⁹² Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” 306.

⁴⁹³ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 109.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

thinking (*Vernunft*).⁴⁹⁵ Knowing is activated by a thirst for knowledge or truth in the scientific understanding of the term. It wants to grasp what is given to the senses, and deals with evidence that is “unshakeable by argument.”⁴⁹⁶ It seeks the “irrefutable” and so results from logic or fact-finding. Its opposites are error and ignorance. The thinking process, however, does not resemble this at all. It is activated by the human need to think beyond what is or can be known—to think or speculate about the sources of knowing. It is a quest for *meaning* or *understanding* rather than *scientific truth* or *explanation*. Its opposites are illusion and opinion. It is concerned with ideas about God, freedom, immortality. Crucially for Arendt, Kant had created a possibility for meaning by liberating it from cognition and the crude positivisms it implies. He did not follow through all the consequences of the possibility, thinking mistakenly that he had cleared room for faith. The Idealists after him rejected the sterile dogmatism of the past yet demanded the impossible in recompense: an impossible certainty.⁴⁹⁷ The Kantian opening towards meaning was closed.

Taking up Kant’s vision, Arendt transformed his distinction between thinking and cognition into one between truth and meaning, the constitutive relationship of human orientation in the world.⁴⁹⁸ In a manner of speaking, she makes metaphysics immanent in the world by making the quest for meaning constitutive of man’s relationship with it. Truth belongs to the evidence of the senses and has an objective quality that is

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 57-65.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 63-64.

⁴⁹⁸ Arendt says that “Kant remained unaware of the fact that man’s need to reflect encompasses nearly everything that happens to him” Hannah Arendt, “Thinking” manuscript, quoted by Jonas, “Acting, Knowing, Thinking” 36.

“unshakeable by argument and replaceable only by other evidence.”⁴⁹⁹ The quest for meaning looks beyond factual truths, inquiring into the meaning of their existence. Conversely, factual truths would not have been sought out but for the quest for meaning. The two faculties yield one another: as Jonas says, “the quest for meaning encompasses both.”⁵⁰⁰ The endless interplay between them constitutes the way man understands and deals with reality. Unfortunately, Arendt neglected to develop this relationship fully. Nevertheless, what is extant provides an epistemic basis for the activity of understanding politics, as I develop in the section below.

I now formulate the *problématique* of a hermeneutic of political events in four directions which Arendt anticipated but did not fully explore. Firstly, her dualistic language of “the seen” and the “unseen,” or the “sensual” vs. the “supersensual” must be superseded by one symbol designating the whole of which man is a part. The supersensual exists only through the sensual and can only be accessed through it: “[t]he world of appearances is *prior* to whatever region the philosopher may *choose* as his ‘true’ home.”⁵⁰¹ This “home” proves to be no home at all, but the illumination of that conceptual space which human beings use uncritically when orienting themselves in the world. It has foundations which it cannot found in experience, and a roof top which it cannot climb in the “non-appearing measure”. It is equally “true that once the suprasensual realm is discarded, its opposite, the world of appearances [...] is also annihilated.”⁵⁰² I shall suggest using the concept *reality* as a symbol for the single whole in which human

⁴⁹⁹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 57.

⁵⁰⁰ Jonas, “Acting, Knowing, Thinking,” 36.

⁵⁰¹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 23.

⁵⁰² Arendt, “Thinking & Moral Considerations,” 420.

beings participate.⁵⁰³ For a political hermeneutic it is important to bear in mind that Arendtian political concepts like natality, action and freedom, which she strictly “distinguished from metaphysical thought”,⁵⁰⁴ must be made historically transparent to be glimpsed at all; only in such a context can their true meaning be distinguished. This means they cannot be defined exhaustively, which would require transcending the practice in which they have meaning. A metaphysics of experience knows that context comprehends the comprehending mind. Its terms therefore illumine reality from within rather than try to cognize from without.

Secondly, the constitutive tension of the new metaphysics of experience as a formative movement between beginning something new and the Beyond to which the beginning is directed reflects Arendt’s phenomenological return to experience. Speaking about the movement beyond what appears, Arendt says that its “truth—*a-lētheia*, that which is disclosed (Heidegger)—can be conceived only as another ‘appearance,’ another phenomenon.”⁵⁰⁵ The truth is not sitting *there* awaiting the metaphysician’s gaze, yet this is no license to reduce reality to the flat perspectivism of *dokei moi*⁵⁰⁶ in the way Arendt is often misunderstood. The comprehending mind does not just report the actors’ speeches and deeds but goes beyond them toward the contextual whole which is only glimpsed in speeches, relating the partial *doxai* to that non-appearing whole towards which understanding moves. If human beings—the “question-asking beings”⁵⁰⁷ about

⁵⁰³ This is not against Arendt for, as she puts it, “[t]here are not two worlds because metaphor unites them” but it is meant to note the fluidity of the quest without the ontological baggage of the world concept. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 110.

⁵⁰⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

⁵⁰⁵ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 23-24.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

what is not present—disclose their trajectory beyond the given, science cannot truncate its reflection to that which is given immediately to the senses.

Thirdly, the quest for meaning as a performative movement beyond what appears lends a ground to human existence. While Arendt expends most of her energies disproving the old metaphysical view that this ground is a higher reality, or that it can be *comprehended*, she nevertheless trusts experience enough to “conclude that there may indeed exist a fundamental ground behind an appearing world, but that this ground’s chief and even sole significance lies in its effects.”⁵⁰⁸ Human beings are neither limitless creativity nor slaves of the given, but creative participators in the given through acts that move beyond it. Arendt’s concern to affirm contingency and appearance cannot ultimately bend her thought to accept her intentions fully. Her thought points beyond her intentions, in areas which only seem to subvert them.

Fourthly and finally, the constitutive tension in which human beings move makes the problem of how they apprehend reality and their own movement in it as *the* question facing *political* science. We stabilize meaning and are able to move in it through the narratives that immortalize the world by endowing it with meaningful depth. For Arendt, meaningful language is rooted in metaphor. *All* philosophical language is metaphorical⁵⁰⁹ because it gives its account of thought’s movement among its objects *via* analogies with the sensual world from which alone language arises. The thought-thing is unimaginable, hence unthinkable and unreal, unless its reality is established *via* metaphorical analogy with images in the sensual world. Philosophical language, then, is

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 102.

entirely “symbolic”: its true meaning may be disclosed only experientially, “when we dissolve the term into the original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the first philosopher to use it.”⁵¹⁰ But the language of politics is also symbolic insofar as it is meaningful language. Of course, it cannot be wholly symbolic because a political being moves in the world of objects and intentions which have a tangible, cognitive status. Movement in the world entails cognition and intentionality. It must always be borne in mind, however, that politics is more than intentionality and cognition. Political language shares the symbolism of philosophical language. An Arendtian hermeneutic of political events should be a hermeneutic of symbols.

At the beginning of this section I staked out the space for a new reading of Arendt somewhere in between the Aristotelian and Nietzschean readings by turning away from her preoccupation with instrumental reason toward the quest for meaning as the guidepost for rethinking appearance and thinking as experience simply. My argument moved from the primacy of action in *The Human Condition* to the primacy of the quest for meaning in all human reality that encompasses both the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. With that in mind, I now turn to the science.

5.2. The Hermeneutics of the Quest: Arendt and the Science of Politics

Hannah Arendt wrote that political science must “pursue the quest for meaning,”⁵¹¹ *i.e.* interpret human experience. She also wrote that political science must carry out its task experientially.⁵¹² The *what* of political science is thus undisputed among her readers.

⁵¹⁰ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 104.

⁵¹¹ Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 322.

⁵¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian, 1968), viii.

The *how* remains a problem. Her readers agree that she did not mean political science is to formulate universal laws explaining particular events, or to stand detached from the phenomena the better to observe them, or to predict and control human affairs. They also agree on what the beginning of political science should look like: it should approach events as phenomena; understand them from the inside not explain them from the outside; and seek impartiality not objectivity. Drawing on the reflections on human experience and epistemology from the previous section, this section joins the ongoing scholarly debate on what an Arendtian political science ought to be.

First I recover Arendt's concept of understanding as a dialectical movement from "preliminary" to "true" understanding. Understanding is not as pure an experience as thought or action. Arendt is far too concerned about political truths to say anything so *playful* about so serious an activity. Thus, she gives to understanding a status in-between the quests for meaning (experience) and for knowledge (science). As noted previously, the dialectic between meaning and knowledge defines human orientation in reality. This allows us to think of understanding as an experiential activity. Second, I review the secondary literature which compares Arendt's "method" to story-telling critically comparing it to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (hereinafter *The Origins*). While the literature tells us much about the peculiarities of her method, it has overlooked how the illumination of story-telling is rational, *i.e* the difference between Arendt and a story-teller. To supply that defect, I shall argue that understanding is experiential and participatory. It is experiential because it results from making sense of experience and from trusting the experiences of the inquiring scholar. It is participatory in being a questioning movement of the speeches and deeds of an event that goes beyond them

toward the meaning that they point to. Arendt expressly addressed the former but only hinted at the latter but it is the latter that supplies the answer to the defect. By critically comparing *The Origins* to Strauss's reading of Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War*, I shall interpret what Arendt is about. I show that she outdoes herself in those most Thucydidean moments when she manages to abstract from the speeches and deeds of the event in quest of their meaning. Then she reveals the phenomenon to be something other than what it seemed historically. Yet she also undoes herself at her most un-Thucydidean moments, as when she regards the totalitarian drama as little more than the by-product of the advent of non-experience—the mass or “the blob”⁵¹³—a giant abstract vortex swallowing up both victims and partisans in its unreality. Consequently, Arendt has been blamed for the aura of fatality in her account. Third and finally, I shall reconstruct the movement of understanding conceptually. I show that it comes to resemble thinking as the inquiring scholar moves from narrative reconstruction of the event through the sources to *think about* the meaning of the sources beyond *them*. This proceeding has a paradoxical structure: understanding must stay faithful to the sources while simultaneously going beyond them. Understanding an event requires its reconstitution by way of the movement of the scholar's own reason *through* the sources. This is conceptual at heart, though most amenable to presentation in narrative form. The “reasons” the scholar finds for the event, such as the rise of “superfluity” in *The Origins*, are no reasons at all; they caused no one to do anything. They are, however, what reason uncovers as the sources that illumine the event through its narrative reconstitution—its “principles”. The participation of the movement of understanding in

⁵¹³ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

the event casts it anew. Insofar as it abstracts, this movement of understanding is, at one and the same time, performative and rational.

Arendt lays out her view of understanding in her essay “Understanding and Politics,” where she tells us it is the “unending activity” by which “we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality.”⁵¹⁴ Translated into her Kantian epistemology, understanding is what fits knowledge into its worldly context. It both “precedes and succeeds knowledge,”⁵¹⁵ and is what makes knowledge meaningful. From this standpoint, understanding functions like common sense.⁵¹⁶ If action is the specifically human form of movement in reality to be distinguished from behavior, and speech is the specifically human form of communication to be distinguished from “signs and sounds”,⁵¹⁷ understanding is the specifically human form of being in the world to be distinguished from cognition. Hence, understanding is not to be confused with a stock of knowledge, but is the unique way individuals negotiate the web of meaning in which they are born in order to assert their equality with and distinctness from others.

Understanding being an act, Arendt indicates the horizons within which it moves. Like thought it moves between two poles, “preliminary” and “true” understanding. Its beginning is less lucid than thought, for it is uncritical, but its end is less ephemeral than thought, for it illuminates an event rather than thought-things. Preliminary understanding precedes any reflective formulation of the relationship of man to the world,

⁵¹⁴ Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 308.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 311.

⁵¹⁶ Sandra K. Hinchman, “Common Sense & Barbarism in the Theory of Hannah Arendt,” *Polity*, vol., 17, no., 2 (Winter, 1984), 324.

⁵¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

corresponding to Strauss's "common sense"⁵¹⁸ or "unreflective prudence." It comes with being born in the world and follows uncritically from common opinion (*doxa*). True understanding is the goal of scientific inquiry into a political event. Insofar as true understanding is a temporary cessation of activity, it approaches the epistemic status of cognitive knowledge—it is *there*, on paper, finite and immobile.

Arendt accents understanding's nature as an act at the expense of its results or products, saying it "never produces unequivocal results."⁵¹⁹ The movement from preliminary to true understanding is dialectical. It does not invalidate the intimations of preliminary understanding but sharpens and deepens them. The movement is actuated when preliminary understanding is exposed as inadequate, and ends by subsuming and reordering preliminary in true understanding. True understanding then is a *critical differentiation* from preliminary understanding. Taking totalitarianism for example, preliminary understanding recognizes its radical newness. Hence it reacts in horror and marshals untold resources in the struggle against it. But because it is unreflective, it makes do with older concepts to justify its horror, explaining totalitarianism through old-fashioned lust for power or past injustices. Its explanation glosses over the experiential cognizance of newness, subsuming it under the familiar.⁵²⁰ True understanding begins at the moment it is recognized that preliminary understanding cannot name the newness—or, the *appearance*—of the event. If the movement toward true rejects preliminary

⁵¹⁸ For Arendt's use of "preliminary understanding" see her "Understanding and Politics," 311. I do not discard the term "preliminary understanding" in favor of "common sense," because for Arendt common sense is the Kantian sense "common to all [...] a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account [...] of the mode of representation of all other men." Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 70-72.

⁵¹⁹ Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 307.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 312-313.

understanding as a whole, it descends into methodological obtuseness, as by construing the event cognitively, or seeking ulterior motives behind it.⁵²¹ Arendt calls this movement from preliminary to true understanding critical thinking. Her description of its dialectic corresponds to Strauss's reading of the dialectical movement of Thucydides's thought.

This reconstruction of Arendt's take on understanding brings us to a temporary *impasse*. On the one hand, she treats understanding like thinking. Understanding is an open-ended activity sharing the experiential nature of thinking. In the same existential terms she calls both of them "natural light" and "illumination."⁵²² More than a hint of similarity is discernible in her description of the Socratic *dialegesthai*: "dialectic brings forth truth *not* by destroying *doxa* or opinion, but on the contrary reveals *doxa* in its own truthfulness."⁵²³ On the other hand, Arendt maintains her old dichotomy between thinking and the world of appearances. Thus, she tells us that understanding deepens preliminary insights, while thinking breaks from common or preliminary understanding and endangers it. Understanding augments *doxa*, but the Socratic dialectic left "many of his listeners [...] not with a more truthful opinion, but with no opinion at all."⁵²⁴ Understanding is a critical immersion in the world of appearances, while thinking is a turn away from them. Understanding must deal with the stubborn facts of the event, while thinking moves in its own freely constituted path. Understanding is heightened awareness of the world, while thinking is manifested in the world only as absent-

⁵²¹ For an example, see Arendt's criticism of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* in Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Sociology," *Essays in Understanding*, 29-40.

⁵²² Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 319; 326, n.17.

⁵²³ Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research*, vol., 57, no., 1 (Spring: 1990), 81.

⁵²⁴ Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 90-91.

mindedness. Although “equivocal,” it is not “resultless” like thinking. It seems that understanding stands *in-between* thought as pure act whose meaning is performatively revealed, and knowledge or truth the meaning of which it must reveal. I take up the status of understanding in the third part of this section, where I reconstruct the movement of understanding in light of the experience of thinking we have elucidated in the previous section.

I turn now to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to reconstruct the activity of understanding through example. This book was chosen for two reasons: it has sparked the most methodological debate, and its competitor *On Revolution* was analyzed in Chapter Four. I shall review other accounts of what Arendt is about methodologically first, and then formulate my own account. I shall challenge the literature that argues for a narrative or story-telling Arendtian method by showing that, while congruent with the experientiality of understanding,⁵²⁵ it says too little about why understanding is *rational*. I show that understanding is rational when it abstracts from the materials of the event and approximates thinking. This view of the hermeneutic of politics raises the question of going beyond the materials, which Eric Voegelin answered.

The literature on the “method” of Hannah Arendt generally echoes Benhabib’s call for political theory as “storytelling.”⁵²⁶ Lisa Disch and Seyla Benhabib may be its strongest

⁵²⁵ See Ernst Vollrath, “Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking,” *Social Research*, vol., 44, no., 1 (Spring 1977): 160-82; Seyla Benhabib, “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative,” *Social Research* vol., 57, no., 1 (1990): 167-96; David Luban, “Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Theory,” in Lewis Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds., *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994): 79-110; *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, eds., Gisela T. Kaplan and Clive S. Kessler (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989), and; Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

⁵²⁶ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 87.

representatives. Both do justice to Arendt's own sense of political science as an experiential alternative to crude objectivism. Disch's elucidation of Arendt's creative appropriation of Kant's concept of "taste" affirms the epistemic validity of her impartiality, revealing a way of understanding politics that is neither disengaged rationality nor empathy. Her reading reveals how to *begin* such efforts at understanding because it elucidates the phenomenal nature of the object of analysis. Elucidation of the nature of Arendtian impartiality, however, reveals little about *how* the scholar arrives at impartial judgments. At stake is the the dialectical movement of understanding within the event. The fact remains that no amount of "telling yourself the multiple stories of a situation from the plurality of conflicting perspectives that constitute it"⁵²⁷ can explain Arendt's tremendous insights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Whose stories enabled Arendt to see the essence of totalitarianism in the transformation of human beings into a bundle of reactions through ideological indoctrination and absolute terror? Or that the totalitarian movement resembles a perpetual-motion machine that falls apart the moment the movement stops?⁵²⁸ No looking through the multiplicity of viewpoints of those who ideated, implemented or suffered the nightmare could arrive at such conclusions, as they are *abstract*. They go well beyond anything contained in the sources. It is Arendt, not Hitler, Stalin nor any of their victims, nor all the participants taken together, who could tell us definitively what totalitarianism is.

Benhabib's reading goes farther in recovering the movement of understanding, while at the same time her preoccupation with "storytelling" misses the radical implications of

⁵²⁷ Lisa J. Disch, "More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory*, vol., 21, no., 4 (Nov., 1993), 686.

⁵²⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 306; 363.

Arendt's argument. Her view of the need for a "fragmentary historiography,"⁵²⁹ which looks for moments of rupture to recover meaning, allows Benhabib to read *The Origins* in a way most faithful to the movement of Arendt's thought from its heart in the last chapter on "Ideology and Terror" backwards to the historical moments that eventually crystallized in totalitarianism. Arendt's perspective on history is recovered. It becomes the space where understanding moves in the quest to create standards of its own for making sense of the radically new. Yet the abstraction lying at the heart of Arendt's understanding is left hidden. What does it mean for political theory to recover the "pearls of past experience"⁵³⁰ so to re-illumine the present? What distinguishes an imaginative storyteller from a scholar seeking to understand the story?

Arendt called her approach to the study of politics Thucydidean.⁵³¹ Specifically, she defined the endpoint of the act of understanding equivalently to the umpire position Strauss pointed to in Chapter Three. Thucydides, says Arendt, "kept himself aloof, and quite consciously so, from involvement with the events themselves." Yet his withdrawal "was much more limited"⁵³² than Archimedes's, who is for her the archetype of the natural scientist. Her words commending Thucydides are few but wholly congruent with Strauss's much wider analysis. I shall thus compare Arendt's work on totalitarianism with the Straussian analysis of Thucydides the better to illumine the movement of her thought. I show that, like Thucydides, Arendt moves from her preliminary understanding

⁵²⁹ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, x.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵³¹ Arendt, "Archimedian [sic] Point," 2. Copy of transcript of a lecture for the University of Michigan College of Engineers, 1968 made available to the author by the Hannah Arendt Archiv of the Hannah Arendt Centre, Universität Carl von Ossietzky, Oldenburg. See also Disch, "More Truth than Fact," 680-681.

⁵³² Arendt, "Archimedian Point," 2.

in a way that parallels the free movement of thinking, except that it is no longer memory (as to thinking) or common sense (as to action), but history that provides material for understanding. As thinking moves beyond towards the “non-appearing measure” that it constitutes in flight, so Arendt’s understanding, moving within the totalitarian event to illuminate it, discovers that it must move beyond the speeches and deeds that constitute the event in history, to the principles they point to. This questioning move beyond the sources always strives to remain within the sources, even while abstracting from them. What Benhabib designates “fragmentary historiography” stands revealed as the use of history to illumine concepts that the movement beyond the materials discovers. Understanding uses history like thinking uses the visible world and memory—to provide analogies for its own movement. Fragmentary historiography is not an intentional search for moments of “rupture, displacement and dislocation.”⁵³³ Rather, it is a conceptual movement beyond the event’s historical boundaries that is inherent in the movement of understanding. This is the reason why in *The Origins* “the connections between the sections are not explicit and the volume as a whole is characterized more by disjuncture than progression.”⁵³⁴ Past history is brought to life to serve understanding and not for its own sake. It is a *present* past. The upshot is that the meaning of the event is transformed far beyond what a mere history or description of the event can do.

Arendt holds to her preliminary understanding of the phenomenon even as she begins the effort to understand it.⁵³⁵ Her abhorrence is the lodestar of her scholarship. At this level she is entirely Thucydidean: she will make transparent this preliminary

⁵³³ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, xi.

⁵³⁴ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41.

⁵³⁵ Hannah Arendt, “A Reply,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 15, no., 1 (January, 1953), 77.

understanding at a new equilibrium that “[prepares] a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart which perhaps will come into free play only after the battle is won.”⁵³⁶ The effort requires openness to extend one’s thinking beyond what merely seems to be the case in the event.

Her path to more luminous understanding, however, is blocked by the nature of this particular phenomenon. Totalitarianism is the experience of annihilating experience.⁵³⁷ As one moves in space away from the phenomenon’s core site (the concentration camp) toward the free world; or back in time from the rise of the movements toward the historical moments that crystallized⁵³⁸ into them, the sense of reality heightens as the freedom underlying existence becomes more present. Contrariwise, there is also a sense of reality seeping out of the account, as civilization devolves into masses, then mobs; common sense is supplanted by ideology; parvenus are transformed into pariahs; and politics is supplanted by brute force. Not only does she write about something she “felt engaged to destroy,”⁵³⁹ she is also faced with a phenomenon that increasingly fails to resemble events which are “miraculous,” hence free by nature. The phenomenon’s repulsion redoubles Arendt’s difficulty: a dramatic representation of it might well legitimize the *dramatis personae*. In such a case, the resources for preparing “the human heart and mind” are thin indeed—only a grim determination to understand the calamity in its unexpected newness can instigate the effort.

⁵³⁶ Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 310.

⁵³⁷ Arendt, *Origins*, 308.

⁵³⁸ Hannah Arendt, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding,” *Essays in Understanding*.

⁵³⁹ Arendt, “A Reply,” *The Review of Politics*, 77.

The differences between Arendt and Thucydides begin to come into view here. The surreality of totalitarian movements together with their shocking deeds precluded dramatic treatment for Arendt. Whilst Thucydides viewed the Peloponnesian War as a strictly political affair and tried to reconstruct its drama the better to draw nuanced judgments, Arendt's account concentrates on the historical and social situation that gave rise to totalitarianism. In Thucydides, the event unfolds and its truth is revealed in its movement. In Arendt, the event roars menacingly in the offing. For Thucydides the war is a break with what went before it, whereas Arendt's totalitarianism deeply depends on its originating moments. Thucydides shows this break by elucidating the war's *dynamis*—what made it worth studying in itself, but Arendt's totalitarianism is merely one potent instance of the modern drive to absolute domination. Doubts, then, remain about the appropriateness of the unit of study. Finally, in Thucydides the justice of the acts and the often blinkered view of the participants is at issue; in Arendt the problems are far graver, far more sociological.

Arendt is weakest precisely at her most un-Thucydidean. She does not consider the irreducibly worldly nature of the event, firstly; and secondly, her book reads like a treatise on sociology, not politics. Carole E. Adams has identified some of the problems on the first score. For Arendt the slide of classes into masses paved the way for totalitarianism; however, this is not factually true, especially in the Germany of the 1920s, where folk were well-organized on the basis of class and occupation.⁵⁴⁰ More importantly, nothing unique or specific about Hitler's rise to power is found in her

⁵⁴⁰ Carole E. Adams, "Hannah Arendt and the Historian: Nazism and the New Order," in *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, eds. Gisela T. Kaplan and Clive S. Kessler (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 34-5.

account: the Nazis made no concrete promises, did not act in the post-Versailles reality, and addressed no socio-economic needs. As a result, “[t]he image Arendt creates is of an abstract entity in which all human beings are caught up, whether victims or executioners, in an inexorable process defined by ideology, leading to anti-utilitarian goals and ultimately to human destruction.”⁵⁴¹ The leading actors in the totalitarian drama do not reveal themselves in speeches and deeds, for they are no actors at all, but vessels of the *Zeitgeist* who half-unconsciously set in motion the nightmare. There is no *who* behind the speeches, laws, and anti-utilitarian actions.

The “aura of fatality”⁵⁴² haunting Arendt’s account spills over beyond the drama to the historical accounts of its originating moments. Her treatment of the pre-totalitarian past abounds with the law of nature-like generalities she so vehemently condemned elsewhere. She will “discover the hidden mechanics”⁵⁴³ that precipitated the catastrophe, which gained its all-encompassing status not because of the world war and the atrocities of the totalitarians, for then something could be pointed out and analyzed objectively. Instead, thanks to the totalitarian catastrophe we are able to diagnose the greater catastrophe of our times.⁵⁴⁴ The language of generalization pervades all, mercifully punctuated by keen insights into particular men or events such as the Dreyfus Affair, Benjamin Disraeli or Cecil Rhodes. Here Arendt is at her farthest from Thucydides—not power, but powerlessness is the red thread of her account.

⁵⁴¹ Adams, “Hannah Arendt and the Historian,” in *Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, 36.

⁵⁴² Eric Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 15, no. 1 (January, 1953), 73.

⁵⁴³ Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii.

