

Postmodern Aristotles: Arendt, Strauss, MacIntyre, and the Recovery of Political Philosophy

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Abstract

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What is political philosophy? Aristotle pursues that question by asking what the good is. If Nietzsche's postmodern diagnosis that modern philosophical rationalism has exhausted itself is true, it is unclear if an answer to that question is possible. Yet given the prevalence of extremist ideologies in 20th century politics, and the politically irresponsible support of philosophers for these ideologies, there is an urgent need for an answer. This thesis examines how, in these philosophical circumstances, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Alasdair MacIntyre conclude that a key resource in the recovery of political philosophy, and in showing its contemporary relevance, lies in the recovery of Aristotle's political philosophy.

This thesis contends that how and why Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre turn to Aristotle, and what they find in Aristotle, depends on their varying critiques of modernity. Convinced that the philosophical tradition is shattered irreversibly after the events of totalitarianism, Arendt argues for a retrieval of Aristotle and his understanding of politics from the fragments of that tradition. Strauss is impelled to turn to the political philosophy of Aristotle because of the crisis of radical historicism, to recover classical rationalism's answer to what the good is. MacIntyre turns to Aristotle to find the moral justification for rejecting Stalinism that contemporary philosophical traditions fail to provide; he reconstructs an Aristotelian tradition that can answer the question of what the good is better than his contemporary rivals.

Although these thinkers may appear disparate, this thesis argues that each addresses the question of what the good is by offering a vision of political philosophy as a way of life, which Aristotle helps form. This way of life probes the relationship between philosophy and politics as permanent problem for human existence. In recovering this tradition of thinking with Aristotle about the character of political philosophy, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of each of these thinkers, as well as to the practice of political philosophy in modern, post-Nietzschean times.

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List of Abbreviations

Friedrich Nietzsche

<i>BGE</i>	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
<i>GS</i>	<i>The Gay Science</i>
<i>TSZ</i>	<i>Thus Spake Zarathustra</i>
<i>UDHL</i>	<i>On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life</i>

Aristotle

<i>EN</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
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Thomas Aquinas

<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa Theologiae</i>
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Hannah Arendt

<i>BPF</i>	<i>Between Past and Future</i>
<i>EIU</i>	<i>Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Eichmann in Jerusalem</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>'On Hannah Arendt'</i>
<i>HC</i>	<i>The Human Condition</i>
<i>LOM</i>	<i>The Life of Mind, Vol I. Thinking</i>
<i>LSA</i>	<i>Love and Saint Augustine</i>
<i>MDT</i>	<i>Men in Dark Times</i>
<i>Origins</i>	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Promise of Politics</i>
<i>Rev</i>	<i>On Revolution</i>
<i>RJ</i>	<i>Responsibility and Judgment</i>

Leo Strauss

<i>CG</i>	<i>Churchill's Greatness</i>
<i>CM</i>	<i>The City and Man</i>
<i>FPP</i>	<i>Faith and Political Philosophy</i>
<i>JPCM</i>	<i>Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity</i>
<i>LAM</i>	<i>Liberalism Ancient and Modern</i>
<i>NRH</i>	<i>Natural Right and History</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>On Tyranny</i>
<i>PAW</i>	<i>Persecution and the Art of Writing</i>
<i>RCPR</i>	<i>The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism</i>
<i>SCR</i>	<i>Spinoza's Critique of Religion</i>
<i>SPPP</i>	<i>Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy</i>

<i>TM</i>	<i>Thoughts on Machiavelli</i>
<i>TWM</i>	<i>'The Three Waves of Modernity'</i>
<i>WIPP</i>	<i>What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies</i>

Alasdair MacIntyre

<i>ASA</i>	<i>Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy</i>
<i>AMEM</i>	<i>Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism</i>
<i>AV</i>	<i>After Virtue</i>
<i>CNS</i>	<i>'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science'</i>
<i>ECM</i>	<i>Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity</i>
<i>EP</i>	<i>Ethics and Politics. Selected Essays, Vol. II</i>
<i>NMW</i>	<i>Notes from the Moral Wilderness</i>
<i>TP</i>	<i>The Tasks of Philosophy. Selected Essays, Vol. I</i>
<i>TRV</i>	<i>Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry</i>
<i>WJWR</i>	<i>Whose Justice? Which Rationality?</i>

Introduction

Ἀλλὰ ζητήεον τίνα χώραν ὁ φιλοσοφῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει κατέξει;
*But one must seek this: what place will the philosopher have in the city?*¹

*On réfléchit assez rarement sur ce qu'est en elle-même la philosophie.*²

Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Alasdair MacIntyre all broadly agree with Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation that modern philosophy, premised on a problematic conception of rationalism, has exhausted itself. They all share the conviction that modern philosophy has buried and obscured the insights of pre-modern philosophy. They argue that those insights, including the insights of Aristotle, can overcome modern philosophical exhaustion. From pre-modern philosophy, they aim to reconceive the character of Western philosophical tradition as a whole, discovering what philosophy is.

I call these thinkers 'Postmodern Aristotles' for two reasons.³ First, I am arguing that all three accord Aristotle a role in overcoming modern philosophical exhaustion. Their understanding of Aristotle is a central factor in their thought. These thinkers are interested in the character of philosophy, investigate the roots of philosophical activity in pre-modern philosophy, and pass their investigation through Aristotle. Other studies focus on how these thinkers aim to discover what philosophy is from the reading of other figures of the canon—such as Plato. This study examines the understanding Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre gain from passing

¹ Simplicius (1996), XXXII, 64.

² Hadot (1995), 1.

³ The structure of this dissertation is deeply indebted to Zuckert (1996). Whereas Zuckert investigates why Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, and Derrida turn to Plato, I examine why Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre turn to Aristotle.

their investigation through Aristotle. Above all, this is an understanding of what political philosophy is.

Second, I call these thinkers 'Postmodern Aristotles' because they look to Aristotle's political philosophy from a 'postmodern' position. Although 'postmodern' is a term with multiple meanings, I am taking 'postmodern' in its literal meaning, 'after the modern.'⁴ Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre are all 'postmodern' because they are convinced that modern rationalism has exhausted its promises and possibilities.⁵ As postmodern critics of modernity, they seek to make a new beginning beyond modernity and to discover something better. As postmodern Aristotles, they turn to Aristotle for an understanding of how political philosophy can make a new beginning.

Since their projects claim that vital insights of Aristotle have been lost to modernity, these thinkers read Aristotle against the spirit of modernity. This involves an un-traditional and in some respects anti-traditional reading of Aristotle. But as an exercise in *reading* Aristotle, two possible readings are *not* at work here. First, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Alasdair MacIntyre are not engaged in a contextual study of Aristotle, where one is trying to reconstruct the historical motivations and intentions for Aristotle writing as he did, to pursue the historical context underlying Aristotle.⁶ These thinkers all agree that later readers of Aristotle interpret and appropriate his work in a different context. The context of the modern

⁴ For a discussion of this and other meanings of postmodern, see Zuckert (1996), 279. Additionally, my meaning of 'postmodern' opposes those who define postmodernism as the absence of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979). For Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre, being 'after the modern' does not entail abandoning grand narratives but reconceiving their purpose.

⁵ Zuckert (1996), 1.

⁶ E.g. Jaeger (1948).

philosophical crisis presents a certain opportunity to read Aristotle in a different way, which they intend to act upon. Nor are their readings primarily an exercise in the analytical extraction of certain philosophical propositions from Aristotle, where a thinker interested in a contemporary philosophical debate might develop these propositions to address that debate.⁷

Instead, these thinkers read Aristotle to reconceive the meaning, purpose and practice of political philosophy. How they interpret Aristotle depends heavily on what they criticize in modernity, what new beginning beyond modernity they believe is possible, and what kind of recovery of pre-modernity is possible.

In that respect, their reading of Aristotle is a key component of their thought.⁸ Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre are trying to understand the activity of philosophy in a different way, and they think that to situate properly the activity of philosophy, they must understand the activity of political philosophy. For them, reading Aristotle enables a heightened moment of self-awareness concerning political philosophy, and this self-awareness is essential for articulating a different conception of political philosophy and ultimately, philosophy.

By 'philosophy,' I mean the general activity of thinking and the search for understanding. This activity of thinking relates to an 'existential option,' a choice for a particular way of life and a vision of the whole of reality.⁹ I do not use the term 'philosophy' univocally. Indeed it is an assumption of this dissertation that the

⁷ This is the project of Anglo-American appropriations of Aristotle via the analytic philosophical method. In its most influential domains, moral philosophy and philosophy of action, it is initiated by Anscombe (1958). E.g. Foot (1978); Irwin (1989).

⁸ I do not claim to downplay or diminish the many other authors, ancient and modern, who shape the thought of Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre. I aim to draw out the themes that arise directly from their interpretation of Aristotle and how that relates to their overall project.

⁹ I am indebted to Hadot (1995), 17-20.

history of philosophy has provided different conceptions of the activity of philosophy. This assumption bears upon the thinking of Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre. As 'philosophers,' these three have different ways of understanding their 'philosophy,' their activity of thinking, and the appropriate way of life related to it. While I use the term 'philosophy' in such a way, Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre do not adopt an identical use. All three take a critical attitude toward aspects of or other thinkers within the history of 'philosophy;' this critical attitude defines their own activity of thinking. Nevertheless, all agree that in thinking, they are engaging in a unique activity distinct from other human activities. So despite the wariness of the term all three share, I use the one term 'philosophy' to maintain consistency and to unite the concerns of all three.

In claiming that Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre have a particular interest in the activity of 'political philosophy,' I recognize that the term is a contested concept in academic practice. The dominant academic consensus is that thinking about politics at any conceptual level is 'political theory,' while the justification and clarification of normative political reasoning is 'political philosophy.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, neither of these terms satisfactorily describes how Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre understand their own activity. Departing from the dominant consensus, I unite the concerns of all three under a different meaning of 'political philosophy.'

As I use it, 'political philosophy' broadly conceived is the activity seeking an answer to the question of the ends of human life, or the question of the good. In so

¹⁰ See Freedman (2004), 3.

doing, political philosophy articulates a comprehensive account of the good: ‘a totalized view, an all-encompassing horizon for reflecting on the ends of human life.’¹¹ Of course, each thinker develops their understanding of the good, their ‘political philosophy,’ in different ways. Nevertheless I submit that seeking an answer to the question of the good is the best way to characterize their projects, pointing to a common tradition of thinking within which they all participate.¹²

Healing the Academic Discipline

As my study adopts this understanding of political philosophy, it opposes itself to what prevailing currents in the academic discipline of political philosophy assert political philosophy to be. Moreover, I select three thinkers from the periphery of the academic discipline of Anglo-American political philosophy. As this approach offers an implicit criticism of the academic discipline, it is necessary to provide some justification of what I hope this study provides for the academic discipline of political philosophy.

A familiar story in the academic discipline is that the latter half of the 20th century witnessed a renaissance of the academic discipline of political philosophy. This story is told as John Rawls singlehandedly reviving the discipline with the 1971 publication of *A Theory of Justice*, and led to attempts to narrow the activity of political philosophy to the Rawlsian activity. Consequently, it marginalized any

¹¹ Beiner (2014), 14.

¹² I therefore follow Beiner (2014), who argues that the political philosophy of Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre can all be characterized in this way. Nevertheless their differences should be recognized: MacIntyre adopts the language of the good and pursues a final answer directly and explicitly. Arendt is decidedly uncomfortable in using language of the good, and Strauss is uncomfortable that a final answer to the question of the good can ever be achieved.

activity of political philosophy that did not offer systematic theories of justice.¹³ More recent reflections on 20th century political philosophy take care to note the range of 20th century contributions to the activity of political philosophy.¹⁴ Yet if those interested in the peripheral thinkers of political philosophy once suffered under the proud Rawlsian's contumely, they now suffer from the pangs of diversity. More and more approaches are acknowledged under the heading of 'political philosophy,' with the effort to understand these approaches subordinated to a determination to avoid ranking and ordering them.¹⁵ One is left with the impression of incommensurability on a vast scale, leaving a variety of camps incapable of properly understanding one other, let alone debating one other. It is hard to disagree with the claim that this plurality exacerbates the discipline's 'descent' into insularity and irrelevance inside and outside the academy.¹⁶

Resolving this problem in the academic discipline is a herculean task beyond this dissertation, but I can indicate two ways forward and how this dissertation proceeds in that direction. The diversity in the academic discipline is a twisted, veritably Gordian knot of incommensurable concepts, yet here I follow Ronald Beiner to cut through it. In defining political philosophy as the activity seeking an answer to the question of the good, Beiner provides a way to evaluate political philosophers. For Beiner, there is an epic character to political philosophy, as it is a contest of grand visions or reflections on the ends of life. Political philosophers who do not provide this grand reflection are not fulfilling their job description. Of course,

¹³ E.g. Kymlicka (1990).

¹⁴ E.g. Vincent (2004).

¹⁵ Vincent (2004), 319; c.f. Jaffa (2012), 45-48.

¹⁶ Gunnell (1993, 2011, 2012).

many 20th century philosophers have denied that they need to provide a reflection on the ends of human life. They are precisely the problem. Beiner argues that their accounts inevitably take a stance on the good, so that neutrality about the good is untenable. If Beiner's approach is taken seriously, it provides a way to evaluate, rank, and order the diverse approaches to political philosophy that have found their way into the academy.¹⁷ To do this, however, one has to know what the alternatives are. The prior step to this critical exercise is first to listen to the grand reflection on the ends of life presented by political philosophers. The aim of this dissertation is to listen to Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre, to grasp fully the fruits of their grand reflection on the ends of life.

The second way forward has to do with how listening prioritizes a historical exegetical approach. The academic discipline of moral philosophy also faces seemingly irreconcilable divides between fixed camps, having been divided into the three camps of utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Moral philosophers are then defined by reference to these camps. Yet even a short analysis of their theories shows that these labels are inadequate. For Martha Nussbaum, these labels mislead by segregating the history of philosophy. Figures associated with the deontology, like Kant, are indeed concerned with problems related to virtue ethics. Those who rely extensively on these labels betray a poor understanding of the history of philosophy. Nussbaum contends that a way forward is to label moral philosophers with reference to the thinker in the history of the philosophy they purport to interpret or criticize. Instead of speaking of virtue ethicists, one should speak of

¹⁷ Beiner (2014), 232-33. In his evaluation of twelve 20th century thinkers, seven fail to take an explicit stance on the good, and three fail to present positive political visions of the good.

neo-Humeans, neo-Aristotelians, and anti-Kantians, and discuss and debate these positions accordingly.¹⁸

Nussbaum's insight is that philosophical activity is bound up with its history. Only by turning to the history of philosophy can we understand and evaluate substantive philosophical theories. Moreover, we understand substantive philosophical theories not just by turning to the history of philosophy, but to the traditional canon of the history of philosophy. What is true of moral philosophy is also true of political philosophy, even the most Rawlsian theory. As Rawls himself said: 'we learn moral and political philosophy, and indeed any other part of philosophy, by studying the exemplars.'¹⁹ The study of these 'exemplars,' the traditional canon of political philosophy, can be accused of theoretical abstraction, culminating in a rhetoric *displaced* from political particularities and therefore from political philosophy.²⁰ Yet I contend that that it is an *indispensable* rhetoric, contributing to the self-awareness of political philosophy. All political philosophy is, to a greater or lesser degree of self-awareness, historically informed political philosophy.²¹ To contribute to that self-understanding, it is fruitful to follow Nussbaum's suggestion and study political philosophers in relation to the 'exemplar' they hope to interpret and criticize. I therefore explore how three 20th century political philosophers interpret one particular 'exemplar,' Aristotle.

¹⁸ Nussbaum (1999), 201.

¹⁹ Rawls (2007), xiv.

²⁰ E.g. Gunnell (1986, 1993, 2011).

²¹ While there are those who contend that a scholarly historical recovery of the meaning of texts in the history of political philosophy must be devoid of political evaluations of history (Skinner 1969; Pocock 1975; Tully 1988), this recovery is often paradoxical. After the meaning of texts is established to scholarly satisfaction, political evaluations creep back into the history. e.g. Skinner (1998). The history of political philosophy is never devoid of evaluation, but presupposes or contributes to an account of political philosophy. See Perreau-Saussine (2007).

These are the deeper concerns at stake for the academic discipline of political philosophy, yet in this dissertation I limit my approach in the following manner. I make no claim as to the veracity of the interpretation of Aristotle that Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre offer. To this end, I offer no independent interpretation of Aristotle. I am concerned with the interpretation of Aristotle that Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre provide, and how it shapes the thought of each. In the following chapters, it is Arendt's Aristotle, then Strauss's Aristotle, then MacIntyre's Aristotle who speak, not Aristotle himself nor my interpretation of Aristotle.²² Thus this dissertation is not a study belonging to the disciplines of ancient philosophy or classical studies, but is a study in the history of 20th century philosophy and political thought. To clarify the 'historical' sense of my study, my method is not to offer a contextual study of the work of Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre.²³ In examining each thinker, I seek to understand how each one situates himself or herself in relation to a body of literature. That body of literature is primarily the work of Aristotle, yet it includes other prominent figures within the history of philosophy and political thought. I adopt an exegetical approach for reading philosophical texts, in light of the philosophical issues Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre raise.²⁴

²² This also applies to the other authors they interpret.

²³ Tully (1988), Skinner (2002). For studies of Strauss or Arendt attentive to their context, see Lazier (2008), Keedus (2015). Perreau-Saussine (2005) also partially adopts this approach for his study of MacIntyre.

²⁴ Some exegetical studies examine a combination of the two but not all three. Bartlett (2001) considers the responses of Strauss and MacIntyre to critiques of reason. Breen (2012) considers how MacIntyre and Arendt treat philosophical issues raised by Weber. As I am focused on exegetical studies, I must pass over the numerous studies that are inspired by Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre. This absence is perhaps most unfortunate for Strauss, as many studies inspired by his analysis of Aristotle have contributed to Aristotle scholarship. E.g. Jaffa (1952), Salkever (1990), Nichols (1992), Benardete (2002), Burger (2008), Pangle (2013).

Nietzsche *and* Aristotle

Their starting point is a perception that a crisis of modernity is itself a philosophical issue, shaping the task of political philosophy. For Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre, it is Friedrich Nietzsche who draws attention to a crisis in modernity through the doctrine of historicity: namely, that the human being is historical. In the classical text for the discussion of this problem, *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche addresses how meaning emerges from the relation of the human being to history.²⁵ This historical sense delivers a form and horizon to a human life and is the condition for sustaining a meaningful life. What enables a meaningful life is a balance between the sense of historical awareness and the need to rise beyond it.²⁶

Yet Nietzsche describes the modern situation as an *excess* of historical awareness. The awareness of what seems true or has seemed true to other ages overwhelms the modern human being with conflicting world-views. He has no clear criteria for assessing and choosing between these different views. This inability to choose paralyzes him, so that he cannot find any meaning or existence for himself. Consequently, he drifts toward a philosophical and moral relativism.²⁷ Nietzsche's burning anxiety over modernity, and his characterization of modernity as a crisis, stems from his sense that the unprecedented increase in historical awareness for the human race is drawing the human race into an unprecedented decline.

²⁵ See Salkever (1990), 157-58.

²⁶ *UDHL*, I.62-63.

²⁷ *UDHL*, I.64; IX.115-16.

Hence history represents a predicament, felt more keenly in modernity than in any previous age.²⁸ This predicament is certainly serious. Yet it is not insurmountable. The activity of philosophy, in its very ancient form of metaphysics, claims to overcome the predicament. It assumes that, in pursuing metaphysics, the human being can rise above his historical situation to grasp timeless truth. But the activity relies upon the assumption that metaphysical truth transcends history. What if metaphysical truth, rather than transcending history, is essentially tied to it? What if the human being is not just historical, but *essentially* historical?

Nietzsche intensifies the predicament by holding that the human being is *essentially* historical. He revolutionizes the whole conception of philosophy. Instead of being a way to escape from history, philosophy is bound to history. The activity of philosophy only expresses one's historical situation. Philosophical questions are superseded by historical questions, so that there is no essential distinction between them. This is the primary meaning of historicism.²⁹

So for Nietzsche, the enquiry into the activity of philosophy is bound up with the study of the history or tradition of philosophy. As the newly recognized importance of our historical situation shows we moderns are products of the tradition, Nietzsche thinks that to understand ourselves, we must understand the tradition. Moreover, we must have a *critical* understanding of the tradition that frees us from the 'pieties' that inhibit understanding.³⁰ Nietzsche looks to expose the true

²⁸ Fackenheim (1961), 1.

²⁹ Fackenheim (1961), 61.

³⁰ Zuckert (1996), 17-18.

activity of philosophy. To do this, he looks back through the history of philosophy to its origins in the pre-modern Greek world.

Nietzsche's preoccupation is with Plato's portrayal of philosophy and the way of life associated with it. Plato makes philosophy into an activity that evaluates the world, expressed by how he renders the idea of the Good as the ruling principle of reality in his *Republic*. Philosophy posits values to rule reality, as well as other human beings. Hence Plato *politicizes* philosophy.³¹ However, Plato's politicization comes at the price of honesty. While Plato conceptualized the morally perfect state, at the same time, he 'considered it necessary that the first generation of his new society (in the perfect state) should be educated with the aid of a mighty *necessary lie*.'³² Deception, then, underwrites Plato's activity of philosophy. From his interpretation of Plato, Nietzsche thought that philosophers do not discover meaning. They legislate out of the will to power, wanting to impose their own meaning onto the world. Political philosophy manifests this legislative act most publicly. Like Plato in his *Republic*, it is an attempt to create the perfect state, the attempt to impose one's own values onto other people and whole societies. Modernity exposes philosophy as a legislative act, laying bare its deception. But when philosophy is exposed for what it is, it hastens the collapse of the whole tradition. Sources of meaning that once persuaded whole societies are no longer convincing. Rationalism appears deceptive, and anti-rationalism gains strength. Nietzsche anticipated that once human beings became aware that they were the only source of meaning in the world, and that traditional philosophy was deceptive,

³¹ Zuckert (1996), 17.

³² *UDHL* X.118.

they would seek to impose their own meaning across the world through the force of their will. Out of this crisis of philosophy would come a crisis of politics, leading to incessant battles between opposing powers.³³

Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre are all haunted by Nietzsche's thinking. For all three, Nietzsche raises the centrality of the predicament of history for modernity and its challenge to the activity of philosophy. All three agree with Nietzsche to the extent that to understand the activity of philosophy, we must gain a critical understanding of the tradition of philosophy. All three agree that the exhaustion of the tradition of philosophy provokes or exacerbates a political crisis. All three are then impelled to turn to the treatment of the activity of philosophy in pre-modern, Greek thought. This raises the status of activity of political philosophy.

The so-called 'Platonic' idea of the activity of political philosophy discovers what the good is and attempts to legislate it in politics. The way of life of philosophy is to rule the city. In this picture, 'political philosophy' has an air of finality about it.³⁴ Societies will continue to be imperfect *until* rulers become philosophers or philosophers become rulers.³⁵ Philosophy and politics, theory and practice, can be unified. Nietzsche can expose the rational foundations of this project in discovering what the good is as an illusion. It can be celebrated or deplored. But unless Nietzsche's 'Platonic' conception of political philosophy is challenged, philosophers are left to achieve the unification of theory and practice through argument; or what is more likely given the prominence Nietzsche places on historicism, through

³³ *Ecce Homo*, Why I am a Destiny, §1; Zuckert (1996), 3.

³⁴ C.f Hadot (1995), 124-25.

³⁵ *Republic* 473d.

historical events.³⁶ Is that understanding of political philosophy correct? Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre all disagree.³⁷

Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre find resources in Aristotle to develop a different account of political philosophy. Aristotle seeks to answer the question of political philosophy: what is the good?³⁸ In seeking an answer to this question, Aristotle considers the ways of life that might achieve the good. He discusses the relationship between philosophy and politics as a contrast between two different ways of life. Aristotle weighs philosophy as one among three ways of life from which a free man may choose: the life of enjoyment, the political life; and finally, the contemplative life, the philosophical life.³⁹ Since only the vulgar pursue the life of pleasure, Aristotle reduces these three possibilities to two: the 'practical' life of politics, and the 'theoretical' life of the philosopher. In that way, Aristotle becomes the first to contrast 'theory' and 'practice.'⁴⁰

But this leaves unaddressed the issue as to whether the life of political activity or the life of philosophical activity is the better life. Aristotle's answer is by no means straightforward. Aristotle definitively argues for the superiority of the philosophical contemplative life, because the essence of man is to rise above himself, to divinize himself.⁴¹ Yet it is unclear how this is meant to relate to the political life, since in some respects political life and practice remains indispensable.⁴²

³⁶ Bartlett and Collins (1999), xii-xiii.

³⁷ All of them disagree with this view; not all of them agree that it is actually Plato's view.

³⁸ *EN* 1094a23-25.

³⁹ *EN* 1095b14-19.

⁴⁰ Lobkowitz (1967), 4.

⁴¹ *EN* 1177b27-1178a5, Hadot (1995), 126-27.

⁴² Lobkowitz (1967), 26; Hadot (1995), 129.

As compared to the straightforward 'Platonic' account, Aristotle leaves a series of questions. What is the relationship between theory and practice? What is the relationship between the philosophical way of life and the political way of life? What is the relationship between philosophy and politics? These are all questions explored by Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre as they interpret Aristotle to discover what political philosophy is. In light of the demands the crisis of modernity places upon them, they seek to describe what the good is, and what political philosophy is as a way of life, possibly the best life.

The Argument of the Dissertation

In the following three chapters, I provide an account of why Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre turn to Aristotle, how they interpret Aristotle, and what they find in Aristotle that helps them justify their conception of political philosophy as a way of life. As all three are united by a sympathy with Nietzsche's diagnosis of modernity, what they find in Aristotle cannot be separated from what limitations modernity imposes on how to interpret Aristotle, and what modern problems justify why they turn back to him. All three, therefore, develop a critique of modern political philosophy, with three themes. First is a concern about political irresponsibility. All three draw attention to the extremist ideologies of 20th century, Nazism and Stalinism, which confirm Nietzsche's prophecy about a crisis of politics. Second is a concern that modern political philosophy worsens political irresponsibility, compromising liberal democracy. Third is a historical explanation of when and where modernity has gone wrong. Yet if all three thinkers believe in the urgency of a

recovery of political philosophy from pre-modernity, they disagree as to what the character of this 'recovery' can be.

In chapter one, I examine the thought of Hannah Arendt. For Arendt, political irresponsibility takes the form of totalitarianism and the widespread support and cooperation of philosophers with it. This led her to conclude that there was a problem with the traditional activity of philosophy in modernity. Arendt sees the tradition's three strands, metaphysics, religious belief, and political philosophy, as having come to a decisive end. Modernity has utterly transformed the relationship between philosophy and politics, so that the possibilities for human meaning and purpose once disclosed in politics are obscured. Arendt asks the question of what the 'good' is through the lens of 'meaning.' Because the tradition has come to a decisive end, Arendt does not believe a *recovery* of the tradition's insights on political philosophy is possible. Instead, she argues for a *retrieval* of the insightful fragments left over from the tradition.

Arendt's retrieval takes her back to the fragments of Aristotle. Aristotle demonstrates the value and meaningfulness of action, and in turn political life, for disclosing human meaning. Yet Arendt sees a threat to political life from the traditional validation of the life of metaphysical contemplation above the life of action. It leads to the supremacy of philosophy over politics. Aristotle's thought is culpable for promoting this supremacy, which prevents the full meaning of the political life from being seen. Nevertheless, Arendt's last word to Aristotle is not an accusation. Drawing from Aristotle's insights, she develops her own conception of the importance of the activity of thinking, with its own meaningfulness, which

Arendt contrasts with political activity and provides the character of her activity of political philosophy.

In chapter two I examine Leo Strauss. Strauss identifies the crisis of modern philosophy and politics in the theoretical assumption of radical historicism. Radical historicism makes philosophy impossible; it particularly makes one unable to justify the question of the good. Political irresponsibility takes the form of radical historicists abandoning the capacity to distinguish between good regimes and tyranny. It provokes a loss of confidence in liberal democracy and culminates in some radical historicists endorsing tyranny. Strauss rejects radical historicism, but sees it as developing through modern philosophy. His reading of the tradition leads him to conclude that genuine philosophy is only possible if one recovers political philosophy. To combat radical historicism, Strauss's *recovery* takes the form of a *return* to pre-modern, classical political philosophy. Classical political philosophy, starting with Socrates and carrying on with Aristotle, first turns to political phenomena. It sees this study as a necessary first step for disclosing the true nature of reality. Aristotle is distinct because he develops the systematic study of politics, political science. Strauss wishes to show how Aristotle's political science helps disclose the whole of reality, how it relates to philosophy. But Aristotle is also concerned with the health of the city. Strauss tackles political irresponsibility by providing a defence of the best regime through Aristotle. In Strauss's argument, Aristotle proposes a practically realizable best regime that in modernity, corresponds to liberal democracy.

In chapter three, I treat Alasdair MacIntyre, whose complicated intellectual trajectory requires a more biographical treatment. MacIntyre's initial intellectual formation as a Marxist meant he developed a critical eye not just on liberal democracy, but on the roots of liberal democracy found in modern liberal individualism. MacIntyre's outlook was very much that of a political radical, believing that the only way to overcome modern liberal individualism was through revolution. Yet while many Marxist revolutionaries were tempted by politically irresponsible support for Stalinism, MacIntyre recognized Stalinism was immoral; however, his Marxist intellectual formation could not tell him why it was immoral. Thus began MacIntyre's journey through the 'moral wilderness' to justify why Stalinism was immoral. Dissatisfied with modern liberal answers, MacIntyre develops a diagnosis of the crisis of modern philosophy in partial agreement with Nietzsche's critique of traditional philosophy. Modern philosophy did try to legislate, MacIntyre holds, and it failed. But MacIntyre contends that this is only a failure of the modern tradition of Enlightenment philosophy. It is possible to recover Aristotle's pre-modern tradition. MacIntyre's *recovery* is a *reconstruction* of an identifiable Aristotelian tradition in the face of modern philosophical problems. Rather than Aristotle *per se*, it is this Aristotelian tradition that provides the intellectual resources to overcome the crisis of modernity by reconstructing a plausible account of what the good is. This account justifies why Stalinism and liberal individualism are wrong, and offers the revolutionary project to achieve the common good that Marxism failed to provide effectively.

Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre are three distinct thinkers manifesting real differences in intellectual starting points, assumptions, and methods, which lead them down very different routes. Nevertheless, their decision to pass their thought through Aristotle leads them all to related philosophical projects, which raise the complexity of the question of the good and examine the problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics. In the conclusion I turn to what their projects indicate about the character of Aristotelian political philosophy, one 'existential option' for navigating postmodernity's uncertain currents.

I.

Hannah Arendt's Dialogue with Aristotle

A Conversation with the Fragmented Tradition

Circumventing more usual philosophical approaches, Hannah Arendt develops her own unique approach to phenomenology that is unique in terms of its object of study, and unique in terms of its method.¹ In *The Human Condition*, her object of study is human activity, the facets of the *vita activa*. Philosophers, she argues, have not properly addressed it.² In studying the *vita activa*, the three activities that concern Arendt are labour, work, and action. Arendt describes labour as the activity corresponding to the biological processes of the human body necessary for survival. Arendt contrasts labour's concern with the necessary, natural aspects of human existence with work, which concerns the artificial, unnatural world of things surrounding a human being. In Arendt's specific formulations, the basic human condition of labour is 'life itself,' while the basic human condition of work is 'worldliness.'³ Arendt's special concern, however, is with conceptualizing what is 'authentically political,' which she thinks needs to be thought about in its own terms.⁴

¹ Buckler (2011), 6; Parekh (1981), 66-75.

² *HC*, 12-21.

³ *HC*, 7.

⁴ Kateb (2000), 131.

That concern takes her to examine action. In Arendt's phenomenology, action has two fundamental aspects that distinguish it from labour and work. The first is that it is the only activity that goes on directly between men.⁵ The second is its correspondence with the human condition of plurality. Plurality is the underlying condition for all political life, without which political life is impossible, and through which political life must be possible.⁶ Action causes a particular individual to become publically manifest to others, or to *appear* to others. In that way, action is the life of someone shown to others. Since this action implicates others, it also concerns communication with others. This way of communicating with others creates a common and shared space of appearances, in which a certain form of communication is nourished and safeguarded. Action occurs in the public sphere, the sphere of politics; and the way of life corresponding to action is the political life. In this way, action is what is authentically political. Crucially, however, Arendt wants to communicate the importance and value—the *meaning*—of political action for human life.⁷ Arendt's insight is that political action discloses the importance of freedom. Without freedom political life would be meaningless.⁸

Moreover, Arendt's thought is a response to the crisis of modernity.⁹ Modernity has lost sight of the meaning of freedom in the political realm. 'To the question of politics, the problem of freedom is crucial, and no political theory can afford to remain unconcerned with the fact that this problem has led into 'the

⁵ *HC*, 7.

⁶ *HC*, 7. Plurality is central to Arendt's account of worldliness. See Benhabib (2003), 50.

⁷ The 'essential dimension' of Arendt's theory of political action is that of meaning. See Villa (1995), 10-11.

⁸ Kohn (2000), 114-15, 127; *BPF*, 145.

⁹ See Canovan (1994).

obscure wood wherein philosophy has lost its way.’¹⁰ Modernity’s crisis is a crisis of the political, a crisis experienced as the erosion of the common human world and of the understanding of freedom.

What is unique about the method of Arendt’s phenomenology is that, to trace this erosion, she turns her attention to the historical inheritance. Her method defies straightforward explanation.¹¹ A most difficult problem is relating her analysis of the crisis of modernity to her analysis of past history, since it appears eclectic and arbitrary. Arendt describes past history and past philosophy in terms of ‘the tradition.’ But she assumes that the crisis of the present human situation, caught up in the predicament of the loss of the common world, is decisively and irreversibly separated from past history and past philosophy. For her, a straightforward history or history of ideas is impossible. The inability to draw in straightforward fashion from the tradition problematizes our ability to understand our predicament. Nevertheless, the fragments of the philosophical tradition persist, and any understanding of the present human situation must start by a conversation with these fragments.

I examine Arendt’s critique of modernity, as well as what she retrieves in Aristotle to respond to modernity. I focus on how she converses with the fragments of the philosophical tradition so as to understand the situation of the human being in modernity. What interests Arendt is how this situation emerged. Consequently, she looks to the thinkers who come at the end of the tradition. She sees the tradition as ending in the critical work of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Marx. They regard the

¹⁰ *BPF*, 144.

¹¹ Arendt is reticent in describing her method. Buckler (2011), 4-5.

tradition of philosophy as having reached a point of exhaustion, and attempt thereupon to overturn the tradition. Through these three thinkers, Arendt shows how the traditions of philosophy, religion, and political philosophy have each come to an end. Despite their insights, however, these three fail to provide an account for the present human situation because they misdiagnose modernity, and exacerbate certain trends that underwrite the present crisis.

Arendt's concern, I argue, is that a perverse conception of history kills the common human world, driving civilisation toward the un-worldly attempts at resolving contemporary problems. For Arendt, these attempts to resolve contemporary problems culminate in the totalitarian movements of the 20th century. The distorted conception of history diminishes the importance of politics, promotes prejudice against politics, and intensifies the catastrophe of the contemporary human situation. Yet it also provides the opportunity to think in a different way. Arendt sees a need to examine the older fragments of the tradition, especially those contained in Aristotle, to uncover the philosophical insights that the prejudices of the present obscure, ultimately to articulate the importance of a common world and the meaning of freedom.

I. Arendt's Approach to the History of Philosophy

Before examining Arendt's treatment of particular figures in the tradition, it is important to conceptualize her approach to the study of the past tradition of philosophy. For Arendt, the fragments of the past tradition are not grasped by an intellectual history, but as part of our *political* history, discreetly shaping the lived

reality of the present.¹² Intellectual history is about thinkers addressing one another. Ideas speak in response to ideas, not to political, real-world events. Ideas implicate political events only as a relation of cause and effect: ideas influence and shape political events, in a 'pre-established harmony' between thought and action.¹³

Arendt's preference for political history problematizes this causal approach for understanding the relationship between past ideas and contemporary politics. Arendt does not think one can declare that a certain idea or thinker 'causes' or 'is responsible for' a series of political events, either because it adheres to a deterministic narrative that denies human freedom,¹⁴ or because the implications of the events are usually far beyond the most radical predictions or ideas of the thinkers.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the search for the origins of an event is permissible and it is here that history should be comprehensible. The search for the origins of an event is an attempt, after the event has taken place, to identify its different elements.¹⁶ To comprehend political history, we must identify the 'subterranean streams' in history that have finally come to the surface in the contemporary moment.¹⁷ It is here where the study of the ideas of past thinkers is important.

Yet the activity of these past thinkers must be understood properly as well. For Arendt, philosophizing is in part about receiving ideas, but it especially arises and takes its bearings out of the incidents and events of living experience.¹⁸ Arendt's view is that events, more than ideas, change the world. Philosophy registers the

¹² *LOM*, 212-213; *MDT*, 203; Benhabib (2003), 88, 94.

¹³ *EIU*, 431. Arendt is thinking of Hegel.

¹⁴ *BPF*, 26-27.

¹⁵ *EIU*, 325; Benhabib (2003), 71.

¹⁶ *EIU*, 325.

¹⁷ *Origins*, ix.

¹⁸ *BPF*, 14.

shock of the event.¹⁹ History in turn is a 'story,' not of ideas but of 'events.'²⁰ Philosophy is a response to history, a reflection on the changing, developing world, rather than a reflection proceeding without reference to the world. The high regard Arendt has for Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Marx is due in part to their particular conceptual innovations upon the tradition of philosophy,²¹ but also to their philosophy being at heart a recognition that their world was being invaded by specific problems arising in modern human history.²²

If philosophy is a response to events, then one can make sense of one of Arendt's most dramatic claims: that the political experience of totalitarian domination is so unprecedented, it cannot be understood either by the traditional conceptions of political thought or philosophy, and its actions cannot be judged by the traditional conceptions of moral philosophy or law.²³ Consequently, the wisdom of the past, the tradition, 'dies' in our hands when we try to apply it to understand the events of our time.²⁴ The actions of totalitarianism are so far beyond the design of any philosophical idea, that they render the traditional categories of thought and moral judgement impotent.²⁵ Hence, the definite fact of the contemporary moment is that there is complete break from the tradition.²⁶

In insisting that the tradition is broken, Arendt insists that contemporary thinkers are unable to grasp in any consistent unity what the thinkers of the past

¹⁹ *HC*, 273.

²⁰ *HC*, 252.

²¹ *BPF*, 37-38.

²² *BPF*, 27.

²³ *BPF*, 26.

²⁴ *EIU*, 309.

²⁵ *EIU*, 339-40.

²⁶ *EIU*, 309; *BPF*, 26.

tradition understood. The rupture between the past and contemporary moment is too great. One can only pick up the segments of the thought of the past, without any certainty as what the original intentions behind these segments were. Nevertheless, the interesting feature of the contemporary moment is that the fragments of the thought of the past, *separated* from the intention of their creator, shape and influence the contemporary moment. Arendt expresses this interpretive assumption by reference to Shakespeare:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange. (*The Tempest*, I.ii.)²⁷

In thinking about the history of philosophy, Arendt's task is to draw out the fragments that still shape and guide the contemporary age. In that respect, the fragments of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Marx expose three exhausted aspects of the tradition, guiding Arendt's understanding of the crisis of modernity.

II. Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Marx: Three Perspectives on the End of the Tradition

In Arendt's interpretation of Nietzsche, modernity is a world-historical experience of philosophical exhaustion characterized by the end of metaphysics and degeneration in the human condition. Hegel is the immediate predecessor of the end of the tradition. Hegel claims that world history is a continuous philosophical development at which the systemic thought of Hegel himself stands at the end.²⁸ By merging together all the divergent streams of philosophical thought into a unified,

²⁷ *LOM*, 212; *LSA*, 4-5.

²⁸ *BPF*, 27. Hegel sees himself as the culmination of philosophical development. *LOM*, 96.

consistent development, Hegel designs a system with three features. First, his system historicizes past philosophers, making them servants to the prevailing historical forces their times.²⁹ Second, by declaring his own time as the one that realizes philosophical truth, not the past, Hegel repudiates the authority of the past traditions of philosophy and the philosophers therein. They are to be read as obsolete and ultimately incorrect. Third, Hegel transforms philosophy into history. The critical feature for understanding reality is not by grasping eternal, unchanging ideas, but by grasping the meaning of the time-process itself, the philosophy of history. Philosophy of history replaces metaphysics as the primary activity of a philosopher.³⁰

Hegel, then, precipitates the collapse in authority of the past tradition of philosophy as metaphysics, which Nietzsche pithily calls 'the death of God.'³¹ This signifies a historically transformative event: in its aftermath, the quest for eternal, unchanging ideas, metaphysical philosophy, is no longer persuasive.³² With the death of God, the religious and spiritual unity Christianity once provided has vanished.³³ The contemporary age is a moment where the inefficacy of Christianity is catastrophically evident.³⁴ Arendt emphasizes the implications this has in the moral realm, where the former standards of value have been irrevocably lost and

²⁹ *HC*, 294.

³⁰ *BPF*, 29, 68.

³¹ *LOM*, 7. Arendt is interpreting the 'death of God' through Martin Heidegger's announcement of the end of onto-theology. For Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's death of God, see Heidegger (1977).

³² Arendt thinks the quest for the eternal unchanging ideas is metaphysical philosophy. See *HC*, 20; *LOM*, 7-8.

³³ *Origins*, 208.

³⁴ *Origins*, 195; *HA*, 313-14.

moral commitments lack clear justification.³⁵ This historical situation affects nearly every modern human being—all experience the repercussions of the death of God.³⁶

This experience of the collapse of the metaphysical tradition gives shape to a unique sense of time in modernity, which for Arendt shapes the lived reality of a thinking human being.³⁷ The human being is caught between two periods. He no longer believes in the old order but has no sense of direction to discover the new. For a long time, the tradition bridged this gap between past and future, concealing it. Its exhaustion, despite Hegel's efforts, has severed the continuity of time.³⁸ So in modernity, with the breakdown of the tradition, the gap between past and future is not simply a problem experienced by philosophers, but a political problem, a reality and perplexity for everyone.³⁹ Arendt thinks there cannot be a return to the 'good old days,' wherein one might attempt to retry the tradition, or an 'arbitrary promulgation' of new values to fill the gap between present and future.⁴⁰ Since no escape is possible, Arendt's intellectual concern is 'how to move within this gap.'⁴¹

Living in the interval between past and future breaks up the apparent continuum of time and creates this struggle between past and future.⁴² This struggle transforms how the human being thinks. Arendt contends that thinking is bound to this struggle, dispelling the image that the human being can escape to a 'timeless,

³⁵ *PP*, 104; *Origins*, 299.

³⁶ *LOM*, 11.

³⁷ *BPF*, 12.

³⁸ *BPF*, 5, 8.

³⁹ *BPF*, 13.

⁴⁰ *PP*, 104; *BPF*, 14.

⁴¹ *BPF*, 14.

⁴² *LOM*, 204. Arendt draws from Heidegger. C.f. *BGE*, § 224.

spaceless, suprasensuous realm as a proper region of thought.⁴³ The distinction between a sensuous realm of appearances and a suprasensuous realm laden with meaning hereby dissolves.⁴⁴ Thinking, based out of the 'now' of the human condition, is inescapably historical.

For Arendt, the human being is a being conditioned by his history.⁴⁵ The historical event of the 'death of God' conditions the human being to assume a degenerate, unhealthy existence, metaphorically described as an animalized existence.⁴⁶ For Nietzsche, this animalized existence takes the form of the 'last man.' The last man, effectively a bourgeois moral relativist, is only concerned with physical pleasures, and does not long for a greater or more challenging way of life.⁴⁷ For Arendt, the danger is viewing the world in terms of historical 'development' or 'processes,' seeing the law of historical development as analogous to Darwin's law of natural development.⁴⁸ The historian, as Hegel taught with the concept of 'the cunning of reason,' need not pay attention to the aims and awareness of the actors to identify the whole historical trend.⁴⁹ In that way, the action does not have any meaningful sense until it is placed within a universal process, irrespective of which

⁴³ *BPF*, 11.

⁴⁴ *LOM*, 10.

⁴⁵ *HC*, 9-10.

⁴⁶ *HC*, 322; c.f. *BGE* § 62, 203.

⁴⁷ *TSZ* Prologue 5.

⁴⁸ *PP*, 75; *EIU*, 378. Arendt notes that the notion of 'process' and 'development' in history are inherited in part from Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution as the law of nature. Arendt, however, other than briefly examining the similarities between the Darwinian conception of history and the Marxist conception of history (*Origins*, 463), has no explicit discussion of Darwin's influence on modernity and his conception of history. Darwin's influence on the theoretical development of totalitarianism, moreover, is limited (*Origins*, 159, 171, 330). The primary political effect of Darwinism is, as noted above, in the genealogy of man from animal life (*Origins*, 178-79). Arendt, however, regards the concept of history as fully developed in the thought of Hegel and Marx. Consequently, I focus my treatment on these figures rather than Darwin.

⁴⁹ *LOM*, 95-96.

account of universal process, whether it be scientific or historical. This historical outlook ultimately fails to provide meaning, and only obscures the meaning that is possible from understanding the particular actions of agents in the world.⁵⁰

Failing to find meaning in history, the modern human being looks for other sources of meaning, which turn him away from others and toward himself, like Nietzsche's last man.⁵¹ Arendt concludes that the modern human individual is isolated: he has no meaningful relationship to the world, to what lies outside the self. He is also isolated from other human beings, and the feeling of being deserted of all human companionship is what Arendt calls 'loneliness.'⁵² In the contemporary moment, loneliness has become an everyday experience in culture and society.⁵³ When loneliness is an everyday experience, the human being takes on the form of existence known as 'mass man,' a small component of 'mass society.' 'Mass man' is a human being marked by a 'self-centred bitterness,' 'repeated again and again in individual isolation.' 'Mass men' have no common economic, social or political interest with one another.⁵⁴ This self-centred isolation dissolves the significance that individual differences might have between other human beings.

This utter isolation alters the way 'mass man' relates to himself. His self-centredness weakens his instinct for self-preservation, as he neither believes the search for meaning nor his particular life matters.⁵⁵ This has two consequences. First, his thought drifts away from his particular sensible experiences toward

⁵⁰ *BPF*, 89; *HC*, 322-23; *EIU*, 339.

⁵¹ *HC*, 115, 309; *MDT*, 23.

⁵² *Origins*, 474.

⁵³ *Origins*, 478.

⁵⁴ *Origins*, 315; *EIU*, 356-57.

⁵⁵ *EIU*, 359.

generalized non-sensible concepts. It is a flight into abstraction. Mass man is ripe to think he can know everything *a priori*.⁵⁶ Second, mass man is no longer interested in himself. The desire for self-preservation erodes, and is replaced by a sense of feeling expendable. What this exemplifies, for Arendt, is the un-worldly and even anti-worldly character of the mass man. Extended across a whole society, the feeling of being expendable becomes not just restricted to a few particular cases, but a phenomenon striking whole societal strata.⁵⁷

Arendt departs from Nietzsche's portrayal of the modern human being as a self-centred, pleasure-seeking bourgeois relativist. Instead, she portrays a self-hating, quasi-nihilistic being attracted by theoretical abstractions. In its origins, mass man is not only a product of an intellectual culture but also a product of the breakdown of the class-ridden society of the nation-state; mass movements attract both the vulgar and the cultured.⁵⁸ Mass man is especially vulnerable to be swept up by the political events surrounding totalitarianism. By focusing on the significance of these events, Arendt's critique of modernity advances in a very different direction than that of Nietzsche. Nevertheless, what unites Nietzsche and Arendt is a conviction that the shared cultural experience of philosophical and religious exhaustion, the collapse of the authority of the old tradition, is not a moment to celebrate. Instead, it is a crisis that has emptied the historical culture of meaning, turned the search for meaning inward, and conditioned the human being for a diminished form of life.

⁵⁶ Totalitarian movements exploit this presumption. *EIU*, 356.

⁵⁷ *Origins*, 315-16.

⁵⁸ *Origins*, 316-17.

If Arendt were simply continuing her narrative of modernity from where Nietzsche left off, she would be susceptible to the same criticism she makes of Nietzsche: she would see the past history of philosophy as 'one dialectically developed whole,' and therefore propose a universal Hegelian history.⁵⁹ To show that the narrative of modernity cannot be reduced to a single theme, she identifies the insights other thinkers make about the exhaustion of the tradition. To emphasize this exhaustion in religious thought from a different angle than Nietzsche, she draws attention to Kierkegaard. While Nietzsche interprets 'the death of God' as metaphysical exhaustion, it is Kierkegaard who actually addresses the central religious phenomenon, belief. In Arendt's interpretation, the radical criticism of religious belief, prevalent since the 17th century with the natural sciences, makes it a characteristic of the modern age to doubt religious truth.⁶⁰ Yet believers, equipped with the concepts of traditional theology, especially the complementary relationship between faith and reason, had a more than adequate response to the frequently vulgar criticism thrown by the natural sciences or materialism.⁶¹ Kierkegaard, however, carries that attitude of doubt into religious experience itself. He understands religious experience as a struggle from doubt to belief, wherein the recognition of the rational absurdity of the human condition and one's belief constitute part of the decision to believe. He therefore reverses the complementarity of faith and reason, setting them against one another.⁶²

⁵⁹ *BPF*, 28.

⁶⁰ *BPF*, 94.

⁶¹ *HC*, 319.

⁶² *BPF*, 28-29.

For Arendt, Kierkegaard has two great effects. As with Nietzsche, an old anthropological conceptualization is weakened. Kierkegaard challenges the traditional concept of the human being as *animal rationale* with the concept of doubting, struggling, suffering human beings individuated by their lived experience of faith.⁶³ The second is a transformation of religion itself. Impelled by Kierkegaard's conclusions, the modern experience of religion becomes one of doubt. Genuinely religious men are now preoccupied with doubt, which is what decisively undermines faith.⁶⁴ The framework of doubt that Descartes once voiced—that everything must be doubted—has triumphed, so that no thought or experience can escape it.⁶⁵ The result of this triumph in the sphere of religious belief is that it demonstrates definitely that the religious tradition has collapsed. On the fringe of society, modern religious believers are the simple-minded, like Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov, or Myshkin, 'the idiot.'⁶⁶

If the first aspect of the exhaustion of the tradition is the end of metaphysics, and the second the weakening of religious belief, third aspect is the end of political philosophy. It is Marx who achieves this in three ways: by ordering the highest human activity as labour rather than reason, by altering the conception of meaningful action in the public sphere away from rational discourse toward violence, and by transforming the relationship between politics and philosophy, revising the activity of political philosophy. Marx argues for an anti-traditional anthropology. By declaring, 'labour creates man,' he challenges the religious idea

⁶³ BPF, 34-35.

⁶⁴ HC, 319.

⁶⁵ HC, 275.

⁶⁶ BPF, 29.

that God creates man and insists that man's humanity is the result of his own activity. He opposes the conception that man's capacity for reason makes him different from animals. Labour, traditionally the lowest human activity,⁶⁷ replaces reason, until then the highest attribute of humanity. The human being is not an *animal rationale*, but an *animal laborans*.⁶⁸

Arendt, for her part, appreciates that Marx challenges the definition of the essence of humanity as contemplation and defines humanity in terms of action. Yet Arendt disputes whether *labour* can constitute human meaning. Although Marx glorifies labour, he also glorifies the future society free from labour, when the productivity of labour becomes so great that labour itself withers away. Arendt thinks that a simultaneous attempt to define humanity by labour and valuing production, while at the same time idealizing a state of freedom from labour, is a tremendous inconsistency. It suggests an alternative between productive, meaningful slavery, and unproductive, meaningless freedom.⁶⁹ Labour, for Marx, is no more than the biological life-process of keeping alive.⁷⁰ Labour cannot be separated from the other biological life-process, consumption, so that each life-process constitutes the activity of *animal laborans*. Since this is the essence of his activity, he concentrates primarily on this kind of action.

Arendt's view is that the leisure time of *animal laborans*, therefore, is spent not on higher activities, but in consumption, in attempting to satisfy newly developing desires. It reinforces the internalized search for meaning. Happiness is

⁶⁷ HC, 83-84.

⁶⁸ BPF, 21-22.

⁶⁹ HC, 104-105; BPF, 24. Ultimately, modernity is about victory of the *animal laborans*. HC, 320-25.

⁷⁰ HC, 98-99.

only possible when 'life's processes of exhaustion and regeneration, of pain and release from pain, strike a perfect balance.'⁷¹ When the human being is conceptualized as *animal laborans*, these biological processes, what Marx called the 'metabolism of nature,' govern him exclusively. The consequence is that he is cut off from the world, as his life is of concern to no one.⁷² He exists in 'mass culture,' a consumer society.⁷³ Feeling as if one's life is of no concern to others drives him into loneliness.⁷⁴ Marx's anthropology, then, perpetuates the phenomenon of loneliness that is the mark of contemporary human experience and human society.

Marx's political philosophy also declares that violence instigates political change. For Marx, the meaning of history concerns the development of human productivity, and political change is an important sign of the transformative forces advancing human productivity. Marx sees the causes of political change as the violence of wars and revolutions, illuminating the causes underlying the development of human productivity and in turn the causes underlying the meaning of history as a whole. Violence is crucial to the meaning of history. To the extent that the meaning of history depends on free and conscious human action, therefore, meaningful human action is violent action. This overturns the traditional exalted place given to rational speech as the most meaningful conception of human action between persons. The inter-personal space, the political sphere, changes from a place where one acts most meaningfully through rationally persuading others, to a

⁷¹ HC, 134.

⁷² *Origins*, 475. It is the conceptualization of activity that *homo faber* accomplishes that first isolates the activity of one human being from others, in excluding the political realm. See HC, 160-67.

⁷³ HC, 134.

⁷⁴ *Origins*, 475.

place where violence is the most meaningful way of relating to other men. Because the exercise of violent coercion is the precise opposite of rational persuasion, and only takes place where rational persuasion fails, Marx is devaluing the meaning of rational persuasion. Hence his view decisively undermines rational speech, traditionally the most human way of relating to another person. Violence, not rational speech, constitutes the political sphere.⁷⁵

Having transformed the meaning of politics, Marx also transforms the activity of political philosophy, changing 'the attitude of the philosopher toward politics.'⁷⁶ Marx interprets the history of philosophy as one where philosophers, occupying a place distinct from the political world inhabited by human beings, dispute about how to interpret correctly that political world. This debate locates the truth about the world within a realm of ideas, separate from the common human world. Under Marx's interpretation, philosophy from Plato to Hegel is 'not of this world.'⁷⁷ Marx sets out to end this separation of philosophy from the world. He famously declares that the point of philosophy is now not to interpret the world, but to change the world. Philosophy now becomes a project for the whole common human world to realize. Marx predicts that the philosophical goals will become the reality of the common human world. At that moment, philosophy itself will no longer be necessary, and will be abolished.

By merging philosophy with political life, Marx overtly challenges the tradition, for the tradition has kept philosophy and politics as distinct spheres of

⁷⁵ *BPF*, 21-23.

⁷⁶ *BPF*, 17.

⁷⁷ *BPF*, 23.

activity. But Arendt concludes that Marx's thought on this matter is full of inconsistencies. 'When philosophy has been both realized and abolished,' asks Arendt, 'what kind of thought will be left?'⁷⁸ In terms of traditional concepts, Marx asserts practice against theory. But this decision to abandon theory is itself theoretical.⁷⁹ It imports Marx's most systemic philosophy, the theory of dialectics, into practice. Since one can only understand the activity of the political world by means of dialectics, political practice becomes more theoretical than ever before. Furthermore, Marx carries Hegel's philosophy of history, with all its theoretical baggage concerning the concept of history, into the understanding of political practice. Considering the laws of history is a prerequisite to understanding political action. Philosophy and politics are now functions of history.⁸⁰ The world is only understood through history. So Marx, rather than making political action supreme, has made history supreme. But history makes the political actors and their particular actions in the world irrelevant. The world, as human actors experience it, is irrelevant. Nietzsche's cry that the world has been 'abolished'⁸¹ rings true, and history is the culprit.

III. The Triumph of History and the Loss of Human Meaning

Arendt's interpretations of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Marx help coalesce her disquiet about modernity into several key themes. First, there is her concern about cultural disintegration. The failure of Hegel's project of philosophical unification prompts the unravelling of traditional sources of meaning by eroding the

⁷⁸ *BPF*, 24.

⁷⁹ *BPF*, 17.

⁸⁰ *BPF*, 29.

⁸¹ *BPF*, 30.

authority of past philosophy. The cultural collapse of Christianity exposes not only that religious belief is almost impossible in modernity, but also that the metaphysical system pursuing eternal truth is no longer persuasive. Second, there is a heightened consciousness of the historical character of human existence. Hegel's philosophy replaces metaphysics with the philosophy of history, seeking to uncover meaning in time-processes rather than eternal truth. As meaning is drawn from history, it is the memory of the past that imposes a form and horizon on human life to provide meaning. In Nietzsche's view, Hegel's failure means that the narrative of the past cannot provide a specific form and horizon: one is caught in the fluctuating moment of the 'now,' compelled forward by no concrete intention, but uncomfortably aware of the vastness of past history.

These two themes yield a third: in the activity of thinking, there is a dissolution of the distinction between sensory and suprasensory, between sense perception and a world beyond the senses. This is a corollary of the death of God. The quest for the knowledge of the eternal, unchanging ideas found in the suprasensory realm, which constitutes metaphysics, is no longer a persuasive intellectual effort. Consequently, Arendt sees thinking as bounded to that historical moment of the 'now' in which the human being exists. It is the historical thinking, thinking about a memory of the past, which imposes a form and horizon on the human life and ultimately provides meaning. This anticipates a fourth theme: modernity is marked in large part by an anxiety over how to act meaningfully. The death of God removes traditional justifications for moral action. The modern human being paces about, uncertain as to what is right, with a heightened historical

consciousness. The cultural ideals that form him threaten moral relativism. The death of God also undermines basic metaphysical assumptions. The dissolution of the suprasensuous realm where truth dwells also abolishes the sensuous world of appearances, leaving one uncertain as to what is real. The spectre of nihilism haunts philosophy.

Next, there is the questioning of the 'traditional hierarchy of human qualities,' attempting to find anew in the flux of modernity, 'what the specific human quality of man' is.⁸² An attack is directed against the traditional philosophical conception of man. For Nietzsche, the attack against an unchanging human nature leads him to characterize the modern human being as 'the last man' and seek the 'superman.' For Kierkegaard, the attack is on *animal rationale*, by emphasizing a doubting believer who struggles against his reason in order to have faith. Marx revolts against the primacy of the contemplative character of *animal rationale*, by promoting the primacy of action as labour in conceptualizing *animal laborans*. Arendt criticizes each of these approaches. Nietzsche's 'superman' wills for the sake of life, but this highly individualized approach to the problem leaves unaddressed the breakdown of the world between human beings.⁸³ Kierkegaard conceives faith as achieved through doubt. But this defines a reality lived by faith through the prism of Cartesian doubt. Kierkegaard's knight of faith remains trapped within the Cartesian structuring of the world. His mind is the only possible grounding for certainty, fully internalizing the search for meaning.⁸⁴ Marx, by idolizing labour,

⁸² *BPF*, 38.

⁸³ *PP*, 201.

⁸⁴ *HC*, 284.

idolizes a form of action, which, insofar as one acts, does not involve other human beings. As a result, the victory of the *animal laborans* as a conception of man exacerbates the problem of loneliness that marks contemporary existence. Consequently, humanity's pursuit of meaning is marked by an internalized, self-centred search for alternate sources, which increasingly takes on abstract forms. Worldliness as a ground for human meaning is categorically obscured. In that manner, the historical process becomes the only refuge for consolidating human meaning.

Moreover, the domination of historical understanding shackles thinking to a series of abstract concepts. These concepts are drawn not from the reality experienced by particular human beings, but from one's conception of the laws of history. Consequently, theoretical abstractions are more illuminating than the particular reality of human beings. This informs 'distorted' attempts to explain the 'historicity of man.'⁸⁵ Understanding human meaning through history, as Marx does, signifies that the aims and awareness of particular human agents are not essential for grasping their whole meaning. Action, in that view, is not meaningful in itself. Thinking, philosophizing, is understood through history. It is the triumph of historicism over thought, philosophy, politics, and the reality of the world.

IV. History against Politics

The triumph of historicism at the end of the philosophical tradition provides the subterranean current for Arendt's more typically identified concern about modernity, expressed in her insistence that the crisis of the modern world is

⁸⁵ *EIU*, 320-21.

‘primarily political.’⁸⁶ It is a core component of Arendt’s thought that this influence of the tradition underwrites her account of the crisis of the political. The triumph of historicism has profound repercussions for how one understands the political sphere and how political irresponsibility becomes possible. Political action only has meaning as part of a historical process—and only certain kinds at that, such as revolt and revolution.⁸⁷ For Arendt, this devaluation of action for the sake of historicism turns history against politics.⁸⁸ Arendt thinks that this underwrites much of the prejudice against politics that marks the contemporary age.

Arendt sees several forces in the contemporary world that try to rid the world of politics, and the historical understanding motivates much of it. Totalitarianism tries to enslave human beings to the service of ‘historical processes,’ sacrificing freedom to a strict conceptualization of historical development.⁸⁹ The concept of historical development interprets history as preordained to follow certain fully knowable laws. Inevitably, subsuming all human life under these iron laws, history kills freedom.⁹⁰

But the reaction against totalitarianism can also mistreat politics and further political irresponsibility. In light of the concern that the world wars were brought about by state antagonism, there is the hope of ridding the world of politics through world government, purging the world of individual, antagonistic states.⁹¹ Yet the central problem in this view of world government is its reliance upon a conjectured

⁸⁶ *BPF*, 140.

⁸⁷ *PP*, 121.

⁸⁸ *PP*, 95.

⁸⁹ *PP*, 98, 120.

⁹⁰ It removes any concept or space for spontaneity that could provoke a different direction or outcome. See *PP*, 126-27.

⁹¹ *PP*, 97.

vision of a future world, an end of history where troubles assailing humanity will have vanished. It is the kind of thinking to which mass man is especially vulnerable, and Arendt thinks it culminates in another form of totalitarianism.⁹²

In modernity there is an imperative to think about politics, but thinking incorrectly about politics exacerbates political irresponsibility. Some conclude from the experience of totalitarian states that politics is contrary to freedom. Their view would be that to preserve freedom, politics must be separated from freedom.⁹³ Another is that the state's acquisition of such destructive technologies means that politics is a great danger to human life, not just for societies but for the continued existence of the whole human race.⁹⁴ In light of modern events, politics seems incompatible with freedom and with the existence of life. This poses a drastic question: Does politics still have any meaning at all? If so, can it transform the meaninglessness of the contemporary age into meaning?

For Arendt, answering this question in modernity is the summit of thought, to be attempted in spite of all the challenges. But it is not an ascent to be attempted with despair over the modern condition. There are also hopeful opportunities that spur one upwards, brought in large part by the end of the tradition.⁹⁵ There is the opportunity to think free from the constraints of the metaphysical tradition. There also is the opportunity to dissolve the distinction between professional thinkers and the many. Every sane person must be able to think, and identify what is right and

⁹² *PP*, 97, 176.

⁹³ *BPF*, 148.

⁹⁴ *PP*, 108-09.

⁹⁵ *LOM*, 12-13.

wrong. Thinking cannot be left to specialists, and Arendt can therefore help initiate the climb that others may also join.

Arendt believes that politics does have meaning, and that it can help overcome some of the meaninglessness in modernity. It can challenge the degrading anthropology of the mass man. It can provide the human being meaning and direction without the expired authority of the metaphysical tradition. It can counter the supremacy of historical processes by providing a space and meaning for human freedom. It can rebuild the lost sense of worldliness. And it can also provide the groundwork for a new way to think about the activity of philosophy, and how it ultimately relates to politics.

But to do all this, Arendt must rethink the meaning of politics. This rethinking, having started with the last act of the tradition in 19th century philosophy, moves back to the first act in ancient Greece and considers the fragments of Aristotle. Arendt finds in Aristotle the insights that situates her understanding of the meaning of politics.

Aristotle and Political Action

I. Arendt's Approach to Reading Aristotle

Arendt's enquiry into the content of politics looks back, very selectively, to the ancients. It is not an arbitrary beginning. In Arendt's phenomenology, to understand politics, one first must understand that the pronouncement of the word 'politics' evokes the experience and inheritance of its etymological root, the Greek term *polis*. This linguistic inheritance, echoing the experience of those who lived

within the historical *polis*, also includes the philosophical and political meanings imparted to the term.⁹⁶ It necessarily includes the original connotation, as well as what other writers or poets in the past have spoken on the theme of the *polis*, and by consequence shaped the understanding of ‘politics.’⁹⁷ Moreover, the experiences of the peoples of the past, the Greeks and Romans, are worth giving special attention to, on account of how highly they think of the political realm.⁹⁸ Arendt’s phenomenology concludes that the tradition is the primary source for helping discover the meaning of ‘politics.’

But the stumbling block to understanding the phenomenon evoked by the word ‘politics’ is that its authentically inherited meaning has also been distorted by the philosophical tradition, initiated by Plato. The phenomenon cannot be seen properly. The task, therefore, working from the same source of the tradition, is to identify the distortion of meaning, while also identifying the authentically inherited meaning. Arendt’s study of the origins of the tradition seeks to balance these two divergent tasks. Key to the success of this balancing act is her reading of Aristotle, for within his work she identifies the authentic meaning of politics and its distortions.

In claiming that Arendt interprets Aristotle in these contradistinctive manners, I am taking two interpretive stances. First, I recognize that Arendt’s multifaceted conversation with the Greeks is not reducible to a strict treatment of the figures of the philosophical tradition. I am concentrating on her treatment of one

⁹⁶ *BPF*, 153.

⁹⁷ *HC*, 64, 183.

⁹⁸ *BPF*, 153.

figure from the origins of the philosophical tradition in Greece. I do not take the view that Arendt reads the Greek philosophical tradition as criticizing Greek politics with one voice, and simply inverts the reading to criticize the Greek philosophical tradition from the standpoint of Greek politics.⁹⁹ Arendt thinks that the tradition is much more complicated than a single narrative of the Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy distorting politics. Instead, Arendt is in search of the fragments, scattered throughout the totality of the historical past, which disclose an authentic meaning of politics. Arendt does think that reflections on politics, political thought, precede the philosophical tradition.¹⁰⁰ She can then search for the authentic meaning of politics in writers that precede the philosophical tradition, like Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides, and in Greek tragedians.¹⁰¹ But to find the authentic meaning of politics, she also relies heavily on Aristotle. This is because Aristotle offers the first systematic reflection upon the phenomenon of politics. Aristotle can be both a participant in the philosophical distortion of politics as well as a source of disclosure due to the distinct approaches Aristotle has in thinking about politics.¹⁰²

It is necessary, then, to take a second interpretive stance on how to resolve what those distinct approaches of Aristotle are, and how they then map onto Arendt's critique of the tradition. Following Michael McCarthy, I hold that Arendt finds in Aristotle two approaches to political thought: the 'descriptive' and the 'revisionary.' The descriptive approach draws from existing political practice,

⁹⁹ See Euben (2000), 151.

¹⁰⁰ *PP*, 81.

¹⁰¹ For an account of Arendt's Hellenism based on her appropriation of dramatic tragedy, see Euben (2000).

¹⁰² This dual character to Arendt's reading of Aristotle is why it is incorrect to place her outright within an Aristotelian tradition (Habermas (1987), 48), or deny outright she is Aristotelian (Beiner (2014), 5).

honouring the language, customs and opinions of the political community under investigation. The revisionary approach, in contrast, is more normative, seeking to reverse or oppose existing political practices with new, loftier standards. It is insofar as Aristotle is a *revisionary* thinker, orienting his critical thought with the help of the Platonic categories disparaging politics, that he distorts the authentic meaning of politics.¹⁰³ It is insofar as Aristotle is a *descriptive* thinker, orienting his political thought from extant Greek political life, that he is able to help disclose the authentic meaning of politics. For Arendt, Aristotle records the historical experience of Greek life:

Aristotle was providing not so much his personal opinion as he was reflecting a view shared with all other Greeks of the period, even if that view usually went unarticulated. Thus politics in the Aristotelian sense is not self-evident and most certainly is not found everywhere men live in community. It existed, as the Greeks saw it, only in Greece—and even there for only a relatively short period of time.¹⁰⁴

Consequently, Aristotle's writings are a remarkable transmission of political insights from the Greek world. They provide the opportunity to disclose more fully the rare and often unnoticed experience of political action, as it uniquely developed in Greece, and therefore guide the search for the content and meaning of political life for the human condition.

II. Aristotle and the Priority of Activity

If Arendt's distinction between work and labour owes itself to Indo-European etymology, then the distinction between work and action owes itself to

¹⁰³ McCarthy (2012), 134.

