

*E pluribus pluribus- The political  
pluralism of Hannah Arendt and Isaiah  
Berlin*

by

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## *E pluribus pluribus*

The official motto of the United States, enacted so by Congress during the Eisenhower administration, is “In God We Trust”. The unofficial motto, long imprinted on our coins as well as the Great Seal of the United States, is *E pluribus unum*- Out of many, one. While unofficial use of “In God We Trust” as a motto dates from the Civil War era, *E pluribus unum* goes back to the beginning of the nation at the Continental Congress of 1776. The delegates saw the need to for a symbol, a Great Seal, for their new enterprise and assigned a committee of three to work on a design. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were chosen. The Congress, desperate to keep the colonies united in their fight against Great Britain, was looking for a way to symbolize the idea of one new nation from thirteen proto-states, and this motto, *E pluribus unum* must have seemed perfect, right down to its thirteen letters.<sup>1</sup>

The committee members may have been familiar with the phrase from a literary publication, *Gentlemen’s Magazine*, printed in London, but widely read amongst the more literary-minded delegates. The magazine used the motto *E pluribus unum* on its cover next to a bouquet of flowers<sup>2</sup>- that many individual flowers compose a bouquet must have seemed an apt metaphor for thirteen small, newly independent states forming a union- a new nation. Just what that union was or was to entail was a work in progress (and still is), but the idea of unity was crucial, not only to the delegates, but to the survival of the new nation, which at the time was hardly a given.

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, Thomas. “‘In God we Trust’ or ‘E Pluribus Unum’” Origins- Current Events in Historical Perspective, Ohio State University. [https://origins.osu.edu/history-news/god-we-trust-or-e-pluribus-unum-american-founders-preferred-latter-motto?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://origins.osu.edu/history-news/god-we-trust-or-e-pluribus-unum-american-founders-preferred-latter-motto?language_content_entity=en)

<sup>2</sup> The Great Seal. <http://www.greatseal.com/mottoes/unumflowers.html>

The Latin itself may go back to Cicero who wrote about affinity between those who have the same beliefs and values, and how it is that many people can become one- “ut unus fiat ex pluribus.”<sup>3</sup> For Cicero, the *unus* comes from not just a shared sense of values, but the *same* values. Unity for Cicero, was no mere political arrangement drawn from a map, such as the American founders may have had in mind. It was the natural affinity for people of the same values to be drawn to one another. Cicero does not in this passage describe how he thinks people of differing outlooks might get along while sharing the same community, the problem of plurality with different points of view, but the ideal is the drive toward unity- one made from many. The difference in the two motto’s grammatical structure is revealing: Cicero’s wording implies that the *pluribus* disappears within the *unum*- that one shall be made from many (think *fiat lux*, let there be light), and “the one” is the surviving entity; the American motto, without a verb as in Cicero, only states that there is a one made from a many, but the plurality is not necessarily subsumed in the unity, and so they can both be surviving entities, neither greater than the other. Again, this is exactly the idea that the Continental Congress was trying to convey- the individual states did not have to give up their own identity, or more important, their sovereignty (at least before the 1789 constitution), by submitting to participation in the new, larger nation.

The tension between plurality and unity in political theory goes even further back than Roman times to ancient Greece. Aristotle put forward the idea of a city ruled by a mixed

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<sup>3</sup> “May one be made of many.” Cicero, *De Officiis*, Liber Primus, §56. The Latin Library. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/off1.shtml#56>

government of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy- the *politeia*.<sup>4</sup> Plato, by contrast, famously proposed a “utopian” state entirely focused on unity through strict adherence to state prescribed ideology. Aristotle himself may have ultimately chosen unity over pluralism when the issue was political stability, but there nevertheless is a stark difference in the two philosophers’ attitudes toward political and ideological homogeneity.