⁵⁴⁴ “[...] without the fictitious world of totalitarian movements, in which with unparalleled clarity the essential uncertainties of our time have been spelled out, we might have been driven to our doom without ever becoming aware of what has been happening.” Arendt, *The Origins*, viii.

Arendt herself called the narrative strategy of her book “unfortunate”: her thinking moves from the core of the event backwards in time. Once she finds the mass superfluousness in the totalitarian reality, her mind works its way back in history looking for its meaning in analogous situations.⁵⁴⁵ Only once the abstraction occurs in the third part can the two earlier parts gain their significance. As Arendt says, “[t]his essence, in my opinion, did not exist before it had come into being.”⁵⁴⁶ The other two parts are not the story of the rise of superfluousness or anti-Semitism, but a reservoir of materials, experiences, events and discourses to elucidate by analogy what already had been found meaningful within the event. The past comes to be in the movement of understanding through the event although it is presented in the opposite direction. The past serves understanding just as the sensory world serves the experience of thinking.⁵⁴⁷ Arendt herself saw this less clearly, for she thought she could narrate the disparate moments which crystallized in the new phenomenon. This only increases the “aura of fatality,” which is exacerbated by the chronological presentation.

By contrast, Arendt is most like Thucydides when abstracting from the sources the “essence” of the phenomenon. Here the achievement of *The Origins* is conspicuous. Totalitarianism is revealed in its depth of meaning to function through mechanisms

⁵⁴⁵ Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” n.12, 325; Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, 64. If we read it as Arendt unfortunately presented the narrative, then the line of explanation leads from the past to the present with fatal certainty. It is the story of steady but certain social decomposition which in the end required only a mediocre World War I corporal to bring to its ‘logical’ conclusion. However, this chronological direction to the line of meaning breaks down under the weight of its own inconsistencies. Firstly, it is simply not true that Germany was a mass society in the 1920s. Secondly, the fatality of account denies the possibility that totalitarianism was an event. Thirdly, the account relegates any particulars which by definition are the stuff of an event to a merely illustrative role.

⁵⁴⁶ Arendt, “A Reply to Eric Voegelin,” *Essays in Understanding*, 405.

⁵⁴⁷ When describing why all philosophical language is metaphorical, Arendt notes that the function of metaphor is “turning the mind back to the sensory world in order to illuminate the mind’s non-sensory experiences for which there are no words.” Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 106.

invisible to the eyes of its sufferers, and from principles hidden to the consciousness of its adherents.⁵⁴⁸ World-historical moments which seem unrelated to totalitarianism are intimately intertwined with it.⁵⁴⁹ The heart of the book, where she “unconceals” the essence of totalitarianism in just two pages, is radically not determined by the sources supposed to constitute the event, for Arendt’s thinking moved *beyond* them to unconceal the event as the motive to render man a bundle of reactions through the twin tools of ideological indoctrination and absolute terror. Neither tool is what it *seems*: indoctrination is not propaganda and terror is not meant to instill fear. None of the actors intended to use them for the exact reason Arendt adumbrates, although some may have glimpsed this use. Instead, indoctrination and terror became the means enabling the event—the totalitarian movement—to hive itself off from history by stamping out experience, cutting off the totalitarian space from reality, and reducing men to laboratory specimens.⁵⁵⁰ Both emerge from a “concealed” existential motive to drive out practice and reduce “world” to a blueprint. Thus the concentration camp is revealed to be a representative instance of the totalitarian regime which shows the totalitarian reality free from any historical or contextual “impurities” *as a consequence* of the abstraction.

The comparison of Arendt and Thucydides shows what each does best. Thucydides *reconstitutes* the event dramatically, improvising the speeches not merely for narrative effect as Strauss points out, but to seek the reasons for the event. These reasons *unfold*

⁵⁴⁸ For example, while adherents of the totalitarian movements may see terror as a necessary tool to prosecute the class struggle or the enemies of the movement, in Arendt’s analysis terror is transformed from a means (suppression of opposition) to an inner principle of the movement.

⁵⁴⁹ Such disparate events as the growth of the bureaucratic nation state in France, or the principles inherent in industrial growth brought about the superfluity which made possible the concentration camps (the victims) as well as the mass support “neither from ignorance nor from brainwashing” of totalitarian movements. “Preface to Part Three: Totalitarianism,” Arendt, *The Origins*, xxiii.

⁵⁵⁰ See Arendt, *The Origins* 341, 44, 438-9.

with the narrative. Arendt, heedless of this principle, never restages the event in imagination. Having omitted to establish its eventfulness, her account is exposed to the charge that totalitarianism may not be unique at all.⁵⁵¹ Thus, her book is often mistaken for a sociological analysis of totalitarianism. By contrast, Thucydides's restaging of the event leaves the reader in no doubt as to the appropriateness of studying this occurrence in itself. The Peloponnesian War can be an object of study *because* it is a whole. This cannot be known *a priori* but only after its unity emerges from its imaginative reconstitution. The actual war was not harmonious; it was merely bloody. The participants had no idea they were living a single event—they distinguished the ten years' war of 431-21 from the peace that followed and from the Ionian war of 414-404 BC. The war as an event is revealed to be joined-up through the symbol that the inquiring mind constructs out of the re-imagined interplay between its actors: *kinesis* (movement or upheaval). Arendt had to show "how all the particular things in the world and every particular deed in the realm of human affairs fit together and produce a harmony, which itself is not given to sense perceptions."⁵⁵² But by omitting to restage the event, she leaves the joinedness hidden to her readers, and thus sociological readings keep cropping up.

The aura of fatality stems from Arendt's unwillingness to take the eventfulness of totalitarianism seriously. The Peloponnesian War is a concrete universal "[containing]

⁵⁵¹ Adams, *Hannah Arendt and the Historian*, 41. See also Voegelin, "Concluding Remark," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 15, no. 1 (January, 1953), 85

⁵⁵² Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 133.

the whole meaning;”⁵⁵³ totalitarianism for Arendt has representative validity for the modern age.⁵⁵⁴ It is an example that illuminates a whole, rather than a whole itself.

Thucydides did take the war’s eventfulness seriously, and thus stayed consistent all throughout. His inquiry into the reasons why Greece imploded moves from “manifest” to “immanifest” and so ultimately true causes; in this his instruction becomes “silent.” As he inverts the chronology, he enables the reader to see the true causes without stating them bluntly, for they are no causes in any causal sense. As he nears the true causes, he retreats farther from the factual event. Thus, his ellipticalness about the true causes, lest they may be mistaken for what they are not: mechanisms of the event instead of the principles that they are. Arendt by contrast, who is much more modern in her mode of explanation, states her causes bluntly and definitely. But as they are not causes at all, as Arendt knows perfectly well, her story comes to resemble that of an inexorable fatalism in whose ontological grip all human beings are powerless. The actors in the totalitarian drama are caused to behave by a context, an environment, or far-distant acts which deprive them of the possibility of action.

The lack of unity in Arendt’s narrative undermines her goal of preparing the resources of the heart against the folly of disorder. This resourcefulness must be located within the concrete situation in which it was undermined, the drama of the rise and fall of totalitarianism. How this might be achieved in an account of totalitarianism is hinted in the dramatic nature of the event: “you always need at least two tones to produce a

⁵⁵³ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 56.

⁵⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Origins*, viii.

harmonious sound.”⁵⁵⁵ Totalitarianism provoked its own nemesis, a resistance of individuals, groups, societies, and eventually, the United Nations. It is a part but not the whole of order. The resourcefulness of the heart, then, is prepared by conceptually restaging the dialectical struggle similarly to Thucydides’s abstract interplay between the Spartan and the Athenian “spirits.” What was it about modern order that made it at once superior and susceptible to the totalitarian debacle? Arendt hinted at it when she replied to Voegelin, “liberals are clearly not totalitarians.”⁵⁵⁶ To prepare the resources of the heart, Arendt would perhaps have to restage the dramatic encounter between domination and resistance and not give no account of the slow, malignant growth of a tumor that only the doctor—the Archimedean scholar—can remove.

To recapitulate, the failure of the secondary literature on Arendt’s method to distinguish firmly between story-telling and political science reflects Arendt’s own lack of clarity. The existentialist language she uses to describe “thinking” and “understanding” leaves no doubt of the experiential nature of the quest for meaning. This has raised concerns among theorists that these activities are not rational.⁵⁵⁷ On the other hand, her emphasis on contingency, story-telling and a sense that is experience is its own justification—a view Arendt herself did not subscribe to—have made her a favorite of post-modern readers. Yet she does claim repeatedly that the experiential quest is rational.⁵⁵⁸ What is the nature of a reason whose essence is *logos* not *theoria*, whose language is symbolic and metaphorical not strictly logical, which takes flight rather than deliberately initiated,

⁵⁵⁵ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 183.

⁵⁵⁶ Arendt, “A Reply,” 80.

⁵⁵⁷ Sheldon Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political,” *Salmagundi*, 60 (1983): 3-19; Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: the Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 48.

⁵⁵⁸ Arendt “Truth and Politics,” *Between Past and Future*, 231; Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 57-65.

and which must be experienced in order to be understood? How does it differ from a flight of fancy or a dream state with eyes wide open or a poetic incantation? Arendt never tells us completely, but her thinking allows us to outline some of the principles of this reason.

Understanding is rational because its ends are like the ends of reason or thinking. By bringing together what Arendt says about understanding and what she wrote in *The Origins*, we may infer that understanding is the *activity* that arises from the scholar's *participation* in a phenomenon she already knows. It is constituted *experientially* rather than by a technique. Understanding cannot by contemplating the movement comprehend it, nor, by stepping outside it, contemplate reality: "this does not mean that [the historian] must or can understand the nature of this light itself."⁵⁵⁹ Here it is necessary to go beyond Arendt by asking: If reason is movement and all movement is a movement toward something, what does understanding move toward? Understanding is the act of a questioning participation in a phenomenon one already knows in a preliminary sense, toward the absolute reason for the event it seeks to understand. Like thinking, understanding seeks finality, but also like thinking, this finality is denied to it, in that the nature of the finality—absolute reason, or principle—is not a reason in the causal sense. Understanding seeks a closure that is denied to it by the events *qua* phenomena it seeks to explain. A gap therefore subsists in the translation from phenomena to reason, which forever calls on the reason of others to interpret it. Practice is always already ahead of reason. It leaves behind for reason's inspection the results of the act but not action itself.

⁵⁵⁹ Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 326, n.17.

The critical questioning of speeches and deeds forever yields ends for inquiring reason to pursue. These ends are the reasons for the event. They start with the reasons given by the participants in the event which, upon closer scrutiny, prove to be partial reasons that point beyond themselves. As the inquiry moves through the materials in the space beyond, which the materials themselves illumine, the understanding movement formulates its own ends, ever more transcendent than the immanent reasons given by the participants. As reason takes flight from the factual event deeper into its meaning, it relies ever less on the objective nature of the materials constituting the event. In Arendt's Kantian vocabulary, it shifts from the faculty of cognition to the faculty of thinking. The movement of understanding creates the ground or end toward which it moves. What seemed to be the explanation for the event in preliminary understanding is shown to be a stepping stone to the further movement of understanding. As understanding reason moves from "reason" to "reason," it finds it cannot include the "final reasons"—the *truth* of the event—within itself. If it could, it could step outside them to *contemplate* them. The reasons that keep emerging as poles to which the understanding is drawn are shown to be no grounds at all. Yet the more penetrating the truth-constituting movement toward the "ground" of the event is, the more luminous becomes the light of reason on the substantive problems within the event. The absolute toward which all reasoning aims makes recognition of the relative possible. The movement of reason "not above but beyond the materials"⁵⁶⁰ finds a principle by which the materials can be ordered. But the absolute never achieves an objective status—the

⁵⁶⁰ This formulation invokes Arendt's finding that thinking moves "*beyond* sense perception" but not "*above* the world of the senses" as in the traditional metaphysics. Arendt, "Thinking & Moral Considerations," 420.

understanding movement finds that it cannot rest anywhere, on any reason(s). As long as it is moving, the understanding reason can conceive of its own ground and end, but it finds it can never actually attain it.

How then does understanding come to a stop to report its findings in a finite, narrative form? As understanding moves through the gap illumined by the speeches and deeds constituting the event, it comes to resemble thinking ever more. At its inception it was most unlike thinking, for the bed it had to lie on had already been made for it by the sources, the true facts, the public justifications of the actors, but as it moves further into the space the sources point to, understanding discards the immanent facts and speeches. The more it moves *in* the event, the more it moves *beyond* the event. But this Beyond is not a vantage whence to contemplate the event, but is the unconcealing of the depth of the event. Hence the movement is ever more abstract. It comes to a stop whenever it has transformed the event from a historical occurrence whose truth is immanent in the sources—a quasi-object that is *there* in history—to an abstract reconceptualization of the event whose truth is nowhere to be found outside the movement of understanding itself. The reasons for the event given by the understanding transcend the motives given by the actors, who would not recognize and, most likely, could not act upon them. They are abstract. But abstract reasons cause no actors to decide or do anything; they are not causative reasons at all, but ends, which the movement of understanding has forged in its critical flight. They are in short elliptical: to be indicated, spoken about, gestured towards,⁵⁶¹ but not formulated as final reasons which constitute the ground of the event.

⁵⁶¹ This is the reason why Arendt claims that understanding “never produces unequivocal results” although she never elucidated the radical repercussions of this claim fully. That understanding is like thinking, is

They are the sources of the event's illumination, not the causes of its occurrence. They are Thucydides's reasons.

The event reconstituted by the movement of understanding reveals a nature different to what the event appears to be in history. It is the formative movement of understanding toward its Beyond that constitutes the event, not the speeches and deeds which only seemed to. As in *The Origins*, the movement beyond the event has a temporal dimension in which the relationship of the event with its historical past is renegotiated, and a dimension of meaningful existential depth that goes beyond the materials. These dimensions are not isolated: the temporal reconstitution of the event is at the service of the movement of understanding in the event. As Arendt puts it, "not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past 'causes' which we may assign to it, but this past itself comes into being only with the event itself."⁵⁶² This the secondary literature misses in its anxiety to illumine the *appearing* nature of the event. To say with Vollrath that the event emerges from "opaque and impenetrable darkness, which is the human heart"⁵⁶³ is to correctly affirm the uncaused and "miraculous" nature of the event, but to obscure its infinite depth.

The movement of understanding beyond the event, therefore, most purely resembles philosophical reason. The movement of understanding from firmly rooted in the sheer visibility of the event to philosophizing recalls Nietzsche's saying:

emphasized once again by thinking's "resultless" nature. See, respectively, Arendt's "Understanding and Politics," 307 and "Thinking & Moral Considerations," 433.

⁵⁶² Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 319.

⁵⁶³ Vollrath, "Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking," 166.

Philosophy leaps ahead on tiny footholds; hope and intuition lend wings to its feet. Calculating reason lumbers heavily behind, looking for better footholds. For reason too wants to reach that alluring goal which its diving comrade has long since reached.⁵⁶⁴

Understanding undergoes a transformation through its movement from “discursive reason”, as it were, to “philosophy”, running ever faster through the sheer *thereness* of the event until it takes flight beyond every appearance to whatever region it chooses to call home.

The abstraction that makes part of the understanding effort does not close the narrative.⁵⁶⁵ On the contrary, it shows the radical *openness* of the text to a dialogue with others and the possibility of being persuaded that inquiring reason was mistaken. This openness is presumed in the dialectical manner of the understanding act. Firstly, understanding only occurs through participation in the materials; so it must occur in a space “that is potentially public, open to all sides.”⁵⁶⁶ Secondly, the lack of a clear schema for the understanding act means it is an individual effort that depends on the powers of reasoning and understanding of the scholar. Just as the *logos* that ends all *logoi* does not exist, so no one scholar can prohibit others from taking up their own understanding act. Thirdly, the movement of the inquiring reason beyond the sheer *thereness* of the materials means that reason opens a gap between its own *logos* and the symbolic evocations of the speeches and deeds. Action must be inscribed in the concepts of reason. In the Arendtian dialectic there is a gap between the movement of

⁵⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1962), 40.

⁵⁶⁵ Most readers of Arendt disagree: in the quarrel between truth and humanity, she supposedly took the side of humanity. My argument all throughout this chapter has been that there is no quarrel to begin with. For a representative example, see Lisa Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 90-98.

⁵⁶⁶ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 43.

understanding and the acts that constitute the event, which fundamentally cannot be filled—but which invites others to fill it with their own rational participation.

I have moved beyond Arendt as far as my understanding movement allows. In the process, I have found that the event cannot contain its own meaning; instead, meaning must be revealed by the movement of our own understanding that reconstitutes the event in ways radically different from what it seemed. If we do not, if we remain strictly within the boundaries of speeches and deeds and simply retell the story, we risk mistaking the speeches and deeds created in freedom for its *exercise*. Political science must make sense of the way human beings name or symbolize the experiences which engender the speeches and deeds. For this a theory of symbolization is needed. Moreover, the understanding act understood as *energeia* will forever flirt with the danger of irrationality. Just as the act cannot be limited to an inquiry about speeches, because they yield a context that “is elusive, almost like Being,”⁵⁶⁷ so the act must occur in the context of a science of order to make transparent the order that always already orders it. For these reasons I now turn to Eric Voegelin.

⁵⁶⁷ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 51.

6. The Realism of Eric Voegelin

With regard to the relationship between thought and life, the case of Eric Voegelin is the least clear of the three thinkers I study. Like Strauss and Arendt, his philosophy clearly springs from the historical situation he found himself in as a man and as a citizen: the “motivations of my work are simple, they arise from the political situation.”⁵⁶⁸ In the 1930s he dedicated two books to German politics, *Race and State* (1933) and *The Race Idea in Intellectual History* (1933), in which he dismantles National Socialist race doctrine. The rising ideological fanaticism in Europe, which deeply moved him as a young man, was the subject of his next two books, *The Authoritarian State* (1936) and *Political Religions* (1938). His thinking about the politics of his time hardly ceased with his exile to the United States. In the 1950s his thesis of modernity as a Gnostic rebellion seeking to “immanentize the Christian eschaton” earned him great honor amongst American conservatives—an honor he deplored—and his face on the cover of *Time* magazine.⁵⁶⁹

The political situation, however, or the personal problems of exile, was not all there was to his “situation”. For Voegelin, the situation meant something prior to and much deeper than one’s immediate situation in the world. Personal experiences, symbolic recovery through remembrance “in a sense that has become archaic, to remind somebody of who

⁵⁶⁸ Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Memoir*, in Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 28.

⁵⁶⁹ Beside the autobiography cited above, for biographical information on Voegelin, see *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, eds., Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn (Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 2008); Mark Lilla, “Mr. Casaubon in America,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 28, 2007. For the epistolary dialogue between Strauss and Voegelin, see Barry Cooper and Peter Emberley, eds., *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). For the newly discovered letters between Voegelin and Arendt on his famous review of her *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, see Peter Baehr, “Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin,” *History and Theory*, vol., 51 (October 2012): 364-380.

he is or what he is,”⁵⁷⁰—all are partial devices in one complex attempt to illuminate *who* one is. Thus, Voegelin’s first book *On the Form of the American Mind* (1928) was born of his efforts to cope with his experiences in America when he travelled there for two years on a fellowship in 1924. In *Anamnesis* (1966) he explored his own earliest childhood memories—“anamnetic experiments” Voegelin called them in scientific jargon—in order to respond to Husserl’s philosophy of consciousness. Whatever the issue—the race idea, Austrian constitutionalism, or the structure of consciousness—Voegelin returns to its beginnings, the originary experiences; the point at which the problem first took shape.

Voegelin’s own life-story resembles these constant new beginnings. Born in Cologne at the beginning of the 20th century, his family moved house to Vienna when he was nine. Unlike Strauss and Arendt, he did not attend the classical *Gymnasium* but was trained in law and political science.⁵⁷¹ A conscientious Central European scholar steeped in the intricacies of Neo-Kantianism, Kelsen’s legal positivism, Othmar Spann’s sociology, and the methodological debates raging in German universities at that time, his 1924 trip to America effected a real shock and, so it happened, a true new beginning. Pragmatism and the common-sense philosophy of William James and others affected him deeply. Then in 1938 Hitler’s troops entered Vienna, precipitating a narrow escape and flight to America, just as his latest book *Political Religions* was rolling off the presses. In the United States he avoided the *émigré* groups on the East Coast and jealously guarded and

⁵⁷⁰ Eric Voegelin, “Responses at the Panel Discussion of ‘The Beginning of the Beginning,’” in *The Beginning and the Beyond*, Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences Supplementary Issue of *Lonergan Workshop*, vol., 4, ed., Fred Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 106-107.

⁵⁷¹ Barry Cooper, *Beginning the Quest: Law and Politics in the Early Work of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 216.

cultivated his American citizenship. Not until 1958 did he finally accept an invitation to go back to Europe and establish a research institute in Munich, where he stayed for ten years, stepping on every political toe that he could find. Deeply wary of joining any of the camps in the scimmages of the sixties, he returned to America where he wrote and taught until he died.

In a way more redolent of Strauss than Arendt, Voegelin's work evades intelligibility in terms of his life's story. He continually engages "the situation," but seems ever to be engaging "everything"—from Greek philosophy to Egyptian cosmology, from Imperial China to Archaic megaliths. Three stages in Voegelin's work may be discerned. In each one of them Voegelin, like Strauss, is prodded by the situation to make theoretical breakthroughs far beyond the here and now. The first stage runs up to the publication of *The New Science of Politics* (1952). This "early Voegelin" is another scholar among the many dealing with the political problems of that era: race theory, Austrian state theory, methodological debates in the sciences and humanities. Like Arendt he is loath to profess a "method" and his style is distinctly idiosyncratic. The last great project of this stage began in an effort to write a standard textbook on the history of political ideas, which exploded into the mammoth manuscript that now takes up eight volumes of *The Collected Works*. It was abandoned after absorbing the insight that political ideas cannot be the object of political science, for that would be to rationalize political symbols which point beyond themselves toward their engendering experiences.

The second or "middle Voegelin" stage runs from *The New Science of Politics* to the German publication of *Anamnesis*, and includes the first three volumes of *Order and History*. It is the stage of his philosophy of history. With *Anamnesis* begins a shift to the

philosophy of consciousness, which ran to the end of his life. The political science of this “late Voegelin” is a historical science that eschews philosophy of history so as to avoid forcing the historical materials into a pre-existing framework. The return to the beginning becomes a core philosophical theme of this period. As David Walsh aptly put it regarding the last essay in the *Anamnesis* volume, “[w]ithin it a great mastery of sources is strictly subordinated to the unfolding of questions that shape a meditative whole, moving with ease up and down, backward and forward and sideways, yet without ever losing the thread of the beginning in the question of political science to which they return.”⁵⁷² The task for us will be to interpret the materials as they unfold their meaning in the movement of the inquiry. Briefly put, this stage is a philosophical but also empirical elaboration of what Voegelin did in his first work *On the Form of the American Mind*, where he first breaks with Max Weber’s ahistorical ideal-type method.⁵⁷³ In this and the next chapters I will follow this thread, working between the early and late Voegelin so as to illuminate his understanding of the problem of foundings.

Chapter Six situates Voegelin’s thought in the context of the theoretical breakthrough of the Chapter Five, where the argument shifted from Arendt’s ontology of appearance to understand human experience in light of the quest for meaning. In the dialogue between the two that follow, I deepen the breakthrough and situate politics and founding moments in the new light. Chapter Seven addresses Voegelin’s science of order, its

⁵⁷² David Walsh, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans., M. J. Hanak, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (hereafter, *Collected Works*) vol., 6 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 8.

⁵⁷³ Eric Voegelin, “Forward,” *Anamnesis*, *Collected Works* 6, 33; Eric Voegelin, “On the Form of the American Mind,” Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, eds., *Collected Works 1* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 18-19.

significance for the problem of method in political science, and the peculiar place of founding moments within it.

The newly discovered correspondence between Arendt and Voegelin that occurred in his middle period yields one letter where Arendt aptly summed up the difference between the two:

[Y]ou are primarily a historian of ideas, or a humanities specialist, and I primarily offer explanations from a “political, social, and economic viewpoint,” but in a difference of attitude to the event as such [...] This may be an extreme case, but the specific valency [*Valeur*] of events, their actual specific gravity, can never be derived from any ideology or from any specific context within the history of ideas. In the event as such, there is always revealed something that was not present, or capable of being contained, in any preparatory generality.⁵⁷⁴

In the next two chapters I shall show that, wittingly or not, Voegelin took her criticism to heart.

6.1. Participation and the Luminous Quest for Meaning

Chapter Five elaborated a metaphysics of human experience by bracketing Arendt’s concern for instrumentality and rethinking experience in light of what she called the quest for meaning. I did not thereby aim to negate but to add to her aesthetic emphasis on the dramaturgic and contingent nature of appearing. My reading is vulnerable to the same charge leveled at Arendtian aestheticists: the understanding of human experience as *energeia* leaves our orientation in reality a precariously subjective, self-expressive gesture that is amoral in any straightforward sense. Order in history is fragile and precarious, forever teetering on the edge of the abyss of disorder.

⁵⁷⁴ Peter Baehr, “Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin,” *History and Theory*, vol., 51 (October 2012), 377-378.

Among the few thinkers of the twentieth century who rejected this possibility is Eric Voegelin. He did so by examining empirically the varieties of order in history. This set him apart from Arendt and Strauss, for his thinking on order followed from empirical investigation. Voegelin's work can be read as an ongoing philosophical clarification, calibration or attunement to the order he found in "the materials"⁵⁷⁵ of history. For Voegelin, thinking divorced from those materials will not do for a science of politics.