¹⁰⁴ *PP*, 116; *HC*, 24.

Aristotle.¹⁰⁵ Arendt sees work as akin to making or fabrication, and relates it directly to the Greek verb *ponein* and the noun *poiēsis*. The act of *poiēsis*, of making an artificial object in the world, has a definitive beginning, in the mind of the maker; and a definitive end, when the maker finishes the object. It is instrumental, 'entirely determined by the categories of means and ends.'¹⁰⁶ Arendt is in search of a different kind of act: *praxis*, which she thinks cannot be captured by the categories of means and ends.

One influential reading of Arendt sees as her highly critical of Aristotle's articulation of *praxis*. While she borrows the *poiēsis-praxis* distinction, she sees *praxis* as already laden with the categories of means and ends. This reading argues that Arendt believes Aristotle excessively emphasizes the goal-oriented or end-oriented character of *praxis*. The teleological framework invoked at the start of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that every action and choice 'is held to aim at some good,'¹⁰⁷ means that all activity must be subsumed under a goal or function external to the activity. *Praxis*, on its part, must have as an end another good beyond its own activity. This good is ultimately the morally good life, and so the morally good life is the proper function (*ergon*) for man. The virtues at work in *praxis*, as good habits or traits (*hexeis*) help actualize that good and constitute the morally good life. This morally good life is the good that all action and choice aim at, and is the 'highest good' of man.¹⁰⁸ In politics, it is realized as the final good of the state.¹⁰⁹ In this way,

¹⁰⁵ HC, 48n, 195.

¹⁰⁶ HC, 143. See EN 1139b1-5.

¹⁰⁷ EN, 1094a1.

¹⁰⁸ Villa (1995), 45.

¹⁰⁹ Villa (1995), 46.

Aristotle's teleological understanding of *praxis* makes action a means to a moralistic goal or end.¹¹⁰ This would subject *praxis* to a predetermined, definite end, defined by the good of the state, and thereby obliterate its distinctiveness.

The implication is that for Arendt, the introduction of the notion of 'end' is itself problematic, because it instrumentalizes all acts under the static end of the morally good life. But this is not exact. Arendt in fact sidesteps this reading of Aristotle entirely. As we shall see, she associates this kind of reading with various distortions within the tradition, reaching their philosophical zenith in medieval scholastic philosophy. To appreciate the subtlety of Arendt's treatment of Aristotle, one must draw upon the passages she emphasizes about the 'end' of action. There, Arendt supports a conception of 'end,' not as an external, static and predetermined end but a fluid and undetermined end, intrinsic to the action. Moreover, Arendt supports a conception of 'good life,' not as a fixed moral potential but understood as the most meaningful life for the human being. This conception underwrites how Arendt wants us to think of the content and meaningfulness of action and political life.

The decisive clue to how Arendt, in her interpretation of Aristotle, sidesteps the conception of 'good life' as a predetermined 'morally good life,' is her conceptualization of 'virtue.' Arendt appropriates the term, but emphasizes it in its original Greek derivation, *aretē*.¹¹¹ In that light, she suppresses an interpretation of virtue as a *hexis* or a character trait, and emphasizes virtue as an activity, performed in public, by which one distinguishes one's self from another. For her, *aretē* must

¹¹⁰ Villa (1995), 42-52.

¹¹¹ *HC*, 207.

first be understood in its primordial meaning of excellence. The contrast is then between someone doing excellent acts and someone doing morally good acts. The essential character of the act is different. Arendt sees the paradigmatic example of this doer of good works as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth does not teach the activity of excellence but the activity of goodness, and the essential character of goodness is that to be good, one be neither seen nor heard.¹¹² The activity of Christian moral goodness emphasizes that the agent must preserve his anonymity.¹¹³ The activity of virtue, however, as Arendt understands it, is the opposite, a deliberate individuation of one person from another. Arendt adopts a different articulation of the 'good' and the good life from the morally good life.

Arendt finds in Aristotle's *praxis* a legitimate way of thinking about 'ends,' which does not succumb to instrumentalization. For Arendt, the crucial point about action, imported directly from Aristotle, is that the end is the act itself.¹¹⁴ The meaning and purpose of the act is inseparable from the act. Consequently, Arendt thinks the full meaningfulness of action is realized in the performance of the act itself.¹¹⁵ But to understand this conception of meaningful action requires clarification of what Arendt supports when she approvingly cites Aristotle's conception of the end of action. This approval, since it conceives of purposiveness as intrinsic to the action, and permits the concept of end to describe the content of action, might seem to concede too much to the categories of means and ends thinking that Arendt is supposed to be avoiding. Arendt's further comments on that

¹¹² HC, 74-75. Arendt refers to Matthew 6: 2-4.

¹¹³ HC, 180; LSA, 18, 95.

¹¹⁴ EN 1140b6; 1094a1-5.

¹¹⁵ HC, 206.

subject might take her away from this approving citation of Aristotle on ends. At times, Arendt does seem to say that any reflection on the purpose of action is misguided, constituting action at one point in *The Human Condition* as ‘spontaneity and practical purposelessness.’¹¹⁶ In that kind of phrase, Arendt seems to be rejecting any role for ends. But this exposes Arendt to a theoretically substantive charge, delivered by Habermas, which accuses Arendt’s theory of political action of excluding purposive or goal-directed activity from politics, providing an implausibly narrow conception of politics.¹¹⁷ Can Arendt’s position on ends be clarified?

Arendt denies that one must categorically exclude any form of goal-directed activity. She explicitly declares that goals, like motives or aims, factor ‘in every single act.’ The difference for Arendt is that goals are not ‘determining factors’ for action.¹¹⁸ Arendt is not excluding or dismissing purposive activity from her conception of politics.¹¹⁹ In that respect, Habermas’s charge does not reflect a rigorous grasp of Arendt’s thought. Arendt’s own stronger remarks concerning the ‘purposelessness’ of action can be interpreted in this context, as a rejection of a predetermined end for action.

However, the concept of ‘end’ here has to be explained. Instead of rejecting the concept of teleology outright, Arendt is rejecting the conception of teleology that arranges or conceptualizes fixed ends that are external to and determinative of the action. In her view, it is this kind of teleology that is corrupt. But for Arendt,

¹¹⁶ *HC*, 177.

¹¹⁷ Habermas (1977). In Habermas’s view, strategic ‘social’ action and instrumental ‘asocial’ action are excluded from Arendt’s account.

¹¹⁸ *BPF*, 150.

¹¹⁹ Cane (2015), 62.

Aristotle's etymology does not point in the same direction. In Aristotle, the word used for teleological end is a term of his own invention, *entelecheia*. It is a composite of three words: *echein*, to have; *telos*, end; and the prefix *en*, in. Attentive to the etymological meaning, *entelecheia* signifies *echei to telos en*: to have an end in [itself]. As a result, Arendt thinks that Aristotle's concept of actuality (*energeia*) designates activities that achieve *entelecheia*. They have an end in themselves, thereby exhausting their full meaning in the performance itself.¹²⁰

This notion of 'performance' relates to Arendt's repeated theme that action should be understood as 'virtuosity.' Although Arendt relates this term to Machiavelli's *virtù* as the best example of what kind of action she is describing, she does not mean it as a rejection of the ancient Aristotelian tradition.¹²¹ She holds that the appropriate metaphors for understanding action as *virtù* are drawn from the Greeks: flute-playing, dancing, healing, and seafaring.¹²² These are the metaphors that Aristotle uses to describe the concept of *energeia*, as they are activities that realize their end in the activity itself.¹²³ While Arendt may appreciate Machiavelli for describing action as *virtù*, thereby giving action its proper political context, she finds

¹²⁰ HC, 206n. Arendt cites *Metaphysics* 1050a23-24. Arendt draws her understanding of *energeia* from Heidegger. Benhabib (2003), 114-15.

¹²¹ C.f. Villa (1995), 45. He says the 'self-containedness of action does not refer to some determining *telos* (e.g. virtue, the good for man), rather, it is expressed *solely* in terms of the virtuosity of performance.' But the dichotomy is unnecessary. It is possible to affirm that virtue, *aretē*, is realized in terms virtuosity of performance. While Villa recognizes the potential compatibility in Aristotle, he says that Aristotle can never affirm the quality of performance alone as a criterion for *eupraxis*, always emphasizing the 'unity of performance and virtue, of good action and character (*hexis*)' (45). Yet if I am correct, Arendt also wants to unite performance with virtue (understood as *aretē*). What she leaves out is an analysis of *hexis*. But Villa's effort to contrast performance as freedom *against* the good, virtuous action distorts Arendt's appropriation of good as 'meaningful' for the sake of Villa's agonistic, Nietzschean reading (Benhabib (2003), 197-98). Performing free actions realizes the good, most meaningful life.

¹²² BPF, 151-52.

¹²³ HC, 206n.

that the content and meaning of this action is in its foundations approached through Aristotle. Action can in this way have an end. This preserves its meaningfulness. Arendt thinks there is an important semantic distinction between two different ways of describing teleology, 'in order to' and 'for the sake of.' 'In order to' concerns the ideal of utility, implicating the categories of means and ends. It is the instrumental conception of teleology that Arendt criticizes. But 'for the sake of' concerns the expressive ideal of meaningfulness.¹²⁴ It is in that latter sense that Arendt thinks the concept of 'end,' even with its teleological implications, has an important place in the understanding of action in politics.

As an ideal of meaningfulness, it is now possible to speak of the proper function of man (*ergon*), but not as a fixed, determined, and limiting function as sketched earlier. The meaningful possibilities realized for the human being in action are only disclosed in politics. Politics, for Arendt's Aristotle, is *ergon tou anthrōpou*, 'the work of man *qua* man.'¹²⁵ Arendt thinks that this observation underlies the importance of political activity for human being, and why it is worth examining what is unique about political activity. As Arendt interprets the phrase, *ergon* is suggesting some unique activity. Although there is an etymological relation with *ergon* to *ergazesthai*, which Arendt associates with the phenomenological sense of 'work' as a category of the *vita activa*,¹²⁶ Arendt thinks the meaning of *ergon* here should not be mistaken with that sense of 'work.' Instead, Arendt thinks that Aristotle is referring to a particular kind of *ergon*. In her view, *ergon* is a term that

¹²⁴ HC, 154.

¹²⁵ HC, 206-207. Arendt cites EN 1097b22.

¹²⁶ HC, 80.

does not distinguish between ‘works’ and ‘deeds,’ but orders them together, so that *ergon* signifies the works and deeds that are ‘durable enough to last and great enough to be remembered.’¹²⁷ What is at stake is a unique activity providing a sense of action.

This action characterizes the meaningfulness of political life, and thereby the meaningfulness for human life. *Ergon* is meaningful if it enables one to live well (*eu zēn*). Living well is then what *ergon* is ‘for the sake of.’ It stands outside the categories of means and ends that Arendt avoids because living well exists in sheer actuality (*energeia*), expressed as an end in itself, an *entelecheia*. What about Arendt’s earlier insistence on the activity of the virtues: even understood as excellences, could they not be described as means, mere instruments, to achieving “the work of man *qua* man”? In fact, Arendt’s abstention from describing them as traits or qualities, for the sake of describing them as activities, helps preserve her ordering of action here. The *aretai*, as activities, are performed for their own sake, and so are themselves actualities. Arendt writes, ‘the means to achieve the end would already be the end; and this ‘end,’ conversely, cannot be considered a means in some other respect, because there is nothing higher to attain than the actuality itself.’¹²⁸ The proper works and deeds of men are ends in themselves.

III. Politics as a Way of Life

Arendt does not simply emphasize the value of an alternative way of life, the life of action, by which one might live, while at the same time withholding reflection on this way of life as being more valuable than others. Although Arendt is careful not

¹²⁷ HC, 19n.

¹²⁸ HC, 207.

to suggest that there is a fixed end and purpose to human life deduced by reflection on human nature, she does think that action in the public realm has a uniquely meaningful connection with aspects of the human condition. As such, there is an inherent dignity in action that can lead to a more meaningful, more complete life than other possibilities.

Arendt's critique of modernity is, as shown earlier, an extended meditation on the insufficiency of a life involving labour alone, and how a shrunken view of the possibilities inherent in the human condition casts the human being into the abyss of nihilism. In particular, she repeats that the problem with the life of labouring is that there is no public world in which the human being can live meaningfully.¹²⁹ Cognizant of that absence in modernity, Arendt is trying to articulate the way of life that includes the public world. It is a life worth aiming at, a 'good' life, a life intrinsically different from other possibilities.¹³⁰

In Arendt's conversation with the tradition, her treatment of *eudaimonia* provides an important clue in her search for a way of life worth aiming at. Although the meaning of this term invokes a venerable philosophical disputation concerning the aim of a human life, which extends throughout the history of philosophy, Arendt emphasizes its original Greek meaning against its later medieval meaning. In its medieval meaning, *eudaimonia* corresponds with the Catholic theological definition of the total happiness or beatific state befitting *what* the human is, which is to say

¹²⁹ *HC*, 208. Arendt's particular concerns are the atrophying of a 'space of appearances,' as well the common sense that fits the self into reality.

¹³⁰ See Beiner (2014), 4, 14, 16.

one whose nature is to be created in the image and likeness of God.¹³¹ But in its original Greek meaning, *eudaimonia* is a lasting yet distinct state of being of an individual visible only to other human beings. Arendt describes it as the essence of *who* somebody is: best understood when they die and leave nothing behind but their story, which gains them immortality.¹³² Arendt's exposition on the meaning of *eudaimonia* allows her, by implication, to affirm one who 'consciously aims at being essential,' as long as one understands 'essential' in its original Greek sense.¹³³ Arendt concludes that for one to aim at *eudaimonia* is for one to aim to realize one's essence, particularized for the human individual and not universalized for the pursuit of a fictitious natural end. Like Aristotle, Arendt seeks what enables an individual human being to live well and act well.¹³⁴ The question to bear in mind is where Arendt distinguishes herself from Aristotle in what is the more meaningful life.

For Arendt, to understand what the public realm is first requires contrasting it to what it is not, the private realm. In the Greek civic community, the contrast is best expressed as the divide between the political realm and the household realm. The household is the realm where people live together for the sake of their biological life, satiating their wants and needs.¹³⁵ Consequently, it contains the activity of labour. In this realm, rule over others, which includes servants and slaves,

¹³¹ *HC*, 192; *PP*, 95-96.

¹³² *HC*, 193; 183-84; *MDT*, 104-5. For the importance of storytelling in Arendt's thinking, see Disch (1994); Benhabib (2003), 91-95. For the discussion of immortality and meaning, see *HC*, 55-57.

¹³³ *HC*, 193.

¹³⁴ *EN*, 1095a20.

¹³⁵ *HC*, 30.

is permissible, so strict inequality is also permissible.¹³⁶ The overarching principle directing this sphere is necessity. For the human being, who undeniably has biological wants and needs drawn from the world, it is crucial that necessity be given its due. Necessity underwrites *eudaimonia*.¹³⁷ Total independence from necessity, total independence from the external world, is impossible if one wants to lead a meaningful, fulfilling life. Siding with Aristotle, Arendt thinks that having some basic external goods is a requirement for *eudaimonia*; one cannot achieve *eudaimonia* if one is ill, or too poor to eat.¹³⁸

This sphere of necessity contrasts directly with the political realm, where the principle is freedom. This contrast, Arendt suggests, is not about two equally self-sustaining spheres of existence, but is about one sphere being recognized as inadequate. Recognizing this inadequacy, one seeks out a more complete way of life in the world. A life governed by necessity is for the Greeks a pre-political phenomenon, an incomplete life.¹³⁹ The result of mastering necessity in the household realm is that it permits one to be independent from necessity. From this new position, one can follow Aristotle and recognize the incomplete character of the household realm, and choose, in freedom, a way of life that better realizes *eudaimonia*.¹⁴⁰ The emphasis is on freedom: Arendt describes how Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* draws attention to three freely chosen 'ways of life' that are concerned with things 'neither necessary nor merely useful': the three possible lives

¹³⁶ HC, 32.

¹³⁷ HC, 31.

¹³⁸ HC, 31. See EN, 1099a30-b8; *Politics* 1253b25. C.f. Beiner (2014), 16: he passes over this aspect of Arendt's reading of Aristotle.

¹³⁹ HC, 31.

¹⁴⁰ HC, 31.

that might realize *eudaimonia*.¹⁴¹ They are the life of enjoying bodily pleasures, the life devoted to matters of the *polis*, in which ‘excellence produces beautiful deeds,’ and the life of the philosopher devoted to the contemplation of things eternal.¹⁴² Setting aside the life of the philosopher for now, Aristotle holds that the life of enjoyment fails to attain *eudaimonia*. Yet the political life does. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes at length the content and value of the political life. This discussion fascinates Arendt, and she pursues what precisely makes *bios politikos* more valuable.

Aristotle prompts Arendt to conceptualize what action is, and the importance of action for realizing the meaningfulness of political life. But Arendt also conceptualizes action as the highest realization of freedom. In her view, freedom is inherent in action; men are free as long as they act.¹⁴³ The kind of freedom that Arendt is seeking to describe is the freedom that requires a common public space to meet and connect with other human beings.¹⁴⁴ The freedom of the public realm, public freedom, is interconnected with politics and makes political actions meaningful. Arendt argues that public freedom is the *raison d’être* of politics, and that the field of experience of freedom is action.¹⁴⁵ The political realm, then, is the realm where freedom is experienced. However, Arendt’s insistence on freedom as the *raison d’être* of politics appears distinctly modern and un-Aristotelian.¹⁴⁶ On some interpretations of Aristotle, freedom has no independent pride of place in his

¹⁴¹ HC, 12-13. As Arendt notes, Aristotle rejects ways of life that are ‘undertaken under compulsion,’ such as the life of the money-maker. EN 1096a5.

¹⁴² HC, 13.

¹⁴³ BPF, 151.

¹⁴⁴ BPF, 147.

¹⁴⁵ BPF, 145.

¹⁴⁶ Villa (1995), 44.

framework, as freedom is apparently 'subsumed by the moral purposes of the state.'¹⁴⁷ But this is not Arendt's reading of Aristotle. Arendt finds in Aristotle the meaning of political life as public freedom.

IV. Public Freedom as the Meaning of Political Life

Arendt believes that one departs the private sphere and enters the political sphere in pursuit of the more valuable life. She cites Aristotle's remark that 'the *polis* comes into existence for the sake of living, but remains in existence for the sake of living well.'¹⁴⁸ Arendt emphasizes a particular feature of living well: within the *polis*, living well is about the presence of freedom. Arendt explores the reason why a life devoted to the *polis* is a life most closely associated with freedom. The decision to live in the *polis* is a free decision: the *polis* is the 'very special and freely chosen' form of organization. In terms of the human activity, the unique character of this political realm makes political life the freest and most dignified form of human life. At the same time, Arendt continues to emphasize her opposition to a fixed natural human end, denying that the political realm is a natural end or natural essence of human life.¹⁴⁹ In choosing this language, Arendt is not denying that a greater meaning for human life is pursued in the political realm. Rather, she is emphasizing a qualitative difference between the private and the public realm. In no way can the political realm be concerned with the necessities of life, nor can the origins of the political realm be connected with pursuing the necessities of life. No activity that

¹⁴⁷ Villa (1995), 44.

¹⁴⁸ *Politics* 1252b29; *HC*, 183.

¹⁴⁹ *PP*, 95.

serves necessity can constitute the political realm.¹⁵⁰ The fundamental qualitative difference between the public and the private realm is, negatively, the absence of acts driven by biological necessity; and positively, the presence of freedom as a 'fact of everyday life.'¹⁵¹

What precisely is this kind of freedom that Arendt considers a fact of everyday life in the public realm? The contrast with necessity, where one is beholden to life processes, might lead one to think that freedom is living as one likes, a freedom of the will. Yet Arendt sees this as 'inner freedom' and rejects this definition by agreeing with Aristotle, who says that this is the conception advanced by someone who does not know what freedom is.¹⁵² There are several problems with inner freedom. It is wholly individualistic, an internal feeling devoid of any outer manifestations. This means it has no relationship to the public world, and is indeed a retreat from the public world. Crucially, inner freedom requires no connection with other human beings.¹⁵³

Moreover, Arendt rejects the association of political freedom with moral freedom, seeing the source of the latter distortion of freedom in the philosophical conception of the Stoics. They see freedom as a choice between good and evil action within a clearly demarcated realm where one has the power to act.¹⁵⁴ In rejecting the Stoic conception, Arendt refuses to connect freedom with the action of the will out of a particular motive or for a consciously intended goal. An act that consciously

¹⁵⁰ *HC*, 37; *PP*, 95.

¹⁵¹ *BPF*, 144; cf. 147.

¹⁵² *BPF*, 146. Arendt cites *Politics* 1310a25ff.

¹⁵³ *BPF*, 145, 147.

¹⁵⁴ *BPF*, 146.

presumes a certain goal, judges that goal to be worth pursuing, and then follows through on it by means of the faculty of the will, is not for Arendt a matter of political freedom, but of 'right or wrong judgement.'¹⁵⁵ She draws a strong contrast between two different conceptions of freedom. On the one hand, there is a conception of moral judgement that stems from an understanding of morality linked to a conception of inner freedom. This begins with the Stoics, is set ablaze as a 'religious predicament' by Pauline Christianity, and culminates in medieval Scholastic formulations.¹⁵⁶ This conception emphasizes an act with a particular pre-formulated object of cognition, which the will then pursues. Freedom is about being able to choose between different objects of cognition. On the other hand, action is free only if it can call 'something into being which did not exist before' as an object of cognition. It transcends the guidance of an object of cognition. It is, ultimately, a higher paradigm of freedom.

Instead of a choice between good and evil acts in the faculty of the will constituting the highest paradigm of freedom for the human being, Arendt finds this by reflecting on the Aristotelian definition of the human being as *zōon politikon* and *zōon logon exon*. These definitions help describe what features of the *bios politikos* make life more valuable. *Bios politikos* realizes such high possibilities because it provides an opportunity to conduct human affairs by the faculty of speech in a place—the *polis*—where human beings live together.¹⁵⁷ What is at stake with the definition of the human being Aristotle deploys is not meant to indicate an essential

¹⁵⁵ BPF, 150.

¹⁵⁶ BPF, 150, 56, 59, 288; RJ, 115-19.

¹⁵⁷ BPF, 22-23.

human faculty, but a particular way of acting. To interpret *zōon logon exon* as ‘rational animal,’ as the Latin philosophical tradition does, is to misinterpret the faculty of speech as the faculty of reason, and risks obscuring the promising way of life that the human use of speech indicates. The way of life is one where the use of words by one citizen to persuade another citizen decides an outcome. It is meant to stand against a way of life where one uses force and violence against another to decide an outcome.¹⁵⁸ That action constitutes the human being as *zōon politikon*, a specifically *political* animal and not social animal.¹⁵⁹ In Arendt’s view, Aristotle’s definition and his restriction of the scene of the actualization of this definition to inside the Greek *polis* indicates that those outside the *polis*, slaves and barbarians, do not share in this way of life.¹⁶⁰

Speech, however, is only one component of the *bios politikos*. Arendt thinks that in the Greek world, speech and action were ‘coeval and coequal.’¹⁶¹ Each belong together, as in the paradigmatic example of Homer’s Achilles as ‘the doer of great deeds and speaker of great words.’¹⁶² Why do speech and action belong so close together, and why is Achilles honoured for doing each? Aristotle provides a clue when he writes that it is the ‘sharing of words and deeds’ which makes it worthwhile for men to live together in the *polis*.¹⁶³ In Arendt’s view, the Greek reasoning (which Aristotle transmits) lies in how to answer the question, crucial to

¹⁵⁸ *HC*, 26; *BPF*, 22-23.

¹⁵⁹ *HC*, 23-24. Arendt blames Seneca and Thomas Aquinas for the distortion of the term, censuring the Stoics and Scholastics alike.

¹⁶⁰ *HC*, 27. Arendt thinks that the denial of speech to certain members of the human race, by making them legal aliens from every country, is effectively to exile the stateless from the human race. *Origins*, 297.

¹⁶¹ *HC*, 26.

¹⁶² *HC*, 25.

¹⁶³ *EN* 1126b12.

achieving *eudaimonia*, of *who* the human being is. Speech and action disclose the unique character of particular human being to others who are present.¹⁶⁴ Not only are they coequal, they also require one another. Without a deed, there would be nothing to speak about. But without speech, a deed would remain unintelligible. What happens by, with, and through the deed is identified by the doer who is speaking, announcing 'what he does, has done, and intends to do.'¹⁶⁵ Taken together, action and speech give the human being a human identity in a human world.

V. Meaningfulness and Morality in Political Life

Arendt's conception of action as sharing of words and deeds is what defines the *bios politikos*, and the opportunity to realize action and speech as the distinct *praxis* of the *vita activa* provides *bios politikos* with its meaning. Yet Arendt's expunging from *bios politikos* of the intentional acts that choose between good and evil, as well as her attributing so much value to the kind of action possible in the political *against* more moralistic conceptions of action opens her to a serious charge that could undermine Arendt's theory of action providing meaning for political life.

Specifically, the charge is that Arendt divides some acts, which are defined by their motives and aims or intentions, from political acts. Since she explicitly associates moral activity with intent, she implies that the conception of political activity is empty of moral content. For some of Arendt's critics, it appears she celebrates immorality or promotes action unhinged from moral constraints.¹⁶⁶ Even one of Arendt's most articulate defenders, Seyla Benhabib, has taken these

¹⁶⁴ HC, 178-79.

¹⁶⁵ HC, 179.

¹⁶⁶ Kateb (1983), 32-33; Jay (1978); Beiner (2014), 12-13.

criticisms as valid to some extent, and tried ambitiously to ‘think with Arendt against Arendt,’ providing a procedural conception of ethics from some themes in her work, as set against the allegedly amoral strains.¹⁶⁷

This objection, however, ignores Arendt’s insistence—a quiet and rare insistence, but one she still considers vital—that action springs from a principle. A short passage in ‘What is Freedom?’ highlights how Arendt thinks that the principle can provide the ethical significance to action. She thinks that virtue is the principle underlying meaningful action; Arendt sees three fragments from the tradition providing evidence. Montesquieu speaks of ‘virtue,’ and the Greeks, through Homer, speak of ‘excellence.’¹⁶⁸ But Machiavelli’s *virtù* provides the clearest example. With reference to the Aristotelian metaphors that correctly emphasize how action can be an end in itself, Arendt thinks that Machiavelli’s *virtù* ‘best illustrates’ excellence as a principle, as that with which man answers the opportunities of the world before him.¹⁶⁹ Principles, in Arendt’s view, provide the ethical orientation. At the same time, recalling Arendt’s distinction between the meaningful ‘for the sake of’ and the instrumentalist ‘in order to,’ acting on a principle is not acting to bring about virtue, but as already acting virtuously, as acting for the sake of virtue. Nor is one acting out of a psychological motive that originates and concerns the self.¹⁷⁰ Arendt’s fear here is that this kind of conception of principle places the ethical significance of action wholly within the psyche. It sets the stage for a wholly internal, wholly individual,

¹⁶⁷ Benhabib (1988), 31; Benhabib (2003), 123ff.

¹⁶⁸ *BPF*, 151. Arendt refers to Homer *Iliad*, VI. 208. See also *HC*, 41n.

¹⁶⁹ *BPF*, 151-52.

¹⁷⁰ Cane (2015), 63.

conception of morality as a duel between different faculties within the will.¹⁷¹ Morality of this sort is concerned with self-purification, of regulating and monitoring one's purity of intention.¹⁷² It is within the 'horizon of Christian traditions' that this conception takes hold, suppressing a conception of freedom and of ethical evaluation that is, as Arendt writes, 'an accessory of doing and acting.'¹⁷³ If this is the exegetical substance of Arendt, it remains to justify its theoretical substance. How is it possible to provide ethical evaluation of deeds, without reference to the intentions and inner motivations of an actor? The way to see how deeds serve as a source of meaning is to turn to Arendt's most notorious example: Eichmann.

Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is not just a report on the 1961 trial of Otto Adolf Eichmann. Instead, as she privately admitted, it is 'an approach toward the groundwork for creating new political morals.'¹⁷⁴ To do so, Arendt set aside considerations and speculations on Eichmann's motives or intentions. In what remains the subject of persistent controversy, she did not concern herself with a close examination of the extent to which anti-Semitism motivated Eichmann's actions.¹⁷⁵ Instead, Arendt's text focuses on describing the operation and scale of the Third Reich's Final Solution. As part of that description, her report on the trial draws attention to Eichmann's role and participation in the Shoah.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, the concentration on Eichmann's deeds in propagating genocide discloses the sheer

¹⁷¹ BPF, 157.

¹⁷² Cane (2015), 63. I am indebted to Cane's analysis here.

¹⁷³ BPF, 163.

¹⁷⁴ Robin (2015).

¹⁷⁵ E.g. Benhabib (2014).

¹⁷⁶ EJ, 83-111, 151-219.

enormity of his crimes against humanity.¹⁷⁷ Given that scale, Arendt implies, the reflection on his motivations or intentions to determine moral culpability does not matter. No motivation or intention, however benign or malignant, can alter the significance of the death toll of the Final Solution. Eichmann, in trying to show he was sympathetic to particular stories from the Final Solution, that he never bore the Jews any ill-will, never 'personally' had any problems with the Jews, and thereby was not a fanatical anti-Semite, highlights the contrast between intention and action. If Eichmann was telling the truth, and really bore the Jews no ill-will, he was playing a role in a macabre comedy, where the mass-murderer insists he never meant to hurt anyone. This was the comic element in Eichmann's trial to which Arendt drew attention. If Eichmann was lying, and trying to excuse himself by sympathetic fictions, he was refusing to confront the enormity of his deeds. This corresponds to Eichmann's 'thoughtlessness.'¹⁷⁸

For Arendt, Eichmann is an example of the limits of theorizing about morality based upon consideration of intention. Any attempt to formulate Eichmann's intentions for the public by traditional juridical procedure is a side issue to the moral problem at hand. Eichmann's moral culpability cannot be lessened by showing he did not really intend the full extent of the Final Solution, nor could it be increased by showing he was a fanatical anti-Semite. It is his deeds that damn him. Eichmann's deeds show him to be a mass murderer. His speech shows him to be someone unwilling to confront the moral import of his deeds. It is on that basis that

¹⁷⁷ Benhabib (2000), 76-82. Drawing attention to these crimes as 'crimes against humanity' is central to Arendt's political thinking in *EJ*.

¹⁷⁸ Benhabib (2014).

Arendt judges him. It is also on that basis that Arendt shows her theoretical consistency, and shows herself capable of providing a stern, uncompromising moral judgement in evaluating the actions of particular actors.¹⁷⁹

Action reveals the worth of the actor. That is, ultimately, what Arendt thinks is at stake with political action, and why, given its public character, it moves in a realm wholly different from the realm where one evaluates intention. By entering into the public sphere, the doer of deeds and speaker of words must be willing to risk the disclosure of himself.¹⁸⁰ He proves himself open to the possibilities of glory and of excellence, but also open to judgement and condemnation.¹⁸¹ It is the possibility and peril of public freedom.

VI. The *Polis* and its Purpose

A life that participates in public freedom requires the presence of others, and one requires a realm to guarantee the existence of public freedom, and a place where people can come together.¹⁸² For Arendt, that constitutes the purpose of the political realm, reflected in the nature of the Greek *polis*, the quintessential example. The *raison d'être* of the *polis* is 'to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear. This is a realm where freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered, and turned into stories before they are finally

¹⁷⁹ See her rejection of collaboration or consequentialism: 'those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they choose evil.' *RJ*, 36. Arendt's rejection of instrumentalism is also about rejecting this kind of reasoning about ethics.

¹⁸⁰ *HC*, 180.

¹⁸¹ For this reason, Arendt rejects notions of collective responsibility as a diminishment in the personal responsibility of the actor. See *RJ*, 19-23, 28-29, 59, 97, 147-58. Arendt's moral judgement could well be summarized by a remark of Nietzsche's: 'She told me she had no morality—and I thought that she had, like myself, a more severe morality.' *RJ*, 104.

¹⁸² *Rev*, 31.

incorporated into the great storybook of human history.’¹⁸³ This reflection on the purpose of the *polis* provides Arendt with the chance to describe the essential features of the political realm. For Arendt, it is a realm of equality, of plurality, and of appearances.

As noted above, Arendt’s account of the *bios politikos* emphasizes this way of life as the most ‘good’ or meaningful life. The ‘good life’ of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is, in Arendt’s reading of Aristotle, the life of the citizen. It concerns the life of one who is no longer bound to labour and work, and so is freed from the necessary life processes that mark biological existence.¹⁸⁴ In the life of the citizen, the activity of speaking holds a special importance. Those who partake in *bios politikos*, citizens, must have as their central concern speaking and talking to other citizens. Speech becomes a way of life. When one takes up speech as a way of life, one opts for persuasion rather than violence. Because one speaker must persuade his fellow citizens in order that his fellow citizens obey him, and he can be persuaded by other citizens to obey them, no one citizen is in command of another. A citizen, then, in Aristotle’s formulation, is one who rules and is ruled in turn.¹⁸⁵ Aristotle’s idea here is that the activity of speaking, shared amongst all citizens, gives each citizen the chance to rule. But contrary to a model of ruling that persists in the household sphere, where obedience to the command of the head of the household is unquestioned, total, immediate, and permanently arranged, the model of ruling here entails a dynamic involvement of all free citizens who can exercise temporarily the

¹⁸³ *BPF*, 153. Political action thus produces the stories that assure one of immortality. See von Heyking (2016), 168.

¹⁸⁴ *HC*, 37.

¹⁸⁵ *Politics* 1277b13-16.

role of command as long as they persuade others to accept them in that position. Once they are unable to persuade, another takes their place. Ruling, then, in the sense it persists in the household, does not exist in the *polis*.

It is for that reason that Arendt, adjusting Aristotle's formulation to contrast it from household rule, but expressing the same thought, writes that the free citizen is one who neither rules nor is ruled by others.¹⁸⁶ Arendt also explores a further implication of this concept. Citizens move in a sphere where they obey one another by first having been persuaded live in a realm of equality. To live in this situation, she thinks, is another facet of public freedom. Freedom is possible only among peers.¹⁸⁷ It makes the life of the citizen more worthwhile. In this sense, as Aristotle notes, the life of the citizen is better than the life of someone who simply rules over others, like a despot.¹⁸⁸ By conceiving of such a close, mutually supporting relationship between freedom and equality, Arendt is contesting the modern concern, articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville, that equality is a danger to freedom.¹⁸⁹ Public freedom demands equality. Yet it is a certain kind of equality.

Arendt insists on the equality of those who participate within the political realm as citizens; who, in other words, share the association of citizenship. As citizenship depends upon the performance of an activity, not on nature or social class, Arendt thinks that the association of citizenship, and the concomitant political equality, unites persons of diverse natures and social backgrounds. It is very different from other kinds of equality that may emphasize associations dependent

¹⁸⁶ *HC*, 32.

¹⁸⁷ *Rev*, 31.

¹⁸⁸ *Politics* 1325a4. *HC*, 32n.

¹⁸⁹ *Rev*, 30. C.f. Villa (1995), 44.

on sameness of nature or social background. Two of the same professionals, united and equal in social class, do not necessarily express political equality. Claims to unite the human race in equality under a shared essence, such being creatures made in the image of God, or sharing in the same sinfulness, are not expressions of political association. Arendt agrees with Aristotle that citizenship is not an association based on shared natural traits.¹⁹⁰ The challenge of a true political association is that it must unite and make equal in the public realm 'people who are different and unequal.'¹⁹¹ This equalization between different and unequal citizens takes place through friendship (*philia*).¹⁹² Justice, in the sense of material distribution, is on its own insufficient. For Arendt, the crucial insight concerning the true character of a community comes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, rather than Plato's *Republic*. It is Aristotle who identifies that friendship is a necessary component of a community. Friendship builds the community bond between citizens. It provides a shared understanding of the opinions of others, despite whatever differences may exist between persons.¹⁹³ This shared understanding tempers and moderates the pursuit of glory and excellence that characterizes Greek life, setting one citizen in an unceasing contest with the others. Friendship leads the citizens from contest to community.

In this way, political equality helps build a common world of equals, but also embraces and encourages difference. The embrace of difference constitutes a recurring theme in Arendt. In her own language, the political realm must guarantee

¹⁹⁰ *Politics* 1275b23-34.

¹⁹¹ *HC*, 215. Arendt cites Aristotle, *EN* 1133a16.

¹⁹² *PP*, 17.

¹⁹³ *PP*, 18.

plurality. It is consonant with Aristotle's own emphasis. For Aristotle, a true *polis* must ensure a unity, but if it is too much of a unity, it becomes more like a household. What preserves this unity and at the same time prevents the destruction of the *polis* and its replacement by a familial unit is the presence of plurality (*plēthos*) in the *polis*.¹⁹⁴ Through that lens, it is possible to see the logic informing Arendt's assertion at the start of *The Human Condition*, that plurality is *the* condition of all political life.¹⁹⁵ This condition has two senses: *conditio sine qua non* and *conditio per quam*.¹⁹⁶ As *conditio sine qua non*, the *polis* must have plurality to be a political sphere, to be different from non-political spheres. As *conditio per quam*, the actions undertaken within the *polis* must emphasize and sustain this plurality. The speech of citizens serves to distinguish one citizen from another, revealing the unique distinctiveness of a unique being and thereupon actualizing plurality.¹⁹⁷

At the same time, the actualization of plurality through speech must be done amongst other men, who are affirmed as equals to one another.¹⁹⁸ This equality is closely related to plurality. As noted earlier, equality means that the *polis* shares the rule-ruled relation amongst all its citizens. If a single individual or collective body sets themselves forward to be rulers over the others, then one-man-rule, 'mon-archy,' results. For Arendt, this is Aristotle's concern over the problem of tyranny. 'Mon-archy' is a possible description of several different regimes: a regime where one man rules as an outright tyrant against all, to a benevolent despotism, all the

¹⁹⁴ *Politics* 1261a18-25; Frank (2005), 143-47.

¹⁹⁵ *HC*, 7.

¹⁹⁶ *HC*, 7.

¹⁹⁷ *HC*, 176-78.

¹⁹⁸ *HC*, 7-8, 175-78.

way to a form of democracy where the people form a collective body to rule as one against others.¹⁹⁹ What unites all these regimes is not necessarily how poorly or how cruelly they rule—some can rule very well, in fact. Instead, they all insist that only ‘the ruler should attend to public affairs.’²⁰⁰ In these regimes, the ruled do not participate in common affairs and are relegated to private life. The ruler then deprives the ruled of their chance to distinguish themselves in the political sphere and actualize their plurality. One-man-rule abolishes plurality, but because plurality is the *sine qua non* of the political sphere, it also succeeds in abolishing the political sphere.²⁰¹ One-man-rule is the abolishment of the *polis*.

The final, and most explicitly ontological, feature of the *polis* Arendt outlines is that the *polis* is the space of appearances.²⁰² Arendt defines appearances linguistically. What from the world ‘appears to me,’ (*dokei moi*), is formulated in speech as *doxa* (opinions). Appearances are opinions. In this sense, the world reveals itself differently to different people. Moreover, as *doxa* also means ‘splendour’ and ‘fame,’ to assert one’s own opinion is also to show one’s splendour and fame, to show who one is. Every man has his own *doxa*, his own opening to the world that is fame. Since a man opens himself to the world through speaking and acting, the space of appearances comes into being ‘wherever men are together’ through speech and action, where their different *doxai* meet and interact.²⁰³ This interaction is through persuasion. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies the art of

¹⁹⁹ HC, 221n. Arendt sees Aristotle as emphasizing a regime where the many have power ‘not as individuals, but collectively,’ *Politics* 1292a13.

²⁰⁰ HC, 221. Arendt cites Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* xv. 5.

²⁰¹ HC, 220-21.

²⁰² Disch (1994), 56. As Disch notes, some metaphysical assumptions underwrite Arendt’s account of the public realm.

²⁰³ PP, 13-15; HC, 199.

persuasion as the strictly political art of speech. Persuasion comes from the realm of opinions, *doxai*.²⁰⁴ It recognizes its inherent limits, in that, meeting another human being, one is always speaking to another unique person. It therefore reaffirms plurality. In persuading, one offers an opinion amongst other opinions. That is why plurality underwrites the space of appearances.²⁰⁵ Arendt links the space of appearances to the political character of the *polis*. 'Whatever occurs in this space of appearances,' she writes, 'is political by definition.'²⁰⁶ The space of appearances makes the *polis*. More than just a physical location, the *polis* is the organization of people who live together and appear to one another.²⁰⁷

Arendt's explicit ontological thesis is that Being and appearance coincide. The human reality, suggests Aristotle, is the same as appearance: 'for what appears to all, this we call Being,'²⁰⁸ This thesis has important implications. First, reality is guaranteed by the presence of others who act and speak in the same realm. As 'appearing' is always an 'appearing to,' Being always presupposes a spectator.²⁰⁹ Second, the thirst for knowledge never leaves the world of appearances altogether. Both common sense and comprehensive scientific knowledge rely on evidence, 'inherent in the world of appearances.'²¹⁰ Thus reality is the world of experience, with no transcendent beyond: *only* what appears to all, *only* this we call reality. Third is the implied rejection of what Arendt calls 'metaphysical fallacies.'²¹¹ A

²⁰⁴ *PP*, 12-13; *HC*, 26.

²⁰⁵ *HC*, 220.

²⁰⁶ *BPF*, 153.

²⁰⁷ *HC*, 198.

²⁰⁸ *HC*, 199. Arendt cites Aristotle, *EN* 1172b36.

²⁰⁹ *LOM*, 19.

²¹⁰ *LOM*, 54.

²¹¹ *LOM*, 15.

metaphysical fallacy is a fallacy that attempts to transcend the world of experience into a comprehensive theory of the whole. As a *fallacy*, it has constituted an inheritance of the errors of past philosophers, by which we have deceived ourselves deeply, almost naturally.²¹² The metaphysical fallacies Arendt rejects are the kinds that coalesce to sustain an ontology where appearances are not really real, but only a partial representation of a veiled realm of Being. Arendt definitively rejects the two-world metaphysical dichotomy, between the world of appearances and the world of reality.

Arendt's ontological claim also helps identify two of the threats to politics as challenges to that ontological thesis. The existence and purpose of the *polis*, the existence of the political realm, is dependent upon a people engaged in a certain activity. It resides in action and speech. If words no longer 'disclose realities,' if deeds no longer 'create new realities,' then the space of appearances atrophies.²¹³ The *polis* vanishes. Any way of thinking that disbelieves the reality disclosed in doing great deeds and speaking great words is *ipso facto* a threat to the political realm. The threat here is a way of thinking that devalues politics, criticizing it as a realm of contingencies, uncertainties, and imperfections. The implicit contrast is between this political realm, and a non-political realm of stability, certainty, and perfection.

There is, moreover, a second threat: ignoring appearances altogether. If being and appearance are totally divided, everything that appears can be doubted on the grounds that it may not *be*—that is, it may be a delusion. This assumption

²¹² Burch (2011), 19.

²¹³ *HC*, 200.

underwrites modern science.²¹⁴ The domains of knowledge that cannot be doubted, such as mathematics, must not be concerned with appearances at all.²¹⁵ This is in part the direction and impetus of the metaphysical tradition. Appearances are not a worthy object of study, ultimately because they are not real. One is again left with a dichotomy between two worlds: one, the invisible reality, and the other, the visible unreality. Plato's initiation of the tradition of political theory makes these two threats real.

Aristotle Astray: Contemplation and the Threat to the Political

Despite Aristotle's insights, he is caught up within Plato's thought. Critically, he re-presents the Platonic relationship between philosophy and politics, the dichotomy between philosophical life of contemplation and unphilosophical life of action. This implicitly devalues politics and solidifies the two-world dichotomy that seizes thought and obscures the phenomenon of politics. Consequently, as the tradition of political theory marches on across time, the fate of the political is to lose its inherent dignity.

I regard the implications of Plato and Aristotle's prioritization of the life of contemplation against the life of action as Arendt's focus. The prioritization of philosophy over politics is the decisive issue.²¹⁶ At the start of *The Human Condition* Arendt clearly identifies the primary challenge to understanding the *vita activa*:

²¹⁴ HC, 275.

²¹⁵ HC, 266.

²¹⁶ Bernstein (2000), 280; Dolan (2000). C.f. Habermas (1985), 171; Villa (1995), 42. The concept of teleology and the blurring of the distinction between *poiēsis* and *praxis* do of course play a role, just a secondary role.

The term *vita activa* is loaded and overloaded with tradition. It is as old as (but not older than) our tradition of political thought. And this tradition, far from comprehending and conceptualizing all the political experiences of Western mankind, grew out of a specific historical constellation: the trial of Socrates and the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*.²¹⁷

The issue for Arendt is this conflict. The place to start is with the event that originates this conflict: the trial and death of Socrates, the 'turning point' for the history of political thought.²¹⁸ Arendt sees the trial as one where Socrates is unable to persuade his judges of his innocence, and is thereby executed. The young Plato was scandalized by this event. Socrates relied on the primacy of persuasion and *doxa*. For Plato, Socrates's failure to persuade his judges cast doubt on the validity of persuasion, the specifically political form of speech, hitherto the highest art in the Greek world. It also cast doubt on *doxa*, opinion. Socrates submitted his own *doxa* to the *doxa* of the Athenians, but the majority, with their irresponsible opinions, voted to condemn him. For such an injustice to happen by means of *doxa* showed that *doxa* was a grossly unreliable standard for politics. Plato then yearned for an absolute standard beyond *doxa* that could serve as a reliable standard for politics. Finally, the irresponsible actions of the city had killed the finest example of philosophy the world had yet seen. In Plato's view, it could happen again. For philosophy, irresponsible politicians are an existential threat. It is 'bad management' of political affairs that makes the philosopher unable to pursue philosophy.²¹⁹ But from the point of view of the city, the philosopher is a 'good-for-nothing,' someone who does

²¹⁷ HC, 12.

²¹⁸ PP, 6.

²¹⁹ PP, 82.

not act in the best interests of the city and makes others unfit for political life.²²⁰ Out of these two opposing views is born the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*.

I. Plato's Fateful Influence

From Socrates's trial, Plato draws two fateful conclusions: one, metaphysical, and the other, political. The metaphysical conclusion of Plato, 'the most anti-Socratic conclusion,' is to oppose opinion to truth.²²¹ Plato's demand for an absolute standard in politics finds a convenient alignment with his doctrine of ideas. Although Arendt does not think that the origin of the doctrine of ideas is primarily political, she does think it had some influence over the development of his philosophical doctrine of ideas insofar as one recognizes its political implications.²²² Arendt interprets the allegory of the cave to contain these implications. The central lesson of the allegory of the cave is metaphysical. On account of the world of the cave being unreal, the philosopher must not be content with the world of the cave-dwellers and must seek a different world. The *doxai* within the cave are a distortion of reality. Instead, the philosopher must seek the causes (*archai*) of what things are. Outside the cave of appearances, alone, he discovers causes and the essences of things. The essences are the ideas (*eide*), and the study of them makes the philosopher. Finally, the philosopher must return to the cave, but only to convince those within that their world is not the true world.²²³

²²⁰ *PP*, 9-10.

²²¹ *PP*, 8.

²²² *PP*, 8. *HC*, 226n.

²²³ *PP*, 29.

In rejecting *doxa*, Plato creates another world devoid of *doxa*, a world of truth. One is the realm of human affairs: the other, the realm of ideas. One is the realm of politics: the other, the realm of philosopher. One is the realm with other human beings: the other, a realm outside the plurality of men. Plato opposes the contemplation of the eternal outside the cave to life in the cave. In so doing, he portrays the life of the philosopher as inherently contradictory to the life of the citizen, the *bios politikos*.²²⁴ Moreover, the latter can never disclose reality. Only contemplation of eternal ideas can. In that move, the *vita contemplativa* triumphs over and is declared more valuable than the *vita activa*.

For Plato, the conflict between the philosopher and *polis*, and the consequent danger to the philosopher, leads him to conclude that politics must change to keep philosophy safe.²²⁵ To solve the conflict, he proposes a radical political solution: that the philosopher rules the *polis*. Plato's solution is radical because he insists that the philosopher is still concerned foremost with the eternal, non-changing, non-human affairs; but he also argues, contrary to the perspective of the *polis*, that the concern with the eternal actually makes the philosopher fit to play a political role. The philosopher's concern for the eternal ideas does not make him, as the *polis* thinks, 'good-for-nothing.'²²⁶ Plato wants to make philosophy useful for politics.²²⁷ He therefore transforms the ideas into standards for politics, as variations on the most important idea, the idea of the good. In that way the eternal ideas can be applied to politics, and these eternal ideas can then eliminate the uncertain and contingent in

²²⁴ *HC*, 20.

²²⁵ *HC*, 229.

²²⁶ *PP*, 10.

²²⁷ *PP*, 37.

human affairs. In Arendt's interpretation of the allegory of the cave, Plato expresses the use of philosophy for politics. For Arendt, by teaching this lesson, the allegory shows that philosophy is 'designed for these political purposes.'²²⁸ The philosopher ruler is the only one who knows the highest idea required for political life, which is found outside the cave: the idea of the good.²²⁹ The idea of the good then completes the city, via the philosopher as the only one who knows it. The idea of the good provides the philosopher ruler the necessary standard for ruling human affairs with objective certainty.²³⁰

There is a particular method to realize this standard in political life. The ruler, in the Platonic model, is the one who knows what is. Someone who knows what something is, grasps the idea of what something is. Applied to political rule, the philosopher ruler knows the idea (*eidos*) of what is-to-be in politics, the idea of the good, then organizes the means and executes them to bring about the idea. This is the same structure of action as *poiēsis*: one perceives the image or shape (*eidos*) of the product-to-be, then organizes the means to realize it.²³¹ The model of *poiēsis* provides the objective certainty that Plato seeks. The city is the statue, while the philosopher ruler is the sculptor.²³²

Imagining political action as *poiēsis* transforms the concept of relation between men in the political realm. If certain, clearly indicated standards must result from politics, men can only live together lawfully and politically when some

²²⁸ *PP*, 31, 56.

²²⁹ *HC*, 226.

²³⁰ *HC*, 226.

²³¹ *HC*, 225.

²³² *HC*, 226-227.

rule and some obey.²³³ The philosopher ruler is the one who dominates others. Arendt thinks the philosopher ruler, as a form of one-man rule, is technically tyranny. Yet it is not necessarily an evil regime; the philosopher ruler as a tyrant could still be benign.²³⁴ Consequently, one must be wary of claiming that Arendt sees continuity between Plato's *Republic*, the concept of philosopher ruler, and the history of tyranny into modernity.²³⁵ More at stake for Arendt is the conception by which the philosopher ruler commands the city and brings permanent order to human affairs. In that conception of rule, there is no place for action.²³⁶ The conception of command required to underwrite the demand for permanent order must come from a source beyond the political realm. For Plato, it is how the master of the family acts. Plato thereby imports into politics the categories recognized for a well-ordered household. Plato's *Republic* is actually an attempt to extend the concept of the family until it embraces every citizen, so that the *polis* would be the same as one family, with a clear master of the household who commands and is obeyed.²³⁷

In Arendt's reading, the influence of Plato upon the tradition is subtle but formidable. Practically speaking, Plato's 'city in speech,' the commonwealth ruled by philosophers, never was taken seriously. The prospect of the philosopher ruling tyrannically was thereby never a live concern for politics.²³⁸ More influential is that Plato presents the city in speech for the sake of preserving the safety and flourishing

²³³ HC, 222.

²³⁴ HC, 221.

²³⁵ Plato's conception arises from 'the earnest desire to find a substitute for action rather than from any irresponsible or tyrannical will to power.' HC, 222. C.f McCarthy (2012), 132-33.

²³⁶ HC, 224.

²³⁷ HC, 223-24.

²³⁸ PP, 27, 84.

of the philosophical way of life.²³⁹ What lingers is indifference and contempt for the political world, as the political world can interfere with the flourishing of philosophical activity. Plato terms the political world 'the realm of human affairs' and connotes it as the realm of troubled, futile actions that should not be treated with great seriousness.²⁴⁰ Diminished in seriousness, the political realm is subject to a further theoretical transformation. Although political activity had once been worthy of dignity because it was conceived as free from necessity, now all political activity is reduced to the level of mere necessity, the lowest level of human activity.²⁴¹

Plato's thoughts over the trial of Socrates have a critical effect for the development of political theory. He introduces the concept of ruler and ruled as the most important political relationship. He lowers the dignity of the political realm metaphysically, by declaring that the political realm is only the world of appearances, which he contrasts to the non-political world of eternal Being. He disbelieves that there is any seriousness in the world of appearances, so it is not worthy of careful theoretical study. He constructs an activity of contemplating the world of eternal Being, the *vita contemplativa* and contrasts it unfavourably to the *vita activa* that is caught up in the world of appearances. Finally, he sets in motion the gradual diminishment of the *vita activa* as a life concerned with the realm of mere human necessities. Consequently, he introduces a conception of the *vita activa* and political life, which, worked out in time, eventually leaves no place for freedom.

²³⁹ BPF, 107-115.

²⁴⁰ HC, 19, 185.

²⁴¹ HC, 85, 314. PP, 82.

II. Aristotle's Development of the Contemplative Life

Aristotle not only passes on these Platonic thoughts, he gives them a particular form and articulation. The core of his 'revisionary' teaching, his effort to redirect the norms and goals of existing human practices, is to answer the question as to what is the best human life, the life that best realizes *eudaimonia*. As noted earlier, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* draws attention to three freely chosen 'ways of life' that might realize *eudaimonia*: the life of enjoyment, the political life, and the contemplative life, the life of the philosopher devoted to the contemplation of things eternal.²⁴² Despite Aristotle's lengthy analysis of the value and worth of the political life, which Arendt finds to be a great treasure, Aristotle concludes that contemplative life is the best life.

Aristotle emphasizes that *eudaimonia* is an activity that has to accord with the highest human virtue.²⁴³ This virtue, he argues, is theoretical wisdom (*sophia*). The specific activity of theoretical wisdom is for the mind to be concerned with the most excellent of things, the *archai*. The mind's concern for the *archai*, the mind's *contemplation* of the *archai*, is the most self-sufficient activity one can imagine: the wise person can contemplate without any other person present. It is also praised because it is a solitary activity. Additionally, Aristotle associates leisure (*scholē*) with *eudaimonia*. Although in Arendt's view the Greek conception of leisure initially corresponds with the liberation from life's necessities, Aristotle now extends it.²⁴⁴ All persons are in need of the necessities of life as a prerequisite to free, virtuous

²⁴² *HC*, 12-13. See *EN* 1096a5, 1095b14-19.

²⁴³ *EN* 1177a12-14.

²⁴⁴ *PP*, 117; *LOM*, 92-93.

action. But once basic necessities are satisfied, the virtuous still need other human beings toward whom to act virtuously. For example, the just man needs others toward whom he will act justly.²⁴⁵ Since the presence of other human beings constitutes the political realm, and is a requirement for any virtuous political action, the man in the political realm who acts virtuously *needs* the presence of other persons: he is never truly free from necessity. He is never truly at leisure, and therefore never truly happy. Only the man who does not need the presence of others to act is free from necessity. Leisure (*scholē*) is therefore redefined as freedom from the realm where others are present. It is now, in Arendt's interpretation of Aristotle, freedom from the realm of politics.²⁴⁶ The conclusion is that only the man who exits the political realm is really at leisure, and ready to pursue *eudaimonia*.

Eudaimonia, according to Aristotle, rests upon fully exploring the implications of the activity of the mind (*nous*). This brings Aristotle to consider the gods. The gods, completely self-sufficient, engage in a pure, uninterrupted activity of the mind, undertaken for its own sake, which looks upon the unchanging and eternal, the *archai*. Theirs is the freest life. Human beings also have a mind, and so can and should engage in the divine activity and emulate the freest, divine life. This is the best and happiest life for the human being. Although Aristotle, recognizing that political activities are characteristically human, does not argue to forgo these activities entirely, he thinks they are secondary to the contemplative activity.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ *EN*, 1177a30-33.

²⁴⁶ *PP*, 82.

²⁴⁷ *LOM*, 163. Arendt refers to *EN*, 1177b26-1178b18.

Definitively, the highest purpose of human life is not political activity, but the divine activity, contemplating the eternal.²⁴⁸

As Arendt sees it, Aristotle's attempt to fix definitively the end of human life as contemplating the eternal is where his conception of teleology does its most damage to the political. Happiness resides in leisure free from politics, the purpose of action is advance into a state of leisure where one is free from political obligations, and free to contemplate. Politics is now a means to an end, and that end is leisure. Effectively, this is declaring that the proper end of politics is to cease participating in politics. Leisure is also the precondition of a life devoted to contemplation. Broadly speaking, then, the condition for the possibility of philosophy is to discover the opposite of political activity. Political activity is anti-philosophical.²⁴⁹ The contrast between these two ways of life is blunt, and blunter still is which of the two is better. *Vita contemplativa* is a higher, happier, and freer life. Arendt sees no other conclusion: according to Aristotle, contemplation is the supreme way of life. As Aristotle writes, 'One should either philosophize or take one's leave of life.'²⁵⁰ The triumph of philosophy over politics is complete.

Aristotle's reinforcement of the hierarchy culminating in contemplative philosophy distorts some of the ways he understands politics, leading him away from his original insights. Like Plato, Aristotle naturalizes the political realm. Aristotle argues that *vita contemplativa* is the freest, most self-sufficient life, and thus implies that *bios politikos* is in some way not free. Refining the Platonic

²⁴⁸ *LOM*, 136.

²⁴⁹ *PP*, 82-83.

²⁵⁰ *LOM*, I 134. Arendt cites Aristotle's fragmentary dialogue *Protreptikos*, Düring ed., B19 and B110.

argument, Aristotle suggests that the political realm has a natural origin. Not only does the family and the cooperation of families arise from the demands of material necessity, but political communities arise out of them as well. Aristotle of course emphasizes the radical distinction between *polis* and family, but in Arendt's view he does not do entirely enough to dispense with the notion that politics exists to satisfy material concerns.²⁵¹ In that way, the free character of political action is not adequately defended.

Aristotle does speak of the *polis* as a voluntary association of citizens living together in freedom. But he further undermines the importance of freedom when he carries on from Plato and distinguishes between the forms of government by analysing who is ruling and who is ruled: the one, the few, or the many. Although Aristotle justifies the concept of rule by an appeal to his conception of material, 'natural' necessity—which establishes the difference between the young and old fit and unfit to rule—his conclusion is very Platonic.²⁵² Aristotle affirms that the concept of ruling is fundamental to political analysis. This contradiction undermines the previously explored view of freedom Arendt finds in the *Politics*, emergent from the reflection on the *polis* as a realm of equals where all citizens share in ruling and being ruled. Rather, in Arendt's view, it shows another feature of the Platonic inheritance. In prioritizing the concept of rule, what motivates Aristotle is wariness for the unpredictability of *praxis*, with its constant potential for new beginnings.

²⁵¹ *HC*, 37, 183; *PP*, 17.

²⁵² *BPF*, 116-17.

Correspondingly he desires to replace that uncertainty with the concepts that evince the certainty of the master issuing orders.²⁵³

Plato's suspicion of the unpredictability of action impels him to describe action through concepts drawn from *poiēsis*, human craftsmanship, where the terms are more secure. Aristotle, although 'to a lesser degree' than Plato, also succumbs to this temptation.²⁵⁴ For Arendt, Aristotle's motivations for doing so are primarily metaphysical. Desiring to rank contemplation as the highest activity, Aristotle, like Plato, finds that both contemplation and the work of the craftsman are guided by beholding the idea or model—both meaning *eidos*. Recognizing this 'inner affinity' between contemplation and *poiēsis*, Aristotle ranks the kinds of cognition thusly. At the bottom rank he places practical insight (*dianoia*) and political science (*epistēmē praktikē*); next, he places the science of fabrication (*epistēmē poiētikē*); finally, following out of *poiēsis*, he places *theōria*, the contemplation of eternal truth, as the highest kind of cognition.²⁵⁵ Through that taxonomy, Aristotle provides *poiēsis* with a greater metaphysical dignity than *praxis*.

In the Platonic manner, Aristotle's metaphysical views contrast appearances to reality, transmitting and solidifying the two-world dichotomy of metaphysics. A subtle indication of this is how Aristotle's metaphysics affect his conception of free, virtuous action, and develop it in a direction Arendt does not repeat. For Arendt, the essence of freedom is located in the realm of appearances. In evaluating action, Arendt thinks it should be assessed as it appears to others, so for her, the Greeks are

²⁵³ HC, 222. BPF, 118-19.

²⁵⁴ HC, 230.

²⁵⁵ HC, 301-302. Arendt refers to *Metaphysics* 1025b25, 1064a17.

troubled by whether an act is really just if it is seen by no one else.²⁵⁶ Aristotle emphasizes that every performance of action rests in character (*hexis*), something that cannot ever appear to another. For this reason, character is a theme absent from Arendt's articulation of action. But Aristotle, for his part, is concerned with trying to distinguish actions that are really virtuous from those that only have the appearance of virtue. His solution to that problem is to argue that really virtuous actions are grounded in character, which intensifies the dichotomy between appearance and reality in the field of action.²⁵⁷ Aristotle's treatment of communication also emphasizes the dichotomy. Although he systematically analyses the political art of persuasion, he is guilty, like Plato, of the un-Socratic manoeuvre of comparing unfavourably political speech to an invented philosophical speech. After all, Aristotle's systemic analysis of speech demarcates the political art of speech, rhetoric, from the art of philosophical speech, dialectics.²⁵⁸ This approach shows that Aristotle carries on the division between an art of speaking opinions and an art of speaking truth. He shares the Platonic suspicion of the realm of opinion and appearances, and desires to replace a form of communication that yields unpredictable outcomes with one that compels knowledge through proof.²⁵⁹

Finally, Aristotle practices a philosophy that has no sense of relationship to politics, but is a retreat from politics. To repeat, despite Plato's insistence on the importance of the philosopher ruling the political realm, the practical effect was not

²⁵⁶ *PP*, 21-22.

²⁵⁷ C.f. Villa (1995), 45. The real issue is that Arendt never mentions *hexis*—as I argue here, the absence of an effort to constitute genuinely virtuous actions as opposed to apparently virtuous suggests that Arendt's concern is the metaphysical assumptions sustaining a dichotomy of appearance and reality.

²⁵⁸ 'The art of persuasion is the counterpart of the art of dialectic.' *Rhetoric* 1354a1. *PP*, 12-13.

²⁵⁹ *BPF*, 219.

to initiate a trend of philosophers attempting to seize control of the political realm, but to initiate philosopher's dislike and disinterest in the political realm. For Arendt, it is another event that shows how Aristotle inherits and propagates this attitude. When Aristotle, like Socrates, was threatened with persecution for impiety, a consequence of his philosophizing, he decided not to face his accusers in a trial. Socrates still obeyed the laws of Athens, and, because he felt responsible for the city of Athens, he remained in the city. Aristotle did not. He fled the city of Athens entirely. Aristotle's justification was that he did not want Athens to sin twice against philosophy. For Arendt, Aristotle's action is telling:

With Aristotle the time begins when philosophers no longer feel responsible for the city, and this not only in the sense that philosophy has no special task in the realm of politics, but in the much larger sense that the philosopher has less responsibility for it than any of his fellow citizens.'²⁶⁰

What Aristotle wants from politics is, above all else, safety. In terms of how the city is supposed to behave, what philosophy wants, in the last analysis, is to be left alone.²⁶¹ The good philosopher turns entirely away from politics. The result is *apolitia*.²⁶² Philosophy is characterized by an indifference to politics.²⁶³ The degradation of philosophy 'depends entirely' on separating the few who act philosophically from the many who act politically, and ensuring that the few are neither harassed by the many nor drawn toward the many.²⁶⁴ Left alone, philosophy is a solitary activity that leaves behind the very exercise of speech. Philosophical truth, in Aristotle's account, is a truth without word (*aneu logou*), a truth that cannot

²⁶⁰ *PP*, 26.

²⁶¹ *PP*, 26.

²⁶² *PP*, 26, 133.

²⁶³ *PP*, 133.

²⁶⁴ *PP*, 135.

be expressed in speech.²⁶⁵ The contemplative way of life is an escape from the common world of human beings, an illusory attempt to escape the human world for something deemed more certain and more real.²⁶⁶ In the last analysis, it is this ultimately metaphysical attitude that constitutes Aristotle's threat to the political.

Aristotle and Thinking

In Arendt's view, how should philosophy stand in relation to politics? Which is more meaningful for the human being? One view is that the activity of philosophy should take a determined second place to political action, so that political action assumes 'existential supremacy' over all other human activities.²⁶⁷ For Arendt, political action certainly illuminates a crucial, and traditionally underappreciated, facet of human existence. But if one thinks it is the 'supreme' activity for illuminating human existence, one runs into a paradox. Hannah Arendt does not practice as she preaches. She defines herself as a thinker, and she is clear: when she *thinks* about political action, she does not *do* political action. Does she really intend to underrate the meaningfulness of her own activity of thinking?

Arendt primarily explored the activity of thinking in the last years of her life.²⁶⁸ Her suspicion of 'professional thinkers' meant she was very wary about offering self-reflections on her activity of thinking, including its content and meaningfulness, until her Gifford Lectures.²⁶⁹ Although her unexpected death did

²⁶⁵ *LOM*, 114. *HC*, 20.

²⁶⁶ *PP*, 203.

²⁶⁷ Kateb, (1983), 6-7.

²⁶⁸ See Bernstein (2000) for assessing Arendt's exploration of thinking earlier in her career.

²⁶⁹ *LOM*, 3.

not give her a chance to complete this work entirely, she left some clear signposts of her position on the activity of thinking. The manner in which Arendt described herself is important. She eschewed the label of 'philosopher,' seeing it associated with the tradition she had declared exhausted. Yet she still wanted to hold to some aspect of 'philosophical' activity. She therefore described herself as a 'thinker,' as distinguished from a 'philosopher.' In that vein, Arendt made a further distinction. She was emphatic that she was a thinker, not a political actor. Arendt did not desire to act.²⁷⁰ As an acutely self-aware thinker, Arendt recognized that she had spent much of her work criticising those who considered the activity of philosophy, at least insofar as it was informed by the notion of *vita contemplativa*, to have an inherently higher dignity than political action.

As a result, some interpretations of Arendt argue that she intended to reverse that traditional prioritization, instead providing political action with a higher level of supremacy. Her activity of thinking, then, could be seen as a way to help others act in politics, where the highest level of human meaning is disclosed. There is something of that strain: the goal of Arendt's thinking about politics is to make us better aware of the promise inherent in politics for disclosing human meaning, so that we can act better in politics.²⁷¹

But does Arendt simply see her thinking as *classe préparatoire* for future political actors? If that were so, she would be very close to view she attributes to Karl Marx. For Marx, whose view brings the tradition of political theory to its end, the purpose of philosophy is to orient and transform political action. Meaning is

²⁷⁰ HA, 303, 306; Young-Bruehl (1982), 450-451.

²⁷¹ Gottsegen (1994), 10.

realized not in philosophy, but in politics. Arendt, however, as noted above, has much to criticize with the Marxist stance. Ultimately, it only reverses the categories of the tradition. But Arendt wants to move beyond them, giving her thought this paradox: Arendt praises action, but she desires to think, and does not desire to act. One must dispense with any quasi-Marxist resolutions to Arendt's activity of thinking, and engage directly with the paradox.

Arendt is clear that for her, thinking is an activity. While the philosophical tradition has assumed that thinking culminates in passivity, receiving reality in a state of meditative, contemplative rest, Arendt disagrees. She uses Cato's famous tag, 'never is a man more active than when he does nothing,' to indicate that while thinking may appear passive, it is in fact not. Thinking is an activity. This provides the basic assumption for her Gifford Lectures, in which she explores the question as to precisely what we are doing when we are doing nothing but thinking.²⁷² Arendt's answer to the question is less clear, particularly in terms the issue I am exploring here, of how she distinguishes thinking from action. Although Arendt is nebulous on what she thinks she is doing when she is thinking, one can do well to follow in the footsteps of her interlocutors. The Canadian political theorist C.B. Macpherson once pressed Arendt on the very paradox, questioning how she could desire to think, yet not desire to act. He argued that Arendt had arbitrarily divided the two: thinking or 'theorizing' is acting. Arendt replied as follows:

²⁷² *LOM*, 6-8.