In thinking through the classical history of plurality and unity, there is one sense in which the history of the U.S. much more resembles the Rome of Cicero and decidedly not the ancient Athenian of Plato and Aristotle. Rome offered, under certain conditions, citizenship to the people it had conquered. Athens strictly limited citizenship, even amongst its own people, and regarded non-Greeks as barbarians. With its long history of immigration from around the world, the U.S. resembles, or at least has at certain periods, resembled, Rome. One can become a naturalized American in the same sense that one could become a Roman citizen, which would never have been permitted in Athens (even Aristotle was not an Athenian citizen!). Perhaps in ways unexpected to the founders, we have enlarged the meaning of *E pluribus unum* beyond an experiment in sovereignty to encompass the motto of a nation of immigrants. At this point in our history, the U.S. is populated with recent immigrants and the descendants of immigrants from around the globe. We have formed, above all in our national mythology, if not always in practice, one national identity, though we seem to less and less frequently share the same values, as Cicero would have hoped.

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II §6, and note 198 thereto. Hackett Publishing Co., 2017, trans. C.D.C. Reeve

The mythology portion of this history is not an issue to be ignored. The American continent was populated by a remarkable civilization that was, and never has been to this very day, considered part of our American plurality. Native Americans have been subject to crimes ranging from land theft to genocide, in fact nothing else in our American history is an appropriate analogy for what the white settlers and their new nation perpetrated on the continent's original inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Worse yet, the American mythology takes in these crimes not as crimes but as part of the glorious march westward and fulfillment of manifest destiny.

Other Americans were brought here not as part of the great search for freedom, religious toleration, or a better way of life, but in chains. These people, too, were excluded from the American plurality in all but the cynical three-fifths compromise. A century and a half past emancipation, African Americans struggle to fully participate in the American plurality and the American dream.

More recent immigrant groups from the great waves of immigration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries suffered rejection and racism for decades, struggling against poverty and hate in an effort to join an American society which would not have them. It is only in retrospect, as part of our immigrant mythology, more so than in reality, that they are included in the *pluribus unum*. And yet, for many of us born decades after these struggles, even with eyes wide-open to the injustice of the past, we cannot imagine our nation any other way- racism persists, the struggle continues, but we can see strength in diversity and the common search for justice.

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<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, an analogy in European history- the Nazis were savvy enough to steal their victims' assets before murdering them.

To give diversity a voice, rather than mere lip-service, is to foster plurality. This distinction implies that it is not enough to acknowledge difference, or even practice “tolerance.”<sup>6</sup> Diversity becomes plurality when it has the right to be seen and heard, the right to have a voice in public and state its case as equals. Perhaps in time we can finally make this much of the American pluralist dream, embracing it while not falling for the melting pot mythology.

The struggle of plurality and unity asks many questions. How far need unity go? How important is pluralism? What if anything must be sacrificed for the sake of unity? Cicero’s words are particularly telling- those with the same values *become one*. Would the ideal for him be a community where everyone thinks exactly alike? Is there one “right” way to think? Can we not think of ourselves as part of any political unity with those who do not share our values? While sharing the same values might attain maximum unity, or social stability, it would leave society vulnerable to tyranny, for as Isaiah Berlin demonstrated, a society that is sure that it has all the right answers will stop at nothing to see its beliefs imposed on others, no matter the means and no matter the harm. As Berlin would also point out, while unity, stability, plurality, and freedom are all human goods, they frequently clash and trade-offs need to be made.

For Hannah Arendt, the worry was the *pluribus unum* process running in reverse, under the tightening “iron band of terror which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of many

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<sup>6</sup> This particular usage of tolerance is abominable- I tolerate my children’s bad behavior, but it is not for me in any sense to tolerate another’s existence.

the One..."<sup>7</sup> Arendt, every bit as much as Berlin, fears the anti-pluralist state. In Arendt's vision, this type of state enforces ideological purity by forcing everyone into the same "tight band" of thought and even identity- violence is the ultimate expression of anti-pluralism.