It may be possible to reduce Voegelin's claims to the following seemingly contradictory statement: reality has a stably pre-existing structure *but* reality unfolds only in manifold experiences (or "the reality of experience is self-interpretative").⁵⁷⁶ This section clarifies the statement by a twofold argument: firstly, for Voegelin human existence is participation in reality. This is experienced paradoxically, for human beings find it at once intentional and "luminous", which refers to the effect of participating in the living world of man, as if the *who* that a man is were "spotlighted" or laid bare *nolens volens* by participation itself. Secondly, this luminousness of participation means that human beings experience themselves as transcendent to the merely given, a transcendence that is the essence of being human. While thinking together with but beyond Arendt brought out the metaphysical quality of experience, with Voegelin this will form the core around which a science of human affairs can be built, in Chapter Seven.

⁵⁷⁵ This is a term Voegelin used frequently to denote the whole set of texts and other cultural products that human beings have created historically. Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 63-64.

⁵⁷⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Memoir*, in Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 81. See also, Ellis Sandoz, "Introduction," in Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Washington, D. C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1997), xiv.

Voegelin's idea that existence is a kind of participation highlights the playfulness of human existence. An early summary of this can be found in his review of Jan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, published in 1948. Voegelin approvingly cites Huizinga's idea that "play is a vehicle of meaning", yet "not a determinant of meaning."⁵⁷⁷ It is by virtue of the "quality of transcendence"⁵⁷⁸ that play can become a medium of cultural life. In an otherwise enthusiastic review, Voegelin expresses a single reservation: for him, transcendence is not a mere outcome of playfulness as for Huizinga, but present in all creation—transcendence is the generic essence of all existing beings, while play is specific to human and animal beings. This emphasis on transcendence is the red thread that binds together all of Voegelin's work.

Voegelin begins like Strauss and Arendt by recovering a pre-theoretical, everyday orientation. Like them he found a paradox at the heart of human existence. This paradox of participation can be illumined by the play metaphor. For Voegelin, this paradox is the fundamental experience of life. If human existence is like play, each participating individual is a "player", that is, simultaneously "a part" and "a partner" in existence. He is conscious of the whole in which he participates and of himself as a part in that whole.⁵⁷⁹ Every player knows the "rules" of the play to some extent, and can plan and initiate acts in the play. The awareness of rules constitutes the player as a cognitive subject and brings out the *intentional* mode of participation. But insofar as a player is in

⁵⁷⁷ Eric Voegelin, "Review of *Homo Ludens: Versuch einer Bestimmung des Spielelements der Kultur*, by Jan Huizinga," in *Selected Book Reviews*, ed., Barry Cooper, *Collected Works 13* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 166. Appropriately, George Kateb uses the game analogy to illuminate the "spirit" of Arendtian politics in George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Alanheld, 1983), 17.

⁵⁷⁸ Voegelin, "Review of *Homo Ludens*," 164.

⁵⁷⁹ Robert McMahon, "Eric Voegelin's Paradoxes of Consciousness and Participation," *The Review of Politics*, vol., 61, no., 1 (Winter, 1999): 117-118.

the play, he is simultaneously in a different mode of being. In order to play, he must open himself up to the whole of the play. As Huizinga put it, “[a]ny game can at any time wholly run away with the players”, for it is the game itself that “plays itself to an end.” The play “creates order, is order.”⁵⁸⁰ Each player is obliged as it were by the mode of his own being to relinquish any subjective “I” standing *apart from* the game, to become *part of* the game; his existence is existence through the game. Man cannot choose to quit the play; he cannot but be receptive to it. Hence, the play itself is “the subject of which consciousness is to be predicated,”⁵⁸¹ in that the play illumines the player. The game “appeals”⁵⁸² to man who cannot but respond in speech and deed. The player is receptive to the whole, rather than contemplating or apprehending it. This is the *luminous* mode of being. No act of the player can be purely intentional, because he is obliged to apprehend the game as a whole and act in its context. The game pre-exists the player; it must be played in earnest. In Voegelin’s terms, the player’s participation is paradoxical: he is aware that he is simultaneously apart from and part of the game.⁵⁸³

⁵⁸⁰ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 8-9, 10.

⁵⁸¹ Eric Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” *Order and History*, vol., 5 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 15.

⁵⁸² Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 38.

⁵⁸³ In his final work, “In Search of Order,” on which I rely to elucidate participation in reality, Voegelin introduces the term “paradox of consciousness” to illuminate the paradox of participation. For reasons of clarity, I do not refer explicitly to Voegelin’s theory of consciousness, replacing it simply with the term “participation.” Voegelin writes that consciousness is “an experience of participation in the ground of being” and thus we need not adopt it as a symbol to designate the site where reality is experienced. If we recognize that human existence and the knowledge that flows from it is participatory, then the insight that “consciousness is participation” does not advance the analysis any further. Voegelin himself rejected the possibility of a theory of consciousness as an “illusion” although, as Szakolczai has observed, he “fell into the almost stereotypical German error of trying to reduce intellectual [endeavor] to the development of a general theory, an error attacked relentlessly by Nietzsche, and identified by Voegelin as the Gnostic search for a system.” For the quotations see, Eric Voegelin, “Consciousness and Order: Foreword to ‘Anamnesis’” in *The Beginning and the Beyond*, Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences Supplementary Issue of *Lonergan Workshop*, vol., 4, ed., Fred Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 35, 36; Arpád Szakolczai, *The Genesis of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 62. For an excellent exegesis of the paradox of consciousness, see Robert McMahon, “Eric Voegelin’s Paradoxes of

Reality may be a play writ large but the scale difference matters. Men choose and act after yet within the reality of participation. The play metaphor illumines the reality of participation, yet players are radically less aware of what the rules are: some rules are simply unknown, others change subtly or abruptly and the source of change cannot always be comprehended. There are no spectators in full possession of all that might be known. Participation has a “disturbing quality,”⁵⁸⁴ for man is “an actor, playing a part in the drama of being and, through the brute fact of his existence, committed to play it without knowing what it is.”⁵⁸⁵ Voegelin’s words here can easily be exchanged for Arendt’s analysis of the rules of “the great game”⁵⁸⁶ of existence as directives rather than commands. Man is by nature radically open and receptive to the play of existence in a manner that no merely human game can replicate.

Intentionality and luminosity denote not kinds of experience but its structure. As McMahon points out, “intentionality and luminosity are polar opposites, paradoxically copresent [*sic*] in all experience.”⁵⁸⁷ Intentionality is the dimension evident in the bodily or object-like aspect of existence. In it surrounding reality “assumes the position of an object intended.”⁵⁸⁸ This is the realm of the subject’s confrontation with the world. The individual is oriented cognitively to the world in a manner that recalls Arendt’s adoption

Consciousness and Participation,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1 (Winter, 1999): 117-139. For more on the problems regarding Voegelin’s philosophy of consciousness, see John J., Ranieri *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 1995), esp., 15-25. For Voegelin’s final argument on the paradox, see Eric Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” *Order and History*, vol. 5 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

⁵⁸⁴ Eric Voegelin, “Israel and Revelation,” *Order and History*, vol., 1, ed., Maurice P. Hogan, *Collected Works 14* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 39.

⁵⁸⁵ Eric Voegelin, “Israel and Revelation,” *Collected Works 14*, 39.

⁵⁸⁶ Arendt, *On Violence*, 97.

⁵⁸⁷ Robert McMahon, “Eric Voegelin’s Paradoxes of Consciousness and Participation,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1 (Winter, 1999), 119.

⁵⁸⁸ Eric Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” *Order and History*, 15.

of Kant's faculty of cognition. Human beings treat reality often in this mode as "thing-reality."⁵⁸⁹ By contrast, luminosity means the impression that reality makes back on the orienting person, who apprehends himself as inextricably embedded in the game. He is a partner, not just a part of reality.⁵⁹⁰ Voegelin calls this aspect of reality "it-reality"⁵⁹¹ (in the manner of the linguistic expression "it rains"). The impersonal verb negates subjectivity, although "it" acts with undoubted reality. "It" refers to the mysterious whole experienced as comprehending individual partners. Therefore, luminosity may be considered analytically prior to intentionality: it constitutes subject-object relations by situating them in a potentiating context. This dimension of experience precludes men's treating reality as if it were *merely* "thing-like." The paradox of participation arises out of the simultaneous influence of both dimensions on human orientation in reality.

Voegelin's conclusion, that reality does not exist outside of the fact of participation, is similar to Arendt's that experience is how "we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality."⁵⁹² Yet he also claims that reality is stable, its order is a given.⁵⁹³ This order has a particular "quaternarian" form—named after the four "sides" of reality: God, man, world, society—within which the participatory movement occurs:

God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being. The community with its quaternarian structure is, and is not, a datum of human experience. It is a datum of experience insofar as it is known to man by virtue of his participation in the mystery of its being. It is not a

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁹² Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Essays in Understanding*, 308. Philosophically, there is a great difference in so far as Voegelin's is a theory of the eventfulness of consciousness. However, this does not impact my current argument. For more, see Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

⁵⁹³ Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Washington D. C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1997), 11.

datum of experience insofar as it is not given in the manner of an object of the external world but is knowable only from the perspective of participation in it.⁵⁹⁴

Whereas the paradox of participation explains the *how* of human orientation in reality, the order of being is the *what* they participate in. Voegelin's *what* stabilizes Arendt's ontology of appearance, positing the stability and continuity of experienced reality. The structure of being is a given insofar as it arises out of the testimony that human beings in all societies and all ages have left behind. Symbolic expressions of reality all share it, no matter how widely divergent the symbolisms. Yet, this equivalence of experiences is not by any means straightforward, as participation is open-ended. The history of symbolisms, Voegelin says, is "the great work of analogy surrounding the unseen truth."⁵⁹⁵

A note of caution before proceeding any further: there is no "quaternarian" or quadrangular field in which man finds himself that may be revealed by the powers of thought, science or poetic inspiration. Voegelin constantly warns against this, but his conceptual language of a "quaternarian structure" and "community of being" makes it difficult to apprehend his thought. To this day, some of his readers heed his warning but are incapable—not due to lack of effort, to be sure—of following through with the immense task ahead of them. For example, Ted McAllister notes that "[n]o matter how often Voegelin [warns] the reader not to make the in-between into a place, or to reify the 'poles' of this tension, the language rather defeats the purpose. In the end, how is one to think of poles in a tensional field except as things?"⁵⁹⁶ The answer is straightforward yet

⁵⁹⁴ Voegelin, "Israel and Revelation," *Collected Works* 14, 39.

⁵⁹⁵ Voegelin, "Israel and Revelation," 46.

⁵⁹⁶ Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 241.

difficult: one has to *think* them, and not *see* them with the mind's eyes.⁵⁹⁷ One has to apprehend them, not comprehend them. Here Voegelin's help could have been more generous—he often presents the results of his thinking conceptually instead of symbolically.⁵⁹⁸ The conceptual language is appropriate when he is presenting the results of his investigation of order in history. It becomes an obstacle if the reader seeks to understand the meaning of Voegelin's analysis. The dissolution of terms in their original context, which is what Arendt calls understanding, is doubly difficult when the terms are presented as concepts describing the way things are. There is nothing to be done but read his empirical work of the first four volumes of *Order and History* in light of his more meditative philosophical work in *Anamnesis* and the fifth volume of *Order and History*. Secondly, one may read Voegelin with the help of his philosophical contemporaries, who elucidate symbolically much of what Voegelin was after, although few held onto the movement of participation in its entirety, as Voegelin did. Some of Voegelin's readers have done this by placing him in “dialogue” with other postmodern thinkers such as Heidegger, Levinas, Ricoeur and others.⁵⁹⁹ Voegelin's neglect of the work of some of his philosophical contemporaries adds to the difficulty. Thirdly and most importantly, the reader himself needs to regain the assurance of *who* he is by

⁵⁹⁷ All seeing with the mind's eye, of course, is thinking but not all thinking is seeing with the mind's eye. I bring attention to the precarious difference, in order to not fall prey to the misinterpretation of the visual metaphor which confuses the symbols of thinking for things that may be comprehended and described. But, as Arendt reminds, the truth of thinking remains “beyond words [... for] there exists no metaphor that could plausibly illuminate this special activity of the mind, in which something invisible within us deals with the invisibles of the world.” Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 117, 123.

⁵⁹⁸ Voegelin distinguishes clearly between concepts and symbols, yet admits that philosophy requires both. See Eric Voegelin, “The Meditative Origin of the Philosophical Knowledge of Order,” trans., Frederick G., Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 50.

⁵⁹⁹ Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993); Peter A., Petrakis and Cecil L., Eubanks, eds., *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004); David Walsh, “Editor's Introduction,” *Anamnesis, Collected Works* 6: 1-27.

meditatively recovering the truth of order from the depths of his own psyche. If nothing comes up (a distinct possibility, as the movement cannot be willed), Voegelin is likely to remain beyond reach.

This cautionary note is necessary due to the opacity of terms like community of being, which I cannot avoid, as they indicate the stability of the experience of reality. To anticipate the analysis a little, the partners in the community of being—God, man, world, and society—are not partners in any “objective” or visually metaphorical sense, but the indices which hold the movement of participation together. They plunge deep into the non-appearing depths far below the dissonance of appearance, being the ends to which experience is broadly directed. They may be inferred transcendently from the general structure of experience, but they are not, and cannot be known in any straightforward sense of cognition (as in the *cogito ergo sum*). On the other hand, they *are* partners in the sense that it is towards them and in the trust of their existence that our experiential life in society, history, and the psyche, is ordered. If they were not drawing us on, we would not venture forth in speech and deed. If man did not exist as one of the partners, the human world would be diminished, and man would be something less than what he is.

Participation has historically occurred in three fields: the social, the historical and the psychic or inner dimensions of order.⁶⁰⁰ Firstly, man participates in the social by virtue of being born:

Existence in society, by force of birth and nurture within a family, is ontologically, not by choice the manner of human existence. The alternative to existence in one concrete society—short of not

⁶⁰⁰ Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” *Anamnesis*, 267-278.

being born at all or committing suicide—is not solitary existence but existence in another concrete society. The organization of man’s personal life in attunement with the truth of order is possible only within the framework of social order.⁶⁰¹

Human beings begin the play of participation through the “self-interpretation”⁶⁰² of the society to which they belong. In an insight that recalls Strauss, Voegelin notes that human beings experience a “tension in political reality”⁶⁰³ that arises out of different articulations of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and untruth. He immediately departs from Strauss, as he endows the tension with phenomenological depth and a broad directedness. It is not merely a matter of choice, but is experienced as constant push or pull *beyond* the given. This experience is symbolized differently by different people and it “leaves room for a multitude of modes of experience that motivate a corresponding multitude of symbolic expressions of experience.”⁶⁰⁴ The tension is experienced as a movement beyond the given articulation of right order towards a truer, more just and nobler order.⁶⁰⁵

Secondly, as men participate in society, they may become preoccupied with the durability or transiency of the partners in the community of being. They observe that they are outlasted by society, which is outlasted by the world, which is outlasted and perhaps created by the divine. The higher strata of the hierarchy (gods, world, society) are more meaningful and more luminous than the lower strata (persons, families, living beings in the “here and now”).⁶⁰⁶ In participation they discover that the community of

⁶⁰¹ Eric Voegelin, “*The Nature of the Law and Related Legal Writings*,” *Collected Works* 27, eds., Robert Anthony Pascal, James Lee Babin and John William Corrington (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 56-57.

⁶⁰² Eric Voegelin, “What is Political Reality?” *Anamnesis*, 343.

⁶⁰³ Voegelin, “What is Political Reality?” 343.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁶ Voegelin, “Israel and Revelation,” 41-42.

being has a hierarchical structure,⁶⁰⁷ and the farther one ventures from the here and now, the more luminous the reality. This hierarchy is not a classification scheme independent of the movement itself, for existence cannot be ordered at will outside of the existential movement. It indicates the broad directedness of the movement towards what is experienced as more meaningful or more truthful.

The discovery of history expanded the horizon of human knowledge and experience, which revealed the social of here and now to be a concrete reality made possible by something outside itself. Just as social reality is meaningful and obliges one to attune oneself to its order even as one differentiates one's own views within it, so the newfound hierarchy becomes meaningful. As social reality is distinctly object-like, so historical participation is more luminous. Once this hierarchy is perceived, one cannot but try to make sense of it by naming one's experiences linguistically. Men are stuck between their own mortality, with its objective finitude, and the immortality and paradisiac world of the gods. The luminous nature of the act of participation shares the principle of immortality that Arendt imputes to all appearances, yet men cannot behave as if they were immortal or did not live in a world of finite objects. The universality of the human condition in the "in-between" begins to come into view.

By questioning, observing and telling stories human beings become aware of the consubstantiality of their partners in the community of being. Like individuals, societies experience participation in an order bigger than themselves. History is thus the

⁶⁰⁸ Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 1. See also the discussion in John J. Ranieri, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 138-143.

meaningful evidence of human transcendence, the reaching beyond the here and now of persons and societies. History is the *fact* of transcendence. It has an objective existence in events and facts chronologically ordered which make its study possible, but what constitutes it is the order that “emerges from the history of order.”⁶⁰⁸

The third field of participation in which the order of being emerges is the psychic or spiritual field.⁶⁰⁹ I will explicate the spiritual emergence of order in greater detail than the social and the historical because Voegelin made it the centerpiece of his science of order. Though his concerns were breathtakingly wide-ranging, “his philosophical investigation began and ended with the individual soul.”⁶¹⁰ Voegelin reached Arendt’s conclusion that philosophy is an experiential movement that is to be understood symbolically,⁶¹¹ but adds that it is a movement within and towards something, *i.e.* one within the order of being. Like all human experience, philosophy is not only a radical beginning that contains its own principle of truth, but it also has its *telos* in a non-appearing end.

I shall follow Voegelin’s early reading of Augustine’s meditation in books X and XI of *Confessions*, firstly because it is conveniently brief; secondly, because it mirrors Voegelin’s far more sophisticated and well-known later readings of the emergence of order in the Greek psyche in *Order and History* (IV) and in his own anamnestic experiments in *Anamnesis*; and thirdly, because it exhibits the coherence of Voegelin’s

⁶⁰⁸ Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 1. See also the discussion in John J. Ranieri, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 138-143.

⁶⁰⁹ Each “field” for Voegelin is a symbol which denotes the site of participation. For the emergence of the psyche as the site of participation in Plato see Eric Voegelin, “The Beyond and its Parousia,” *The Drama of Humanity and other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985* ed., William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, *Collected Works* 33 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004) , 399.

⁶¹⁰ McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity*, 223.

⁶¹¹ Arendt, “Thinking,” *Life of the Mind*, 102-104.

work from beginning to end as an open-ended effort to understand the nature of human participation.⁶¹² Significantly, the reading is part of a work on a “theory of governance.” Voegelin assumed from the start that political thought cannot consider political acts in isolation from the inner life of man.

Voegelin illuminates the nature of the person through concrete meditation instead of abstract reasoning because a meditation is a report of a concrete experience by a particular person. The meditation is the experience which illumines spiritual order. Augustine’s meditation proceeded toward the “divine ground of being” *via* spatial and temporal metaphors. The spatial imagery “passes through the realm of being by ascending from level to level”⁶¹³ in memory, while the temporal imagery passes through “the coming into being and the perishing of things.”⁶¹⁴ Already in this early work, Voegelin was finding meditation to show that man is “characterized by his openness to a transcendent being, by his being a frontier between the world, with its being and becoming, and a superworld.”⁶¹⁵ The dichotomy “world/superworld” recalls the Straussian dichotomy between the exoteric realm of politics and the esoteric realm of philosophy, which Arendt overturned, only to replace it with her own peculiar dichotomy between the metaphysical space of thinking and the space of appearances. Voegelin’s dualistic language, however, contradicts his insight into the nature of human participation. It reads awkwardly, for the young Voegelin had yet to supersede the neo-

⁶¹² Trevor Shelley called my attention to this text in his unpublished Master’s dissertation *Ascent from the Biological Baseline to Philosophical Openness: An Essay on the Order of Inquiry into Human Nature and Politics* (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2006).

⁶¹³ Eric Voegelin, “The Theory of Governance,” *The Theory of Governance and Other Miscellaneous Papers: 1921-1938, Collected Works* 32 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 231.

⁶¹⁴ Voegelin, “The Theory of Governance,” 231.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

Kantian terminology against which he was already rebelling; the later Voegelin was to transcend the dichotomy with a unifying philosophical language.

Voegelin views the person as “the point of intersection between divine eternity and human temporality.”⁶¹⁶ The experience of meditation itself is “the clearest proof available that human being does not just exist in space and time.”⁶¹⁷ In language congruent with Arendt’s understanding of the experiential movement of thought, Voegelin concludes that meditation is no logical demonstration of the nature of participation but “can only be re-enacted and precariously re-symbolized”.⁶¹⁸ The identification of humanity as “point of intersection” was an early version of Voegelin’s later discovery of Plato’s *metaxy* (in-betweenness)—“the domain of human knowledge”⁶¹⁹ in all post-cosmological articulations of order. Plato’s definition of *metaxy* in the *Philebus* (16c-17a & 30c-e) and *Symposium* (202a-203a) as a dynamic movement between ignorance and knowledge, or finitude and immortality, or beast and God, in the place that partakes of each but belongs to neither, symbolizes *the* space of philosophical articulation of order. Truth unfolds in the experience of order and can neither be found nor denied. In the later Voegelin’s dramatic words, “[t]he *Symposion* presents itself as the report of a report over intervals of years; and the reporting continues to this day.”⁶²⁰ There is no truth of order outside of the process of re-enactment and re-symbolization of the experiential movement in the *metaxy*. The

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 236.

⁶¹⁷ Barry Cooper, “Surveying the Occasional Papers,” 742.

⁶¹⁸ Cooper, “Surveying the Occasional Papers,” 742.

⁶¹⁹ Eric Voegelin, “The Ecumenic Age,” *Order and History*, vol., 4 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 184.

⁶²⁰ Voegelin, “The Ecumenic Age,” 186.

empirical testimonies of this movement which the early Voegelin found to be the core of human nature are expounded later in the five-volume *Order and History*.

Voegelin's insight is that concrete experience reveals the existence of order. It is both independent of man and revealed in the person's quest for the truth of order. In the process of experiential movement "the divine ground [...] common to all men"⁶²¹ is revealed. In the Augustinian meditation, the movement is symbolized under the Question that Augustine pursues in his meditative quest: "Where does the soul find God when it seeks Him in order to find peace in him?"⁶²² The question must not be read dogmatically as the right question that ought to be asked. Plato did not *pursue* the Good but found it in the process of dialectic.⁶²³ Descartes did not seek God but a level of being whose reality he could not doubt, and Moses did not intend "I Am" but was called by Him. The point here is that the meditative *quest-ion*⁶²⁴ contains an *archē* (beginning) and a *telos* of the meditating soul. The emerging truth does not exist outside of the engendering experience and its "precarious" symbolization, for then it would dogmatically calcify into a theoretical abstraction. The final resting point, if ever reached, can only be negatively determined as none of the stages or nodal points which the meditative experience has ascended through. The resting point for Augustine is

not God, of whom he might have a definite concept, but that point in the movement of his soul at which his soul finds peace. This point is found when no driving impulse remains in the meditative course [...] the place that is no longer a place in any palpable sense of the term.⁶²⁵

⁶²¹ Ibid., 186.

⁶²² Voegelin, "Theory of Governance," 227.

⁶²³ "The whole procedure involves nothing in the sensible world, but moves solely through forms to forms, and finishes with forms." Plato, *The Republic*, trans., Desmond Lee, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 511c.

⁶²⁴ The term is Jeffrey Bell's in Jeffrey A. Bell "Immanence/Transcendence: Deleuze and Voegelin on the Conditions for Political Order," *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, 101.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 227, 231.

Once this highest point is reached, it illumines all other transitory points through which the meditation has passed. The resting place is not a situation from the perspective of which being is apprehended, for it is luminously *beyond* the actual movement, yet it gives meaning and direction to the experience of meditation, creating order in the stages below through which the meditation has moved. The substantive problems of existence are recognized in the light of the truth of a movement which is beyond itself. For Augustine the soul turns back on the existents that were discarded in the upward quest—the “order of time,” “the radiance of the light,” “the sweet melodies of songs of all kind” down to the most mundane pleasures—in the recognition that although “God is none of this, ‘nevertheless,’ for the soul, He is this as well.”⁶²⁶ Augustine’s love of God is the condition of the possibility of his *amor mundi*. In more general terms, the transcendent ground is formatively present in human acts in the world. To put it in the terms of the previous chapter, the “non-appearing end” is neither a distant nor a meaningless objective toward which action happens to be broadly directed, but a “divine presence that becomes manifest in the experience.”⁶²⁷ When Voegelin says that “philosophizing seems to me to be in essence the interpretation of experiences of transcendence,”⁶²⁸ he could have dropped the qualifier because experience is by definition a trajectory beyond the given.

The meditation is directed by the meditator’s longing to find peace. It is a rediscovery of reality *via* moving within its order. The order of social and historical existence and the

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 228.

⁶²⁷ Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, ed., Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works 12* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 271.

⁶²⁸ Eric Voegelin, “Letter to Alfred Schütz, Jan., 1, 1953,” *Selected Correspondence: 1950-1984*, trans., Sandy Alder, Thomas A. Hollweck and William Petropulos, ed., Thomas A. Hollweck (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 122-123.

inner-worldly order do not belong to two different realms, however. While the symbols used to explicate it may be suitable or entirely opaque, the engendering experience goes to the heart of what it is to be human. Viewed as transcendence, it is an attunement to what is most real not an escape from it. The evocative nature of the luminous calls for a response. One of the symbols that the existential movement produces is an understanding of human reality as “the reiteration of memory.”⁶²⁹ But this is only the penultimate stage before definitions and concepts cease in the final resting place. Augustine’s resting place has an ontological status *qua terminus* of reasoning similar to Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* or Socrates’ “form of the good.”⁶³⁰ In the words of the later Voegelin, “[c]oncerning the content of the Agathon nothing can be said at all. That is the fundamental insight of Platonic ethics.”⁶³¹ The finite historical movements unfold the ahistorical infinity of order. This is the mystery upon which the science of order is founded.