Thinking in its purity is different—in this Aristotle was right...all modern philosophers have somewhere in their work a rather apologetic sentence which says: 'Thinking is also acting.' Oh no, it is not! And to say that is rather dishonest. I mean, let's face the music: it is not the same. On the contrary, I have to keep back to a large extent from participating, from commitment.²⁷³

How does Arendt understand the difference between thinking and acting? Here, for the final act of her intellectual life, she turns back to Aristotle. Her considered position is a unique account of the relation of the activity of thinking to the activity of politics. Bearing in mind that all political philosophy has an attitude to politics, what Arendt does, in the last analysis, is take an *ironic* attitude toward politics. This attitude means that, while she does not rank thinking as 'higher' than political action, she does hint at the limits of political life. Conscious of the limits of political life, the thinker is in a privileged position for seeing the meaning of human affairs. As such, via her ironic attitude, Arendt affirms the dignity of the life of the thinker.

I. Aristotle on Thinking

Arendt says that Aristotle is 'right' about the purity of thinking, so she agrees with Aristotle's account of distinguishing between thinking and acting. Her agreement, however, is not straightforward. As indicated above, Arendt's quarrel with Aristotle is over his conception of the *vita contemplativa*. Following that, Arendt cannot accept the specific grounds Aristotle provides for distinguishing between the activity of thinking and acting. For Aristotle, what he describes as the activity of thinking, theorizing, is contemplation of the eternal and unchanging *archai*.

²⁷³ HA, 304.

Aristotle's position only has meaning by holding the view that there are things unchanging and eternal to contemplate. Yet for Arendt, as discussed earlier, in modernity this view is no longer feasible. Arendt's definitive opposition is to the view that 'the distinction between the sensory and suprasensory...that whatever is not given to the senses—God or Being or the First Principles and causes (*archai*) or the Ideas—is more real, more truthful.'²⁷⁴ In contrast to Aristotle, Arendt's view is decisively post-metaphysical. So while Arendt criticizes Aristotle's *vita contemplativa* for its hierarchical prioritization over *vita activa*, her objection is not just about the concept of politics implied. It is also about metaphysics. From her post-metaphysical stance, Arendt concludes that the classical Aristotelian account of the purity and meaningfulness of thinking, as theorizing, is no longer persuasive.

Nevertheless she does not abandon the account of the purity of thinking entirely: Aristotle is 'right' about something. For Arendt, it is still possible to salvage a fragment illuminating the meaningfulness of thinking, and build up a different conception of the activity. Arendt finds that fragment at the start of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, translating the first phase literally: 'All men by nature desire *to have seen*.'²⁷⁵ The literal translation has three important implications. One is that the desire to investigate the world arises from what is seen, what is given to our sensory apparatus. 'The questions raised by the desire to know,' she writes, 'are in principle all answerable by common-sense experience and common-sense reasoning.'²⁷⁶ For Arendt, this grounds the desire to know firmly in the world of the senses. Second,

²⁷⁴ LOM, 10.

²⁷⁵ LOM, 58. Arendt cites *Metaphysics*, 980a22, usually translated as 'all men by nature desire to know' [*eidenai*].

²⁷⁶ LOM, 58.

there is a delight in seeing for its own sake common to ‘all men.’ Seeing—something easily attainable by everyone—makes things intelligible to human beings, and so human beings delight in intelligibility for its own sake. The desire for intelligibility is an inextricable feature of the human condition. As all men share it, the desire to know cannot only be actualized by the few, by an elect of ‘professional thinkers’ who are specialists in an otherworldly realm, but must implicate every human being.²⁷⁷ Third, every human being is implicated, for Arendt, by means of a very different faculty from that involved with action. The ‘purity’ of thinking is possible because of the desire to know for its own sake.²⁷⁸ Armed with this insight, Arendt develops how she understands thinking. In *The Human Condition*, she had assumed that thinking culminates in rest, and is ultimately contemplative.²⁷⁹ But realizing that the activity of thinking is not the same as the activity of contemplation, she can articulate the meaning and content for the activity of thinking in a different direction from Plato and Aristotle.²⁸⁰

For Aristotle, and Plato before him, the thinking characteristic of philosophy develops out of a concrete and unique experience: a sense of wonder (*thaumazein*) at that which is. This sense of wonder is experienced as speechlessness, implying that ultimate truth is beyond words. For Aristotle, the recipient of the experience of wonder is mind (*nous*), which is without speech (*aneu logou*). The essence of philosophical thinking, in the account of Plato and Aristotle, is a withdrawal from

²⁷⁷ LOM, 13.

²⁷⁸ Although Arendt, thanks to an insight from Kant, distinguishes the faculty of thinking from the activity of cognition. Consequently, she does not think that thinking and knowing are the same activities. See LOM, 57, 61-62.

²⁷⁹ LOM, 6.

²⁸⁰ Taminiaux (1997), 18-19.

the public, political world; to find the experience of speechlessness, one must be removed from the experience of speech that sustains the political life.²⁸¹ The removal of the experience of thinking from politics is also a removal of the experience of thinking from the realm of appearances; as Plato's allegory of the cave shows, thinking in the cave only discovers that the appearances are illusory. From Plato's allegory, the experience of withdrawal specifically concerns the withdrawal from the realm of appearances into the realm of Being. The philosopher thinks in a world apart from appearances. If the realms of Being and appearances divide, then philosophical thinking concerns the otherworldly realm of Being. Finally, it develops into a way of life, *vita contemplativa*. As a way of life, philosophical thinking is an activity where one develops a language of reality based on a conception of Being, without reference to the world of appearances. When one takes this language and applies it to the realm of appearances, then one frequently speaks not in terms commonly recognizable to those who live in the realm of appearances, but in terms of non-sense.²⁸²

II. The Thinker as Spectator

To escape that result, Arendt rebuilds the account of the activity of thinking into a different way of life. To start, Arendt does not deny that there is a fleeting experience of wonder.²⁸³ But she is impressed by the interpretation Aristotle provides for this experience of wonder. Aristotle identifies the sense of puzzlement (*aporein*) in which one becomes aware of one's ignorance, and tries to progress

²⁸¹ *PP*, 33; *EN* 1142a25.

²⁸² *PP*, 36.

²⁸³ *PP*, 38.

beyond it.²⁸⁴ The desire for intelligibility impels one to overcome the experience of wonder. The challenge, however, is to address the experience of withdrawal. In the *vita contemplativa* account, the pursuit of truth prompts one to withdraw from the world of appearances to a realm of Being. In Arendt's account, the desire for intelligibility prompts the thinker to pursue not truth, laden as that term is with the metaphysical tradition, but to pursue *meaning*.

To elaborate her post-metaphysical account of thinking, Arendt proposes to replace the metaphor of the cave of Plato with the tale of Pythagoras. Life, in the tale of Pythagoras, is like the Greek festival, the great Pan-Hellenic games that would draw all the Greeks together for religious rituals, competitions, and celebrations. Pythagoras considers the different types of people who go to the games, and divides them into three groups. Some go to the festival in order to participate in the athletic activities, competing for a prize. Others go to the festival as shopkeepers, wishing to sell their wares. These two represent the ways of life of those motivated by competitive glory or material advancement. But the best way of life, thinks Pythagoras, is that of the spectators (*theatai*). In his view, they hunt not for fame or gain, but for truth.²⁸⁵

For Pythagoras, the spectator represents the philosopher, driven by the desire for truth. Arendt downplays the role of truth for the philosopher, saying it does not signify an other-worldly, 'invisible' truth.²⁸⁶ Instead, she examines the philosopher in his role as spectator. The nobility of the activity of the spectators is

²⁸⁴ LOM, 114, 121.

²⁸⁵ LOM, 93.

²⁸⁶ For a fuller account of the path Arendt takes, see Burch (2011), 19-20, 22.

that they do not participate in the games but instead, 'look on it as a mere spectacle.'²⁸⁷ What precisely is the 'it' they looking upon? Rather than looking upon the whole of reality, the *kosmos* of the contemplative philosopher, they are looking upon the various actors who are competing, or 'performing,' in the festival. Here, Arendt explores the character of action, previously described as 'performative,' and extends the metaphor. As the spectator sees all the different performances of the various actors, the spectator sees their whole 'play.' All the actors enact their parts, but each actor, by definition, is only a part of the whole. He finds his meaning solely as a constituent of the whole.²⁸⁸ To find the whole meaning of the play, one must be in the position of thinking spectator, not actor. Therefore, if one is to pursue meaning, one must be in the position of the spectator. It is here where Arendt thinks there is a trade-off between action and thinking. 'As a spectator you may understand the 'truth' of what the spectacle is about; but the price you have to pay is withdrawal from participating in it.'²⁸⁹ Withdrawal, for Arendt, is the condition for finding the meaning of the whole play. The nature of the activity of thinking is that it is an interruption from the ordinary human political activities, a 'breaking off' from the public sphere. It is a movement out of the order of politics.²⁹⁰ For this reason, although there is a movement into another world, Arendt characterizes the activity of thinking by 'the fact of withdrawal.'²⁹¹ As Arendt's response to Macpherson

²⁸⁷ *LOM*, 93.

²⁸⁸ In this way, the search for meaning replaces the search for truth. See Burch (2011), 19.

²⁸⁹ *LOM*, 93.

²⁹⁰ *LOM*, 197.

²⁹¹ *LOM*, 199.

suggests, it is this fact that Aristotle understands to constitute the activity of thinking in its purity.

Arendt provides a further qualification to the activity of thinking's withdrawal from the world, drawn from Pythagoras's metaphor. There, the spectators are part of an audience, who deliberate and discuss the meaning of the performances with each other. The verdict of the spectators on the meaning of the whole, 'while impartial and freed from the interests of gain or fame,' is not formed independent of the views of others. Although the spectator is disengaged from the particularity of the actor, he does not therefore act in complete isolation. Hence unlike the *vita comtemplativa*, who flees from the company of men and their uncertain opinions, the spectator remains among them. While the spectator withdraws from the world to think, his thinking is not a solitary activity.²⁹²

Arendt's denial that thinking is solitary is a radical denial, extending even into the self. Borrowing from Socrates, who demands that a man speak his opinion only when he is 'in agreement with himself,' Arendt understands thinking as a conversation with one's self, as if one were two. So in withdrawing from the world into myself, I encounter myself, and dialogue with myself. In thinking, I discover that I am 'two-in-one.'²⁹³ For Arendt, this establishes just how deeply rooted plurality is in the human condition. It is a persistent presence in human life, and escape from plurality is illusory. If thinking is always a dialogue with another, even in the self, it is never in its essence, as Aristotle thought through Plato, *aneu logou*. It requires

²⁹² *LOM*, 94.

²⁹³ *PP*, 19-21.

speech to be activated, to sound out and to be manifested.²⁹⁴ In withdrawing from the world to think, the thinker discovers the correspondence of plurality and speech. As plurality and speech constitute the activity of thinking, Arendt can then argue how thinking involves other human beings. The presence of other human beings, who speak to the thinker and to whom the thinker speaks, in no way taints the purity of thinking. Rather, there is an anticipated extension from thinking with one's self, to thinking with others. Aristotle provides the link. The vital core of his theory of friendship is that 'the friend is another self.'²⁹⁵ For Arendt, this signifies that a friend is that with whom 'you can carry on the dialogue of thought with him just as well as with yourself.'²⁹⁶

III. Friendship and Thinking

Arendt finds three important implications for the theory of friendship in understanding thinking. First is a therapeutic implication. When thinking is conceived as an activity undertaken with fellow human beings, it weakens the tendency of thinking (a tendency built into the activity), to drift toward metaphysical fallacies. Arendt is sympathetic to the development of these fallacies, such as the two-world dichotomy, since they are conclusions derived from authentic experiences of the thinking self. The reason why these fallacious conclusions emerge has to do with one particular aspect of thinking, which prepares the ground for these fallacies to seem like necessary conclusions. As thinking is a withdrawal, the withdrawal often proceeds into solitude. The experience of solitude overturns

²⁹⁴ *LOM*, 121.

²⁹⁵ *EN* 1166a30.

²⁹⁶ *LOM*, 189; *PP*, 20.

common sense, and makes it seem that only what is thought is real, and all else seems illusory. But friendship provides the remedy. The presence of others breaks down the experience of solitude and preserves contact with the world.²⁹⁷

Second is the political implication. The activity of thinking continues in the company of others, so as to understand the opinions of others and understand how the world appears to others. The experience of plurality, extended now to actual human beings, continues to subsist. Rather than about developing a single view, thinking with other human beings is about understanding the variety of human opinions, so that the commonness of the world becomes apparent.²⁹⁸ The goal, through this dialogue, is to sustain a community of friends where a common world begins to show itself. In this way, thinking relates to the public sphere.

Recognizing that thinking relates to the public sphere helps identify the third implication of the theory of friendship, its moral implication for thinking. What both Socrates and Aristotle suggest is that living together with others begins with living together with myself.²⁹⁹ As noted earlier, Arendt thinks that friendship plays a role in establishing the common world of the *polis*. Yet this was only explored as a phenomenon within the public sphere, and so only as a corollary of action, in terms of how individuals appear to one another through their actions. But by emphasizing that in the activity of thinking, even when it is internal to the self, one still meets another self, Arendt says that in thinking, one appears to one's self. If there is a disagreement, one has to resolve this before one can live with others. 'Living

²⁹⁷ *LOM*, 197-199.

²⁹⁸ *PP*, 18.

²⁹⁹ *PP*, 22.

together with myself' requires that I first be in agreement with myself. Couched in the language of appearances, it requires that through the conversation with myself, I appear to myself as I would want to appear to others. For Arendt, this insight implicates the very meaningfulness of politics. It informs the possibility as to whether morality has any earthly reality. Crucial for Arendt, there is here a conception of a secular idea of conscience, which could show how someone would want to act justly even if they are unseen by others. Socrates's advice is to 'be as you would like to appear for others;' but since I first have to be in agreement with how I appear to myself, I testify first to myself as to what I really appear to be. Put more starkly, one should never kill, because in the dialogue with yourself, you will testify to the fact that you have killed. You will then appear to yourself as a murderer, as long as you live.³⁰⁰ In the absence of gods who see all and pass judgement on our actions in the public sphere, the awareness of how we might appear to ourselves if we act unjustly is, in the last analysis, what impels us to act justly in the public sphere.

Socrates believed this awareness could be learned. Although Arendt is less sure of that, for her, the crucial Socratic teaching is the importance of thinking for living justly.³⁰¹ 'The underlying assumption of this teaching is thought and not action, because only in thought can the dialogue of the two-in-one be realized.'³⁰² What is unique about thinking is that the presence of thinking can be among the conditions that assist human beings in doing good and avoiding evil. There are here

³⁰⁰ *PP*, 22.

³⁰¹ *LOM*, 5.

³⁰² *PP*, 23.

further intimations of Eichmann. For Arendt, the one noticeable characteristic of Eichmann is his thoughtlessness, his absence of thinking which condemns him as politically irresponsible. The case of Eichmann is exemplary because it connects the problem of good and evil directly to the activity of thinking. Eichmann's case is a warning for modernity, demonstrating that modern political irresponsibility happens when thinking is absent. It provides the imperative to understand what thinking is, and what role the activity of thinking has for morality.³⁰³ To summarize, the goal of political action is to build a realm of friendship from which a common human world begins to show itself. But this requires thinking. Thinking provides the impetus to act justly, by demanding that an individual be in agreement with himself before he acts in relation to others. Once he learns to do that, he can live with others in friendship. Through the activity of thinking with other human beings, the thinker helps establish a common world built on the shared understanding of friendship.

Nevertheless, while there is this positive link to the political sphere, thinking exists independently of politics. Entered into, thinking is an oasis that gives life to politics, yet considered as an activity in itself, thinking is free from politics.³⁰⁴ So despite the link to politics and the public world provided through friendship, thinking has its own ontological dignity. It constitutes the human condition. Arendt already has argued that all human beings have a desire for intelligibility. But she refuses to rank this sphere of life as higher or lower than the political sphere. In that sense, she is helped by Aristotle's discussion of the relationship between language,

³⁰³ *LOM*, 3-5. This role for thinking, however, is not to produce usable practical wisdom. See Bernstein (2000), 284.

³⁰⁴ *PP*, 202-203.

the faculty that implicates other human beings, constitutes the public sphere, and impels one to act in the world; and thought, the faculty that is implicated in the desire for intelligibility, the activity of thinking, and ultimately some form of philosophy. Aristotle refuses to decide whether thinking is the origin of speaking, which would make the activity of thinking prior to political activity; or whether speaking is the origin of thinking, which would make political activity prior to thinking. Arendt sees both aspects as part of the fundamental constitution of human existence. As thinking is not a solitary activity, it involves speech: 'thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think.'³⁰⁵

Yet Arendt provides a different kind of priority to thinking. As described above, in rejecting metaphysics, Arendt affirms a basic ontological thesis: that Being and appearing coincide. There are important implications. The word 'appearance' would make no sense if there were no one to acknowledge the appearance. Every 'appearing' of something is always an 'appearing to' someone. From Arendt's post-metaphysical view, for something 'to be,' it must appear to a *spectator*.³⁰⁶ Arendt concentrates upon the activity of speculation in her interpretation of the tale of Pythagoras, and, she calls the highest form of speculation, the speculation on meaning, the activity of thinking. Thinking in its purity becomes the highest form of speculation. For something to be requires that there be a thinking spectator to see it. Being requires thinking, and thinking is never apart from Being. With that view, Arendt echoes a classic formulation of Parmenides: that thinking and being are the

³⁰⁵ LOM, 99.

³⁰⁶ LOM, 19.

same.³⁰⁷ Arendt therefore privileges thinking. Thinking is the way to make what appears in the world intelligible. Arendt describes no other way to do this: in her view, the actor's perspective is always in a significant way incomplete, and requires the spectator to build it up. Although Arendt does not say it explicitly, it is no great stretch to conclude as a result that thinking is the fundamental way of being.³⁰⁸

Like political action, thinking is an activity that has its end in itself. Arendt finds that view in Aristotle. Although Aristotle argues that thinking is ultimately contemplative, and so culminates in quietude or rest, Arendt's close reading of Aristotle notices a passage where Aristotle implies a very different outcome. Aristotle describes philosophical thinking as an *energeia*, the 'perfect and unhindered activity which [for this very reason] harbours within itself the sweetest of all delights.'³⁰⁹ There is for Arendt a contradiction between the 'quietude' of contemplation and *energeia*, especially one that has no culmination beyond the activity but is an end in itself. Thinking produces no definite, end results. As Aristotle says, it is 'unceasing motion, which is motion in a circle.'³¹⁰ Being a repeating circle, thinking does not end in truth, nor does it build conclusive systems of thought, but swings back to address the same questions with which it began.³¹¹ It remains in its content elusive and ineffable. Since Arendt believes thinking neither pursues an eternal truth nor a definite worldview, the activity of thinking is about perpetually sharing opinions between friends, which remain scattered

³⁰⁷ For Parmenides, and for Arendt, one will not find thinking apart from Being. One can only think what is. As a result Parmenides concludes, 'it is the same thing to think and to be' DK Fragment B 3; c.f. B 6. Burch (2011, 23) notes the Heideggerian implications of Arendt's view.

³⁰⁸ Burch (2011), 23; HA, 303.

³⁰⁹ LOM, 123. Arendt cites *Protreptikos*, Düring ed., B87.

³¹⁰ LOM, 124. Arendt cites *Metaphysics* 1072a21.

³¹¹ LOM, 124.

fragmentations.³¹² What does thinking do? Aristotle provides the metaphor: ‘the activity of thinking is life.’³¹³ The only metaphor that can describe what it does is the sensation of being alive, a metaphor that at once points at the mystery, vitality, and importance of thinking underlying the human condition.

IV. Thinking and Politics

With what attitude does Arendt’s thinking relate to politics? Arendt’s thinking praises politics. She rejects the conception of thinking as oriented toward the contemplation of eternal *archai*, and turns the activity of thinking away from any fallaciously conjectured otherworldly realm toward the realm of this world. Grounded in this world, thinking reveals the phenomenon of politics and illuminates its meaning for the human being. Arendt’s thought about politics argues that politics is in need of redemption, and that this redemption of politics in turn redeems the human world.

But Arendt desires to think, and does not desire to act. Her argument for the purity of thinking fundamentally constitutes thinking as a withdrawal from the world of politics. As the tale of Pythagoras shows, one must recognize the limits of the world of actors performing, since the metaphor of ‘performance’ indicates that each actor only plays a part of the whole. The character of action is to be limited. Consequently, political action can never wholly constitute meaning. To ground meaning completely in politics, to find total ‘homeliness’ in politics, is impossible; in politics, Being and appearance do not coincide.³¹⁴

³¹² E.g. Lessing, *MDT*, 8; and Arendt herself. Jones (2013).

³¹³ *LOM*, 123. Arendt cites *Metaphysics* 1072b27.

³¹⁴ Villa (1995), 203, 205.

The spectator identifies the limits of politics; not acting, looking upon politics, he recognizes that political action is but a part of the whole. While the spectator recognizes how important each actor is for constituting meaning, he also sees that each actor cannot constitute all meaning. In withdrawing from action to look upon it, and seeing its limits, the spectator cultivates his sense of *irony*.³¹⁵ Only in withdrawing from politics to think, only in the pure activity of thinking, does the gap between Being and appearance resolve itself. 'I don't know of any other reconciliation but thought,' says Arendt, showing how she privileges thinking.³¹⁶

Arendt emphasizes the importance of thinking, and further hints at the limits of politics, when she associates thinking with freedom. Although freedom and political action are inseparable, freedom is not exclusive to political action; 'thinking is another mode of moving in the world of freedom.'³¹⁷ While Arendt describes a retreat into the freedom of thought exhibit during the 'dark times' of impending totalitarian rule, she also describes the possibility and need for free thinking in these 'dark times.' The free character of thinking suggests independent thinking. Independent thinking needs 'no pillars and props, no standards and traditions to move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain.'³¹⁸ The unfamiliar terrain of which Arendt speaks is the modern moment, where the radical break with the tradition has taken place. Only the pure activity of thinking, genuinely moving freely, can respond to the threat of totalitarianism.³¹⁹ When old categories of

³¹⁵ I owe the term to Taminiaux (1997), 2-3.

³¹⁶ *HA*, 303; Burch (2011), 23.

³¹⁷ *MDT*, 9.

³¹⁸ *MDT*, 10.

³¹⁹ Bernstein (2000), 278-79.

understanding and value have been swept away, when the political realm is breaking down, and genuine political action is no longer possible, the activity of thinking takes on a fierce urgency. At that moment, Arendt implies, it may be the only activity that can struggle against totalitarianism.

Thinking's activity of withdrawal from the political world exposes a tension that further intensifies the irony. On the one hand, the spectator is part of an audience, so he, alongside others, looks upon the actors. Thinking still relates to the common world in which human beings interact and take initiatives; by thinking with friends, fellow thinkers judge specific events.³²⁰ The withdrawal from action to thinking shows that the thinker still belongs to the common human world. On the other hand, thinking makes one homeless. Although Aristotle's decision to flee the city when threatened with persecution signifies his indifference to politics, it has for Arendt an additional level of meaning about the essence of thinking. It indicates that thinking is not at home in the political realm.³²¹ While it need not be an exit into a realm of Being, it is always a withdrawal from the realm of appearances. It places the thinker in a different relationship to politics. The activity of thinking puts the thinker in a place of nowhere. The way of the life of thinking remains what Aristotle calls the 'life of a stranger' (*bios xenikos*).³²² For Arendt, the thinker is never entirely at home in the common world of humans. The thinker permanently bears the aura of an exile.³²³ In the last analysis, Arendt strengthens her paradoxical account of

³²⁰ Taminiaux (1997), 21.

³²¹ *LOM*, 199.

³²² *LOM*, 53. Arendt cites *Politics*, 1324a16.

³²³ Arendt, self-conscious of herself as a thinker and a Jew, explores the Jew's status as a 'pariah.' See Bernstein (2000), 278-79.

thinking and politics. Rather than resolving the problem of how thinking relates to politics, Arendt problematizes that relation. Conscious of its incompleteness, the thinker views the meaning of the political realm ironically. Arendt describes thinking as a simultaneous withdrawal from and belonging to the world of appearances, and so exposes the tension directly.³²⁴ Aware of this, the thinker maintains an ironic relation to the political realm, because of the tension in his involvement toward it. Arendt's caution in describing her relation to politics is her understanding this tension, and understanding that it cannot be explained away. Yet in leaving her reader with an account of the importance of thinking, Arendt is not cautious but daring. If she inspires her readers to redeem politics, she also inspires her readers to think. She dares her readers to work out what a redeemed activity of thinking would mean, and where in the world it would place them.

Conclusion

Arendt's interpretation of Aristotle is an effort to think *with* Aristotle *against* Aristotle. In thinking *with* Aristotle, Arendt finds in Aristotle a great treasure of insights on the phenomenon of politics. She uncovers Aristotle's conception of the activity of virtue or excellence (*aretē*), performed for its own sake, which constitutes political action (*praxis*). *Praxis*, in turn, constitutes the core of the political life (*bios politikos*). Aristotle eloquently demonstrates the value and meaningfulness of *bios politikos* for the human being. Arendt goes further. Following Aristotle, she emphasizes that the meaningfulness of *bios politikos* is characterized by public

³²⁴ Taminiaux (1997), 21.

freedom, expressed in the sharing of words and deeds in the *polis*. She finds Aristotle's conception to be an insightful contrast to the individualized, internal freedom of the will, which concerns interior struggle between good and evil. Arendt's ordering of deeds over intent means she evaluates the moral content of public freedom by how one person appears to others. Her emphasis on a realm where free action can occur draws her to take up Aristotle's articulation of the meaning and purpose of the *polis*. The *polis* is the realm where citizens meet and interact by means of persuasive speech rather than coercive action. Citizens can rule only as long as they persuade the others to allow them to rule; if another is more persuasive, another may rule. Citizens, in Aristotle's formulation, rule and are ruled in turn, so that there is no fixed order of ruler and ruled. Citizens meet each other as equals.

In opposition to modernity's Tocquevillean anxiety about equality being a threat to freedom, Aristotle provides a conception of public freedom for citizens inextricably linked to equality. The *polis*, moreover, differs from the family in that it must unite distinct and different citizens, building an association not through natural ties or sameness of material conditions, but through friendship. From Aristotle, Arendt discovers the insight into plurality that constitutes the phenomenon of politics. Lastly, the *polis* is the realm where particular persons appear in their distinctiveness to one another, and this appearance underwrites one's conception of what is real. Arendt takes up Aristotle's phrase, 'what appears to all is called Being,' and gives it a specific ontological formulation. For her, Being and appearance coincide. As the realm of appearances, the *polis* is the realm that

constitutes the totality of human reality. Arendt repeats her opposition to the two-world metaphysical dichotomy, which denies Being is discovered in the realm of appearances, attempting instead to place Being in a distinct realm beyond appearances. Any attempt to escape from the reality of appearances, any flight into a transcendent beyond, is an illusion. Moreover, as such a metaphysical view denies the reality disclosed by human activity in the political sphere, it is a threat to the dignity of politics.

‘Political philosophy,’ Arendt writes, ‘necessarily implies the attitude of the philosopher toward politics.’³²⁵ In Arendt’s view, it is Plato who proposes the two-world metaphysical dichotomy, in the form of contrasting the uncertain opinion found in the world of appearances to certain truth found in the world of reality. In this way, political philosophy is supreme over politics, and guides and directs it through the terms provided by political philosophy. With his political philosophy, then, Plato develops an attitude toward politics that threatens their inherent dignity. Aristotle fatefully inherits this attitude. Despite Aristotle’s insights into the value and meaningfulness of *bios politikos*, he ranks it as merely secondary to a higher way of life. Aristotle upholds Plato’s divide between truth and opinion; he associates political persuasion with uncertain opinion, while philosophical dialectics he associates with certain truth. Aristotle also finds an affinity between contemplative thought and fabrication (*poiēsis*). Like Plato, Aristotle considers *poiēsis* as higher than *praxis*. This view inevitably devalues *praxis* as the core of the political life, further diminishing the dignity of politics. Aristotle also argues that the *vita*

³²⁵ BPF, 17.

contemplativa, as the best life, corresponds to the freest life. To justify his position, he has to show the ways in which *bios politikos* is associated with a lack of freedom. So despite his previous rich articulation of public freedom, he undermines it by naturalizing the political realm, and making the concept of ruling the essential political category for comparing different kinds of regimes. Aristotle's demonstration of the inadequacies of *bios politikos* encourages him to develop a way of life indifferent to politics. The core content of the *vita contemplativa* is for the few to live separate from the political world of the many, and engage in an essentially solitary activity, isolated from other human beings. Aristotle therefore initiates a view of the political sphere where it is characterized by lack of freedom, and encourages an activity, which, taken as a way of life, is a flight from the common human world. It is in opposing these positions where Arendt must, with great fervour, think *against* Aristotle.

Having discovered a range of insights concerning the meaning of politics in Aristotle, but having discovered Aristotle's fateful inheritance that distorts the meaning of politics, it might seem that Arendt departs from him in the end. But this is to sever the conversation prematurely. Arendt's project thus far is to value political life against the domination of the *vita contemplativa*. But the paradox is that Arendt embraces a life of thinking, not a life of politics. As she articulates her understanding of thinking, Arendt draws herself into a final conversation with Aristotle concerning her own activity of thinking and its relation to politics.

The shift for Arendt is her assertion that thinking is a wholly different activity from political action, with its own independent dignity. Due to her post-

metaphysical stance, Arendt cannot accept that thinking is oriented toward contemplating eternal principles. But it is possible to draw from Aristotle a post-metaphysical set of insights. Aristotle's justification for the importance of thinking, 'all men by nature desire to know,' literally means, 'all men by nature desire *to have seen*.' For Arendt, the literal translation establishes a desire, shared by all men, to understand from through their senses. From this, Arendt concludes that there is a desire for finding intelligible meaning in the world. From Aristotle to Arendt, the 'purity' of thinking is possible because of the desire for intelligibility implicating a wholly different faculty than that concerned with action. This interpretation of Aristotle helps Arendt think against Aristotle's metaphysically laden philosophical way of life. By emphasizing the desire for knowing as the desire 'to have seen,' Arendt grounds the desire for intelligibility in the world of the senses, common to all human beings, and not in another world. As it implicates a desire inherent in all human beings, thinking need not be restricted to a few 'professional thinkers,' but is an activity that all human beings can and should practice.

Helped by Aristotle's theory of friendship, Arendt argues that thinking need not be conceived of as an essentially solitary activity. Thinking, even within the individual self, is always a dialogue with another self. Friendship, for Arendt's appropriation of Aristotle, is a relationship with another self, with whom one can carry on the dialogue of thought just as well as with one's self. Thus the purity of the activity is preserved and strengthened in the course of the dialogue with one's self extending to one's friends. Thinking with friends helps ward off the threats metaphysical philosophy presents to the political. It keeps the thinker grounded in

the common world, resisting the tendency to drift into metaphysical fallacies. It nourishes plurality in politics, strengthening the political realm. Finally, the notion of thinking with others shows that the presence of thought impels human beings who think to act justly. Ultimately, in thinking, one recognizes the boundaries and limits of politics. While Arendt does not argue that thinking is supreme over political life, Arendt's emphasis on the importance of the desire for intelligibility means that for her, thinking is the only way to disclose meaning. One grasps its importance not by Aristotle's taxonomy, but by Aristotle's metaphor: thinking is *life*.

So although Arendt criticizes the form thinking takes in Aristotle's *vita contemplativa*, she argues for the independence and dignity of the activity of thinking. Her thinking about politics shows the importance of politics to human life, but also reveals the limitations of politics. Her conception of thinking emphasizes the persistence of the common human world through friendship, but also shows that withdrawal from politics essentially constitutes thinking, meaning that the thinker is a stranger to those in politics. The reader is left to puzzle over these conflicts. In thinking about politics, Arendt exposes the tension between thinking and politics. The reader is left recognizing that politics, despite its redemptive qualities, is not the only source of redemption for the human being. One learns to distance oneself from politics. The attitude of the 'political philosophy' of Hannah Arendt to politics is, ultimately, one of irony.

Arendt's ironic attitude enables her to oppose two streams in political philosophy that threaten the dignity of politics. By refusing to declare that thinking is supreme over politics, she stands against the Platonic stream of political

philosophy, which aims to resolve definitively the problem of the relationship between thinking and politics. Plato resolves the problem by finding, through philosophical thinking, the concepts to direct and govern politics. It is a concept that is fateful for the shaping the activity of philosophy in modernity, and would account for philosophers presuming they can direct and govern totalitarian movements, leading to their cooperation with these movements.³²⁶ The path of the Platonic thinker is to withdraw from the world of appearances; alone, he claims himself capable of ultimate understanding of truth. The Platonic thinker tries to claim total devotion to the thinking activity. But he then claims a right of return from the thinking activity to the world of common appearances, the world of politics, where he then asserts the right of regulating all other activities.³²⁷ Either he, intrigued by the concept of the philosopher ruler, wants to advise the tyrant or be the tyrant, aspiring to contribute a new solution for human affairs.³²⁸ Or he views politics as inherently flawed, becomes indifferent to it, and retreats into his own contemplative practice. Arendt shows how thinking always implicates the common world, and so affirms the dignity of politics.

The other stream Arendt opposes is the tendency to declare that history is supreme over politics. Arendt's attitude toward the concept of history is nuanced, since she thinks the path of modernity inclines the human being to historicism. Previously, one could reply to historicism by an appeal to metaphysics. Metaphysics assumed that in thinking, human beings grasp timeless, eternal truths. These truths

³²⁶ E.g. Martin Heidegger. See Disch (1994), 14-18; Taminiaux (1997), 21.

³²⁷ Taminiaux (1997), 21.

³²⁸ Taminiaux (1997), 20.

are independent of any historical period. The very activity of thinking rises above history, and so refutes historicism. But for Arendt, historicism is an issue for modernity because metaphysics is no longer persuasive. The demise of the belief that there are eternal truths means the essence of thinking can no longer be about rising above history to grasp eternal truths. Historicism cannot be decisively refuted. Modernity turns history into the predicament that it is, and it means modern political philosophy, notably Marxism, sees history as supreme over politics. Arendt's reply is to think about political action, which exposes the limits of historicism. Arendt argues that action 'creates the condition' for history.³²⁹ The free actions of human beings direct and make history. For an act to be free in this political sense, it must transcend motives or consciously intended goals, and have the potential to call something into being that did not exist before, something which could not be known beforehand.³³⁰ The implications of freedom, for Arendt, mean that one can never definitively know or predict the course and direction of history. To the modern systems of thought that declare a known outcome to history, Arendt provides the resources for resistance. Novelty, the constant possibility of new beginnings entailed by the correct understanding of free action, decisively overturns historicism. Man can rise above his own times, because the conception of freedom demands it. When the dignity of politics is given its due recognition, history cannot claim itself supreme over human life.

Arendt's thought addresses the question of the meaning and purpose of politics. Her answer is freedom. Yet she sketches two meaningful activities, political

³²⁹ *HC*, 9.

³³⁰ *BPF*, 150.

action and thinking, which discloses a mode of freedom. Each sketch resists a modern danger, a source of political irresponsibility. Against a danger to characterize thinking as unworldly, Arendt testifies to the importance of the world for thinking. Against a danger of subsuming freedom under history, Arendt testifies to the importance of freedom for underwriting the meaning of politics. But Arendt also testifies to the importance of freedom for thinking afresh in the dark times of modernity. Her path of thinking is to emphasize the themes of political action, worldliness, and freedom as she leads political philosophy out of 'the obscure wood' of the tradition wherein it 'lost its way.'³³¹ In her political theory, then, Arendt shows herself engaged in project greater than the bounds of politics. She is a thinker on a grand scale, reimagining and reordering all human activities. But the result is deliberately ambiguous. Arendt shuns a definitive conclusion on a new order of things, particularly in how thinking relates to politics. While she provides her readers with a fresh, post-metaphysical account of thinking, and a fresh account of politics, she also exposes a fundamental tension between thinking and politics that cannot but haunt all human action and all human thought.

³³¹ *BPF*, 144.

II.

Leo Strauss's Aristotle and the Return to Classical Political Philosophy

Strauss's Critique of Modernity

Leo Strauss's principal philosophical theme is the rational justification of the activity of philosophy as the best way of life. His attempt to justify the activity of philosophy as the best way of life arrives at an impasse when it meets the claim of religious revelation to offer the best way of life. The principal philosophical problem for Strauss is the theologico-political problem, played out across the last five hundred years of modern history. Modern philosophy attempts to resolve the theologico-political problem through a radical emphasis on political philosophy—a politicized philosophy. The result is a failure. It exhausts modern rationalism, bringing about the dominance of positivism and historicism. These forces render impossible the rational justification of philosophy as the best way of life, and claim that philosophy itself is impossible. With historicism, not rationalism, guiding philosophy, modern philosophers become politically irresponsible. Strauss, therefore, seeks a return to classical political philosophy, to understand and respond to the failure of modern political philosophy.

For Strauss, classical political philosophy provides an alternative to positivism and historicism: a politically responsible philosophy, which can rationally justify itself as the best way of life and undertake the quest for the knowledge of the whole. In Strauss's return to classical political philosophy, the study of Aristotle is a crucial step, following from Strauss's study of Socrates. It is Aristotle who examines politics on its own terms, showing its worth, limitation, and role for political philosophy.

I. Strauss's Art of Writing

Why does Strauss study the ancients? In the opening of *The City and Man*, Strauss declares:

It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.¹

Anxiety about the present impels Strauss to study the past. In recounting the history of political philosophy, Strauss is no dispassionate exegete. On the contrary: Strauss's philosophical project is to engage with the problems of modernity. In turning to the past, however, Strauss deploys an unusual style of writing that obscures his own scholarly voice and his philosophical project. The consequences ignite in the Strauss wars.² This requires some initial explanation about Strauss's chosen manner of writing.

¹ *CM*, 1.

² Controversies date back to Strauss's early writings. See Major (2013), 5-6. The most familiar charges against Strauss, that he is guilty of outright bad historical scholarship (e.g. Burnyeat (1985)) or plays at being an intellectual guru for selected disciples (e.g. Skinner (1969)) are addressed in Z&Z (2006).

Strauss's writings are the essential vehicle for communicating his philosophical teachings.³ While he arranges most of his writings as exegetical commentaries of earlier thinkers, they shift between historical exegesis and personal philosophical judgement. Strauss's pedagogy is to design his writings as a debate between the past and the present, trying to persuade the reader of the debate's vitality. Strauss will intimate certain positions that he himself holds, but past thinkers, not Strauss, have the stage. Strauss's primary goal is to persuade the reader to learn from the history of philosophy, in order to address the concerns of the present.⁴ The result is provocative. Strauss's conception of the purpose of an exegetical commentary is ambitious, an attempt to have a philosophical conversation with the present by learning from the past. Strauss's model is that of the medieval commentator, who uses his dialogue with a historical text to articulate philosophical views that engage his contemporaries.⁵

Strauss's pedagogy also includes a kind of esoteric writing. But this does not mean he conceals something scandalous or morally disturbing.⁶ There are different versions of esotericism; Strauss's is concerned primarily with delivering a subtle and reserved manner of argument. It is of the following kind:

³ Meier (2006), xix; Lampert (1996), 67n. Strauss does not communicate his philosophical views through an oral teaching. Neither the study of his class transcripts nor the views of his students will yield his philosophical views.

⁴ Major (2013), 13; Tanguay (2007), 1-2.

⁵ C.f. *PAW*, 16; Lampert (1996), 146.

⁶ Landy (2014), 9.

Truly philosophical authors write not to so much to propagate doctrines as to encourage younger readers to follow them in a life of inquiry. Such authors artfully attempt to arouse questions in the minds of their most attentive readers and then provide hints concerning the way those questions might be answered; but these authors leave their readers to think out the answers and the problems with these possible answers for themselves.⁷

Thus Strauss's subdued arguments are a conscious decision to exercise restraint in expressing his philosophical views.⁸ To see Strauss's argument clearly, one has to pay careful attention to his 'veiling,' in his argumentative and rhetorical strategies. Following these strategies leads from the surface exegetical commentary to the core of Strauss's argument.⁹ One addresses interpretive disputes by providing the best justification as one can, by reference to Strauss's written works.¹⁰

II. The Justification of the Philosophic Life and the Theologico-Political Problem

Whatever Strauss's ambiguities, there is one note on which he is very clear. He sees modernity as a philosophical and political crisis. As a German Jew coming of age in the 1920s, Strauss's writings show an abiding concern with the political experiences of his generation, notably the decline and fall of the Weimar Republic.¹¹ He saw how his generation first abandoned liberalism, and was then seduced by various forms of political extremism. Strauss anxiously observed the strength and

⁷ Zuckert (2011), 26. Elsewhere, Z&Z (2006) provide a detailed argument for Strauss not writing esoterically, but writing with 'pedagogical' reserve. Their distinction is helpful to show the great difference between scandalous esoteric teachings (like Machiavelli's anti-Christian esoteric teaching) and Strauss's direct discussion of esotericism. It thereby helps refute the idea that Strauss has a morally scandalous teaching about politics. Nevertheless they make this distinction too strongly in Z&Z (2006). As the citation shows, Zuckert is well aware that there are different versions of esotericism.

⁸ This 'restraint' is most evident in the paucity of autobiographical remarks from Strauss, and the abiding controversy concerning Strauss's own theological views and stance toward controversial philosophers. See Meier (2006), 3, 23; Lampert (1996).

⁹ Tanguay (2007), 3; Lampert (1996), 13-14. Lampert is attentive to Strauss's manner of writing, but he still assumes that Strauss adopts the style of esotericism concealing a scandalous teaching.

¹⁰ In conceding that Strauss writes esoterically, I admit that some of Strauss's views remain elusive.

¹¹ Preface, *SCR*, 1.

tenacity of fascism and communism. These ideologies could not be set aside as alien forces that assaulted Western civilisation's enlightened liberal democracies from without. More disturbingly, they arose from within the West. However much communist or fascist regimes represented a hostile takeover of civilized Western states, they had their apologists who worked within the framework of Western liberal democracies. Even if by the 1950s these extremist ideologies did not quite represent a clear and present danger; even if one form had been decisively beaten on the battlefield and the other was held off by Western military might, they were indeed real forces.¹² The politics of the 20th century, the politics of modernity, were a tangled constellation of liberal democracies and extremist ideologies. But for Strauss, the political factors are not the fundamental issues, only symptoms. Strauss's view is that the crisis of the West is not a political crisis but an 'intellectual crisis,' a loss of the West's sense of purpose.¹³ Modernity certainly has its political components, but its essence will be found in neither the gulag nor the concentration camp.

In this very important way, Leo Strauss imitates Friedrich Nietzsche. Strauss sidesteps the particulars of modern politics to go in search of the underlying idea of modernity. Strauss's contention is that the essence of modernity lies in a series of intellectual presuppositions. These presuppositions are advanced and promulgated by philosophers and are traceable to certain historical moments.¹⁴ Modernity is an

¹² *CM*, 5.

¹³ *CM*, 3.

¹⁴ *CM*, 7. *Pace* Beiner (2014), 52-53, Strauss is not blind to the role sociology and human action play in modern history. See his account of the Nazi rise, Preface, *SCR*, 1. His interest is with the intellectual character of modernity.

intellectual or philosophical transformation that changes the way human beings understand and live in the world. Strauss identifies a historical moment where modern philosophy seizes the stage of Western history from ancient philosophy, and shapes Western civilisation. Like Nietzsche, Strauss regards modernity as a problem, and turns to that which is not modern, the ancients. His reading of the ancients is informed by a critique of modernity. Like Nietzsche, Strauss wants 'to repeat antiquity at the peak of modernity.'¹⁵

Strauss orients his philosophical account of modernity with one fundamental philosophical problem: the theologico-political problem. In Strauss's words, it is '*the* theme of my studies.'¹⁶

What does this formulation mean? It is about the confrontation between philosophy and faith in revelation on the one hand, and the confrontation between philosophy and politics on the other. The former confrontation concerns the rational justification for the philosophic life in the face of the challenge posed by revelation.¹⁷ The latter confrontation concerns how philosophy can defend itself politically, against the laws and conventions of the political community. Since Strauss does not define these confrontations directly, they require further explanation.

Why is revelation such a challenge to philosophic life? That requires answering a prior question: what is the philosophic life? Strauss answers this question through his Nietzschean repetition of antiquity. But Strauss, unlike

¹⁵ Zuckert (1996), 105.

¹⁶ Preface to *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft*, in *JPCM*, 453; Preface, *SCR*, 1. Meier (2006), 4; Tanguay (2007), 4-5. C.f. Beiner (2014, 41) makes esotericism 'the heart of Strauss's political philosophy.' This mistakes Strauss's means for reaching his theme with his theme. Strauss did not challenge us to reread the tradition of philosophy to recover esotericism; esotericism is a means to recover how the tradition of philosophy treats the theologico-political problem.

¹⁷ Batnitzky (2009), 45.

Nietzsche, wants to repeat the model of Socrates. In Socrates, as he is presented in the history of philosophy by Plato and Xenophon, Strauss finds the definitive model of the philosopher. He wants to legitimize philosophy 'in its original, Socratic sense.'¹⁸ Of course, Strauss has to reveal what this 'original, Socratic sense' of philosophy actually is—hence the need to turn back to antiquity. For now, it is possible to present Strauss's provisional understanding of philosophy.

For Strauss, philosophy is the quest for knowledge of 'nature' or 'the whole.' 'The whole,' for Strauss, signifies 'all things.' It is the quest for the knowledge of God, man, the world, for the nature of all things.¹⁹ As an attempt to gain knowledge of the whole, philosophy is the attempt to replace the opinions about the nature of the whole with knowledge of the nature of the whole. The nature of God, man, and the world are the fundamental questions for philosophy. The philosopher would cease being a philosopher 'by evading the questions concerning these things or by disregarding them because they cannot be answered.'²⁰

This may sound like an invitation to metaphysical dogmatism, yet Strauss emphatically denies this. He argues that philosophy is not about the quest for the *possession* of the truth of the whole, but rather is about the *quest* for the truth of the whole. Undertaking this *quest*, rather than the successful completion of the quest, is the standard for establishing if one is genuinely living as a philosopher. It may be that philosophy cannot fully answer these fundamental questions. Indeed, Strauss doubts philosophy's capacity to realize knowledge. Subjectively speaking, Strauss's

¹⁸ *NRH*, 32. This contrasts Strauss to Nietzsche, who delegitimizes Socrates; as well as to Heidegger, who neglects Socrates. Velkley (2011), 39, 46.

¹⁹ *WIPP*, 11.

²⁰ *WIPP*, 11.

philosopher cannot ever declare definitively that he has completely realized knowledge. Against scepticism, however, Strauss embraces the possibility of an answer. Strauss, therefore, describes philosophy as ‘zetetic,’ seeking to answer fundamental questions. But every tentative answer further exposes what one does not know. Echoing Socrates, Strauss holds that philosophy ‘is nothing but knowledge of one’s ignorance.’²¹ Philosophy has to be always practiced with this ‘subjective certainty’ taken as ‘objective truth.’²² Philosophy must be attracted to answers without succumbing to them.²³

Definite answers remain elusive, but this does not make philosophy futile. The object of study, nature, is too important, so that even a modicum of awareness of nature is better than none.²⁴ The crucial aspect is maintaining the study of the most important things. Since Strauss’ articulation of philosophy assumes the elusiveness of definitive philosophic answers, he places great emphasis on the presence of the right philosophic questions. For Strauss, the key is *awareness* of these questions about nature: about God, man, the world, and the nature of things. Genuine knowledge of a fundamental question is better than blindness or indifference to it.²⁵

What would justify a choice for this way of life? The answer to this question raises the fundamental question of the place of knowledge of the good in human life. Broadly speaking, knowledge of what is good makes human beings genuinely happy.

²¹ *OT*, 196.

²² *OT*, 196. Zuckert (2009), 551.

²³ *OT*, 196.

²⁴ *WIPP*, 11.

²⁵ *WIPP*, 11.

Human life requires knowledge of what is good. The way of life that provides knowledge of what is good would be the best way of life, solving the problem of human happiness. To satisfy the requirement that it be *knowledge* of what is good, a claim about what is good must be learned through one's own natural powers, and not accepted through another's authority. The only activity that can definitively acquire knowledge of the good is the free, unaided investigation about what is good, independent from any authority.²⁶ This is kind of activity philosophy claims to be. So the provisional justification of philosophy as the best way of life holds that it alone provides the free, unaided investigation into what is good for human beings.²⁷ Philosophy alone solves the problem of human happiness.²⁸

By defining the activity of philosophy as the unaided investigation into the knowledge of the good, Strauss does two things. First, his emphasis on an 'unaided' investigation raises the issue of what 'aids' to the investigation exist. These 'aids' could actually be compromising philosophic activity by making the investigation dependent on an authority. Second, Strauss embeds the activity of *political* philosophy into the broader activity of philosophy, to work out a fuller definition at a later point. All political action is guided by a thought of what is worse or better for society, and this implies that every political act is informed by some opinion about the good.²⁹ By arguing that the pursuit of the good is ubiquitous in human life, and defining political action in terms of seeking the good, Strauss makes an objective of philosophy and political philosophy the same: to gain better understanding of the

²⁶ *NRH*, 84.

²⁷ *NRH*, 74.

²⁸ *RCPR*, 181; Zuckert (1996), 114-15, 148; Vekley (2011), 143.

²⁹ *WIPP*, 10.

good. Moreover, Strauss elaborates that the question of the good raises the need for an immutable standard for human society.

In themselves, the laws and conventions of politics cannot constitute the standard for the good, because they are mutable and conventions differ across time and place. The philosopher has to adjust the direction of his quest for knowledge away from the conflicting laws and conventions he encounters in politics. The more he grows aware that conventions determine politics, and the more he discovers that convention cannot be an immutable standard for what is good, the more he discovers the importance of nature as the immutable standard for what is good.³⁰ Strauss discusses this need for an immutable standard for what is good as 'natural right.'³¹ Hence an essential task of philosophy is to gain a greater understanding of what natural right is, as part of the understanding of what the good is. Philosophy sets out to pursue a better understanding of nature, as the only grounding for what is good. Knowledge of political things becomes, in a certain way, secondary to the knowledge of the whole. The philosophic temptation is to disparage and ignore politics, to which I shall turn to later.³²

This is Strauss's provisional account of the philosophic life. Yet Strauss's demand for justification of this way of life is comparative. The philosophic life must face down other possible ways of life that might make man genuinely happy, and must demonstrate its superiority in the face of these alternatives. Strauss sees three other alternate ways of life: the poetic life (the life of the artist), the political life, and

³⁰ *NRH*, 92-93.

³¹ *NRH*, 2, 9.

³² *WIPP*, 81; Meier (2006), 96-97.

the religious life informed by divine revelation. Strauss thinks that neither poetry nor politics can justify themselves as providing genuine knowledge of the good. Poetry addresses themes of virtue and vice and so must make some claim about what the good is. It is really subservient to philosophy.³³ The political life, characterized by conflicting opinions between citizens about what the good is, relies on philosophy to settle these conflicts.³⁴ In the demand for justification, philosophy scores decisive victories against poetry and politics. But no such victory is possible against revelation.

Revelation challenges philosophy at its very core, replacing philosophy's claim for the authority of the knowledge gained through unaided human reason, with the authority of the knowledge revealed by divine revelation. The central claim of divine revelation is that it provides knowledge of the good. If it does, man must be obedient to divine revelation, and serve it completely. The possibility of divine revelation invokes what Strauss calls 'the fundamental question:' does man acquire knowledge of the good on his own, or is he dependent for that knowledge on revelation?³⁵ Either man himself guides his reasoning, or God guides it. There is no other alternative. The basic, irreducible choice of human existence is for either a life of free insight, or a life of obedient love.

³³ *CM*, 135-37. For Strauss, the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is more complex than I can present here, as there is a poetic discovery of nature (*NRH*, 90n). Poetry reveals the 'cardinal problem of human life,' thereby preparing one for the philosophic life. *RCPR*, 182; Marshall (2007), 243-47; Velkley (2011), 150-54.

³⁴ *WIPP*, 80-81.

³⁵ *NRH*, 75. Strauss's understanding of the theologico-political problem develops out of his 'Farabian turn,' his study of Islamic and Jewish medieval. Tanguay (2007), 7. Although I cannot treat it here, I note that Strauss's 'Farabian Turn' helps him develop his theory of esotericism, his conception of philosophy, politics, revelation, and their relationship. Batnitzky (2009), 48-60.

This may be the basic choice, but Strauss does not think that one simply ‘decides’ for one or the other.³⁶ As noted above, Strauss’s account requires that each way of life compare itself to another, and demonstrate its superiority. But between philosophy and revelation, Strauss thinks it cannot be done. The tension between philosophy and revelation is that neither can succeed in demonstrating its superiority over the other. ‘All arguments in favour of revelation,’ Strauss writes, ‘seem to be valid only if belief in revelation is presupposed; and all arguments against revelation seem to be valid only if unbelief is presupposed.’³⁷ At first sight, the inability to decisively refute the other appears to set a stalemate. Philosophy and revelation fight for small tactical advantages from entrenched positions, but they essentially acknowledge that complete victory is impossible. Considering this stalemate, one could sue for peace, affirm the frontiers, and declare that both revelation and philosophy are possible, justifiable ways of life. But Strauss shrewdly sees a problem in agreeing to disagree. Suppose one grants that a religious claim *may* be true. In Strauss’s view, once one grants this possibility, the conflict changes. The trench warfare between revelation and philosophy is not broken outright—but the forces of revelation bleed philosophy white.

Once one grants that revelation’s challenges to philosophy may be true, it gains the upper hand. It presents *the* theoretical challenge to philosophy. Revelation agrees with philosophy that the greatest human desire is to know, but it argues that

³⁶ For two assessments of Strauss’s apparent ‘decisionism,’ see Meier (2006), 23-24; Batnitzky (2009), 55-56. Both agree that each way of life must provide a rational justification, but disagree about whether Strauss thinks a rational justification of revelation is possible in the last analysis. Michael Zuckert (2009), 267-69.

³⁷ *NRH*, 75.

access to knowledge is not possible by unaided human reason, and is only possible by accepting divine revelation. Revelation submits that philosophy does not provide knowledge, and does not really satisfy the greatest human desire.³⁸ Revelation is also *the* existential challenge to philosophy. Philosophy is a way of life that takes its meaning and direction from free and unimpeded quest to pursue knowledge. If philosophy is subordinate to any other authority, its quest for knowledge is compromised.³⁹ Yet revelation subordinates this quest for knowledge to another authority, God, upon whom the realization of the quest for knowledge now depends.⁴⁰ Only God can grant what philosophy wants, so he must be taken as the ultimate authority. So the religious claim is vindicated. Because revelation seems to be able to do better than what philosophy claims to do, philosophy is in second place; at best, it is waiting for God; at worst, it is defying him. If revelation is possible, philosophy cannot justify itself as the best way of life.

Nor can one argue that rational philosophy can demonstrate the impossibility of revelation. Natural reason begins from ignorance, to seek knowledge by natural means. But revelation is in principle not available to natural reason. Rational considerations of the world can never refute revelation, since the essence of revelation is to be not of the world. So reason can neither confirm nor refute revelation. But this entails that reason, *on its own terms*, cannot justify itself as the sole exclusive form and standard of truth about the world. This grants that

³⁸ Meier (2006), 7.

³⁹ PAW, 21.

⁴⁰ Meier (2006), 7.

the philosophic life 'is not necessarily, not evidently, *the* right life.' Strauss goes on to say:

Philosophy, the life devoted to the quest for evident knowledge available to man as man, would itself rest on an unevident, arbitrary, or blind decision. This would merely confirm the thesis of faith, that there is no possibility of consistency, of a consistent and thoroughly sincere life, without belief in revelation. The mere fact that philosophy and revelation cannot refute each other would constitute the refutation of philosophy by revelation.⁴¹

Philosophy cannot decisively refute revelation without begging the question as to which life is better. The choice for philosophy against revelation rests on an act of the will, just as faith. The difference is that the faith of philosophy reveals its lack of probity.⁴² The more philosophy tries to assert that it can refute revelation, the more it reveals its arbitrary character, and the more it exposes its lack of probity. To summarize, Strauss sees the problem in the terms of the following argument:

1. Philosophy is a rationally justifiable pursuit;
2. If philosophy is to be a rationally justifiable pursuit, it must be able to refute revelation without begging the question;
3. Philosophy cannot refute revelation without begging the question.
4. Philosophy is not a rationally justifiable pursuit.⁴³

This is the theologico-political problem: philosophy's attempt to refute revelation culminates with philosophy appearing not to be a rationally justifiable pursuit. It calls into question the capacity of philosophy to justify itself. It is a problem of the most fundamental and dramatic proportions. Moreover, it is precisely this problem that undermines the project of modernity.

⁴¹ *NRH*, 75.

⁴² Meier (2006), 16.

⁴³ I modify a similar syllogism from Michael Zuckert (2009), 267.

III. Strauss's Crisis of Modernity

It is important to grasp Strauss's concept of the right relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. Strauss's drama of the history of philosophy is based on choices made with respect to common philosophical problems. History has no philosophical predetermination or 'fate.'⁴⁴ Nor does the course of political events follow the logic of philosophical thought.⁴⁵ Although history does 'expose' philosophical problems, these problems are always in principle theoretically accessible, even if in practice they are not. History does not 'disclose' a philosophical problem.⁴⁶ History does not determine or limit the capacity for philosophy. While Strauss argues that the history of philosophy helps expose the foundations of modern philosophy, he is emphatic that philosophy is not a historical discipline.⁴⁷ The question for interpreting Strauss is how and where the need to do the history of philosophy arises.

Modern philosophy emerges from a quarrel with ancient philosophy, and so constitutes a modification of the concepts of ancient, or pre-modern, philosophy.

⁴⁴ Pace Beiner (1990), 243; (2014), 49-50. Beiner makes Strauss mimic Heidegger's history of philosophy. Whereas Heidegger has everything go wrong when Platonic philosophy replaces Parmenides, Strauss has everything go wrong when Machiavelli's political philosophy replaces Plato and Aristotle's political philosophy. Beiner thinks Strauss holds that all modernity is corrupt, so he cannot explain why Strauss defends aspects of modernity (2012, 54n, 56n). Yet for Strauss, historicism, not him, assumes there is an 'absolute moment' in history from which all understanding unfolds. *NRH*, 29; Zuckert (1996), 118-21.

⁴⁵ As his discussion with Kojève demonstrates, Strauss rejects the Hegelian conception of history. In Strauss's view, the establishment of the universal and homogenous world state *might* be a possible political event. But it is not inevitable. *OT*, 207-12; Zuckert (1996), 119, 304.

⁴⁶ Although the distinction between 'expose' and 'disclose' seems obscure, it is important to grasp for Strauss's considered stance toward the problem of history. For Strauss, it is important to raise the awareness of how history introduces stances into philosophy, but to maintain the emphasis on philosophy as trans-historical—philosophy 'exposes' what has always been present, and does not 'disclose' something completely new. Philosophical and theoretical insight, not history, is the source of meaning about the nature of the whole. This is Strauss's disagreement with Hegel and Heidegger on the meaning of history. Velkley (2011), 156-64.

⁴⁷ *WIPP*, 56; Michael Zuckert (2013), 166.

Modern political philosophy is a tradition, and Strauss sees that it is ‘the essence of traditions that they cover or conceal their humble foundations by erecting impressive edifices on them.’⁴⁸ The modern problem is that modern philosophy has so concealed the foundations of philosophic activity, and has so transformed opinions and habits, that philosophic activity is not straightforward. A straightforward ascent from opinion to knowledge, a straightforward ascent from the Platonic ‘cave’ to come out in the open, is not possible. Modernity has artificially created a ‘second cave’ lying beneath the first cave of opinions. If someone ascends out of the cave, he now must travel a longer stretch than before, along a different route, with the right tools, to arrive at his destination. Philosophy requires an altered introduction. That altered introduction is the study of the history of philosophy. To be a good philosopher, one must be a good historian—without forgetting that philosophy is essentially different from history.⁴⁹

Strauss presents modern philosophy as the result of three distinct historical ‘waves:’ movements in the history of modern philosophy, which, while definite, independent, and not predetermined, help bring about the present crisis.⁵⁰ Machiavelli’s radicalism initiates modernity—for Strauss, it is Machiavelli who teaches something wholly new.⁵¹ Yet Strauss inquires into the ‘decisions and missed questions’ contained in the history of modernity, to better understand the philosophical issue at stake.⁵² I shall set the details of Strauss’s history aside to focus

⁴⁸ *NRH*, 31.

⁴⁹ *NRH*, 32. For the places where Strauss uses this analogy of the second cave, see Meier (2006), 56-57.

⁵⁰ *TWM*.

⁵¹ Pangle (1983), 25.

⁵² Meier (2006), 62.

on the philosophical issue characterizing modernity. As Strauss argues, the moderns think they can solve the theologico-political problem, and this assumption radically changes philosophy and political philosophy.

Strauss is ‘devoted to the *issue*’ that is controversial between the ancients and the moderns.⁵³ For Strauss, the historical movement from antiquity to modernity, which Strauss frames as *la querelle des anciens et des modernes*, is primarily about how philosophers choose to respond to the theologico-political problem. *La querelle* is about which response is better. ‘A philosophy which believes that it can refute the possibility of revelation—and a philosophy that does not believe that: this is the real meaning of *la querelle des anciens et des modernes*.’⁵⁴ Strauss’s philosophical objective is to draw attention to this debate as it arises in the history of philosophy.

In Strauss’s consideration, modernity is an account of human thinking where a momentous shift of emphasis takes place. The shift is to attend to the natural needs of men. In contrast with previous philosophy, modern philosophy emphasizes a single overriding priority, what Francis Bacon called ‘the relief of man’s estate.’ The goal is to ‘satisfy in the most perfect manner the most powerful natural needs of men.’⁵⁵ Hence modern philosophy targets the hostile forces of nature that so often ruin health and bring death. Nature is an enemy to be conquered.

This project transforms philosophy. Modern philosophy takes up the assumption that there are immutable principles of justice, or natural right. It argues

⁵³ Meier (2006), 62.

⁵⁴ ‘Notes on Philosophy and Revelation,’ in Meier (2006), 177.

⁵⁵ *CM*, 7.

that the most important natural right is that all men have a natural right to comfortable self-preservation.⁵⁶ Hence, it creates a new moral imperative. It creates a new universal consciousness: as the natural right belongs to everyone and is owed to everyone, the satisfaction of this natural right must develop alongside that of everyone else. It is an argument for collective, universal prosperity, implying the development of a universal society to work toward realizing that collective, universal prosperity.⁵⁷ It implies a new conception of philosophical and scientific activity: philosophical activity and scientific activity are valuable when they work toward realizing that right goal of collective, universal prosperity in the universal society. To bring about this comprehensive program conquering nature, philosophical and scientific knowledge must be popularized and spread to as many people as possible.⁵⁸ At its core, modern thought is determined by the idea of progress: scientific progress, moral progress, material progress, and political progress.⁵⁹

So as modern thought promises to transform philosophy, it also promises to transform political philosophy. In Strauss's eyes, the radical transformation of political philosophy constitutes modernity.⁶⁰ In modern political philosophy, there is a change in the understanding of theory and practice, a blurring of the distinction

⁵⁶ *CM*, 4. Velkley (2011), 65.

⁵⁷ *CM*, 4.

⁵⁸ Modernity has two defining beliefs. The first is the 'unlimited progress in the 'conquest of nature' which is made possible by modern science.' This project drives the 'the popularization or diffusion of philosophic or scientific knowledge.' *OT*, 178.

⁵⁹ *WIPP*, 76. Velkley (2011), 149.

⁶⁰ *TWM*, 83.

between the two.⁶¹ Modern political philosophy holds that theories should be practical and achieve real political change affecting the greatest number of people possible. Whatever the differences in the practical projects of modern political philosophers, Strauss thinks they are all united by the rejection of the philosophical schemes of the classics, because they appear impractical, or unrealistic.⁶²

To initiate this project, however, requires throwing off the authority of revealed religion. In Strauss's assessment, modernity really begins when the intellectuals of the West, notably Machiavelli, address the philosophical and political authorities of revealed religion and cry *non serviam*. What motivates their writings is a great anti-theological passion.⁶³ They want to demolish religion entirely, and fight the philosophical and political forces of revealed theology with ferocious, mocking polemics.⁶⁴ While they offer philosophical criticism of revealed religious theology, they do not attempt a piece-by-piece refutation of their opponents. Instead, mockery becomes the refutation. Although Strauss compares the strategy of Enlightenment to Napoleon's strategy, a clearer analogy for the present is this: the strategy of Enlightenment is akin to the Manstein plan for the invasion of France in 1940. Rather than engage the entrenched armies of religious orthodoxy on their Maginot line of scholastic apologetics, involving static, drawn-out battles of disputation, one bypasses the line entirely. Philosophy fights the war not to refute revelation *per se*, but to show something else: that it is philosophy, not revelation,

⁶¹ Strauss writes to Eric Voegelin: 'the root of all modern darkness from the 17th century on is the obscuring of the difference between theory and praxis.' Letter to Eric Voegelin, March 14, 1950, in *FPP*, 66; Zuckert (1996), 121.

⁶² *WIPP*, 40; *NRH*, 169.

⁶³ *WIPP*, 44.

⁶⁴ Preface, *SCR*, 29; *TM*, 231.

which can achieve a newer, better world. One trusts that the energy of the campaign for the new world will eventually make the defensive lines of religious orthodoxy irrelevant, consigning revealed religions to the dustbins of history.⁶⁵

In sum, the whole anti-theological enterprise of modernity is political.⁶⁶ Together with its commitment to progress, Strauss argues that modernity marks the radical politicization of philosophy, and therefore a shift in the conception of the activity of political philosophy. It has great political effect. But modern philosophy overstretches itself. It claims to be a rationally justifiable pursuit, and that it can defeat revelation, killing God by outflanking him. Yet it attempts to refute revealed religion with a ferocious polemic rather than philosophical disputation. In spite of the sound and the fury of modern philosophy, it does not refute revelation philosophically. On Strauss's view, this weakness is fatal. It does not solve the theologico-political problem.

Upon closer examination, the choice for modern philosophy over revealed religion appears arbitrary. For Strauss, modern philosophy cannot conceal 'the fact that its basis is an act of will, of belief, and, being based on belief, is fatal to any philosophy.'⁶⁷ Modern philosophy's refutation of revelation begs the question. Its arbitrary character is revealed, and its lack of probity is exposed. Modern philosophy, then, cannot provide a rational justification for the abandonment of revealed religion. The basis of Enlightenment philosophy cannot provide a rational justification for itself. Modernity's confidence in its own rational superiority is

⁶⁵ Meier (2006), 14; Tanguay (2007), 100-101.

⁶⁶ Preface, *SCR*, 29.

⁶⁷ Preface, *SCR*, 30.

decisively undermined. So the scene following modern philosophy's assault on revealed religion is something like this. In its initial phase, the Manstein plan for advancing Enlightenment succeeds spectacularly: much of the territory of revealed religion is now occupied. *Cependant, rien n'est perdu*. Revealed religion practices a vigorous resistance, a resistance that erodes at the strength of the occupying forces and questions the very legitimacy of the occupation.

God is not dead after all. In holding this position, Strauss departs from the substance of Nietzsche's account of modernity. For Nietzsche, the question of whether God exists has lost its importance in modernity, indicating God's 'death.' The death of God is a necessary assumption to overcoming modernity. For Strauss, an issue in modernity is the *persistence* of the question of whether God exists, an issue over which modern enlightenment stumbles.⁶⁸

There is a second issue that is controversial between the ancients and the moderns: the understanding of the good through natural right. In the way modern philosophy treats this issue, it undermines its claim to rationalism by removing the capacity to justify what the good is. While modernity initially measured its moral progress through an understanding of natural right, it ends up turning morality against natural right. This leads, Strauss holds, to the lukewarm justifications of morality in positivism. With the question of the good unable to be justified effectively, the stage is surrendered to historicism and a concomitant collapse into political irresponsibility.

⁶⁸ Zuckert (1996), 106. Strauss disagrees with Nietzsche's view that the fundamental historical fact problematizing modern life is the death of God. *TSZ* Prologue 2-3; C.f. Lampert (1996), 168-73.

How does this happen? Modern political philosophy measures progress in human welfare by the extent to which it conquers nature.⁶⁹ Initially, this progress in human welfare takes its bearings from natural right, meaning human natural needs. Human nature is the standard.⁷⁰ This creates an inconsistency, as an unchangeable human nature sets a limit to the conquest of nature. Progress would then be significantly restricted. If modernity is to sustain the mission of progress, it must extend its conquest of nature to conquer *human* nature. But this implies that human nature is changeable. So the mission of progress must recognize that the natural needs of men, a purported unchangeable human nature, cannot actually direct the conquest of nature.⁷¹ In the end, nature cannot provide the standard for progress.

The new standard for progress is reason. As this is a practical project, the kind of reason implicated is moral reasoning or morality. For moderns, morality entails autonomy, not bowing to any law that a man has not imposed upon himself.⁷² To enact the moral law autonomously requires demonstrating that one is the master over all other possible influences to action. The moral law must therefore shape the natural within man and outside of man.⁷³ By reorienting progress away from natural human needs and toward rational morality, a division emerges between nature and reason.