*E pluribus unum* and *E pluribus pluribus*- I believe that plurality is the much more important and vital half of our national motto. The greatest unity we should seek is the universal recognition of our common humanity, the result of which is a shared commitment to a pluralist society and institutions of government that foster a public space where every voice can be heard.<sup>8</sup> Similar arguments are found in the works of Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt, and so I will explore their work on plurality with an eye toward what we can learn from them that might illuminate our thinking on plurality and unity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Isaiah Berlin is best known for his essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty"<sup>9</sup> in which he gives his famous account of positive and negative liberties, the meaning of which, I will argue, is a direct consequence of his value pluralism. For that reason, I will first present Berlin's account of value pluralism and his warnings of the results of a society where only one ideology is predominant and the potentially catastrophic consequences. Berlin's antidote is a pluralism of ideas and values.

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<sup>7</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 1951, p 466, hereafter OT.

<sup>8</sup> There are important and rather sticky qualifications to this statement that are discussed below, e.g., Does the untruthful, hateful, or irrational voice need to be heard? Is it a right? In what context?

<sup>9</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1969) from *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1995, hereafter TCL.

By contrast, Hanna Arendt's pluralism begins with people- that pluralism is the natural condition of humans, that "men not man" inhabit the earth<sup>10</sup>. Berlin's value pluralism depends on people pluralism and the public space that is politics, where one can speak, be heard and seen. Arendt provides the logical, and very much human, premise, from which we can argue our way toward Berlin's value pluralist conclusions. However, the success of pluralism is never guaranteed, so I also look at Arendt's work on the case for truth, as well as her account of violence. The public sphere, filled with debate about ideas, promotes a pluralistic, stable society, but only to the extent that it is free from lies. When public speech becomes corrupted by lies, "word and deed have parted ways", and plurality is eclipsed by power.

As we know from logic, from false premises, anything can be validly concluded. In a one-party state, or even a democracy where truth is at the whim of the demagogue, violence is frequently that "valid" conclusion.

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<sup>10</sup> Both Arendt and Berlin use male-gendered language almost exclusively. I will render their quotes exactly as given in their texts while avoiding this in my own writing.



## ISAIAH BERLIN- On Value Pluralism and Freedom

*To force people into the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes  
is almost always the road to in humanity.*

Isaiah Berlin was born in Riga, Latvia (then part of Russia) in 1909, but his family relocated to St. Petersburg shortly thereafter. It was from there that Berlin witnessed the Bolshevik revolutions of 1917 which impressed upon him, even at a very young age, the horror of violence which later would form the basis of his antipathy toward, and fear of, ideological extremism. Certainly he would have been too young to have taken in the full historical and philosophical implications that he was to develop later, but something in his experience of the events (he reportedly witnessed a Czarist policeman dragged off by a mob to a violent end) stayed with him throughout life and was a key influence on his thinking.<sup>11</sup>

While the Russian revolution had been the dominant early influence on his life, his philosophy developed during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century horrors of the rise of Nazism, Stalinism, and world war. Berlin saw these movements- fascism and communism in particular- as “great ideological storms” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and blamed the fanaticism and violence in their wake on the monistic nature of their underlying philosophies.

In this context, Berlin developed his ideas about both political and value pluralism and how they might become an antidote to the dogmatism and fanaticism that inspired, in his view,

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<sup>11</sup> Banville, John, introduction to *The Crooked Timer of Humanity*, p. xii

much of the century's violence, for aside from political analysis, Berlin firmly believed that ideas inspired the great turns in history. The quote at the top of this section, taken from Berlin's essay, *The Pursuit of the Ideal* is an excellent example of this view.<sup>12</sup> Berlin's views on pluralism were also the wellspring of his seminal essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in which he developed a philosophy of freedom- the famous two liberties- negative and positive. In this section, I will trace the development of Berlin's thinking on pluralism, focusing on his essay, "Pursuit" and later show how his "Two Liberties" arise directly from his pluralism.

Berlin's account of pluralism is grounded in moral philosophy as much as political philosophy, which itself he calls "ethics applied to society" and the result of "moral enquiry."<sup>13</sup> While much of Berlin's political thought is on the level of ideas, his definition of ethics is right at the human level and bears keeping in mind- "Ethical thought consists of the systematic examination of the relations of human beings to each other [...] and the systems of value on which such ends of life are based."<sup>14</sup> Berlin is searching for an explanation for human behavior in political society that can help us live together peacefully and avoid extremes of suffering and violence, which for him is clearly a moral cause. He connects the passions that inspire violence with the dogmatic belief in a single ideology and the rationale for cruelty it provides.