The stability of the experience of reality now comes into full view. Reality is enduring, for men move within an order of being, an order which yet is experienced only in moving beyond itself. It begins to emerge at the moment when we begin to exercise our own freedom by either questioning or acting on conventional wisdom or codes of conduct. We do not begin to question the immanent order if the truth is not already present in the moment of questioning; likewise, we do not begin to act unless we feel the

⁶²⁹ Voegelin, “The Theory of Governance,” 230.

⁶³⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, 517c. Emphasizing the movement at the expense of a substantive truth to be found in the Good, Socrates says to Glaucon “[a]nd you won’t go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region. That at any rate is my interpretation which is what you are anxious to hear; the truth of the matter is, after all, known only to god.” Ibid.

⁶³¹ Eric Voegelin, “Plato and Aristotle,” *Order and History*, vol., 3, ed., Dante Germino, *Collected Works* 16 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 176.

need to actualize the truth we sense. Becoming aware of the problem of truth means already realizing the truth of what we are questing after.⁶³² The questioning effort places man in an immediate existential tension for he seeks to uncover what he is already anticipating. This “knowing” movement gives it order: “[t]he search, thus, is not blind; the questioning is knowing and the knowing is questioning. The desire to know what one knows to desire injects internal order into the search [...]”⁶³³ Yet this order is not *there* for the taking; it exists only in the complex of the questioning movement that illumines what it is already moving in: “from the very start we begin not with any definitions, but with movements.”⁶³⁴ As Voegelin puts it in the context of his exegesis of Hesiod,

There is only one reality; this one reality is engaged in its one genetic movement of gods and things toward the one just order of the whole; and if the order is experienced as far from achieved in the present, its imperfection is apprehended as such by a vision of the whole whose order has come to the end of the struggle for its achievement.⁶³⁵

The order has no demonstrable nature but it does have an experiential, that is, a participatory one. The order of reality is participation, for, as Voegelin says of consciousness, it “is not an *a priori* structure, nor does it just happen, nor is its horizon a given [...] [it is] a ceaseless action of expanding, ordering, articulating, and correcting itself.”⁶³⁶ Reality is not the totality of social meaning, or a house of language, or a horizon, or a social construction, but man’s movement *beyond* the horizon of the immanent order. This movement is not philosophical speculation but immanently present in the materials of history. The transcending order is experienced as a whole in the continual movement beyond its own structure. Reality becomes a “world,” in

⁶³² Eric Voegelin, “The Meditative Origin of the Philosophical Knowledge of Order,” trans., Frederick G. Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 43.

⁶³³ Voegelin, 190.

⁶³⁴ Voegelin, “The Meditative Origin,” 42.

⁶³⁵ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 78.

⁶³⁶ Eric Voegelin, “Remembrance of Things Past,” *Anamnesis*, 1977, 4.

Arendtian terms, only in light of the non-appearing measure as illumined in the questing movement. In the young Voegelin's words,

What is essential is the relationship of the endless flow of events toward that which endures and, in relation to which, the flow itself becomes perceptible; a flow without firm edges, a flow without banks in which motion emerges as a phenomenon is not a flow at all.⁶³⁷

Remarkably, human beings have always known this; the empirical evidence shows that “the variety of symbolizations is accompanied by a vivid consciousness of the sameness of truth at which man aims by means of his various symbols.”⁶³⁸ This is what set Voegelin apart from Strauss and Arendt from his very first writings. We may think of the whole of his work ever since this early formulation as an endeavor to deepen its insight by a marriage of what previously seemed impossible: the classical formulation of order (Strauss) wedded to the phenomenology of experience (Arendt).

6.2. Thinking with Arendt beyond Arendt: the Politics of Eric Voegelin

In this section I shall differentiate Voegelin's understanding of politics from Arendt's. Both recognize the plurality of human experience and celebrate new beginnings. Politics for both is a practice the “truth” of which can only be found in the manifold of opinions that appear to constitute it; unlike Arendt however, Voegelin does not truncate the metaphysical depth of the movement of participation after its beginning. This allows him to shed Arendt's ontological approach to politics; understand it not as exceptional but omnipresent in human history; and turn the spotlight from virtuous action to a fuller account of human experience. I shall illustrate this by comparing Arendt's and Voegelin's concepts of freedom. Like Arendt, Voegelin reminds us that politics exists in

⁶³⁷ Voegelin, “The Theory of Governance,” 235.

⁶³⁸ Voegelin, “Israel and Revelation,” 45.

its openness to limitless, unpredictable possibilities, but unlike her, he attempts no positive demarcation of “the political.” Consequently, I lay out Voegelin’s thinking about politics only in the middle of the section as the possibilities of participation in reality begin to crystallize in their narrative, symbolic and experiential form. The section concludes by considering Voegelin’s “ethics of experience” so as to sketch, against aesthetical readings, the impossibility of a place “beyond good and evil” for either Voegelin or Arendt. By moving from agreement to disagreement to potential agreement, the contrast between Arendt and Voegelin reveals the dialectical nature of the dialogue. Arendt illumines symbolically its paradoxes, which Voegelin strove valiantly to articulate conceptually. This should help us read Voegelin anew.

One of the central insights of Voegelin is precisely that a definition of politics abstracted from the concrete materials of participation is bound to fall into the abyss of its own abstraction. Thinking can be about politics but cannot form politics to its mould, for it cannot but come after politics. It recognizes that politics leaves behind its own materials—speeches and deeds—never fully its practice. Since thinking cannot get behind the materials to observe their practical constitution for the *energeia* that is practice cannot be wholly comprehended, it admits that is constituted by politics and not the other way around. The project of thinking a politics prior to historical existence is as much of a fiction as the project of thinking a historical existence prior to politics.

For Voegelin, “to set up a government is an essay in world creation.”⁶³⁹ Politics is the activity of symbolic evocation of the community unfolding in participation. The

⁶³⁹ Eric Voegelin, “Appendix A,” *History of Political Ideas: Hellenism, Rome and Early Christianity*, vol. 1, ed., Athanasios Moulakis, *Collected Works 19* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 225.

evocative act shares the qualities of the Arendtian notion of experience defined in Chapter Five. To evoke the community in participation is to *attempt* to order it explicitly or implicitly toward “non-appearing” ends. In the evocative act a “little world of order” emerges, which gives human life “a semblance of meaning.”⁶⁴⁰ Thus, politics has its genesis in a quest for meaning, a meaning which flows out of the acts of participation in reality. Its situation amidst the tension of existence brings to the fore the *narrativity* of the symbolic articulation of that tension. Only through narrative can human beings articulate and reflect on themselves and their relationship with the “community of being.”

The narrativity of politics constitutes a red thread of agreement running through Voegelin and Arendt: as human existence has a narrative cast, so political science is a hermeneutic science. Narrative has a paradoxical structure, reflecting the paradox of participation. Voegelin illustrates this paradox by the simple example of beginning to write a book chapter.⁶⁴¹ Writing the first sentence expresses an *intention* to write simply. But this intention would not suffice for anything “above the level of a railway guide,” as Orwell once put it. For narrative to be meaningful, the beginning must reflect the intentionality inherent in a “knowing” quest after truth. And yet, the intention with which the chapter was begun determines neither its final form, nor its narrative message. Both reader and writer must wait until the whole chapter emerges. The whole is manifest in space (printed pages), in time (of reading), and in meaning (of truth) and the reader must take stock of it in all three dimensions. Upon surveying the whole chapter, the reader finds that it points beyond itself to the book, and the book to the vast field of

⁶⁴⁰ Voegelin, “Appendix A,” *Collected Works* 19, 225.

⁶⁴¹ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 13-14.

social debate it responds to, which, in a manner of speaking, is spurring the writing forward without determining it. Each whole (chapter, book, social debate) is illumined by the larger context in which it is embedded. No whole would exist without the luminous relationship with what is beyond itself that is formative of its own construction. Each narrative act is therefore complete and incomplete simultaneously, pointing beyond itself infinitely. Reader and writer both become conscious that the beginning of the narrative was no beginning at all. The pointing beyond itself undermines the objectivity of any beginning or end of the narrative act contained within the book. It reflects the metaphysical nature of human experience as we have seen in Arendt. In Voegelin's words, "Neither the beginning nor the end comes first,"⁶⁴² for "the story cannot begin unless it starts in the middle."⁶⁴³

The structure of the narrative act corresponds to the structure of experience defined in Chapter Five through Arendt. Every narrative act points beyond itself, backwards, to the common sense that makes it possible and, forwards, to the truth it strives to attain. Of course, the *sensus communis*, being a "habit of judgment,"⁶⁴⁴ does not *cause* the narrative act. Voegelin's *sensus communis* is compatible with Arendt's common sense as a "sensation of reality"⁶⁴⁵ helping us orient ourselves in the world. Likewise, the truth expressed by the act of narration is not to be found dogmatically contained therein. It lies beyond, in the experience of truth, which the narrative act has striven to symbolize. A hermeneutics of political science, then, must stem from a theory of symbolization (to

⁶⁴² Ibid., 13.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁴⁴ Voegelin, "What is Political Reality?" 411.

⁶⁴⁵ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 58-59. See also, Sandra K. Hinchman, "Common Sense & Political Barbarism in the Theory of Hannah Arendt," *Polity*, vol., 17, no., 2 (Winter, 1984): 317-339.

be presented in Chapter Seven). Here it suffices to say that narrative is experienced as more or less truthful insofar as it faithfully represents the knowing movement. Its truth cannot appear in any straightforward, objective sense; it is precariously revealed in the movement of the act; deracinated from its experiential context, it becomes opaque. The narrative act for Voegelin is an uncaused movement that constitutes its own principle; its *telos* in a non-appearing end that cannot be wholly comprehended.⁶⁴⁶

Here we touch the roots of accord between Arendt and Voegelin: to live a human life is to live as a *beginner*. Narrative as a mode of symbolization is manifest as an event in the world; thus, it wholly reflects Arendt's understanding of action. The narrative-event is self-sufficient because it is an ordering of the symbols of experience into a concrete whole. It is initiated by men who lose control of it at their moment of beginning—even in as orderly an enterprise as the writing of an academic book chapter. Voegelin admits that the beginning neither determines the end, nor is determined by anything that went before, because of the nature of the act itself: its truth unfolds in the act, “compelling changes in the construction and making the beginning unsuitable.”⁶⁴⁷ Even when the act is objectively complete, the author cannot control the interpretations and responses it provokes either. So, beginning a narrative means beginning something new of which the end cannot be known in advance. This structure of the narrative act as an insertion of meaning in reality implies an Arendtian stage full of other actors where one's beginning is interpreted and reacted to by one's peers.

⁶⁴⁶ The conclusion recalls our redefinition of experience in Arendt, Chapter Five.

⁶⁴⁷ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 13.

Voegelin's language of order gains an Arendtian flavour at this point. The history of the endless variety of symbolizations of order manifests the fact that to be human means to begin the quest. Conceiving of order as Plato's *metaxy* "cannot be the last word in the matter."⁶⁴⁸ We recognize the truth of this symbol of Plato's *because* we are always attempting to understand the essentially unknowable. Every beginning is extraordinary, miraculous and contingent, as others cannot speak for us; otherwise, we "could simply reprint Plato's dialogues."⁶⁴⁹ If every story begins in the middle, it is by beginning a story that we exist.

Human beings find "room for a multitude of modes of experience that motivate a corresponding multitude of symbolic expressions of experience"⁶⁵⁰ because they live and act in a "luminous" context. In participation they "encounter a plurality of middles, validating a plurality of quests, telling a plurality of stories, all having valid beginnings."⁶⁵¹ Plurality is an empirically verifiable fact of the history of order; it is part of the "structure in reality,"⁶⁵² for order cannot be found outside the plurality of its manifestations. If truth is encountered only experientially, and experience is never singular,⁶⁵³ than truth unfolds only in plurality.⁶⁵⁴ For Voegelin as for Arendt, the individual in his freedom has no antecedent. He discovers his own source as an

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 345.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 29. Note that Voegelin says structure *in* and not *of* reality in order to emphasize the contextual meaning rather than the fixity of this "empirically certifiable fact."

⁶⁵³ The truth of order cannot be in the singular, for one cannot close oneself in one's own consciousness as Voegelin was always careful to show. Otherwise one would be an *idiotes*, although even the Greek *idiotes* could not drop out of participation at the level of perception of reality. Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans., and ed., Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 179.

⁶⁵⁴ Hence, Voegelin often does not speak of "being" but "the community of being" denoting the poles that constitute it.

intersection between beginning *ex nihilo* and the world of meaning into which he was thrown by birth and to which he must respond. Human beings are constituted in natality and plurality, in contingency and fulfilment in the witness of others. Arendt's thought is a re-symbolization of the paradox at the heart of Voegelin.

Yet right here, at the core of his agreement with Arendt, the root of their disagreement is brought to light. Whereas human life for Arendt is constituted by the multiplicity of experiences all of which have a miraculous beginning, for Voegelin life makes sense only in the whole arc of its participatory movement, from its miraculous beginning to its "non-appearing" ends. The Arendtian project consists of theorising beginnings in order to countervail the expansion of the empire of instrumentality over human life and to overturn the dangerous dream of regulating life according to "reason." The broad directedness of action is overlooked, either because it "lies in the activity itself,"⁶⁵⁵ or perhaps out of fear that *any* talk of ends may bring back instrumental thinking into political philosophy. Yet experience understood as a beginning "beyond good and evil" leaves beginners floundering in a nihilistic *energeia* ever transcending into a sparsely inhabited void. As we saw in Chapter Five, ends are formative to experience as providing it with a *telos*. Despite Arendt's reticence, the nature of experience demands talk of ends.

I interpret Arendt such that experience has a broad *telos* that is world-directed, albeit "non-appearing." It manifests in the world as a desire to display oneself in order to trigger the judgment of others. Human beings affirm their existence by beginning, but are fulfilled in the plurality of the world. What began as a project to recover the open-

⁶⁵⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 206.

endedness of human existence as a beginner ends in a project that implicitly binds existence to the witness of others. Arendt's autonomy of politics seems to condemn human beings to an either/or fate: either act in the light of the public realm to win the approval or admiration of others, or a withering-away in a beastly concern for bodily necessities.

Voegelin begins disagreeing with Arendt when he explores further the implications of the plurality of experience. His long-running involvement with the plurality of symbolizations of order in history led him to ask whether "plurality" means multiple realities each with its own plurality, or "a plurality of episodes occurring in the same comprehending It-story."⁶⁵⁶ The first option is dismissed "because we have no experience of a comprehending reality other than its comprehensiveness in relation to reality in its mode of thing-ness."⁶⁵⁷ Such a speculation would negate human experience as such. The possibility of "out-comprehending the comprehending paradox"⁶⁵⁸ is not open to man, whose domain of knowledge is *metaxy*. The second option must therefore be accepted.

However, there are good reasons for accepting the second option. As we saw in the example of beginning to write a book, every beginning points beyond itself to "a Beginning beyond the beginning and [to] an End beyond the end"⁶⁵⁹ of the act itself. This Beginning and End are not merely the discourses whence the act sprang or which it may trigger in others. That would distort the act into a mere instrumental link in the

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

great discursive chain. Beginning and End are rather “symbols expressing the participation of the temporal story in the dimension of the It-reality,”⁶⁶⁰ and are beyond the world of appearances because human experience always everywhere points beyond itself. As symbols they have an experiential basis “in the very structure of the quest itself.”⁶⁶¹ They are the philosophical symbols that express the experience of action.

A human act is “no beginning of anything at all unless it has a function in a communion of existential concern.”⁶⁶² It is a new, contingent re-enactment of the existential concern that moves men toward the truth they already dimly perceive. This truth is the atemporal end which is nowhere to be found outside its temporal unfolding. Following Plato, Voegelin calls this the Beyond.⁶⁶³ There is no experience without transcending. But the *telos* of the movement uncovered in the previous chapter has to be understood experientially not deterministically: “teleology unfortunately is no more than a dignified but unfounded opinion about the order of things once the question of *telos* is taken out of its experiential context.”⁶⁶⁴ That context is the movement of man beyond himself toward the ground that his existence cannot contain.

To act is to evoke an ineffable depth that pulls us beyond appearances. It is the Beyond which is a “non-appearing measure” that is partly constitutive of human experience in our reading of Arendt. Although only implicit, it nonetheless pervades her texts. It is present in the “Introduction *into* Politics” as the ideal which “first [moves] human beings

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 14.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁶⁴ Eric Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” *What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, eds., Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works* 28 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 108.

to act but [...] also the source of constant nourishment for their actions.”⁶⁶⁵ But it is also implicit in *The Human Condition*, which tells us that societies judge by an ideal beyond all yardsticks manifest in the world of appearances;⁶⁶⁶ so that that broad *telos* of action toward the judgment of others must be directedness toward this unmanifest standard. This standard does not loiter around the end of action, but operates in the very heart of society understood as a “community of judgment.”⁶⁶⁷ The give-and-take of life becomes a worldly space of appearances only when the actions gesture towards a “non-appearing measure” that forms the invisible heart around which the space comes into being.

The return to everyday experience begun by Strauss and sustained by Arendt was completed by Voegelin. Human beings act as if the future were eternal; they wonder about what is absolutely absent; they are never wholly contained by the here and now. The foreknowledge that they may not reach the end-state that moves them has never prevented their living “beyond themselves,” as the expression goes. They measure themselves and their actions by something brighter yet never present. The radical plurality of human experience reaching beyond the given becomes intelligible only “under the assumption that the truth brought up from the depth of his psyche by human being, though it is not the ultimate truth of reality, is representative of the truth in the divine depth of the Cosmos.”⁶⁶⁸ Human reality is precisely this movement between the infinite harmonious depth and the dissonant articulations that symbolically express it. This is how Arendt’s statement that “Being and Appearing coincide” in *The Life of the*

⁶⁶⁵ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics.” *The Promise of Politics*, 195.

⁶⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 154-155.

⁶⁶⁷ Michael W. Jackson, “The Responsibility of Judgement and the Judgement of Responsibility,” in *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, eds., Gisela T. Kaplan and Clive S. Kessler (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 54.

⁶⁶⁸ Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience,” 234.

Mind needs to be read. The movement between appearance and depth is the inexhaustible source of man's political condition.

If we are to understand politics as an expression of this movement, each actor is *a part* and *the whole* of the political community. The actor is a part of the whole by the singular perspective he inserts into the world, yet simultaneously he is a whole, for the political game exists as a whole nowhere except in his luminous apperception of the It. Here lies the paradox: each has his own perspective on the whole, yet the whole does not exist except in each of the perspectives.⁶⁶⁹ The whole is apprehended by each yet comprehended by none. The paradox is exemplified in the problem of political representation. A political community is re-presented "elementally"⁶⁷⁰ in the evocative language of the actors or players who constitute it; this apparent constitution nonetheless disallows anyone to assert that the community is *just there*. The community as a whole exists only in its luminous apprehension in the psyche of each participant, who invokes it from his own depth by trustingly symbolizing it in the world of appearances. Whereas cognitively, or intentionally, it exists only in the various *dokei moi* of the world of appearing, as Arendt puts it, the appearances point beyond themselves to the metaphysical movement that made them possible. Though singularities, the *dokei moi* are also true representatives of the whole.

The upshot of this analysis seems wholly Arendtian: no truth exists outside of the perspectival opinions. However, Arendt overlooks the fact that each player knows that

⁶⁶⁹ See McMahon's marriage example in McMahon, "Voegelin's Paradox of Consciousness," 127-128.

⁶⁷⁰ By "elemental representation," Voegelin means all the external aspect of representation, i.e., the totality of speeches, deeds, articulations, rituals, institutions and cultural products by which we distinguish a society. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 31-34.

the whole is autonomous and that it helps to shape each perspective by inducing new intentions. Truth is not in these perspectives merely, even if manifest solely through them. If we rest content with this elementary analysis, we get no farther than an intersubjectively formed, socially constructed meaningful whole in which all participate. But this misses the movement whereby the common whole escapes the intentions and perspectives of each. The condition for such a participatory world-creating activity is the articulation of order in a symbolical form.

This nuance exposes their radical disagreement in approach—a disagreement that goes to the heart of our problem of *thinking* about *practical* political events. Delving deeper into the contrast, I shall argue that thinking about politics with Voegelin obsolesces Arendt's ontological approach; brings to the fore the ubiquity of politics; and, consequently, supersedes the dramaturgic, revelatory concept of action which, as we saw in Chapter Four, is bound up with Arendt's ontology of appearance.

Arendt's theoretical stance is haunted by the ontological demands of her thought. Wittingly or not, her ontology implicates standards that historical acts must meet to qualify as anything more than behavior. This fixes Arendt's political science in a pose of nuanced externality to real political events, transposing speeches and deeds onto the ontological definitions rather than just addressing the historical materials. The net result is a peculiar rehabilitation of historical action that is immediately discounted through the ontological lens of the scholar.

Voegelin's discovery of the paradoxical structure of participation frees him directly to face historical experience, just as Arendt demanded. His criticism of ontology applies to her too, albeit in a much more nuanced manner:

The appearance of the term ontology in particular marks a phase in the Western effort to extricate philosophy from its bondage to a dogma that had degenerated, in the wake of the Reformation disputes about a true theology, to the conception of an autonomous doctrine. This effort was necessary, and it is still necessary today, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it miscarried with unfortunate consequences. Although ever since Locke one of the declared purposes of the effort was the recovery of experience, the experiential basis of symbolic language, 'metaphysical' or 'theological,' was in fact not recovered. On the contrary, the effort threw out, together with the degenerative doctrinism of the *fides*, the *ratio fidei* that had been Anselm's concern, without regaining even the erotic tension toward the divine ground that had been the moving force in the noetic quest of Plato and Aristotle. As a result, far from recovering the reason of the quest, the effort set 'reason' free to become the instrument for 'rationalizing' the ideological irrationality of doctrinalizing experiences of alienation.⁶⁷¹

Ontology rightly terminated the Scholastic derailment in metaphysical foundationalism or "metaphysical and theological fundamentalism"⁶⁷² as Voegelin called it elsewhere. It was a move to restore philosophy, but by ignoring the transcendental nature of experience, it ended up blocking its own road toward a true experiential science. Scholars squandered enormous resources on the mock battles of post-foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, fighting an enemy that had already died a natural death. Voegelin marks a break with the possibility of an ontological system of politics, especially one that defines "the central concept of political science"⁶⁷³ ontologically like *The Human Condition*. It is now clear that to construct an ontology of political practice is to submit reality to an order outside itself. Politics cannot be defined ontologically, but

⁶⁷¹ Eric Voegelin, "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth," in *What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed., Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works* 28 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 198. Voegelin sensed this point from the beginning of his scholarly career, in his criticism of the South West German School of neo-Kantianism. See Eric Voegelin, "Autobiographical Memoir," in Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution*, 47.

⁶⁷² Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason," 64.

⁶⁷³ Hannah Arendt, "The Tradition of Political Thought," *The Promise of Politics*, 45.

ontology may be of provisional help in the quest.⁶⁷⁴ In Voegelin's terms, to understand experience is to participate in the movement in which it unfolds, but this time by re-enacting it reasonably, that is, by making it transparent in *logos*. It is actuality that orders ontology, not the other way around.

The very clarity of some of Arendt's main concepts, like "action," or "space of appearance", spells an elision of the materials of history which to Voegelin is unavailable. To illustrate her nuanced externality, let us take for example the concept of "freedom" in her essay "What is Freedom?" For Arendt, freedom bears a heavy load: it establishes the primacy of experience; it refutes the modern dogma that freedom is ensured and regulated by politics; and it rejects a whole slew of theoretical misconceptions around the liberal concept of freedom. This is a welcome move away from social scientific convention. There follows her ontological definition of freedom: calling into being a new thing which never existed before "even as an object of cognition or imagination ...". This is clarified by examining ancient Greek and Roman experience, where freedom was an end in itself; for they were the "only ancient political communities [...] founded for the express purpose of serving the free."⁶⁷⁵ This helps her clarify our own experiential situation, which happens to be fallen. In this process, Arendt has empowered herself to illumine a variety of historical situations, as well as quite probably garnering the enthusiastic endorsement of many free men and women. Her understanding of freedom potentiates her philosophy of beginning by emphasizing its

⁶⁷⁴ See also Sandro Chignola, "The Experience of Limitation: Political Form and Science of Law in the Early Writings of Eric Voegelin," *Politics, Order and History: Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*, ed., Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 64.

⁶⁷⁵ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" *Between Past and Future*, 151, 154.

miraculous and active nature, while its expirable, ephemeral quality chimes with her idea that freedom is experienced prior to any theoretical articulations regarding its nature. It seems to uncap the experiential wells that lie at the root of philosophy while simultaneously placing theory in the service of real political practice; viz. equality, participation, or deliberative democracy. It becomes a means to think about an end: a peculiar politics of clarifying our awareness of events, opening up spaces where the potential of freedom might be actualized. The lack of any talk of ends creates an opportunity to use political thought for our own freedom-enhancing political ends. This is indeed how Arendt has been utilized by some of her post-modern readers.⁶⁷⁶

Voegelin by contrast disconnects freedom from Arendt's ontology of appearance by situating it in the metaxy of participation. Human beings have a peculiar freedom: less than the freedom of gods but more than the biological determinism of beasts. Politics is the human response to this condition.⁶⁷⁷ As Barry Cooper says, "Within the ontological constant of limited freedom, human beings can create a political order that more or less adequately responds to that attribute."⁶⁷⁸ The nature of freedom does not preclude talk of ends either. Yet Voegelin's talk of ends—especially "divine" or "transcendent" ones—seems to close off the possibilities that Arendt opened. It even sounds old and stale compared to the exciting Arendtian potentialities. But for Voegelin freedom cannot be or be understood outside the participatory movement beyond what is toward a non-

⁶⁷⁶ The most famous is perhaps Bonnie Honig in Bonnie Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁶⁷⁷ But politics is not the *only* human response to *metaxy*. Asking questions that go beyond what is immediately given "to the last point" or philosophizing is another expression of freedom. See "What is Political Reality?" 366.