This division corresponds to the division between the morally rational 'Ought' and the morally neutral 'Is.' Under this division, philosophy studies the

⁶⁹ *CM*, 7.

⁷⁰ This becomes the modern, Hobbesian teaching on natural right; see Tanguay (2007), 102-109.

⁷¹ *CM*, 7.

⁷² *CM*, 40. Strauss sees the content of modern morality as fully worked out in Kant's philosophy. Kant therefore prepares the way for historicism. Marshall (2009), 221, 237, 253, 274-78, 318.

⁷³ *CM*, 40.

‘Ought,’ while science studies the ‘Is.’ By dividing the ‘Is’ of nature from the ‘Ought’ of moral reasoning, one separates the scientific study of nature (fact), from the philosophical study of moral reasoning (value). In an important claim, Strauss charges that the increasing separation between facts and values undermines the rational justification for science and philosophy. It leaves scientific progress without a moral compass.⁷⁴ Moreover, it leaves moral reasoning without a firm rational foundation. Evaluative statements are not descriptions of nature, but are ‘values,’ or subjective preferences. Conflicts between different values are conflicts between different subjective preferences, and are thus insoluble for human reason. Correct values cannot be known, but correct facts can. Only scientific knowledge qualifies as knowledge. When it now comes to the philosophical justification of morality, no science is possible. The implication is stark: no generally accepted body of knowledge concerning moral objectivity exists.

Based on the divide between fact and value, positivism aspires to develop a new study of politics and society, a social and political *science*. Since only scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge, positivism aims to purge the study of politics of anything unscientific. As it asserts that only descriptive facts are within the competence of a science, the new political science forces all evaluative statements found in the study of politics to take their quietus. The new political science proclaims itself value-free or ethically neutral, as the only discipline that provides genuine knowledge of politics. It alone provides the systematic study of political reality.

⁷⁴ *CM*, 7; *SPPP*, 190; Zuckert (1995), 196.

Strauss famously thinks that positivism and its new political science are philosophically untenable, for four major reasons. First, Strauss argues it is impossible to study social phenomena without making value judgements. Value judgements are presupposed in which political phenomena a political scientist decides to study.⁷⁵ If value judgements are not explicitly acknowledged, political scientists import their own prejudices, which make it impossible to understand society as it understands itself.⁷⁶ Despite its intentions to be objective, a value-free political science endangers objectivity.⁷⁷ Positivism distorts political reality. Second, Strauss disputes that only scientific knowledge qualifies as knowledge. Claiming scientific knowledge as the highest form of knowledge depreciates the pre-scientific knowledge that is necessary to form scientific knowledge. Given the practical necessity of pre-scientific judgements, political science implicitly operates with these pre-scientific judgements. Yet political scientists ignore them.⁷⁸

Third, Strauss attacks the assertion that the conflicts between different values are insoluble for human reason. In his view, this cannot be proved. This point is important for Strauss, as he thinks it draws positivism into a politically irresponsible relativism. It cannot evaluate the difference between good regimes, like liberal democracy, and bad regimes, like Nazism and Communism.⁷⁹ To be clear, Strauss does not think that the positivists are crypto-communists.⁸⁰ Positivist political scientists do have a democratic heart, yet they are singularly bad at

⁷⁵ *WIPP*, 21-22.

⁷⁶ *NRH*, 50, 52, 55, 56; *WIPP*, 21.

⁷⁷ *NRH*, 61.

⁷⁸ *WIPP*, 23-25.

⁷⁹ *WIPP*, 22-23.

⁸⁰ Strauss acknowledges an affinity 'between present-day positivism and a certain kind of democracy,' due to the 'not merely methodological' context out of which positivism arises. *LAM*, 26.

justifying their democratic commitments. They cannot identify what makes a liberal man *liberal*.⁸¹

Strauss's fourth consideration against positivism, however, is the most important. He argues that positivism necessarily transforms itself into historicism, which expresses an even more egregious case of political irresponsibility.⁸² For Strauss, this transformation occurs in two stages. In the first stage, the political scientist recognises that his perspective is historically limited, that he is in danger of mistaking peculiarities of contemporary life for essential characteristics of human society. To offset that danger he studies other cultures of the past and present. Being a good positivist, he performs his study on a wholly empirical basis. But, if he maintains his paradigm that imports value-judgements from other paradigms to interpret his empirical data, he runs into the problem expressed by Strauss's first objection. He imposes his own view of human society on another culture. He does not understand the culture as it understands itself. If he wants to get beyond this parochialism, he must deploy historical understanding. He thereby raises historical understanding to great heights, at the expense of empirical scientific studies.⁸³

The ascent of historical understanding leads to the second transformation of positivism. Political science claims to provide a set of true propositions about political phenomena: true answers to the questions of political scientists. But the questions political scientists ask depend upon the direction of their interests: in short, their values. These values are, as the fact-value distinction asserts, subjective

⁸¹ *LAM*, 28.

⁸² *WIPP*, 25-27.

⁸³ *CM*, 8.

preferences. Yet they provide the fundamental concepts of political science. Seemingly objective answers are then regarded as subjective preferences, which cannot give a rational account of their own basis.⁸⁴ The values that embody political science are dependent on the society to which the political scientist belongs. He owes those values not to rational consideration but historical contingency. Strauss concludes: 'not only is social science superseded by historical studies; social science itself proves to be "historical."' ⁸⁵ Political science is relativized: the seemingly objective answers are subjective and contingent. Political science is not in principle superior to any alternative way of understanding.

IV. The Emergence of Historicism

Positivism has transformed into historicism. For Strauss, historicism is 'the assertion that the fundamental distinction between philosophic and historical questions cannot in the last analysis be maintained.'⁸⁶ For example, it takes the attempt to offer a philosophical defence of the good methods of political science as reducible to its historical context. By arguing judgements of good and bad vary according to historical context, historicism challenges the possibility of philosophy. This challenge is extremely serious. For Strauss, it is the reason that historicism, rather than positivism, is *the* threat to philosophy.

Strauss's stance on this matter bears directly against the most articulate spokesmen of historicism: Martin Heidegger and Alexandre Kojève. While Strauss explicitly debates with Kojève in 'Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*,' his letters

⁸⁴ *NRH*, 72.

⁸⁵ *WIPP*, 26.

⁸⁶ *WIPP*, 57.

make it clear he considers the positions of Kojève and Heidegger as representing the modern, historicist position.⁸⁷

It is Kojève who criticizes Strauss's account of the philosophic life directly, accusing Strauss, and classical philosophy, of upholding an 'Epicurean' ideal of philosophy. For Kojève, Strauss's philosopher renounces all political action, living a strictly isolated life, in order to devote himself completely to the quest for the knowledge of the whole.⁸⁸ Kojève makes the nature of the whole into an issue. For Kojève, any attempt to hold philosophy as wholly distinct from politics must be assuming that philosophy is the quest for knowledge of an immutable whole.⁸⁹ This account is theistic and discredited. Instead, one must adopt a historical conception of the whole.⁹⁰

Based on his historicism (grounded in his reading of Hegel), Kojève goes on to claim that the philosopher must "participate" in history, and it is not clear why he should then not participate in it actively, for example by advising the tyrant.⁹¹ For Kojève, philosophy's most complete activity is to provide ideas that guide politics. On one hand, politics is derivative from philosophy.⁹² Philosophy is essentially political action. But on the other hand, political events—history—are necessary for the philosophical idea to reveal itself fully. In that sense, philosophy is derivative from politics. Kojève's historicism justifies the philosopher abandoning the quest for

⁸⁷ Strauss writes to Kojève: 'I am glad that finally someone represents the *modern* position intelligently and in full knowledge—without Heidegger's cowardly vagueness.' Correspondence Sep. 4, 1949, in *OT*, 244.

⁸⁸ Kojève, *OT*, 150-51.

⁸⁹ Kojève, *OT*, 151.

⁹⁰ Kojève, *OT*, 152.

⁹¹ Kojève, *OT*, 152.

⁹² Kojève, *OT*, 173.

knowledge of the whole, and replacing this quest with political objectives.

Ultimately, for Kojève, the political and philosophical objective applicable for our historical time is the idea of the universal and homogenous state.⁹³

Strauss sees this historicized, politicized version of philosophic activity as denying the possibility of any rational evaluation of the good, leading to the most egregious case of political irresponsibility. If positivism leads to historicism, historicism leads to nihilism.⁹⁴ Historicism rejects any permanencies in human society, such as a permanent question about the good society. A 'good society' would be evaluated wholly on account of historical contingencies—in practice, some mysterious dispensation of fate. The historical contingency of characteristics like 'noble' and 'base' prevents any rational evaluation of good and bad dispensations of fate. Historicism does not and cannot assess good and bad political regimes. It acquiesces both to the political breezes and political storms of history. In 'What is Political Philosophy?' Strauss writes:

It was the contempt for these permanencies which permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation. The biggest event of 1933 would rather seem to have proved, if such proof was necessary, that man cannot abandon the question of the good society, and that he cannot free himself from the responsibility for answering it by deferring to History.⁹⁵

The 'radical historicist,' the *cause célèbre* of Germany's *trahison des clercs*, is Martin Heidegger. While Kojève's political irresponsibility is not immediately evident, Heidegger's is. For Strauss, Heidegger is a study of what happens politically

⁹³ Kojève, *OT*, 173.

⁹⁴ *NRH*, 42.

⁹⁵ *WIPP*, 27.

when one's thinking is committed to radical historicism. Heidegger denies there are immutable principles intelligible to human beings. He denies that one can do metaphysics—that is to say, study immutable principles of nature—as well as philosophical ethics—that is to say, study the immutable principles of natural right. Heidegger therefore gives up pursuing the question of the good society, the fundamental question of political philosophy.

This bears directly on Heidegger's politics. Strauss rejects any interpretation of Heidegger which attributes his political stance in 1933 to 'a mere error of judgement'; Heidegger supported the Nazis because of the direction of his thought.⁹⁶ Strauss situates Heidegger's own thinking as a reaction to Husserl, who was himself reacting against the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism. In its account of science, Husserl accuses it of substituting the scientific account of things for the things in themselves: these neo-Kantians make the mistake of beginning with the roof rather than the foundation. Phenomenology, a turn 'to the things themselves,' is required to get a genuine account of reality, looking therefore for the pre-philosophic foundations of reality. In his phenomenology, Husserl observes that science is derivative of the primary knowledge of the world of things. A pre-scientific understanding of the world of things is the real foundation of knowledge. Therefore, Husserl concentrates on the analysis of the sensibly perceived thing.⁹⁷

Husserl's student Heidegger assumes the idea of phenomenology and its slogan, 'to the things themselves.' But Heidegger accuses Husserl of not being radical

⁹⁶ *RCPR*, 30; *JCPM*, 461: 'There is a straight line which leads from Heidegger's resoluteness to his siding with the so-called Nazis in 1933.'

⁹⁷ *SPPP*, 31.

enough: like the neo-Kantians before him, Husserl also begins with the roof. For Heidegger, the sensible perceived thing that Husserl believes to be the foundation is itself derivative from what the Greeks call *pragmata*. These are things ready-at-hand, the immediate objects of our interest and engagement or the practical engagement with things. Only the examination of these things will disclose the foundations of reality, which Heidegger turns into a search for the meaning of Being.⁹⁸ Heidegger's phenomenology proceeds to reject the philosophical tradition, especially as it as developed since Aristotle.⁹⁹ For the development of modern philosophy, the correct interpretation of Aristotle is the issue. As Strauss writes, it presents two pressing questions:

Modern philosophy has come into being as a *refutation* of traditional philosophy, i.e. of the Aristotelian philosophy. Have the founders of modern philosophy *really* refuted Aristotle? Have they ever *understood* him?¹⁰⁰

It is Heidegger's fresh interpretation of Aristotle, standing against modern misunderstandings of Aristotle, which Strauss finds truly remarkable.¹⁰¹ Heidegger reinterprets theoretical and practical reasoning in Aristotle in order to blur any sharp demarcation between them. Specifically, Strauss observes how Heidegger interprets the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 'All men by nature desire to know.'¹⁰² Heidegger takes the 'desire to know' as a rejection of a disinterested quest for objective knowledge. He replaces this disinterested quest with his concept of 'care,' which stresses historically located, concerned decision-making. By arguing

⁹⁸ *RCPR*, 28-29; *JCPM*, 460-61.

⁹⁹ *RCPR*, 38; *JCPM*, 462.

¹⁰⁰ 'The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,' in Meier (2006), 134.

¹⁰¹ *JCPM*, 450, 461; O'Connor (2002), 165; Velkley (2011), 67, 126.

¹⁰² *JCPM*, 461.

that this desire initiates philosophy, Heidegger brings philosophical thinking or theoretical reasoning into historically located decision-making. He argues for despising objective certainties in favour of risking one's self resolutely.¹⁰³ He thereby elevates 'project or decision' above theoretical knowledge.¹⁰⁴ Rather than being separate, theoretical reasoning arises from the demands of practical reasoning, from the demands of resolute action. Resolute action then gives direction to philosophy, so that a philosopher can take direction from those committed to resolute action, even revolutionary action. Strauss sees Heidegger's praise of resolute action as underwriting his decision to become a Nazi in 1933. As Heidegger's political irresponsibility stems from his philosophy, Strauss encourages the scrutiny of the philosophical reasons Heidegger gives for supporting National Socialism. This turns the attention to Heidegger's 1933 Rectoral Address.¹⁰⁵

In his Rectoral Address, Heidegger furthers his fusion of theoretical and practical reasoning. Like Kojève, he argues that philosophy is essentially political action and derivative from political action. Heidegger hopes that his philosophizing will give direction to and take direction from the National Socialist revolution. Heidegger justifies his position through Aristotle. He redefines *theōria* from a contemplative attitude pursued for its own sake, to a passionate activity. Using Aristotle's term *energeia*, Heidegger defines it as 'being-at-work,' and calls *theōria* the highest form of *energeia*.¹⁰⁶ Heidegger's argument is that philosophy is continuous from practice, especially political practice. Moreover, it has a

¹⁰³ RCPR, 36; JCPM, 461: "The key term is "resoluteness."

¹⁰⁴ RCPR, 45.

¹⁰⁵ RCPR, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Heidegger (1985), 472.

responsibility to political practice. A concerned, committed, revolutionary resolution replaces academic freedom, binding the activity of the university to the people and German nation.¹⁰⁷ Heidegger's philosophy is essentially 'practical' and 'patriotic.'¹⁰⁸

To summarize, Heidegger is for Strauss *the* example of the danger philosophy poses to practical life, and practical life poses to philosophy. Heidegger's fusion of theory and practice exposes how serious the problem of the relation between philosophy and practical life is in modernity.¹⁰⁹ It is because of Heidegger's conception of philosophy that Strauss criticizes him. Recalling Strauss's own conception of philosophy as the quest for full knowledge of nature, Strauss charges Heidegger as the man who brings nature '*fully* to disappearance.'¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, refuting historicism is extremely difficult and cannot simply be accomplished by wishing for the natural right it abandoned.¹¹¹ As historicism arises from particular modern presuppositions, Strauss admits he cannot disprove historicism without a complete critical analysis of modern philosophy.¹¹² After all, Strauss embeds his account of historicism within the path of development of modern philosophy. The relevant issue for the emergence of historicism is modern

¹⁰⁷ Heidegger (1985), 476.

¹⁰⁸ See O'Connor (2002), 168. Strauss is aware that Heidegger changes his thinking considerably later in life, *SPPP*, 30, 34. Heidegger's reflections are caught in the modern trap of fusing practice to theory. In the case of the early Heidegger, it is philosophical theory; in the case of the late Heidegger, it is divine revelation. See Velkley (2011), 55, 116.

¹⁰⁹ Velkley (2011), 115.

¹¹⁰ Velkley (2011), 50. Although Strauss is concerned with the relativistic implications of Heidegger's historicism, his claim that Heidegger has no room for political philosophy should not be taken to refer wholly to this level, but to Heidegger's misunderstanding of philosophic activity. Velkley (2011), 161. Heidegger is not completely off the mark; Strauss shares a considerable kinship to Heidegger. Velkley (2011), 46, 57-58, 61.

¹¹¹ *NRH*, 6.

¹¹² *WIPP*, 60.

political philosophy's modification of pre-modern political philosophy.¹¹³ For Strauss, the historical development of modern political philosophy has obscured its basis as a modification of concepts of pre-modern political philosophy.¹¹⁴ This modification conceals real philosophical choices. So Strauss argues that the fusion of philosophical and historical questions is *only* inevitable on the basis of modern political philosophy. But the problem is that, from the point of view of modern political philosophy, modern political philosophy is simply better. Due to modern political philosophy's attachment to progress, it assumes it can build upon the foundations of the past without necessarily examining the truth and validity of these foundations. In its final, historicist form, modern 'philosophy' defines itself in terms of a successful, superior fusion of history and philosophy. Therein lies historicism's threat to philosophy.

Moreover, historicism is not the only challenge to philosophy, as Strauss is also thinking of theologico-political problem.¹¹⁵ Recognizing that modern philosophical reasoning has failed to provide a refutation of revelation, Strauss is also insisting that another power, revelation, cannot be given the victory over reason.¹¹⁶ What Strauss seeks to provide not just a case for classical philosophy against historicism and its Nazi sympathizers, a case for Athens to resist the

¹¹³ 'Accordingly, what is called the 'discovery' of history is the work, not of philosophy in general, but political philosophy.' *NRH*, 34.

¹¹⁴ *WIPP*, 77.

¹¹⁵ See *WIPP*, 77; Behnegar (2013), 27-29.

¹¹⁶ Strauss's critique of Schmitt is an example of this insistence (see Schmitt, 2007); Meier (2006), 84. This aligns Strauss to Schmitt's critique of liberalism, because modern liberalism also holds that the rational justification of the best way of life is impossible. Meier (1995), 42. Nevertheless Strauss's and Schmitt's critique of liberalism is on very different grounds. *Z&Z* (2006), 184-94.

seductions of Nuremburg, but also a case for Athens to respond to the challenge of Jerusalem.

V. A Return to Athens?

Nevertheless, Strauss qualifies his case for Athens, breaking from standard classical philosophic revivals, particularly Neo-Thomism, in three ways. First, he steers away from arguing for a specific cosmology; second, he denies that classical political philosophy is directly applicable to modernity; third, he seeks pre-scientific knowledge of political things from classical political philosophy, embracing the classics not because it is a tradition, but because in its beginning it is not a tradition.

Consider the first. Strauss argues that the abandonment of the lasting and perennial has a dramatic effect on the possibility of philosophical ethics, or natural right. He provokes his reader over the political irresponsibility of those who disregard natural right. Both positivists and historicists suppress the question of the good society that enables political philosophy to ask what is good and what is evil. Strauss writes: 'it would seem, then, that the rejection of natural right is bound to lead to disastrous consequences.'¹¹⁷ He suggests that the abandonment of natural right leads directly to nihilism. Moreover, Strauss is fascinated with Heidegger's turn to the classics, demonstrating the decisive role their interpretation has in recovering philosophical questions. Yet Strauss identifies Heidegger's misappropriation of Aristotle as a central flaw in Heidegger's historicist account of philosophy. The correct interpretation of Aristotle is at issue: for the understanding

¹¹⁷ *NRH*, 3.

of the whole of nature, for the right relationship between theory and practice, and for the understanding of natural right.

This last point is a prickly one. One might think that, through Aristotle and other classical political philosophers, Strauss is attempting a ‘straightforward’ revival of the project of natural law and natural right, asserting transcendent values in the manner of ‘the classical tradition.’¹¹⁸ Is this correct? Strauss calls the issue of natural right an issue of ‘party allegiance,’ dividing into two principal parties.¹¹⁹ Contemporary liberals reject it, while disciples of Thomas Aquinas are for it. In being ‘for’ natural right, Strauss has a common cause with neo-Thomism. But he distances himself from the neo-Thomists.

Strauss recognizes that a powerful objection to classical political philosophy is that it links natural right to a teleological conception of human nature, linked in turn to a specifically teleological cosmology—now discredited. The Baconian investigation of nature, and its propagation of science, has called that into doubt. Thus ‘right-thinking’ people disregard the teleological conception of the universe, into which a teleological concept of human nature once fitted easily.¹²⁰ A new non-teleological cosmology reigns, which implies that a new non-teleological conception of human nature reigns. If one wants to recover a teleological concept of human nature, which would permit considering natural right, what can one do?

Neo-Thomists concede the validity of the non-teleological cosmology and argue for a teleological conception of human nature. Yet by breaking the link

¹¹⁸ An early way of understanding Strauss. Major (2013), 5-6; Tanguay (2007), 123-24.

¹¹⁹ *NRH*, 7.

¹²⁰ *NRH*, 7-8; *WIPP*, 39-40; c.f. Lampert (2008).

between the two, their position carries a potential contradiction about the nature of the whole. Moreover, they surrender the attempt to provide a comprehensive presentation of the whole. Their position, then, ‘presupposes a break with the comprehensive view of Aristotle as well as that of Thomas Aquinas himself.’¹²¹ While neither unreservedly agreeing with the modern non-teleological cosmology nor resuscitating the classical, Strauss takes the position that one cannot know which cosmology is correct. Even the Baconian project, with all its successes, does not provide complete knowledge of the cosmos. Human knowledge is limited. Strauss sees the modern scientific claim as another form of metaphysical dogmatism, about which he remains extremely wary.¹²² As Strauss argues, philosophy need not demand any particular system of doctrine of the whole. For example, Farabi’s treatise on Aristotle’s philosophy ‘does not discuss Aristotle’s metaphysics.’ Philosophy is the way leading to metaphysics rather than metaphysics itself.¹²³ Rather than repeating the sometimes doctrinaire positions of Aristotelian metaphysics, Strauss pursues a non-doctrinaire quest for understanding the nature of a mysterious whole.¹²⁴

Strauss’s second qualification consists in how he speaks critically of attempts to revive a way of thinking about the past that attempts to make classical political

¹²¹ *NRH*, 8; *WIPP*, 285-86.

¹²² Tanguay (2007), 129-30; Landy (2014), 14: Part of Strauss’s wariness stems from his sympathies with Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s critiques of metaphysical dogmatism. The real lesson of the discrepancy between the argument Strauss makes in the main body of the text at *NRH*, 8, and the citations from Aristotle’s *Physics* 196a30ff; 199a3-5, is to be wary of definitive accounts of the whole. See Salkever (1990), 50; Velkley (2011), 128; Marshall (2007), 295-96.

¹²³ Zuckert (1996), 116.

¹²⁴ Velkley (2011), 47, 54, 69. Velkley observes that in affirming the mysterious elusiveness of the whole, Strauss is in this sense post-Kantian. It is on this point where Strauss does not pursue Aristotelian metaphysics, but distinguishes himself from it.

philosophy directly applicable to contemporary life.¹²⁵ For example, he critiques an interpretation of Thomas Aquinas that attempts to draw out egalitarian premises for obviating the gap between the modern and ancient accounts.¹²⁶ Strauss will emphasize that his study of the classics differs from these versions, neo-Thomistic or otherwise. He does not embrace a tradition of classical philosophy for its own sake. This would privilege a particular historical period above all else, either lapsing into the historicism he seeks to refute, or exalting 'the Western tradition,' which Strauss thinks cannot withstand precise analysis.¹²⁷

Strauss's third qualification arises from this desire to avoid embracing a 'tradition.' Strauss's emphasis is instead on pre-traditional, pre-scientific knowledge, to stand against positivism and historicism. His critique of positivism, and its conception of political science, is on philosophical grounds: it does not take pre-scientific knowledge seriously, so distorts political things. As Strauss sees positivism as distorting political reality, a better conception of political science will provide a faithful account of real political life. As far as historicism is concerned, and its distortion of the whole, Strauss thinks there are good philosophical reasons not to take its soundness for granted.¹²⁸ But the genuine refutation, that would present the authentic account of the whole, will have to involve a more radical recovery of non-historicist philosophy. Since Strauss's critique of modern philosophy emphasizes its distortion of political phenomena, he seeks an account of political phenomena that attempts to understand the political phenomena as they present

¹²⁵ Tarcov (1991).

¹²⁶ *WIPP*, 308-9.

¹²⁷ 'Permit me to declare that it is impossible to do so in the last analysis.' *RCPR*, 73.

¹²⁸ *NRH*, 9-34; *WIPP*, 56-77.

themselves to the natural or pre-philosophical consciousness. For that reason, Strauss turns to pre-modern, classical philosophy, the case *par excellence* of non-historicist thought.¹²⁹

In this, Strauss draws some inspiration from Edmund Husserl. As Husserl urged, Strauss goes ‘to the things themselves’ to recover an account of the whole. Strauss differs from Husserl in that he, like Heidegger, emphasizes the pragmatic human practical engagement with things: specifically, the political things. This is Strauss’s Socratic path to recover an account of the whole.¹³⁰ To gain clarity about the political things, one needs a pre-scientific view of political things; or to put in another way, a common sense view of political things. Who makes that understanding primary, asks Strauss? His answer is Aristotle.¹³¹

Moreover, Strauss turns to Aristotle on the grounds that he is non-traditional. Aristotle makes an attempt to understand political reality on its own terms. Seeing politics afresh, Aristotle provides a direct relationship to political life that is not mediated by a tradition.¹³² The possibility of this non-traditional reading of Aristotle is a propitious feature of the modern scene, enabling one to understand in a ‘fresh manner what was hitherto understood only in a traditional or derivative manner.’¹³³

Strauss does not return to classical political philosophy by a direct road, but his detours should be taken as sign of his philosophical seriousness. The concern

¹²⁹ *NRH*, 33.

¹³⁰ Velkley (2011), 72.

¹³¹ *CM*, 11-12.

¹³² Tarcov (2013), 66.

¹³³ *CM*, 9.

with classical political philosophy arises out of the concern for the present.

Appropriation of the past does not supply ready recipes for the present, which is part of his rejection of neo-Thomism. Modern society is 'wholly unknown' to the classics.¹³⁴ But, if one is to understand and respond to the present predicament, Strauss thinks classical political philosophy is indispensable.

Strauss's assignment is bold. The enemy is historicism. The friend is political philosophy, which must ask what the *good* society is. Political philosophy has an ally in Aristotle. So Strauss reads Aristotle to help him study politics, to help him find that primary understanding of political phenomena. He reads him to show, against value-free political science, what an alternative concept of political science would look like. He must also show that this alternative concept of political science does not lead one into political irresponsibility. For the present, it must encourage good citizens who are also good liberal democrats. Yet he must read Aristotle in a non-historicist way that develops a better awareness of the whole than historicism. This awareness of the whole provides a better conception of political science, and prepares the way for justifying philosophy as the best way of life.

Strauss's Aristotle

In overcoming modernity's fashioning of the 'second cave', Strauss's project addresses three distinct concepts through his interpretations of three different historical figures. With Socrates, Strauss identifies a conception of philosophy and raises the problem of political philosophy. With Plato, Strauss hones that

¹³⁴ *CM*, 9.

conception. With Aristotle, Strauss identifies a conception of political science. But Aristotle appears to diverge from Socrates and Plato. To grasp the inherent unity of Strauss's turn to classical political philosophy, I argue that Strauss's treatment of Aristotle helps establish the integrity of his project. It shows the relationship between philosophy, political philosophy, and political science without diminishing the value Strauss finds in all three.

Strauss finds in Aristotle an elaboration of Socrates's account of the whole, focused on political science. In the initial stage, Aristotle extends upon the insights of Socrates's 'second sailing,' Socrates's turn to the study of the human things or political things, to develop political science. Strauss's position is that while Socrates is the founder of political philosophy, Aristotle is the founder of the classical political science. Elaborating on the political things, Aristotle outlines the importance of moral virtue, the city, and the best regime. In contrast to positivism and historicism, Aristotle develops a political science that fosters political responsibility; Strauss argues that the application of Aristotle's political science to the present entails the support of constitutional liberal democracy. Aristotle's political science also helps reveal key features of the whole: first, how to understand the problem of natural right; and second, how the philosophic life can be defended from historicism. Aristotle's political science increases the self-awareness of the philosopher, enabling a better understanding of the philosopher as a political philosopher.

I. From Philosophy to Political Science

As noted earlier, the philosophical temptation is to disparage and ignore politics. In Strauss's account of history, philosophy precedes political philosophy.¹³⁵ Philosophy's concern is the study of nature. The distinct study of human things, including politics, would appear to be a distraction from the study of nature. A special effort would be required to persuade philosophers to study politics; from the point of view of philosophy, politics does not appear serious.¹³⁶ Historically, the role of Socrates is to make that special effort. Unlike the pre-Socratics, Socrates's insight is that politics is serious. In Socrates's 'second sailing,' he turns from the study of nature to the study of human things: politics. Against the views of his predecessors, Socrates argues that the political things are both worthy of serious study, and that serious study of the political things is necessary for understanding the whole of nature.¹³⁷ Emphasizing what is required to gain greater knowledge of nature, rather than the systemic knowledge of nature itself, Socrates's philosophy preserves its initial zetetic impulse, and is independent of any specific cosmology.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Socrates also develops a schematic ontology to reject the pre-Socratics. Aristotle then refines the Socratic response to the pre-Socratics, to develop a precise study of politics. He founds political science. As Strauss presents this refinement, it enables a contemporary response to historicist contentions about nature.

¹³⁵ *NRH*, 82.

¹³⁶ *CM*, 13-14.

¹³⁷ *NRH*, 122.

¹³⁸ Velkley (2011), 20, 78.

Strauss's account of the pre-Socratic philosophers observes that they study what is 'by nature.' They examine the 'first things,' which are responsible for the coming into being and perishing of everything.¹³⁹ Because they study these things, they are philosophers. Strauss appropriates Aristotle's formulation that philosophy searches for the causes or 'principles' of all things, the 'first things' (*archê*).¹⁴⁰ Strauss links the search for the first things to Aristotle's description of the first philosophers, 'who discoursed on nature.'¹⁴¹ Philosophy is the quest for the things that constitute 'nature,' and the things that constitute convention. Nature, the eternal, is higher than convention, the contingent.¹⁴² The task of philosophy is to separate nature from convention, and investigate nature.¹⁴³

The pre-Socratics make this basic distinction between nature and convention.¹⁴⁴ Yet the pre-Socratics also disparage the human things for the sake of the permanent first things. The latter is genuinely real and worthy of serious study, while the former, having nothing to do with a permanent nature but with convention, with changing contingencies, is not serious and ultimately not real. The

¹³⁹ *CM*, 14. The pre-Socratics are indeed philosophers, and so despite their disagreements with Socrates they do not threaten Socrates as the citizens do. *SPPP*, 88.

¹⁴⁰ *NRH*, 82. Strauss cites *Metaphysics* 981b27-29.

¹⁴¹ *NRH*, 82. Strauss cites *Metaphysics* 982b18: the first philosophers are similar to lovers of myth in that they wonder at the world. Yet Strauss suggests philosophers are different on account of their interest in higher things, rather than the lovers of myth who indulge in trivial things (citing *EN* 1117b33-35).

¹⁴² *NRH*, 90.

¹⁴³ *NRH*, 82. Strauss uses this historical account of the origins of the distinction between nature and convention to clarify his philosophical account of the importance of the distinction between nature and convention. He wants to show that as far as one grants philosophical activity, a quest for knowledge, one has to show what is essential, i.e. *natural*, to what philosophy seeks to know about the totality of reality. See *NRH*, 95-96.

¹⁴⁴ *NRH*, 90. Strauss implies that the pre-Socratics do not adequately engage with the principle that no being emerges without a cause in *NRH*, 82n. The first philosophers study 'first things,' but they are materialists (Strauss cites *Metaphysics* 983b7). Their error is that they do not ask what moves matter or what is its cause (Strauss cites 1071b26-27). They thus misunderstand the nature of the whole.

pre-Socratics make three conclusions. First, they conclude that what humans find good or just is merely conventional.¹⁴⁵ Second, they conclude that the political art or political science, which contains human speeches about what is good, how one should act, and what laws should govern human communities, is impossible. It treats contingencies, not permanencies, and a science must treat permanencies.¹⁴⁶ Third, they conclude that there can be no natural justice or right, because justice or right changes from time and place.¹⁴⁷

Strauss's Socrates rejects all these conclusions.¹⁴⁸ Critically, he finds the source of his disagreement with his predecessors in their assumptions about the nature of the whole. Preserving a concern with the study of nature, Socrates maintains the basic distinction between nature and convention, but applies it in a different way.¹⁴⁹ He argues that there are things that are just by nature. As justice is the common good *par excellence*, Socrates defends the idea that there is a common good.¹⁵⁰ By recognizing the reality of an account of justice and the common good, one recognizes the distinctive character of political things, since the claim of political things is that there is a common good. Socrates's position affirms that there is an essential difference between things that are political and things that are not.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ *NRH*, 93.

¹⁴⁶ *CM*, 14.

¹⁴⁷ *NRH*, 97.

¹⁴⁸ Socrates of course does not have his own work, but Strauss sees the Athenian Stranger of Plato's *Laws* as providing the views of Socrates's predecessors, as well as the Socratic objections to their views. *CM*, 14.

¹⁴⁹ *NRH*, 122. See *Metaphysics* 1078b9–16. If Aristotle holds that Socrates only studies moral questions, Strauss disagrees with Aristotle. But Aristotle says that Socrates examines '*tās ethikās aretās*': moral virtues; not 'only.' C.f. Zuckert (2004), 89-90.

¹⁵⁰ *CM*, 16.

¹⁵¹ *RCPR*, 132.

This merits serious study of the political art or science. As such, Socrates is the first to articulate the idea of natural justice or right.¹⁵²

To arrive at these positions, Socrates sees that the fundamental issue rests in the account of the human mind or soul. Socrates's predecessors do not believe that there are just things by nature because they are material reductionists, making the soul derivative from the material body.¹⁵³ By reducing the soul to the body, what is most one's own and most private, they see everything in terms of private goods. They make the existence of a common good impossible.¹⁵⁴ As justice is the common good *par excellence*, they therefore conclude that there is nothing just by nature.¹⁵⁵ If someone is to speak of justice, it is only about using others to achieve one's own private good. As the sophists argue, the art necessary to do that is the art of persuasion: rhetoric. The sophists then believe in the omnipotence of speech, subordinating political science to rhetoric. By being material reductionists, they fail to see an essential difference between the common good and the private good. So they fail to see the difference between political things and non-political things.¹⁵⁶

Socrates argues that the soul is distinct from the body.¹⁵⁷ The soul then directs, rules, and governs the material body by nature, in order to pursue the just things and avoid the unjust things.¹⁵⁸ It does this through reasoned deliberation or speech. From the study of the soul, Socrates observes that man's naturally defining characteristic is speech or reason (*logos*). This implies that reasoned

¹⁵² *NRH*, 120.

¹⁵³ *CM*, 16. Strauss cites *Laws* 891c1-4.

¹⁵⁴ *CM*, 16-17.

¹⁵⁵ *CM*, 16.

¹⁵⁶ *CM*, 17. Strauss cites *EN* 1181a12-17; *CM*, 23; *SPPP*, 228.

¹⁵⁷ *NRH*, 127.

¹⁵⁸ *CM*, 16. Strauss cites and echoes the argument of *Laws* 891e5-892b1, 896b10-c3.

communication with other human beings about the common good is constitutive of human nature.

As Strauss presents him, Aristotle completes Socrates's argument.¹⁵⁹

Following Socrates's assumptions concerning the nature of the whole, Aristotle believes that justice is by nature, and by nature common. He believes that on account of the specific kind of nature which human beings have, certain things are just or good for human beings. Since the uniqueness of the human being does not lie in the body but the soul, Aristotle's task is to identify what is distinct about the human soul.

For Aristotle, that is the capacity for speech or reason (*logos*). It is this capacity which distinguishes the human soul, and thereby the human being, from the souls of animals and other living things. This natural trait provides the basis for natural justice.¹⁶⁰ As speech is communication, man is social in a more radical way than any other animal. Every distinctly human act must refer to other human beings. Because man is by nature social, the perfection of his nature must include the virtue that can only be realized in common, justice.¹⁶¹ Speech unites men together in common associations for common purposes, which includes pursuing what is just and good. As men are naturally drawn to live together, Aristotle argues that the common association made possible through common nature, the association for the purpose of living well, is by nature. This is the political association. So man is by nature a political animal. The study of humanity, the human things, demands the

¹⁵⁹ E.g. 'Aristotle goes to the end of this road...' *CM*, 16; 'The assertion of the Athenian stranger is confirmed by what Aristotle says...' *CM*, 17.

¹⁶⁰ *NRH*, 127.

¹⁶¹ *NRH*, 129.

study of politics, the political things. To the pre-Socratic philosopher suspicious of political philosophy, who argues that studying politics is a distraction from the study of nature, Aristotle provides the refutation: politics is by nature.

This is how Strauss presents the famous Aristotelian teaching that man is by nature a political animal: the elaboration of the nature of the soul to correct the pre-Socratics. Yet Strauss immediately follows it with a further consideration. The political association or union is not the highest or most perfect union. Instead, Strauss writes that the most perfect or intimate union with other human beings possible is 'the union in pure thought.' If speech implies the activity of politics, it also implies the activity of thinking.¹⁶² Speech, or reason or understanding, would be directed toward considering and discussing common opinions. The purpose of this kind of speech is to replace opinions with knowledge. Speech does not just denote the active pursuit of justice in political association; it also denotes the thoughtful pursuit of knowledge or wisdom.

The human soul, in its capacity for speech, discloses the importance of philosophy and politics. This provides two divergent paths in the wood of the human soul. One path concerns speech. Related to political activity, it implicates the common goals of human beings who share a community. From diverse interests, ambitions, passions, and professions, human beings deliberate together in order to act.¹⁶³ This is practical reasoning. The second path concerns thought. It addresses

¹⁶² *CM*, 17. Strauss cites Aristotle's account of man as a political animal in *Politics* 1253a1-18, and *Politics* 1281a2-4, where Aristotle indicates that the political community is not simply for the sake of living together, but for the sake of noble actions. While neither of these passages mentions thinking, Strauss takes the second passage to imply that the noblest human action would be union with another in pure thought. *NRH*, 127.

¹⁶³ *EN* 1126b11-12.

the task to ascend from opinions to knowledge, and expresses itself as philosophy. This is theoretical reasoning. These two paths cut through the soul of the human being, and mark a basic tension for human life.¹⁶⁴ At this point, however, one can only note this tension and return to the importance of politics for philosophy.

Politics is important for philosophy because reasoning can only be elaborated with other human beings, so philosophy arises out of political life. Reflection on human nature reveals that, on account of the dual character of reasoning, the human being requires the city, politics, to achieve the most intimate union in thought.¹⁶⁵

Socratic philosophy recognizes that the 'core' of the study of nature, philosophy, is the study of politics. Socrates starts with the study of the law, as the law declares what one ought and ought not to do. The starting-point for analysing politics is the phenomenon of law. One then ascends from the study of law to nature.¹⁶⁶ *Pace* the pre-Socratics, the study of politics does provide some important knowledge of nature, because political things are essentially different from non-political things. Additionally, Socratic philosophy deploys the method of dialectics. Socrates starts from the common sense embodied in the accepted opinions, and seeks to transcend them, but with a caution principally founded on the knowledge of his own ignorance. This means he never ceases to consider the opinions about the law and justice. While Socrates has particular considerations about nature and the

¹⁶⁴ Strauss exposes this fundamental problem, and wrestles with how to reconcile this duality in man. See Velkley (2011), 77-79.

¹⁶⁵ 'Without the city, no philosophers. They are the conditions.' *JPCM*, 465.

¹⁶⁶ *RCPR*, 143; *CM*, 20.

whole, he remains chiefly concerned with the human things of politics.¹⁶⁷ Thus Socrates introduces political philosophy as 'first philosophy.'¹⁶⁸ It is 'first' because it is a necessary step to ascend to the knowledge of nature, and it is 'first' because it discloses the schema required for a genuine knowledge of nature.

A momentous question arises. What is meant by 'political'? It is necessary to address the content of political philosophy, or what one is studying when one studies politics. For Strauss, the seriousness of political philosophy hinges on whether an organized body of knowledge of politics, a 'science' of politics, is possible.¹⁶⁹ The pre-Socratics hold that 'political' is the realm of particular contingencies rather than permanencies, so a political 'science' cannot be a serious proposition. To refute them decisively and establish political philosophy as serious, it is necessary to show how a political science is possible: how the study of politics can be the study of permanencies. Yet contrary to what the pre-Socratics thought, the study of politics is not restricted to mere contingencies. It implicates the political order that is just by nature. Aristotle argues that what is just by nature must everywhere have the same power.¹⁷⁰ Political philosophy seeks which political order is best everywhere and always. In this manner, it seeks what is permanently just. Hence the study of politics can be a study of the permanencies of nature. A political 'science' is possible. As Socrates argues that the just things are by nature, Aristotle sees that the study of the just things would entail the scientific study of the

¹⁶⁷ *CM*, 20.

¹⁶⁸ *CM*, 20.

¹⁶⁹ In this sense, science is identical with philosophy. It is the modern philosophic revolution of the 17th century that divides the two. See *LAM*, 205.

¹⁷⁰ *NRH*, 100. Strauss cites *EN* 1134b19.

just political order. Aristotle therefore treats political philosophy as the quest for the political order which is best according to nature.¹⁷¹

But this conception of political philosophy is incomplete. It implies that the knowledge of nature would provide the knowledge of the best political order. One might assume that the study of the permanencies of nature would provide knowledge of the whole of nature; equipped with this knowledge of nature, one could then have knowledge of the permanencies of politics. The study of nature would be prior to and directly applicable to the study of politics. The science of nature would be the science of politics.

On these assumptions, the pre-Socratic Hippodamus experiments with political philosophy.¹⁷² Based on his interpretation of nature, where the key to the knowledge of nature is the number three, he provides a simple account of the best political order. There ought to be 10,000 citizens divided into three parts. The land ought to be divided into three parts; and the laws, lawsuits, and legal verdicts ought to be all sorted into three kinds.

Despite its simplicity, Aristotle notes that Hippodamus's account degenerates into great confusion.¹⁷³ Hippodamus thinks that by having the right account of nature, he could plan the best political order. Aristotle criticizes Hippodamus not because of his interpretation of nature, but because of his interpretation of the political. Hippodamus fails because he does not first ask the question, 'what is

¹⁷¹ *CM*, 17.

¹⁷² *CM*, 19.

¹⁷³ *CM*, 19. Strauss cites *Politics* 1267b30-1268a6. For the confusion resulting from Hippodamus's proposal, Strauss cites 1268b3-4, 11.

political?’¹⁷⁴ This develops another insight that Aristotle draws from Socrates. In Strauss’s terminology, that insight is ‘noetic heterogeneity,’ a term requiring further elaboration.

In the Socratic presentation, to ask, ‘what is something,’ is to ask what is the ‘essence’ of the thing. Whether one asks, ‘what is courage?’ or ‘what is a city?’ or ‘what is a tree?’ one is asking about what some thing essentially is. This question addresses the shape, form, or character of a thing that comes to sight first and distinguishes it from other things. It points to how these essential differences show themselves first to us, to human beings, with what we say about them or what opinions we have of them. It is to ask ‘what is the idea (*eidos*)’ of a thing. Here, ‘idea’ signifies only the most accessible, commonly held, look or surface meaning of the thing.¹⁷⁵ As it addresses the essence of one thing as distinguished from another thing, it points to essential differences between things.¹⁷⁶ To study nature, Socrates holds that it is necessary to start with the study of these distinct things. Specifically, one proceeds through dialectics: one starts with the opinions that are held as to what these things essentially are, and tries to gain knowledge of what they essentially are.

¹⁷⁴ *CM*, 19.

¹⁷⁵ *NRH*, 123; *CM*, 119-120. Strauss doubts the merit of the traditional, ‘Platonic’ interpretation of the ideas (*eidē*) as self-subsisting forms dwelling outside the realm of human beings; ‘it is utterly incredible’ and ‘appears to be fantastic... no one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas.’ *CM*, 119. But I argue that Strauss addresses the ideas in two stages. First, he aligns his critique of the ‘Platonic’ ideas to Aristotle’s critique. This is to show their inadequacy (Zuckert (1996), 154). Once the ideas are expunged of their ‘Platonism,’ Strauss initiates the second stage, where the ideas help disclose the reality of nature.

For a more detailed explanation of Strauss’s interpretation of the doctrine of ideas, see Pangle (1983), 2-5. Yet *pace* Pangle, the doctrine of ideas, interpreted as the surface observation of differences disclosing essential differences between things, is *actually* a sound way of conceiving of the nature of things. It vindicates noetic heterogeneity as a valid ontology opposed to the homogeneity of pre-Socratic cosmology.

¹⁷⁶ *CM*, 19.

Contrary to his predecessors, Strauss's Socrates identifies the study of nature with what the essence of each being is.¹⁷⁷ Nature is not essentially one being. It is essentially heterogeneous, which is to say that there is an essential difference between each kind of being. The whole comes to light as the *heterogeneity* of essentially different parts. It is *noetic* heterogeneity, in that each being presents itself through the idea commonly held about it. Dialectics—proceeding from the opinions about the thing to knowledge of the thing—permits a better grasp of the idea's essence. This would distinguish noetic from sensible heterogeneity, which would attribute the essential difference between the things to the material elements out of which they are formed—such as fire, air, water, and earth.¹⁷⁸

Noetic heterogeneity, as Strauss presents it, has decisive implications for what the whole of nature is, and how one understands it. First, it rejects explanations of things by attempts to find what is a first thing in itself, or what is first by nature. The discovery of noetic heterogeneity vindicates common sense. It lets things be as they are first understood, by the phenomena, rather than trying to explain away essential differences as illusory by reference to a prior principle.¹⁷⁹ The phenomena are the foundation for understanding nature. Moreover, noetic heterogeneity lets one know that there is no special or immediate access to the knowledge of the whole. As Aristotle teaches, there is no noetic understanding that can grasp the first things or the whole directly.¹⁸⁰ Pursuing knowledge of a thing is

¹⁷⁷ *NRH*, 122.

¹⁷⁸ *CM*, 19.

¹⁷⁹ *NRH*, 123-24.

¹⁸⁰ Smith (1994), 193. Strauss imitates Aristotle, for whom *nous* does not grasp first things or the whole directly. This imitation is necessary to refute Heidegger's historicism, which aims to expose a single metaphysical tradition and its premise about the whole being intelligible and knowable as an

to pursue knowledge of a part of the whole, not the whole. It is the necessary precursor to pursuing the knowledge of the whole. As the whole is essentially heterogeneous, knowledge of the whole is only provided through the knowledge of the parts. This leaves knowledge of the whole unavailable, so we only have partial knowledge of the parts.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, it is possible to gain better understanding of the whole, meaning that knowledge of the whole should still be pursued.¹⁸² There is a perception of the nature of the whole that situates the parts of the whole in their proper place. The parts are not loose and disconnected: they have their meaning by their place in the whole.¹⁸³ It is, therefore, only possible to pursue knowledge of the part by having some understanding of the whole.

Noetic heterogeneity is such an insight into the whole. It allows Socrates to hold that the 'the science of the whole' is 'what each of the beings is.'¹⁸⁴ It favours the study of political things as such.¹⁸⁵ It also allows Aristotle to show how Hippodamus is mistaken. Hippodamus makes the mistake of aspiring for the kind of clarity and simplicity alien to the subject matter of politics.¹⁸⁶ He takes the kind of

object, as Descartes thought (*SPPP*, 144). See *NRH*, 30-31; Kenington (1981), 67; Velkley (2011), 122. Strauss's imitation of Aristotle allows him to address the problem he outlines in *NRH*, 30-31. Through Aristotle, he can say that the whole is intelligible, yet direct knowledge of it is unavailable. He can then avoid Cartesian assumptions about knowledge, articulate different assumptions about knowledge, and emphasize Descartes's break with the ancients (*CM*, 45; 'The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,' in Meier (2006), 136). Against Heidegger's historicism, Strauss can claim there is a quarrel between the ancients and the moderns over how to access knowledge of the whole.

¹⁸¹ *WIPP*, 39.

¹⁸² *CM*, 20-21. By contrast, positivism and historicism dogmatically insist that a better understanding of the whole is impossible and the pursuit should be abandoned.

¹⁸³ 'to understand the whole means...to understand the unity that is revealed in the manifest articulation of completed whole.' *NRH*, 123.

¹⁸⁴ *NRH*, 122.

¹⁸⁵ *NRH*, 123.

¹⁸⁶ *CM*, 19. Strauss cites *EN* 1094b11-27; *RCPR*, 142.

reasoning appropriate to the productive arts, the technological and scientific arts, and incorrectly applies it to politics.

Strauss frames the issue in terms of the kind of reasoning associated with effective improvement, or innovation or progress. Believing the law is the same as every other part of nature, he thinks the kind of reasoning appropriate to the scientific and technical arts is also appropriate to the legislative art. Hippodamus assumes that innovation in the technological and scientific arts is the same as innovation in law. He assumes a harmony between technical and scientific progress on the one hand, and political progress on the other. For Hippodamus, reasoning about the technical and scientific arts is susceptible to 'infinite refinement and progress.'¹⁸⁷ His task is to complete the science of nature. This study could then apply to knowledge of any part of nature, including politics, and thus provide the knowledge of politics. Political science could be pursued only after one has knowledge of the whole.¹⁸⁸

Aristotle shows that the reasoning concerning the law is different. An effective law depends not on its rational content, but on its capacity to be obeyed. Obedience to the law arises entirely from custom, and custom is a mixture of reason, passions, and the ancestral opinions fostered through poetry. In contrast to the kind of reasoning deployed to make technical and scientific arts effective, reason only has a limited role in making the law effective.¹⁸⁹ If the technical and scientific arts are

¹⁸⁷ *CM*, 22.

¹⁸⁸ Bernadete (1978), 2-3.

¹⁸⁹ Strauss's version of Aristotle 'denies to the law the very possibility of full rationality.' See Bartlett (1994), 145.

deduced from rational knowledge of nature, and law is not, politics is not homogenous but heterogeneous to the rational knowledge of nature.

By framing the issue in terms of progress, Strauss hints at the contemporary issue.¹⁹⁰ To assert that there can be reconciliation between the rational knowledge of nature and politics assumes that the initial heterogeneity between politics and nature is not permanent. Progress makes harmony possible. To justify this assertion in turn requires the category of history.¹⁹¹ The particular historicist assumptions would be: the assumption that the heterogeneity between nature and politics cannot really be permanent, the confidence that history can abolish this heterogeneity, and that the reconciliation of nature and politics would bring good results. To establish Aristotle's case against the reconciliation of nature and politics through history, it is necessary to emphasize the difference between reasoning about scientific and technological arts, and reasoning about the law.¹⁹²

It remains to address who can be political philosophers. The need for understanding the distinct and independent character of reasoning about the law would at first sight favour those who deploy their reasoning about the law: the statesman, the legislator, or the founder of a political community. This is where the virtue of justice would show itself, and thereby the best political order.¹⁹³ But the vision of these agents is restricted to what must be done in the here and now of politics. Being in the thick of it, as it were, their sense of what is permanent is

¹⁹⁰ 'On the basis of some observations made nearer home, one might suspect a connection between Hippodamus' unbridled concern with clarity and simplicity and his unbridled concern with technological progress.' *CM*, 22. My italics.

¹⁹¹ Bernadete (1978), 3.

¹⁹² Jaffa (2012), 62. Strauss echoes Aristotle at *EN* 1094b23-25.

¹⁹³ *NRH*, 133-34.

deficient. If the statesman were to represent *ipso facto* the perfect political philosopher, it would represent the raising of the contingent over the permanent, and spell the end of a political 'science.' Consequently, men who are immersed in and limited to the contingencies of political life cannot undertake political philosophy.¹⁹⁴ The study of politics requires those who are not engaged in political life. The political philosopher cannot be the same as the statesman, legislator or founder. This insight preserves political science, but it divides communities. There are now those who are immersed in politics and aim to act justly in their contingent circumstances (statesmen, legislators, founders) and those who are outside of politics, but who investigate the permanently just political order (political philosophers). These two factions eye each other warily.

For Strauss's Aristotle, Hippodamus's attempt at political philosophy provides an applicable lesson. When describing Hippodamus in *Politics*, Aristotle adds a personal remark about Hippodamus's lifestyle. Hippodamus is vain and extravagant, living in an overdone manner and paying too much attention to his clothing. Strauss notes that this personal remark is the only one of its kind in Aristotle's work.¹⁹⁵ Sensible, temperate freemen find Hippodamus's extravagance ridiculous. The lesson is that well-bred, morally virtuous freemen, the kind who would be statesmen, legislators, and founders, find political philosophers and their political philosophy ridiculous. Aristotle therefore indicates that political philosophy

¹⁹⁴ *CM*, 17. Strauss invites comparison to *EN* 1135a4-5; whereas political systems which are enacted by humans differ, one system by nature is the best everywhere. C.f. *WIPP*, 31, where the habits of obedient citizens prevent them from seeing where the law needs to improve.

¹⁹⁵ *CM*, 18. Strauss cites 1267b22-30. He compares it to Aristotle's positive remark about the high quality of Socrates's speeches (1265a10-13). To make it clear that Aristotle's audience values moderation, Strauss cites two other asides of Aristotle: the praise of laws concerning moderation (1263b15-22), as well as of the moderation of Eudoxus (*EN* 1172b15-18).

is a questionable practice. Aristotle is well aware that he has to defend political philosophy before the court of well-bred freemen suspicious of it.¹⁹⁶ But there is a complication. By delivering this critical remark of the intemperate life of a pioneer of political philosophy, Aristotle is visibly taking the side of the freemen. Aristotle is doing this while *at the same time* affirming that only a political philosopher can investigate the permanently just order. Like Socrates, Aristotle is aware that he has to compel philosophers to take political philosophy seriously. Otherwise they will think, as Pascal did, that philosophers writing political works are practicing ‘the least serious part’ of their lives.¹⁹⁷ So on the one hand, Aristotle must practice political philosophy and show the need for a science of politics, while on the other, he sympathises with the citizen who thinks political philosophy ludicrous.

The question of who can practice political philosophy is then directly related to the question of how to present political philosophy to the public. Aristotle has an answer. Knowing that political philosophy is a questionable practice for the well-bred men in political life, he sides with them, teaching his political science only to such well-bred men.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, given his Socratic philosophical commitments, which draw one to study the whole, part of Aristotle’s teaching is to persuade these well-bred men of the merits of philosophy. Indeed, this is a further answer to the momentous question posed earlier: ‘what is meant by ‘political?’ While the earlier answer dealt with the content of politics—what one would study when one studies politics—this answer concerns discreet communication. As Aristotle is carefully

¹⁹⁶ *CM*, 18.

¹⁹⁷ *CM*, 18.

¹⁹⁸ *CM*, 25.

selecting his audience, and crafting a message suited to them, he is doing *political* philosophy. This meaning is understood as philosophy, practiced as guarded politic or cautious politicking. By mixing both content and manner, Strauss's Aristotle's has an equivocal understanding of the term 'political' in political philosophy: an essential component of Aristotle's teaching, and of the teaching of classical political philosophy.

In sum, the central issue motivating Strauss's Socrates to undertake his 'second sailing,' to turn from the study of nature to the human things, is to better understand the whole. Correcting the assumptions of his predecessors, Socrates recognizes how studying the human things reveal the nature of the whole. Properly understood, philosophy, the study of the nature of the whole, is an ascent from politics, the study of human things. Yet there are two complications to a straight ascent.

First, Socrates addresses the character of the human soul, an insight Aristotle develops. The human soul, in its capacity for speech, further reveals its basic ontological composition in its two forms of reasoning, theoretical and practical reasoning. With theoretical reasoning, the human soul acts upon his desire to understand the whole. By the insistence on the elevated status of the human soul, Strauss's Socrates and Aristotle are open to the idea of an ordered whole, and of a human soul that is directed toward that ordered whole. With practical reasoning, the human soul acts to realize the common good, justice, in the political association with other human beings. This shows the dual importance of the activity of philosophy and politics to humanity, yet at the same time that they are distinct

activities. The error of Hippodamus serves as a warning. To understand politics, it must not be understood as dependent on the prior study of nature. It must be understood in its own terms, in the terms of practical reasoning. By studying politics distinctly and on its own terms, Strauss holds that 'not Socrates or Plato but Aristotle is truly the founder of political science.'¹⁹⁹

Second, noetic heterogeneity discloses that the whole is only known through its parts. The parts appear as phenomena about which human beings share ideas or opinions, in political life. Philosophy would proceed from the kind of reasoning associated with political action to theoretical reasoning, in order to gain a better sense of the parts. But the dependence of the whole upon knowledge of the parts, the opinions shared in political life, shows that political philosophy is 'first philosophy.' The political things are of 'decisive importance for understanding nature as a whole.'²⁰⁰ Aristotle develops these assumptions about the whole, and clarifies the insight into the whole by pursuing scientific knowledge of the part. This is the philosophical importance of his political science.

These two complications to the ascent from politics to philosophy show the need for Aristotle's political science, studying practical reasoning (*praxis*) in its own terms. For Aristotle, political science is the quest for the permanently just political order. Political science must be taught while cultivating the sympathy of well-bred men suspicious of political philosophy. Keeping the Socratic awareness of the human soul, one must acknowledge the inherent distinctiveness of practical

¹⁹⁹ *CM*, 21.

²⁰⁰ *RCPR*, 126.

reasoning and theoretical reasoning that characterizes the human soul.²⁰¹ Aristotle pursues his enquiry into practical reasoning without losing sight of the role of theoretical reasoning, nor subsuming practical reasoning into theoretical reasoning. It is to the themes of Aristotle's political science that I now turn.

II. Aristotle's Political Science: Moral Virtue

Strauss's reflection on practical reasoning exposes the themes of political science. The first step is the discovery of moral virtue, and the human excellence or perfection it entails. Moral virtue is realized in society; specifically, it is realized in a closed society. This leads to the second step: the discovery of the city. To achieve perfection in the city, one must live in the best city. The best city is the best regime. Hence the truest theme of political science is the study of the best regime.

To repeat, Strauss's starting-point for analysing politics is the phenomenon of law. In order to express Aristotle's response to how the pre-Socratics and historicists obscure the difference between nature and politics, Strauss articulates the distinct and independent character of the reasoning about the law, termed the legislative art. The legislative art is distinct from the kinds of reasoning associated with other arts because the efficacy of the law depends on custom—a mixture of reason, passion, and poetry. Moreover, the efficacy of the law depends to a certain extent on its strength—the law needs teeth. In politics, persuasion through reason is only effective with a limited audience. For the law to be fully efficacious, it must also instill respect and fear from those in politics who are only disposed to obey the

²⁰¹ Marshall (2007), 257.

stronger. Aristotle teaches that the nature of politics ‘often defeats reason.’²⁰² On account of the nature of politics, the full legislative art will include the respect and cultivation of custom through poetry, the ability to persuade through reason, but also the ability to discipline through force.²⁰³

Strauss now speaks of the legislative art as the highest form of practical reasoning (*praxis*). *Praxis* is superior to *poiēsis*. While *poiēsis* addresses the partial goods of particular arts, *praxis* addresses the good of the whole of society, the common good. It is precisely in order to meet the common good that the conception of legislative reasoning must be more expansive than that associated with *poiēsis*.²⁰⁴ Moreover, the concern with the common good makes the legislative art the highest form of practical wisdom, or prudence. Strauss reformulates the legislative art as prudence. Prudence is concerned with the whole human good. The connection between the legislative art and prudence connects politics to the pursuit of the good life. To be prudent is to lead a good life, making one’s own decisions well. In that way, prudence is the kind of knowledge inseparable from the right habit of choosing—moral virtue. As prudence is inseparable from moral virtue, this connects the legislative art to moral virtue.²⁰⁵ The close connection between prudence and moral virtue is another difference between *praxis* and *poiēsis*. It is also further evidence of the higher dignity of *praxis*, because *poiēsis* lacks this connection to moral virtue. For Strauss’s Aristotle, artisans, acting as artisans, require less moral

²⁰² CM, 22. Law also defeats rational persuasion; the sophists are blind to the sternness of politics.

²⁰³ CM, 23. Zuckert (1996), 267.

²⁰⁴ CM, 24.

²⁰⁵ CM, 24.

virtue than slaves.²⁰⁶ Prudence and moral virtue unite to enable one to lead a good life. That is the ultimate end of prudence. Within the sphere of human things, prudence addresses the whole human good, and is supreme.

For Strauss, the sphere of human things is also 'closed' by prudence. The ends guiding prudence, or the principles of prudence, are known independently of the theoretical sciences. The sphere of prudence is *de iure* independent of the theoretical sciences.²⁰⁷ Strauss means that the knowledge of the theoretical sciences is not necessary for understanding and acting upon these principles of prudence. What is necessary for understanding the principles of prudence is to be morally self-conscious. The independence of prudence is preserved because its principles are knowable to morally good men: what Strauss calls 'gentlemen' (*kaloï kagathoi*).²⁰⁸ Affirming this independence, Aristotle describes the moral virtues as they are known and agreed upon by the morally virtuous men. Aristotle demarcates the limit of the sphere of human things as the conventions that the morally virtuous gentlemen acknowledge.²⁰⁹

To support the independence of the sphere of prudence, Strauss insists on the intelligibility of moral virtue in its own terms. In so doing, Strauss intensifies a tension in Aristotle. On the one hand, Aristotle argues that the requirement for genuinely morally virtuous actions is to do noble and just deeds chosen for their own sake. On the other, Aristotle speaks of moral virtue as a means to other ends, seeming to instrumentalize moral virtue to other ends. What does Aristotle mean?

²⁰⁶ *CM*, 25. Strauss cites *Politics* 1260a33-41.

²⁰⁷ *LAM*, 206.

²⁰⁸ *CM*, 25.

²⁰⁹ *CM*, 26.

Strauss explores two possible explanations. Following Aristotle's opinion that the highest end of man is theoretical understanding, one could say that theoretical understanding is the natural end toward which moral virtue tends. But then the philosopher would choose morally virtuous actions as 'mere means toward his end' of theoretical understanding, instrumentalizing moral virtue.²¹⁰

To counter this position, Strauss considers whether moral virtue would seem to be more intelligible if it tended toward the natural end of social life. Yet the moral virtues cannot be understood as being for the sake of the social life, which is to say, for the sake of the city. The purpose of the city, after all, is to be for the sake of the practice of moral virtue.²¹¹ Rather than attempting to solve these problems by arguing to what natural end moral virtue is a means, Strauss thinks Aristotle's insight lies in showing that both these explanations are needed. Moral virtue is in some sense 'absolute:' something essentially intelligible only on its own terms. This is Aristotle's great discovery. Without this discovery, it would not be possible for him to argue politics is independent from nature, and that the knowledge of politics does not depend on the knowledge of nature. He can therefore found political science as an independent discipline.²¹² At the same time, however, moral virtue is in some sense 'incomplete:' it points beyond itself, beyond the life in the city.²¹³

Nevertheless, this admission does not diminish the importance of moral virtue. Even

²¹⁰ *CM*, 27.

²¹¹ *CM*, 27. Strauss cites *EN* 1095b30-31: virtue is superior to social honour. *EN* 1099b29-32: the goal of political science is primarily devoted to the character of its citizens, for the sake of making good men who do fine actions. *EN* 1178b5: As man lives with others, he acts virtuously. *Politics* 1278b21-24: As it falls to each man to live finely, common advantage brings them to live together.

²¹² Aristotle's emphasis of this feature contrasts him to Plato, who passes over all virtue not grounded in philosophical knowledge as vulgar virtue *CM*, 27; O'Connor (2002), 185.

²¹³ *CM*, 27.

if moral virtue can be pursued for the sake of something beyond itself, it is still good in itself.²¹⁴

The discovery of moral virtue transforms political science into a practice that seeks to realize moral virtue in the city, particularly in the audience that political science addresses, the gentlemen. Political science seeks to educate the gentlemen in moral virtue. Strauss elaborates this plan in his appraisal of the ancient understanding of liberalism, which provides the proper goal of a 'liberal' education. Strauss sees the original understanding of a 'liberal' as a free man, distinguished from a slave. It has a political meaning and what one might call an 'internal' meaning.²¹⁵ Its internal meaning refers to the order of the soul, a man who is in control of his passions—almost the opposite of the modern meaning of 'liberality.' In the ancient sense of 'liberality,' the initial manifestation is exactly how Aristotle identifies 'liberality:' the man who gives gladly from his own property. In this sense, the 'liberal' man shows he is not greedy and not a slave of his passions.²¹⁶ Strauss takes this Aristotelian insight as a starting point for identifying the full character of the liberal man and the political meaning of 'liberal.'

By being free of his passions, the liberal man uses his leisure time and wealth to become a 'cultured' human being.²¹⁷ He is 'concerned with the most weighty matters,' the good order of the soul and the city, and forms his aesthetic and moral

²¹⁴ O'Connor (2002), 185-86. Rosen (2003, 129) thinks Strauss's defence of moral virtue is exoteric. But see *CM*, 27. Strauss's emphasis on the goodness of moral virtue relies on his contrast between Aristotle and Plato. So Strauss's analysis of the distinction between Aristotle and Plato would have to be exoteric, implying that all technical discussions philosophers offer are exoteric. But this is not really Strauss's position—as Rosen acknowledges (2003, 121).

²¹⁵ *LAM*, 10.

²¹⁶ *LAM*, 28.

²¹⁷ *LAM*, 3.

judgement through reading, conversation, and learning.²¹⁸ He takes part in political life. He desires to be virtuous and excellent in political affairs. His political freedom is a freedom for realizing his human perfection. His realization of excellence must not be thwarted, ruled or controlled by the vulgar who have no grasp of human perfection.²¹⁹ As an independent, free person, the gentleman can in turn help others in the common pursuit of excellence, promoting the form of government that best permits men not to be subject to any master.²²⁰ He encourages other individuals and their government to be more liberal. For that reason, Strauss writes that 'liberal education in the original sense not only fosters civic responsibility: it is even required for the exercise of civic responsibility.'²²¹

The gentlemen's cultivation of moral virtue makes them better citizens and more perfect human beings. If a gentleman knows 'that' the just things are and 'what' they are, he does not need to know the 'why' in addition.²²² Nevertheless, the education they receive through political science also appeals to those few gentlemen who want to know the 'why' in addition to the 'that.' Aristotle, for example, corrects erroneous conceptions of virtue and vice that may predominate in the city.²²³ In this project, his education implicitly invites the questioning of those who want to know the 'why.' If this were pursued, it would take the gentlemen to philosophy. The education of political science shows that the gentleman is naturally affected by philosophy. Although this is not its proximate goal, Aristotle's political science is

²¹⁸ *LAM*, 11.

²¹⁹ *LAM*, 12.

²²⁰ For 'all practical purposes he will be a republican.' *LAM*, 29.

²²¹ *LAM*, 13.

²²² *CM*, 25-26. See in particular *EN* 1095b4-7 (Strauss cites the longer passage 1095a30-b8 in 25n).

²²³ For example, Strauss sees Aristotle's omissions of shame and piety from the list of virtues as evidence for trying to correct the gentleman's conception of virtue. *CM*, 28; *WIPP*, 94.

also an attempt to actualize this possibility of philosophy in the gentleman.²²⁴ As long as gentlemen do not practice philosophy, they are, from the point of view of philosophy, imperfect human beings. They do not speculate on the whole of life. Strauss's interpretation is that despite Aristotle's defence of independence of the sphere of prudence and of the political life, he does not assert here that it is equal to or superior to the philosophic life.²²⁵

III. Aristotle's Political Science: The City

Moral virtue addresses the whole natural human good, a good realized in society. Natural human perfection, including the conception of political freedom outlined above, can only be realized in society. This society, however, must be a small society, and a closed society. It needs to be a small society because the society capable of achieving a common good must cultivate trust. Trust presupposes acquaintance with the other members of society. Thus mutual trust helps cultivate a society where a person is responsible to and responsible for others, in the shared pursuit of human perfection. Strauss links the fruits of mutual trust to political freedom, the freedom to pursue excellence in common with others.²²⁶

This also explains why the society must be a closed society. Political freedom requires the cultivation of the right habits of virtue, and so takes generations to build up. Not all human societies can realize the most mature expression of political freedom at the same time. Consequently, the society that tried to be a totally inclusive 'open' society would actually be a mixture of different societies at

²²⁴ *CM*, 28. Strauss's seriousness for educating gentlemen shows that this argument cannot simply be written off as an exoteric teaching. C.f. Rosen (2003), 136.

²²⁵ *NRH*, 51.