This search first takes him to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time of growing interest in the moral treatment of all individuals who suffer injustice, oppression, and cruelty. These writers pursued a philosophy that goes beyond the need for practical solutions and that would address

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<sup>12</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, "The Pursuit of the Ideal" (1988) from *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 1990, Hereafter PI.

<sup>13</sup> PI, p. 2

<sup>14</sup> PI, p 1-2

the basic human need for love, truth, honesty, and justice. They also understood that philosophy alone would not be enough. It would be just as important to convince, or inspire, the broader populace to action. Berlin is thinking here of more than Marx, or the more famous Russians, such as Tolstoy or Turgenev. He also has in mind lesser-known Russians such as Alexander Herzen and Vissarion Belinsky, both of whom feature prominently in Berlin's treatment on the subject, *Russian Thinkers*.<sup>15</sup>

These 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers took it for granted that solutions not only existed, but that they were discoverable, as well. They also assumed that once the solutions were discovered that they would be both realizable and reconcilable with each other. One of Berlin's key observations, and he returns to it over and over in his writing, is that these writers genuinely believed that "all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only [...] the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another."<sup>16</sup> Berlin calls this the "Platonic ideal" and indeed traces it back to Socrates who believed, in Berlin's opinion, that rationality and argument could discover the true answers to all questions. Plato, in *Republic*, certainly put forth the idea that there was one best way to govern a city, even if others might do. This belief in rationality carried forward to the enlightenment thinkers on politics who, perhaps inspired by the natural sciences, also believed that "the light of reason with which all men were endowed"<sup>17</sup> would help them established the irrefutable laws by which human society should be governed.

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<sup>15</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, *Russian Thinkers*, Penguin Books, 1978

<sup>16</sup> PI, p. 6

<sup>17</sup> PI, p. 5

Berlin's views on the history of political philosophy may be contestable, particularly with respect to Socrates and Plato, but his general characterization of philosophy's faith in reason and in philosophy itself, particularly among the enlightenment figures, can be granted as we move toward his arguments for pluralism. We recognize, of course, that philosophy is a more nuanced project than Berlin gives it credit for here, and surely the good faith search for a theory of the human condition that can help us find solutions to the sufferings of humanity is a laudable project. Berlin acknowledges this, but the issues that he brings up speak to philosophy's blind spot to its own limitations, and I think he does not fault philosophy for it so much as point out that its belief in true, reasoned solutions has not been entirely warranted, looking at the historical record.

As evidence, Berlin points to the "great ideological storms" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that inspired Berlin to write on political philosophy and pluralism. He had, in some way, witnessed the Russian revolution and its Marxist ideology, the rise of Nazism in Germany with its racist ideology, and lived through World War II and its atrocities. He came away connecting ideology itself with "totalitarian tyrannies of both right and left and the explosions of nationalism, racism and religious bigotry."<sup>18</sup>

Can we conclude that a particular ideology, or its originator, is responsible for the atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? There are two areas in which one could object that Berlin should make further distinctions, but fails to do so. The first is the difference between philosophy and ideology. The political theory of any individual political thinker is not necessarily given as a

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<sup>18</sup> PI, p. 1

plan of action. As noted above, some political thinkers have perhaps overestimated their ability to hit on the right-for-all-time solutions to problems, but usually with a considerable amount of nuance that cannot be present in ideologies, which ignore nuance in order to produce a plan of action. Further, ideologies are presented as articles of faith, to be dogmatically believed in and acted upon. Kant's political philosophy may suffer from Age of Reason overconfidence, but would never be mistaken as a blueprint for violence.