⁶⁷⁸ Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 174.

appearing whole. Freedom is the movement of an existence that cannot grasp itself. It is the possibility of life and hence, where there is life, freedom is present. The ends of life are simply whatever freedom makes possible through its own actualization. Philosophy cannot set ends, as Arendt well knew. But it was Voegelin who freed historical action to unfold itself without the burden of any external philosophical or scientific expectations. The philosopher does not define freedom first, then look for its actualization in the materials of history; he exposes the historicity of its constitution in the materials. To illustrate with an example dear to Voegelin and Arendt, the death of Socrates, institutionalists would say that, once found guilty, Socrates was no longer free. Arendt would give a more nuanced account: on the one hand, Socrates' submission to the law was world-affirming, yet on the other, Arendt would have to acknowledge that her account of freedom runs into some trouble inasmuch as Socrates took a conscious decision—and an act is free only insofar as it escapes the decision—and he brought nothing into being other than his own death. Voegelin, by contrast, would only have to read Socrates's words to recognize that his inaction signaled his freedom. That inaction disclosed the truth that one is never free to disobey the law, in that freedom is derived from law. Socrates's obedience illumines the condition of a man of mature freedom, disclosing that the value of life can only be judged by the transcendent opening beyond life.⁶⁷⁹

The two other features that distinguish Voegelin's political philosophy from Arendt's follow from the different modes in which their respective returns to the ordinary occur. Firstly, Voegelin recognizes the ubiquity of politics; secondly, he avoids Arendt's

⁶⁷⁹ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol., III, *Plato and Aristotle*, ed., Dante Germino, *Collected Works* 16 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 66-67.

unpredictability and theatricality without losing the power of her insights. A simple example reveals Voegelin's recognition of the ubiquitous, often stern aspects of politics. Arendt must consider "rulership" anti-political for it closes the ontological space of appearing, whereas Voegelin is beholden to no such commitments, stating, "No matter how ordered a society may be, this corporeality, imposing the need to provide material subsistence and to control the passions, consigns it to existence in the form of organized rulership."⁶⁸⁰ More generally, if Arendt sees the modern world as almost wholly devoid of "political" activity, Voegelin can easily detect the political nature of the activity of public corporations, for example.⁶⁸¹ So long as a problem or goal has become the common concern of a political society understood as a social field of meaning, then the concern is political in that it impacts the order and organization of that society. The political appears from the "self-illumination of society"⁶⁸² in which the living partnership that keeps society together is constantly evoked, renegotiated or withers away. The order of a society does not follow straightforwardly from the evident or elemental goals it may have, but emerges from the mysterious movement that symbolically draws up the ineffable truth. It lies at the intersection between the symbolic articulation and its Beyond; whence Voegelin says, "Every concrete symbol is true insofar as it envisages the truth, but none is completely true insofar as the truth about being is essentially beyond human reach."⁶⁸³ A society's *nomos* is not just constituted in action, as Arendt had it, but is in continual movement beyond itself. Its order is to be found in those sites where the concrete reenactment of existence occurs, and only

⁶⁸⁰ Voegelin, "What is Political Reality?" 398-399.

⁶⁸¹ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 375.

⁶⁸² Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 27.

⁶⁸³ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, 46.

secondarily in ideas, institutions and legal spaces where it is “supposed” to occur. Only in this way can Arendt conclude that “all the relevant business in the affairs of [France]”⁶⁸⁴ during the war years was transacted by the men and women of the *Résistance*. The unseen truth of “the emotional center of the [cosmion]”⁶⁸⁵ remains mysterious because the movement cannot be described, only re-enacted. This does not mean that it is unknowable⁶⁸⁶—it is Voegelin’s claim that the political community is radically open to living out its “non-appearing” secret more fully, with a direction already present in the contingent foothold it has in truth. The tension breaks out into the open because political society has to deal with “the finite character of the cosmion and the absoluteness at which it aims.”⁶⁸⁷ This may have sounded radical to contemporaries, but it is plausible in its affinity with postmodern thinking; what at the end of the last section I termed one side of that unlikely partnership between ancient metaphysics and postmodern thought which Voegelin effects.

Voegelin’s rejection of the ontology of appearance shifts attention away from the inherent unpredictability, instability, virtuosity and heroism of Arendt. Her virtuosity of action does not tear the world apart because it is enacted with an outfit of practices and institutions that keep the game on an even keel: “judgment [...] action in concert, promising, forgiveness, law, the public-private distinction, foundings, constitution-making, and amendment.”⁶⁸⁸ Honig points out that politics for Arendt is the active

⁶⁸⁴ Arendt, “Preface,” *Between Past and Future*, 3.

⁶⁸⁵ Voegelin, “Appendix A,” 226.

⁶⁸⁶ Voegelin, “What is Political Reality?” 345.

⁶⁸⁷ Voegelin, “Appendix A,” 227.

⁶⁸⁸ Bonnie Honig, “The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response to ‘Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action’ by Dana R. Villa,” *Political Theory*, vol., 21, no., 3 (Aug., 1993), 529.

negotiation of the boundaries of boundless action. This bounding is not imposed on action, it is inherent in the evocative action insofar as it calls for multiple responses to-and-fro. Her stance is effective insofar as it demonstrates the impossibility of instrumental understanding, but it lies open to the charge of irrationality, indifference to substance, and radical historicism. This criticism fails, however, after Voegelin's account of participation. However ineffable to Arendt, reality is far from unknowable. The experiential movement is distinguished by trust in the meaningfulness of its move from the depth to symbolization, "of raising it to the reality of its truth."⁶⁸⁹ As Voegelin expresses it:

The imaginative play has its hard core of reality as it is motivated by man's trust (*pistis*) in reality as intelligibly ordered, as a Cosmos. Our perspectival experiences of reality in process may render no more than fragments of insight, the fragmentary elements may be heterogeneous, and they may look even incommensurable, but the trust in the underlying oneness of reality, its coherence, lastingness, constancy of structure, order, and intelligibility, will inspire the creation of images which express the ordered wholeness sensed in the depth.⁶⁹⁰

This assertion does not deny the contingency and open-endedness of the play of existence that is pivotal to Arendt. It merely affirms that, but for this underlying trust, man would misrecognize his appearances in the world as nihilistic—which more than anything would open the door to an instrumental manipulation of human appearing as a desperate defence against the disorder then perceived inherent in existence.

The recovery of the metaphysical quality of experience carried out in Chapter Five now comes into full maturity. Political action is not only contingent, it is also ethical. What was merely a possibility in Arendt may now be understood fully. Voegelin spells out this "ethics of experience" in his 1963 essay "Right by Nature," where he attacks the

⁶⁸⁹ Voegelin, "Right by Nature," *Anamnesis*, 149.

⁶⁹⁰ Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, ed., Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works 12* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 127.

derailment of natural law into the claim of universal norms of conduct by revisiting Aristotle's symbol "right by nature."⁶⁹¹ He revisits this symbol because "it is the first of its kind which warrants hope that we may discover in it the experiential bases of the symbol,"⁶⁹² only without the dogmatization that accompanied the propagation of natural law as a school of philosophy. Voegelin unpacks a contradiction in a particularly problematic part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by re-situating it in the context of the discussion on justice in the *Politics*. First Aristotle says that justice by nature "has the same force everywhere and does not exist by people's thinking this or that," then he adds in the same breath that justice by nature is changeable: "with us there is something that is just even by nature, yet all of it is changeable."⁶⁹³ This paradox reveals its kernel of truth in the context of the *Politics*, where invariable natural justice refers to the justice of the ideal *polis* that is not ruled by men.⁶⁹⁴ Since "right by nature" consists in the ideal *polis* but at the same time is firmly rooted "in man's concrete experience of what is right, which is immutable and everywhere the same,"⁶⁹⁵ Voegelin elaborates that right by nature cannot be refracted by human reason into a dogmatic set of rules for governing any city of man:

[T]here can be no natural law conceived as an eternal, immutable, universally valid normativity confronting the changeable positive law. This is so because the justice of the polis, its *nomos*, insofar as it constitutes the rule of law among men free and equal, is itself right by nature.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹¹ Voegelin, "Right by Nature," 140-156. See also, William Paul Simmons, "Voegelin and Levinas on the 'Foundations' of Ethics and Politics: Transcendence and Immanence Revisited," *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, ed., Peter A. Petrakis and Cecil L. Eubanks (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 131-133.

⁶⁹² Voegelin, "Right by Nature," 140.

⁶⁹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans., David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), bk., 5, 1134b20, 1134b29.

⁶⁹⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a38; Voegelin "Right by Nature," 142.

⁶⁹⁵ Voegelin, "Right by Nature," 147.

⁶⁹⁶ Voegelin, "A Letter to Alfred Schütz Concerning Edmund Husserl," 58-59.

This is the context in which Aristotle claims concrete actions possess “a higher degree of truth”⁶⁹⁷ than universal principles. Ethics unfolds from participation in existence, for it is “the truth of existence in the reality of action in concrete situations.”⁶⁹⁸ Ethical truth lies at the level of the concrete⁶⁹⁹—this and only this justifies Socrates’ philosophical position at his death. Even in the case of what is generally presumed to be the opposite, the Decalogue of Moses, Voegelin observes that:

[t]he commands are not general rules of conduct but the substance of divine order to be absorbed by the souls of those who listen to the call [...] It is framed by the firm blocks of the first and tenth commandments with their injunctions against the antitheistic rebellion of pride and the antihuman rebellion of envy. Between the two protective dams, in the middle, can move the order of the people through the rhythm of time.⁷⁰⁰

As an ideal, natural law only comes to be a problem in the philosopher’s reaction to the experience of disorder. Since philosophy cannot prescribe to politics objective, universal rules of conduct, natural law is to be understood as a possibility of critique, not positive lawgiving.

Simply put, the quarrel between Arendt and Voegelin consists in this: whereas Arendt’s account lends “existential supremacy”⁷⁰¹ to action as beginning, Voegelin extends it across the whole movement of existence. This extension is not a rejection but a deepening of the Arendtian beginning. With this in mind, we now turn to Voegelin’s conception of founding, without her ontological baggage.

⁶⁹⁷ Voegelin, “Right by Nature,” 148.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷⁰⁰ Voegelin, “Israel and Revelation,” 480.

⁷⁰¹ George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Oxford: Robertson, 1984), 7.

6.3. Founding Moments and Participation

Voegelin considers the problem of founding in his discussion of the book of Genesis. The discussion is not justified by theological motives but emerges out of the quest for a beginning. The seemingly infinite regress into which thinking about any particular beginning is prone to fall prompts the development of concepts by which the quest illuminates its movement. Yet the questing mind is uncertain whether they are merely “the phantasy [*sic*] of the present analysis.”⁷⁰² The meditation needs to return to its symbolic self-interpretations to reassure itself. The problem of founding is not approached as a philosophical problem, but emerges out of the questing mind’s need to ensure its own reality and “calm down”⁷⁰³ the abstract questions about its own abstractions.

The suspicion of theology still lingers, however, over someone who spoke so much about “the divine ground” and “God” and who proclaimed himself a “mystic philosopher.”⁷⁰⁴ The prudent reader may ask: why *this* beginning and no other? Voegelin never articulated an explicit answer, yet it is clear enough to dispel any suspicions. The meditative movement backwards from the beginning of writing a sentence to the Beginning passes through several stages: from the dimensions of space, time and meaning to the “communion of existential concern” which enabled a beginning, to the problem of language inherent in this communion and the act of

⁷⁰² Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 18.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁴ Eric Voegelin, *Letter 422*. To Gregor Sebba (Feb. 3, 1973) in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, CW 30, Selected Correspondence 1950-1984, trans. Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck & William Petropulos, ed., and intro. ,Thomas A. Hollweck (2007; Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 751. See also, Frederick G. Lawrence, “The Problem of Eric Voegelin, Mystic Philosopher and Scientist,” *International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 35-58.

participating in it, and on to the philosopher's language as a means of communicating participation reasonably, to the structure of simultaneous luminosity and intentionality which is illumined with the help of philosophy.⁷⁰⁵ In the end, it finds that reality and language are bound together through the experience of participation such that neither makes sense without the other, yet neither can be resolved into the other:

There is indeed no beginning to be found in this or that part of the complex; the beginning will reveal itself only if the paradox is taken seriously as the something that constitutes the complex as a whole. This complex, however, as the expansion of equivocations shows, includes language and truth, together with consciousness and reality.⁷⁰⁶

The return to the Biblical beginning occurs due to the inner consistency of the quest: there is no vantage point outside "the materials" of the participatory complex whence the inquiring mind can contemplate the Beginning *as such*. The quest seeks within the complex until it reaches *this* beginning, for "how does a Beginning begin if there is no acting Beyond and nothing to be acted upon?"⁷⁰⁷ *This* beginning proves superior to competing myths of beginning such as Hegel's or Hesiod's because it not only presupposes, it also symbolizes the experience of the Beyond. Viewed from within the complex however, "the beginning of the genealogical line remains ambiguous."⁷⁰⁸ Voegelin's thought remains wedded to the materials, for to step outside them would mean stepping outside existence—not into airy abstractions, but into "the vacuum of [pseudo-abstractions]."⁷⁰⁹ His reasons emerge from "philosophic analysis"⁷¹⁰ of the materials. The return to the Biblical beginning is not moved by theologico-political

⁷⁰⁵ Voegelin, "In Search of Order," 13-16.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷⁰⁹ Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," 274.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

dogma, but is a return to a fuller symbolization of the experience of a world-constituting act. It is that beginning beyond which the quest cannot go.

One final objection may be raised: though the reasons for the return to Revelation may be sound, the nature of such a proceeding may warp the quest into something it is not: a contemplation of beginning *ex nihilo* instead of a human beginning, which is always relative to what preceded it. As Arendt noted, the paradox of foundings was smuggled into Western political philosophy through the Judeo-Christian God.⁷¹¹ Firstly, I acknowledge that the propriety of a return to Revelation can only be demonstrated only by the results of the analysis; no *a priori* argument can suffice independently of the returning movement. Secondly, at this point one knows enough already about the constancy and structure of the complex of participation to ease concerns about beginnings *ex nihilo*. Insofar as Genesis is a narrative of the Divine command, it is a description of the Divine appearance in the human domain. Since there is no reality outside the complex of human movement in *metaxy*, the Divine act that occurs in that *metaxy* must share the characteristics of action already described. God may be everything or nothing, but once He enters into the world He is a partner in the formative movement of existence. If God acts, He acts in the only way by which this is possible in *metaxy*:

The authors of Genesis I, we prefer to assume, were human beings of the same kind as we are; they had to face the same kind of reality, with the same kind of consciousness, as we do; and when, in their pursuit of truth, they put down their words on whatever material, they had to raise, and to cope with, the same questions we confront when we put down our words.⁷¹²

⁷¹¹ Arendt, "Willing," *The Life of the Mind*, 203-305.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

The return to Revelation, therefore, cannot be a doctrinal exegesis, or a projection of any type of fantasy about the nature of the Divine and creation.⁷¹³ It is a part—the most important part—of the meditative quest.

Voegelin's return to Revelation is the endpoint of the meditative quest which tests the truth unfolded through that quest. In the return the truth apprehended dimly at the beginning of the quest has become transparently luminous. In order to avoid misunderstandings about an all-powerful sovereign who *made* the cosmos, Voegelin brooks the more literal Buber-Rosenzweig translation: "God spoke: Light be! Light became." This act of founding is simultaneously intentional and luminous: it is intentional because it is an act of naming, but it is luminous insofar as the naming "is a power in reality that evokes structures in reality."⁷¹⁴ The founding act thus has evocative strength or "magic"⁷¹⁵ power. The story of the Divine naming of the cosmos is by analogy the story of the beginning of the political "cosmion." It "has to convey an aura of analogy"⁷¹⁶ in Voegelin's words, for the way human beings experience and symbolize foundings *post factum* is equivalent.

But "what is that kind of reality where the spoken word evokes the structures of which it speaks?"⁷¹⁷ After the founding act, it is symbolized as "formless waste" (*tohu*). Yet this must not be misconstrued as a material nothing, as an intentionalist reading might have it. It is "neither nothing nor not-nothing,"⁷¹⁸ for it reflects the structure of reality as such.

⁷¹³ Ibid., 20-22.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁷¹⁵ Voegelin, "Appendix A," 230.

⁷¹⁶ Voegelin, "In Search of Order," 20.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., 22.

It is not nothing, for then no creative evocation would be necessary, as Arendt shows when considering the first question of philosophy: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”⁷¹⁹ Yet it is nothing because it is experienced as unreal, shapeless matter, unstructured by the formative movement in reality. The pre-creation matter *becomes* “formless waste” in a post-creation perspective. The creation of the cosmos is not equivalent to a carpenter’s working a table, as Arendt feared; it is the authoritative act that creates the “obedience in which men retain their freedom.”⁷²⁰ This authority is established by a declaration giving meaning to the creative act, making it authoritative. The founder must put the founding act into words;⁷²¹ the Book of Genesis is that Word.

Voegelin agrees with Arendt that foundings are radical, self-sufficient beginnings which reconstitute the world without being absolute beginnings, for they do “not occur in a vacuum.”⁷²² Even the most radical beginnings share this structure. If no notion of order existed prior, no authority would exist, either, to be bestowed on the founder. The new truth “coerces,” in Arendt’s word, only those who already entertain a concept of the public space “however inarticulate, deformed, or suppressed.”⁷²³ This truth is not some caprice of the founder which somehow became a successful public relations *coup*; it must connect with “what is common to the order of man’s existence as a partner in the comprehending reality.”⁷²⁴ The founding story is the symbolic re-enactment of the intersection between the eternal truth that is always dimly to be apprehended and the prevalent historical symbols.

⁷¹⁹ Arendt, “The Tradition of Political Thought,” *The Promise of Politics*, 55.

⁷²⁰ Arendt, “What is Authority?” *Between Past and Future*, 106.

⁷²¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 130 and Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 25.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷²⁴ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 26.

The moment of founding shares the paradox of participation: it is a narrative that names in the mode of thing-ness while also being a luminous event in “the It-tale that demands expression.”⁷²⁵ The two cannot be separated by positing a sovereign founder who tells a perfect story. The experience and the story are two sides of the same coin. The sovereign does not spring out of nothing, and the prophet or founder has to speak of his experience authoritatively. It is the task of political science to unravel this nexus through a theory of symbolism. This task is carried out in the next chapter.

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 30.

7. The Political Science of Eric Voegelin

Strauss, Arendt and Voegelin all agree where political science must begin: in the everyday understanding, common opinions, speeches and deeds that political life consists in. Strauss proved unable to achieve a return to the ordinary, however; for him, experience is a route—albeit the only route—to philosophizing. Arendt endowed experience with a depth it lacked in Strauss, turning it from a stepping stone to airy abstractions into a resting place where reason dwells. Accordingly, Chapter Five advanced toward a political science that is both experiential and participatory. But that chapter presented thought *on the move*; it moved with Arendt to a stance that is not explicitly Arendtian, where the terrain is difficult to illumine, lying on the pale of Arendt's thinking. It opened a new range of problems on which Arendt provided little guidance. First, the proposition that the experience of understanding is reasonable, because it *comes* to resemble the experience of philosophizing, raises the question of distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable experience. How to save reason-as-experience from sinking into subjectivism and solipsism, if its principles of verification remain invisible to anyone other than the reasoning mind? Second, the proposition that speeches and deeds both constitute political life and point beyond themselves is vulnerable from two sides: to home in on their objective reality as speeches and deeds is to risk losing sight of the experiential movement that yielded them, that is, to risk depriving the political event of its phenomenality. On the other hand, to move through them toward the experiential quest for meaning they point to, is to risk losing sight of their empirical situatedness, that is, to risk merely philosophizing in lieu of understanding the political event.

Having come to a resting place, this chapter assesses the nature of this new equilibrium in light of the above questions. I shall argue in the following section that Voegelin's science of order takes adequate account of the risks of an empiricism cut off from the truth of order, on one side, and a philosophizing cut off from historical situatedness, on the other. I first present his science of order as a mode of reflection about the whole arc of the movement of participation. This broaches the problem of a science cut off from the empirical connectedness of the materials *qua* pure reflection on the nature of being descending into solipsism or metaphysics purporting to "out-comprehend" existence. I turn to Voegelin's "equivalency of experiences", "historiogenesis", and "unoriginal thinking" to examine how his science remains deeply empirical throughout its reflective movement. These terms allow science to distinguish reasonable from unreasonable experiences. Voegelin also appropriates the terms "depth" and "psyche" to symbolize how the movement of reason beyond itself remains open-ended, that no high ground exists outside the movement whence reason or reality might be comprehended. Third and finally, I examine his "theory of symbolization" to show how speeches and deeds constitute political phenomena while, at the same time, pointing beyond themselves. The symbolization's gesture beyond itself lends direction to the reasonable quest for the originary experience whence the symbols sprang. Bringing thinking and understanding together, his science of order decisively distinguishes Voegelin's work from Strauss's and Arendt's.

7.1. The Science of Order

Unpacking Voegelin's account of order, symbolization, and reason is no easy task, for he often errs on the side of abstracting to a ground outside of the phenomena. In a

thoughtful critique of the second and third volumes of *Order and History*, Stanley Rosen charges Voegelin precisely with this.⁷²⁶ Rosen's Voegelin identifies the Christian God as the apex and source of human order, and evaluates civilizations in terms of their approximation to Him. The Greeks are judged from the vantage point of Christianity, which puts Voegelin in a position outside Greek civilization, whence he judges its existential failures. This Voegelin founders on a number of contradictions: he extols participation but stands outside the material he is studying; he claims that the meaning of history is open, when it is in fact closed by Revelation; he is a philosopher who trivializes philosophy by positing its ground—a *passionate* yearning for God—outside itself. Rosen is correct and his critique applies equally to Voegelin's views on modernity: from an Archimedean position he passes judgment on modernity as "Gnostic" and its political movements as "ersatz religions." This is the conservative Voegelin of the middle period in the 1950s and '60s, when he published *The New Science of Politics*, the first three volumes of *Order and History*, and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. These are learned works that have in fact little of relevance to say about the modern condition. The philosopher overcame the conservative, however, and my argument rests on his later works, especially the last volume of *Order and History* and *Anamnesis*. We can formulate a participatory science of order from Voegelin's thought, even if Voegelin himself did not always stay loyal to his own philosophical insights—perhaps because they mostly matured near the end of his life.

⁷²⁶ Stanley Rosen, "Order and History," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Dec., 1958): 257-276. The same point can be made for sections of Voegelin's fourth volume of *Order and History*. See, for example, Szakolczai's critique of his treatment of ancient Greek history in Arpad Szakolczai, *The Genesis of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 70-71. From different perspectives, this point is also made by David D. Corey, "Voegelin and Aristotle on Nous: What is Noetic Political Science?" *The Review of Politics*, vol., 64, no., 1 (Winter, 2002), 57-79.

If participation has a transcendence that may be illumined but not out-comprehended by reason, then a science of order arises from the insight that science is the reasoned reflection, within order, of the light of order. A mode of reflection on what comprehends us, it can neither be a search for a metaphysical resting-place nor a belief that truth is equivalent to appearance but only a reflection on “the changeability, the *kineton* itself, and the methods of raising it to the reality of its truth.”⁷²⁷ It is *the* science of human existence, which reflects on the whole arc of the movement of participation, without fragmenting into psychology, epistemology, politology or any of the multitude of *logoi* that have been invented to explain a part of the movement. Science recognizes that any of the *logoi* may be an appropriate starting point for reflection and interpretation, but each must transcend its boundaries in recognizing its own radical dependency on the metaphysical quality of experience and the subversion of its autonomy. The partial *logoi* turn out to be equivocal beginnings to which science must meditatively return, for “[o]nly when the order of being as a whole, unto its origin in transcendent being, comes into view, can the analysis be undertaken.”⁷²⁸ Science is but reason’s mirror within the whole, reflecting on the rational image of the whole.

From these reflections, the risk is obvious that the science of order may descend to solipsism about the constitution of being without regard for the concrete reality it is studying *i.e.* it takes flight towards the non-appearing measure that emerges in its movement beyond the materials. Voegelin’s science was not a license for philosophical speculation, however. In an address on the state of the German university in the Nazi era, Voegelin famously read a passage from *Being and Time* on the nature of signs

⁷²⁷ Voegelin, “Right by Nature,” 149.

⁷²⁸ Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 12.

(which used the example of a car indicator), so as to exemplify how far Heidegger had lost touch with reality. As we read it, Voegelin notes, we sense that “something is not in order”: the language soars above the simple, factual example: “Language and fact have somehow separated from one another, and thought has correspondingly become estranged from reality.”⁷²⁹ How far Heidegger’s *thinking* was from *understanding* became evident when the time came to exercise a modicum of political judgment: “he was taken in by the author of *Mein Kampf*.”⁷³⁰ Heidegger’s endeavor to unconceal the truth about Being resulted in an estrangement from reality through his playful hypostatization of language in the complex of “consciousness-reality-language.”⁷³¹

Science may descend to the non-question of “being as such” even if it recognizes the historicity of existence. Voegelin himself is guilty of this at times, especially in his middle period; as when he criticizes Arendt for overlooking the “essential sameness” of totalitarianism and Gnosticism thus denying the uniqueness of the event. Or: “the true dividing line [...] does not run between liberals and totalitarians but between the religious and philosophical transcendentalists on the one side, and the liberal and totalitarian immanentist sectarians on the other.”⁷³² The problem is that this overlooks the empirical issue or the “*fact* that liberals are not totalitarians.”⁷³³ Voegelin’s insistence on the truth of experience, the meditative origin of the knowledge of order, and his sympathy for the classics, make him seem vulnerable to such an error.