²²⁶ *NRH*, 130-31.

different levels of political maturity. The lower societies would drag down the higher ones, and prevent the open society from ever realizing human perfection. As a closed society is required to realize human excellence, the division of humanity into different groups is also according to nature.²²⁷

It is clear one is speaking about a particular kind of society, limited by a certain size, essentially civilised and urban, and with a measure of political freedom. In Aristotle's terminology, this kind of society is neither an empire nor a tribe, but the city or *polis*.²²⁸ Only in the city can human perfection be realized; only in the city does individual moral virtue flourish enough to achieve happiness. Aristotle thereby argues that the city is the most comprehensive and highest society. The highest good of the individual, the practice of moral virtue that achieves happiness, is exactly what the city aspires for the individual. In that way, the highest good of the city coincides with the highest good of the individual.

As the perfection of the city depends on the perfection of its members, Strauss identifies the chief purpose of the city as the cultivation of the virtue of its members. Strauss therefore identifies liberal education as the city's central concern.²²⁹ By making the city the theme of his political work, Aristotle further develops political science as the discipline that transmits the liberal education that fosters human excellence. It evinces the action-guiding character of Aristotle's political science. The city is described as a kind of political order, and evaluated as

²²⁷ *NRH*, 131-32. Howse (2014) argues that Strauss moves in the direction of liberal internationalism not unlike the post-Maastricht European Union. However, Howse severely mischaracterizes how Strauss's interpretation of Aristotle grounds his understanding of politics. Howse (2014, 11); c.f. *CM*, 1, 10-12. Strauss's reflections do not favour liberal internationalism, but republicanism. *LAM*, 29.

²²⁸ *NRH*, 130; *CM*, 30. Strauss thinks of *Politics* 1326b3-5.

²²⁹ *CM*, 31.

the best political order. Political scientists must acknowledge that the city is good, and they and their students must pursue its good. Aristotle's political science is practical: it describes, evaluates, and encourages actions pursued for the sake of what is good.

The 'city,' however, is not a theme of contemporary political science, so Strauss has to justify his (and Aristotle's) interest in it. The influence of historicism raises two objections against Aristotle's political science. The first objection is that it privileges the Greek understanding of politics above all others. As the *polis* is the most common political order amongst the Greeks, Aristotle is simply enshrining Greek biases as to the best political order within his political science. To this objection, Strauss counters that Aristotle demonstrates great respect for a non-Greek *polis*, Carthage. Aristotle ranks Carthage as 'hardly less' than the *polis* of Sparta, and better than the *polis* of Athens.²³⁰ Aristotle therefore respects the *poleis* amongst Greeks and non-Greeks alike.

The second, more profound objection is that historicism makes the concept of the city obsolete, by replacing it with the term 'culture.' At first sight, the focus on the highest, most meaningful order might suggest an agreement between 'city' and 'culture.' Yet historicism transforms the meaning of culture: expunging any evaluative content, it removes the impression of an order or rank in a single culture, as well as between one culture and another. What is left is a purely descriptive account of culture. From the point of view of historicism, Aristotle's assertion that the political element is the highest element in human society appears to be arbitrary

²³⁰ *CM*, 31; *WIPP*, 87-88.

or at best the expression of one culture among many.'²³¹ His account appears too value-laden and obsolete. Historicism's relativism of culture, however, fails on its own terms: it cannot adequately describe other cultures. In declaring all cultures exactly equal, historicists mean to provide an adequate description of all human societies. Yet their view betrays that it is a product of one particular culture, modern Western culture. They describe all cultures through the lens of modern Western culture, imposing a particular description from one culture onto all other cultures, distorting the description of them. ²³²

Strauss contrasts the wholly descriptive approach to political science, the approach of positivism and historicism, with the practical approach to political science, the approach of Aristotle. Aristotle would have known a forerunner of the descriptive approach in the work of Herodotus. Herodotus studies a society by focusing on the nature of their land, their arts, their crafts, their unwritten and written laws, and their stories. Aristotle sees these as conditions imposed on a society, conditions which shape and limit the society but do not in themselves constitute it. If one wants to understand what constitutes a culture, one should see what ideal its own members look up to. Stated with a more Aristotelian vocabulary, one should focus on how a society presents itself as it aspires to answer the questions of the good society or the good life. Aristotle observes how a society answers the question of the *good* society and good life by developing its political order. The descriptive approach of Herodotus appears as conditions of political order, while the political order appears as the intended result. Only with the latter

²³¹ *CM*, 34.

²³² *CM*, 34.

can the culture or society actually be understood.²³³ So far from being obsolete, Aristotle's approach anticipates and replies to historicism's version of political science.

Strauss's considered assessment is that moderns do not pay adequate attention to the question of the good society and the good life. They hold that it cannot be the task of the state to promote virtue, making the state indifferent to virtue and vice.²³⁴ Yet their exhortation 'does not pay sufficient attention to the importance of habituation or education for the acquisition of virtue.'²³⁵ By avoiding the pursuit of excellence, modern 'liberal' education paradoxically turns into a 'ferocious hatred' of those who state that there are standards of excellence. The result is a savage degradation of education, preventing students from achieving excellence.²³⁶

The counter is to pursue excellence from the start. The Aristotelian liberal education concentrates on habit formation directed toward excellence. It helps people realize the goal of excellence. One version of education seeks happiness however understood; the other version of education seeks true happiness.²³⁷ This is another battlefield in the quarrel between the ancients and moderns. Nevertheless it is one where modern liberal democracy does logically require specifying the goals of education: so it is open to recognizing and incorporating the wisdom of the ancients.

²³³ *CM*, 34-35.

²³⁴ *CM*, 33.

²³⁵ *CM*, 33.

²³⁶ *LAM*, 28, 63.

²³⁷ *CM*, 49.

IV. Aristotle's Political Science: The Best Regime

Strauss's presentation of Aristotle elevates the dignity of the city: distinct from other kinds of associations, the city is the natural association, which, through political life, leads to human excellence.²³⁸ 'Politics,' writes Strauss, 'is the field on which human excellence can show itself in its full growth and on whose proper cultivation every form of excellence is in a way dependent.'²³⁹ In order to reach excellence, a human being must live in the best political order, the society 'most' conducive to human excellence.²⁴⁰ Implicit in Strauss's discussion of the city is an emphasis on 'political order,' which refers to the size of the society, and government's level of centralization.²⁴¹ The city is small and closed, with citizens who are acquainted with one another; the close relationship between the citizens develops a highly centralized government whose presence is felt throughout ordinary life. Yet there are, of course, many different kinds of government that could rule the city, assisting or hindering human excellence. This raises Aristotle's question of the best 'regime' (*politeia*).

For Strauss, modernity has obscured the significance of 'regime,' requiring a reminder of its significance.²⁴² Within a given political order, such as the city, 'regime' refers primarily to the distribution of power. It identifies the basic political authority that orders societies, 'the form of government.'²⁴³ On this description, one

²³⁸ *CM*, 45.

²³⁹ *NRH*, 133-34.

²⁴⁰ *NRH*, 135.

²⁴¹ Pierre Manent's reflections on political order or form make explicit what Strauss implicitly recognizes (2013, 4-10).

²⁴² *NRH*, 138.

²⁴³ *NRH*, 136. Strauss paraphrases Aristotle: 'the governing body is the regime.' *Politics* 1278b11-13; and 1289a12-20.

might think 'regime' synonymous with 'constitution,' but Strauss elaborates. 'Constitution' refers to the foundational laws of a political society, but it does not address the deeper political order. The initial political phenomena may be the laws, but the laws are not independent. They depend on human beings to adopt and administer them. Human beings, and the power they exercise, which is not necessarily what is written in the constitution, direct the laws. 'Regime' refers to this deeper political order: the actual 'form of government' addresses those who *really* hold political power, who *really* shape the laws. The regime is thereby the cause of the laws, so the laws, while important political phenomena, are not the fundamental political phenomena.²⁴⁴

'Regime,' however, is not wholly concerned with the brute fact of political power. A particular regime provides the city with a particular conception of justice, which then informs the laws and constitutes public morality. For example, there are distinct conceptions of justice in a democratic regime, an aristocratic regime, and a monarchic regime.²⁴⁵ Strauss speaks of each regime's conception of justice as providing and elaborating a certain legitimating principle. The legitimating principle is the ultimate principle which is the source of public morality, laws, and the constitution, the principle by which those are defended and upheld. For Strauss, there is not one legitimating principle simply. Different regimes elaborate a specific legitimating principle based on their particular conception of justice. As Strauss sees it, this insight stems from ordinary political experience. Ignoring this variety in legitimating principles is to ignore the perspective of the citizen, who concerns

²⁴⁴ *NRH*, 136. Strauss takes the habits to be authoritative over laws. He cites *Politics* 1292b11-18.

²⁴⁵ *CM*, 48; *NRH* 137; Strauss cites *Politics* 1288a23-24.

himself with a particular public morality.²⁴⁶ Political science must be cognizant of different legitimating principles and how they emerge, thereby requiring the study of different regimes.²⁴⁷

The regime also shapes the way of life.²⁴⁸ Particular regimes mould particular human beings, determining the dominant and authoritative way of life in a community. Every community, in espousing a certain public morality, values certain habits and attitudes. They then recognize the superiority of the human types that best embody these habits and attitudes, regarding a certain human type or character as authoritative.²⁴⁹ This authority takes two forms. One is in terms of social norms and pressures. Every practice is justified by how the authoritative human character would judge it; those practices that cannot be justified become suspect. So strong is this pressure that even those who do not explicitly pass their practice through this process of justification are still shaped by its judgements.²⁵⁰ 'Citizen' is relative to 'regime,' inasmuch as the regime inevitably shapes the human being within it to become a certain kind of citizen.²⁵¹ The second form concerns those who are more likely to govern. To be authoritative, these human characters must have a decisive say in the community, forming the government. The persons who best exemplify these characters end up participating in government.²⁵² 'Citizen,' then, is relative to 'regime' in a second sense too, as a citizen who would

²⁴⁶ *CM*, 48.

²⁴⁷ C.f. Williams (2005), 4; Larmore (2013), 280, 291.

²⁴⁸ *NRH*, 136. Strauss cites *Politics*, 1295b1.

²⁴⁹ *NRH*, 137.

²⁵⁰ *NRH*, 137.

²⁵¹ *CM*, 45-46.

²⁵² *NRH*, 137.

end up ruling in one regime would not be likely to rule in another; few democratic citizens would be able participate in an oligarchic government.²⁵³

The regime's role in public life is so comprehensive, Aristotle holds, that if a given city were to undergo a change of regime, it would actually transform into another city. Once a city changes the end to which it is dedicated, its form and purpose changes—if not its matter or inhabitants. The most acute argument in favour would be seen in terms of the essence of politics, the cultivation of human excellence. If a city were to abandon its dedication to human excellence and turn to baseness, no greater moral change could take place.²⁵⁴

All these elaborations—the arrangement of political power, the specification of justice and morality, the idealization of certain character types that shape the way of life, transform the citizen and effect who is likely to govern—demonstrate that the regime is the fundamental political and social phenomenon.²⁵⁵ It makes man what he is politically, and it makes the city what it is essentially. For Strauss, 'regime' is the true theme of political philosophy.²⁵⁶

Nevertheless, these elaborations expose that there is a variety of conceptions of justice, public morality, ways of life, and accounts of the good citizen: in short, a variety of regimes. As political philosophy is evaluative, these elaborations brand the true theme of political philosophy as the quest for the *best* regime. This is the guiding question of Aristotle's *Politics*.²⁵⁷ Strauss appropriates this quest. Providing

²⁵³ *CM*, 45.

²⁵⁴ *CM*, 46-47.

²⁵⁵ *NRH*, 137.

²⁵⁶ *WIPP*, 33-34.

²⁵⁷ *CM*, 48-49.

his own presentation of Aristotle's teaching, Strauss advises how Aristotle's political science can be applied to contemporary politics.

According to Strauss, what is Aristotle's teaching of the best regime? Strictly speaking, Aristotle's best regime is the rule of the 'best men,' making the best regime an aristocracy. The best men rule because they are the best in moral virtue. Moral virtue depends upon wisdom, so the rule of the best men is the rule of the wise. The aristocracy rules absolutely. For if the aristocracy is indeed the rule of the wise, then, 'it would be absurd to hamper the free flow of wisdom by any regulation...the rule of the wise must be absolute rule.'²⁵⁸ The rule of the wise is neither dependent on elections, nor on consent of the governed, nor laws.²⁵⁹ Since its realization requires only wise men, neither demanding a 'miraculous or nonmiraculous change in human nature,' nor the abolition of evil, it is possible. Since it is in accordance with the requirements of 'excellence or perfection of human nature,' it is desirable. The absolute rule of the wise is both possible and desirable.²⁶⁰

To Strauss's critics, this position is a scandal, as it seems he endorses the classical definition of tyranny: monarchical rule without laws.²⁶¹ While this criticism has been effectively refuted elsewhere, it is useful to note here is how the refutation relates to Strauss's appropriation of Aristotle.²⁶² One can better understand Strauss's teaching by juxtaposing it to Aristotle's definition of tyranny.²⁶³ For Aristotle, tyranny is a deviation from monarchy. It is the monarch ruling to the

²⁵⁸ *NRH*, 140-41.

²⁵⁹ *NRH*, 141.

²⁶⁰ *NRH*, 139; *WIPP*, 85-86.

²⁶¹ *OT*, 69.

²⁶² *Z&Z*(2006), 155-59.

²⁶³ *Z&Z*(2006), 161.

advantage of himself, the monarch, rather than ruling toward the common advantage, the advantage of the other members of the community. Strauss's account of the best regime emphasizes not a *lawless* absolute ruler, but a *just* absolute ruler. For Strauss, it is logical that the absolute rule of the genuinely wise and just, ruling for the sake of others, would be just for all.²⁶⁴ That is the account of the best regime Strauss thinks is by nature, and thereby possible and desirable.

The benefits an absolutely wise and just rule might bring could never justify the absolute, lawless rule of the unwise and unjust.²⁶⁵ Hence the second half of Strauss's teaching on the best regime: that the practically best regime is the regime governed by the rule of law. While the absolute rule of the wise and just may be possible and desirable, its actualization is by no means necessary. Drawing from Aristotle, Strauss argues that the actualization of the best regime depends on a series of favourable conditions that can only arise through chance.²⁶⁶ The best regime may never have been actual, and it may never become actual.²⁶⁷ Strauss's interpretation of Aristotle argues that as the best regime is legitimate or just only under these most favourable conditions; under less favourable conditions, *only* less imperfect regimes are legitimate or just. Strauss's conclusion is that the classical understanding of the 'best regime' promotes a variety of legitimate or just regimes.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ WIPP, 86; Z&Z (2006), 163.

²⁶⁵ Z&Z (2006), 162-63.

²⁶⁶ NRH, 139. Strauss cites *Politics* 1331b18-23.

²⁶⁷ NRH, 139, Strauss cites *Politics* 1296a37-38. See also LAM, 15.

²⁶⁸ NRH, 140. Strauss cites several passages of Aristotle to make his argument. On how justice differs from place to place on account of their being different political regimes, see EN 1135a5. Aristotle considers why it is important for the same science to study the best regime and the best possible regime, *Politics* 1288b10ff. On how polity and aristocracy fall short of the most correct regime, see

One could conjecture a number of conditions under which the best regime should not be implemented, but Strauss identifies the basic problem in terms of the semblance of wisdom vis-à-vis genuine wisdom. For the wise to rule, they must persuade the unwise that they are, in fact, wise. Yet the ability of the wise to persuade is extremely limited, and genuine wisdom is almost impossible for those who are not wise to identify. If one allows the wise to claim a right to rule over the multitude, the more likely outcome is an unwise man deceiving the multitude that he is, in fact, wise. On account of his feigned wisdom, he will persuade the multitude that he has a right to rule. It is likely that this person would rule absolutely, for the sake of himself, and so establish a tyranny.²⁶⁹ Tyranny is the very problem, the ‘cancer,’ which Strauss wants politics to avoid.²⁷⁰ Strauss’s political science must be able to identify the cancer correctly, and prevent its emergence.

Consequently, the threat of tyranny is too great to permit those who claim to be wise to rule absolutely. Strauss’s conclusion is that the alleged right of the wise to rule must be questioned. It cannot be absolute. The demand for wisdom must be qualified by consent of the governed.²⁷¹ The regime meets the requirement of wisdom, as well as the requirement of consent, through the wise man providing a code of law or constitution to a political community, which the citizens of the political community, persuaded of its importance for limiting power, freely adopt.

1293b22-27. On how a democracy can emerge in the city and be in accord with nature, see 1296b25-35.

²⁶⁹ *NRH*, 140.

²⁷⁰ ‘A social science that cannot speak of tyranny with the same confidence with which medicine speaks, for example, of cancer, cannot understand social phenomena as what they are. It is therefore not scientific.’ *WIPP*, 95.

²⁷¹ *NRH*, 141. Jaffa reverses this (2011, 235). He thereby departs from Strauss. Kraynak (2011), 215-219; Michael Zuckert (2011), 250-53.

This code embodies wisdom, so that it takes the place of the rule of men, however wise they might be. Administration of this constitution takes place through the ‘gentlemen’ described above. Although this provides a certain advantage to men of leisure, and thereby the wealthy, the reason gentlemen can rule well is through their desire to be virtuous and excellent in political life. As described above, they are ‘liberal’ gentlemen, republican in outlook. Their shared pursuit of virtue gives society its character. The practically best regime is a republic where these well-bred and public-spirited gentlemen give society its republican character.²⁷²

The application of Aristotle’s teaching for the present, then, is to advocate for ‘a mixture of democracy and aristocracy’ that corresponds to modern, constitutional liberal democracy.²⁷³ To draw in the different kinds of citizens who compose these different regimes and temper the hazards of these groups ruling tyrannically only to their own advantage, Aristotle argues for this mixture of democracy and aristocracy. This is the mixed regime. It brings in features of both in order to be conducive to the rule of the best, under the overarching rule of constitutional law.²⁷⁴ Not only is Aristotle’s political science not an attack on modern liberal democracy, his discussion of the best regime is an argument for this mixture of democracy and

²⁷² See Marshall (2007), 302-10.

²⁷³ *CM*, 35-36.

²⁷⁴ *NRH*, 143. To make this conclusion, Strauss draws from a number of passages of Aristotle but does not establish his reasoning step-by-step. His evidence is as follows. For Aristotle’s ranking of the different regimes, and the character of friendship in each, see *EN* 1160a32-1161a30. On a need for shared ruling between equals, see *Politics* 1261a38-b3. On the case for a mixed regime, see 1265b33-1266a6. On the problems of an authoritative governmental institution drawn from the poor, see 1270b8-27. On the several kinds of citizens prevalent in different regimes, see 1277b35-1278a22. On the distinctions between different modes of rule, see 1278a37-1279a17. On why a regime might be concerned about superior men as possible tyrants, see 1284a4-b34. On tyranny being the worst deviation from a regime, and on which kinds of regimes are the most choiceworthy for cities, see 1289a39ff.

aristocracy. Aristotle's political science is actually an argument *for* modern liberal democracy.

In sum, Strauss thinks that Aristotle teaches two best regimes. The simply best regime is the absolute rule of the wise, but its realization is improbable. Because of its improbability, it cannot and must not be practically pursued. Strauss's reflection on the problem of tyranny, and his definition of the only condition under which the best regime is possible and desirable—when the just man rules justly for all—shows the attraction of the wise ruling above the law, but why it would more likely than not result in tyranny. The two teachings of the best regimes cement the overriding practical importance of the rule of law in the face of temptations to waive the rule of law—temptations exacerbated by extremist ideologies.²⁷⁵ The practical answer to the question of the best regime is, therefore, not the rule of the wise, but the rule of the law in the mixed regime. Modern liberal democracy, where rule is defined and limited by a constitution, effectively mixes aristocracy and democracy. It most closely approaches the mixed regime. It is this practically best regime that political science should try to encourage. Ultimately, Strauss uses Aristotle to help establish a more nuanced understanding of the classical political philosophy's qualified positive view of democracy, completing the rehabilitation of classical political philosophy. From his reading of Aristotle, as well as Plato, Strauss closes: 'liberal and constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age.'²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Z&Z (2006), 161.

²⁷⁶ *OT*, 194. For Strauss's interpretation of *Republic* 473d, see *CM*, 124-25; *OT*, 193. Strauss declares that Plato's political work *par excellence* is not *Republic*, but *The Laws*. *WIPP*, 29.

Strauss wholly rejects all extremist political responses to the problem of modernity.²⁷⁷ Unlike Schmitt and Heidegger, Strauss's political response to the problem of modernity is to defend liberal democracy.²⁷⁸ Aristotle is Strauss's guide to recover the real meaning of politics, preparing a radical philosophical response toward the problem of modernity. But he is also Strauss's guide to promote a moderate and nontyrannical politics: to buttress liberal, constitutional democracy in the face of its challengers.²⁷⁹

V. Aristotle and The Problem of Natural Right

Recalling that the good life is in accordance with nature, the city is the association in accordance with nature, and the best regime is the regime in accordance with nature, it remains to identify how Strauss understands the relationship of nature to politics. Aristotle's political science stays within the sphere of the conventions that gentlemen agree to be morally virtuous, not seeking their justification. Aristotle's approach thereby emphasizes that political science studies these conventions, and is independent from the science of nature, avoiding the error of Hippodamus and other pre-Socratics. Nevertheless, there are two aspects of the relationship between the particular conventions of politics and nature that this approach overlooks.

The first concerns the justification of moral virtue. Prudence is oriented toward the good life. As the end of prudence is the good life, and the good life is

²⁷⁷ Velkley (2011), 114. Altman (2011) is an unverifiable conspiracy theory.

²⁷⁸ Smith (1994), 192.

²⁷⁹ Jaffa's observation that Strauss's political philosophy points to the American articulation of democracy, is, in this sense, correct. However, Jaffa is surely overstating his case if he implies that America is the theoretically best regime actually realized (cf. Jaffa (2012), 30-33). As noted above, Strauss's teaching of the best regime is a city that appears in speech, not as an actual city. Z&Z (2006), 242-43.

according to nature, nature is connected to prudence and therefore to moral virtue. For a moral virtue to be genuine, it must be the means to the good life, or in accordance with the natural end of man. To justify particular moral virtues, one must show that they incline toward the natural end of man. For this justification to succeed, it would require that man know his natural end—knowledge acquired through the science of nature.²⁸⁰ The ostensible independence of political science from the science of nature must be qualified. Strauss observes that political science is vulnerable to false theoretical opinions about the natural end of man, particularly—as seen with the pre-Socratics—false theoretical opinions about the soul. Political science relies upon the theoretical sciences to defend itself against false opinions. So while political science is *de iure* independent from knowledge obtained through the theoretical sciences, Strauss says it is *de facto* dependent on knowledge obtained through the theoretical sciences.²⁸¹

The second aspect that this approach downplays is the relationship between law and nature. Aristotle's view is that prudence in politics is the rule of law in accord with nature, which directs all the other arts. Like the pre-Socratics, then, Aristotle's taxonomy places nature in the first place. But in the second place falls the law, rather than the arts as for the pre-Socratics. The arts thereby assume the third place, inferior to the law.²⁸² The rule of law is in accordance with what is by nature the good life, the whole human good. It directs and situates all the other arts.

²⁸⁰ *CM*, 26.

²⁸¹ *LAM*, 206.

²⁸² *CM*, 25.

Aristotle makes nature the standard for the moral and political sphere. This raises the question of natural justice or natural right. However, there are two different ways to conceive of the relationship between law and natural justice or right. In one the laws are secondary to nature; in the other, the laws are fused with nature. The former is classical natural right, and the latter is natural law. Criticizing the latter, Strauss interprets Aristotle to side with the former.²⁸³

As Strauss notes, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is very brief on natural right.²⁸⁴ Aristotle says the following:

Of the just in the political sense, one part is natural, the other, conventional. The natural [part of political justice] is that which has the same capacity everywhere and is not dependent on being held to exist or not, whereas the conventional part is that which at the beginning makes no difference whether it is thus or otherwise, but once people have set it down, it does make a difference.²⁸⁵

From this passage, natural right appears to have the same capacity everywhere in politics. This initially corresponds with Aristotle's writing, but Aristotle then adds that natural right '...is altogether changeable.'²⁸⁶ Aristotle seems to deny that natural right is unchangeable, and therefore denies the very premise of natural right. It would appear that in reality, natural right is conventional. If maintained, this position would leave Aristotle with little defence against the modern offensive of relativism. Aristotle needs an interpreter.

The interpretation of Thomas Aquinas attempts to buttress the defences by qualifying Aristotle. What Aristotle really means is that the principles of natural

²⁸³ Aristotle does not follow an 'extreme view,' where 'nature and law become fused.' *CM*, 25.

²⁸⁴ *NRH*, 156.

²⁸⁵ *EN* 1134b18-22.

²⁸⁶ See *EN* 1134b25-30.

right, their basic axioms or rules, are universally valid and unchangeable. These can be understood as the basis of a natural *law*, as opposed to natural *right*. A natural law is 'a law which determines what is right and wrong and which has power or is valid by nature, inherently, hence everywhere and always.'²⁸⁷ For Aquinas, there is a *habitus* of practical principles, which inform practical reasoning and provide us with knowledge of the natural law. In the Thomist vocabulary, this *habitus* is the doctrine of conscience (*synderesis*).²⁸⁸ The natural law solution is neat, saving the day from the attack of relativism.²⁸⁹

Strauss objects to this interpretation as a departure from Aristotle. Aristotle does not qualify his statement that natural right is changeable. He implies that all natural right is changeable, while Thomas Aquinas only makes part of it changeable. Moreover, Thomas Aquinas uses *synderesis* to explain why the natural law is available and communicable to all human beings, unchanging and universally obligatory. But *synderesis* is a Patristic term, not an Aristotelian one. The concept is foreign to Aristotle. Strauss thus argues that the Thomistic natural law teaching can only exist through the influence of biblical revelation. Natural law as a series of universally valid, unchangeable, and exceptionless rules is not natural law strictly speaking, i.e. a law knowable to unassisted human reason. For example, according to Aquinas breaking the natural law supposedly yields divine punishment; yet 'it is not entirely clear whether human reason can establish the fact of such punishment.'²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ *SPPP*, 137.

²⁸⁸ *NRH*, 157.

²⁸⁹ Strauss says the Stoics originate the natural law teaching in *SPPP*, 141. C.f. *NRH*, 146, where he rejects the notion that the Stoics introduce a new teaching. c.f. Tanguay (2007), 118.

²⁹⁰ *SPPP*, 142; *NRH*, 163-64.

In Strauss's account of the natural law tradition, natural law becomes indistinguishable from divine law. Initially held to be distinct, the two forms of the higher law become one and the same. The basic tension then is between natural right and natural law. Strauss exposes natural law as revelation. A choice for natural law may be correct, but it is a choice for religious revelation, not a choice for philosophy.²⁹¹

To recover Aristotle for the side of the philosophers, Strauss offers a different interpretation.²⁹² The original Greek philosophers do not study natural law—for them it is a contradiction in terms. Instead, they study natural right, defined as 'what is by nature right or just.'²⁹³ The classical natural right teaching, according to Strauss, answers the question of what is natural right by the question of what is the best regime, because it is here where justice finds its complete answer.²⁹⁴ The best regime is the perfectly just regime. It is therefore the regime that perfectly realizes the common good. Its rulers are perfectly wise, and the laws they promulgate would be perfectly just laws. Yet no actual political regime is the best regime that represents the absolute rule of the wise. How then to assess natural right in actual regimes?

²⁹¹ This conclusion coincides with what Strauss writes in the new preface to 1971 edition, *NRH*, vii. Strauss defends classic 'natural right' against historicism, but qualifies this defense 'to avoid a common misunderstanding...the divine law is not the natural law, let alone natural right.' In his debate with Pangle, Jaffa is correct to use *NRH*'s new preface in order to draw attention to Strauss's continued commitment to classical natural right (2012, 70, 90-92). But he neglects to consider this citation from the new preface. Rather than indicating a Strauss who draws reason and revelation together in their understanding of natural right (c.f. 2012, 98-101), it indicates that Strauss intensifies the divide between reason and revelation.

²⁹² The Averroists, including Marsilius of Padua, are on the side of Aristotle, which is the side of philosophy. *SPPP*, 165, 226; *PAW*, 96-98, 140. Strauss's Locke follows the side of philosophy. See *WIPP*, 220; Michael Zuckert (2013), 162-71.

²⁹³ *SPPP*, 138.

²⁹⁴ *NRH*, 144; Tanguay (2007), 118.

From the point of view of the wise, the positive laws in actual political regimes are not perfectly just, but a dilution of justice. There is thus a problematic character to them.²⁹⁵ Nevertheless, in the circumstances when the best regime is not possible but only secondarily imperfect regimes are possible, these imperfect regimes are legitimate. Thus these laws are legitimate, and must be regarded as preserving the common good and justice. They preserve the common good in part because Strauss's teaching of the best regime concludes that it is unjust to impose a more perfect regime, and therefore more perfect laws, in circumstances where the best regime is not possible.

It is because Aristotle evaluates laws in these secondarily best regimes that he concludes that in politics there is natural right. The relations between fellow-citizens are the most fully developed expression of natural right. Natural right is part of political right; it is not opposed to it. Political life is in accord with nature.²⁹⁶ Nevertheless, in actual political regimes the laws never fully accord themselves to nature. By making the laws second place to nature, the classical natural right teaching entails that the laws of actual regimes are open to modification and refinement to realize justice in accordance with varying circumstances. Classical natural right flows from Aristotle's teaching on the best regime. Aristotle's natural right delineates the minimum conditions of political life as well as the best regime. It describes the minimum condition and maximum possibility of political society, but

²⁹⁵ *OT*, 99; *SPPP*, 139.

²⁹⁶ *NRH*, 156-57.

leaves the details to positive law. In this sense, Aristotle teaches ‘that all natural right is changeable.’²⁹⁷

The danger with this position is that it implies the denial of natural right, weakening the defences with relativism *ad portas*.²⁹⁸ Yet Aristotle, on Strauss’s reading, thinks of natural right not as ‘general propositions but rather of concrete decisions’ in particular situations.²⁹⁹ Through this formulation, Strauss means that the virtue of prudence realizes natural right. For Strauss, prudence, the legislative art, practical reasoning, and natural right all refer to the same capacity: to decide what action realizes the good in light of changing, contingent circumstances, which can never be outlined fully in advance.³⁰⁰ One learns what it is to be prudent not by studying laws, but by studying examples of persons who acted well in particular circumstances. Hence one studies the ‘gentlemen,’ the well-cultivated, well-mannered, and temperate men of the city.³⁰¹

For Strauss, therefore, studying statesmen helps us better understand prudence, as well as the other virtues.³⁰² They serve to manifest the heights of human achievement and excellence in varying circumstances.³⁰³ Nevertheless, this

²⁹⁷ *SPPP*, 140.

²⁹⁸ *NRH*, 158-59.

²⁹⁹ *NRH*, 159.

³⁰⁰ Marshall (2007), 300-301; Marshall (1993), 67; *EN* 1139a5-32.

³⁰¹ *Pace Villa* (2001), 289, who regards it as a strange exultation of virtuosity. Strauss is only asking his reader to consider exemplary cases of prudent persons to help act prudently—identifying virtuous action by reference to the virtuous character. See *EN* 1105b5, *EN* 1140b5-13.

³⁰² See *CG*. Churchill also helps Strauss better understand Aristotle’s conception of the virtue of magnanimity. See Jaffa (2012), 188.

³⁰³ *WIPP*, 86.

leaves open a question: are the manifestations of prudence ever limited by exceptionless moral rules?³⁰⁴

Aristotle's reply is an ambiguous 'perhaps' (*isôs*).³⁰⁵ For Strauss, Aristotle does not do as the Thomists do, and argue in favour of exceptionless moral rules. Instead, Strauss takes Aristotle to suggest that 'there is not a single rule, however basic, which is not subject to exception.'³⁰⁶ The problem with the Thomist position is that it presumes to have sufficient knowledge of all requisite circumstances to define the law with sufficient adequacy and detail to meet all requisite circumstances. Strauss's charge is that reason can never accomplish this; extreme situations that might require exceptions can never be described beforehand in detail.³⁰⁷

When the safety of civil society is threatened, such as in war, one needs to cultivate flexible judgements. Strauss agrees that it is sometimes necessary to disregard universal rules for the sake of the common good. These exceptions are as just as the rules.³⁰⁸ Strauss is well aware that to distinguish between the normal and extreme situation is not easy for statesmen, but there are right and wrong ways to approach it. The Machiavellian statesman takes his bearings from the extreme situation and reduces justice to necessity, blurring the distinction between what is good for the political community and what is good for himself. The Aristotelian statesman defers to the normal situation and what is normally just. He only

³⁰⁴ See Jaffa (2012), 22-23. Jaffa grasps the changeability of prudence well, without losing sight of its orientation to morality. His oversight is that he does not consider the controversial status of exceptionless moral rules in the various traditions of examining prudence.

³⁰⁵ 'some things, perhaps, it is not possible to be compelled to do.' *EN* 1110a27.

³⁰⁶ *NRH*, 160.

³⁰⁷ *NRH*, 161.

³⁰⁸ *NRH*, 160.

reluctantly deviates from what is normally just, in order to save justice. The common good remains his standard.³⁰⁹ Whether his decision was genuinely prudent is subject to the verdict of the historian, who judges whether the extreme actions were just or unjust for the court of mankind.³¹⁰

Strauss's account sets up a quarrel between philosophical natural right and theological natural law. Natural law assumes that one can gain perfect understanding of a universally valid and unchangeable law, applicable in all circumstances. Strauss counters that human reason can only realize this perfect understanding with divine assistance. Natural law relies on revelation. The consequences of adopting this understanding is that natural law, as perfect law, takes precedence over the best regime. Natural law applies irrespective of the circumstances that would make the best regime applicable.³¹¹ Consequently, Aquinas weakens the political character of natural right, separating it from the question of the best regime.³¹²

Natural law also distorts the ascent from politics to the natural human end. The pursuit of the best regime was hitherto in accordance with nature: the best regime was a necessary conduit for realizing the good life. With Thomas Aquinas, the character of the good moral life, realized in accordance with the natural law,

³⁰⁹ *NRH*, 162. This refutes a common charge directed against Strauss, that he promotes an amoral, 'Machiavellian,' politics (e.g. Devigne (1994), 42-47; Villa (2001), 289-90.) Strauss's Aristotle and Machiavelli agree there are no exceptionless moral rules. They disagree about by which things the exceptions take their bearings. For Strauss's Aristotle, it is justice; for Strauss's Machiavelli, it is necessity, which usurps justice and rules the moral universe. See Z&Z (2006), 183-84. *Pace* Villa (2001, 353), Strauss is not denigrating constitutional law and ordinary morality—he is showing why ordinary morality and sound constitutional jurisprudence produce an awareness of the exception.

³¹⁰ *NRH*, 161; *CG*.

³¹¹ *NRH*, 144.

³¹² *NRH*, 144-145.

does not change its content for any regime. It can be realized irrespective of the political community within which one lives. If natural right cannot be justified through political experience, it needs a new ground of justification beyond politics. Strauss thinks that the Thomist account of natural law attempts this justification through an argument about the insufficiency of a human natural end, which intimates a divine end. This view not only obscures the natural human end of philosophy, it also co-opts philosophy to the project of revealed theology.³¹³ The initial wave of modernity reacts against this in order to separate the two again.³¹⁴

VI. From Aristotelian Political Science to Platonic Political Philosophy

What does Strauss's reading of Aristotle provide for Strauss's political philosophy? First, it elaborates Strauss's stance toward metaphysics, cosmology, and ultimately theology. Strauss's analysis of the 'Socratic turn' emphasizes that his philosophy is not an outright rejection of cosmology, but an ontological account of nature and the human soul that is distinct from the pre-Socratic account. When philosophy adopts the account of noetic heterogeneity, it does not dissociate itself from human things or political things; rather, it sees them in their distinctiveness, raising the dignity of political things in order to study them in their distinctiveness. Hence, for philosophy, there is a need to turn from Socrates to Aristotle, and pursue political science. By taking political things seriously, one discloses the importance of three themes: moral virtue, the city, and the best regime. These three themes point back to the question of how politics relates to nature, raising the question of natural right as posed by Aristotle. Strauss uses Aristotle to contrast the philosophic

³¹³ *CM*, 44.

³¹⁴ *NRH*, 164.

understanding of natural right with the theological understanding of natural law. He thereby preserves an account of natural right accessible to human reason, unassisted by the divine. The demarcation between these two versions of natural right rests on a disagreement over interpreting Aristotle. Moreover, it raises the theologico-political problem, Strauss's lifelong preoccupation.

Second, it elaborates how Strauss firmly establishes the real dignity of politics and morality against relativism and positivism. In defending exceptions from laws, does Strauss only exoterically man the ramparts of the West against relativism, while esoterically opening the gates of the West to relativism? No. Strauss's defence of the case of the exception is based on justice. Only by taking justice seriously can one see the instances where an exception to the rule justly arises. Strauss objects to the position that natural right is reducible to exceptionless moral precepts; he is not utterly rejecting natural right. Strauss's Aristotle emphasizes that natural right and moral virtue are intelligible and meaningful of their own accord, and are part of the explanation for legitimately upholding heterogeneity between political and non-political things. To uphold that heterogeneity, politics and morality cannot be null or illusory. Strauss does not ape Nietzsche.³¹⁵ The esotericism Strauss deploys is his reticent defence of the Averroist interpretation of Aristotle over the Thomist interpretation. If the Averroist tradition is ambiguous on specific answers to specific moral questions, it should not be taken

³¹⁵ Velkley (2011), 74.

as a relativistic reflection, but as a zetetic reflection—befitting Strauss’s Socratic presentation of philosophy.³¹⁶

Third, by establishing the dignity of politics and morality in their own terms, Strauss provides the *de iure* independence of political science. Prudence or practical reasoning does not depend on theoretical reasoning for its orientation and meaningfulness. Practical reasoning is not given sanction by theoretical reasoning. Practical reasoning preserves its own object, right action in right circumstances; and theoretical reasoning preserves its own object, knowledge of the whole. Neither are fused together. Strauss thereby keeps theory wholly distinct from practice. He refuses to make either politics derivative from philosophy, or philosophy derivative from politics.

This is part of Strauss’s response to those most articulate spokesmen of historicism, Martin Heidegger and Alexandre Kojève. To some extent, Strauss agrees with Heidegger and shares his starting point. Like Heidegger, Strauss is critical of approaches to understanding the world that were modelled on the natural sciences; Strauss’s concern is with the model of the natural sciences that takes over political science. Like Heidegger, Strauss draws inspiration from Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological approach and slogan, ‘to the things themselves,’ to look for pre-philosophic foundations. Like Heidegger, Strauss’s phenomenology looks to the immediate objects of our interest and engagement and recovers a pre-philosophic understanding of these objects. For Heidegger, this phenomenology looks to things ready-to-hand or *pragmata*; for Strauss, it focuses on the concepts and concerns of

³¹⁶ Tanguay (2007), 125.

ordinary, everyday politics. Only by taking one's bearings from these prephilosophic concepts and concerns can political things be understood. At the level of political things, Strauss establishes a fundamental continuity between pre-philosophic understanding and genuine philosophy; for his part, Heidegger establishes a fundamental continuity between pre-philosophic understanding and authentic concern for Being.

What about Heidegger's view of philosophy as 'practical' and 'patriotic?' By regarding political things so seriously, and thereby the concepts and concerns of practical reasoning, Strauss seems to invite the Heideggerian claim that thinking is 'practical,' requiring resolute engagement with action. Strauss's appropriation of Aristotle certainly rejects a kind of detachment from politics. For Aristotle's political science is necessarily evaluative of political things: it is the essence of political things 'not to be neutral' but to be judged in terms of their goodness or badness.³¹⁷ Moreover, Strauss's political science emphasizes that the political association, in the form of a small closed community, is the most comprehensive association. It is 'patriotic' in the sense of prioritizing this kind of association for human existence, for understanding human things.³¹⁸ Strauss's philosophy defends the dignity of politics, but his defence almost proves too much. If philosophy shares so much ground with politics, then it might suggest that practical life is continuous with philosophy—just as Heidegger did. Philosophy could then direct politics, and

³¹⁷ *WIPP*, 12; O'Connor (2002), 167.

³¹⁸ *WIPP*, 13; O'Connor (2002), 170. The parallel is not exact, because Strauss emphasizes the small, closed community of the city. But he never says that modernity has no genuine political associations. By referring to modern states, Strauss implies that the modern political order of the state has at least partially fulfilled the demands required for a genuine political association.

politics could then direct philosophy, inviting political irresponsibility analogous to Heidegger's.

Strauss's reply is to develop philosophy and politics as separate spheres. This is why he emphasizes that the character of moral virtue is absolute, and the sphere of practical reasoning, prudence, is closed. The political life needs no additional justification. It is practical and patriotic, but based upon an understanding of moral virtue that prioritizes moderation. Strauss emphasizes that Aristotle only addresses his political science to the gentlemen, those who already live virtuously. These gentlemen need no additional justification for what they do. Through their life, they already exemplify the correct understanding of natural right and the virtues. By closing the sphere of prudence off, Strauss's Aristotle gives the sophists and morally dubious intellectuals no theoretical justification for trying to supply an additional understanding of virtue to the gentlemen, thereby corrupting and upsetting their moral decency. Their understanding of virtue is already complete. Strauss's Aristotle gives them reasons to preserve their moderation in the face of the impassioned speech of intellectuals.

Philosophy, for its part, sees politics as a decidedly inferior sphere, full of individuals who may act rightly, but lack self-awareness on the reasons for acting rightly. Strauss emphasizes this when he writes that from the point of view of the philosophic life, 'the man who is merely just or moral without being a philosopher appears as a mutilated being.'³¹⁹ By starkly describing the political life not as an imperfect life on a gradual ascent to philosophy but as a *mutilated* life, Strauss

³¹⁹ *NRH*, 151.

removes any starting point for practice to be continuous with philosophy.³²⁰ *Pace* Heidegger's Rectoral Address, the philosopher does not need to look to politics for guidance or leadership; politics cannot guide him in his own activity.³²¹ The consequences would be dire for philosophy. When Strauss discusses with Kojève the consequences of philosophy marching to the drum of politics, he describes what happens if the political ideal is taken as essentially true. Philosophic activity, even taken only in the sense of an activity of questioning, must submit to this political ideal. The political leader will have to suppress every activity which might doubt the essential soundness of the political ideal, whether it be the universal and homogenous state or National Socialism. He must therefore suppress philosophy as an attempt to corrupt the young. If philosophy complies, it abandons its activity of questioning, and ceases to be philosophy. If it does not comply, it faces annihilation. When tyranny claims to represent an essentially true political ideal, forcing a stance from philosophy, it destroys philosophy. This is the danger politics represents to philosophy. While Strauss's remarks address both Heidegger and Kojève, in at least one sense it is Kojève's formulation which is the more pernicious. One can at least flee National Socialist Germany to another country. But from the tyrant of the universal and homogenous state, there is no state to flee unto. 'There is no escape...the coming of the universal and homogenous state will be the end of philosophy on earth.'³²²

³²⁰ O'Connor (2002), 186-87.

³²¹ O'Connor (2002), 187.

³²² *OT*, 211.

Strauss's response to the fusion of philosophy and politics is primarily prudential. He raises awareness of the problem of tyranny, and shows how philosophy can corrupt politics and how politics can corrupt philosophy. But in his reply to Kojève, he does not address the ontological issue of the immutability or mutability of Truth or Being.³²³ This is a weakness: after all, Kojève argues that only by presuming the immutability of Being could Strauss's account of philosophy make sense. Kojève simply takes the opposite presupposition and arrives at his conclusion. Strauss can use prudential reasons to give Kojève pause, but Kojève identifies the deeper, ontological issue. Strauss is mindful of this difficulty. He writes:

For we both apparently turned away from Being to Tyranny because we have seen that those who lacked the courage to face the issue of Tyranny, who therefore *et humiliter serviebant et superbe dominabantur*, were forced to evade the issue of Being as well, precisely because they did nothing but talk of Being.³²⁴

The last lines, a reference to Heidegger, raise the issue of Being directly, and moreover suggest that Heidegger's phenomenology went awry. Strauss must consider Being, but Being can only be understood through an accurate phenomenology. This is why Strauss turns fully to the problem of Socrates, and undertakes a deeper examination of Socrates in Xenophon's writings.³²⁵ Ultimately, Strauss's examination of the 'Socratic turn' towards human or political things entails a view of Being, an ontology that discloses the cosmos.³²⁶

³²³ O'Connor (2002), 177.

³²⁴ *OT*, 212.

³²⁵ *OT*, 105.

³²⁶ Velkley (2011), 71-72.

Strauss places the roots of all thought and all science in the same pre-philosophic, natural awareness. In Strauss's account of the origins of philosophy, Socrates provides the first abstraction from natural awareness. He advances the account of noetic heterogeneity and the account of the human soul that elevate the dignity of political things. This is why he founds political philosophy. To develop that dignity more fully, and oppose the historicist account of political reasoning, Aristotle abstracts from Socrates's account, making an abstraction from an abstraction.³²⁷ Aristotle's abstraction founds political science, establishes the moderate teaching of the best regime, and reinforces the distinction between theory and practice. Moreover, by elaborating on the political things to which the Socratic turn draws attention, Aristotle also plays a role in the right articulation of the cosmos.

However, 'to articulate the problem of cosmology means to answer the question of what philosophy is, what a philosopher is.'³²⁸ How does Aristotle's abstraction relate back to the idea of philosophy? How does Aristotle's political science relate to philosophy? The answer lies in Aristotle's manner of communicating to his audience. At first sight, Aristotle's political science reinforces the defences gentlemen have against political philosophers. Aristotle indulges their suspicion of political philosophers, and shows why they do not need political philosophy to justify their political way of life. This is his exoteric teaching. Yet, esoterically, Aristotle shows that the political way of life is not completely closed off. By encouraging the gentlemen to perfect their judgement on natural right and moral

³²⁷ Smith (1994), 194.

³²⁸ *WIPP*, 39.

virtue, by giving great precedence and esteem to the statesmen who exemplify prudence most excellently, Aristotle encourages all gentlemen to perfect their practical reasoning. They then seek the wisdom they lack. This lack can only be met by true wisdom, not a counterfeit wisdom. As mentioned above, Aristotle's political science pursues an education in true happiness. 'Man transcends the city only by pursuing happiness, not by pursuing happiness however understood.'³²⁹ In that manner, natural right and moral virtue show 'that the city points beyond itself but it does not reveal clearly that toward which it points, namely, the life devoted to philosophy.'³³⁰ Strauss writes:

When the philosopher Aristotle addresses his political science to more or less perfect gentlemen, he shows them as far as possible that the way of life of the perfect gentleman points toward the philosophic way of life; he removes a screen... The moral-political sphere is then not unqualifiedly closed to theoretical science.³³¹

Although politics is not continuous to philosophy, and philosophy is not continuous to politics, politics is analogously related to philosophy. If it is practiced, it allows the gentleman politician to catch a glimpse of a better self; it changes the self-image of the gentleman.³³² In seeking wisdom that they lack, the gentlemen can become more self-aware, and know that they know nothing. In that self-awareness, they begin to philosophize. This is of course very rare, because the gentlemen who are disposed to actualize that philosophic self-awareness are rare.

³²⁹ *CM*, 49.

³³⁰ *CM*, 27.

³³¹ *CM*, 28.

³³² Conversely, the philosopher does not see a better self in the political man. As this analogy only works in one direction, it does not fall back into Heidegger and Kojève's continuity between philosophy and politics. See O'Connor (2002), 188-90.

By structuring his political science in this way, as an encouragement to philosophize, Aristotle shows that he answers the question of the best life by the philosophic life. His political science proceeds on the assumption that the philosophic life is the best life. Now, Aristotle elevates the dignity of political life. Recognizing the dignity of the city is a necessary precondition for the defence of the philosophic life. But it does not constitute the defence as such. In fact, it shows that the defence of the philosophic life can neither be demonstrated by politics, nor explained by politics. Aristotle, in the last analysis, holds to the superiority of the philosophic life over the political life. Strauss agrees. Inasmuch as modernity conflates the two, so that it really asserts the primacy of practical reasoning over theoretical reasoning, of politics over philosophy, Strauss proposes an Aristotelian alternative. The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns is a quarrel over which has primacy: theoretical reasoning, or practical reasoning. By emphasizing the quarrel in these terms, Strauss is in this sense Aristotelian.³³³

Nevertheless, as Strauss presents him, Aristotle does not provide a rational justification for the primacy of theoretical reasoning. Providing rational justification for philosophy as the best way of life is critical to Strauss's project. This is because the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns also bears on the quarrel between Athens and Jerusalem, over the very question of whether reason or revelation provides the best way of life. Strauss cannot be a complete Aristotelian. One can accept Aristotle's account of the superiority of the philosophic life over political life, but there is a danger of positivizing this for the tradition. Without a rational

³³³ *EN* 1176a30-1179a32. See Tanguay (2014), 49-50, 65-66.

justification of the content of the philosophic life, the philosophic life cannot justify itself in the face of alternatives. Strauss's insistence that the post-classical tradition synthesized the philosophic life with revelation, to the loss of philosophy, indicates his concern over how the classical tradition of philosophy developed. He is more sympathetic to the modern response to the classical tradition than is generally assumed.³³⁴

Moreover, modernity's historicism and relativism is a comprehensive rejection of the philosophic life. Whether it is in Kojève's or Heidegger's version, historicism denounces the essence of the philosophic life. Relativism, in its various modern versions, rejects natural right. Its challenge can only be met with a fundamental rational justification of natural right and the philosophic life, which Aristotle himself does not provide. Fortunately for Strauss, classical political philosophy provides this fundamental justification in its response to radical scepticism concerning the best way of life.

Strauss's account of the importance of the life lived within the moral-political sphere, the political life, relies on an audience which is already pre-disposed to treat the moral-political sphere seriously, being morally virtuous men. It develops an account of justice or natural right which is independent of philosophical precepts yet serious, but it is vulnerable to the radical sceptics of justice or natural right. Aristotle's political science cannot reply to these radical sceptics. After all, there are those who, like Glaucon or Adeimantus, do not take goodness for granted. Risking the appearance of being ungentlemanly, they would dare question the very

³³⁴ Nadon (2013), 81.

goodness of moral virtue and natural right.³³⁵ If natural right cannot be deduced from philosophical precepts, and politics is so changeable that a deduction of natural right from politics is impossible, is natural right deducible from anything?³³⁶

Strauss's answer is that natural right has a trans-political root. This is discovered not in revelation, but in the hierarchy of ends found within the human soul.³³⁷ Strauss looks to the natural human end that confirms the best life. But this is only divulged through the examined life, the philosophic life. The reply to the radical sceptic is to take them from the end of Book I of Plato's *Republic*, into and beyond Book II. Ultimately, Strauss turns to Plato. For Plato always keeps in the mind the question, 'what is the right way of life? Against all its challengers presented in his dialogues, Plato's answer is the philosophic life.³³⁸ To provide the justification of the philosophic life, and defend it against contemporary challenges, requires the reading of Plato. It is Plato, not Aristotle, who provides the complete defence of philosophy. Strauss is Platonic because he wants to follow Plato in that defence. The complete study of Leo Strauss is therefore the study of *Platonic* political philosophy.³³⁹

³³⁵ *CM*, 26. Strauss invites the reader to consider the end of *Republic* I in his footnote.

³³⁶ *NRH*, 145.

³³⁷ Tanguay (2007), 132, 228.

³³⁸ *NRH*, 156.

³³⁹ For a more detailed treatment of why Strauss is not an Aristotelian, see Z&Z (2014a), 144-166, esp. 166.

Conclusion

What then, does Strauss mean by *political philosophy*? A complete answer is impossible here, but there are four ways Strauss defines the term.³⁴⁰ The first, most provisional definition is that political philosophy examines the actions of man; as man is a political animal, the actions at issue for understanding him are political actions. One observes that all political actions assume an opinion about the good life and the good society. Upon reflection, this opinion proves questionable. Yet the serious political animal does not want to pursue actions that only seem to be good. He needs to solve the problem of what is good. He pursues, therefore, the question of the good society and the good human life. In this sense, political philosophy arises directly out of political life. Its object of study is political things. Beginning from 'political thought,' the study of laws, codes, stories and public speeches found in politics, political philosophy moves beyond the conventional surface of politics to discover what is *true*. Political philosophy is defined in terms of the problem it attempts to solve: what is the good society?³⁴¹ It is the pursuit of what is truly good for the individual and society, what constitutes true human perfection.³⁴² In search of an answer, political philosophy takes its cue from Aristotle's political science, and focuses on moral virtue, the city, and the best regime. By focusing on these things, the political philosopher intersects with the political scientist, who is concerned with the here and now, the given political situation within which he exists, and

³⁴⁰ I am indebted to Z&Z (2014b).

³⁴¹ Behnegar (2013), 22-23.

³⁴² *WIPP*, 12.

realizing the good life and the good political order or regime in the here and now.³⁴³

They engage in a fundamentally evaluative and practical activity.

In the second definition, political philosophy is the attempt to replace opinions about the nature of political things with the knowledge of the nature of political things. Defined in this way, political philosophy is a branch of philosophy, which is an attempt to replace the opinions about the nature of the whole with knowledge of the nature of the whole. When the political philosopher in the first sense becomes less concerned with the here and now and becomes more focused on political life or human life as such, he goes to the root of politics and becomes much more comprehensive. Gaining greater understanding of political things, he realizes that he cannot understand the good society without understanding the truly good human life, as well as the world.³⁴⁴ He develops his view on the nature of the whole and moves into a more political *philosophy*, implicating the knowledge of God, the world, and the human being.³⁴⁵ However much Strauss writes on political philosophy, one must never lose sight of Strauss's insistence: political philosophy is but a branch of philosophy. In terms of the object of study, political philosophy culminates in philosophy.³⁴⁶ This is what Aristotle indicates when he 'removes a screen' between politics and philosophy.

The comprehensive character of this pursuit challenges the opinions of those in politics. It sets up a way of life that competes with the political life. Now philosophy has to justify itself before the tribunal of the city. If not, it risks

³⁴³ *WIPP*, 14.

³⁴⁴ *WIPP*, 11.

³⁴⁵ *WIPP*, 11, 16.

³⁴⁶ Tarcov (2013), 75-76.

prosecution. So arises the third definition of political philosophy: *political* philosophy. The issue here is the preservation of philosophy. It is the face that philosophy presents to the city, in order to preserve itself against persecution from the city. Its primary task is to present itself in such a way as not to arouse the suspicion of political men. Yet it is simultaneously trying to invite the most receptive of these political men to live philosophically. Aristotle's political science delicately balances these two tasks, not forgetting the unavoidable tension between philosophy and politics.

It is important to see that this third definition of political philosophy, which Strauss sees as arising from the seriousness of the philosophic life itself, does not discount the first and second definitions. One might think that Strauss discounts Aristotle's political science as having little use for the philosophic life, except through its esoteric invitation to philosophize. The true philosopher would cease to have regard for political things, except for ensuring self-preservation. Political philosophy would only be about *political* philosophy.³⁴⁷ This is incorrect, discounting Strauss's other definitions. Strauss is clear that these other definitions have a role to play in fully understanding political philosophy. He writes that 'political philosophy is the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order.'³⁴⁸ The insights into the moral-political sphere that political science provides remain, notably concerning the right or good political order, the best regime. Both the political scientist and the political

³⁴⁷ C.f. Rosen (2003), 109, 111.

³⁴⁸ *WIPP*, 12.

philosopher regard them as important, although they receive greater nuance in light of the greater understanding of the whole.

Strauss's Aristotle illustrates this point in how he handles the teaching of the best regime from the point of view of the philosopher. Now from the point of view of the citizen, political science must stop tyranny. That means explicitly endorsing liberal, constitutional democracy as the practically best regime. But from the point of view of the philosopher, the philosopher's unequivocal concern is for a regime sympathetic to philosophy.

From that perspective, the philosopher will express certain reservations about democracy. This is how Strauss interprets Aristotle's own reservations about democracy. Strauss takes Aristotle's preference for monarchy over democracy as an indication of his decisive preference for a regime sympathetic to philosophy. A monarch can, rarely, be a gentleman sympathetic to philosophy.³⁴⁹ By contrast, it is almost impossible that the people become sympathetic to philosophy. For Aristotle, people are not receptive to philosophy, but are by nature opposed to philosophy.³⁵⁰ Here Strauss emphasizes the difference between Aristotle and the moderns. Aristotle sees the people as opposed by nature to philosophy. Taking the point of view of philosophy, Aristotle ranks philosophy as more important than democracy. If, out of the natural tension between the *demos* and philosophy one must choose either democracy or philosophy, one must choose philosophy.

Moderns presuppose a fundamental harmony between the people and philosophy. 'On the basis of a break with Aristotle,' moderns believe in the

³⁴⁹ *CM*, 37. Strauss thinks of *Politics* 1284b25-34.

³⁵⁰ *CM*, 37.

possibility of a simply rational society.³⁵¹ They think one can integrate philosophy into the city. The means to do so are for philosophy to relieve man's estate, taken up as the political project of Enlightenment. Moderns think that this dilemma between philosophy and democracy is resolved in history: history overcomes nature, so one can choose both democracy and philosophy. The ancient distinction between nature and convention is replaced by the distinction between nature and history. History opposes and aims to overcome nature.³⁵²

So the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns shows itself again, over what relation philosophy has to politics. Aristotle reminds his reader of the limits of the political democratic regime. As Aristotle argues that 'man transcends the city, Aristotle agrees with the liberalism of the modern age.'³⁵³ For the underlying assumption of modern liberal democracy, as in classical political philosophy, is that individual perfection transcends politics. Aristotle differs from liberalism by 'limiting this transcendence only to the highest in man'—that is, philosophy.³⁵⁴ With these thoughts, Strauss compares modern political philosophy and classical political philosophy. The philosopher is better aware of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.

Nevertheless, in practical terms, this does not mean the philosopher despises democracy. Aristotle's philosophical reservations about democracy, for the sake of preserving philosophical perfection, strengthen the argument someone pursuing the philosophic life in the modern world can make for liberal democracy. At the point

³⁵¹ *CM*, 37.

³⁵² *CM*, 38.

³⁵³ *CM*, 49.

³⁵⁴ *CM*, 49.

where the individual passes out of politics and into pursuing his own perfection, liberal democracy is supposed to fix the boundaries of government. Liberal democracy enables individual perfection of any sort. That includes philosophy. Liberal democracy can deride philosophy, but it cannot destroy it without overstepping the boundaries of government, ceasing to be a liberal democracy, and drifting towards totalitarianism. Recall that Strauss's rejection of Kojève's universal and homogenous state rests on how it 'ends philosophy on earth.'³⁵⁵ Strauss the philosopher supports liberal democracy, not only because it preserves philosophy on earth, but also because it—like classical political philosophy—emphasizes how individual perfection transcends politics.³⁵⁶

Whatever its flaws, then, liberal democracy is the regime most suited to philosophy. Strauss also observes that Socrates not only grew up in democratic Athens, but also practiced philosophy there for seventy years before he was executed. This significant success for philosophy, practicing uninterrupted for seventy years, could not have been replicated elsewhere.³⁵⁷ Those who want philosophy to exist, then, should defend liberal democracy.

There are, then, two applications of Aristotle's best regime to modernity. The first, from the points of view of the good citizen taught by political science, is to foster the rule of law, to support constitutionalism. This entails defending liberal democracy politically. The second application is to foster philosophy. From the point of view of the philosophic life, philosophy must be renewed from *within* the order

³⁵⁵ *OT*, 211.

³⁵⁶ *RCPR*, 161; Velkley (2011), 137.

³⁵⁷ *WIPP*, 36.

that liberal democracy offers. This project will have to fight against liberalism's vulnerabilities, which include encouraging indifference to the features and conditions of political, civic life, as well as softening the people's natural hostilities, by ensuring a presentation of philosophy favourable to liberal democracy. This manner of renewing philosophy within liberal democracy constitutes Strauss's full understanding of this third definition, *political* philosophy.³⁵⁸

Concomitantly, Strauss has two arguments in favour of liberal democracy. One, from the point of view of political science, explicitly endorses liberal democracy as the best protection against tyranny. The second, from the point of view of philosophy, prudently endorses liberal democracy as the regime in which philosophy has the best chance of survival. Moreover, liberal democracy reminds one of the limits of political life, and how individual perfection must transcend politics. It reminds one that the account of the whole is only possible through an account of the tensions of political life. This observation on the question of the best regime shows the relevance of morality and politics. As the question of the best regime is also an expression of natural right, it shows that the content of natural right is important from both the point of view of politics and the point of view of philosophy; there is no devaluation of morality and politics.³⁵⁹ Its object is the same, even if the mode of justification is different.

Finally, there is a fourth definition of political philosophy. This is political philosophy as 'first philosophy.' It is 'first' in the order of learning, because it is a necessary step to ascend to the knowledge of nature. It is 'first' in the order of being,

³⁵⁸ See Velkley (2011), 138.

³⁵⁹ C.f. Tanguay (2007), 132-33.

because it discloses the schema required for a genuine knowledge of nature or being. It seeks a new point of departure for philosophy. Contrary to other possible approaches to philosophy, whether pre-Socratic, Cartesian, Kantian, Husserlian, or Heideggerian, philosophy begins with a study of the human or political things. The study of politics discloses the true nature of the whole. Access to the whole is through the problems discovered in political life. Reflection on the political things in turn discloses the importance of reflection on the soul. Political philosophy prepares the proper understanding of the nature of the whole and the nature of the soul.

Through its four definitions, political philosophy allows the philosopher to better understand the tension within his own soul, which in turn tugs him between theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning, between philosophy and politics. Grasping this tension, political philosophy shows the importance of the human things, but also that they are not the only important things. It presents an account of the human being attracted by the love of wisdom, but it is the love of wisdom whose self-consciousness about politics teaches it the virtue of moderation. Through moderation, the love of wisdom neither dissociates entirely from political things, nor culminates in political things.³⁶⁰ Practiced as a search for the best life, love of wisdom prepares the rational justification of the philosophic life in the face of perennial conflicts. Like much of his work, Strauss's study of Aristotle serves to clarify and draw attention to the tension between philosophy and politics, as well as the tension between Athens and Jerusalem: the two facets of the theologico-political problem. To grasp this and other problems related to the whole, Strauss shuns

³⁶⁰ *LAM*, 24; Marshall (2007), 326-27.

developing or recovering an Aristotelian system, but instead offers philosophy. For Strauss, philosophy is 'meant—and that is the decisive point—not as a series of propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as a way of life, a life animated by a peculiar passion, the philosophic desire, or *eros*.'³⁶¹

³⁶¹ *RCPR*, 259.

III.

Alasdair MacIntyre's Reconstruction of a Revolutionary Aristotelian Tradition

MacIntyre's Critique of Modernity

For the entirety of his intellectual life, Alasdair MacIntyre has criticized the failures and deceptions of liberalism, understood as modern liberal individualism.¹ In his mature intellectual life, he turns to Aristotle because he finds that Aristotle provides the best theory to explain the failures of liberalism and to offer an alternative to liberalism. Yet to treat MacIntyre's Aristotelianism properly, it is necessary to grasp the unique epistemology his philosophical argument presupposes, and how he situates his own turn to Aristotle within that epistemology.²

I. Rationality and the Concept of a Tradition

Any inhabitant of the contemporary world can note that to any given philosophical question, there are a range of alternative and incompatible answers.³ Rational enquiry seeks the correct answer. This raises a fundamental philosophical question pertaining to the requirements of rationality: what are good reasons for a

¹ MacIntyre (1994b), 258; MacIntyre (2011b), 329; Lutz (2012), 30-32.

² See MacIntyre (1994b), 265. *CNS*, published in 1977, provides the outline of MacIntyre's epistemology presupposed in *AV*. *WJWR* works it out in more detail.

³ *AV*, 6-11; *WJWR*, 1-3.

human agent engaged in rational enquiry to judge one answer to be correct over the other answers? In the contemporary world, the dominant approach to assessing the requirements of rationality is to pursue a neutral and impartial ideal of rationality. To achieve this ideal requires divesting oneself of any allegiance to a particular theory, or the social relationships through which we are accustomed to understand our responsibilities and interests.⁴ Yet this ideal of rationality suffers from serious internal contradictions. First, it is only neutral in appearance, presuming the partisan position of liberal individualism.⁵ Second, it relies on formulating self-evident principles akin to the laws of logic, but the proponents of this position cannot agree on what these supposedly 'self-evident' principles are.⁶ For that reason, this ideal of rationality provides no solution to the problem of alternative and incompatible answers. The agent engaged in rational enquiry will thus begin to doubt whether these philosophical questions can ever be resolved and whether there are *any* good reasons for judging one answer to be correct over another.⁷

To counter this epistemology, MacIntyre argues that rationality is embodied in a tradition of rational enquiry. There is no tradition-independent answer to a philosophical question. Each tradition offers its own answers, and its own conception of rationality. An agent judges the answers that other traditions of rational enquiry offer, and their conceptions of rationality, by the standards of his own tradition of rational enquiry. An agent judges the answers his own tradition of rational enquiry offers by its capacity to make the world intelligible. The agent

⁴ *WJWR*, 3.

⁵ *WJWR*, 4.

⁶ *WJWR*, 4, 6.

⁷ *AV*, 11.

judges his tradition to succeed or fail because it is better or worse at making the world intelligible than other traditions.

MacIntyre relies on the concept of a narrative to make this argument. He holds that the basic human requirement is to make sense of the world in which we live: 'man is essentially a story-telling animal.'⁸ Narrative is this human capacity to tell stories about the world, in order to understand the world. MacIntyre links this activity of understanding to the concept of intelligibility; human agents adopt narratives that are true to their own experience.⁹ Narrative is the means to intelligibility and thereby to truth.¹⁰ The application of narratives in human life extends from fairy tales and stories to include intentions, actions, autobiography, history, doctrine, myth, and scientific theory.¹¹

Why might an agent change his narrative? MacIntyre argues that it is on account of experiencing an epistemological crisis: when something that seems to be the case to an agent is not in fact the case. MacIntyre contends that ordinary agents easily recognize the experience of an epistemological crisis: when their schemata for interpreting life, hitherto stable, lead them into error or deception. For example, the child learns that the fairy tale about the giant who holds up the world is not true. This discovery disrupts the intelligibility of their narrative. At this point, the narrative fails, and the child needs to adopt a new one.¹² To resolve the

⁸ *AV*, 216. To critique the telling of stories as an inauthentic human practice fails to provide an account of what human life would look like without narratives. *AV*, 214-15; *ECM*, 236-37.

⁹ *CNS*, 4. See Lutz (2004), 45.

¹⁰ *CNS*, 7-8; *AV*, 207-10.

¹¹ *CNS*, 7-8; *ECM*, 237; Lutz (2012), 5. MacIntyre addresses this as well in his early works; see D'Andrea (2006), 94-95. Autobiography is a crucial component for the agent's self-understanding and evaluation of his own positions and life. See also *ECM*, 238-42.

¹² *CNS*, 4.

epistemological crisis, the new narrative must allow the agent to recognize both how he could have intelligibly held his original beliefs; and second, how he could have been so drastically misled by them.¹³ Thus it is possible to improve a narrative; some narratives are better for assessing the truth or falsity of the world.

A tradition of rational enquiry succeeds in justifying itself in the same way as a narrative, by its capacity to make the world intelligible.¹⁴ A tradition of rational enquiry is a specific kind of narrative, which develops certain epistemological ideals or standards of rational justification: what constitutes ‘appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, and conclusive proof’ for resolving a problem.¹⁵ These standards develop in response to challenges and epistemological crises, so that the concept of rational justification is essentially historical. ‘To justify is to narrate how the argument has gone so far.’¹⁶ The salient comparison for understanding how rational justification takes place comes from ‘research programmes’ in the philosophy of science. A research programme consists of a set of core theories surrounded by auxiliary theories, which explain and defend the core. The mark of a good research programme is not merely its capacity to defend itself from challenges. It also must be able to extend itself, predicting otherwise unexpected events.¹⁷ It is the research programme itself that supplies the standard. A research programme is judged to be better than its alternative research programmes by the success or failure of the standards of rational justification it provides. These are not fixed but are in a single

¹³ *CNS*, 5.

¹⁴ Lutz (2004), 43.

¹⁵ *CNS*, 11-12.

¹⁶ *WJWR*, 8.

¹⁷ Lutz (2004), 48.

strand of continuous improvement vis-à-vis failed alternatives.¹⁸ Yet rational justification takes places in the terms offered by the research programme. What is true for scientific enquiry applies *a fortiori* to all philosophic and ethical enquiry. Rational justification takes place in the terms offered by particular traditions.¹⁹

As rational justification is essentially historical, it cannot be judged according to neutral and timeless conceptions of truth. One need not go in search of a fixed series of rationally justifiable rules that link observations to generalizations ‘once and for all.’²⁰ This would mistake how rational justification takes place. Instead, the concepts of rational justification are understood in their historical context. Theoretical progress, justifying the rational superiority of one account over another, is understood by the distinctive historical encounter the new theory has with its predecessors. The new theory succeeds when at a particular historical moment it solves the problems in areas where the predecessors cannot.²¹ Hence the study of historical examples is decisive for establishing the rational superiority of one theory over another.²² History helps expose philosophical truth, yet also limits what philosophical knowledge is available. As time moves on, new problems arise that require new epistemological justifications.

MacIntyre’s version of historicism, in which he places the standards of rationality within historically developed traditions of rational enquiry, is vulnerable

¹⁸ *CNS*, 18-19.

¹⁹ *WJWR*, 8. Lutz (2004), 57. For MacIntyre there are two misunderstandings of tradition, attributed to Edmund Burke: first, as stable sources of meaning contrasted to conflict; and second, as something contrasted to rationality. See *AV*, 221-22; D’Andrea (2006), 65-66; Knight (2007), 132-33.

²⁰ *CNS*, 19, 23; Lutz (2004), 57.

²¹ *AV*, 265-68; *WJWR*, 9.

²² Including MacIntyre’s own theory of rationality. See *WJWR*, 10; Lutz (2004), 58.

to various charges of relativism.²³ In the most important sense MacIntyre is not a relativist, because he grants that there are timeless truths. The goal of any coherent tradition of enquiry is to seek timeless truth about the world, and each new theory tries to formulate a better approximation of that truth than its predecessor. Yet theories, even scientific theories, are never perfectly true but only the best so far, so there is a kind of relativism that is part of the human condition.²⁴ They always leave room for further refinement.²⁵

For MacIntyre's theory of rationality, it is impossible for human agents to adopt a neutral standpoint that is wholly divested from their social relationships. MacIntyre's crucial maxim is that a philosophy, including moral philosophy, 'characteristically presupposes a sociology.'²⁶ A human agent always deploys the philosophical resources found and used in society in order to develop a better understanding of the world. There is a tight relationship between the way of thinking in a society and its way of life: each embodies the other. A tradition of enquiry is constitutive of the way of life of a society, and helps its agents achieve their goals. Yet the tradition of enquiry is also constituted by the society, as social

²³ Haldane (1994). MacIntyre distinguishes between relativism, where one holds that rational debate between conflicting traditions is irresolvable, and perspectivism, where one questions the significance of any truth-claim. See *WJWR*, 352. He relates the charge of perspectivism to moral relativism, the claim that there is no objective truth in moral practice. For more detailed accounts of how MacIntyre responds to these charges, see Lutz (2004), 66-111; D'Andrea (2006), 403-9; Lutz (2012), 176-79.

²⁴ Lutz (2004), 43, 47. As MacIntyre thinks philosophy's object of enquiry is the world external to a tradition, he is incipiently committed to philosophical realism. Following *AV* and *WJWR*, MacIntyre develops this position into Thomist metaphysical realism. For a detailed discussion of the compatibility between his tradition-constituted rationality and Thomist metaphysical realism, see Lutz (2004), 113-60; D'Andrea (2006), 410-14.

²⁵ *CNS*, 5; *AV*, 270.

²⁶ *AV*, 23.

development deepens the tradition of enquiry's understanding of those goals.²⁷ The philosophical development of an agent is tradition-constituted, passing through four stages. First, an agent inherits a culture, which includes the tradition of rational enquiry into which they are born. Second, one grows from this cultural inheritance, which provides the categories to organize knowledge and experience. Third, new experiences or rival concepts of rationality challenge this culture in ways the agent cannot explain, provoking an epistemological crisis. Fourth, the agent resolves this crisis by the improvement of the resources of their tradition of rational enquiry, or abandoning that tradition for a rival tradition of rational enquiry that provides a better resolution.²⁸

MacIntyre argues that his concept of a tradition provides the best way of attending to the problem of alternative and incompatible answers. It suggests these radical disagreements arise from disagreements in the narratives of human life, which traditions have provided. The societies formed by these traditions are not locked into permanent disagreement. By understanding the nature of these disagreements as disagreements between traditions, solutions are possible.²⁹ Traditions must show themselves to be adequate in the face of alternative traditions. As a philosophy 'characteristically presupposes a sociology,' an investigation into the adequacy of a given tradition of rational enquiry is also an investigation into the adequacy of how its concepts are embodied in society. To

²⁷ *WJWR*, 349; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 104, 113.

²⁸ Lutz (2004), 10-11.

²⁹ *WJWR*, 9-10; Lutz (2004), 58.

achieve that justification requires bringing together the disciplines of sociology, history, and philosophy, although the spirit of the age prefers to keep them apart.³⁰

To characterize MacIntyre properly, it is important to see how his philosophical activity fits into his account of a tradition of enquiry. MacIntyre thinks of his philosophical activity in these terms. First, he readily admits that he, like every person engaged in a philosophical argument, is a 'partisan:' he argues from within a tradition of enquiry.³¹ The justification of his views, both critical and constructive, is comparative, taking place through an explicit engagement with rival positions.³²

Next, he narrates his own philosophical enquiry as a tradition-constituted philosophical development.³³ It can be characterized as passing through four stages.³⁴ In the first and second stages, MacIntyre's philosophical development starts with his Marxist inheritance. As a Marxist, he does not seek only to interpret the world, but also to change it. Nevertheless he finds that all the political options his colleagues on the left consider to change the world to fail. In the third stage, from the late 1950s to 1971, he enters into a deep epistemological crisis: prompted by his failure to find a justifiable critique of Stalinism, he steadily recognizes the theoretical reasons for Marxism's failure. From 1971 to 1977 he undergoes a 'painful self-reflection' to account for this failure. From 1977 onwards he enters the fourth stage, and since then has been 'engaged in a single project' to which *After*

³⁰ See *AV*, 23. C.f. *TRV*, 2, 8. Knight (2011), 24.

³¹ *TRV*, 117; *DRA*, 77; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 104.

³² *ECM*, 88.

³³ MacIntyre (1991), 267-269.

³⁴ See Lutz (2004), 10-32.

Virtue, Whose Justice Which Rationality? and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* are the central works.³⁵

Finally, MacIntyre's 'single project' from 1977 onwards should be understood as a research programme or tradition in its own right. The central works are foundational for defining the core theses of his research programme, to which he has remained committed.³⁶ Yet these works are not the whole story. In a tradition, concepts undergo further refinement and development in the face of challenges in order to satisfy the requirements for adequate explanation and justification. MacIntyre's self-narration of his tradition thus includes where he has refined and developed his views, as well as where they remain open-ended.³⁷

I characterize MacIntyre's work, therefore, as a unified enquiry, in which progress can be told as a continuous story.³⁸ The aim of his enquiry is 'to reconstruct the moral theory and communal practice of Aristotelianism in whatever version would provide the best theory so far, explaining the failure of Enlightenment as part of the aftermath of the breakdown of a tradition.'³⁹ From 1977 onwards, his project is this reconstruction of the Aristotelian tradition. It has a critical and constructive argument, where the critical argument explains the failure of Enlightenment and modern liberal individualism, and the constructive argument explains why the Aristotelian tradition is the best theory so far to correct the Enlightenment failure.

³⁵ MacIntyre (1991), 269.

³⁶ *AV*, ix.

³⁷ D'Andrea (2006), 397-402; Knight (2007), 224-25.

³⁸ Lutz (2004), 7.

³⁹ MacIntyre (1994b), 263.

I first address MacIntyre's critical argument. I can only provide a partial narrative of MacIntyre, so I focus primarily on the fourth stage of his philosophical development; I involve the first three stages to show how he develops the critical argument in the direction he does. MacIntyre develops his critical argument to explain the failure of liberalism, with his critique of liberalism developing a political, philosophical, social, and theological component. In each of these domains he considers—and rejects—rival solutions to liberalism. His inability to find an adequate solution deepens his epistemological crisis. To escape it he sees only two alternatives: Nietzsche or Aristotle?

II. The Political Critique of Liberalism

The young MacIntyre's principal cultural and philosophical inheritance, which provided the categories to organize his knowledge and experience, was Marxism.⁴⁰ From reading Marx, MacIntyre concluded that modern liberal individualism prevents the discovery of the genuine human essence. To understand the genuine human essence is for human agents to 'understand themselves in terms of their actual and potential social relationships and embody that understanding in their actions as well as in their theories.'⁴¹ In Marx's understanding of social practice, it is especially through skilled labour that human agents understand their own activity and their social relationships.⁴² The subsequent onset of capitalism is

⁴⁰ MacIntyre 'was and remains indebted' to Marx's and Marxism's 'critique of the economic, social, and cultural order of capitalism. *AV*, xvi. I summarize how MacIntyre narrates his own debt to Marxism (MacIntyre (1994a)), and what aspect informs the project initiated in *AV* and continued most recently in *ECM*.

⁴¹ MacIntyre (1994a), 229.

⁴² Social practices educate, enabling the individual members of a community to discover what is good and best for themselves. MacIntyre (1994a), 231. MacIntyre argues that for Marx, medieval people 'saw things as they were' because of their practice of skilled labour. *ECM*, 95-96.

damaging to social relations because, through the commodification of labour, it does not allow workers to recognize their own activity of skilled labour. Consequently, capitalism disguises the true meaning of social relations, so that the actuality and potentiality of social relationships are not understood. As capitalism progresses, it takes workers away from their social relationships. Members of communities begin to think of themselves in isolation from their social relationships. They think of themselves as individuals entering into contractual relationships with others for instrumental gains.⁴³

A whole political system develops based on instrumental reasoning. Its basic features can be identified and criticized. The concepts of utility, contract, and individual rights all rule.⁴⁴ Individuals consider the utility of other individuals to realizing their own projects. The most appropriate applications of this approach are to financial transactions or 'contracts.' Defining every human relationship in contractual terms attaches a possible price to it, depriving it of other than monetary meaning.⁴⁵ One enters and exits capitalist contracts by one's choice, understood as autonomy.⁴⁶ For modern liberal individualism, autonomy is the essence of human freedom, but it needs to be defended. Modern liberal individualism makes an attack upon any social structure that inhibits autonomy, whether it is one's family, friends, community, religion, or government.⁴⁷ To carry out this attack, modern liberal individualism seizes upon the concept of individual rights, whether they are 'natural

⁴³ *ECM*, 96-97; MacIntyre (1994a), 223; Lutz (2012), 33.

⁴⁴ MacIntyre (1994a), 223.

⁴⁵ *ECM*, 97; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 24.

⁴⁶ MacIntyre (1994a), 223.

⁴⁷ MacIntyre (1994b), 258.

rights' or 'human rights.' For example, modern liberal individualism asserts that individuals possess property rights against one's community, religion, or government; or it asserts the right to do whatever I wish as long as it does not harm others, emphasizing a right of privacy against one's community, religion, or government. For MacIntyre, these conservative and liberal strands of rights debates show that both sides agree on the importance of individual autonomy, only focusing on different aspects of it.⁴⁸ For Marxism, liberalism and conservatism offer no genuine political solutions to transform the social relations damaged by capitalism. Marxism needs a genuinely revolutionary political project to transform social relations.

From the 1940s to the 1970s, MacIntyre drew from his Marxist inheritance to consider but reject three leftist political projects, that of social democracy, Stalinism, and May 1968. Their failures prompted his epistemological crisis, bringing him to re-examine his own Marxist philosophical inheritance.⁴⁹ like many communist intellectuals in the middle of the 20th century, he was dismayed when the Marxist political project of eliminating material poverty blended with economic determinism, replacing the Marxist humanism that prioritized social relations.⁵⁰ This speaks to the development of the so-called 'Atlee Consensus' or 'end-of-ideology' in post-war British politics, leaving Britain's main political parties endorsing and supporting social democracy. From the point of view of the Old Left,

⁴⁸ AV, 222. Both, MacIntyre notes, cannot consider a role for a tradition of rational enquiry, since their commitment to individual autonomy is based on the rejection of the philosophical resources a community might possess. See also the fifth characterization of 'Morality' in *ECM*, 115.

⁴⁹ MacIntyre (1994a), 232-33.

⁵⁰ From *Marxism: An Interpretation*, in *AMEM*, 1-11; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 23.

post-war economic growth was leading to the emergence of a vast middle class. Marx's theories on violent class struggle appeared to have lost their meaning, removing the need for revolutionary practice.⁵¹ Emphasizing the rational management of the economy, the political project of social democracy argued that it could manage the behaviour of other human beings in order to realize higher levels of material wealth. All one had to do was discover the objective and unchangeable laws of history, as well as provide a class of bureaucrats with that knowledge so they could set out to manipulate humanity in order to achieve those ends.

Arguing that social democracy had lost sight of its origins, the New Left, and the young MacIntyre, fervently rejected this view.⁵² To recall socialism to its revolutionary task required showing that the Old Left's materialist reconciliation with capitalism did not bring about human unity, but rather increased social division. The New Left shifted the locus of the critique of capitalism away from the argument that capitalism was the source of poverty to the argument that capitalism destroyed the social relations essential to human flourishing.⁵³ Social democracy ignored how capitalism destroys social relations. It could not be an authentic Marxist political project, as it quite literally sold out the revolution to liberal individualism. It was another version of liberalism.

Rejecting social democracy out of a commitment to revolutionary politics, MacIntyre could have been seduced into propagating the Soviet cause. He was not,

⁵¹ *ASA*, 3-5.

⁵² 'The "New Left",' in *AMEM*, 88-89; Blackledge (2007); Blackledge and Davidson (2008), xx-xxxvii.

⁵³ 'The "New Left",' in *AMEM*, 90-93.

for the second Marxist political project he rejected was Stalinism. MacIntyre defined Stalinism in the following way:

Stalinists 1) believed in the possibility of 'socialism in one country,' rather than in the making of socialism as a world-revolutionary enterprise; 2) made the working class serve the needs of the party and the bureaucracy rather than vice versa; 3) were guilty of 'the cult of personality'; 4) believed that the end of achieving communism justified unlimited terror and unlimited deceit as means; 5) accepted Stalin's crude mechanistic versions of dialectical materialism and historical materialism.⁵⁴

Stalinism is the supreme case of a political system built on instrumental reasoning, as the ends of communism, the interest of the greater number of future humanity, justifies the means, the immolation of a smaller number of human beings.⁵⁵ The Gulag is a direct product of (4) and (5). Nor is social democracy free from Stalinism's worst characteristics. With (2), MacIntyre identifies a trait common to social democracy (as noted above, really a version of liberalism) and Stalinism. Both give power to bureaucrats, who purport to have special knowledge for achieving certain ends. They direct human and non-human resources to achieve these ends. These bureaucrats are valued for how effective they are as managers. Just as Max Weber described, the bureaucrats justify their authority by their success in using their power to achieve the value of effectiveness.⁵⁶ By calling these bureaucrats 'Weberian,' MacIntyre indicates that they use instrumental reasoning.⁵⁷ Once in political power, liberals, Marxist social democrats, and Stalinists all become Weberian bureaucrats.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Lutz (2012), 20. Lutz is quoting from his correspondence with MacIntyre. See also *NMW*, 32.

⁵⁵ Perreau-Saussine (2005), 66; Lutz (2004), 35-36.

⁵⁶ *AV*, 25-27; MacIntyre (1998), 64-66.

⁵⁷ *AV*, 86; Knight (2007), 126-29.

⁵⁸ *AV*, 109, 262.

The challenge, then, is to reject *both* Stalinism *and* social democracy. Communist intellectuals of MacIntyre's generation failed to meet this challenge. Writing in 1960, MacIntyre identified three versions of a communist intellectual. First, there were those who give up their brains and become Stalinists.⁵⁹ Second, there were those who became social democrats, showing they did not understand the necessary relationship between socialism and revolution. Third, there were those who quit the party to become revolutionaries, showing their commitment to a moral principle.⁶⁰ MacIntyre chose the third option, but it left him with few live political options. Meanwhile throughout the 1960s, many of his left-wing colleagues who rejected Stalinism did so through the language of liberal individual rights, and became social democrats.

Further developments in politics only exacerbated divisions in the left. MacIntyre met the third major version of leftism in May 1968—and completely denounced it. These leftists were very good at finding forms of authority to protest against, but they lacked the capacity to give an account of what they were protesting for.⁶¹ Indeed as they taught their colleagues to despise all forms of authority, they lost themselves in 'irrationalisms.'⁶² Teaching their colleagues that individual consent was the absolute, these leftists deepened the commitment to liberal individualism.⁶³ With the left either conceding too much to liberalism, or losing itself in 'irrationalisms,' MacIntyre drifted away from his leftist colleagues and abandoned

⁵⁹ See MacIntyre's observations on Georg Lukács, *TP*, 137-39.

⁶⁰ 'Communism and British Intellectuals,' in *AMEM*, 121-22; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 29.

⁶¹ *AV*, 71.

⁶² *AV*, 114.

⁶³ MacIntyre concludes that May 1968 'absolutises individual consent by despising all authority.' It is a form of 'collective hysteria.' Perreau-Saussine (2005), 30-31

the Marxist political project.⁶⁴ In *After Virtue*, he preserves the Marxist critique of capitalism and liberalism, for he adamantly affirms the need to critique individualized, instrumentalized social relations to recover the genuine human essence. Nevertheless he concludes that there is no live political option available for Marxism. It is 'exhausted' as a political tradition.⁶⁵

III. The Philosophical Critique of Liberalism

In rejecting Marxist political projects as failures, MacIntyre looked to the theoretical errors that underwrote these failures, to overcome his epistemological crisis. First, he criticized the turn in Marxist theory toward economic determinism, which ends up furthering Weberian politics in the mode of social democracy or Stalinism. Second, he seized upon his left-wing colleagues-turned-social-democrats, who used the language of liberal individual rights to critique Stalinism. MacIntyre reflected on how Marxist critics depend on liberal morality to critique Stalinism, so that they presented their critique of Stalinism through the liberalism they once ostensibly rejected. These failures impelled him to go beyond Marxism's philosophical inheritance—not to abandon it but to correct Marx's philosophical errors.

For MacIntyre, Marx relied too extensively on economic determinism to claim scientific status for his theories. As Marx saw it, the deterministic understanding of human behaviour and the revolution entailed by this understanding provided laws of history: a working-class revolution in an

⁶⁴ MacIntyre and his leftist colleagues became increasingly dismissive of one another. See Blackledge and Davidson (2008), xvi-xviii, xxxvii-xlix.

⁶⁵ *AV*, 262.

industrialized country was inevitable. Marx's argument depends on whether he is right about discovering predictive laws on human behaviour. MacIntyre's 'hidden agenda' in *After Virtue* is to show that Marxist theory is wrong in this respect.⁶⁶ Marxist theory was wrong in having failed in its specific predictions: revolution first took place in an unindustrialized country, Russia, and the working class did not instigate it. Marxist theory is thereby unscientific. Yet arguing in that mode, one could conclude that the only problem with Marxism is that it grasped the wrong predictive laws of human behaviour. For that reason its means do not produce the predicted ends. By contrast, the liberal bureaucrat offers a different set of predictive laws, and different means to achieve it.⁶⁷ Instrumental reasoning survives.⁶⁸

MacIntyre thus argues that a Marxist or liberal theory can *never* discover predictive laws that encompass all human behaviour. These theories fail as an account of human action.⁶⁹ During his period of epistemological crisis, MacIntyre searched for some of the resources for overcoming determinism in Marx.⁷⁰ Marx raised the question of how humans act. In aiming to help workers think of transforming themselves and their social conditions, Marx conceived of society in terms of human agency, and of alienated human powers.⁷¹ By focusing on the powers of human agency and how they might be thwarted, MacIntyre hoped to turn Marx away from economic determinism and to place a renewed emphasis on human

⁶⁶ Wartofsky (1984), 237. Cited in Lutz (2012), 35.

⁶⁷ MacIntyre could even make this observation for the most Hayekian circles of the political right; see Knight (2007), 129-30.

⁶⁸ *NMW*, 36.

⁶⁹ *AV*, 88-108.

⁷⁰ 'Communism and British Intellectuals,' in *AMEM*, 118-19.

⁷¹ *NMW*, 41; 'Breaking the Chains of Reason,' in *AMEM*, 142, 150-51; Knight (2007), 113.

freedom, understood as the desires of agents to actualize the society they want and become the sorts of person they want to be.⁷²

Nevertheless, to develop this account would require a philosophical psychology of human agency or practical reasoning, which Marxism does not provide. Moving beyond Marxism, MacIntyre sought to develop an account of practical reasoning that did not see wants and desires in mechanistic or irrational terms.⁷³ Rather, wants and desires would provide *reasons* for actions. In the critical argument of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre criticizes the accounts of human agency that separate morality, what 'ought' to be done, from the rest of human action, as well as accounts that separate morality from desire.⁷⁴

MacIntyre wrestled with the second great theoretical problem in Marxism by scrutinizing how communist intellectuals engaged with Stalinism. For any communist intellectual who had not given up his brain, there was a pressing need for a moral theory providing a rational, justifiable rejection of Stalinism. So MacIntyre exclaimed: 'a position into which we are all tempted into is that of moral critic of Stalinism.'⁷⁵ Becoming a 'moral critic' of Stalinism was a temptation, not an imperative, because while Stalinism must be rejected, it must be rejected for a reason.⁷⁶ The temptation was to reject it arbitrarily.⁷⁷ During the period of his

⁷² 'Freedom and Revolution,' in *AMEM*, 129; Lutz (2012), 25.

⁷³ Knight (2007), 131.

⁷⁴ Lutz (2012), 82. MacIntyre's treatment of intractable moral disagreements emphasizes how impersonal rational judgements applied by both sides in these disagreements divide desire and duty. *AV* 6-9.

⁷⁵ *NMW*, 31.

⁷⁶ Lutz (2012), 22.

⁷⁷ *NMW*, 37.

epistemological crisis, MacIntyre's preoccupation was to find the moral philosophical theory that could provide the reasons for rejecting Stalinism.⁷⁸

In the late 20th century, three philosophical theories purport to offer reasons for rejecting Stalinism: that of the Encyclopaedist, neo-Kantian liberalism, that of the genealogist, Nietzschean postmodernism, and finally that of the Thomist, neo-Aristotelianism.⁷⁹ Many communist intellectuals chose the first theory, rejecting Stalinism on the grounds of liberal individualism supported by Kantian justifications.⁸⁰ For MacIntyre, they fell into temptation. Kantian moral philosophy attempts to provide liberalism with impersonal and objective moral standards for determining what should be done. One recognizes these impersonal and objective moral standards and legislates them for oneself as the moral law. Here arises the principal critique of Kantian moral philosophy. G.E.M. Anscombe's essay 'Modern Moral Philosophy' attacked the concept of 'legislating for oneself' as 'absurd.' As 'the concept of legislation requires superior power in the legislator,' Kantian moral philosophy makes the subject of the law simultaneously the master of the law.⁸¹ MacIntyre acknowledges his debt to Anscombe in *After Virtue*,⁸² and takes up her critique to emphasize that the Kantian moral agent has no criterion to justify his choice for the moral law other than his own autonomous choice.⁸³ The Kantian

⁷⁸ *AV*, xviii; For a fuller treatment of this preoccupation see Perreau-Saussine (2005), 63-79.

⁷⁹ Reading *TRV* as part of MacIntyre's critical argument. See Perreau-Saussine (2005), 76.

⁸⁰ E.g. Jurgen Habermas. See Perreau-Saussine (2005), 76; Sayers (2011), 80.

⁸¹ Anscombe (1958), 2.

⁸² *AV*, 86.

⁸³ *AV*, 44-46. Lutz (2012), 86-87.

moral agent can only condemn Stalinism 'in the name of his own choice.'⁸⁴ This is no justification.

In emphasizing that Kantianism leaves modern moral agent 'criterionless,'⁸⁵ MacIntyre applies the critique of Kantianism provided by Nietzschean postmodernism. The critical argument of *After Virtue* holds that Nietzsche's diagnosis of contemporary morality is essentially correct. Morality could be a response to some truth discovered through the study of nature. But if one rejects that the study of nature can reveal anything about moral standards, the alternative is to argue that moral standards exist because we choose that they do.⁸⁶ Nietzsche's critique regards the concept of the autonomy of the will as a deeply flawed component of modern morality. It means that the concepts associated with liberalism, contract, utility and individual rights, must also be rejected as criterionless.⁸⁷

Long before composing the critical argument of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre concluded that the moral reasoning of Stalinism and the moral reasoning of liberalism were mirror-images of one another in their account of practical reasoning. They create a dichotomy between will and nature.⁸⁸ Both the liberal and Stalinist see the will as the source of 'morality,' and contrast it with nature—specifically, natural human desires. The liberal, being a good Kantian, chooses morality against desire. The Stalinist chooses desire against morality, yet renames

⁸⁴ *NMW*, 37.

⁸⁵ *AV*, 33.

⁸⁶ Lutz (2012), 24-25.

⁸⁷ *AV*, 69-70.

⁸⁸ Lutz (2012), 25.

desire—in their case, the desire for power—the true morality.⁸⁹ While the Stalinist and liberal invent their values, at least the Marxist discovers them through the study of nature.⁹⁰ This insight prepared the way for MacIntyre to look for an alternative theory of practical reasoning, which did not presuppose the dichotomy between will and nature.

IV. The Social Critique of Liberalism

During the period of his epistemological crisis, MacIntyre also evaluated the social culture that liberalism produced, coming to the conclusion that this flawed social culture emerged from certain philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment. MacIntyre was led to evaluate the social culture because he held that the ease with which so many of his communist contemporaries transformed into good liberals could not simply be explained analytically as a case of flawed moral reasoning. MacIntyre settled on a social explanation, holding that modernity is defined by a social culture wherein the understanding of morality as ‘choice’ dominates.

In the critical argument of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre associates this preoccupation with choice to the theory of emotivism that arose in early 20th century moral philosophy. Emotivism argues that moral judgements are only expressions of preferences, attitudes, and feelings. A moral judgement expressed in a sentence, such as ‘this is good,’ means the same as ‘I approve of this, do so as well’ or ‘Hurrah for this.’ No other rational justification can be provided. For a number of

⁸⁹ *NMW*, 49.

⁹⁰ *NMW*, 47.

reasons, moral philosophers generally agree that emotivism as a theory of meaning for moral judgements is false.⁹¹

Yet MacIntyre argues that it is a cogent theory about the use of moral judgements in society.⁹² Most people use what they present as objective moral judgements to express the arbitrary attitudes, feelings, preferences, and choices of their will. In society, emotivism transforms moral discourse into the will of one person attempting to align the preferences, attitudes, and feelings of other person's will to their own.⁹³ When expressing moral judgements, emotivists encourage and even manipulate others to follow their arbitrary preferences and choices.⁹⁴ The manipulative character of emotivism arises not because emotivists are particularly oppressive. Instead, it is because the emotivist believes that the values and principles are only authoritative by one choice to value them. In society, moral disagreements are clashes of the will; they have no resolution except in one will aligning their choice with another. The social culture of modernity is the 'culture of emotivism.'

What makes the moral culture manipulative is that the characters who inhabit it judge their success solely by how effective they are in adding others to their projects.⁹⁵ The culture of emotivism leaves individuals choosing ends that they agree are essentially arbitrary, so all differences are understood as struggles for

⁹¹ *AV*, 12-13. MacIntyre refers to C.L. Stevenson. MacIntyre reengages with more 'philosophically sophisticated forms' of the theory of emotivism in *ECM*, under the new term 'expressivism' (17). For the sake of continuity with *AV* I use the term 'emotivism.'

⁹² *AV*, 13-19.

⁹³ *AV*, 24; Lutz (2012), 90-91.

⁹⁴ Lutz (2012), 56.

⁹⁵ Lutz (2012), 57-58. The characters who inhabit the culture of emotivism, the rich aesthete, the manager, the therapist, and the conservative moralist, all deploy particular tactics to get others to align their wills to their projects. *AV*, xv, 26-31; Lutz (2012), 58; McMylor (2011), 230-31.

power. In that way, the key to this social culture is the ‘obliteration of any distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations.’⁹⁶

Searching for the roots of the emotivist social culture, MacIntyre adopts another feature of Nietzsche’s critique of modernity, making a genealogical argument.⁹⁷ MacIntyre contends that the emotivist social culture emerges from the Enlightenment project.⁹⁸ Although the Enlightenment project advances an impressive moral philosophy, it is ultimately unable to justify its vision of ethical practice except as a choice for certain values. As ever, this is no real justification. ‘Why the Enlightenment project of justifying morality had to fail’ is a key component of the critical argument of *After Virtue*. The Enlightenment project of justifying morality had to fail because it removes the role of teleology from ethics.

MacIntyre conceives of the Enlightenment project as a rejection of the teleological ethical framework that Aristotle provides in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle’s framework is a ‘threefold scheme:’

1. A conception of ‘untutored human nature.’
2. ‘The precepts of rational ethics.’
3. A conception of the human good as that of ‘human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*.’

The goal of ethics is to take the agent, with his imperfect, untutored human nature, from (1) to the perfected nature of (3), with the help of (2). Each of these three

⁹⁶ *AV*, 23.

⁹⁷ MacIntyre acknowledges that this strategy is Nietzschean, in seeking to unmask an ideology, but his considered reasons include a Thomistic justification, identifying intellectual blindness in moral error: the sin of pride. See *TRV*, 147.

⁹⁸ MacIntyre is well aware that there are different versions of Enlightenment: see *EP*, 172. Yet his emphasis is on the *project*: Enlightenment thinkers, such as Descartes advance a series of theoretical ideas ‘almost as an electoral platform.’ So writes Charles Péguy, cited in Perreau-Saussine (2005), 57.

points require reference to the other two if their status and function is to be intelligible.⁹⁹

MacIntyre claims that Aristotle's framework is 'not essentially altered' until the late Middle Ages.¹⁰⁰ Then the framework is subject to two great attacks. First, Luther, Calvin, and Jansen launch a series of theological attacks. They deny that 'human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*' is something available to the power of human reason. Original sin has destroyed the power of human reason. Second, Enlightenment science launches an attack on Aristotelian natural philosophy. Attaching severe limits to the power of human reason, Enlightenment science contends that any conclusion as to what 'human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*' is unscientific. In the wake of these attacks, modern philosophers remove (3) from the inherited ethical framework, leaving (1) and (2).

The new moral system addresses untutored human nature or imperfect human beings, who must obey (2), reconceived as the rules of morality.¹⁰¹ In *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre gives the new moral system the name of 'Morality.' The rules of morality for 'Morality' have the following characteristics: they are secular; they are universally binding on all human agents and knowable by all; they constrain individual desires; and they are framed in abstract terms and do not mention social roles.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ AV, 52-53.

¹⁰⁰ AV, 53. For an account of how Aristotle's framework meets challenges from other traditions, notably the Augustinian tradition, see TRV, 105-26.

¹⁰¹ MacIntyre considers the assertion that morality is a distinct and autonomous kind of ethical practice as an assertion of modernity. AV, 38; TRV, 28. MacIntyre introduces the term 'Morality' in ECM, 65; it is the 'moral system peculiar to and characteristic of early and late capitalist modernity' (114-15).

¹⁰² ECM, 115. C.f. TRV, 26.

Moreover, 'Morality' rejects 'any teleological view of human nature, any view of man as having an essence which defines his true end.'¹⁰³ This attack also denies that one can infer one's true end, the human good, by considering one's own desires for what is good, and the moral precepts that might help realize this true end, the human good. It separates the rules of morality from desire.¹⁰⁴ The rules of morality are thereby deprived of their purpose. Morality's basis becomes increasingly obscure, although various modern philosophers attempt to justify (2) from (1).¹⁰⁵

However, this exposes the rules of morality to a famous attack from Hume, arguing that one cannot infer an 'ought' from an 'is.' Later, Moore codifies Hume's observation in logic as the naturalistic fallacy. But Moore is incorrect: the way to move from an 'is' to an 'ought' without committing a logical fallacy is through a functional concept, defined as the purpose or function the concept is expected to serve. For example, a watch is a good watch if it serves the function of keeping time accurately; and a farmer is a good farmer if he serves the function of farming well. For the naturalistic fallacy to apply, moral philosophy has to assume that the human person is not a functional concept.¹⁰⁶

Modern 'Morality' provides a concept of the human person that is neither functional nor teleological. This connects to the earlier observations on civil society presuming no essential social relationships. MacIntyre observes how modern life compartmentalizes social life into various social roles that are separate and sometimes in conflict with one another in terms of what they should do. When

¹⁰³ AV, 54.

¹⁰⁴ Morality constrains individual desires, *ECM* 115. Knight (2007), 140.

¹⁰⁵ AV, 55; Breen (2012), 158.

¹⁰⁶ AV, 58.

compartmentalized, the human being lacks a unified, integrated life.¹⁰⁷ Arguing that the self assumes various social roles presumes a divide between the true self and the social roles the self might play. Every moral action can be evaluated differently from whatever social role the self has adopted, including the choice to assume a particular social role. Moral criteria can be exchanged with each social role. The self then, never fully identifies with any social role; correspondingly, no ethical principle exercises its authority over the self. The essence of the individual is his autonomy. The self chooses what ethical principle to value.¹⁰⁸ Unable to reason teleologically from a social role or to a conception of human good, the self is the ghostly 'I'.¹⁰⁹ It chooses which moral rules to value, but lacks any criteria to provide a basis for its choices or a purpose for its choices.¹¹⁰ 'Morality' abstracts the human person from social roles, relationships or responsibilities, and invents the individual.¹¹¹

To emphasize that the abandonment of teleology and its replacement with an abstract individual is a loss for the social culture, not a liberation, MacIntyre insists, with the help of Anscombe, that the rules of morality standing on their own make no sense. Anscombe argues that any concept of a moral rule, 'you ought to do so-and-so,' whether taking a utilitarian or Kantian form, is a holdover from medieval theories justifying moral obligation in terms of God's commands. In the absence of that particular theistic framework, Anscombe concludes, the concept of a moral rule is meaningless. MacIntyre adds that the moral rules prevalent in modernity's social

¹⁰⁷ *ECM*, 228. E.g. Vasily Grossman. See *ECM*, 248-49, 264. Lutz (2012), 123.

¹⁰⁸ *AV*, 26.

¹⁰⁹ *AV*, 32.

¹¹⁰ *ECM*, 134.

¹¹¹ *AV*, 60-61; *TRV*, 192.

culture are unclear concepts decoupled from the original context that gave them meaning. From a sociological perspective, 'Morality' is a collection of fragments handed on from scattered social roles and predecessor cultures. Moral rules are 'forms of expression' for the emotivist, but the emotivist lacks any real awareness of the background beliefs that would be required to justify their use of these moral rules.¹¹² In the culture of emotivism, moral rules are akin to the 'taboo' rules of Polynesians, prohibitions on a whole range of actions. The Polynesians originally had a series of background beliefs by which those taboo rules were understood. By 1776, the time of Captain Cook's voyage, they had forgotten those background beliefs and no longer understood what purpose the taboo rules served. In 1819, King Kamehameha II could then expose the taboo rules as lacking justification, and abolish them with minimal controversy.¹¹³

In our European-based culture of emotivism, says MacIntyre, Nietzsche is King Kamehameha II. In 'five swift, witty and cogent paragraphs' of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche argues that all the various attempts of the Enlightenment project to find a rational basis for morality fail.¹¹⁴ When Nietzsche considers modern morality's social culture, he concludes that the way morality is used is to mask the raw struggle for power. MacIntyre agrees with Nietzsche. Recalling that the objective here is to find a principle for refuting Stalinism, MacIntyre concludes that neither Enlightenment culture nor Enlightenment moral philosophy has the resources to

¹¹² AV, 60; MacIntyre is helped by Anscombe (1958), 5-7.

¹¹³ AV, 112; c.f. TRV, 27-28; 178-86.

¹¹⁴ AV, 113; see GS §335.

refute Stalinism. Liberalism does not have the philosophical and social resources to refute political irresponsibility. Indeed, it invites it.

V. The Theological Critique of Liberalism

Addressing a further Weberian feature of modernity, MacIntyre had long criticized how liberalism transformed the modern way of life into a secular way of life.¹¹⁵ In *After Virtue*, the diminishment of religion is another characteristic of the culture of emotivism. 'All faiths, and all evaluations are equally non-rational; all are subjective directions given to sentiment and feeling.'¹¹⁶ This claim about 'all faiths' develops MacIntyre's concern, explored throughout his work, that the compartmentalization of modern life damages religion. Compartmentalization divides religious activity from one's work, politics, and leisure. It takes what is supposed to be the ultimate, authoritative meaning of life, directing all other activities, and turns it into one optional activity amongst others. So compartmentalization strangles religious life.¹¹⁷ Secularization's broader social effect deepens the emotivist culture, as it turns the question about the meaning of life into an embarrassing one, better not asked for fear of being labelled psychologically disordered.¹¹⁸ The consequence of avoiding this question is the loss of moral conscience and of the capacity to distinguish between good and evil. Liberal individualism inhibits the moral life. Left to his own devices and to secular

¹¹⁵ MacIntyre (1991), 267-68; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 131; D'Andrea (2006), 95-96.

¹¹⁶ *AV*, 26.

¹¹⁷ For MacIntyre's early treatment of this topic, see *Marxism: An Interpretation*, in *AMEM*, 12-14. For a fuller account see McMylor (2011), 234-36.

¹¹⁸ *TP*, 126.

institutions, the individual has no resources to justify his moral or spiritual ideals, leaving these ideals impoverished.¹¹⁹

As a young man and a Christian, MacIntyre thought that Christianity could be a resource for renewing moral life, but even within Christian theology the taint of liberalism had spread. Liberalism transformed Christianity from an authoritative declaration of particular revealed truths into a socially respectable system describing human needs.¹²⁰ Christ comes to tell us the same thing that liberal Enlightenment tells us: we can all just get along. For liberal theology, it is liberal Enlightenment that effectively has the authority. The most famous theological critique of the comfortable alliance between Christianity and liberalism comes from the Protestant theologian Karl Barth, who emphasizes the definitive authority of Christian revelation. Accusing liberal theologians of conforming faith to Enlightenment reason, Barth separates reason from revelation so that the authority of revelation can no longer be subordinated to the authority of reason. This position appealed strongly to the young MacIntyre. He saw himself surrounded by Anglican liberal theologians who make Christianity either trivial or false.¹²¹ Nevertheless, Barth's separations demarcated theology from philosophy. It is an either-or. MacIntyre was interested in how both theology and philosophy could deepen the understanding of practical reasoning. Perreau-Saussine pithily states the dilemma for the young MacIntyre:

¹¹⁹ *ECM*, 136-38. MacIntyre opposes himself to Charles Taylor, see Perreau-Saussine (2005), 135-41.

¹²⁰ *ASA*, 13.

¹²¹ 'The creed of the English is that there is no God and that it is wise to pray to him from time to time.' *ASA*, 26; 7-8; MacIntyre (1994b), 257.

Either practical reasoning is autonomous and men have nothing to do with theology...or the moral life is a function of the commandments of God and men have nothing to do with practical reasoning...in the first case, there is no *religious* morality, and in the second, there is no religious *morality*.¹²²

MacIntyre sought a rational justification for morality, which Barth denied religion can offer. On this point Barth agreed with the liberals, and so ironically he strengthened the liberal dominance of Christian theology.¹²³ Dissatisfied with Barth's understanding of religious belief, and left with no alternative answer, MacIntyre lost his faith toward 1960. Nevertheless, the problem of how liberalism distorts religion still preoccupied him.¹²⁴

VI. The Modern Catastrophe

The narrative of MacIntyre's life up to the *After Virtue* project starts from a Marxist tradition of enquiry, with which MacIntyre defines and seizes upon the problems of modern liberal individualism. As a Marxist, he sets out to find a revolutionary political solution that transforms the deficient social relations of modern liberal individualism. Yet each possible Marxist political solution fails. The political solution of social democracy is indistinguishable from modern liberal individualism, and concedes that politics is to be dominated by Weberian bureaucrats claiming authority by their grasp of deterministic laws governing human behaviour. The political solution of Stalinism concedes the same domination of Weberian bureaucrats, adding the moral horrors of Gulag. MacIntyre knows full well he must reject Stalinism, but in his search for a moral reason to reject Stalinism,

¹²² Perreau-Saussine (2005), 146-47.

¹²³ *ASA*, 15-16.

¹²⁴ For a fuller treatment of the early MacIntyre's interests in the philosophy of religion, see D'Andrea (2007), 123-63.

he is dissatisfied with the predominance of liberal moral reasoning. The most articulate version of liberal moral reasoning, neo-Kantianism, only manages to justify itself through an arbitrary choice for certain moral standards.

According to the research programme of *After Virtue*, the roots of modernity's failure to provide reasons for rejecting Stalinism lies in the Enlightenment project's production of 'Morality,' and the failure to justify it. The Enlightenment project failed because it severed moral rules from their basis in natural teleology. It denounced any attempt to consider the *telos* of rational human desires or social roles, but this left the moral rules it tried to defend as baseless.¹²⁵

The crux of MacIntyre's sweeping critique of liberalism takes the form of a 'disquieting suggestion' at the start of *After Virtue*: 'imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe.' This catastrophe is the widespread destruction of the natural sciences, leaving only fragments. Later, some try to recover the natural sciences from the fragments, but, 'Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all.'¹²⁶

MacIntyre's claim is that in the actual world, ethical practice is in the same state of disorder as the natural sciences are in this imagined world. The social culture of emotivism that underwrites the politics, philosophy, and theology of liberal individualism is a description of this state of disorder. Yet what is the actual catastrophe? To find the catastrophe, he writes:

¹²⁵ Knight (2007), 140-41.

¹²⁶ *AV*, 1.

we shall have to look not for a few brief striking events whose character is incontestably clear, but for a much longer, more complex and less easily identified process and one which by its very nature is open to rival interpretation.¹²⁷

MacIntyre does not associate the catastrophe with the Enlightenment project or with Protestantism.¹²⁸ Although these do contribute, their common feature is to understand ethical practice as an act of the will, an offshoot of a theory of voluntarism, rather than within a teleological framework. MacIntyre's catastrophe is the slow turn away from the Aristotelian tradition of natural teleology toward voluntarism.¹²⁹ This movement makes ethical practice about the will following rules, and unable to answer the question, 'what kind of person shall I become?'¹³⁰

As noted earlier, MacIntyre considers three traditions of enquiry at play in the present: neo-Kantianism, Nietzschean postmodernism, and neo-Aristotelianism. MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment project relies heavily on Nietzschean postmodernism, being Nietzschean in method and substance. In method, MacIntyre deploys a genealogical, historical argument looking for the flaw of the Enlightenment project. In substance, MacIntyre follows Nietzsche and argues that the genealogy of the Enlightenment unmasks Enlightenment's rational justifications

¹²⁷ *AV*, 3.

¹²⁸ C.f. Beiner (2014), 169n, 186-88. Beiner frets that MacIntyre is anti-Enlightenment, yet MacIntyre's quarrel with Enlightenment is that they inherit and develop a theoretical error. To the charge that MacIntyre ignores the positive effects of the Enlightenment (elaborated in Sayers (2011)), MacIntyre has three answers (MacIntyre (2011b)). First, MacIntyre acknowledges that the Enlightenment's emphasis on negative freedom, freedom from interference and intervention in reaction to the abusive coercive power frequently exercised in the pre-modern world, should be given its due: Enlightenment has some positive outcomes (325-27). Yet secondly, granting that many of the hopes of the Enlightenment have not been realized, MacIntyre's critique of the lack of justification behind Enlightenment's claims argues that Enlightenment's unfulfilled hopes occur not in spite of Enlightenment values, but because of them (326). Third, MacIntyre would argue that some of the positive outcomes attributed to Enlightenment have their origins in other sources (c.f. 329).

¹²⁹ 'the late medieval predecessors' of Luther, Calvin, and Jansen 'embody a new conception of reason.' *AV*, 53; *TRV*, 155; Lutz (2012), 44-46.

¹³⁰ *AV*, 118.

of morality as dependent on arbitrary choice.¹³¹ In moral philosophy, the claims of neo-Kantianism to provide rational justification fail. In politics and society, these failed claims show that ethical practice is a collection of fragments, in grave disorder, serving to mask the will to power. In this atmosphere, voluntarism rises to the fore.¹³² The self is a 'ghostly will' who has no criteria to justify its choices for actions. It assumes and surrenders social roles as it wishes.

Nietzsche, however, offers a rival interpretation of the catastrophe. His solution to the disorder of modernity is to embrace voluntarism. Moderns should redefine what is good and bad based on the awareness that we are self-legislators, choosing our values for ourselves without attempting rational justification. MacIntyre makes this position appear compelling—*unless* one can show that the Enlightenment project's rejection of the Aristotelian ethical practice was a mistake.¹³³ Consequently, MacIntyre poses the question, 'Nietzsche or Aristotle?'¹³⁴

MacIntyre has reasons to be uneasy with Nietzschean postmodernism. Nietzsche repudiates any rational basis for ethical practice, notably denying that the 'self' can discover it in shared social activity.¹³⁵ The social culture of Nietzscheanism is Weberian, obliterating any distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations. It leaves power as the sole means of evaluating success: the successful characters of Weberian politics and society are those who

¹³¹ *TRV*, 39-40. D'Andrea (2006), 346.

¹³² MacIntyre sees voluntarism as the common feature of such diverse thinkers as Hare, Rawls, Gewirth, Nietzsche, Sartre, Weber, C.L. Stevenson, and Erving Goffman. *AV*, 21, 26, 35; D'Andrea (2006), 230. C.f. Weaver(1948).

¹³³ D'Andrea (2006), 249.

¹³⁴ *AV*, 109-120. The opposition to rationalism is expressed as a proscription against metaphysics and a unified self, a proscription which the Nietzschean holds inconsistently. *TRV*, 46, 53, 54, 207-14.

¹³⁵ *AV*, 257-58.

are effective in getting the wills of others to align to their own will. It is trapped in the iron cage of instrumental reasoning, with no justification for the ends for which one acts. Politically, Nietzscheanism has no reason to reject Stalinism, or any other deceitful political ideology. It takes the form of the protesters of May 1968: they cannot give an account of their principles, so collapse into collective hysteria. Theologically, Nietzsche denies outright that religious questions persist in the post-Enlightenment world, but his savage attacks against Christianity are also an attack on rationalism. By assuming that theism and rationalism are joined together, Nietzsche inadvertently strengthens the case for reasonable religious belief.¹³⁶ There can be good reasons to sustain religious belief outside of liberal theology.

In brief, neo-Kantianism is complicit in the disorder of modern ethical practice, while Nietzschean postmodernism embraces it. By contrast, neo-Aristotelianism could resolve the disorder in modern ethical practice. The failure of liberalism and Stalinism alike rests on their assumed dichotomy between will and nature. They reject nature as the basis for ethical practice, placing it instead in the will. In contrast, MacIntyre notes that the Marxist is supposed to discover the basis of ethical practice. Moving forward from Marx, can ethical practice be discovered through the study of nature? In light of his claim that the Enlightenment project 'had to fail,' MacIntyre concludes that any successful justification for ethical practice must take the form of Aristotle's ethical framework.¹³⁷ Taking *telos* seriously, expressed in natural human desires and social roles, the question of ethical practice would not be about what rule to follow, but would be about what sort of person one

¹³⁶ *TRV*, 66-67.

¹³⁷ *AV*, 52-55; Knight (2007), 141.

should become. It would prioritize the desires of agents to actualize the society they want and become the sorts of persons they want to be. It would require a philosophical psychology of human agency that does not separate morality from the rest of human action. These are important theoretical correctives, but it is only for the philosopher to interpret the world. The point is to change it. MacIntyre accepts the problems modern liberal individualism produces for social relations, in capitalist markets and Weberian politics. A compelling case for neo-Aristotelianism would also have to rehabilitate the revolutionary promise for a transformation of social relations, to create a 'revolutionary Aristotelianism' that goes beyond the exhausted traditions of Marxist politics.¹³⁸ The constructive argument of *After Virtue*'s research programme aims to meet all these objectives.

MacIntyre's Aristotle

MacIntyre's constructive argument is that when Aristotle is interpreted as part of a tradition, he can provide all these things. MacIntyre describes himself as aiming 'to reconstruct the moral theory and communal practice of Aristotelianism in whatever version would provide the best theory so far.'¹³⁹ Providing a 'best theory so far' within a tradition means that 'reconstruction' is an on-going, open-ended process. This corresponds to MacIntyre's philosophical enquiry. Although there are numerous 'Aristotelian' features of his thought, I focus on the main objective of his reconstruction. I argue that his philosophical enquiry is a unified quest to explain and justify teleology in practical reasoning. This quest prompts him to write *After*

¹³⁸ See Knight (2007), 224; (2011).

¹³⁹ MacIntyre (1994b), 263.

Virtue, commencing the programme of reconstructing the Aristotelian tradition of practical reasoning in the face of modern challenges.

MacIntyre's quest advances through several stages. His initial reconstruction of the Aristotelian tradition in *After Virtue* makes several major departures from Aristotle. His philosophical quest to justify teleology leads him to deepen his commitment to Aristotelianism. In describing MacIntyre's philosophical quest, a controversial issue is how he proceeds from Aristotelianism to Thomism. Some of his most influential critics have seen a sudden, perhaps ideological, rupture at this point. Against this position, I argue that MacIntyre adopts Thomist formulations of Aristotelian positions: he sees continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas on the unity of the virtues, the role of moral absolutes as natural law, and the need for metaphysical explanations. As a Thomist, MacIntyre provides his understanding of the human *telos* and the life of philosophical enquiry. He draws insights from Aristotle, but recognizes that there are deficiencies in Aristotle's account of the best life and the content of the virtues. On these points he breaks with Aristotelianism, and sides with Aquinas against Aristotle. Finally, MacIntyre's account of the best life combines philosophical enquiry and political activity. Since he intends a reconstruction of the 'moral theory' and the 'communal practice' of the Aristotelian tradition, I outline his 'revolutionary Aristotelianism' as his 'communal practice:' his practical challenge to the social and political dominance of liberalism.

I. The Programme of *After Virtue*: Reconstructing the Aristotelian Tradition

The objective of MacIntyre's research programme is to reconceive the whole study of human agency or practical reasoning to vindicate the Aristotelian

tradition.¹⁴⁰ The ‘theory of the virtues’ he seeks in *After Virtue* is part of that larger study. MacIntyre’s tradition of the virtues looks to find excellence in human agency, addressing habits of desiring, choosing, and acting. The Aristotelian form of the tradition of the virtues is that human nature determines what the habits are, so that developing these habits is the essential goal of the good life. MacIntyre prioritizes the theory of the virtues in *After Virtue* because showing what the virtues are demonstrates that human action is teleological, and corrects the basic mistake of the Enlightenment project.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre gave Aristotle’s account of the virtues a central place. Nevertheless MacIntyre disagreed with some of Aristotle’s positions. So he treated Aristotle as part of a tradition on the virtues. MacIntyre could then claim to be someone developing this tradition, and could extrapolate from Aristotle a series of ‘Aristotelian’ positions. With this approach, MacIntyre distanced himself from Aristotle. MacIntyre fully acknowledged that to treat Aristotle as part of a tradition is ‘a very un-Aristotelian thing to do.’¹⁴¹ A tradition leaves present philosophical positions open to the possibility of correction, giving the philosophical positions an incomplete character. By contrast, Aristotle did not explicitly think of himself as contributing to a tradition; he intended to replace the errors of the past by his own comprehensively true account.¹⁴²

Nevertheless MacIntyre sees Aristotle as implicitly undertaking a tradition-constituted enquiry: to repeat a crucial maxim of MacIntyre, Aristotle’s philosophy

¹⁴⁰ *WJWR*, ix.

¹⁴¹ *AV*, 146.

¹⁴² *AV*, 146.

presupposes a sociology. A philosophical theory of the virtues takes as its subject matter a pre-philosophical theory 'implicit in and presupposed by the best contemporary practice of the virtues.'¹⁴³ A philosophical theory of human action develops out of observation and reflection on human action in its social context. In his work, Aristotle develops a philosophical theory of the virtues by reflecting on the social practices extant in Homeric and classical Greece. Those who follow Aristotle do the same, adding Aristotle to their historical series. Hence Aristotle's philosophical theory of the virtues, particularly in his most influential text, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is important for any later thinker who attempts to develop a philosophical account of the best contemporary practice of the virtues. Although Aristotle does not say it, his work constitutes the start of the classical tradition of ethical enquiry.¹⁴⁴

As a tradition allows for correction and development, MacIntyre's casting of Aristotle as part of a tradition allowed him to criticize Aristotle for his weaknesses, and develop the tradition, without repudiating Aristotelianism. MacIntyre's own views develop as a response to later criticisms of and commentaries on Aristotle. The positions of Aristotle himself are secondary to the views that MacIntyre advances as a spokesman of the Aristotelian tradition. It is in these terms that MacIntyre calls his account *neo-Aristotelian*.¹⁴⁵

The programme initiated by *After Virtue* turns back to Aristotle to counter the Enlightenment project's rejection of teleology and reconstruct the concept of

¹⁴³ AV, 148.

¹⁴⁴ AV, 147.

¹⁴⁵ ECM, 31.

teleology. Yet in approaching Aristotle as part of a tradition, MacIntyre in *After Virtue* first criticized Aristotle's conceptualization of teleology, for Aristotle explained teleology in terms of a discredited metaphysical biology.

MacIntyre meant that Aristotle's developed account of teleology relies on his account of natural substances. Natural substances have a determinate function, end, or *telos*, and why and how the activities of natural substances achieve that determinate function, end or *telos*. Since human beings are also natural substances, they are also subject to teleological explanations that show the *telos* of human activity. Aristotle thinks that nature determines the specific good that human beings seek. The *ergon* argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* tries to determine the specific good that human beings seek in terms of the specific *ergon* (function) of the human being. Aristotle provides an answer to the *ergon* of the human being in terms of the unique activity characteristic of the human being, stemming from a feature of human nature, the rational part of the soul.¹⁴⁶

Writing in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre was concerned that Aristotle's ethics presupposed this metaphysical biology, and he distanced himself from it.¹⁴⁷ Instead he drew from a different side of Aristotle to reflect on the operations of human activity. Aristotle thinks that the reflection on human actions provides a better understanding of human activity. Through that reflection, the agent understands the demands of human activity, and grasps its goals or ultimate *telos*. The fundamental lesson that Aristotle provides is that the reflection on human activity reveals the

¹⁴⁶ See MacIntyre (1966), 62-63; Lutz (2012), 167. See also *EN* 1097b22-1098a20.

¹⁴⁷ See *AV*, xi; 148. MacIntyre dropped Aristotle's vocabulary of a characteristically human self-activity (*energeia*) and its state of completion (*entelecheia*). Knight (2007), 135-36.

importance of teleology for practical reasoning. Human activity, as MacIntyre appreciated from Marx, is goal-oriented—it must be understood with reference to intentions, purposes, and reasons for action.¹⁴⁸ Aristotle grasps this important point as well. In *A Short History of Ethics*, MacIntyre had written that Aristotle was ‘completely right’ in identifying the goal or *telos* of human action with the good that the human agent pursues.¹⁴⁹ It is then possible to identify the good not from metaphysics but through reflecting on the actions of human agents. The human good, for Aristotle, and MacIntyre, is ‘socially discovered.’¹⁵⁰ Being neither money, nor honour, nor pleasure, the human good is *eudaimonia*.¹⁵¹ *Eudaimonia* has various definitions: it is the state of being well for man, the best life for man, what is ultimately good for man or what provides human ‘flourishing.’¹⁵² In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre’s formulation of how Aristotle introduces the virtues is as the qualities which enable an agent to achieve the *telos* of *eudaimonia*, and the lack of which frustrates the movement towards the *telos* of *eudaimonia*.¹⁵³

Recalling the trenchant criticisms of instrumental reasoning in his earlier work, MacIntyre specifies the kinds of means virtues are to the end of *eudaimonia*. To do so he drew on a distinction between two kind of means-end reasoning, ‘internal’ and ‘external’ means to an end. It is a distinction not explicitly made in Aristotle, yet MacIntyre believes it was required to understand Aristotle’s

¹⁴⁸ *AV*, 83.

¹⁴⁹ MacIntyre (1966), 58.

¹⁵⁰ Lutz (2012), 174. See also 167-68; MacIntyre (1966), 58-59.

¹⁵¹ MacIntyre (1966), 81-82; *AV*, 160.

¹⁵² MacIntyre (1966), 59-62; *AV*, 148. ‘Flourishing’ is a term used in Anscombe (1958), and regularly in later works of MacIntyre: e.g. *DRA*; *ECM*, 24-31.

¹⁵³ *AV*, 148.

intention.¹⁵⁴ 'External' means-end reasoning identifies truly instrumental reasoning, where the end is characterized independently, or externally, of the means that can be used to achieve it. When Aristotle speaks about virtue as the means to *eudaimonia*, he intends to say that virtue is 'internal' means-end reasoning. So necessary are the virtues to living the good life, that the end of *eudaimonia* cannot be characterized without making reference to the virtues. The virtues are qualities which are valued both for their own sake and for the sake of *eudaimonia*.¹⁵⁵ On these essentials, MacIntyre holds that Aristotle's account of the goal-oriented character for human action, ultimately with the goal of living the best life, was correct.

Aristotle was also correct in the essentials of practical reasoning, the 'action theory' outlining the logical stages of human action. Aristotle, MacIntyre argued, outlines the necessary conditions for intelligible human action, holding for any human culture.¹⁵⁶ For Aristotle, practical reasoning has the following structure.¹⁵⁷ First, there are the wants and goals of the agents. Without this element, there would be no context for practical reasoning. Second, there is the major premise: 'doing or seeking such-and-such is the type of thing that is good for or needed by a so-and-so.' Third, there is a minor premise, where the agent perceives that this is an instance of the requisite kind. Fourth, there is the conclusion, a particular kind of action.

Considered in terms of the structure of practical reasoning, the virtues are those qualities which enable the agent to grasp the major premise, and give the

¹⁵⁴ AV, 148; 184.

¹⁵⁵ AV, 148-49. MacIntyre is thinking of EN 1097b2-4. There is some development and clarification in MacIntyre's understanding of the means-end relationship. Knight (2007), 134-38.

¹⁵⁶ AV, 161.

¹⁵⁷ AV, 161-62.

agent the capacity to act upon it. The virtues involve training in habituation, enabling the agent to become better at practical reasoning.¹⁵⁸ The virtues express training in the emotions and passions. The passions are trained into conformity with what theoretical reasoning identifies as the right goal or *telos*, and what practical reasoning identifies as the right action to do in a particular time and place. MacIntyre thereby contrasted neo-Humean or emotivist accounts of practical reasoning to Aristotle's. From an Aristotelian standpoint, reason cannot be the servant of the passions because the passions must be educated in conformity with practical reasoning.¹⁵⁹

These three positions of Aristotle, the need for the ultimate *telos* of *eudaimonia*, the role of the virtues in relation to *eudaimonia*, and the structure of practical reasoning, form the core of MacIntyre's reconstruction of Aristotelian ethical theory. However, this account of Aristotelian theory must be placed within the Aristotelian tradition of practical reasoning, MacIntyre's real reconstruction. In a tradition, these positions must be described in terms of their historical origins. Moreover, if the tradition is to engage with modern accounts and escape from the charge that the preference for Aristotle's positions is also arbitrary, it must show where it is in need of refinement to demonstrate its superiority over alternative positions. So it is necessary to contextualize Aristotle's theories as an inheritance from Homeric and classical Greek societies, showing what Aristotle develops and where in turn Aristotle needs to be developed. MacIntyre's argument is that the discussion of the Homeric inheritance produces two competing traditions. On the

¹⁵⁸ AV, 150. MacIntyre draws from *EN* 1095b1-8.

¹⁵⁹ AV, 162.

one hand, there are the sophists; and on the other, there are Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.¹⁶⁰ MacIntyre's reading of Aristotle is that Aristotle develops and corrects themes incipient in the struggles Socrates and Plato have with the sophists. So for that reason there is a trajectory from the Homeric inheritance, through the debates of classical Greece, to the developed positions of Aristotle.¹⁶¹

There are three important inheritances that develop in MacIntyre's account of the Aristotelian tradition. First, Aristotle inherits an idea from Homeric, heroic societies that human excellence is a desirable goal and a normative goal for human action. The goal is to lead the best life. Aristotle develops that into *eudaimonia*; nevertheless Aristotle initially leaves the content of *eudaimonia* open.¹⁶² This is in part to be expected, because of the character of dialectics. In Aristotle's philosophy (as opposed to Plato's), dialectics moves toward a *telos*, aiming to give an account of the first principles (*archai*) of the field being discussed, but the conclusion is always in need of further elaboration or development.¹⁶³ It is to be expected, therefore, that there is at least initially an open aspect to Aristotle's account of the human *telos* of *eudaimonia*.¹⁶⁴

Aristotle's second inheritance from heroic societies is to note that the exercise of the virtues in pursuit of *eudaimonia* takes place in a social context, not as an individualized self, separate from society. Moderns like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Nietzsche tried to portray such an individualized, pre-social self—and in

¹⁶⁰ For MacIntyre's account of how the discussion on the Homeric inheritance divided into these two traditions, see *WJWR*, 30-46.

¹⁶¹ *WJWR*, 88-100.

¹⁶² *AV*, 148.

¹⁶³ *WJWR*, 90-93, 100.

¹⁶⁴ *WJWR*, 118.

Nietzsche's case celebrated Homeric heroic life as the case *par excellence* of individualized, self-assertion. Yet they are all mistaken.¹⁶⁵ Instead, as Lutz observes, MacIntyre's interpretation of heroic societies finds that the persons who pursue excellence in this society look 'more like the natural citizens of Aristotle's *Politics*.'¹⁶⁶ For MacIntyre, that particular passage in Book I of Aristotle's *Politics* is one whose 'importance for the interpretation of everything that Aristotle wrote about human life cannot be underrated.'¹⁶⁷ Aristotle grasps from the heroic societies that it is only possible to pursue *eudaimonia* by assuming one's social role and acknowledging that one is a member of a community with particular tasks and purposes.¹⁶⁸ Humans cannot be separated from their community, which for Aristotle is the *polis*, without being deprived of some of their essential attributes.¹⁶⁹

Aristotle develops the link between the human agent and the community to two kinds of 'evaluative practice.'¹⁷⁰ First, the community must recognize the *qualities* of character that help agents achieve their goals, encouraging the development of those qualities and discouraging qualities that do not further those goals. Second, the community must determine what *actions* help the agents achieve these goals, while condemning actions that hinder these goals and hinder pursuit of the common good. The qualities pertain to how the community involves itself in the development of virtues, and the actions pertain to how the community makes just laws to support the development of the virtues necessary to achieve the agent's

¹⁶⁵ AV, 126, 129.

¹⁶⁶ Lutz (2012), 109.

¹⁶⁷ WJWR, 96-97. MacIntyre refers to *Politics* 1252b28-1253a39.

¹⁶⁸ See especially AV, 123.

¹⁶⁹ WJWR, 96.

¹⁷⁰ AV, 151.

goals. Virtues and laws are interconnected.¹⁷¹ In connecting virtues and laws, MacIntyre takes part of Aristotle's theory of the virtues to involve obedience to the laws of the community that prescribes or prohibits certain types of action absolutely, the kinds of actions the virtuous man would always do or refrain from doing. MacIntyre therefore interprets Aristotle to be committed to moral absolutes. 'It is,' MacIntyre writes, 'a crucial part of Aristotle's view that certain types of action are absolutely prohibited or enjoined irrespective of circumstances or consequences'; although Aristotle is 'so brief as to be cryptic' on the subject.¹⁷²

The third inheritance concerns the content of the virtues. The heroic societies emphasized competitive virtues, virtues like success and bravery. Aristotle develops the tradition away from these competitive virtues and toward the cooperative virtues of classical society, emphasizing virtues like justice and temperance.¹⁷³ The account of cooperative virtues transcends community standards and argues they are part of an objective order that is the case, irrespective of the vast swathe of differences in community standards. In the philosophical debates of the 4th century BC, the sophists argued that there is no account of the virtues and the *telos* of human beings as such, but only as it is understood within a particular city. By contrast, Aristotle holds that there is an account of the virtues and of *telos* attributed to human beings as such, making an argument for the objectivity of the virtues and the human *telos*.¹⁷⁴ Aristotle provides an explanation for the human *telos*

¹⁷¹ Lutz (2012), 113.

¹⁷² AV, 150; see also WJWR, 113.

¹⁷³ AV, 133-34; Lutz (2012), 109-10. In WJWR, MacIntyre speaks of the goods of effectiveness and the goods of excellence.

¹⁷⁴ AV, 139; for MacIntyre's full account of the sophists (among which he places Thucydides), see WJWR, 46-68.

in terms of his account of human nature. Moreover, Aristotle's account of objectivity also shows that he regards the universe as hierarchically ordered, so that the virtues and practical reasoning (as well as human nature) can only be fully understood with reference to their place in the cosmos as a whole, within which the life in the *polis* finds its completion.¹⁷⁵

To summarize, then, Aristotle initiates a tradition that identifies the human *telos* as *eudaimonia* and uses dialectics to discover the content of it; it aims to discover an objective *telos* attributed to humans *qua* humans, who are situated in their hierarchically ordered place in the cosmos; and it seeks to identify what the virtuous actions and actions that are absolutely required to realize the best life for a human being, in light of his natural membership in the community of the *polis*.

Nevertheless, from his standpoint, MacIntyre sees difficulties in the tradition Aristotle initiates from heroic society. First concerns the meaning of *eudaimonia*. Although Aristotle determined that metaphysical contemplation of the impersonal unchanging divine was the ultimate human *telos* and the essential content of *eudaimonia*, this answer exposes a weakness in Aristotle's account. For MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, 'there is a certain tension between Aristotle's view of man as essentially political and his view of man as essentially metaphysical.'¹⁷⁶ MacIntyre does not wish to adopt the metaphysical side. Second, Aristotle's emphasis on the community's role in assisting with the pursuit of excellence raises a series of problems. Aristotle's lack of historical awareness leads him to an excessive exultation of the Greek *polis* as the only possible arena in which to pursue the good

¹⁷⁵ *WJWR*, 101-2.

¹⁷⁶ *AV*, 158.

life. Third, Aristotle's account of virtue and vice prioritizes the life of the gentleman and diminishes the artisan classes; MacIntyre holds that Aristotle unfairly diminishes the virtues involved in manual skill and labour.¹⁷⁷ Fourth, Aristotle's proclivity for the Greek gentleman's life leads him to the evidently mistaken conclusion about human nature; non-Greeks and slaves cannot pursue the good life.¹⁷⁸ Fifth, MacIntyre charges Aristotle with seeing too great a harmony between goods. Aristotle neglects to consider how agents experience the insoluble, sometimes tragic, moral dilemmas, the conflicts that arise between goods. Although Aristotle thought tragedy arose from the agent's character flaws, a great tragedian like Sophocles grasps that tragedy arises from very fabric of human life.¹⁷⁹

To resolve these problems, the Aristotelian tradition must consider how the conception of the best life persists when the institution of the Greek *polis* has passed away.¹⁸⁰ It must provide a more historical account of human nature that does not fall prey to Aristotle's ahistorical understanding of human nature.¹⁸¹ It must provide an account of virtue in which insoluble conflicts between goods do not solely originate from character flaws of the agent. Finally, it must temper Aristotle's account of the virtues of the gentlemen with the historical awareness of other accounts of the virtues. Indeed, as the tradition of virtues developed in response to very different historical subject matter, a variety of incompatible answers were given both about the virtues and about the ultimate human *telos*. As MacIntyre

¹⁷⁷ AV, 159; WJWR, 104.

¹⁷⁸ AV, 157-58; WJWR, 105; D'Andrea (2006), 258-59.

¹⁷⁹ AV, 157-58, 163.

¹⁸⁰ AV, 163.

¹⁸¹ AV, 158-60.

notes, 'Aristotle and Nietzsche, Hume and the New Testament are names which represent polar oppositions on these matters.'¹⁸² In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre seeks to overcome Aristotle's weak historical awareness, without relying on a metaphysical biological explanation of teleology.

Historical awareness relates to an overall problem the third inheritance exposes, the issue of objectivity. MacIntyre in *After Virtue* was well aware that historical awareness exposes deep disagreement over what the *telos* of human activity is. Aristotle tried to establish an objective account of it, but on account of his discredited metaphysical biology and historical bias his account was inadequate. If MacIntyre's embrace of the theory of the virtues was not to fall into the problem of arbitrariness that plagues modern ethics, he needed to overcome this problem with due attention to these different theories that establishes an objective account. To attend to this overall problem, MacIntyre's historical survey presented an explicit reflection on virtuous and vicious human action, focusing especially on the different ethical theories of Homer, Aristotle, and Benjamin Franklin.¹⁸³ The point was to find a core account of human activity, faithful to the Aristotelian tradition, which draws from the historical record to provide a philosophically defensible, objective account of human *telos*.

II. Practices, Virtues, and the Unity of Human Life

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's historical account of the different theories of the virtues bring him to the conclusion that in all the historical cases, virtues name the excellences in practical reasoning that the agent seeks. In his three-fold definition of

¹⁸² AV, 162.