⁷²⁹ Eric Voegelin, “The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era,” *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, ed., Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works 12* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 8.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷³¹ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 16.

⁷³² Eric Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” *The Review of Politics*, 15, no. 1 (1953), 75.

⁷³³ Hannah Arendt, “A Reply,” *The Review of Politics*, 15, no. 1 (1953), 80.

The deflection of the quest onto the non-question of being is avoided if science reflects the movement of participation. Science may then recognize that the transcendent character of the movement is shared by the multitude of symbolizations of truth that seem to compete and deny each other's relevance in history. Chapter Five defined this ground theoretically, but in Voegelin the equivalence arises through a combination of empirical work and theoretical reflection. It is manifested empirically as "historiogenesis,"⁷³⁴ and philosophically as speculation on the nature of being. This finding enables science to carry out the movement beyond the materials rationally, that is, in the recognition not only that experiences are unique and perspectival as Arendt and Voegelin both acknowledge,⁷³⁵ but they share a "fundamental identity of structure"⁷³⁶ as well which makes their rational illumination possible.

Historiogenesis is Voegelin's "theory of relativity for the field of symbolic forms."⁷³⁷ It denotes a speculation arising in cosmological societies, linking historical events with mythical accounts of the beginning of order such that practical history is causally related with the first Beginning that lies shrouded in mystery. Each practical beginning is not merely contingent but is meaningfully related to the Beginning. If the question of meaning is to be the "subject matter for empirical exploration,"⁷³⁸ then science cannot cut itself off at the moment of the miraculous beginning but must follow the trail of meaning as far as it leads. The symbolism continuing from cosmological all the way to

⁷³⁴ Voegelin, "The Ecumenic Age," chapter 1; "Anxiety and Reason," *What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, eds., Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works* 28 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990): 52-110.

⁷³⁵ "The experience of reality cannot be total but has the character of a perspective." Voegelin, "Experience and Symbolization," *Collected Works* 12, 120.

⁷³⁶ Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," *Collected Works* 12, 269.

⁷³⁷ Eric Voegelin, "Letter to Donald Ellegood, 21 July, 1960" quoted and commented in Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, "Editor's Introduction," *What is History?*, *Collected Works* 28, xiv.

⁷³⁸ Voegelin, "Configurations of History," in Hollweck and Caringella, "Editor's Introduction," xix.

modern societies is philosophically manifested as “speculation on the ground of being.”⁷³⁹ This confirms empirically the equivalency of experiences. It is simultaneously a theory of relativity affirming the multitude of symbolic expressions in human history the truth of which is participatory, and the transcendent unity that makes it possible to scientifically elucidate the nature of order across time and space: “the sameness which justifies the language of ‘equivalences’ does not lie in the symbols themselves but in the experiences which have engendered them.”⁷⁴⁰ In this way the science of order is decisively differentiated from story-telling while yet sharing its participatory nature.

The science of order moves beyond the symbols towards the engendering experiences: “not the symbols but man himself in search of his humanity and its order”⁷⁴¹ is the reality it seeks to understand. To put the same thing another way, Voegelin’s finding is that the core of science is not a static image of man as such, but the movement of man beyond himself as the constant of historical existence. Insofar as the movement is a constant that illumines the situated participation of human beings, it discovers in the manifold appearances a broad orientedness and intelligibility that cannot be truncated at the level of sheer beginning. The move *beyond* is rational insofar as it is checked and tested against broadly similar efforts “created by our predecessors in the search of truth about human existence,”⁷⁴² for all engage in the same movement. The questioning movement of the scholar beyond the materials mirrors the movement of the subject-matter—social reality itself—beyond its own structure. It is a reflective “search of the

⁷³⁹ Eric Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” *Collected Works* 28, 53.

⁷⁴⁰ Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History,” *Collected Works* 12, 115.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴² Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience,” 122.

search.”⁷⁴³ This reliance on the larger conversation about order that man has symbolized always everywhere allows Voegelin to avoid the trap of self-fascination and to remain always close to the materials.

Yet if the manifold of experiences is the subject-matter, is Voegelin not running the risk of absolutizing *any* experience no matter how irrational? The immediate answer is “no.” Speaking in a different context, Voegelin notes that:

To experience an event in the fullest sense means to understand what has happened, yet understanding requires qualities of knowledge and of intellectual development, of character and of intelligence, which one doesn't necessarily acquire by virtue of the fact that one has lived through an event, whether actively or passively.⁷⁴⁴

The experience of understanding is not experience merely, but the experiential movement to true understanding which we have already traced with Arendt. The question is whether dialogue with others engaged in a similar search, and a rigorous focus on historical symbolizations, check the risk of experience “becoming the resting point”⁷⁴⁵ in the substantive sense of a privileged vantage-point whence the scholar may out-comprehend reality? Voegelin is acutely aware that the movement of inquiry beyond itself does not advance toward a determinable truth lying at its end. The distinguishing feature of the rational movement beyond the materials is its lack of originality. In the words of Gregor Sebba, “Unoriginal thinking is a difficult art to learn. It is not free to invent but forced to organize”⁷⁴⁶ the materials that it gathers along the quest that Arendt called thinking. Its truth is tested by their equivalency to the symbols created by others

⁷⁴³ Ibid., 116.

⁷⁴⁴ Eric Voegelin, “The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era,” *Collected Works* 12, 2.

⁷⁴⁵ Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience,” 123.

⁷⁴⁶ Gregor Sebba, “Prelude and Variations on the Theme of Eric Voegelin,” ed., Helen Sebba, Aníbal A. Bueno and Hendrikus Boers, *The Collected Essays of Gregor Sebba: Truth, History and the Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 209.

in *their* search for truth.⁷⁴⁷ The symbolism of one's thinking is checked against other symbols that have become representative as authoritatively symbolizing the movement of thinking: "Obviously Plato and Shakespeare are clearer and more comprehensive in the understanding of man than is Dr. Jones of Cow College."⁷⁴⁸ If reason is movement beyond the given, it is a process in reality in which the scholar participates in the materials while simultaneously reflecting on them—a paradoxical stance that is dictated by the paradoxical nature of participation. Hence, the movement beyond the materials does not aim at an Archimedean position for the mind cannot step outside of reality and force it into its own pseudo-constructions. If it does fancy that it has reached such a position, reason has collapsed.

To prove that such a collapse is incompatible with understanding, he reappropriates the symbol of the *depth* out of which truth is precariously brought up to conscious experience. This symbol has not been lost since its Greek beginnings—it continues to this day in depth psychology and the psychology of the unconscious. It is "a depth beyond articulate experience;"⁷⁴⁹ the absolute without "substantive content" that forms the "place that is no longer a place"⁷⁵⁰ in Augustine's meditation. Voegelin recognizes in it the movement of his science of order toward a "non-appearing end," while acknowledging the impossibility of delivering on its implicit promise. The movement of participation is broadly directed toward "unbounded"⁷⁵¹ depth.

⁷⁴⁷ Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," 122. See also, Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution*, 25-26.

⁷⁴⁸ Eric Voegelin, "Letter 128, to Robert Heilman, August 22, 1956," in *Selected Correspondence: 1950-1984*, trans., Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropoulos, ed., Thomas A. Hollweck, *Collected Works 30* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 294.

⁷⁴⁹ Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," 124.

⁷⁵⁰ Voegelin, "Theory of Governance," 231.

⁷⁵¹ Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," 124.

As no inner principle arrests the movement, it remains open-ended. To symbolize this open-endedness toward what is beyond itself, the Greeks discovered *psyche*, designating the “site or matrix of experience that surrounds and comprehends the area of conscious experience.”⁷⁵² If it did not also symbolize the open-endedness of science, the experiential movement would risk out-comprehending reality, as it would be equivalent to reality. The science of order avoids this distorting nihilism: “There is *psyche* deeper than consciousness, there is reality deeper than reality experienced, but there is no consciousness deeper than consciousness.”⁷⁵³ The reality that comprehends experience has the same nature as reality experienced. *Psyche* symbolization outfits the scholar to avoid mistaking a component of the consciousness-reality-language complex for the whole. The depth “is fascinating as a threat and a charm.”⁷⁵⁴ It is up to the individual to balance its siren call to truth or nihilism by keeping the depth in balance with the surface; *i.e.* by recognizing its nature as *movement* in-between.

If the science of order is to be a reasonable reflection on the whole, it must have a theory of symbolization: “the whole can be expressed only in symbols.”⁷⁵⁵ Human beings express their participation in reality through symbols that allow them to render intelligible their relationship to the poles that hold reality together: God, world, man and society. These are not subjects but indices toward which human beings are drawn or from which they are repelled in the tensional field that to Voegelin is reality. The tensional whole and the experience of participating therein is metaphysical inasmuch as

⁷⁵² Ibid.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., 126.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁵⁵ Eric Voegelin, “Responses at the Panel Discussion of ‘The Beginning of the Beginning,’” in *The Beginning and the Beyond*, Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences Supplementary Issue of *Loneragan Workshop*, vol., 4, ed., Fred Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 97.

it is plunged in the non-appearing depths, accessible only through the symbols which articulate the movement. In this way the fundamentally mysterious nature of the whole appears to the human mind. Individuals can differentiate their viewpoints—Arendt's *dokei moi*—in terms of the same symbols because they escape precise definition. As long as they retain this quality, they “evoke movements of existence”⁷⁵⁶ by embodying a common experience. But if they lose it, they calcify into dogmas or definitions with which one might instrumentally agree or disagree.

Symbols are apt means of participation for they are susceptible to refinement and change with the changing nature of participation. They are the means by which human beings express their acts of participation and thus indicate its truth-engendering dynamic. Sharing its paradoxical structure, symbols denote nothing beyond them yet gesture to the experience that made them possible. As attempts to respond and articulate one's relationship with reality, they have a broad orientedness beyond the immediate utterance. It is the very quest, not just its articulation that gives a particular utterance its symbolic status. As “the exterior residue of an original full truth comprising both the

⁷⁵⁶ Frederick Lawrence, “On ‘The Meditative Origin of the Philosophical Knowledge of Order,’” in *The Beginning and the Beyond*, Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences Supplementary Issue of *Loneragan Workshop*, vol., 4, ed., Fred Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 57. For more on Voegelin's theory of symbolization, see Murray Jardine, “Sight, Sound, and Participatory Symbolization: Eric Voegelin's Political Theory as an Attempt to Recapture the Speech-Dimension of Human Experience,” in *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, 74-75; Gregor Sebba, “Order and Disorders of the Soul: Eric Voegelin's Philosophy of History,” ed., Helen Sebba, Anibal A., Bueno and Hendrikus Boers, *The Collected Essays of Gregor Sebba: Truth, History and the Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 169-175; John Ranieri, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995).

experience and its articulation,”⁷⁵⁷ the symbols are not merely the evocation; they draw their “contextual validity”⁷⁵⁸ from the free movements that make the evocation possible.

The theory of symbolization allows the science of order to weave a woof of empiricism into a warp of meditative philosophizing to produce a “text” of *understanding* and *thinking*. Limiting inquiry to participation in the real order *via* meditation using the gamut of available tools, from anamnestic self-experiments to philosophical introspection, may result in gross misunderstanding of reality, as the Heidegger example cautions. Yet investigating the symbols without any knowledge of order risks mistaking the “exterior residue” for its truth. Both come together in the scholar’s knowing quest for right order, which necessarily transcends the materials. As Voegelin says in a letter on his *Anamnesis*, the task of understanding is always historical, as the phenomenality of the event cannot be recovered except by clearing away the “debris of opaque symbols.” What is needed, then, is precisely this interweaving of historical understanding and philosophy:

[T]he whole book is held together by a double movement of empiricism: (1) the movement that runs from the historical phenomena of order to the structure of consciousness in which they originate; and (2) the movement that runs from the analysis of consciousness to the phenomena of order inasmuch as the structure of consciousness is the instrument of interpretation for the historical phenomena.⁷⁵⁹

Abstract thought and concrete understanding arise in participation, and they sustain the quest to the horizons of order always within the fact of participation: “the way up toward the light”⁷⁶⁰ is not emancipation from historical existence but an empirical quest all the

⁷⁵⁷ Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” *Collected Works* 12, 53.

⁷⁵⁸ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 40.

⁷⁵⁹ Eric Voegelin, “Letter 241. To Robert Heilman, June 19, 1966,” in *Selected Correspondence: 1950-1984*, trans., Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropulos, ed., Thomas A. Hollweck, *Collected Works* 30 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 505.

⁷⁶⁰ Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization,” 119.

way, for “there is no other way to make sense of the variety of symbols but the way back to their point of origin in the structure of existence.”⁷⁶¹ As ever, we are not to expect a payoff at the end of the quest, for no transcendent order is *there* to attune oneself to. As Voegelin says regarding Plato’s *agathon*, “we know that we are in search for an answer of this type. If, however, the way should lead us to the notion that the social order is motivated by will to power and fear, we know that we have lost the essence of the problem somewhere.”⁷⁶² What is lost is the open-endedness of the orderly movement beyond itself; signaling the collapse of reason through closure. As Voegelin put it in his final, incomplete work, “The truth is in motion; even more, as we have seen, the motion is the truth.”⁷⁶³

Voegelin’s science supersedes the conventional divide between understanding the world of appearances and a philosophical or mystical speculation about the whole, a dichotomy that Strauss and Arendt perpetuate by nuance from different sides of the divide. It shows that Strauss’s idealist understanding of reason has been made obsolete by advances in the contemporary historical sciences, the increased availability of “comparative materials,” and the advances in “critical methods of existential analysis.”⁷⁶⁴ With Voegelin, Strauss’s trust (*pistis*) in the truth of reason is conserved, whereas the *dynamis* of reason’s movement morphs from a “self-assertive action” beyond the materials to a luminous “assertive response”⁷⁶⁵ that is a mode of being in the world. Reason is “the

⁷⁶¹ Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” 84.

⁷⁶² Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 6.

⁷⁶³ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 56, 57.

⁷⁶⁴ Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” 57, 85.

⁷⁶⁵ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 56.

cognitively luminous center of order”⁷⁶⁶ beyond which it cannot move. By illuminating the reality that man already knows, reason makes man *more* at home in the world:

A consciousness of ignorance presupposes the apprehension of something knowable beyond his present state of knowledge; he can experience himself as surrounded by an horizon of knowable truth toward which he can move, even if he does not reach it; he can feel himself drawn to move, and he can sense that he is moving in the right direction when he moves toward the Beyond of the horizon that creates the horizon.⁷⁶⁷

Voegelin shows that reading Arendt as a contingency theorist who emancipated the world of appearances from the conventional concept of truth perpetuates the conventional two-world theory that she herself undermined so effectively. While Arendt seems never to have made up her mind, Voegelin’s science is decisive in showing that the search for the truth of appearances cannot be emancipated from the knowing movement towards “the invisible”⁷⁶⁸ in which human things make their appearance. If this search was diverted at times in the past to objectifying or neglecting the world of appearances, this is no refutation of it. *Order and History* (esp. vols. IV and V) is the empirical illumination of the structure of order revealed in disorderly appearances. Without “the experience of non-contingent actuality,” there would be no “recognition of contingency.”⁷⁶⁹ As this is an empirical claim, I shall now turn to a consideration of Voegelin’s empirical method.

7.2. The Science of Order and Methodology

It is now clear that no method can be formulated a priori for the science of order without denying the nature of experiences and symbols. Nor will it do to explain political things

⁷⁶⁶ Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” 268.

⁷⁶⁷ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 40.

⁷⁶⁸ Cf. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 133.

⁷⁶⁹ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 83.

by resorting to apolitical things. There is nothing to be done but re-enact by way of reason the event to be understood. I traced this re-enactment conceptually in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six I claimed that politics as such cannot be defined by philosophizing outside the concrete materials: it is neither clearly demarcated, as it emerges out of the movement of existence, nor is it self-explanatory, because its materials do not contain the movement. The reasoned re-enactment must move beyond political phenomena to trace their emergence from the order of existence analogically. This movement is theoretical: the symbols-in-practice are transcended *via* the reasonable symbolization of philosophy; that is, to frame a clear method is clearly impossible, but to reflect on methodological questions⁷⁷⁰ is perfectly possible. At this point a conceptual snag is encountered: one must speak of the movement of understanding just so, so that it does not foreclose the movement which can only emerge out of itself as a practice. One may not make a list of first principles or methodological guidelines or a report of the symbols that Voegelin and others forged in their understanding movement. Quite often Voegelin himself is guilty of this as are corners of the secondary literature.⁷⁷¹ The imperative to understand philosophy existentially demands a recovery of the original participatory experience of the thinker; with a philosophical scholar like Voegelin, however, this may be even harder than with other philosophers: Voegelin uses a language of science that controls, categorizes, explains and guides through the materials of history. Its

⁷⁷⁰ See the broader discussion on method and methodology in Elizabeth Frazer, "Political Theory and the Boundaries of Politics," *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, eds., David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 171-195.

⁷⁷¹ For one example among many, see "Reason: The Classic Experience," 273. Early literature on Voegelin such as Ellis Sandoz's or Dante Germino's works are examples of the difficulty of reading Voegelin too closely. See Ellis Sandoz *The Voegelinian Revolution* and Dante Germino, "Eric Voegelin's Framework for Political Evaluation in his Recently Published Work" *The American Political Science Review*, vol., 72 (1978): 110-121. I have found helpful those parts of the secondary literature which set Voegelin in a dialogue with others. In my case, Hannah Arendt has played the role of the dissolving agent that breaks through the conceptual dogmatism that may arise on a first reading of Voegelin.

metaphoric and symbolic nature is not immediately apparent. Generally speaking, a straightforwardly exegetic attempt at his work runs into the difficulty of elucidating concepts the truth of which exists nowhere outside Voegelin's meditative handling of the materials. This section treats therefore of Voegelin's early empirical work before his flight to the United States when his theoretical insights derive from empirical considerations, having not yet found mature philosophical expression. The aim is to let Voegelin's principles of inquiry speak for themselves as far as possible. The understanding effort must begin with speeches and deeds, but it requires "metaphysical speculation and theological symbolization"⁷⁷² before it can arrive at what Arendt called true understanding. This is had neither in the assembling or rearranging of the materials, nor in the philosophical unconcealing of their constitution without regard to historical context, but in the articulately reasoned movement in-between. It is the science of "the" *metaxy*.

If existence is participation, then participation has epistemic value. In Voegelin's words, "man does not wait for science to have his life explained to him, and when the theorist approaches social reality he finds the field pre-empted by what may be called the self-interpretation of society."⁷⁷³ Since self-interpretation happens in participation, it reflects its paradoxical structure. Thus, if the participatory nature of knowledge privileges the participant's experience of reality, then its transcendent dimension obliges science to move beyond the materials lest it reduces reality to external or elemental representations. True science does not labor to construct an epistemology of participation first, but to

⁷⁷² Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 6.

⁷⁷³ Voegelin, *The New Science*, 27.

follow the participatory movement across the whole arc.⁷⁷⁴ Even as early as in (the surviving fragment of) his dissertation, Voegelin insists that society is no mere collection of object-like facts: “the identity of a pile of sand is defined by the individual grains that compose it. The identity of the ‘English nation’ is not defined by the individuals who are members at any one time.”⁷⁷⁵

The object of political science is “social reality” or what Voegelin in his early work (with slight modifications in definitions) “social substance” or “spiritual community” or “objective spirit” or “national types of mind” or “common form.” Social substance is “the particular quality of the spirit by means of which an individual is recognized as belonging to a particular society.”⁷⁷⁶ It may be conceived as the suite of cultural conventions or horizons that define *this* as a “society”: from a philosophical expression of the good life to unconscious mores; attitudes toward one another, nature, life and God; and so on. From the insight that “existence is participation” it follows that this horizon is not closed; in other words, science cannot point to a “social substance” as to a place where its members supposedly dwell; or to put it in another way, we cannot do as Strauss did. For Strauss, the general condition of all mankind is Plato’s Cave,⁷⁷⁷ which stands for cultural horizon or for political society. Philosophy is the liberation from the bonds of a parochial culture into a place outside the Cave. Philosophy is a turning-around from culture-as-dwelling, where the highest knowledge is practical, to culture-as-

⁷⁷⁴ Eric Voegelin, “The Meditative Origin of the Philosophical Knowledge of Order,” in *The Beginning and the Beyond*, Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences Supplementary Issue of *Loneragan Workshop*, vol. 4, ed., Fred Lawrence (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 48.

⁷⁷⁵ Voegelin, “Interaction and Spiritual Community: A Methodological Investigation” in *The Theory of Governance and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1921-1938*, William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, eds., *Collected Works* 32 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 31.

⁷⁷⁶ Voegelin, “Interaction and Spiritual Community,” 35-36.

⁷⁷⁷ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 128; Bloom, “Leo Strauss,” 240-241.

object where it is theoretical. Strauss concludes that the condition of man is akin to Plato's prisoners, and yet this prison has meaning as pointing to the good life; therefore, philosophy is salutary to the prisoners—an untenable proposition that cannot be upheld except heroically. In my reading of Voegelin, this objectification of “culture” is impossible as well as unsalutary to the political. Political society with its myths and opinions is not a “social construction” awaiting the scholar's “deconstruction:” it is first and foremost a mode of participation that also results in myths and opinions. It makes participation possible and can only be apprehended as such: an open-ended reality that always points beyond itself. Stepping outside the Cave is impossible for there is no Cave, but also unsalutary, for objectifying political life foils its luminous character. His gap with Strauss follows from Voegelin's understanding of practice; it is the gap between the instrumental way parts of the Western tradition have viewed the political⁷⁷⁸ and the substantive way in which modern philosophy has recognized its own implication in the political.

To use an apolitical example from the early Voegelin, the problem for the substantive science of human affairs is not (as it were): “What makes this painting great?” but “What makes this a *Dutch* painting?” As Voegelin observes, social substance is so formative that even philosophical thought or scientific traditions vary according to the social substance from which they were first differentiated.⁷⁷⁹ This irreducible difference

⁷⁷⁸ Hannah Arendt, “The Tradition of Political Thought,” *The Promise of Politics* ed., Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 40-62.

⁷⁷⁹ Voegelin, “The Social Determinations of Sociological Knowledge,” trans., M. J. Hanak, eds., Thomas W. Heilke and John von Heyking, *Collected Works 7* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 46. As he explains elsewhere, political history can explain a great deal of the difference between British and German sociology. Voegelin, “Two Fundamental Concepts of Humean Sociology,” *Collected Works 7* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 336-343.

springs essentially from the participatory nature of existence because, as we have seen, participation is always everywhere perspectival, precarious and irreducibly contingent. It is worthwhile noting that Voegelin's scientific formulation had yet to mature. He spoke here of social substance as if it might be unconcealed and beheld by the end of the study. This distorting illusion dissolves in light of his later work.

The effort to understand a social substance demands an expansion of the scholar's horizons through imagination. Scientific work requires knowledge of a given political, historical context; immersion in the materials of the society under study; and perhaps most of all, a commitment to be open to the perspective of participation—a commitment that cannot be taught but only achieved through a combination of Socratic *eros* and Weberian empiricism that constitutes the science of order. The gap between them, inferred on the premise of modern social science that one can study the materials without metaphysics, is an illusion. Not only is social science wrong because its premises are unfounded, as Strauss showed, but also because inherent in the materials is the infinite that comprehends them, as Arendt proved. The greatest social scientists could not but sense this depth despite themselves. Max Weber, who, in Voegelin's words, lived “in the ardor of his immanence,”⁷⁸⁰ by virtue of it could not but indicate the transcendent depth of order in which he ceaselessly moved. Weber's scientific vocabulary is shot through with the tension between metaphysics and immanentism:

For Weber, [proportion] means distance from things and men. That is perhaps the most revealing formulation, because distance requires that a person must himself stand somewhere. The entire

⁷⁸⁰ Eric Voegelin, “Hitler and the Germans,” trans., and ed., Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell, *Collected Works 31* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 266.

immanent reality of being is the reality from which one must have distance. Still, where can one find this distance, if not in the non-existent reality of reason and of spirit?⁷⁸¹

Weber invented symbols like “proportion” or “ideal types” to reflect the invisible meaning of the movement toward truth. The face of transcendence demands that language follow it.

Voegelin carries out two extensive investigations of social substance in this early part of his career. The first, *On the Form of the American Mind*, is an investigation of the form which gives an underlying unity to the cultural and political products of American life.⁷⁸² The second looks at the political challenges facing the young Austrian republic, traceable back to the (absence of an) Austrian substance.⁷⁸³ Let us briefly follow the movement of his understanding in the first book; it was the more challenging in demanding of the young scholar an immense imaginative effort to transpose himself from a Central European to an American existence in order to illumine the “American form” from within.

By his own account, Voegelin’s trip to the United States in 1924-1927 had a “devastating effect” on him: it “was a world in which this other world in which I had grown up was intellectually, morally, and spiritually irrelevant.”⁷⁸⁴ He found himself in an experiential situation where all the conscious and unconscious accords of “normal” as well as professional life were useless to help orient himself in the new society.

⁷⁸¹ Voegelin, “Hitler and the Germans,” 270-271. “Nonexistent reality” is what is conveyed by means of symbols as that part of the experience of participation in that which is not. Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” 52.

⁷⁸² Eric Voegelin, “On the Form of the American Mind,” Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, eds., *Collected Works 1* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

⁷⁸³ Eric Voegelin, “The Authoritarian State: An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State,” ed., Gilbert Weiss, *Collected Works 4* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

⁷⁸⁴ Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 32.

Existentially he had to begin anew. His two-year experience in several American universities and the scholarly dedication with which he threw himself into the new “social substance” resulted in the publication of *On the Form*, which was “an expression of sympathy and respect for the life of a nation.”⁷⁸⁵

On the Form is remarkable for its lack of method. Voegelin confesses that “the rules grew out of the material studied;” they were not followed but “found.”⁷⁸⁶ The materials, on the other hand, include almost everything from meditations on time and existence to Santayana’s poetry to the history and philosophy of the labor movement, economic theory, and “all aspects of everyday life, no matter how trivial”—“an apparent chaos.”⁷⁸⁷ Leaving aside his awkward terminology, his argument begins with the proposition that all cultural, political and philosophical formulations of a nation are expressions of a common (or social) form. It is a form that may be described, for its traces are there in the phenomenal formulations of the society, and yet, at the same time, it cannot be found in any place other than its own traces. While the later Voegelin would realize the form cannot be wholly apprehended because it is beyond participation yet constituted by it *simultaneously*, at this early stage he had not yet found the metaphysical concepts to describe what he intuited. I shall thus focus on the fact that the form can be described or talked about, and leave out the fact that it cannot be literalized.

The procedure he follows is strictly empirical. He begins from the phenomena of the actual self-understanding of individuals and communities, aiming at the form which binds them together into a meaningful whole. The range of phenomena is immense—

⁷⁸⁵ Voegelin, “Preface,” *On the Form*, 1.

⁷⁸⁶ Voegelin, “Introduction,” *On the Form*, 3.

⁷⁸⁷ Voegelin, *On the Form*, 5, 4.

from political institutions to poetry and philosophy all the way down to the color of Hudson River ships.⁷⁸⁸ Each phenomenon points beyond itself to preceding moments and prior formations which indicate the movement—the participation—of the American “mind” in its personal as well as peripheral (institutional) forms. His primary finding is that the American mind is characterized by openness to experience compared with the European mind which is more rationalist, closed and abstract. The American mind is open to open-ended participation. As Gebhardt and Cooper say,

The form of the open self [...] is the meaningful center from which all other forms radiate into society, namely: the fundamental principles of democratic community formation and economic life; the religious notions of God; the emphasis on the practical purposes of all scientific work; and, as a result of a certain disparagement of theory, an empty intellectualism.⁷⁸⁹

Other German-speaking visitors tended to dismiss Americans for their parochialism and untheoretical approach to life; Voegelin overcame his initial shock to find a “mind” open-ended yet simultaneously made immanent to a greater or less degree in the peripheral forms of American life. What seemed a rather childish existence to a sophisticated neo-Kantian struck Voegelin as a healthy, lively openness to reality.

Importantly, *The Form* is not nor does it aim to be persuasive regarding its method. It stands or falls on the results. The soundness of Voegelin’s method, viz. the reasons why he chose a particular phenomenon as representative, cannot be judged outside of the experience of *this* particular scholar’s participation in *that* social substance through *these* materials. Voegelin’s reluctance to speak about his method recalls Arendt’s in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. His American experience seems to have awakened in him a love for the manners and practices of American life stimulated from his meetings with

⁷⁸⁸ Voegelin, “Introduction,” *On the Form*, 5.

⁷⁸⁹ Gebhardt and Cooper, “Editors’ Introduction,” *On the Form*, xxix.

representative individuals, such as John R. Commons, the writings of others such as George Santayana, his studies at Harvard, Columbia and Wisconsin with the likes of John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead, and his extensive tour of the country. *The Form*, then, was an inquiry of reason to shed light on the substance that had awakened that reason. It was constituted by a loving, careful approach to the American materials the better to perceive their commonality and formulate the findings best, given his experience and the apparatus available in the human sciences at that time. This implies two things: first, the participation of *this* man meant that no other scholar could have chosen *these* materials or come to the same conclusion exactly; and second, the reader must attempt to participate in the materials in his own way.

The Form illustrates the dialectic from preliminary to true understanding as sketched in Chapter Five. In this case, its beginning may be traced to the initial shock of the scholar in a world that obsolesces his language *and* the love awakened in him by representatives of the New World who enabled him to use his shock productively. The shock leaves the man unable to participate, who thus undergoes a “shrinking” of reality. Reality, however, is the consciousness-reality-language complex, and its loss is experienced as a radical diminution of one’s humanity. It is a contraction of consciousness into stupidity and a hemorrhaging of language into illiteracy.⁷⁹⁰ Meeting John R. Commons opened Voegelin up to American reality; he embodied what Voegelin was to find in his American experiences. The new openness was not experienced simply as a restoration of one’s humanity, but as an expansion of one’s soul toward realms that the old Central European outfit was blind to. *On the Form* is not just a settlement of ethical debts, but a

⁷⁹⁰ For a full analysis of “stupidity” and “illiteracy” see Eric Voegelin, “Hitler and the Germans,” esp. 90.

deliberate effort to regain his own humanity by restoring the reality that had been suddenly lost. The materials are accordingly selected and ordered to Voegelin's restorative effort which, however, does not purport to tell the reader any determinate form of mind, but moves beyond each articulation of form in order to bring up the reality of its truth. Its end is thus a philosophical symbol: openness of the soul cannot be found in any American citizen, but in the moving effort beyond. It is the equivalent of superfluosness in Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It is neither a cause nor a core of meaning below the apparent surface, but a symbolic evocation of the principle that unfolds in the movement.

The actual movement of understanding among the materials in this first work is theoretically clarified in his last. I shall transpose his words, which were meant to expound Hesiod's vision of reality, into the context of the American effort. Understanding begins with the experience "of a reality beyond the reality in whose truth [the thinker] believed to live."⁷⁹¹ To understand is not just to experience some reality, but to become radically aware that what seemed real at first is simply not so—that Arendt's *dokei moi* contains no truths. This awareness may arise from any one of an endless number of sources—from an epiphanic vision to an experiential shock, a love for representative individuals, or Socratic questioning that reveals what is as something other than what it was claimed to be. The awareness does not show the preliminary understanding to have been merely inadequate but deficient *vis-à-vis* reality. It requires a restoration of a man's relationship to reality. Critical understanding demands that "one

⁷⁹¹ Voegelin, "In Search of Order," 79.

must alter one's very being"⁷⁹² by moving in the order of being along a path seemingly inaccessible before. The dialectic from preliminary to true understanding is, then, an expansion of the extent of reality with which one is in contact, an expansion that includes within itself the preliminary understanding. Once one raises the problem of truth versus appearance, understanding may proceed along either of two forks: with Socrates toward the Beyond or with Weber toward the immanent materials.⁷⁹³ But the two forks are revealed to be inseparable, for the Beyond is formatively in the materials and the materials point beyond. The *physiciens* cannot reason without the *métaphysique*, while the *métaphysiciens* dwell in pseudo-abstractions without the *physique*. Thus, Voegelin can speak of "the two-in-one reality of God's participation in man;"⁷⁹⁴ recalling Arendt's two-in-one structure of all reality—"solitary" thinking and the space of appearances.⁷⁹⁵

In this section I have switched the term *movement of understanding* for "method" to indicate that science must reflect the paradoxical nature of participation in reality. It seeks to understand political events which are autonomous and finite yet point beyond to the formative truth which they participate in. Thus Voegelin like Arendt used the metaphor of light when speaking of true understanding.⁷⁹⁶ The tensions of political existence are

⁷⁹² Voegelin, "The German University," *Collected Works* 12, 4.

⁷⁹³ Voegelin's wording is awkward yet significant. He says that once the overall problem of the tension between the "tensional structures" in immanent reality and the "Beyond of the temporal process as a whole" is raised, the quest for understanding moves in any of two directions: "a clearer understanding and symbolization of the Beyond and of an improved understanding of the structures internal to the temporal process, as well as to the imaginative elaboration of the symbols that will optimally express the experiences tensions between a Beyond and its Parousia in the spatiotemporal epiphany of structures." Voegelin, "In Search of Order," 80.

⁷⁹⁴ Voegelin, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," 79.

⁷⁹⁵ Arendt, "Thinking," *Life of the Mind*, 179-193.

⁷⁹⁶ Compare Voegelin's "the rays of light cast by the presence of the Beyond in the event" with Arendt's numerous metaphors of luminosity of the "natural light of history," the event that "illuminates its own

not *there* to be “solved” by science but to be illumined in what they point to. One cannot judge an event without moving beyond it, but moving beyond it does not mean to occupy a place outside it where one can contemplate it like a tableau. The movement beyond the materials is no movement outside the materials.

7.3. Founding Moments and the Science of Order

I shall now situate the question of foundings in the context of the science of order. Chapter Six showed that Arendt and Voegelin agreed on the nature of founding acts. This points the way out of the *impasse* within the study of foundings that was encountered in Arendt, an *impasse* traceable to the disjuncture of her ontological thinking about politics and her understanding of historical events. The *impasse* consisted of the displacement of the understanding effort by philosophical preoccupations in *On Revolution*. Having thought through the way philosophy and understanding *may* be harmonized in Voegelin, I now return to Arendt’s *On Revolution* in order to read the way out of this *impasse*.

Bonnie Honig’s comparison of Arendt’s and Derrida’s reading of the American Declaration of Independence brings to the surface the problems with Arendt’s reading.⁷⁹⁷ Honig argues that Arendt stresses the appropriateness of the performative part of the Declaration’s preamble—“We hold these truths to be self-evident”—at the expense of the constative part. This would epitomize Arendt’s ontology of appearance,

past; the ‘hidden’ elements that come to light at the end of an event, the impossibility of comprehending the light, this does not mean that he [the historian] must or can understand the nature of this light itself.” Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 76 and Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 326, n.17.

⁷⁹⁷ Bonnie Honig, “Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic,” *American Political Science Review*, vol., 85, no., 1 (March: 1991), 97-113.

which stresses the performative nature of politics. Should the founders have understood what they were *really* doing, they would have created authority for the new republic based on the performative nature of the act of founding, thus bringing their speech up to the level of their miraculous deed. They would not have chosen the illegitimate dodge of natural law which “compels without argumentative demonstration or political persuasion.”⁷⁹⁸ Honig proceeds to point out that performativity cannot perform what Arendt demanded of it, for the “We” of the Declaration is precisely what has to be founded and thus cannot guarantee the act of its own emergence. Honig concludes that Derrida is right in recognizing the *aporia* that is a feature of all performatives: the Founders succeeded because of the obfuscation of their founding statement. In this they exemplified “a structural feature of all language”⁷⁹⁹ and the illegitimate moment inherent in every practice. The constative works as an “invitation for intervention” that licenses us to “respect Arendt’s prohibition against anchoring political institutions in an absolute while at the same time acknowledging that all acts of founding are (as Derrida claims) necessarily secured by a constative.”⁸⁰⁰

The comparison with Derrida exposes one of Arendt’s philosophical problems as no problem at all. For purposes of understanding the American founding, however, Honig has rebuked Arendt in the wrong register: as Chapter Four showed, the problem is the nuanced displacement of the effort to understand actual founding moments with her philosophical preoccupations. It is true that the philosophy of language is as good a beginning as any to highlight the paradox of politics but the analysis cannot end there.

⁷⁹⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 192.

⁷⁹⁹ Honig, “Declarations,” 106.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

As Voegelin says, the paradox which constitutes the complex of consciousness-reality-language obliges a philosophy of language to not sever the experiential link between language and reality:

There is no autonomous, non-paradoxic language, ready to be used by man as a system of signs when he wants to refer to the paradoxical structures of reality and consciousness. Words and their meanings are just as much a part of the reality to which they refer as the being things are partners in the comprehending reality; language participates in the paradox of a quest that lets reality become luminous for its truth by pursuing truth as a thing intended.⁸⁰¹

Language cannot be treated independently of reality because it is not an autonomous problem. Language is inextricably woven into reality in a single complex that unfolds in the participating experience. This experience—and not language *as such*—is the constant to be illumined by the understanding effort.

Cut off from participatory experience, philosophical analysis grinds to a halt at the insight that all performatives have a moment of illegitimacy inscribed in them. This, incidentally, is what Strauss viewed as the role of philosophy in understanding a founding—dispelling the forgetfulness inherent in the act. Politically, this may provoke intervention, *per* Derrida, or alienation and flight from the public sphere, *per* Arendt. Both acts fall under the domain of political judgment, which may go either way depending on time and place. It might seem, then, that philosophy has no more to contribute to political action than to elucidate its rather Sisyphean nature.

But political actors (the American Founders in our case) do not experience their undertakings as Sisyphean at all. To claim with Arendt that they did not quite realize

⁸⁰¹ Voegelin, “In Search of Order,” 17.

what they were doing—albeit through no fault of their own⁸⁰²—is to discover a strange realm where philosophers dwell, whence the actors are lowered into the Platonic cave; it is to backslide to the Straussian stance that had been overcome thanks to Arendt herself. Voegelin, by contrast, harbors no dreams of overcoming *or* getting bogged down in the paradox. His “new form” of analysis “had to move backward and forward and sideways, in order to follow empirically the patterns of meaning as they revealed themselves in the self-interpretation of persons in history.”⁸⁰³ The meaning of the symbols is tracked without imposing an interpretative framework, no matter how nuanced.

Recognition that symbols come to be only in relation to the transcendent nature of human experience is of decisive importance to understanding the materials.⁸⁰⁴ The symbolic nature of political articulation is not merely a house of meaning where human beings dwell, for its depth is infinite. Without symbols, using instrumental reason to make choices devolves into infinite regress and politics becomes impossible.⁸⁰⁵ Articulated in the moment of a society’s constitution, symbols do not cut off the political discussion as Arendt feared, for they are not an objective piece of dogma but a constitutive part of political life.

Voegelin uses reflective symbols, “divine presence” or “Presence” or “flowing presence,”⁸⁰⁶ to name the orientation of man toward, and openness to transcendent or

⁸⁰² See the discussion on “public happiness” and the “slightly comical erudition in political theory” of the founders in Arendt, *On Revolution*, 126-129; 121.

⁸⁰³ Voegelin, “The Ecumenic Age,” 57.

⁸⁰⁴ Eric Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond,” *Collected Works* 28, 185.

⁸⁰⁵ Cf. Voegelin’s analysis of Aristotelian ethics, *Anamnesis*, *Collected Works* 6, 63-4.

⁸⁰⁶ Eric Voegelin, “Hitler and the Germans,” trans., and ed., Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell, *Collected Works* 31 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 70-75. For an exegesis of these symbols, see Meins G., S., Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), chapter 3.

“non-existent” reality. The appeal to the Divine by the American Founders was no illegitimate quest for reassurance by religious sanction, but an act naming the openness of the founding experience. It is consistent with the structure of experience delineated in Chapter Five; hence, it does not oppress Arendt’s “realm of human affairs,” which is “relative by definition,”⁸⁰⁷ but constitutes it. The other option is tyranny or the infinite regress of instrumental reason. Even the Mayflower Compact (perhaps the most shining example of founding in *On Revolution*) speaks of the founding of a “‘civil Body Politick’ held together by the strength of mutual promise ‘in the Presence of God and one another.’”⁸⁰⁸ In light of Voegelin’s “flowing presence” symbolization these are no “unfortunate errors or lapses, marring but not obviating modernity’s greatest moment.”⁸⁰⁹ As Voegelin puts it in his explanation of the symbol,

[e]very point of presence is [...] a point of intersection of time with the timeless [...]. Thus the whole series of time would not be a series on a line at all but a series of present points in which none is ever past, but only past in relation to their present, not really past. Ontologically, really it is always in relation to the presence, which is the same presence that constitutes my present here and now.⁸¹⁰

The “flow of presence” designates the experience of the timeless Now where past, present and future meet. It is the “home on earth”⁸¹¹ in which the human being acts, not the temporal space of the onlooker. It gathers together in a single infinite moment past and future, just as thinking in Arendt holds together judging (past) and willing (future); that is, the “flow of presence” is the *nunc stans* that Arendt set aside for thinking.⁸¹² The

⁸⁰⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 213.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁸⁰⁹ Honig, “Declarations of Independence,” 106.

⁸¹⁰ Eric Voegelin, “The Drama of Humanity,” *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985* eds., William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss, *Collected Works* 33 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 181.

⁸¹¹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 205.

⁸¹² Ibid., 202-213.

difference is that Arendt reserves this space for the philosopher, while Voegelin opens it up to everyman.

The problem of founding, then, is not simply the problem of a beginning that occurs *ex nihilo*, but the problem of a symbolic articulation of the actual struggle to live in truth. While the two problems are both illumined by founding moments, the former leads to the *impasse* of thinking on the paradox, while the latter leads to the flow of thinking in accordance with the experience of the Founders. Their experience provides a broad orientedness to the understanding effort to re-enact the experience by means of narrative. Breakthroughs in society's participation in the truth of its existence, founding moments come to be known as such from the scholar's participation in the experience *via* his own reason. But the participatory effort of understanding would not happen without the experience of "flowing presence," which gives the scholar a reason to understand. The scholar's "present" shares the same structure as the actors'. Understanding is not therefore "an attempt to explore curiosities of a dead past, but [...] an inquiry into the structure of the order in which we live presently."⁸¹³ Philosophically, the problem of understanding is equivalent to the problem of living.

This is the reason for the constant recurrence of the problem of founding in Voegelin's work. Founding is not an independent problem for the science of order, as Strauss claims through the ancients, or an extraordinary illustration of the human condition to be celebrated by philosophy as Arendt does. Founding does not exist *as such* outside of the experience of the struggle to live in truth—the experience that the philosopher shares with the political actor and which is not unique to founding as such. It is therefore a

⁸¹³ Voegelin, "Ecumenic Age," xiv.

ubiquitous, not an autonomous problem. Taken out of their experiential context, the words of a Plato or a Rousseau on the problem of founding are either unintelligible or uninteresting. They may be a beginning, but they are no end of the inquiry. That is why Voegelin keeps returning to founding and formulating it anew: in his early period it was the legal theory and political science problem of the founding of the Austrian republic;⁸¹⁴ in his middle period it was the philosophical problem of the emergence of political order, in the introduction to his posthumously published *The History of Political Ideas*; in the late period it was the exploration of the “process of the whole” in the final pages of *The Ecumenic Age*; the problem of a meaningful link between pragmatic events and an absolute point of origin in historiogenesis; or of the illumination of the Beginning of order that is nowhere to be found outside the movement within order toward its beginning in *In Search of Order*.

The recurrence in Voegelin of the founding problem recalls the nature of its appearance in other representative works dealing with it. For example, Machiavelli, the political thinker most associated with foundings, brought the narrative form of political theorizing to the tradition; in other words, the thinker of founders and foundings cannot think of them outside of historical examples. The effort to understand foundings, which began with the aim of advising the Prince, spurs the movement of thinking that illumines the whole political dynamic. The political aim is theoretically transformed. Similarly, when Plato, the founder of that tradition, deigned to turn to politics, he got his Socrates to found and found repeatedly in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. His aim was not to create the perfect founding or sum up its nature in the abstract, but to think about politics.

⁸¹⁴ Eric Voegelin, *The Authoritarian State: An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State* trans., Ruth Hein, ed., Gilbert Weiss, *Collected Works 4* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

Thinking, like politics, does not have its ground within itself, thus to think about politics is equivalent to the movement towards the ground by which human existence becomes intelligible.

A theoretical model of founding thus will not do: it would have to raise an exterior standard of judgment by which some historical acts would be classified as foundings. Such a classification inhibits instead of spurring the understanding effort. Foundings occur when human beings take action to restore their relationship to the truth of reality which had fallen into disorder. But if restoration is action, it is re-creation. Whatever the stated motives or goals of the Founders, no founding act is a beginning *ex nihilo*, nor is it merely a restoration. The analysis must elucidate the new articulations that signal the re-enactment of the community's participation. These articulations may or may not find expression in changes to the legal order, *Jacquerie* in the streets, or strife in the Constitutional Assembly. As Voegelin put the matter in a letter to Gerhart Niemeyer, it is simply impossible to generalize on the relation between institutional disorder and spiritual experience and its re-symbolization, for every generality succumbs to numerous contrary examples. He concludes, "On the basis of the materials there simply is no unequivocal relation between any state of institutional order or disorder and a spiritual experience that could be generalized. One can only say that in case of disorder men will respond somehow."⁸¹⁵

None of these points is decisive, though they make part of the materials of science. If existence is participation, then founding means participating in a new manner. It is a

⁸¹⁵ Eric Voegelin, "Letter 144, to Gerhart Niemeyer, July 29, 1957," in *Selected Correspondence: 1950-1984*, trans., Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropulos, ed., Thomas A. Hollweck, *Collected Works* 30 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 322.

reformulation of the convictions in which men dwell, which may be honed, expanded, actualized or negated in a new regime. A revolution, a palace *coup*, or a constitutional convention do not constitute—although they may signal—a founding event. The dynamic is invisible to the scholar who beholds only the externals of the movement—the dog and pony show that must accompany all movement in the pragmatic world. To *understand* the movement, only *quest*-ioning through the materials will do: only the participants whose exertions constitute the game provide a standpoint appropriate to the analysis. A political community is a living thing; only by entering into its mode of life can its nature be understood. The founding moment is not a revelation of the ontological “idea” of the community or an extraordinary political moment, though one may partly recognize both. It requires nothing beyond the participatory approach for a substantive science of politics that we have outlined in this chapter.

Foundings cannot be modeled or defined because they occur in participation. Since the truth of the act is in the action, no two regimes are alike, no matter what their outward form may be. Each has its “non-appearing”_measure unfolding in the dynamic by which its participants bring it to life. To get at it, the scholar must access the vantage-point of the participants whose acts broke the instrumental relations of power, enlarged common perspectives, and quickened reality endowing it with existential depth. The deepest access to the political is not through some theoretical preconception but in practice. In abstract concepts and theoretical contemplation reality is likeliest to be flattened.

Founders found because the movement beyond the order at times requires the re-articulation of order. Scholars understand because the movement of reason beyond the

material facticity of the event requires its symbolic re-enactment. To found, as to understand, “one must alter one’s very being.”⁸¹⁶

⁸¹⁶ Eric Voegelin, “The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era,” *Collected Works* 12, 3.

8. Conclusion: Rethinking Political Foundations with Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin

The First Chapter of this thesis posed the problem of understanding foundings in two registers: the philosophical problem of founding as such, and the political scientific problem of understanding actual founding moments. The first register seemed to be promising as a guide to the second. This breakdown of the problem followed from a review of the secondary literature. Rousseau's seminal reflections in *The Social Contract* paradigmatically conceived founding as a paradox: the founders must possess the spirit of the laws before they institute the laws that make the spirit. This philosophical articulation of the problem proved valuable as a beginning of analysis, as it implies the impossibility of reducing politics to its external manifestations. The "social spirit" of Rousseau is not revealed to the naked eye; it is of "another order,"⁸¹⁷ and is glimpsed only by one who thinks beyond, or behind, these external manifestations. My analysis of the problem of foundings follows from this interplay of unbound thought and embedded understanding. Rousseau's paradox is reflected and transformed in Nietzsche's thinking on *große Politik*, Plessner's notion of *kairos*, "the supreme moment", and Carl Schmitt's account of *Ausnahmezustand* ("the state of exception")—all concepts that indicate a rupture with normal politics.⁸¹⁸ In contemporary political theory, the polarization between the normal and the extraordinary endures in the distinction between "politics" and "the political", "ordinary" and "emergency" politics, or the "ontic" and the "ontological," the former usually being consigned to empirical political science, while the latter remains the domain of philosophy. The tension

⁸¹⁷ See f. 34.

⁸¹⁸ Marchart, *Political Difference*, 55.

between these two poles sets free the oscillating dynamic which bore this thesis along. In moving through the thought of Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin, every instance of movement from one pole to the other helped rearticulate the initial conception of foundings. I shall now summarize the findings of this thesis from the standpoint of this rethinking of the founding problem.

Leo Strauss demonstrates that the problem of foundings cannot be dissociated from that of understanding a particular founding. The initial exposition of a philosophical problem that would illuminate the secondary empirical problem is rearticulated by making the latter the primary problem. Strauss does this *via* his return to classical political philosophy, which rehabilitates the citizen's perspective and adopts the classical idea of *politeia* or "regime". This denotes the political whole—the political "world"—where human beings may reach their perfection. It is more fundamental than the external manifestations or the laws and institutions of the political community. It indicates "the way of life of a society rather than its constitution."⁸¹⁹ Unlike with Rousseau, way of life does not connote something invisible behind the visible institutions but pervades life's externals—in the political or "factual"⁸²⁰ as opposed to legal constitution of society. It is therefore definitely not an ontological concept, a name for a pure moment of "another order;" and yet it is revealed "in speech,"⁸²¹ that is, by thinking and talking together. Especially, it cannot be measured and understood as if it is self-evidently part of the externals of politics. Strauss's subtle re-situation of the problem away from abstract

⁸¹⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 136.

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

⁸²¹ Ibid., 139.

philosophizing neither gets rid of philosophizing nor empowers the positivist sciences of the externals.

Nevertheless, through Strauss, I could rethink the founding problem in three dimensions: a) as a problem of temporality; b) as a problem of sociality; and c) as a problem of epistemology. In its temporal dimension, founding acts do not occur *ex nihilo* and therefore cannot be meaningfully approached as a paradox. Thinking abstractly about a “social spirit”—whatever its status—is a vain enterprise because no such thing can be found outside of political reality. Reality has a depth that encompasses any “social spirit”. Likewise, the regime cannot be reduced to external phenomena, for “[t]he *politeia* is more fundamental than any laws; it is the source of laws.”⁸²² The temporality of foundings displaces the problem from philosophy to history, but in history one encounters a multiplicity of regimes and thus a multiplicity of foundings, each uniquely constituted in complex permutations of particularistic factors.⁸²³ Just like the problem of regimes, for Strauss the problem of foundings cannot be limited to understanding particular historical foundings simply. They create the possibility of moving beyond them to speak about founding as such.