¹⁸³ AV, 185.

virtue, MacIntyre argues that the virtues enable the agent to achieve excellence in terms of practices, then in the narrative order of a unified human life, then in terms of traditions. This provides the basis for understanding what human activity is and how it is directed toward a unified end or *telos*. Overall, MacIntyre's account of human activity reconstructs the functional, teleological conception of the human agent denied by Enlightenment. MacIntyre's concepts provide much material for analytical commentary, but I focus on how MacIntyre develops these concepts from Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition.

In the first place, the virtues are developed within a social sphere called 'practices.' Defining a practice, MacIntyre writes:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.¹⁸⁴

For MacIntyre, activities like tic-tac-toe or throwing a football are not practices, but technical skills: abilities and capacities that do not admit of further development. Once one knows how to do it correctly, nothing further is required to their performance. They serve the ends and goods of practices, and relate to practices because every practice requires technical skills.¹⁸⁵ By contrast, the following are all practices: architecture, farming, painting, and music; the making and sustaining of

¹⁸⁴ AV, 187.

¹⁸⁵ AV, 193.

families and political communities; games like chess and football; and theoretical academic sciences like physics and chemistry.¹⁸⁶

MacIntyre develops this account from Aristotle in two ways. First, MacIntyre terms practices to be ‘socially established cooperative’ activities. Building on Aristotle’s reflection that the pursuit of excellence is taken up in common and not alone, MacIntyre makes practices the function of social relations, linking one human agent with other human agents.¹⁸⁷ He agrees with this aspect of the Aristotelian tradition. He endows the pursuit of excellence with a social locus that he thinks is faithful to Aristotle’s intention if not his content.¹⁸⁸

Second, MacIntyre’s examples of practices show that he alters Aristotle’s own account of human activities. Aristotle distinguishes between *poiēsis* and *praxis*, where the latter addresses human action undertaken for its own sake and the former addresses a productive action, the purposeful action of bringing something into being distinct from the producer. Yet MacIntyre uses both activities as examples of a practice; he classes the activities of politics and community life alongside farming and painting.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, by classifying theoretical sciences as practices, he blurs Aristotle’s insistent distinction between *praxis* and *theōria*, where the latter concerns the realm of what is contingent and could be other than it is, and the former concerns the realm of what is eternal and unchanging. Setting MacIntyre’s treatment of *theōria* aside for now, his blurring of *poiēsis* and *praxis* demonstrates

¹⁸⁶ AV, 187-88.

¹⁸⁷ Knight (2007), 146.

¹⁸⁸ MacIntyre downplays the individualized components of Aristotle’s account. D’Andrea (2006), 271.

¹⁸⁹ For a defence of the continuity of MacIntyre’s interpretation from Aristotle, see Knight (2007), 30-36, 38.

his development of the Aristotelian tradition. MacIntyre argues that productive crafts are valuable because they help human beings achieve excellence. The 'craftperson is perfected through and in her or his activity' as well as because of the 'good product.'¹⁹⁰ He is then able to overcome Aristotle's diminishment of the productive arts associated with labour, although MacIntyre drops Aristotle's distinction between productive and unproductive practices.¹⁹¹

From understanding practices, MacIntyre argues, it is possible to introduce what virtue is. An agent enters into a practice because the practice addresses a need or desire that they have. It helps the agent achieve certain goods.¹⁹² Applying the distinction between internal and external goods that MacIntyre thinks is implicit in Aristotle, MacIntyre argues that practices pursue internal goods. In the context of practices, internal goods are those that can be achieved only by participating in the practice and learning to achieve those standards of excellence appropriate to the practice. Success in the practice is only possible by habitually committing oneself to gaining excellence in the practice. In MacIntyre's example, the only way to become skilled at chess is to play chess.¹⁹³ MacIntyre's introductory definition of virtue is that which helps someone succeed in the practice: 'a virtue is an acquired human quality' enabling us to achieve goods internal to the practice.¹⁹⁴

Practices can also be helpful for attaining goods external to the practice. The difference is that the pursuit of external goods does not require achieving those

¹⁹⁰ MacIntyre (1994c), 284; Knight (2007), 155-56.

¹⁹¹ Knight (2007), 147.

¹⁹² Lutz (2012), 157.

¹⁹³ *AV*, 188.

¹⁹⁴ *AV*, 191.

standards of excellence within the practice. To use MacIntyre's example, suppose a parent encourages a child by promising a reward of candy for victory. Candy would be an external good. If the child plays chess to win candy, the child could cheat to win that candy, violating the standard of excellence within the practice of chess.¹⁹⁵ Alternatively, the child could find that it is easier to win candy by doing something else, like selling lemonade for candy.

MacIntyre's introductory definition of virtue helps reinforce that success in a practice requires strong qualities of character. It is necessary to desire the good internal to the practice for its own sake and not instrumentally, as a means to achieve an external good. If the child really wants to learn to play chess well, he recognizes that he learns more from losing well than from cheating to win. He must learn the qualities that allow him to become strong enough to overcome the temptation to cheat, so assisting him to set aside his desire for candy as his primary motivation for playing chess.¹⁹⁶

Nevertheless, this definition of virtue only addresses the pursuit of excellence internal to a practice. As in Aristotle, virtue is made a means internal to the end—but the end is the practice, not the good. A more complete (and more Aristotelian) definition must address how the virtues relate to the pursuit of the good across various practices.¹⁹⁷ Many of the virtues an agent cultivates within a practice presuppose a larger understanding. MacIntyre thinks this is the case with justice, understood in Aristotle's way as giving each person her due. One can

¹⁹⁵ AV, 188.

¹⁹⁶ Lutz (2012), 157.

¹⁹⁷ AV, 201.

understand what a person is due only by being able to order and evaluate different practices in terms of her overarching good.¹⁹⁸ So MacIntyre's second definition of virtue argues that the virtues 'sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good,' enabling us to overcome 'harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions' and furnishing us with 'increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.'¹⁹⁹

This account provides a goal to the virtues that transcends particular practices. In this manner, MacIntyre addresses the issues of the conflict between goods that he thought Aristotle had addressed inadequately.²⁰⁰ Conflicts between the goods can arise because of the differing demands made between practices. But ordering and evaluating goods with respect to our personal goals can overcome these conflicts. MacIntyre's second definition allows agents to rank the goods internal to different practices, both for themselves and for others, by an overarching *telos* transcending practices.

Moreover, the second definition elaborates on a presupposition of the first definition: that is an *agent* who pursues these goals, with a continuous identity through time and participation in many different practices.²⁰¹ The agent can only pursue these goals intelligibly by having an account of the unity of his life, or an overall human good. The agent acts to seek a unified life, which is a good life. How

¹⁹⁸ AV, 202. See Lutz (2012), 158.

¹⁹⁹ AV, 219.

²⁰⁰ AV, 201.

²⁰¹ D'Andrea (2006), 274.

then to show that it is rationally justifiable to ‘conceive of each human life as a unity,’ to as to specify the good of each life?²⁰²

In *After Virtue* and his following works, MacIntyre justifies the unity of life, the overall human good, in terms of the intrinsic narrative structure of human life or ‘narrative concept of selfhood.’²⁰³ MacIntyre thinks this account of narrative is presupposed in Aristotle and his predecessors, but as it was taken for granted then it was not made explicit. So MacIntyre develops it.²⁰⁴ In his understanding, narrative is inter-dependent with the concepts of intelligibility and accountability—using one concept presupposes the other.²⁰⁵ The unity of the individual life of a human being is the ‘unity of a narrative embodied in a single life’ of a human being.²⁰⁶

Human actions are ‘enacted narratives.’²⁰⁷ MacIntyre takes the first step of Aristotle’s account of practical reasoning, the wants and goals of the agents that provide a context for practical reasoning, and elaborates these wants and goals as the story we each tell about our own life. No action is possible without implicitly answering the question, ‘of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’²⁰⁸ For MacIntyre, it is only by reference to these previously existing narratives that the action is intelligible.²⁰⁹ By arguing that goals require narratives to be intelligible, MacIntyre has taken teleology and given it a narrative meaning. To pose the

²⁰² *AV*, 203.

²⁰³ *AV*, 217.

²⁰⁴ *AV*, 203.

²⁰⁵ *AV*, 218.

²⁰⁶ For MacIntyre, personal identity is unity of character. Metaphysical attempts to justify personal identity cannot succeed independent of the inter-related concepts of narrative, intelligibility, and accountability. *AV*, 218; Lutz (2012), 124; D’Andrea (2006), 276.

²⁰⁷ *AV*, 211.

²⁰⁸ *AV*, 216.

²⁰⁹ *AV*, 206. At this stage of his argument, MacIntyre takes up the insights of Anscombe and Wittgenstein that intentional actions are not interior mental events but must be understood with respect to social practices. See Perreau-Saussine (2005), 85-87.

question 'What is good for me?' is to ask how best to live out the narrative unity of my life. This is my *telos*.

How then to answer the question of what is good for man? MacIntyre answers that the good is a unified life. The goal an agent is pursuing is to unify, integrate, and harmonize their life, described as a narrative 'quest.'²¹⁰ Two features of this quest relate to MacIntyre's conception of teleology. First, this quest is in search of *the* good, the ultimate good by which we order the other goods of our lives. Second, *the* good cannot be adequately characterized in advance of the pursuit of it. It has to be discovered. This process of discovery is by no means smooth. As MacIntyre's second definition reminds us, harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions hinder the pursuit of a unified life. These require the development of new qualities of character or an education in the virtues. For MacIntyre, the purpose of an education in the virtues is both for acquiring greater self-knowledge, and gaining a greater understanding of the character of the good that is sought.²¹¹

MacIntyre's definition of the content of the good or *telos* for man, the good life that is to fill out the content of *eudaimonia*, constitutes the quest for the good: 'that the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.'²¹² Far from providing robust content to the *telos* of *eudaimonia*, this is, as MacIntyre says, very much a 'provisional

²¹⁰ AV, 219

²¹¹ AV, 219.

²¹² AV, 219.

conclusion.’²¹³ Nevertheless, he hopes it achieves the objectivity that eludes a more specific account of the *telos* of *eudaimonia*, and is justifiable in a way that more substantive accounts are not.²¹⁴

Such is the context in which the second definition of virtue operates. Yet it is still incomplete. It considers narrative in terms of an individual, but it does not consider narrative in terms of its social setting. For if stories shape our own life, so that we always act *in media res*, in the midst of previously existing stories, then we are also heirs to the stories of others. From membership in a family, city, tribe, and nation, one inherits from the past a variety of expectations and obligations. MacIntyre holds that the membership in these communities provides an agent’s ‘moral starting point,’ giving an agent’s life its own moral particularity.²¹⁵ An agent finds himself part of past stories, part of a history, which provides the setting for his actions. In this sense, he is part of a tradition that transmits practices.²¹⁶ Tradition thus provides the criteria for MacIntyre’s third definition of virtue:

The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practice are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.²¹⁷

²¹³ AV, 219.

²¹⁴ D’Andrea (2006), 277.

²¹⁵ AV, 220.

²¹⁶ Institutions also sustain practices, and thereby have a role to play in developing traditions. See D’Andrea (2006), 277. Yet institutions are not the same as practices, which critics of MacIntyre’s conception of a practice fail to address. C.f. Miller (1994); MacIntyre (1994c), 284-86. Successful institutions are subordinated to the goods internal to practices. The role of the virtues is to focus on these internal goods, keeping the institutions from corruption. See AV, 194; Knight (2011), 25-26.

²¹⁷ AV, 223.

MacIntyre's purpose here is not to return to the norms of the past, but is instead to reject liberal individualism. The second definition of virtue stops with the individual. It does not consider the individual's past. On that measure, a wealthy aristocrat could himself embody all the virtues without considering that the family fortune was built on injustice.²¹⁸ Tradition connects the individual to past history. MacIntyre's reflection on Aristotelian justice, giving each person her due, expanded the first definition of virtue into the second by noting how practices standing alone were insufficient for acknowledging the overarching good of the person. In the same way, he notes the insufficiency of the second definition by observing how it leaves no place to consider past injustices that thwart the overarching good of the person. So the third definition of virtue connects the individual to the past and provides a better, deeper sense of what justice is.²¹⁹

As MacIntyre's claim was to choose Aristotle as opposed to Nietzsche, the culmination of modern liberal individualism, he must show how his account is Aristotelian. In *After Virtue* he offers two ways it is not, and three ways it is. MacIntyre's account does not require allegiance to Aristotle's explanation of teleology by reference to metaphysical biology. Moreover, MacIntyre acknowledges that insoluble moral dilemmas are possible. They can arise between the demands of competing practices.²²⁰ The ways it is Aristotelian are 'at least' three.²²¹ First, it commits to a range of concepts that an Aristotelian account of practical reasoning

²¹⁸ Lutz (2012), 124-25.

²¹⁹ AV, 126. Miller (1994) neglects to consider how all three definitions are required to realize the virtue of justice. See MacIntyre (1994c), 284-86.

²²⁰ AV, 196-97.

²²¹ AV, 197.

requires, helping provide the correct philosophical psychology of human agency to reply to the failures of liberalism.²²² This account integrates morality into the whole range of human action and dissolves the separation between desire and morality.²²³ MacIntyre develops his philosophical psychology in later works, taking care to show how his Aristotelianism remains distinct from Nietzsche's account.²²⁴

The second way MacIntyre's account is Aristotelian addresses its differences from utilitarianism or consequentialism. In *After Virtue*, he elaborates on one major difference, the account of pleasure and enjoyment. While utilitarianism treats pleasure and enjoyment as the end of every activity, Aristotle reminds us that the pleasure and enjoyment differ from activity to activity. Some pleasures are independent of all activity, and are associated with external goods. Other pleasures are associated with particular activities, and are associated with internal goods. Consequentialism has no capacity to make this distinction.²²⁵ Moreover, MacIntyre defends moral absolutes while at the same time rejecting rule-based consequentialism. Many neo-Aristotelians take the position that abandoning rule-based approaches to morality means abandoning moral absolutes. Yet in doing so, they endorse a version of the consequentialism. For MacIntyre, like Elizabeth Anscombe before him, the rejection of moral absolutes is a characteristic of modern

²²² *AV*, 197. MacIntyre lists several, although his list is certainly incomplete: 'voluntariness, the distinction between the intellectual virtues and the virtues of character, the relationship of both to natural abilities and to the passions and structure of practical reasoning.'

²²³ Because MacIntyre appears to downplay the role of reason in practical reasoning, Nussbaum (1999, 169, 196) classifies MacIntyre as a neo-Humean. This is a serious error. MacIntyre carefully distinguishes his position from Humean and neo-Humean accounts of practical reasoning. Hume's mistake is not to distinguish between practical reasoning of the form 'I desire x,' and practical reasoning of the form, 'I desire x because x is good to pursue.' MacIntyre (1982), 295-305; *AV*, 161; *WJWR*, 298-99.

²²⁴ See *ECM*, 68, where Bernard Williams is the spokesman of Nietzsche.

²²⁵ *AV*, 197-99.

moral philosophy and politics. Consequentialism justifies Stalinism, for then the ends of communism can justify the means of terror and deceit. MacIntyre counters consequentialism and Stalinism by upholding an Aristotelianism in which there are moral absolutes.²²⁶

The third way MacIntyre's account is Aristotelian is that it links evaluation and explanation. By identifying certain actions as virtuous or vicious, one is never only evaluating, but also helping explain why those actions rather than others were performed. Without reference to the virtues, an attempted explanation of human life will accomplish very little.²²⁷ The link between evaluation and explanation is most evident in MacIntyre's reconstruction of the functional concept as emerging from reflection on a practice. Within a practice like sailing, the functional concept helps establish the validity of reasoning from 'he is a sea-captain,' to 'he ought to do whatever a sea-captain ought to do.'²²⁸ It counters the Humean claim that no valid argument can move from factual premise to evaluative conclusion. MacIntyre's account enables a descriptive account of the standards of excellence internal to a practice, the reasoning internal to a practice, to evaluate between right and wrong actions.²²⁹

With his three-fold definition of virtue, MacIntyre in *After Virtue* thought he developed the Aristotelian tradition in such a way as to rehabilitate the teleology the Enlightenment project rejected. Specifically, MacIntyre's objective was to

²²⁶ Anscombe (1981) 66-71; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 88. For a MacIntyrean discussion of how consequentialism in contemporary virtue ethics departs from Anscombe's virtue ethics (1958), see Sanford (2015), 69-80.

²²⁷ AV, 199.

²²⁸ AV, 56-58; Knight (2011), 23.

²²⁹ Knight (2011), 23.

rehabilitate the idea that man is a functional concept.²³⁰ He hoped to imitate Aristotle's *ergon* argument, although distancing himself from the metaphysical biological substance of this argument.²³¹ Practice, the narrative order of a single human life, and tradition, are MacIntyre's tripartite substitution for the metaphysical biological teleology of 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*.'²³²

III. Deepening Aristotelianism through Thomas Aquinas

In response to some criticisms of the account of virtues and practices in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre developed his reconstruction of the Aristotelian tradition of practical reasoning to be more Aristotelian. Although MacIntyre continued to criticize Aristotle for his insufficiently historical consciousness and for diminishing the importance of activities related to work, MacIntyre's most important revisions show how he deepens his commitment to the Aristotelian tradition. In this section I shall treat two of MacIntyre's revisions: adopting the unity of the virtues and dropping the concept of insoluble moral dilemmas, by formulating moral absolutes through the account of the natural law provided by Thomas Aquinas.

The novelty of the argument of *After Virtue* in favour of Aristotelianism won MacIntyre widespread acclaim and many supporters. Nevertheless *After Virtue* was never intended to be a solitary *magnum opus*, but the start of a research programme for the Aristotelian tradition: 'a work still in progress' with need for further refinement in the face of criticism.²³³ MacIntyre responded to his critics by deepening his commitment to Aristotelianism. Yet some critics, initially sympathetic

²³⁰ AV, 58-59.

²³¹ Knight (2007), 138.

²³² Knight (2011), 142.

²³³ AV, 278.

to the research programme of *After Virtue*, were scandalized that MacIntyre's deepening Aristotelianism led him to identify as a Thomist. Martha Nussbaum and Thomas Nagel, for example, saw MacIntyre's self-identification as a Thomist as a rupture with Aristotelianism. In their view, MacIntyre had turned an exciting programme in ethics into an embrace of Christianity. Perhaps he had hidden this commitment all along.²³⁴

This charge ignores how MacIntyre narrates his own movement from Aristotelianism to Thomism, and fails to engage with where MacIntyre sees continuity between Aristotelianism and Thomism. Rather than arguing that MacIntyre's Christian views had been driving his Aristotelian philosophy, or that he had abandoned his philosophical reasoning, it is better to argue that his Aristotelianism leads him to recognize philosophical problems that Thomism helps answer. Although his religious views find philosophical justification in Thomism, they are a secondary issue.²³⁵

As MacIntyre narrates, he became a Thomist partly because: 'Aquinas was in some respects a better Aristotelian than Aristotle, that not only was he an excellent interpreter of Aristotle's texts, but that he had been able to extend and deepen both Aristotle's metaphysical and his moral enquiries.'²³⁶ Quite obviously Aristotle and Aquinas have major differences. Aquinas is a theologian, and should not be transformed into a philosopher doing theology. MacIntyre sees Aquinas as integrating Aristotle into the understanding of the Biblical religion provided by the

²³⁴ Nussbaum (1989) and Nagel (1995), 203-214.

²³⁵ C.f. Nagel (1995), 209.

²³⁶ *AV*, x.

tradition Saint Augustine initiates, not vice versa.²³⁷ But the issue is whether an initial philosophical conflict between each is reconcilable. By making the issue of reconcilability about Christianity, Nussbaum and Nagel obscure where MacIntyre sees possible reconciliation between Aquinas and Aristotle—and where he comes to realize it is not possible.

MacIntyre took seriously the question of whether a ‘reconciliation’ between Aquinas and Aristotle is possible: it is a ‘question of the relationship of claims about the human virtues to claims about divine law and divine commandments.’²³⁸ For MacIntyre’s reconciliation of Biblical religion and Aristotelianism to hold, MacIntyre has to defend the Thomist thesis that ‘only a life constituted in key part by obedience to law could be such as to exhibit fully those virtues without which human beings cannot achieve their *telos*.’²³⁹ Obedience to the law must fit within an account of the virtues and the human *telos*.

Before tackling this more fundamental issue, MacIntyre revised one feature of *After Virtue*’s argument, his rejection of the scholastic concept of the unity of the virtues: that to have one virtue, one must have them all.²⁴⁰ MacIntyre’s treatment of this issue reveals how he recognizes philosophical problems that Thomism helps answer.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre was wary of embracing the unity of the virtues because he thought he would have to take a substantive stand on the content of the

²³⁷ *WJWR*, 182.

²³⁸ *AV*, 278.

²³⁹ *AV*, 278.

²⁴⁰ E.g. *EN* 1106b36-1107a2; *ST* Ia-IIae qu. 65 ar. 1 In summarizing MacIntyre’s modified account of the unity of virtues and the existence of evil practices, I am indebted to Lutz (2012), 160-66.

virtues and the nature of human perfectibility. MacIntyre held that the courageous Nazi soldier should be regarded as virtuous.²⁴¹ As MacIntyre realized by the time he published *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* this account led him into serious difficulties.²⁴² The problem with rejecting the unity of the virtues is that it is then impossible to specify objectively what makes an act virtuous. It turned virtue into a quality of temperament.²⁴³ To judge Nazi's actions as evil would require a standard external to human agency. It would turn to voluntarism where the standard of good and evil is supplied externally, possibly through a lawgiver.²⁴⁴

By contrast, for Aristotle the virtues are never mere qualities or habits, but habits that make the agent excellent.²⁴⁵ As long as the Nazi soldier's courageous habit was directed toward an unjust object, it could not be described as virtuous.²⁴⁶ MacIntyre recognized that the rejection of the unity of the virtues compromised his ability to describe a virtuous action in an objective way. So he agreed that to establish an objective account of the virtues demands discovering the requirements

²⁴¹ *AV*, 179. MacIntyre debates with Peter Geach (1977), 150-70. Geach is distinguishing his own position on the unity of the virtue from Aquinas. In Geach's view Aquinas held an all-or-nothing interpretation of the unity of the virtues. Yet Geach's position may be a misreading of Aquinas, see Lutz (2012), 183. MacIntyre admits his view on the unity of the virtues 'was due in part to a misreading of Aquinas,' but he does not specify the origin of his misreading, *WJWR*, x.

²⁴² *WJWR*, x.

²⁴³ Similar to Kant's account of courage: see Lutz (2012), 162.

²⁴⁴ Lutz (2012), 164-65. The same issue applies to MacIntyre's allowance in *AV* that there may be evil practices (*AV*, 164). While Knight suggests that MacIntyre now holds that a tradition of enquiry enables one to judge between good and evil practices Knight (2011, 23), it is better to argue that MacIntyre changes his mind not to allow them at all (consider the language of MacIntyre's response to Frazer and Lacey (1994) in MacIntyre (1994c), 289-90). This is because it suggests that the human powers to achieve excellence can be gained initially through evil action. Lutz (2012), 164-65; *EN* 1104b30-3.

²⁴⁵ See *EN* 1106a15-24.

²⁴⁶ D'Andrea (2006), 265-67.

of excellence in human agency. The Aristotelian and Thomist path to do so is by discovering the interrelatedness of the qualities of excellent human agents.²⁴⁷

Critics of MacIntyre's Thomism could accept this revision to draw away from voluntarism and an external lawgiver providing the standard of good and evil. Yet MacIntyre's adoption of Thomist natural law seemed to violate this very purpose.²⁴⁸ *After Virtue* was supposed to be affirming a morality of the virtues, but had instead apparently conceded authority to a morality of rules. MacIntyre reminded these critics that they were making a mistake in seeing such a stark contrast between a morality of virtues and a morality of rules. MacIntyre had done no such thing. Instead he had argued that an Aristotelian morality of virtues requires a morality of laws, notably laws governing moral absolutes. While Aristotle was 'so brief as to be cryptic' on this subject, MacIntyre uses Aquinas to explain in greater detail the connection between laws and the virtues.²⁴⁹

MacIntyre's explanation extends through several works, but his basic intention is to defend the precepts of the natural law that Thomas Aquinas elaborates. What are the precepts of the natural law? They are one and the same for everyone, they are unchanging and unchangeable, they are known to be what they are by all rational human beings, and the knowledge of them cannot be abolished from the human heart.²⁵⁰ As MacIntyre already accepted that Aristotle argued for

²⁴⁷ For MacIntyre's modified interpretation of Aristotle's unity of the virtues, see *WJWR*, 137; For the consequences of this modified interpretation see Lutz (2004), 98-104; Lutz (2012), 163-64.

²⁴⁸ Nussbaum (1989) specifically refers to this.

²⁴⁹ *WJWR*, ix.

²⁵⁰ *EP*, 65.

moral absolutes, he does not think that this definition of the precepts of the natural law violates Aristotelian tenets.

The Thomist and Aristotelian treatment of the natural law appear very different. For Aristotle the law is that which applies to the citizen in the best *polis*; for Aquinas the law is the natural law, that which applies to every human being in the *civitas Dei*. However, MacIntyre finds a specific parallel between the role natural law plays for Aquinas and the role positive law plays for Aristotle. Both outline the presuppositions of effective practical and theoretical reasoning. As Aquinas presents the law from the theological perspective of obedience to God's law, MacIntyre first reinterprets the precepts of the natural law in Aquinas as the presuppositions of effective practical reasoning. They help initiate the education in the virtues.²⁵¹ For Aristotle and Aquinas, the lawgiver helps us identify which actions are just prior to our acquisition of virtue. The law also has a function in our education in the virtues, by answering the question 'what action is it bad for me to perform?'²⁵² To answer this question demands rational enquiry into what are good and bad acts. MacIntyre argues that the precepts of natural law provide the necessary preconditions for rational enquiry. They admit of no exception, because any exception will threaten the possibility of rational enquiry. Moreover, they must be universal, because any human being is potentially a partner in deliberation concerned with goods.²⁵³ For MacIntyre, there are a variety of ways we can fail to exercise properly the self-questioning that would enable us to resolve moral disagreements. Violating the

²⁵¹ *WJWR*, 180.

²⁵² *WJWR*, 181.

²⁵³ *EP*, 79.

precepts of the natural law is violating reason, in the sense that it is hindering our capacity to pursue the truth about goods and the goods, in order that we might achieve the goods and the good.²⁵⁴

To reconcile this account of the natural law to Aristotle requires showing that Aquinas's Biblical understanding does not claim that obedience to the law wholly constitutes human life. Aquinas must claim that 'only a life constituted in key part by obedience to law could be such as to exhibit fully those virtues without which human beings cannot achieve their *telos*.'

In MacIntyre's interpretation of Aquinas, obedience to the precepts of the natural law extends beyond the act of obedience, simply doing what the precepts enjoin and refraining from doing what they prohibit. As MacIntyre describes, the precepts of the natural law become operational at the point where we have motivating reasons for performing actions contrary to the precepts. The precepts then provide a reason that outweighs the motivating reasons for disobedience. The reason for obedience is that they point us toward a more perfect good that would be thwarted by following through on the motivating reasons. Obedience, then, is meaningful by reference to this more perfect good. Obedience to the law is only one characteristic of the goodness of actions.²⁵⁵

Furthermore, no law governs *how* to apply the natural law to individual cases. Only a person with the right virtues can apply the natural law correctly to individual cases. Like Aristotle, Aquinas leaves the judgement concerning how to apply the law to individual cases to the virtue of *prudentia* (*phronēsis*). For both

²⁵⁴ *EP*, 81-82.

²⁵⁵ *WJWR*, 194-95.

Aristotle and Aquinas, *phronēsis/prudentia* is therefore a requirement for applying the natural law and the other virtues.²⁵⁶ Obedience to the natural law is a necessary requirement to achieve one's *telos*, but hardly sufficient. Without the virtues, human beings cannot achieve their *telos*. One needs the virtues. Reconciliation between Thomism and Aristotelianism is here possible. MacIntyre has successfully met the challenge he gave himself.

Of course, reconciliation at this level does not mean the abolition of the differences between Aquinas and Aristotle. There is a major difference between Aquinas and Aristotle in the content of the virtues and the human *telos*. For Aquinas, Aristotle only has a partial understanding of what the human *telos* is, so his understanding of the virtues is incomplete. On Aquinas's view, we are naturally inclined to disobey the natural law. We therefore require grace to obey the law and initiate the education in the virtues. Grace provides new virtues, notably charity, the acquisition of which is a prerequisite for the natural Aristotelian virtues being able to achieve the genuine human *telos*. Thus Aristotle is brought into the Biblical Augustinian framework.²⁵⁷ Moreover, while Aquinas's *prudentia* closely parallels Aristotle's *phronēsis*, Aquinas departs from Aristotle to place *prudentia* within the Biblical Augustinian framework. *Prudentia* is exercised toward the ultimate end of human beings, yet human actions are meant to accord with God's providence. God creates and orders particulars; if we act rightly, our actions reproduce this ordering and are then in accord with God's providence. For that reason, Aquinas's *prudentia* always has a theological dimension. So while MacIntyre's critics were right to point

²⁵⁶ *WJWR*, 195-96.

²⁵⁷ *WJWR*, 181-82.

out the theological dimension of Thomism, dismissing it as 'ideological' fails to engage with the continuity MacIntyre sees between Aristotle and Aquinas on the role of the natural law and unalterable moral absolutes.²⁵⁸

By affirming the precepts of the natural law as unalterable moral absolutes, MacIntyre recognizes that it seems to create insolubly tragic moral dilemmas, where conflicting goods provide one with no way of exiting the situation without violating one moral absolute. In *After Virtue*, one of his criticisms of Aristotle was that he had ill-appreciated the tragic character of these situations. Later, however, he acknowledges he made a mistake. Correcting this mistake from a Thomistic standpoint, MacIntyre argues that insoluble moral dilemmas only emerge as a result of a prior action that violated a precept of the natural law.²⁵⁹

To deal with moral dilemmas, MacIntyre emphasizes against Williams, Nussbaum, and others that moral dilemmas should not be treated as brute facts, producing inescapable tragedy. Instead, moral dilemmas appear inescapably tragic only through a certain theoretical account that makes certain conclusions about their source and how resolvable they are.²⁶⁰ MacIntyre's theoretical account sees moral dilemmas arising in a different way. Individuals arrive in moral dilemmas because of their practical reasoning.²⁶¹ They find themselves confronting a situation where no right action seems available. Nevertheless, they are still seeking to pursue the right action, which is why they cannot simply drop one horn of the dilemma. Aquinas's account of moral dilemmas is helpful because it shows how these

²⁵⁸ *WJWR*, 196-97. C.f. Nussbaum (1989).

²⁵⁹ *EP*, viii-ix.

²⁶⁰ *EP*, 96; *WJWR*, 186-187.

²⁶¹ *EP*, 93.

situations arise, but suggests the agent follow their desire to pursue the right action by self-questioning their practical reasoning that has brought them to this point. The problem lies in the reasoning that has led one to conclude something about one or both horns of the dilemma. Instead of assuming theoretically that moral dilemmas are brute facts, Aquinas takes the theoretical stance that anyone can understand that their reasoning is in error, and right reasoning can always rescue the agent from seeming moral dilemmas.²⁶²

IV. Continuity and Rupture with Aristotelianism: MacIntyre's Metaphysical Biology

The most significant revision following *After Virtue*, however, is that MacIntyre changes his stance toward Aristotle's 'discredited metaphysical biology.' He now believes his account of the virtues requires both a metaphysics and a biology—exactly as Aristotle thought. Yet his version is not Aristotelian in substance. Although his metaphysics maintains continuity with Aristotle, the biology and the corresponding account of the virtues he develops do not. It is on these issues where he adopts Thomist and un-Aristotelian positions.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's argument made teleology intelligible by the reflection on social practices that aim at the good the human agent desires, revealing that the agent is aiming at an ultimate good. This could be accomplished while discounting Aristotle's explanation of teleology in his account of human nature—his metaphysical biology. Yet by making teleology 'social' rather than 'metaphysical,' MacIntyre opened himself to the criticism that he had not actually succeeded in

²⁶² *EP*, 99-100; *WJWR*, 187.

providing an objective account of the virtues and teleology.²⁶³ He was therefore vulnerable to the charge that his account of the virtues and teleology did not escape relativism. The kind of relativism suggested here would be that MacIntyre's truth claims about virtue and teleology always depend upon the limited view of the world the perspective of social cultures provide, rather than a claim that transcends these perspectives.²⁶⁴

In clarifying whether his account of teleology was 'social' rather than 'metaphysical,' MacIntyre realized that his account of social teleology presupposed a specific account of human nature, a specific metaphysical grounding. He needed to accept that human beings have a particular end (in which practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human life function as they do) toward which they are directed by reason of their specific human nature.²⁶⁵ Although he had tried to evade Aristotle's *ergon* argument, he had to face it directly. He could not explain the human ultimate good without also explaining the nature of the human being.

As MacIntyre suggests in *Whose Justice?*, the danger was that in the absence of this kind of explanation, it was too easy to transform Aristotle into another protagonist of modernity. Recall that modernity rejects the idea of an ultimate good. The contemporary spokesman for modernity, John Rawls, goes so far as to say that the idea of subordinating all our aims to one ultimate end 'strikes us as irrational, or more likely as mad.'²⁶⁶ Yet Rawls cites Aristotle with approval; Rawls assures us that

²⁶³ For a summary of these criticisms, see Lutz (2004), 115-19.

²⁶⁴ See Lutz (2012), 175-76. Note that the charge of relativism applied here is distinct from the charge of relativism applied to MacIntyre's claims about the process of the rational justification of a tradition.

²⁶⁵ *AV*, xi.

²⁶⁶ Rawls (1971), 554. Cited in *WJWR*, 165.

he is not alien or mad. Nussbaum echoes Rawls by emphasizing that Aristotle recognizes the variety and heterogeneity of goods, in contrast to Thomas Aquinas. MacIntyre's reply is that Aristotle and Aquinas both recognize the variety and heterogeneity of goods, understanding them as goods insofar as they are constituents of 'the kind of life directed to *the* good and *the* best.'²⁶⁷ Rawls and Nussbaum can discount Aristotle's ultimate good and transform him into a familiar, sane, modern because they set aside Aristotle's *Politics* and the more metaphysical aspects of Aristotle's account of human nature as determined toward a particular *telos*. Aristotle understands the ultimate good through how the good life is constituted in the *polis*, and how this political life finds its completion with reference to its place in the teleological order of the cosmos.²⁶⁸

To establish the impossibility of aligning MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism with the modernist appropriation of Aristotelian views practiced by Rawls and Nussbaum, MacIntyre clarifies the place of metaphysical explanation in the Aristotelian tradition. He finds in Aquinas the most cogent account of the ultimate human good presupposing an account of human nature.²⁶⁹ Interpreting Aristotle, Aquinas argues that the essence of goodness consists in what is desirable.²⁷⁰ Goodness is what all desire, and all desire their own perfection. Perfection relates to a being's actuality or its existence. Aquinas then argues that being is prior to goodness: for something to be good and desirable, it must be actual—it must

²⁶⁷ *WJWR*, 165. MacIntyre refers to Nussbaum (1978), (1986).

²⁶⁸ *WJWR*, 165-66; *EP*, 4-5.

²⁶⁹ 'I had, without realizing it, presupposed the truth of something very close to the account of the concept of the good that Aquinas gives in question 5 in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*.' *AV*, xi.

²⁷⁰ In *ST* Ia qu.5 ar.1. Aquinas cites Aristotle directly to establish this argument: 'Hence the Philosopher says (*Ethic. i*): "Goodness is what all desire."'

exist.²⁷¹ As being precedes the good, the understanding of the good must also be informed by an understanding of our being, or the kind of natural substance that we are. It is because Aristotle takes this argument to be correct that he explains teleology in terms of the specificities of the human nature. He then gives an account of the specific human *telos* and the specific kind of flourishing that realizes this *telos*.²⁷² MacIntyre explicitly adopts the same structure, even with its cosmological implications.

In order to provide harmony and order for the variety and heterogeneity of goods, addressing the ultimate good, Aristotle formulates a conception of the unifying purpose of all action, which MacIntyre defends. This conception serves as the first principle (*archē*) of practical reasoning. The *archē* is a fixed and unalterable end, providing a permanent, universal standard for evaluating action.²⁷³ It is this metaphysical feature that supplies stability of meaning and thereby objectivity.²⁷⁴ The *archē* is first in the sense that it is the principle, the end, upon which all other acts of practical reasoning are based. Deliberation about acts is about ordering means to achieve a predetermined end. Only insofar as we have an *archē* can we then embark on deliberation.²⁷⁵ The *archē* of practical reasoning is an action-guiding principle, connecting to the *telos* of action. As Aristotle says, 'Deductive arguments concerning what is to be done have an *archē*. Since such and such is the *telos* and the

²⁷¹ In *ST* Ia qu.5 ar.2, Aquinas cites Aristotle directly to establish this argument: 'It is said by Aristotle (*De Causis*) that "the first of created things is being."'

²⁷² Knight (2007), 195.

²⁷³ *TP*, 146.

²⁷⁴ *TP*, 152.

²⁷⁵ *WJWR*, 132-33.

best . . .'²⁷⁶ The *archē* is the principle in accord with which the human agent develops other action-guiding principles that enable the agent to recognize when his desires are pointing him in a direction away from the ultimate good, the wrong direction, and correct them to the right direction.²⁷⁷ There are two aspects to the *archē* of practical reasoning, which MacIntyre describes in the following way. 'We reason theoretically *to* and *about* that ultimate end which is the *archē* of practical enquiry and reasoning, but *from* that *archē* it is by practical reasoning that we are led to particular conclusions about how to act.'²⁷⁸ So while the *archē* is discovered by theory, a proper understanding of the *archē* cannot set aside the characterization of practical reasoning in its own terms that uses the *archē*.

MacIntyre's contention is that while the ultimate human good is metaphysical, the conception of the ultimate human good must be understood first by the place it has in practical reasoning. One must not to set aside the reflection on practical reasoning and social context to find a satisfactory metaphysical explanation derived from theoretical reasoning. Philosophical theory must not dictate what practical reasoning is from a standpoint external to practical reasoning.²⁷⁹ MacIntyre situates himself against two camps. Renaissance Aristotelians assume one can begin with a theory of the ultimate good and then, secondarily, find an application for the theory of the ultimate good in practice.²⁸⁰ They fail for two reasons. First, theoretical arguments about the ultimate good never

²⁷⁶ EN VI 1144a32-35; MacIntyre cites this in *TP*, 146.

²⁷⁷ D'Andrea (2006), 311; *ECM*, 55.

²⁷⁸ *WJWR*, 193. MacIntyre draws from Aquinas, *Commentary on the Ethics* VI, lect. 2.

²⁷⁹ *ECM*, 53.

²⁸⁰ *EP*, 7-18, 36. E.g. Francesco Piccolomini, Leonardo Bruni, and John Case.

succeed in forming the good character that is a requirement of successful practical reasoning.²⁸¹ Second, as contemporary Aristotelians correctly note in criticizing 'Grand End' views of practical reasoning, one does not first need theoretical knowledge of the ultimate good to act correctly. It is mistaken to think that an agent's choice shows the virtue of prudence only if it realizes the agent's grand picture, 'a true and acceptable account of the good.'²⁸² Yet the camp of contemporary Aristotelians mistakenly argue that a genuine Aristotelian position takes the theoretical conception of the ultimate good as irrelevant to agent's practical reasoning.

By contrast, MacIntyre argues that turning to a theoretical conception of the ultimate good helps justify the choices human agents make:

Since what discriminates one kind of character from another is how goods are rank ordered by the agent, and since each rank ordering of goods embodies some conception of what the good life for human beings is, we will be unable to justify our choices until and unless we can justify some conception of the human good.²⁸³

MacIntyre stresses the practical relevance to the agent of a theoretically grounded conception of the human good, which is grounded in metaphysics.²⁸⁴ MacIntyre's statement of the place of *archē* in theoretical reasoning is important here, as it reminds us that it is not an 'epistemological' first principle, as Cartesian philosophy adopts and Aristotelian philosophy must reject. In MacIntyre's telling, Aristotle develops a conception of dialectical enquiry that aims to give an account of the first

²⁸¹ *EP*, 21.

²⁸² Broadie (1991), 198. Cited in *EP*, 22. MacIntyre characterizes Broadie as a 'contemporary Aristotelian.' She argues MacIntyre subscribes to the 'Grand End' view.

²⁸³ *EP*, 36.

²⁸⁴ *EP*, 26.

principles (*archai*) of the field being discussed. But acquiring knowledge of first principles is a process. They are not knowable at the outset of the enquiry.²⁸⁵ Moreover, the conclusion one makes is always in need of further elaboration or development.²⁸⁶

In the course of an agent's practical reasoning, seeking an answer to the question of what sort of human being he should become, the agent discovers what the good is and begins to think theoretically, to philosophize, about the good. It does not mean an agent must first be a theorist or philosopher to act prudently. In this respect the contemporary Aristotelian critique of the 'Grand End' position is correct. Instead it is to say that good rational agents seeking to justify their choices begin theoretical enquiry, and become moral philosophers.²⁸⁷

So what then is the *archē*, the ultimate good of practical reasoning, that theoretical enquiry discovers? MacIntyre's holds off from providing a substantive account. The view that he ascribes to Aristotle emphasizes the dialectical character of this discovery. His Aristotelian tradition provides an 'outline sketch' of *eudaimonia*.²⁸⁸ But it sets aside Aristotle's substantive answer of contemplation as a case of philosophical theorizing failing to characterize the life of practice in its own terms. What MacIntyre prefers to do is list some characteristics of the ultimate good. Its achievement involves a high degree of self-knowledge. It is an end that completes and perfects the life of the agent who achieves it. When other goods are given their due place in the life of the agent, then the agent is directed toward the achievement

²⁸⁵ *TP*, 146-50.

²⁸⁶ See *TP*, 149.

²⁸⁷ *EP*, 35.

²⁸⁸ *EP*, 35.

of his ultimate good, and vice versa.²⁸⁹ This kind of description reinforces features of the ultimate good already known. An additional step, one taken by Thomas Aquinas, is to approach the question negatively and determine what the ultimate good cannot be.²⁹⁰ This rules out a life completely directed to acquisition or possession of money, political honours, reputation, power, health, pleasure, as well as intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual excellence.²⁹¹ This kind of answer makes it clear that MacIntyre is recasting the *ergon* of the human being as one of rational enquiry into the ultimate good.²⁹²

There is one way to describe the content of ultimate good positively. For Aristotle, the content of the human good is determined in a particular way. MacIntyre frequently emphasizes that Aristotle held that one cannot deliberate about one's own good without deliberating about the good of one's community, and vice versa.²⁹³ The *ergon* of the human being cannot be actualized when the human being is detached from the context of the community, the *polis*. In a like manner, MacIntyre holds that the *ergon* of the human being is such that the human agent can only deliberate about his own good while deliberating about the good of the agent's community, embodied in practices, relationships with others, and traditions. The *ergon* of the human being can only be actualized in common.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ *ECM*, 53.

²⁹⁰ *ECM*, 53, 229; MacIntyre refers to *ST* Ia-IIae qu. 2-3; and qu. 2 ar. 1-8. See also D'Andrea (2006), 277.

²⁹¹ *ECM*, 53, 229.

²⁹² See *ECM*, 86.

²⁹³ *EP*, 35. It is 'from within and only from within a given *polis*,' that one can ask what is the ultimate human good. *WJWR*, 133.

²⁹⁴ *ECM*, 51-52; see also *WJWR*, 133.

In the last analysis, the Aristotelian tradition cannot bring forth a protagonist of modernity because the Aristotelian tradition characterizes the *ergon* of the human being in terms anathema to modern liberal individualism. Again, the fundamental opposition is between Aristotle and Nietzsche. In *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre contrasts his neo-Aristotelianism with the Nietzschean conception of the *ergon* of human being. The Nietzschean conception of the *ergon* is that it is actualized when the human being excludes oneself from practices, relationships, and tradition. From MacIntyre's perspective, the Nietzschean denies oneself 'the possibility of understanding what it is to be such a rational agent.'²⁹⁵

To elaborate on the specific human nature that supports this common deliberation about the good, MacIntyre acknowledges that the account of the goods requires a biological explanation, which he develops in *Dependent Rational Animals*.²⁹⁶ The intention of *Dependent Rational Animals* is in a significant way Aristotelian. MacIntyre has fully discarded the initial conviction of *After Virtue*: that it was possible to reconstruct teleology without reference to the 'metaphysical biology' that explains Aristotle's teleology. Nevertheless MacIntyre acknowledges that the biological explanation he offers in *Dependent Rational Animals* is 'not an especially Aristotelian one.'²⁹⁷

In *Dependant Rational Animals*, MacIntyre builds a link between the social practices human beings hold in common with intelligent non-human animals like

²⁹⁵ *ECM*, 58.

²⁹⁶ *DRA*, x.

²⁹⁷ *AV*, xi.

dolphins and gorillas. The social practices of each involve the pursuit of respective goods—what contributes to the flourishing of a member of that species. MacIntyre argues that intelligent non-human animals are, like human beings, capable of practical reasoning. Whether we are speaking of humans, dolphins, or gorillas, when we describe them acting to pursue their goods the meaning of ‘goods’ is ‘precisely the same.’²⁹⁸ MacIntyre believes that philosophers have overemphasized the distinctions between human and non-human animals, obscuring resemblances.²⁹⁹ MacIntyre regards the focus on human animality—the emphasis of the features human animals share with non-human animals—as an Aristotelian regard, for ‘no philosopher has taken human animality more seriously.’³⁰⁰

To identify what is specifically human flourishing, MacIntyre follows Aristotle in identifying human flourishing with a specifically human activity. As opposed to dolphins, human beings need to understand themselves as practical reasoners about goods, and argue and learn from others about human flourishing.³⁰¹ All this helps us judge truly for ourselves what is good. Human flourishing is not possible without this independence of judgement. Unlike gorillas and dolphins, the specific activity that must be realized for human flourishing is for the human being to be an independent practical reasoner. Independence here signifies that we humans, using language in different ways than animals, evaluate our own social

²⁹⁸ *DRA*, 61; 64.

²⁹⁹ *DRA*, 49-51.

³⁰⁰ *DRA*, 5.

³⁰¹ *DRA*, 67-68.

practices and the social practices of others. This enables us to judge and act on our own.³⁰²

Now, Aristotle held that the criterion of self-sufficiency is a requirement of the ultimate good. Aristotle argued that the *megalopsychos* (the magnanimous or great-souled man) is a paragon of virtue because he is self-sufficient. For example, the *megalopsychos* is ashamed to receive benefits because it is the mark of an inferior to receive benefits.³⁰³ By contrast, MacIntyre criticizes Aristotle's *megalopsychos* for indulging in the illusion of self-sufficiency. Aristotle loses sight of our animal dependency, and assumes that the human being does not require the communal relationships of others in order to live well. This is a mistake also made by Nietzsche.³⁰⁴ To establish a stronger difference between Nietzsche's individualism and neo-Aristotelianism requires dropping the *megalopsychia* from the virtues. So MacIntyre turns 'Aristotle against Aristotle' with 'the aid of Aquinas.'³⁰⁵

While MacIntyre follows Aristotle in arguing that we need the virtues because of the kind of biological being we are, he emphasizes different virtues, arguing that we are rational animals whose vulnerability (susceptibility to disability and affliction) throughout most of life makes us mutually dependent on one another. To become independent practical reasoners, we require the constant aid and assistance of other independent practical reasoners.³⁰⁶ The virtues that enable us to

³⁰² *DRA*, 71-77; Knight (2007), 197-98.

³⁰³ *DRA* 7, 127; MacIntyre cites *EN* 1124b 9-10.

³⁰⁴ *DRA*, 162-65; Knight (2007), 198-99.

³⁰⁵ *DRA*, 8.

³⁰⁶ *DRA*, 81-98; D'Andrea (2006), 378.

become independent practical reasoners are the virtues that foster these relationships of aid and assistance, the virtues of ‘acknowledged dependency.’³⁰⁷ A key virtue of acknowledged dependency is what MacIntyre calls the virtue of ‘just generosity.’³⁰⁸ To conceptualize the virtue of just generosity MacIntyre follows Aquinas against Aristotle. MacIntyre replaces Aristotle’s flawed virtue of *megalopsychia* with Aquinas’s virtue of *misericordia* (mercy or pity). *Misericordia* calls us to meet the urgent needs of our fellow human beings, notably when situations of vulnerability arise.³⁰⁹ Only when we can depend on others can the goods human beings seek to pursue in their social practices be realized. The communal life that Aristotle argued belongs essentially to human beings can thereby be realized only when the virtue of *misericordia* is considered the greatest of virtues in relating to our neighbour.³¹⁰

MacIntyre’s argument in *Dependent Rational Animals* thus exposes two points of rupture with Aristotle. First, it shows how MacIntyre develops Aristotle’s *ergon* argument in a different way than Aristotle. MacIntyre believes Aquinas’s account of the virtue is correct because of the human biological condition of mutual dependency. The human *ergon* is explained in terms of mutual dependency, which underwrite the conditions for human flourishing. Aristotle, for his part, stressed self-sufficiency to establish his theory of the key virtues and the ultimate good. The human *ergon* is explained by the activity of the human being, the self-sufficiency of the rational soul, which bears the least resemblance to animals. Self-sufficiency

³⁰⁷ *DRA*, 120.

³⁰⁸ *DRA*, 121-23; for a concise explanation of the virtue of ‘just generosity’ see Dunne (2013), 65.

³⁰⁹ *DRA*, 123-28; MacIntyre is interpreting *ST* IIa-IIae qu. 30 ar. 3, qu. 31 ar. 3.

³¹⁰ *DRA*, 125; MacIntyre cites *ST* IIa-IIae qu. 30 ar. 4.

thereby underwrites the condition for human flourishing. By contrast, MacIntyre's explanation of the human *ergon* comes from human social practices that most resemble animals.³¹¹

A second rupture lies in the consequence of MacIntyre's rejection of self-sufficiency. For Aristotle, self-sufficiency ultimately justifies the best human life, the contemplative life, because it is the life that is the most self-sufficient. MacIntyre cannot accept that argument.³¹² So one part of MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism sets aside Aristotle's answer of the contemplative life as the best life, for not properly characterizing the life of practice in its own terms. Yet another part, developed in *Dependent Rational Animals*, rejects the substance of Aristotle's contemplative life as the best life.

These two ruptures emerge because of the differences between Aquinas and Aristotle. In opposing Aquinas's *miser cordia* to Aristotle's *megalopsychia*, MacIntyre concedes that there is greater opposition between Aquinas and Aristotle than he had initially thought.³¹³ To be virtuous, Aquinas wishes *not* to share in the attitudes of Aristotle's *megalopsychos*.³¹⁴ Thus it is Aquinas, not Aristotle, who provides a correct theory of the virtues. Moreover, it is Aquinas, not Aristotle, who provides an account of the best life.

V. Thomism and the Final End of Human Life

MacIntyre had claimed in *After Virtue* that his account was not Aristotelian in two ways: it does not require allegiance to Aristotle's metaphysical biology, and it

³¹¹ Knight (2007), 200.

³¹² Knight (2007), 200. See *EN* 1177a28-1177b1.

³¹³ *DRA*, x-xi; *AV*, xi.

³¹⁴ *DRA*, xi.

gives an account of moral dilemmas, that does not spring from a character flaw alone. In his later revisions, he made his account Aristotelian in both these ways. Moreover, he subscribed to the unity of the virtues. He also saw sufficient continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas to adopt Aquinas's formulations of these issues, as well as adopting Aquinas's views on the natural law.

One might wonder why MacIntyre chose to identify himself as a Thomist rather than as an Aristotelian who agreed with Aquinas's elaborations on Aristotle's positions. The best answer is that on MacIntyre's own account of philosophy, philosophical positions are always embedded within traditions of enquiry and cannot be articulated intelligibly outside of a tradition of enquiry. A philosophical person is trained into a tradition, but it may never have been explicitly formulated for them. For that reason, a philosophical person can experience 'a shock of recognition' when she encounters a coherent presentation of tradition: '*this* is not only, so such a person may say, what I now take to be true but in some measure what I have always taken to be true.'³¹⁵ MacIntyre's self-identification as a Thomist is such an instance in the biography of a philosophical person. Upon studying Aquinas more carefully, his shock of recognition was that even during the period of his self-identification with Aristotelianism he had 'in some measure' always taken the prominent philosophical positions of Thomism to be true.

This also applies to MacIntyre's Catholicism. He was received into the Catholic Church in 1983, following the publication of *After Virtue*. MacIntyre had turned to Karl Barth as a counter to liberal theology's lack of real faith, but through

³¹⁵ *WJWR*, 394.

Barth, MacIntyre had lost his own faith. He learned from Barth to separate rational philosophical argument from theology, considering them as two wholly separate spheres. MacIntyre then realized he could not rationally justify religious belief. Later, MacIntyre learned why the separation Barth made was false.³¹⁶ Here Aristotelianism played a major role. 'I was only able to respond to the teaching of the Church,' said MacIntyre, 'because I had already learned from Aristotelianism both the nature of the mistakes involved in my earlier rejection of Christianity, and how to understand aright the relation of philosophical argument to theological inquiry.'³¹⁷

MacIntyre's interpretation of Aristotle acknowledged that according to Aristotle, reason could show that God exists and that it is possible to gain knowledge of God in some sense. According to MacIntyre, Aristotle's best human life takes place 'in the overall life of the *polis*, which itself has to be understood, in this light, as existing for the sake of that in human beings which links them to the divine. All rational practical activity has as its ultimate final cause the vision, so far as it is open to human beings, of what God sees.'³¹⁸ Once MacIntyre granted that reason could gain knowledge of God in some sense, there was no longer the complete separation between philosophy and theology that Barth imagined. The pressing question is what 'in some sense' means. In answering this question, MacIntyre was helped by Thomas Aquinas and his doctrine of analogy.³¹⁹ MacIntyre holds that Thomism's specifically *religious* conclusions—that knowledge of God is in some sense possible

³¹⁶ MacIntyre (1994b), 257.

³¹⁷ MacIntyre (1994b), 266.

³¹⁸ *WJWR*, 143.

³¹⁹ Perreau-Saussine (2005), 145-46.

and that he exists—have intrinsic philosophical merit consonant with Aristotelianism.³²⁰ Barth's anxiety, that any theology too close to philosophy succumbed to liberal theology and to liberalism, no longer troubled MacIntyre: liberalism could be refuted on the secular philosophical grounds Aristotelianism provided.³²¹ Yet to adopt Thomist elaborations of Aristotelianism meant MacIntyre was working from within the Thomist tradition and had recognized its conclusions to be correct. So he identified himself with Thomism.

There is then an additional step to take. Once the identification with this tradition becomes part of the life of the philosophical person, rationality requires of such a person that:

he or she confirm or disconfirm over time this initial view of his or her relationship to this particular tradition of enquiry by engaging, to whatever degree is appropriate, both in the ongoing arguments within that tradition and in argumentative debates and conflicts of that tradition of enquiry with one or more of its rivals.³²²

Once MacIntyre has identified as a Thomist, he must debate from that perspective. So he engages in ongoing arguments within Thomism, as well as elaborating debates with traditions of enquiry that conflict with Thomism.

In the process of doing so, he makes the following discovery. He had initially identified a strong continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas. He regards his views about the relationship between theology and philosophy as part of the continuity. Nevertheless, he discovered that he could not pass over the points of discontinuity

³²⁰ See also D'Andrea (2006), 389-93.

³²¹ 'My philosophy... is secular in its content as any other.' MacIntyre (1994b), 266. See also MacIntyre's account of the self-understanding of early 20th century Thomists, *ECM*, 106.

³²² *WJWR*, 394.

and rupture between Aristotle and Aquinas on the content of the virtues and of the best life. Complete reconciliation between the two eludes MacIntyre.

What then is MacIntyre's account of the best life, and in what way does he regard it as Aristotelian? To answer the question of the best life, he recasts Aristotle's life of theoretical contemplation into an account of the practice of theoretical enquiry provided by Thomism. As a Thomist, he does not regard his account as identical to Aristotle. As outlined above, the most significant ruptures between Aristotle and MacIntyre's Thomism arise in MacIntyre's rejection of self-sufficiency in life as illusory, entailing a rejection of *megalopsychia* as well as Aristotle's contemplative life as the best life. There was a sign of this latter rupture in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre described theoretical activity as a practice. Aristotle never did this, and was insistent on distinguishing between *praxis* and *theōria*: *praxis* concerns the realm of what is contingent and could be other than it is, and *theōria* concerns the realm of what is eternal and unchanging.

Following *After Virtue*, MacIntyre did develop his Aristotelianism to confirm, that philosophical enquiry must be theoretical in Aristotle's sense: it must address the realm of what is eternal and unchanging. After all, MacIntyre acknowledges that he cannot justify his account of teleology without a metaphysical explanation taking the form of a defence of first principles. '*Archē/principium* and *telos/finis*, so it must seem, stand or fall together.'³²³ As described above, the *archē* is decisively metaphysical. It is a fixed and unalterable end, providing a permanent, universal standard for evaluating action. MacIntyre holds that this un-modern conclusion is a

³²³ *TP*, 146.

reasonable conclusion to make. The distinctiveness of Aristotelianism in both theoretical explanation and practical rationality is its first principle of the reasonableness of a 'final good' or 'final end,' to introduce MacIntyre's Thomist vocabulary for the 'ultimate good.'³²⁴

For MacIntyre's activity of theoretical enquiry to be a 'practice' in his use of the term, one must be able to identify a *telos* or distinctive good internal to the activity of enquiry.³²⁵ Although neither Aristotle nor Aquinas systematically discusses the practical activity of enquiry, MacIntyre argues that Aristotle supplies this *telos* in *Posterior Analytics*. This text provides the account of a perfected science, a perfected type of understanding or theoretical enquiry.³²⁶ *Posterior Analytics* helps clarify that 'achieved understanding is the theoretical goal of the practical activity of enquiry.'³²⁷ Aristotle's account, filled out by Aquinas and other Aristotelian interpreters, argues that understanding is only achieved once one grasps the *archai*. Consequently, theoretical enquiry has as its *telos* what is eternal and unchanging.³²⁸ Moreover, enquiry aims at completion or finality. At least theoretically, there is a final terminus for enquiry. MacIntyre finds this conclusion particularly important in defending his metaphysical realism, because it allows us to justify why a notion of truth involves an absolute standpoint.³²⁹ 'About truth itself Aristotle said very little,' writes MacIntyre, so he looks to Aquinas for a 'more extended account.'³³⁰

³²⁴ Knight (2007), 165.

³²⁵ *TP*, 156.

³²⁶ *TP*, 155.

³²⁷ *TP*, 156.

³²⁸ *TP*, 156-57.

³²⁹ *TP*, 208; 157-58.

³³⁰ *TP*, 159.

Describing the practice of philosophical or theoretical enquiry within the Thomist tradition, MacIntyre supplies four characteristics. First, all men desire to know and understand, so philosophy pursues questions posed by human beings in general.³³¹ Professional philosophers elaborate questions about the universe and the ends of life that are first explored by ‘plain persons,’ ordinary people untrained as philosophers.³³² Second, philosophy as practice has and develops its own standards of excellence, including a semi-technical vocabulary, and its own specializations.³³³ Good philosophical practice preserves as the central topics for developing its standard of excellence or internal goods ‘the nature of truth, of good, of rational justification, and of meaning.’³³⁴ Moreover, good philosophical practice develops its own standards of excellence without losing sight of the questions about the universe and the ends of life first explored by plain persons.³³⁵ Third, philosophy provides a system: it provides a comprehensive vision of the good, the ends of life, and the order of things.³³⁶ Good philosophical practice contributes to previously existing conversations about this system, acknowledging the role future participants have to make further contributions.³³⁷ Fourth, philosophy can learn from God’s revelation. This relationship is a complex one, but there are two conceptions of this relationship to which MacIntyre does not subscribe. Revelation is not supposed to put a decisive end to the rational enquiries of philosophy, showing philosophy to be

³³¹ *TP*, 180.

³³² *TP*, 187. For an account of ‘plain persons,’ see MacIntyre (1992). MacIntyre intends the term to be fairly universal, but ‘plain persons’ might be far less common than he thinks. Beiner (2014), 183-88.

³³³ *TP*, 180.

³³⁴ *TP*, 131.

³³⁵ *TP*, 130.

³³⁶ *TP*, 181.

³³⁷ *TP*, 130-31.

redundant and unnecessary before the claims of revelation. Nor is philosophy limited as a prologue to revelation, after which it must be silent. Instead, revelation ennobles philosophy: it provides new resources and teaches philosophical enquiry where it can best pursue further questions. A holy life does not stop being a philosophical life.³³⁸

While the further details of this account are beyond the present study, it is important to note two Aristotelian features. Carrying on from his characterization of Aristotle's dialectics as a provisional kind of enquiry, MacIntyre's Thomist account emphasizes that progress in enquiry is always open to future contributions, making progress in philosophy provisional. Aristotle's dialectics is in search of *archai* as its *telos*.³³⁹ To reach the *telos* of truth is a long, challenging, and sometimes frustrating process, and conclusions admit of further possible revision. Yet MacIntyre emphasizes the provisional character of enquiry more than Aristotle or Aquinas ever explicitly did; though he thinks Aquinas's conclusions were more provisional than Aristotle's, making his emphasis more Thomist than Aristotelian.³⁴⁰ MacIntyre's reflections on the provisional character of knowledge take full form through his concept of a tradition of enquiry, which competes with rival traditions in order to provide the most rationally justifiable account of reality.

Second, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* provide the context within which theoretical enquiry takes place.³⁴¹ While MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's characterization of self-sufficiency as illusory, in turning 'Aristotle against Aristotle'

³³⁸ *TP*, 182; 213-14.

³³⁹ *TP*, 162.

³⁴⁰ *TP*, 163, 166-67.

³⁴¹ *TP*, 164.

he can concentrate on the insights of the context that Aristotle provides for theoretical enquiry. Aristotle ostensibly presents two conflicting accounts of the best life; one, a solitary theoretical activity contemplating the eternal and unchanging; and two, the life of moral and political virtue realized in common. Aristotle appears to make the life of moral and political virtue inferior.³⁴² MacIntyre's interpretation is that both lives need to be combined. While Aristotle sees the moral and political life as subordinate to the life of contemplative enquiry, the latter is impossible without the former. The two modes of life must be combined in the *polis*, and the *polis* exists 'for the sake of that in human beings which links them to the divine. All rational practical activity has as its ultimate final cause the vision, so far as it is open to human beings, of what God sees.'³⁴³

MacIntyre therefore argues that philosophical enquiry in the Aristotelian tradition is an inherently social activity. 'In important matters we deliberate with others,' wrote Aristotle, 'not relying on ourselves for certitude'.³⁴⁴ Aristotle's and Aquinas's remarks, writes MacIntyre, 'could have been made just as aptly about theoretical as about practical thinking'.³⁴⁵ Solitary deliberation fails. We need from others the virtues of objectivity—a shared commitment to pursue truth.³⁴⁶ Moreover, the life of theoretical enquiry requires certain virtues, both moral and intellectual.³⁴⁷ These virtues are at play in fostering the characteristics of good philosophical practice. MacIntyre also connects the context of philosophical practice

³⁴² *WJWR*, 142. MacIntyre cites *EN* 1177a12-1178b32.

³⁴³ *WJWR*, 143.

³⁴⁴ *EP*, 73. MacIntyre cites *EN* 1112b10-11.

³⁴⁵ *EP*, 73.

³⁴⁶ *EP*, 74.

³⁴⁷ *TP*, 164.

to trying to see the world from the absolute standpoint, *sub specie aeternitatis*—as earlier noted, a tenet of metaphysical realism. MacIntyre's conception of philosophical practice so that it is friendly to the insights of revelation can be regarded as an extension of this aspect of the Aristotelian context. MacIntyre's account of philosophical activity emphasizes the features of moral and political life, the study of what is good and the ends of life, alongside the cosmological order of things.

This context also clarifies how MacIntyre treats the question of the best life, the one that best realizes the final end or ultimate good of the human being. As noted above, MacIntyre's hesitancy to provide a concrete answer to what the ultimate good means he approaches it by ruling out what it is not and what kind of life it does not involve. He emphasizes the enquiry rather than a particular answer. For MacIntyre, the *ergon* of the human being is one of rational enquiry into the ultimate good. MacIntyre's account of philosophical practice is not of an activity of rational enquiry reserved to a privileged professional set. Instead, plain persons first pose philosophical questions. Self-questioning is a general human activity. Second, MacIntyre holds that the *ergon* of the human being is such that the human agent can only deliberate about his own good while deliberating about the good of the agent's community, embodied in practices, relationships with others, and traditions. The *ergon* of the human being can only be actualized in common; while Aristotle said it must be actualized in the *polis*, MacIntyre's Thomism substitutes for the *polis* the family and political community.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ *TP*, 194.

Nevertheless, these are descriptions of what would be required to live the best life. They do not explain what the best life would be, beyond that it requires seeking what is the best life. MacIntyre's rejection of self-sufficiency as an illusion deprives him of the Aristotelian criterion for explaining what the best life would be. He is left with no specific explanation of the content of the best life.

This is MacIntyre's intention.³⁴⁹ MacIntyre avoids a theoretical explanation of the best life and the final end that characterizes it for the aforementioned reason: he does not want to commit to a theoretical explanation of the life of practice that fails to characterize the life of practice in its own terms. Additionally, MacIntyre thinks his reticence to give a comprehensive account of the final end is faithful to the nature of theoretical enquiry. The provisional character of theoretical enquiry means that we cannot expect a definitive answer to the ultimate end of human life. Here MacIntyre shows how he prefers Aquinas to Aristotle. While Aristotle thought he could definitively conclude that the final end is theoretical contemplation, Aquinas defers the final end to an otherworldly future. For MacIntyre, this means that the answers reason provides are tentative.³⁵⁰ The application of MacIntyre's Thomism preserves the provisional character of theoretical enquiry. Yet it acknowledges that theology could provide more definitive answers, which could in turn inspire new philosophical enquiry. Nevertheless in his major writings MacIntyre remains neutral with regard to theological commitments, not arguing

³⁴⁹ C.f. Beiner (2014), 170.

³⁵⁰ *WJWR*, 193; Knight (2007), 196.

from these commitments. He thereby invites his readers to debate him on philosophical, rather than theological grounds.³⁵¹

There is, however, an additional purpose in MacIntyre's reticence. It indicates that he supports the Thomistic account of the final end. He is not rejecting self-sufficiency as a characteristic of the most perfect good. He is instead arguing that self-sufficiency is not found where Aristotle thought it was found, in great-souled or contemplative activity lived in this present, finite life. Aristotle failed to recognize that these activities require the virtues of acknowledged dependency for their realization. For a Thomist, Aristotle did not grasp the final end correctly; consequently, his account of practical reasoning is not merely incomplete, but radically defective.³⁵² MacIntyre acquiesces to the Thomist critique of Aristotle in two ways: he suggests theoretical enquiry reveals that no good discovered in present, finite human life can be satisfying for human nature, and he implies that as self-sufficiency is not found in any present human life. Self-sufficiency, and the perfect good satisfying human nature, is found only outside and beyond this present, finite life.³⁵³ Aquinas uses this argument to explain why the final end of the beatific vision is suggested by human nature, and is therefore a reasonable conclusion to consider. MacIntyre follows this approach in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. By frequently stressing the incomplete character of the final end discerned through practical reasoning in this present life, MacIntyre asks his reader to consider what a complete or perfected life would look like. His intellectual

³⁵¹ D'Andrea (2006), 392.

³⁵² *WJWR*, 193.

³⁵³ *TRV* 137-38; *WJWR*, 192. MacIntyre refers to *ST* Ia-IIae qu. 5 ar. 4.

practice is not that of a Thomist theologian, however. He concludes *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* by raising the question of what a perfected life would look like; yet he halts his enquiry at the point where it would address natural theology.³⁵⁴

VI. Revolutionary Aristotelianism

MacIntyre's theoretical argument, developed throughout his work, is that the Aristotelian tradition elaborated by Aquinas provides the best response to modern liberal individualism. MacIntyre's clarifications and elaborations of this theoretical argument constitute the majority of his academic work, but it is imperative not to let this quantity distort the purpose of his project. To repeat again his crucial maxim, a philosophy presupposes a sociology. A corollary of this claim is that philosophical theory is embodied within social practices. MacIntyre's opposition to modern liberal individualism is not only a theoretical conflict, as the theoretical mistakes of modern liberal individualism are embodied in the dominant institutions of social life. Providing a better theory to modern liberal individualism is an important part of challenging it, but it is ultimately insufficient for correcting liberal individualism. It must be challenged in social life, in the institutions that embody it.³⁵⁵

Modern liberal individualism is embodied in the institutions of the state, the market, and 'Morality.'³⁵⁶ These three institutions are linked. Although the state claims to be political, to realize the common good, it represents institutionalized interests. The state is united in an indissoluble partnership with the market. Its Weberian bureaucrats share a need with private corporations for capital formation,

³⁵⁴ See *ECM*, 315.