In its social dimension foundings are occurrences that change how human beings relate to each other. It affects the fundamental configuration of the “way of life” of a community. The problem of foundings ties in with the main problem in political science: examining power relations or “the factual distribution of power.”⁸²⁴ This recalls Strauss’s philosophical anthropology which begins from man’s association with others

⁸²² Ibid., 136.

⁸²³ Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth*, 54.

⁸²⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 136.

as the basic characteristic of human life. To understand a founding then is to begin with “the specific social context” and with individuals as “constitutively situated.”⁸²⁵ The sociality of founding shifts the problem from the domain of the humanistic, historical sciences generally to political science specifically. As the science of human association, political science is uniquely positioned to understand foundings.

Finally, in its epistemological dimension to understand a founding is to understand the convictions, values and social practices of a community—what makes it unique. It is also to understand the participants in the founding through their speeches and deeds. These are not merely significant because they reveal what the founders intended, but because they gesture as well to the encompassing way of life of the community and the ends that animate it. They reflect the whole spectrum of a community’s “way of life” from external institutions and immediate objectives to socio-economic practices and, finally, assumptions and ends, which are sometimes stated, but often only implied in its political life. As a founding can only be understood through speeches and deeds, it is a manifestation of human nature, of the fundamental problems which go beyond the particularities of time and place. It thus remains a problem of political philosophy.

This reformulation situates the problem of founding decidedly out of the domain of pure thought, and locates it at the intersection of thought and understanding, political science and political philosophy. The two are not separate activities, as the latter stems from the former. For Strauss, classical political science *is* political philosophy, but a philosophy

⁸²⁵ Lois McNay, “Recognition as Fact and Norm: the Method of Critique,” *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, ed. David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 86.

that unfolds from political particulars: from understanding historical regimes. He vindicates the initial breakdown of the problem, but by inverting its order.

For Strauss, the problem requires the movement of thinking through the particular political phenomena to the fundamental problems of human nature. His reformulation removes the obstacles to understanding the problem posed by certain modern philosophical schools who treat founding by beginning from an abstract state of nature; by positivist social science that measures externals and is unable to distinguish foundings from revolutions, *Putsches* or amendments to the constitution; and historical studies which merely retell the story of it by relating speeches and deeds. My discussion of Strauss also recovered important indications of this movement of thinking in his study of Thucydides: it is a dialectical movement from the particulars to the abstract, from the multitude of perspectives to the “elliptical” or “unavowed” expression of the “true causes” of the event. Yet the ellipsis of Thucydides’s articulation of abstract causes leads Strauss to demand a clarity that the Greek historian does not provide. Denouncing the Thucydidean approach’s failings, Strauss’s own account of foundings ends up restating the accounts of idealist philosophy. Like Plato’s Statesman or Rousseau’s lawgiver, Strauss’s “founder”⁸²⁶ is an abstract figure who knows what is best always and everywhere.

Strauss’s incomplete relocation of the problem from philosophy to political science was completed by Hannah Arendt. A founding event, Arendt tells us, “carr[ies] with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness.”⁸²⁷ Nothing that went on before caused it: “it is as

⁸²⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 133.

⁸²⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 206.

though it came out of nowhere in either time or space.”⁸²⁸ How then is an event that is a beginning with “nothing whatsoever to hold on to”⁸²⁹ to be understood? Her answer is, from inside the event itself. Founding is an absolute that “carries its own principle within itself,”⁸³⁰ that is, its “full meaning [is] in the performance itself.”⁸³¹ The problem of foundings for Arendt too becomes coeval with the problem of understanding historical events. Political philosophy must accept that the question escapes its purview.

For Arendt, understanding political events means preserving their phenomenal status. Since phenomena exist only in the acts that bring them to life, and “[do] not survive the actuality of the movement which brought [them] into being”⁸³², one must insert oneself in the event to preserve its phenomenality. To qualify as a phenomenon, an occurrence requires its own space of appearance. Understanding *qua* act, as an “insertion”⁸³³ of meaning into the event, constitutes it through “the actuality of the movement.”⁸³⁴ A historical occurrence becomes an event when it is constituted by the act of understanding.

The analysis of Arendt’s own understanding of the French and American revolutions, however, revealed a performative contradiction, in that she judges the events by the standards of her ontology of appearance. The revolutionaries appear as actors on a stage who do not quite understand the script. Arendt does not stand outside the event in the manner of Archimedes, but neither does she ever fully restage the event in its manifold

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁸²⁹ Ibid.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 212.

⁸³¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 206.

⁸³² Ibid., 199.

⁸³³ Ibid., 178.

⁸³⁴ Ibid., 199.

of perspectives in the manner of Thucydides. In her essay *Understanding and Politics* Arendt had already given a dialectical account of the nature of understanding that reminds one of Thucydides. This inspired me to rethink understanding by abandoning Arendt's ontological analytic. In my account, the act of understanding, *qua energeia*, comes to resemble thinking. This is the point at which Strauss's reversal of the poles as set forth in the Introduction is complete. Founding is no longer a problem of philosophy *and* a problem of politics, which may be treated by answering the two initial questions separately. Philosophy simply cannot provide a guiding framework that a political scientist might adopt to understand founding moments. Yet the promotion of the secondary question of understanding actual foundings to a primary position has not annihilated philosophical questioning. Understanding cannot come from static contemplation, empirical measurement or faithful retelling. *Qua* experience it must be a dialectical movement from preliminary to true understanding. The act of understanding as an experience of participation in the event becomes like philosophizing in its dialectical ascent.⁸³⁵ From the standpoint of the study of foundings, the relation of philosophizing to understanding has been radically transformed. Drawing a parallel with the Thucydidean dialectic of the Spartan spirit, one may say that understanding must relate to philosophizing as the Spartan spirit should have related to the Athenian spirit. Without the action that is philosophy, understanding remains like the peaceful Spartans, able to control the materials, but not to cull their meaning; to categorize occurrences, but not to bring their constitution to light; to construct law-like generalities, but not to illumine. Understanding needs to adopt the daring of philosophy by partaking of its

⁸³⁵ See Arendt's analysis of the act of thinking in Arendt, "Thinking," *Life of the Mind*, 103-104.

noble sickness—the philosophical *eros*. But *eros* cannot *rule* understanding, for then it will take flight from the materials to the ethereal strata of solipsism. The activity of understanding must be bounded by the materials at its beginning and its end. Philosophy must be an essential component of the understanding act, not its substitute. True understanding at the end of the dialectic must resemble preliminary understanding, with the exception that *it* now is bound to the event like philosophy is bound to politics.

If the act of understanding culminates in thinking—in Thucydides’s movement through the manifold of perspectives to beyond them—then Thucydides, not Arendt or Strauss, is fully vindicated. Thucydides’s dialectic to absolute causes is not the restoration of Straussian idealism—it does not signal the victory of Plato over Thucydides. The causes are expressed at times “silently” and at times “elliptically”: they are “intimated” rather than asserted categorically.⁸³⁶ The causes of the event that understanding finds are not causes in any straightforward meaning of the term. The question remains: What then are they?

The breakthrough in rearticulating the problem of foundings as a problem of understanding comes at a cost. The specific problem of founding became the more general problem of a science of politics—understanding political events. At first glance the initial problem seems to have moved out of sight.

The constant reformulation of the problem moved the thesis from one pole (philosophy) to the other (understanding politics). Viewed from the first pole, founding is either admitted to be a paradox, or else it is explained away as a cause of “another order” that

⁸³⁶ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 237.

stands beyond, behind or below political acts. From the second pole, the problem of studying foundations is equivalent to the problem of studying politics. At either of the poles the problem as a whole—the problem lying in-between their field of tension—risks dropping out of sight.

The movement of understanding, however, has “cleared a space” lying between the poles. As we traverse it, we sense “[o]ur quarry [...] is lurking right under our feet all the time,”⁸³⁷ as Socrates said when he was looking in vain for the justice of his *kallipolis* in philosophic heights. Voegelin, the philosopher of the in-between (*metaxy*), induces us to “look down” to avoid harming the problem of founding with the carelessness of our hasty movement from one pole to the other. Political reality and solitary thinking, he says, share in common their transcendent nature; they cannot have their own ground within themselves because they *are* the movement toward ground. It turns out that Strauss was right to reconceive the problem of foundations in light of the classical concept “regime,” which intertwines the citizens’ perspectives with what animates them. And Arendt was right in her philosophical conceptualization of founding as a type of beginning that cannot be explained by what went before. But the claims of both of their respective answers to completeness is exposed as false. Both answers purport to end the very movement through which the inquiry makes sense. Finally the nature of the problem becomes clear. In trying to answer the initial, primary question, we thought *about* founding. To answer the secondary question that superseded it, we thought *about* the understanding of founding. The comprehensiveness of our answers

⁸³⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, trans., Desmond Lee, 431e.

did an injustice to the problem. Putting these pieces together, we “look down” between the two poles and *think founding*.

The conventional philosopher of the *metaxy* turns out to be the unconventional philosopher of foundings. Each of the numerous definitions of founding in Voegelin is undermined by his quest to understand, which constantly moves toward a more complete illumination of the nature of founding. The tension between philosophy and politics becomes productive: foundings are recognized in the movement of understanding. For Voegelin, a founding is a symbol which evokes the understanding movement toward itself. It demands an answer as to what it is, while at the same time revealing the partiality of all answers, for a founding does not have to *be* anything.⁸³⁸ Foundings exist in the answering that they induce; thus, none of Voegelin’s many definitions of founding can be used as conceptual standards and applied to understanding them. They are provisory acts of signification in thinking. For example, when he says in the context of explicating historiogenesis that “[r]evelation is a spiritual and intellectual revolution inasmuch as the ground beyond no-ground is found at last,”⁸³⁹ this is no more than a provisional formulation of the cause of cosmological societies’ breakdown. In Voegelinian terms, it is a “differentiation of insight” in the *logos*, but not the “tension itself” in which the *logos* always-already moves.⁸⁴⁰ It enables Voegelin’s understanding movement within the materials, and if it is successful, it makes the materials meaningful to his readers.

⁸³⁸ Voegelin, “The Authoritarian State: An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State,” trans. Ruth Hein, ed. Gilbert Weiss, *Collected Works 4* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 58.

⁸³⁹ Eric Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” *What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, eds., Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works 28* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 67.

⁸⁴⁰ Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” *Collected Works 28*, 70.

Now the reasons for Thucydides only intimating absolute causes become transparent. We already know from Strauss that they are not actual causes. Yet they are not untrue, for they express the truth in an existential sense by evoking “the movements of existence or participatory consciousness,”⁸⁴¹ *i.e.* understanding. They are, in short, symbols. Symbols do not only enable participation in reality, they are also the forms by which human beings attain knowledge. “Reflection is not an external act of cognition directed toward the process as its object, but part of a process that internally has cognitive structure.”⁸⁴² Consequently, the resultant knowledge on the causes of the war is a “correlation between perception in the cognitive and existential sense.”⁸⁴³

Thucydides’s choice to “intimat[e] what he regards as the originating principles” instead of making those principles the object of investigation, as philosophers do, does not mean *pace* Strauss that “it is evidently necessary to go beyond Thucydides toward the philosophers.”⁸⁴⁴ Thucydides expresses his movement by symbolically establishing analogies with the actual occurrences of the event. Hence his dialectic of the Spartan and Athenian spirits reflects the actual Spartan and Athenian attitudes. Thucydides’s understanding is successful insofar as it evokes its movement in his readers. On one hand, the “intimating” allows him to reveal his true understanding. The symbols are complete, thus allowing his inquiry to rest. On the other hand, they point beyond themselves to the engendering experience of participation, suffering and meaning that evoked Thucydides’s movement. By this gesture to a beyond they bestow meaning on a

⁸⁴¹ Lawrence, “On ‘The Meditative Origin of the Philosophical Knowledge of Order,’” 57.

⁸⁴² Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond,” 218.

⁸⁴³ Voegelin, “Letter 27 to Leo Strauss on January 2, 1950,” in Barry Cooper and Peter Emberley, trans., and eds., *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 64.

⁸⁴⁴ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 236.

war of no objective interest to us, his readers; they rather call on us to participate in its events.

Voegelin's theory of symbolization discloses why Thucydides has become exemplary in the inquiry into the problem of foundings. Thucydides provides the clearest example of the act of understanding. But all experiences, *qua energeia*, have a broad direction toward the "non-appearing measure." Thucydides's movement culminates beyond the materials. This resting point "is no longer a place in any palpable sense of the term,"⁸⁴⁵ hence it must be symbolized in order to gain its reality. As Voegelin's conception of experience clarifies, the act of understanding is constituted by and points toward what is beyond itself. The concrete account of the war is made possible by a "ground" that emerges in the dialectical movement of understanding. This is what Strauss was indicating when he called the conversion of Thucydides from partisan to umpire "his most advanced education."⁸⁴⁶

My reading of Voegelin also encompasses the insights of Strauss and Arendt precisely by moving beyond them. It raises the question of the place such a reading has in contemporary political theory. The constant interrogation of the materials as a movement beyond them is an interrogation of "symbolisms of theology or of myth or of a metaphysics of transcendent divine Being."⁸⁴⁷ In other words, the question of political found-ings becomes the question of found-ations. The movement of the question saves the quest-ion. In contemporary lingo, this motif seems to qualify Voegelin as a post-foundationalist. Indeed, there is a great deal in Voegelin that recommends this

⁸⁴⁵ Voegelin, "Theory of Governance," 231.

⁸⁴⁶ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 162.

⁸⁴⁷ Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," *Collected Works* 11, 2.

classification. Like Voegelin, post-foundationalism: a) makes founding moments the clearest examples of the political; b) is a meeting point of philosophy and politics; c) refuses to flatten politics to its visible externals, and so rises above mere empiricism; d) refuses to submit politics to a pure ontology, and so rises above mere philosophy; and e) rescues the autonomy of politics, rejecting attempts to subsume it under any other heading. Marchart's conclusion that "a notion of the political-as-ground remains indispensable for post-foundational thought"⁸⁴⁸ overlaps with Voegelin's life-long efforts to illumine the ramifications of the insight that the search for a ground "is a constant in all civilizations, as also in all subdivisions of civilizations in all societies."⁸⁴⁹ This is the overlap that Petrakis and Eubanks refer to when they speak of the metaphoricalness, or the "foundationalism without foundations,"⁸⁵⁰ of Voegelinian metaphysics. Similarly, Fred Dallmayr notes that Voegelin's approach to the materials is "deconstructive," and that his conception of the tension of existence is "'non-' or 'anti-foundational,' in the sense of not being rooted in a substantive *archē* or a constitutive subjectivity."⁸⁵¹

Yet in the same breath, Dallmayr adds that "the term [*deconstructive*—ET] would hardly have found his favor."⁸⁵² Was Voegelin too prejudiced to admit that he, too, belonged to a school which he had explicitly rejected? It should be clear by now that the answer lies in his philosophical attitude to philosophy's incompleteness. The "constant interrogation

⁸⁴⁸ Marchart, *Political Difference*, 167.

⁸⁴⁹ Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," *Collected Works* 11, 2.

⁸⁵⁰ Petrakis and Eubanks, "Introduction," *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, 21.

⁸⁵¹ Fred Dallmayr, "Voegelin's Search for Order," *The Journal of Politics*, vol., 51, no., 2 (May, 1989), 421.

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*

of metaphysical figures of foundation,”⁸⁵³ as Marchart defines post-foundationalism, is carried out through reason. Yet reason, Voegelin tells us, is nothing but the “[s]eeking, finding, and giving the ground of things [...] the act of relating things to a ground.”⁸⁵⁴ This definition resembles the older foundationalist definitions that post-foundationalism claims to obsolete. As Voegelin proceeds to answer the question of reason, he continues in post-foundationalist language to tell us that it is “the clearing in existence [which] is not an existent thing but existence illuminated so as to make visible the tension toward its ground.”⁸⁵⁵ Reason can be named as much as founding can. It is a “stark symbol”⁸⁵⁶ around which Voegelin clusters a list of meanings that interact and illumine each other. Aristotle, Plato and St. Thomas are found in the list, while his contemporaries are conspicuous by their absence.

For Voegelin, reason makes its appearance as the interrogation of foundations, yet it is much more than an interrogatory act. Every advance made toward a positive illumination of reason must be “accompanied by a bodyguard of cautionary negatives,”⁸⁵⁷ for language slides into objectification of this “field of non-existence.”⁸⁵⁸ What unfolds is nothing less than a mode of being, a way of life which as an activity orients man towards the ground of reality. Voegelin’s understanding is Socratic. As reason emerges out of the questioning of particulars to the last point, it finds it is not blind but has a “directional character”⁸⁵⁹ that is animated by the mysterious ground

⁸⁵³ Marchart, *Political Difference*, 2.

⁸⁵⁴ Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” *Collected Works* 28, 74.

⁸⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

toward which it moves in response. This reason, which is most clearly not ratiocination,⁸⁶⁰ recognizes its own implication in its ground. That it cannot make it comprehensively transparent pales before the experience that “the ground is constitutive of existence through being present in it.”⁸⁶¹ Reason is the theoretical counterpart of practice—“frantic and perverse as it sometimes appears, there is reason in the search for order.”⁸⁶² As such, its opposite is not the *vita activa* as Arendt may be misread, or religious faith as Strauss may be misunderstood, but “willful groundlessness, *i.e.* [...] a rejection of the transcendent ground already known and [...] refusal to engage in search of it through faith.”⁸⁶³ Voegelin is neither a foundationalist nor an anti- or post-foundationalist. The battles over the *existence* of a ground are for ideologues, not philosophers.

The science of order that I have reconstructed through Voegelin certainly is not isolated from contemporary theory. As a science that interweaves empiricism with philosophizing or understanding and thinking, it responds to McNay’s call to immanent critique:

The discrepancy between the ideal and the real, between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’, is not a relation that normative political thinkers should attempt to overcome, disregard, or conceal, rather it designates precisely the domain in which they should situate themselves in order constructively to explore its tensions and paradoxes.⁸⁶⁴

Yet, to categorize Voegelin’s insights under one of the contemporary labels is to exchange its kernel of truth for a momentary reprieve of illusory conceptual clarity. The failure of the ill-conceived project to find a rational demonstration of the principles of

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid., 90.

⁸⁶² Ibid., 72.

⁸⁶³ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁶⁴ McNay, “Recognition as Fact and Norm,” 86.

moral order arouses neither anxiety—as in some liberals—nor elation over a newfound “freedom” or “absence of ground”⁸⁶⁵—as in some post-foundationalists,—nor does it lead to “thinking without a banister,”⁸⁶⁶ as some readers of Arendt would have it. Voegelin recovered the deeper stance that exposes the idea of demonstrative foundations as a category mistake. There are no demonstrative foundations because reason is not a demonstrative exercise. However, this neither leads to the wholesale repudiation of the much-caricatured tradition nor to a conservative clinging to it, for the very meaning of reason precludes it.

As he moves through his clusters of meanings around the symbol “Reason,” Voegelin comes to the group which deal with its “ordering force of existence,” from the standpoint of which to be virtuous requires “efforts to keep existence open toward its ground and to persevere, in seeking the ground, the Platonic *zetesis*, in resistance to the disorder of existence through opinion.”⁸⁶⁷ At this point the Voegelinian augmentation of Arendt has left her far behind. The site of Arendtian truth is revealed to be the site of non-truth, for existence is not analogous to Arendt’s crude theatre analogy that links appearance to the gaze of others.⁸⁶⁸ Voegelin explains in his exegesis of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* that reason is not only the wonder (*thaumazein*) that Arendt makes so much of,⁸⁶⁹ but also the positive desire to climb out of ignorance. The “passive perplexity” is

⁸⁶⁵ Marchart, *Political Difference*, 156.

⁸⁶⁶ Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt” *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 336. See also Lisa Disch, “Training the Imagination to go Visiting,” *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 141-171.

⁸⁶⁷ Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” 90.

⁸⁶⁸ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 19. The first insight that makes possible her philosophical anthropology is the biological fact of otherness of bodies, which then translates into the strictly human sort of otherness that she calls ‘distinctness’. In Arendt, it is possible to think back from her definition of appearance to biology—a travesty to be sure, but a travesty that is made possible by the partiality of Arendt’s thought.

⁸⁶⁹ Arendt, “Socrates,” 33-36.

less important than “the active raising of the question.”⁸⁷⁰ Reason is the movement beginning from the moment of wonder toward “a supreme reaching out for supreme knowledge of the supremely knowables.”⁸⁷¹ This is a path of neither indifference nor interrogation, but of illumination of the Beyond, toward which it moves, without possessing it, through the recognition that its “moving was present even in the first stirrings of *thaumazein*.”⁸⁷²

Voegelin’s iterative reformulation of the problem of foundations brings to light the character of the movement of this thesis from Strauss to Arendt to Voegelin. Voegelin’s reinstatement of the life of reason brings him to the discovery that “the scholastic and classic problem is indeed identical with our own.”⁸⁷³ In other words, it would seem that the endpoint of what seemed our ascent beyond Strauss is—Strauss. Perhaps that is why Voegelin said he was “*hors concours*.”⁸⁷⁴ The reasons for this, however, are not, strictly speaking, Straussian reasons. Voegelin resorts to the classics because “the complexities of the noetic quest are so enormous that one man alone could never reach the goal.” In bringing earlier efforts back to life, mistakes are not repeated, and “partial solutions” are not lost. His is the “unoriginal thinking” that reconfirms the stability of the reality wherein we are always-already moving. Increasingly, as he developed his identity as a scholar, Voegelin also needed to discharge “his debt of gratitude for the formation of his

⁸⁷⁰ Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” 103.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*

⁸⁷³ Eric Voegelin, “Debate and Existence,” *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, ed., Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works 12* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 277.

⁸⁷⁴ Eric Voegelin, “136. Letter to James W. Fesler,” in *Selected Correspondence: 1950-1984*, trans., Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropoulos, ed., Thomas A. Hollweck, *Collected Works 30* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 309.

own state of mind” in “dialogical critique.”⁸⁷⁵ Finally and most pertinently, his return to classical philosophy is justified by his insight into the metaphysical nature of existence. The insight demands a conceptual apparatus to illumine transcendence that was unavailable in Voegelin’s time,

since we are confronted with the situation peculiar to the twentieth century A.D., of having no generally accepted language, or literary form, for dealing with the fundamental problems of truth and language raised by our present knowledge concerning the historical manifold.⁸⁷⁶

It is not a *partisan* but a *critical* return to the classics. He does not need to begin from a *tabula rasa* to create an “entirely new universe of symbols,” because the new language is “for the most part the old language of experiential analysis that has been buried under doctrinal deformation.”⁸⁷⁷ Amid the classical return, the task of science remains hermeneutic—to critically deal with the original language in the trust that “the original symbols [...] contain, however compactly veiled, a rational structure that can be made intelligible through reflection.”⁸⁷⁸ His return then, unlike Strauss’s, is not a return *tout court*, but rather is informed by contemporary advances in science. Neither is it a return in order to vindicate the classics against the moderns. Voegelin’s thinking is a *rethinking* of classical philosophy from a thoroughly modern perspective, viz. interwoven with the critical insights of modern comparative sciences and philosophy.

Voegelin’s return to the classics intimates the upper boundary of the dialogue between Strauss, Arendt and Voegelin: the preoccupation with the whole. If the return to experience was the beginning of the dialogue, the question of the whole was its end. For

⁸⁷⁵ Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” 104.

⁸⁷⁶ Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History,” 116.

⁸⁷⁷ Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond,” 230.

⁸⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

Strauss, the whole always remained “problematic,”⁸⁷⁹ transpiring contextually. It shows up timidly in Arendt as the “harmonious order behind [the sum total of things in the world] which itself is not visible and of which nevertheless the world of appearances gives us a glimpse.”⁸⁸⁰ But with Voegelin the question of the whole was the guiding question—from its beginnings as given in pre-reflective experience to its end as the effort to rationally illumine it. The question becomes the rich source of light that makes intelligible the movement of human being in it. It is this recognition in light of the whole that allows Voegelin to interweave politics with philosophy, which had parted ways in Strauss and Arendt.

As my reading moved beyond Strauss with Arendt, and beyond Arendt with Voegelin, it recognizes its Straussian beginnings in its final resting place. The coincidence of the endpoint with its beginning occurs on the common ground of the *zetetic* nature of philosophy. Strauss says, in words that could have been Voegelin’s, “The unfinishable character of the quest for adequate articulation of the whole does not entitle one, however, to limit philosophy to the understanding of a part, however important. For the meaning of a part depends on the meaning of the whole.”⁸⁸¹ What is lacking in Strauss is an awareness of the implications of the universality of the transcending movement, which he confined to philosophy alone—misleading him to posit political and philosophical ways of life, each with their own mode of being, orientations in the world, and moralities.

⁸⁷⁹ Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*, 172, 41.

⁸⁸⁰ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 144.

⁸⁸¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 125-6.

The return to the ancients is thus a partial validation of the Straussian return, understood as *zetetic* open-endedness. The validation is qualified, for Voegelin rejected *a priori* abstractions on the nature of philosophy or faith in the possibility of systematic knowledge of the whole. Voegelin's return is a return to the engendering experience of philosophy as resistance to personal and social disorder, and then to its symbolic movement toward order under the attraction of the ground. Hence, it is unlike Strauss's return. Understanding experience, which Strauss elided, was prerequisite to knowing this; that is, Arendt had first to be understood. The dialectical movement of understanding, bounded by Straussian and Voegelinian philosophy, needed Arendt to take flight.

The move beyond philosophical idealism has brought the inquiry full circle to the Straussian project: the recovery of the ancients. The problem of founding has thus brought us back to the founding moment.

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