³⁵⁵ MacIntyre (1994a), 228-29; Knight (2007), 174.

³⁵⁶ *ECM*, 166.

economic growth, and a trained yet disposable labour force whose members 'are also compliant consumers and law abiding citizens.'³⁵⁷ 'Morality' helps to shield these institutions from rational criticism.

For MacIntyre, no political tradition offers a practical alternative to the institutions of modern liberal individualism. Marxism and all political traditions are exhausted.³⁵⁸ This is true of the Aristotelian tradition as well. Aristotle's context for human life, including philosophical enquiry, culminates in the *polis* as the ideal form of political community. But recovering the *polis* is not an option for MacIntyre. The historical and social circumstances that led to its emergence in ancient Greece no longer exist. There is no practically applicable path to reviving it. Moreover, even nostalgia for the *polis* would be misplaced. The *polis* is for MacIntyre a seriously deficient political form in terms of justice.³⁵⁹ After all, it excluded slaves, women, artisans, and non-Greeks from participation in it.

Some of MacIntyre's more subtle critics have argued that he does not take up the theme central to Aristotle's *Politics*: the question of the best regime. Aristotle's analysis of the *polis* points to different political regimes, ways of governance into which the city can be arranged. This raises the question of which regime is best for realizing human perfection. Aristotle thus makes the question of the best regime central to the *Politics*.³⁶⁰ MacIntyre does briefly consider the best regime, the best kind of *polis*, yet does not see it as a live political option for Aristotelianism. The

³⁵⁷ *EP*, 211; Knight (2007), 170.

³⁵⁸ *AV*, 262.

³⁵⁹ *Pace* Nussbaum (1989): MacIntyre longs 'nostalgically for a unanimity that human life has never really had.' See Lutz (2012), 179-80; D'Andrea (2006), 421-26.

³⁶⁰ Perreau-Saussine (2005), 54, 128; Manent (2005), 2-3, 5-6.

restructuring of the best kind of *polis* to remedy its injustices, the *polis* that could admit slaves, women, artisans, and non-Greeks, and allow them to participate fully in the life of the *polis*, would be inconceivable to Aristotle.³⁶¹ Moreover, it makes Aristotle's *polis* incoherent, since he simultaneously describes a human *ergon*, while excluding the vast majority of humans from realizing it.³⁶²

If all political traditions are exhausted, including Aristotle's regime, there is no practical political alternative to the liberal regime at present. It is here to stay for the foreseeable future.³⁶³ MacIntyre accepts this.³⁶⁴ By immigrating into the United States in 1969, he acquiesces to the rule of liberalism exemplified by the United States. In his life, liberalism's 'political solution' becomes the default solution.³⁶⁵ Attempts to overthrow liberalism end in 'terrorism or quasi terrorism.'³⁶⁶ Stalinism and other extremist ideologies are ruled out; he is willing to tolerate alliances with liberal states to defeat these ideologies.³⁶⁷ The reason, therefore, that MacIntyre drops Aristotle's question of the best regime is because the practical answer at present is liberalism.³⁶⁸

However, MacIntyre's Aristotle remains radically political. His reconstruction of the politics of the Aristotelian tradition focuses not on the theory of politics or the

³⁶¹ *WJWR*, 105.

³⁶² *ECM*, 86.

³⁶³ *AV*, 255.

³⁶⁴ As Perreau-Saussine has argued. He deploys a MacIntyrean account of philosophical biography, where details of biographical life play a role in understanding the narrative of the philosopher's life. See *TP*, 132. For MacIntyre's own self-understanding of what he had learned from living in the United States, see MacIntyre (1994b), 266.

³⁶⁵ *AV*, 255; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 53.

³⁶⁶ MacIntyre (1994b), 265.

³⁶⁷ MacIntyre (1997), 252.

³⁶⁸ In this sense, Perreau-Saussine is correct to say that MacIntyre 'radically depoliticizes' Aristotle: MacIntyre analyses man and the requirements of moral life, as they are realized in social practices, stopping there and not relating these to the best regime. Perreau-Saussine (2005), 54.

best regime but on the basic level of practice.³⁶⁹ For MacIntyre, to resist the institutions of the liberalism requires eventually building up new, alternative institutions. The source of institutions lies in practices. So rather than speculate about the institutions required in the best regime, MacIntyre sees the more fundamental issue in specifying what kinds of political practices need to be encouraged. His goal is not to reform and replace the dominant order of liberal individualism. Rather, he hopes to subvert it by fostering the kinds of practices that enable the right kind of character formation, habituation in the virtues, which would permit human agents to work together to achieve the good.³⁷⁰

MacIntyre argues for three different forms of resistance to the liberal institutional order. First, he argues for passive resistance, refusing to participate in the activities of the liberal state since it always results in 'collaboration.'³⁷¹ For example, MacIntyre argues that one should not vote.³⁷² He urges adopting the strategy of withdrawal and resistance pursued by St Benedict, meaning communal retreat from participation in liberal institutions.³⁷³ In later works, MacIntyre elaborated on two additional forms of resistance informed by the politics of the Aristotelian tradition. These are pursuing common projects that conflict with the managerial institutions of the state, and active resistance that weakens the power of unjust institutions.³⁷⁴

³⁶⁹ Knight (2011), 34.

³⁷⁰ MacIntyre (2011a), 12-13; Knight (2011), 30, 32-34.

³⁷¹ MacIntyre (1994b), 265.

³⁷² Knight (2007), 179-80.

³⁷³ AV, 263; see xvi for MacIntyre's later clarification.

³⁷⁴ For further elaboration see Knight (2007), 179-89.

The effort to achieve the good together is an essential feature of the politics in the Aristotelian tradition. For Aristotle, the activity of the *polis* presupposes that there is an ultimate good for the human being. It aims to discover it.³⁷⁵ In the absence of the *polis*, a genuinely Aristotelian political practice must be ordered for the sake of the ultimate good.³⁷⁶ Moreover, an essential step in understanding the good is that the good qua individual is only achieved by directing oneself to common goods. The pursuit of the ultimate good requires addressing and ranking these common goods as well.³⁷⁷ For MacIntyre's Aristotelianism, participation in politics is reasoning together about the ultimate good.³⁷⁸

The good life is in an important way also the life of political action; politics cannot be an optional activity for the agent informed by the Aristotelian tradition.³⁷⁹ Politics in the Aristotelian tradition does not demarcate between morality and politics. In modernity, when institutions hostile to Aristotelian tradition dominate, the virtues play an important role in achieving the common good in defiance of the institutional obstructions of liberal individualism.³⁸⁰ Moreover, for Aristotelianism the virtue of justice cannot come into being in the soul without making efforts to realize justice in actual social contexts.³⁸¹ In that way, active resistance to liberal individualism that weakens unjust institutions is part of living a good life.³⁸²

³⁷⁵ *WJWR*, 134.

³⁷⁶ Knight (2007), 178.

³⁷⁷ *ECM*, 175.

³⁷⁸ Knight (2007), 179.

³⁷⁹ *ECM*, 182.

³⁸⁰ *ECM*, 178, 82.

³⁸¹ *WJWR*, 89-97; D'Andrea (2006), 301.

³⁸² Knight (2007), 186.

MacIntyre needs to show that his account of Aristotelian politics and morals has contemporary relevance. He must specify 'what kind of practice it is within which in his particular time and place the form of an Aristotelian moral and political life can be realized.'³⁸³ He therefore draws attention to three important characteristics of the mode of social and political practice that Aristotle's theory of politics presupposed.

First, the practice of Aristotelian community must be informed by shared deliberation. It must be a type of practice in which there is sufficient agreement about goods and how to order them, to provide shared standards for rational deliberation on both moral and political questions.³⁸⁴ MacIntyre's account of the role of natural law here comes into force, as he argues that such rational deliberation is only possible when there is shared recognition of the authority of the precepts of the natural law.³⁸⁵

Second, the activities of these communities presuppose shared standards of rational justification independent of the de facto interests and preferences of members. These standards help define the common good. No other pre-rational or non-rational bond, whether ethnic, religious, or cultural, can substitute for these standards.³⁸⁶ An Aristotelian political community is a community of rational enquiry, not just a community linked through pre-rational bonds.³⁸⁷ To meet this standard of rational enquiry is exacting. Although MacIntyre is frequently classified

³⁸³ *EP*, 18; 5-6, 38-39; *ECM*, 176.

³⁸⁴ *EP*, 39.

³⁸⁵ *ECM*, 178; *DRA*, 111.

³⁸⁶ *EP*, 39; *ECM*, 177.

³⁸⁷ MacIntyre (1997), 241.

as a communitarian, this is incorrect for one overriding reason. He never praises communities as such. Instead he argues that the best human life is embodied in communities directed toward the common good. MacIntyre is unflinchingly critical toward communities that fail to realize the common good—as communities often do.³⁸⁸ The precepts of the natural law provide this exacting standard for radical social critique, for they are such that ‘any’ violation constitutes a threat to justice and the common good.³⁸⁹

Third, the practice of an Aristotelian community must be small and local. Widely shared participation in deliberation, if it is to lead to effective decision-making that realizes the common good, requires a community small enough for its members to hold each other to account. To succeed in this end again requires justice: the community must avoid conflicts of interest that arise from too great inequalities.³⁹⁰ These kinds of communities, argues MacIntyre, are incompatible with the nation-state and the market, and must remain small to protect themselves from their destructive incursions.³⁹¹ These kinds of communities are found within the households, fishing crews, farming cooperatives, schools, clinics, neighbourhoods, and small towns.³⁹² Since *After Virtue*, MacIntyre has argued that the pursuit of these common projects is one of the most important forms of resistance to liberal individualism. Pursuing these projects is the modern equivalent of founding a *polis*.³⁹³ MacIntyre’s focus on these kinds of communities leads to the

³⁸⁸ MacIntyre (1997), 243-46; *AV*, xiv-xv; Perreau-Saussine (2005), 44-46.

³⁸⁹ *EP*, 48. The emphasis is MacIntyre’s. See also MacIntyre (1997), 247; *ECM*, 89.

³⁹⁰ *EP*, 39; MacIntyre (1997), 250; MacIntyre (2011a), 13.

³⁹¹ MacIntyre (1997), 248.

³⁹² *ECM*, 110.

³⁹³ *AV*, 151.

charge that he preaches romantic localism, but this charge misunderstands his intention.³⁹⁴ The basis for these forms of communities is not in their particular place or locality, but in their exemplification of certain practices. MacIntyre praises particular communities because they do what theory cannot: they succeed in defending rational enquiry, fostering the virtues of human agents, and caring for common goods against institutional corruption and managerial manipulation.³⁹⁵ These communities succeed in caring for the common good, so unlike the liberal state, they succeed in justifying the exercise of political authority over their members.³⁹⁶

Nevertheless the successes of these projects are fragile. MacIntyre is under no illusions that the refusal to collaborate with the institutions of liberal individualism, active resistance to liberal individualism, and pursuing common projects informed by the Aristotelian tradition will achieve victory over the institutions of liberalism. The barbarians alluded to at the end of *After Virtue* are set to rule for a long time.³⁹⁷ The present moment, then, is marked by a long, drawn-out, twilight struggle between two rival philosophies of practical reasoning. It is a struggle that fractures the thinking of rational agents, and no one can escape this

³⁹⁴ See D'Andrea (2006), 421-26.

³⁹⁵ MacIntyre (2011a), 14-16; Knight (2011), 32.

³⁹⁶ Murphy (2003), 152-53, 160-61.

³⁹⁷ *AV*, 263. MacIntyre's reflections on the institution of the university exemplify his pessimism. Although MacIntyre defends the Thomist practice of theoretical enquiry, he argues that even at the impressive moment of its foundation, when it was immediately relevant to philosophers and plain persons, the Thomist practice did not succeed in securing institutional support, due to voluntarism's doubts about a unified subject of theoretical enquiry (*TRV*, 158-61; *ECM*, 93; MacIntyre (2009), 97-98, 101-2; D'Andrea (2006), 363-64). As the modern university has institutionalized the disagreements that characterize liberal society, reform for the sake of the Thomist practice of theoretical enquiry is perhaps impossible. MacIntyre (2009), 173-80; *ECM*, 177.

condition entirely.³⁹⁸ The critical political difference is that liberalism controls the institutions, and the Aristotelian tradition does not. The critical theoretical difference is that the Aristotelian tradition aims at discovering the final end for human beings. Liberalism does not.³⁹⁹

Conclusion

Toward the end of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre crystallizes his neo-Aristotelian philosophy of practical reasoning into four integrated conclusions:

Agents do well only if and when they act to satisfy only those desires whose objects they have good reason to desire, that only agents who are sound and effective practical reasoners so act, that such agents must be disposed to act as the virtues require, and that such agents will be directed in their actions toward the achievement of their final end.⁴⁰⁰

Each of these four conclusions generates their particular philosophical controversies. Yet for MacIntyre, they stand and fall together with the last conclusion, which brazenly challenges modern liberal individualism: that agents do well only if and when they directed their actions toward the achievement of their final end. Since *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's philosophical preoccupation has been to give the best account and defence of the concept of final end, ultimate good, or *telos*, and the role it plays in human agency.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre began the reconstruction of the Aristotelian tradition of enquiry on the virtues and the ultimate human good. He constructed a neo-Aristotelian account of teleology that in large part agreed with the specific

³⁹⁸ *ECM*, 167.

³⁹⁹ *ECM*, 182-83; Knight (2007), 188.

⁴⁰⁰ *ECM*, 243.

positions of Aristotle, but also rejected several prominent positions Aristotle took. In *After Virtue*, he developed a socially discovered account of teleology, where the human *ergon* is understood without reference to the metaphysical biology with which Aristotle justified his account of the human *ergon*. Despite Aristotle's metaphysical biology, MacIntyre also discovered in Aristotle a social investigation into human agency that demonstrated that human agency is goal-oriented. Human action is directed toward an ultimate goal or *telos*, human flourishing or *eudaimonia*, and the virtues are the qualities enabling an agent to achieve the *telos* of *eudaimonia*. The exercise of the virtues to achieve *eudaimonia* takes place in a social context. Human agents help each other cultivate the virtues, and the laws of the community, including moral absolutes, help one in cultivating the virtues and avoiding vice.

In MacIntyre's reconstruction, the virtues are defined in three ways. The virtues enable the agent to achieve excellence in terms of practices, by aiming for the goods internal to practices. The virtues sustain the unity of an agent's life in which the agent seeks out the good of his whole life. The virtues sustain the traditions, which provide the social, historical, and narrative context to practices and the lives of individual agents. MacIntyre's three-fold definition shows that human action is social and goal-oriented, challenging the prominent philosophy of modern liberal individualism. His account distinguishes itself from *liberal individualism*, because it upholds the importance of social context. In linking the virtues to traditions, his theory links the present life of a single individual into their

whole inherited past. His account distinguishes itself from *modernity*, and the Enlightenment project, by adhering to the ethical framework it rejected:

1. A conception of 'untutored human nature.'
2. The precepts of rational ethics.
3. A conception of the human good as that of 'human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*.'

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre devoted himself to an Aristotelian reconstruction of (3), though he additionally argued that laws and moral absolutes, exceptionless precepts, play a role in (2). Nevertheless his reconstruction was in several ways un-Aristotelian: it did not rely upon Aristotle's metaphysical biology, it discarded the unity of the virtues, and it acknowledged insolubly tragic moral dilemmas.

Following *After Virtue*, MacIntyre became more Aristotelian by reading Thomas Aquinas, to justify himself *vis-à-vis* modernity. He adopted the unity of the virtues. He articulated (2) and the moral absolutes he previously accepted through the precepts of the natural law, regarding insolubly tragic moral dilemmas as the product of flawed practical reasoning. MacIntyre also found Thomism helpful to meet the demands of (1). He accepted that the practices, individual narratives, and traditions of human agents aiming at (3) have the specific end they do for reason of their specific human nature. An account of the human good presupposes an account of human being, as Aquinas recognized. MacIntyre gave an account of how metaphysical first principles related to practical reasoning. In these developments, he was exploring the continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas. This account helped him distinguish his neo-Aristotelianism from modernist appropriations of Aristotle practiced by Rawls and Nussbaum.

Furthermore, MacIntyre realized that (1) required not only a metaphysical grounding, but a biological grounding as well—as Aristotle recognized. Yet MacIntyre departed from Aristotle to provide a more Thomist account. While human beings need to be independent practical reasoners in order to flourish, we are biologically dependent on other human beings to fulfil this need. Consequently, the virtues of acknowledged dependence are an important part of realizing human flourishing. Aquinas grasped dependency in his discussion of the virtue of *misericordia*. Aristotle did not, instead praising self-sufficiency in the virtue of *megalopsychia*. MacIntyre's rupture with Aristotelianism rests in the consequences of criticism of self-sufficiency as illusory. Not Aristotle but Aquinas provides a better account of the content of the virtues. Moreover, MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's argument that the contemplative life is the best life, the one that most realizes human flourishing, because it is the most self-sufficient.

What then, for MacIntyre, is the best life that realizes human flourishing? It would be the life lived in accordance with the final human end. Yet it is Aquinas, not Aristotle, who provides the better account. Aristotle ostensibly presents two conflicting accounts of the best life, the moral and political life and the contemplative life. Although Aristotle seems to settle on the contemplative life being the best life, he also suggests that one needs the moral and political life to realize the contemplative life.

To clarify this problem, MacIntyre concentrates on the human *ergon*, which would help articulate the ultimate human *telos* or final end and answer the question of what life best realizes human flourishing. He considers the human *ergon* as one of

rational enquiry into the final end, which can only be actualized in common. He firmly places rational theoretical enquiry within a social and political context. Politics and philosophy are intertwined and inseparable. His account of the Aristotelian political community is as the location where rational enquiry into the final end takes place.

MacIntyre regards both theory and practice as constitutive of the best life. He argues that theoretical enquiry into the ultimate good or final end is an important part of practical reasoning. The goal of theory is both to order theoretical beliefs rationally, and to orient the practices that presuppose these beliefs rationally. Conversely, practice that instils the virtues in the human agent strengthens theoretical enquiry. One learns what justice is in part by being just and pursuing justice. Political life helps the human agent better understand what the virtues are and his final end. Both theory and practice work together to provide an account of the final human end. While the final end is discovered by theory, a proper understanding of the final end cannot set aside the characterization of practical reasoning in its own terms that uses the final end.

For MacIntyre, political life matures into philosophical life, which in turn directs political life. In the course of an agent's practical reasoning, seeking an answer to their final end, and beginning to rank and order the goods, the agent begins to discover what the good is; to think theoretically, to philosophize, about the good. One does not need to be a professional philosopher to do this. Every human being becomes a philosopher through the course of good practical reasoning.

MacIntyre describes the best life as the philosophical quest for understanding the final end, worked out in a political context. He provides some characteristics of the final end. Its achievement involves a high degree of self-knowledge. It is an end that completes and perfects the life of the agent who achieves it. When other goods are given their due place in the life of the agent, then the agent is directed toward the achievement of his ultimate good, and vice versa.

In the quest for understanding the final end, the agent rules out a life directed to acquisition or possession of money, political honours, reputation, power, health, pleasure, as well as intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual excellence—although each of these have their place. Nevertheless MacIntyre the Thomist gives no definitive answer to the final end. The final end is not discovered in this present life. While Aristotle thought he could reach the theoretical conclusion that the final end is in theoretical contemplation, Aquinas argues all accounts of the final end are imperfect. MacIntyre exposes the limits of philosophy: definitive theoretical conclusions explaining the final end fail, and distort the proper theoretical understanding of the life of practice.

MacIntyre's theoretical study of practice tries to avoid both a flight into theoretical abstraction and a fall into anti-theoretical particularism. MacIntyre's philosophical biographies frequently identify philosophers who are guilty of these errors. For example, Georg Lukács is guilty of theoretical abstraction and Franz Rosensweig is guilty of anti-theoretical particularism.⁴⁰¹ Even Aristotle takes flight into theoretical abstraction by considering the final end to be theoretical

⁴⁰¹ *TP*, 133-39.

contemplation. By contrast, MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism strives to respect both the universal and the particular. 'Neither in life nor in enquiry,' he writes, 'is it possible to encounter the concrete and particular except as instances of the universal and general. As we should have learnt from Aristotle, every "this" that we encounter is a "this-such."'⁴⁰²

The necessary link between the two means that MacIntyre's last bow in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* goes to narratives. He has argued that we understand ourselves as rational agents in a quest to understand our final end. To do so requires grasping the unity of our life through the unity of a narrative. Both the course and the outcome of practical reasoning are understood by being able to provide a narrative of our own life. Yet we also need instruction through the narratives of other rational agents. Why?

For MacIntyre, our theoretical reasoning is not fully developed. The theoretical generalizations about practical reasoning are only understood adequately through attention to particular cases of practical reasoners, understood through narratives. Once we understand the particular cases, we can apply the theoretical generalizations, but not before. Narratives teach us how to apply the theoretical generalizations to particular cases.⁴⁰³ Moreover, our practical reasoning is not yet fully developed. So the study of particular agents exhibits the relevance of theoretical generalizations to agents engaged in practical reasoning. Narratives are only understood if we have the right theoretical generalizations.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰² *TP*, 139.

⁴⁰³ *ECM*, 311.

⁴⁰⁴ *ECM*, 311.

For MacIntyre, we require narrative biographies of rational agents and political communities. His biographies are intended to teach us the importance that the narratives of other rational agents have for understanding practical reasoning.⁴⁰⁵ Moreover, we must never forget that practical reasoning includes politics. We need 'to examine instructive examples of the politics of local community... so as to learn what makes such politics effective and ineffective.'⁴⁰⁶ His examples attempt to show why effective politics require the virtues, and therefore the conception of practical reasoning offered by the Aristotelian tradition.⁴⁰⁷ The point of MacIntyre's philosophy is for us to learn that this is true about the world, so that we can then change it.

⁴⁰⁵ *ECM*, 244.

⁴⁰⁶ MacIntyre (1997), 252

⁴⁰⁷ *ECM*, 176-83, esp. 180, 181; MacIntyre (2011a), 17-19.

Conclusion:

Postmodern Aristotelianism

What, then, to make of these three reinterpretations of Aristotle, which consider the best life the human being can live?¹ All three face a Nietzschean temptation, contending that in modernity, the traditional resources for answering that question are in a state of exhaustion. All three agree, with Nietzsche, that modernity has exhausted itself, placing them in an unprecedented, 'postmodern' situation. All three find evidence for this diagnosis in philosophy, politics, and how modern philosophy relates to politics. They stress political irresponsibility in the present that impels them to turn to the past. But unlike Nietzsche, and unlike many of their contemporaries, they maintain that from their study of the past, a recovery of the question of the best life is possible. For that recovery they turn to Aristotle.

This raises another series of questions. For Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre, the questions of what to critique in modernity, what 'recovery' of political philosophy from pre-modernity is possible in postmodernity, and what is to be recovered from pre-modernity are all interrelated. They form part of their investigation into the question of the best life. The second feature to note, then, is that the study of the political philosophy of Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre must address these questions together. To take one of these questions away makes their political philosophy appear truncated or arbitrary. My approach has been to show

¹ C.f. Zuckert (1996), 254.

that linking these questions through a particular thinker that they all address helps gain a better understanding of their political philosophy. Prioritizing the questions of why they turn to Aristotle, how they read Aristotle, and what they find in Aristotle reveals how they treat the question of the good, the best life, and thus their political philosophy. The third feature to note, then, is that it enriches the study of Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre to interpret them in light of how they treat a particular 'exemplar' from the canon of political philosophy.

Initially, I submitted that to navigate the divides of contemporary political philosophy beyond an incommensurate pluralism, it would be valuable to reconsider these divides by providing an account of how thinkers treat 'exemplars' in the tradition of political philosophy. To conclude, I describe some of the main features or 'conditions' of Aristotelian political philosophy that emerge from how Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre interpret Aristotle. What is *Aristotelian* political philosophy?

There are two boundaries to this question as I pursue it here. Although what I outline could provide points of contrast between some of the main features of Aristotelian political philosophy and the approaches in contemporary political philosophy, I do not provide these contrasts here. Second, I ignore the distinctions and interpretive disputes within Aristotelianism. Nevertheless, I outline the terrain of Aristotelianism that unites Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre in their reflections on the ends of life. Moreover, I probe them on how comfortably they inhabit this terrain.²

² My approach is similar to Sanford (2015), 150.

1. *Aristotelian political philosophy seeks an answer to the question of the good life for the human being.*

While Aristotle can begin the *Nichomachean Ethics* by observing that people have ‘nobly declared that the good is that at which all things aim,’³ Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre diagnose a modernity that is uncomfortable, if not downright hostile to this ‘noble’ declaration. All identify a complacent relativism that neuters the vitality of the question of the good, effectively denying that it can be answered and therefore denying that it should be asked as a question.⁴ Those who flatter themselves that they remain neutral between the ‘goods’ peddled in political life inevitably privilege certain concepts of the good.⁵ The forgetting of the question of the good raises the spectre of political irresponsibility. As Strauss argues, if the rational evaluation of the good is impossible, one defines the good by what is historically contingent. It is therefore impossible to evaluate between good and bad political regimes. In the last analysis, deferring to history privileges tyranny. Arendt is not far from Strauss. Those who try to define the good by history end up subordinating the good to historical ‘processes.’ Totalitarian movements claim their authority through their purported knowledge of these historical processes.

While Arendt and Strauss link relativism and political irresponsibility through historicism, MacIntyre links them with emotivism. This describes the modern social culture and the use of statements about the good; arbitrary attitudes replace judgements about what the good is. Modern ‘Morality,’ as MacIntyre refers to it, is where disagreements about the good are clashes of the will. For ‘Morality,’

³ *EN* 1094a2.

⁴ C.f. Beiner (2014), xix.

⁵ C.f. Beiner (2014), xix.

there is no justification to choose the good of the liberal democrat over the good of the Stalinist. So both camps try to manipulate others to serve their interests, deepening problems of political irresponsibility. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn understood, liberal democrats and Stalinists are both cohabitants of modernity.⁶

These problems impel Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre to seek an answer to the question of what the good life for the human being is. What then, is the good? Against relativism and historicism, all agree that the good is knowable, but all deny that it is self-evident or expressed as a single principle. Understanding the good is itself a problem: because of its complexity, the question raises four levels of consideration.⁷

As *the good*,⁸ it implies a cosmos, in which the human being has its place; as the *human good*,⁹ it focuses on what is good specifically for human beings; as the *practical good*,¹⁰ it addresses the sphere of action; as the good '*being sought*,'¹¹ it relates the question of the good to the activity of seeking, suggesting that the good is *always* a question for the human being. If the good is the object of study, the object to be explained, then the study of the good links evaluation with explanation. On this point Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre all agree. They all agree, moreover, that on account of the complexity of the good, neither explanation nor evaluation can yield laws or rules that are true for all time or that bind all rational beings.¹²

⁶ AV, 35.

⁷ Salkever (1990), 151. I draw these four levels from Burger (2008), 14.

⁸ EN 1094a22.

⁹ EN 1091b7.

¹⁰ EN 1095a16-17.

¹¹ EN 1097a15.

¹² Salkever (1990), 151.

This expresses the core of Aristotelian political philosophy. MacIntyre, Strauss, and Arendt do not lose sight of this core, and they do not lose sight of these four levels of consideration of the good. In the subsequent conditions of Aristotelian political philosophy, their treatment of these four levels of consideration will remain a theme.

This first condition is the core, but it does not address the manner of treatment of the question of what is good.¹³ Consider the following manner of treatment; it answers the question of what is good by an authority that reveals what is good to human beings. 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6:8).¹⁴ The second condition helps distinguish between this manner of treatment of the question of the good, which relies on the authority of revelation, and the manner of treatment pursued through Aristotelian political philosophy.

2. *Aristotelian political philosophy presupposes no authoritative answer as to what is good is readily available. One must seek an answer to what is good without relying on an authority.*

Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre all grapple with the issue of how authority can relate to the question of what is good. For Hannah Arendt, modernity is characterized by the exhaustion of prevailing authoritative standards. Nietzsche's phrase, 'God is Dead,' indicates the depth and extent of the collapse. A whole tradition, professing authority in religion, metaphysical philosophy, and political thought, is no longer effectively believed in. The movement of modernity has

¹³ See Kerber (2016) for this critique of Beiner (2014).

¹⁴ The subsequent condition is indebted to Bartlett and Collins (2011), 237-38.

exhausted the meaningfulness of these authorities. The storms of totalitarianism have successfully buried the tradition so that it is impossible to recover it completely. Without meaningful direction for life, the modern human being is exposed, as if in a desert. For Arendt, this exposure cannot be escaped or avoided, but must be faced down directly. Thinking in the modern world is 'thinking without a banister,' because there are no standards left to rely upon.¹⁵ Yet while Arendt thinks a complete recovery of traditional authorities is impossible, a retrieval of their fragments is possible. These fragments, including the writings of Aristotle, help one to spur thinking, survive the sandstorms, and discover the oases of meaning that persist in the desert.¹⁶

Leo Strauss also holds that modernity is characterized by a state of exhaustion in the prevailing authorities. But while Arendt sees the exhausted traditional authorities as extending back to Plato, Strauss pinpoints the exhausted authority to the Enlightenment project's effort to solve the theologico-political problem, the tension between philosophic reason and revealed religion, once and for all. The objective of the Enlightenment rationalism, to use Nietzsche's language, was to kill God. Although the Enlightenment rationalism aimed to expose religious revelation's claim to authority as arbitrary, it could not do so without making its own arbitrary claim to authority over religious revelation. The Enlightenment thus suffered from a lack of probity. This emboldened religious authority to resist the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, aware of its own inconsistency and unable to proclaim definitively that 'God is dead,' could not justify its own claim to authority

¹⁵ *HA*, 336.

¹⁶ *PP*, 201-204.

and entered into crisis. As moderns give up trying to justify which one is true, unjustified claims to authority then abound in modernity; the tendency is to differ to history. What is needed is a form of rationalism capable of questioning these authorities. That form exists in classical rationalism. While Arendt sees only a retrieval of fragments possible in light of modern conditions, Strauss contends that a return to classical rationalism is possible. Strauss's return to Aristotle is not in order to make him an authority, but because he provides an example of rationalism done well, someone who thinks in the absence of a predetermined authority. Aristotle becomes part of Strauss's effort to justify rationally which account of the good is correct.

Like Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre also identifies the source for the loss of rational authority in the failure of the Enlightenment project. Strauss addresses the Enlightenment's ambition to overthrow religious authority; similarly, MacIntyre addresses the Enlightenment's ambition to free human agents from the traditional sources of authority found in their churches and communities. The Enlightenment aspired to provide a new authority for human practical reasoning, based on the power of each individual's human reason to identify self-evident precepts of morality. Yet MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment project to justify morality had to fail: it dropped the concept of teleology, which had provided the necessary social and natural context to make morality intelligible. In modern society, the precepts of morality are 'taboos,' negative or positive commands that are taken as authoritative by human agents, without the human agents understanding why they should be authoritative. When the taboos are challenged, they are dropped.

Nietzsche's challenges to these taboos are enough to make modern society one in which no authoritative justification for morality is possible.

To recover the rational justification of the good, MacIntyre initiates the research programme of *After Virtue*. He seeks to reconstruct the Aristotelian conception of practical reasoning, updating it to respond to contemporary philosophical problems, and demonstrate the superiority of this reconstruction over alternatives. MacIntyre's reconstruction justifies teleology, providing the authoritative justification for morality that the Enlightenment failed to provide. Yet MacIntyre's development of the Aristotelian conception takes him to Thomism, exposing him to the charge that the research programme of *After Virtue* presupposed religious authority all along. Is this true?

Unlike Arendt, who thinks that religious authority no longer holds weight in modernity, and Strauss, who describes the relationship between philosophy and religious authority as a perennial conflict, MacIntyre thinks religious authority can enrich philosophical enquiry, and philosophical enquiry can help better articulate religious authority. However, it is incorrect to characterize MacIntyre as relying on religious authority. MacIntyre holds that secular philosophy—that is, philosophy that does not presuppose a religious authority—provides an outline sketch of what the good is. An additional feature of his outline sketch is to show that the presuppositions of revealed religion are philosophically compatible with Aristotelianism. MacIntyre can therefore show on the grounds of secular philosophy that it is possible that religious authority is correct about what the good is. For MacIntyre, it is reasonable to proceed from secular philosophy to natural theology.

To deny that secular philosophy raises questions of natural theology would be a failure of reason. On this point he and Strauss would agree. As philosophers they both halt their enquiry at the same point, where answering the question of *quid sit deus* in the affirmative would provide additional characteristics as to what the good is beyond those confirmed by secular philosophy.¹⁷

If Strauss raises a fundamental conflict between philosophy and revelation, it is because he, like Karl Barth, sees philosophy and revelation as irreconcilable authorities.¹⁸ The difference is that while Barth isolates revelation from philosophy to preserve revelation, Strauss isolates philosophy from revelation to preserve philosophy. MacIntyre's response to each is the same: he sees no strict separation between philosophy and revelation, on the grounds that the authority of revelation requires philosophy to make sense of who God is. That answer may not satisfy Strauss, but it is a dispute in the philosophy of religion, and not a dispute between theologians that presupposes a certain authority. MacIntyre's enquiry may arrive at conclusions compatible with religious authority, but his enquiry presupposes that no authoritative answer about what is good is readily available.

So far, the first and second conditions that I have outlined could very well be called conditions of political philosophy, not restricted to *Aristotelian* political philosophy.¹⁹ To identify the necessary features of Aristotelian political philosophy, it is helpful to turn to the following two conditions, which set a high standard for how Aristotelianism understands the good:

¹⁷ Cf. *CM*, 240-41; *ECM*, 314-15.

¹⁸ Batnitzky (2009), 45.

¹⁹ N.B. Salkever (1990), 151.

3. *Aristotelian political philosophy finds incoherent the designation of a distinctive sphere of human action definable as 'the moral.'*
4. *Aristotelian political philosophy is non-consequentialist, in the Anscombeian sense.*²⁰

Aristotelian political philosophy considers the practical good, so it addresses the whole range of human action, or 'ethics.' This scope allows it to be concerned with the whole human way of life, and raise the question as to what is the best way of life. A sphere concerned wholly with 'the moral,' the meaning of 'ought' and its cognates, which would provide a reductionist series of rule-based principles, does not feature.²¹ MacIntyre, Arendt, and Strauss all provide criticisms of attempts to understand human action in terms of a sphere of 'the moral.'

While neither MacIntyre nor Strauss rejects outright a place for an 'ought' in practical reasoning, they both hold that it is only intelligible in relation to the whole human good. MacIntyre's contention is that the Enlightenment project had to fail because it tried to separate considerations of precepts (the 'ought') from a functional understanding of the human being. Thus it collapsed into incoherence. MacIntyre reconstructs an ethical framework that sees precepts as only intelligible by reference to how they realize the human good, thereby linking the 'ought' to a functional understanding of the human being: 'human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*.'

Strauss, for his part, sketches a similar charge of incoherence in his critique of modernity's fact-value distinction. The demarcation between 'is' and 'ought' turns the 'ought' into a subjective 'value,' inviting relativism. By contrast, Strauss's return

²⁰ I draw these two points from Sanford (2015), 153.

²¹ Sanford (2015), 152.

to classical political philosophy is a turn to the study of the human things as a part of the study of nature, which discovers what the human good is by nature. As Aristotle reveals, the natural human good is fully discovered in the city, in political life, as 'moral virtue.' An important aspect of Aristotle's discovery of moral virtue is that 'the ought,' simple commands or precepts, are insufficient to describe or realize the human good. 'The moral' cannot be demarcated from the whole human range of human action. For that reason Strauss does not go in pursuit of a distinctly moral sphere, but turns his attention to how the good is realized in political life. From this structure of practical reasoning, refusing to separate 'the moral' and 'the political,' MacIntyre and Strauss seek to discover what is the human good that would characterize the best way of life.

Arendt stresses distinct spheres of human activity. Yet neither does she concede a distinct sphere to 'the moral.' Instead Arendt argues critically that 'the moral' distorts the understanding of human action, which is characteristically political action. Arendt praises the 'good' of political action in terms of its 'meaningfulness,' contrasting that with a specifically 'moral' goodness. Arendt associates 'moral' goodness with the coming of Christianity, and sees the essential feature of 'moral' goodness as anonymity. But, Arendt argues, meaningful human action is found in the opposite: in performing one's action publically to disclose one's individuality before others. While Arendt stops short of calling the Christian use of 'the moral' incoherent, her charge is that the applied use of 'the moral' to 'the political' leads to incoherencies. For example, the sphere of 'the moral' focuses on one's inner will or intention in order to identify whether one's actions were

‘morally’ good or bad. Arendt argues this leads to incoherent assessments of the enormity of the crimes committed by participants in totalitarian regimes, such as those of Adolf Eichmann. To those who hold that intention matters for morality, Arendt asks: in light of the enormity of Eichmann’s crimes, do speculations on the extent of his anti-Semitism add or detract from his guilt? Is it not his deeds that damn him? Arendt sees part of her project as sketching a new understanding of morality that stems from reflecting on the practical good, the phenomena of human political action, rather than trying to apply a so-called sphere of ‘the moral’ to the political. Arendt does not avoid the question of what makes an act right or wrong, but instead discovers the criterion of right and wrong in the individual’s silent dialogue with himself.²² For Arendt, the silent dialogue exposes that morality is not experienced as ‘ought’ or ‘ought not,’ but as a ‘can’ or ‘cannot.’²³

As Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre all critique a distinct sphere of ‘the moral’ concerned with the meaning of ‘oughts’ at play in modernity, it is unsurprising that all three face versions of the charge of amoralism or relativism. Hence the fourth condition is important for specifying the character of morality, of assessing good and bad actions, in a form of political philosophy that rejects the sphere of ‘the moral.’

MacIntyre draws much inspiration for the critical argument of *After Virtue* from Elizabeth Anscombe’s critique of modern moral philosophy. Anscombe argues that modern moral philosophy is characterized by ‘consequentialism,’ the rationalization of setting aside principles for the sake of a desired consequence.

²² *RJ*, 97-98.

²³ *RJ*, 78-79, 109.

Consequentialism, Anscombe charges, is unable to provide an intelligible account of moral absolutes. It can provide no *reason* why the judicial murder of the innocents should be impermissible. In Anscombe's constructive argument, she argues that Aristotelianism must be non-consequentialist, providing an account of moral absolutes that cannot be set aside for fear or hope of consequences. This is what it means to be non-consequentialist in the Anscombeian sense.²⁴

MacIntyre offers the most explicit and unequivocal defence of moral absolutes in Aristotelianism. He upholds and defends exceptionless moral absolutes as a feature of Aristotelianism. They are necessary for training the agent to live well in common with others, as well as to pursue rational enquiry into the good. MacIntyre finds the Thomist formulation of the precepts of the natural law to be the clearest statement of the role these exceptionless moral absolutes play in practical reasoning. MacIntyre emphatically contrasts his understanding with the forms of instrumental reasoning that he sees as characteristic of modern political systems. Arendt echoes MacIntyre's critique of instrumental reasoning, and is dismayed by its prevalence in modern political systems. Arendt's proposals for a new understanding of morality clearly evoke an uncompromising standard of judgement. Her standard of 'responsibility' condemns any occasion where an agent sets aside his principles for the sake of a desired consequence. Consider the kinds of problems upon which consequentialist moral philosophy thrives. In the 'Jim and the Indians' problem, the military captain preparing to execute twenty Indians presents the visitor, Jim, with the choice of either shooting one Indian himself and seeing the

²⁴ Anscombe (1958), 9-10, 12, 19.

other nineteen be spared, or not shooting one Indian and seeing all twenty be executed. Consequentialist morality provides a clear answer, but Arendt has a pithy way to cut past it: the only way for Jim to see the consequentialist calculus is as a *temptation*.²⁵ If Jim is morally reliable, he would reply, 'I can't murder innocent people just as I can't say, "two and two equal five."' ²⁶ Arendt accepts exceptionless moral absolutes, and is a nonconsequentialist in the Anscombeian sense.

Strauss's opposition to relativism means he must have a suspicion of consequentialism, because suggestions that principles can be set aside threatens relativism. Strauss's discussion of natural right evinces his interest in providing a response to the challenge of relativism. Strauss's standard for natural right is not based on 'rights' or rules, but on the best regime and how it realizes the common good. The best regime is that which is most perfectly just and thus perfectly realizes the common good. Its positive laws would be perfectly just. Bearing the best regime in mind, Strauss holds that the vast majority of regimes never achieve this perfect compatibility between law and natural right.

For MacIntyre's Thomism, even if human reason frequently errs, human reason can grasp the natural law correctly and therefore identify the exceptionless moral absolutes correctly. Strauss does not share this confidence in human reason. He criticizes the Thomist concept of natural *law* for presuming, in the absence of the best regime, that a law can be outlined in sufficient adequacy and detail to meet all

²⁵ Williams (1978), 98-99; *RJ*, 18. C.f. Anscombe (1958), 12: 'By it [consequentialism], the kind of consideration which would formerly have been regarded as a temptation, the kind of consideration urged upon men by wives and flattering friends, was given a status by moral philosophers in their theories.'

²⁶ *RJ*, 78.

requisite circumstances. This is to presume the kind of knowledge only a divine authority would possess. Strauss therefore criticizes Thomism on the grounds its exceptionless moral absolutes are not really provided by human reason, but by Biblical revelation. Strauss instead argues that the proper understanding of natural right grants that rules formulated in positive law sometimes admit of exceptions. These exceptions are necessary to preserve the common good, such as when the very existence of the political community is threatened. For Strauss, this is a requirement of the common good, and therefore a requirement of justice. Although interpreting Strauss as denigrating morality is a mistake, since justice remains the standard, Strauss implies that there are no exceptionless moral absolutes.

If an Anscombeian were to charge Strauss with consequentialism, Strauss could reply that he speaks about the kinds of exceptions that arise in law. For example, no laws on killing can possibly identify all the circumstances where killing might be justified. Strauss's reasoning is about identifying whether doing a certain action in certain circumstances as an act of justice or injustice. He is not discussing whether there are exceptions to actions associated with badness, such as adultery.²⁷ Strauss's prioritization of law and politics might satisfy an Anscombeian in these discussions, but controversies over other issues, such as the use of atomic weapons in war, will undoubtedly persist.²⁸ Yet even nonconsequentialists in the Anscombeian sense debate between themselves whether formulations of moral absolutes should be more rigid or flexible. Strauss's emphasis on flexibility need not

²⁷ It is thus compatible with the kind of Aristotelian reasoning outlined in Anscombe (1958), 12. C.f. *EN* 1107a9-21.

²⁸ C.f. Anscombe (1958), 9n.

make him an external contributor to this debate. The abiding issue is Strauss's critique that many of these formulations owe their content to Biblical revelation, but even that critique need not place Strauss's contributions *extra ecclesia Anscombeia*.²⁹ Strauss's positions are therefore compatible with nonconsequentialism in the Anscombeian sense.

5. *Aristotelian political philosophy considers happiness to involve the activity of virtue.*³⁰

Alasdair MacIntyre's resolution to the weakness of modern 'Morality' is to reconstruct the theory of the virtues. Yet unlike some proponents of 'virtue ethics,' who pay lip service to Aristotle's influence but develop their concepts in more contemporary ways, MacIntyre discovers a more robust position in Aristotle.³¹ The reconstruction of Aristotle's theory of the virtues argues that virtue is defined by its relation to happiness. Happiness is that which is constituted by virtuous activity. But the understanding of the virtues is epistemologically prior to an understanding of happiness or human flourishing. For MacIntyre, the human good cannot be adequately characterized without already having made reference to the virtues.³² It is for this reason that MacIntyre seeks to reconstruct an Aristotelian theory of the virtues that would adequately characterize the human good and therefore human flourishing. He eventually favours a Thomist account, because he thinks a Thomist account is better at characterizing the conditions of flourishing.³³ MacIntyre argues

²⁹ A stipulation of the 'New Natural Law' account of moral absolutes, which claims descent from Anscombe, is that they must not be dependent on Biblical revelation. Grisez (1983), 115; c.f. Finnis (2011), 52.

³⁰ Sanford (2015), 157.

³¹ Sanford (2015), 157.

³² *AV*, 49; Sanford (2015), 157-58.

³³ C.f. Jaffa (1952), 23-34, 123-66. Note *AV*, 278.

for the virtues of acknowledged dependency, which are virtues that foster the relationships of aid and assistance upon which every human being relies.

MacIntyre's considered view is that human flourishing is constituted by the virtues of acknowledged dependency.

While Arendt uses the term 'virtue,' she does not use the term 'happiness.' She prefers to use the term 'meaningfulness.' Nevertheless she is thinking of a relationship between virtuous activity and meaningfulness analogous to the relationship between virtuous activity and happiness; for Arendt, meaningfulness is constituted by virtuous activity. Arendt emphasises virtue in its original Greek derivation, *aretē*, understood as excellence. As virtue is an excellence, performed for its own sake, Arendt uses the term 'virtuosity' to draw attention to the publically performative character of virtue implied in activities like flute-playing and dancing. As an activity performed in public, virtue enables one individual to distinguish himself from another. This is what virtue is for. Realizing one's individuality discloses one's action as a free action, which is what makes life meaningful and connects the performance of virtue to freedom. Arendt's considered view is that meaningfulness is constituted by freedom as virtuosity. Yet Arendt suppresses a description of virtue as *hexis*, and so omits to consider how virtue relates to particular passions, emotions, or desires.³⁴ She prefers to reflect critically on how traditional conceptions of the will limit freedom, and thereby constrain the space where freedom as virtuosity appears.

³⁴ *EN* 1104b5-8.

MacIntyre argues against omissions of Arendt's kind. They contrast the will as the source of what is good and bad to natural human desires or goals. Although Arendt prefers the term 'action' over 'will,' she struggles to formulate an effective criterion for justifying morality other than one's choice. While Arendt holds to unwavering moral standards, MacIntyre's charge is that the voluntarism begun in the late middle ages and carried on up to Kant (who is a source of much inspiration for Arendt's untraditional understanding of action) is philosophically untenable. Although Arendt tentatively answers the question 'what kind of person shall I become' by referring to a dialogue in oneself aiming at internal harmony, MacIntyre would hold that only a philosophical psychology of human agency, uniting desire and action, establishes to what good the internal harmony must be directed.

For MacIntyre, treating virtue as *hexis* allows one to begin a real answer to 'what kind of person shall I become?' That lies in a person's education. To acquire the virtues requires being trained in the right habits. To educate a person well, so that they act freely as independent practical reasoners, MacIntyre emphasizes the virtues of acknowledged dependency. This is not to suggest that Arendt ignores the topic of education. While she aims at and celebrates freedom in politics, she insists that treating children as free, independent, or autonomous ruins educational systems.³⁵ Yet unlike Arendt, MacIntyre provides a philosophical explanation as to why it is a mistake to treat children as autonomous. This explanation only comes by reference to human biological nature as dependent rational animals.

³⁵ BPF, 177-78.

While Strauss approaches virtue from the perspective of political science, he also relates virtue to *hexis*. The task of political science is education. To the question ‘what kind of person shall I become’ the answer is: a just and noble person. For Strauss, political science cultivates the passions toward the good, encouraging the virtues of self-mastery and moderation. Only in this way can the citizen exercise the virtue of prudence. Like MacIntyre and Arendt, Strauss aims at political freedom. If Arendt’s freedom is about displaying individuality, and MacIntyre’s freedom addresses independence in practical reasoning, Strauss’s freedom is about self-rule. MacIntyre stresses the virtues of acknowledged dependency that are required to reach independence. Pursuing a different course, Strauss stresses the Aristotelian meaning of liberality as self-mastery, which allows the liberal individual—the one who has the virtue of liberality—to rule himself and not be ruled by others in political life. MacIntyre’s education is an education in generosity, with the Thomist sense of *miser cordia*; Strauss’s education is a liberal education, with the Aristotelian sense of liberality.³⁶

While Arendt does not treat the topic extensively, both MacIntyre and Strauss emphasize the importance of law for the education in the virtues. Good laws are necessary to support the development of the virtues, by teaching which actions help or hinder the achievement of the individual as well as the common good. Laws are therefore necessary for the achievement of the common good and thus for a genuine political community. Yet good laws cannot teach by rational persuasion alone. Strauss holds that while reason plays a role in training citizens in the virtues,

³⁶ Note that the education is not restricted to civic republicanism; c.f. Salkever (1990), 258.

there are those who lack self-rule and remain slaves to their passions. Strauss thus argues that effective law is only partially based on reason. As law needs to direct those who are not going to be persuaded by reason, it is also partially based on poetic appeals to the passions, and partially based on force.³⁷

MacIntyre, for his part, is attune to the fact that positive law is only partially based on reason, but sees this as a problem to overcome. He offers a radical critique of laws that fail to conform to the rational standard provided by nature. For MacIntyre, the imperfect application of the precepts of the natural law is always damaging to the individual and common good. Good communities aim to conform their positive law to the natural law as a requirement for realizing the individual and common good. To accomplish this requires in turn shared rational or philosophical enquiry into the good, a practice not restricted to professional philosophers but available to what MacIntyre calls 'plain persons.' Occasionally communities succeed in realizing the individual good and common good, but that is especially rare in modernity where innumerable obstacles are thrown up. Far more often the practice of rational enquiry shows places where the precepts of the natural law are not upheld and thus where the common good is damaged. The imperfection of the law thwarts happiness, and exposes the need for the radical critique of the institutions of modernity by political philosophers. When an imprudent enquirer asked Charles de Gaulle if he was happy, de Gaulle replied, 'I am not stupid.'³⁸ MacIntyre comes close to saying that in the vast majority of modern societies, human beings are happy only if they are stupid.

³⁷ Zuckert (1996), 267-68.

³⁸ *ECM*, 202.

For Strauss, positive law has a perennially imperfect character. While MacIntyre wants to deny that most societies are genuine political communities because they fail to conform to the high standard of the natural law, Strauss instead argues that knowledge of the whole of nature, required to formulate natural *laws*, is not available. In the absence of perfect knowledge, positive law remains imperfect. Strauss then takes a series of additional steps. He distinguishes between two types of recipients of the laws: those who are persuaded by reason, and those who are not. For Strauss, those who are persuaded by reason can be of two types: either they obey one who speaks well, or they know what virtue is already. Those who know what virtue is already can also be of two types: either they are satisfied with *what* virtue is and have no need to know *why* it is virtuous, or they are not satisfied to know *what* virtue is, and will want to know *why* it is virtuous.³⁹ For Strauss, it is the role of the legislator or political scientist to form laws that educate all these human types in the virtuous actions required for achievement of the individual good and common good, in light of the perennially imperfect character of positive laws. Nevertheless, those who want to know the ‘why’ require special attention, because their intellectual energy surpasses all the other groups. The achievement of their individual good is then distinguished from the achievement of the common good of which the rest are capable. They alone can realize the highest natural end of man, theoretical understanding or philosophy. They are the only ones who can be happy in the fullest sense. Strauss comes close to saying that in existing political communities, the stupid are actually unhappy.

³⁹ EN 1095b3-13.

6. *For Aristotelian political philosophy, prudence directs the truly virtuous to right action.*⁴⁰

MacIntyre and Strauss both find in Aristotle an elaboration and defence of the position that an agent is only doing a good act if he has the virtue of prudence. In MacIntyre's theory of practical reasoning, when an agent has the virtue of justice, he knows the actions that count as just, and is habitually inclined toward these actions. The just agent does not have to speculate continually about what it is to act justly, as that is contained within his habit of justice. Yet he needs to know how to act justly in a particular circumstance. It is by the virtue of prudence that an agent is guided to right action in a particular circumstance.⁴¹ Like MacIntyre, Strauss holds that prudence is inseparable from good or virtuous character. Like MacIntyre, neither art, nor law, nor natural law, can substitute for prudence. Prudence is required to complete reasoning on how to act virtuously in particular circumstances. It is prudence that makes one genuinely just.⁴²

Prudence, like the other virtues, needs to be taught. An education in prudence is a study of particularity, the particular circumstances in which the prudent person has acted prudently. To acquire prudence, an agent needs to study these exemplary cases. In his latest work, MacIntyre provides narrative biographies of individual agents who led untypical lives and confront issues not faced by many. MacIntyre's primary objective is to show that we require a narrative understanding of other agents to grow in prudence. He shows that in their prudent actions they pursue an ultimate good; prudence is exercised with a view to the ultimate human

⁴⁰ Sanford (2015), 161.

⁴¹ *WJWR*, 196; Sanford (2015), 162.

⁴² *CM*, 25; *WJWR*, 194-96.

good. Yet this also shows that no finite good serves as the ultimate human good. For MacIntyre, this is true of politics as well. Although we can study exemplary cases of communities that achieve the common good, which educate prudence in political actions, these studies show how frequently liberal institutions thwart the common good. While one option would be to advocate for the overthrow of liberalism, MacIntyre sees that as an invitation to terrorism and rejects it. No political alternative is possible, so MacIntyre acquiesces to the rule of liberalism. He does not teach an alternative political science of the best regime. In the absence of that teaching, communities achieving the common good are fated for fragile, finite accomplishments. MacIntyre thus exposes the limitations of ethics and politics: practical reasoning in ethics and politics seeks something it cannot obtain fully there.⁴³

Strauss also holds that an education in prudence studies particularity. He links prudence to the search for the human good, starting in political life. Strauss's examples for an education in prudence have the character of an education in political science, studying statesmen like Winston Churchill. Churchill vividly displays a particular case of human excellence in the face of tyranny. That excellence involves a defence of liberalism. Unlike MacIntyre, Strauss sees modernity's crisis not in liberalism itself, but in the ability to articulate and defend liberalism. Strauss tackles political irresponsibility and the threat of tyranny by providing a defence of the best regime. In Strauss's account of political science, the practically realizable best regime corresponds to liberal democracy. Aristotle teaches a lesson in the

⁴³ *ECM*, 314-15; *WJWR*, 196-97.

common good that Churchill exemplifies. Nevertheless, Strauss observes that even those exemplary studies of statesmen do not realize the whole human good.

Churchill's career is also marked by a great failure. Although he succeeded against Hitler, this success inevitably increased the threat posed by Stalin and the Soviet Union. Churchill therefore reminds political scientists of their limitations.⁴⁴

While political science appears to address the whole human good, it cannot realize the whole human good because there is no complete achievement of the human good in political life. Strauss's examples of statesmen, therefore, draw attention to human excellence in political life, but also expose that this excellence is incomplete. In political life, 'there is no adequate solution to the problem of virtue or happiness.'⁴⁵ The contrast is then with the life that would realize the natural human end and be a truly happy life. Since the study of prudence 'removes a screen' separating these two ways of life, the study of prudence shows that the human good is divided between the city on the one hand, and the individual on the other.⁴⁶ It is in this sense that political science is instrumental, because it eventually shows that the facet of prudence concerned with political life cannot be an end in itself. It must be a means toward a more complete human good realized in another way of life, pursued by individuals who transcend the city to discover true happiness.⁴⁷ Strauss thus arrives at a remarkably similar insight to MacIntyre on the limitations of ethics and politics: in ethics and politics, prudence seeks something it cannot obtain fully there.

⁴⁴ *CG*.

⁴⁵ *OT*, 182.

⁴⁶ *CM*, 28.

⁴⁷ *CM*, 49.

Starting from different concerns, Strauss and MacIntyre address the role played by theoretical knowledge in developing the virtue of prudence. Strauss's concern is with positivists and relativists. They wield theoretical claims over practical reasoning to diminish the dignity of politics as an expression of the human good, or deny that there is a human good altogether. To recover the dignity of politics as an expression of the human good, Strauss argues that theoretical knowledge is not necessary for developing the virtue of prudence. The requirement is instead to have a sufficient level of self-awareness to recognize what virtue is. There is no need to know the 'why' in addition. Practical reasoning is therefore separated from theoretical reasoning. Only when the virtues are challenged by false opinions about what *the* good is and what the *human* good is does one require theoretical knowledge of nature to counter these false opinions.

MacIntyre's concern is with liberals. They attempt to understand the *practical* good without reference to *the* good or the *human* good, and so engage in practical reasoning without reference to theoretical reasoning. MacIntyre's liberals concede that there are human goods, but they halt further enquiry into the ultimate human good. MacIntyre therefore argues that to enact the virtue of prudence requires a rank ordering between human goods. This rank ordering embodies a conception of the ultimate human good. To justify one's choices therefore requires a theoretical understanding of the *human* good and *the* good; MacIntyre develops the research programme of *After Virtue* to include both biology and metaphysics. MacIntyre and Strauss agree that a virtuous agent does not start from theory and apply theoretical understanding to practice, and that it is possible for agents to act

prudently without recourse to theoretical reasoning. They hold similar positions about prudence and right action, and the role of theoretical reasoning in justifying reasons for action.

Their deepest differences lie elsewhere. MacIntyre holds that theoretical knowledge is continuous from practical reasoning. From their continuity, MacIntyre argues that the incomplete generalizations of theoretical knowledge need to be substantiated by instances of practice, so that while theory informs practice, practice also informs theory. Strauss recoils from this view. He aims to avoid the situation where political ideals are taken as essentially true, as Heidegger notoriously did. For Strauss, this is the problem of radical historicism. Once one begins to ask the 'why,' Strauss maintains, the political sphere begins to show its imperfections, or even mutilations.⁴⁸ Politics does not guide philosophy. The effect of Strauss's separation is to demarcate those who practice politics from those who practice philosophy.

Arendt, for her part, has no extended treatment of the best regime or prudence. Arendt is certainly not blind to the question of the best regime; she favours American liberal democracy. Arendt voluntarily chose to become a citizen of the United States because it 'was indeed a government of law and not of men.'⁴⁹ But her justification for choosing this constitutional regime over and above the regimes of European nation-states extends beyond Aristotle.⁵⁰ Arendt does refer to the virtue of *phronēsis* as one of the fundamental abilities of man as a political being to

⁴⁸ *NRH*, 151.

⁴⁹ *RJ*, 3-4.

⁵⁰ E.g. For a discussion of Arendt's classical republicanism, see Brunkhorst (1999), McCarthy (2012). Volk (2015) argues Arendt ultimately looked to Weber.

orient himself in the public realm. Prudence is the principal virtue of the statesman. Yet Arendt develops it under the heading of 'judgement,' which takes her toward Kant.⁵¹ This project is incomplete in Arendt's writings, it is not possible to examine whether Arendt sees prudence as directing the truly virtuous to right action. Yet it is possible to examine what Arendt conceives to be the starting point of judgement, in the activity of thinking. Although Arendt criticizes the tradition of philosophy for its distortion of the political, she does not dispense with the activity of thinking. Drawing from Aristotle and the Greeks, Arendt articulates a unique interpretation of theoretical activity, a topic Strauss and MacIntyre also address.

7. *Aristotelian political philosophy insists on the paramount importance of theoretical activity.*⁵²

Strauss, MacIntyre, and Arendt all distance themselves from traditional interpretations of *theōrētikos* as 'contemplative.' Arendt is the most critical of the traditional interpretation, for she regards contemplative activity as the introduction of Platonic two-world metaphysical fallacy, where a world of appearances is contrasted to the world of Being or 'reality.' In this Platonic picture, contemplation is associated with philosophy. As Aristotle inherits it, the object of contemplation is 'reality,' the *archai* or eternal principles. By contrast, Arendt argues, the world of appearances is associated with action, with the contingent and changing world of politics. The Platonic picture ranks contemplation as higher than action, and philosophy, understood as contemplation of non-human affairs, as higher than politics, the realm of human affairs. The dignity of politics is thereby diminished.

⁵¹ *BPF*, 218; Beiner (1983), 12-19.

⁵² C.f. Sanford (2015), 154.

Arendt holds that the metaphysical tradition is exhausted. Its questions no longer need to be outlined and answered. The more pressing task is to overcome this exhausted metaphysical tradition. To that end Arendt develops the ontological thesis that Being and appearance coincide. There is no transcendent realm in which philosophers think, apart from the realm of appearances. From that ontological thesis, Arendt reconsiders what it is to think. Arendt's post-metaphysical stance leads her to drop the object of thinking as the contemplation of *archai*. Yet this does not lead her to conclude that the only meaningful human way of life remaining is political action, to change the world through action. Although Arendt wishes to raise the dignity of political action, Arendt does not wish to repeat the error of Marx. For Aristotle was right that the activity of thinking is not the same as acting.

Retrieving the activity of thinking in its purity through Aristotle's insight, Arendt looks to Aristotle's other 'fragments'. She opens the activity of thinking to all human beings—not just professional philosophers—and confidently casts the object of the activity of thinking as the world of appearances, not an object beyond the world. Yet thinking is for Arendt at least in one sense beyond the world; it beyond the world or realm of politics. The thinker is a spectator who observes the participants of politics, but does not participate in it. The spectator is therefore better positioned to understand politics than the participant. Arendt aims to overcome the hierarchy of contemplation over politics, yet paradoxically she retrieves a conception of the meaningfulness of politics *and* a conception of the meaningfulness of thinking. Arendt elevates the dignity of politics, but by conceiving the thinker as a spectator, she takes a distancing, ironic attitude toward politics.

Thinking is the activity of paramount importance for the human way of life, as it is the only way to understand Being. 'I can very well live without doing anything,' Arendt declares, 'but I cannot live without trying at least to understand whatever happens.'⁵³

For Strauss, it is the political way of life in itself that, by its imperfections, implies philosophy is the higher way of life. Politics does not fulfill the natural human end, and so cannot provide true happiness; yet the philosophic way of life can. To the traditional interpretation of philosophy as 'contemplative activity,' which has as its object the *archai*, Strauss realigns its objectives by an ontological thesis: the 'subjective certainty that one does not know' the whole 'coincides with objective truth' about the whole.⁵⁴ Philosophy is zetetic. It is not about the possession of the knowledge of the *archai*, but the quest for the knowledge of the *archai*. This quest provides awareness of the fundamental questions about the whole that traditional metaphysics addresses, about God, man, the world, and the nature of all things. To vindicate these questions as the fundamental questions, Strauss upholds the additional ontological thesis of noetic heterogeneity, thereby defending the basis of the Socratic and Aristotelian understanding of nature that treats the good as distinct from the other parts of nature.⁵⁵ Noetic heterogeneity establishes that the *archai* exist, including the *archē* of the good, but not what they are.

⁵³ *HA*, 303.

⁵⁴ *OT*, 196. Strauss exhibits a post-Kantian thesis: he 'undertakes a return to classical thought without a return to metaphysics as the tradition conceives it.' Velkley (2011), 69; see also 54.

⁵⁵ In this way Strauss 'seeks to recover "what metaphysics intended."' Velkley (2011), 69.

MacIntyre also realigns the object of traditional metaphysics. He understands philosophy as the quest for the knowledge of the *archai*, primarily the quest for the *archē* of the human good. MacIntyre's epistemological thesis is that rationality is tradition-constituted, so that every understanding of the *archai* is provisional and always open to further revision and justification. From that epistemological standpoint, MacIntyre defends the ontological theses that the human good is an end toward which humans are directed because of their specific nature, and that it is attainable.⁵⁶ MacIntyre thus insists on the paramount importance of theoretical enquiry into the human good. Yet MacIntyre also holds the additional thesis that the human good is not attainable in this life.⁵⁷ The reconciliation of these three theses lies in Thomism.⁵⁸

So while Arendt's theoretical activity counters the basic cosmological assumptions of the tradition of metaphysical philosophy, Strauss and MacIntyre consider theoretical activity as a zetetic or provisional activity that raises awareness of the questions the tradition of metaphysical philosophy poses. For Arendt these questions are tentatively posed and definitively rejected; for Strauss they are definitively posed rather than tentatively solved; for MacIntyre they are definitively posed and tentatively solved. Although they treat these issues in different ways, their deliberated ontological theses show that their theoretical activity raises the fundamental question of metaphysics: what is being?⁵⁹ The paramount importance

⁵⁶ C.f. *ST* Ia qu. 5 ar. 1; Ia-IIae qu. 5 ar. 1.

⁵⁷ C.f. *ST* Ia-IIae qu. 5 ar. 3.

⁵⁸ *WJWR*, 192-93.

⁵⁹ *Metaphysics* 983a22.

they give to theoretical activity gives Aristotelian political philosophy a decidedly metaphysical, even supernatural, outlook.⁶⁰

While Strauss, Arendt, and MacIntyre all argue for the paramount importance of theoretical activity, they do not lose sight of the fact that theoretical activity is an *activity*, a way of life addressing the practical good.⁶¹ For Strauss, theoretical activity offers a practical good distinct from that found in political activity: the preservation of theoretical activity in the face of the hostile political actors. Theoretical activity cultivates an ironic or exoteric rhetoric, dissimulating those aspects of theoretical activity that others find threatening. It additionally cultivates an esoteric rhetoric, inviting the political actors most receptive to theoretical activity to seek the good. Arendt's theoretical activity is also ironic, but of a different sort: it is in an exercise in distancing oneself from practical activity. Like Strauss, she holds that theoretical activity proposes a practical good or way of life distinct from that originally retrieved or recovered in political life.

Perhaps related to his suspicion of irony, only MacIntyre tries to abolish a distinct practical good for theoretical activity.⁶² For MacIntyre, Aristotle's understanding of contemplative activity is deficient because it pursues an illusory ideal of self-sufficiency. Theoretical activity is a practice, pursued in common with other human agents. Human agents undertake a quest for the *practical* good because they desire to live well. At times this quest becomes theoretical: the good being sought is the *human* good and *the* good, with its metaphysical and

⁶⁰ C.f. Sanford (2015), 156.

⁶¹ C.f. Hadot (1995) 129.

⁶² MacIntyre (2012).

supernatural implications. Yet the way of life that seeks the good is always in a political, practical context. For MacIntyre, one pursues what is good so that one may act on it. Hence MacIntyre stresses that it is the *practical* good being-sought in theoretical and practical activity.

What of the question of Simplicius? What place does the philosopher have in the city? A straightforward, 'Platonic' answer is that it suffices for the philosopher to rule the city. Philosophy and politics, theory and practice, can be unified. Nietzsche agreed that philosophy had traditionally aspired to rule the city in this way, legislating its own idea of the good for the whole city. In modernity, the 'Platonic' answer is fully exposed; moreover, its rational foundations for providing an idea of the good are exposed as exhausted. What is left for Nietzsche is to hunt down the origins of the 'Platonic' answer in the history of philosophy. Those who journey from Nietzsche do the same.

Yet the 'Platonic' answer still persists in the present. When this answer is mixed with the historicism that Nietzsche advocated, it combines with the 'Platonic' answer to produce a noxious brew. Nietzsche was content to make ominous predictions about the wars of the future. But for Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre, passing through these wars impels them to ask whether the project to unify theory and practice through having the 'right' arguments, which effectively defers to being on the 'right' side of history, was itself *good*. The significance of their journey from Nietzsche is that in recovering the question of the good, believing that rationalism is not exhausted, and that rationalism does not have to bow to history, Arendt, Strauss, and MacIntyre all disagree with and counter the 'Platonic' answer. For the

Aristotelian political philosophy that their journey from Nietzsche arrives at, there is no finality to the problem of theory and practice.

MacIntyre's political philosophy places the philosopher in the city in order to change the city. Yet because the philosopher does not know definitively what the good is, neither can the citizens. MacIntyre does hold that cities will continue to be imperfect until citizens become philosophers and philosophers become citizens, but that presents no resolution on its own. Philosopher-citizens can discover characteristics of the good, but they cannot know definitely what it is. Knowledge of the good, including the practical good, is possible in theory but is not fully achieved in practice. His philosopher-citizens are pilgrims for the practical good, on quest to discover what the good is.

For the sake of the citizen, Arendt's political philosophy seems to banish the philosopher from the city. While philosophers hitherto disparaged the *practical* good of political activity in light of *the* good of contemplative activity, the citizen should realize that the practical good in fact a *human* good worthy of aim. Yet Arendt develops the thinker distinctly from the citizen, as someone aware of the limitations of the practical good of the citizen as a *human* good. She implies that the thinker better grasps the human good. Arendt then fosters a tension between the thinker and the citizen over the human good. Often the thinker exposes how citizens fail to achieve the practical good. The thinker lives in the city, but the thinker's way of life makes her a stranger to its citizens.

Strauss's political philosophy is developed in response to the fear that philosophy can be banished from the city. If it is banished, then who will raise the

question of *the* good? Yet that question of *the* good can only be disclosed by first examining the *practical* and the *human* good that is discovered in the city. To pursue the question of *the* good, the philosopher must therefore find its place in the city and study the city as 'first philosophy.' At times he may have to defend the city. He disguises himself before the city; at times he may have to defend himself from the city. The philosopher lives in the city but never completely reconciles himself to it. He never forgets that his way of life transcends the city, in the good *being-sought* that is always a question for the human being.

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