Further to that point, not all philosophies, or ideologies for that matter, are created equal. The U.S.S.R. under Stalin was one of the most murderous regimes in history, and while communist in some sense, no one would mistake the philosophy of Marx as a plan for the gulag or firing squad. 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism may have had its theorists (Berlin singles out Joseph de Maistre in particular), but the racism that fueled Nazi genocide could never be called a philosophy. Berlin should make these distinctions, but does not.

However, he is not entirely blind to this problem. He does recognize that ideologies come "to be transformed in the name of a vision of some supreme goal in the minds of the leaders, above all of the prophets with armies at their backs."<sup>19</sup> So while I wish Berlin were more clear on the point, ideologies, or perhaps a certain type of overly-certain ideology, may inspire demagoguery and violence, or perhaps it is that certain ideologies are more susceptible to this type of manipulation. As noted, Kant fanatics have never (to my knowledge) taken over a country, invaded their neighbors, and slaughtered their enemies. Of course, a Stalin or Hitler may have found any number of ways to power while proclaiming any ideology whatsoever.

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<sup>19</sup> PI, p. 1, The "prophets" analogy is via Machiavelli, an important influence on Berlin's pluralism.

Berlin calls the type of ideology that is susceptible to manipulation by cult-of-personality leaders' monism, and as the name suggests, is the very opposite of pluralism. There are clearly philosophies, and Berlin counted Marxism among them, that claim to be the absolute truth and to hold all the answers. It truly is this type of philosophy that can be manipulated by tyrants. If there is but one answer to the alleviation of the suffering of humanity, and the leader is in possession of that answers, no amount of cruelty or bloodshed over the short-term is too high a price to pay for the permanent realization of utopia. Or so Berlin saw the U.S.S.R.

It was Berlin's encounter with the work of Machiavelli that that led him to realize that philosophical monisms ignore the facts of history. Machiavelli points out that Christian ethics and Roman *virtù* (public virtue- courage and strength, in the Roman sense) are incompatible values within the state. Berlin extrapolated from this that, opposed to both ancient and enlightenment thinkers, not all values, not all "goods," are compatible- choosing one may mean giving up on the other. A look at history will show that different cultures at different times held radically different, and frequently incommensurable, values from other cultures.

Yet, Berlin observes, it is crucial to recognize that no matter how different two cultures may be, they are not different in every respect- all are *human*. It is this recognition of their common humanity that allows us to identify with cultures and societies across time and the globe- we can read Homer, Basho, the Tao Te Ching, or Polynesian folk tales and see ourselves reflected in them. We are distinct, sometimes our values are unreconcilable, but not all of them. If we had no values in common with the ancient Greeks, we would no longer read Homer; he

would not speak to us. The fact that we do, shows that we can share something across the ages, and that something is our common humanity.

This is precisely Berlin's pluralism- "the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other."<sup>20</sup>

For my purposes, it is even more important to see that the same pluralism that Berlin sees between cultures over the ages, can also be the pluralism that is the glue of society in the here and now. The same common humanity that binds me to the ancients binds me to my neighbor, who may have completely different values than I do, but whom I still recognize as fully human. Any deviation from the careful balance pluralism strikes between acknowledging the same and different is taken to society's detriment- to be completely different with no recognizable common humanity would be anarchy, or Hobbes's "war of all against all;" to be all the same would be to squeeze out the variations that make us truly human. This is the "unity" often sought by tyranny.

Of course, some values will always clash. Berlin asks, do we not, each one of us, have conflicting aims and desires? We have certainly all had to make difficult decisions that reflect our moral and ethical values. If values did not clash or have competing interests, even within each of us, these decisions would be easy. But they are not easy, which shows that there really are values that conflict and no hierarchy can be assembled. Berlin's famous example of the

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<sup>20</sup> PI, p. 11

issue in society is the balance between liberty and equality. Certainly both have long been valued, particularly since the enlightenment and the birth of liberalism. Both liberty and equality are goods that we strive for, yet “total liberty for wolves is death to lambs.”<sup>21</sup> (12-13).

These values, liberty and equality, both “goods,” can and do conflict, sometimes irreconcilably. A society interested in maintaining a pluralist balance of interests should tinker with possible solutions, what Claude Levy-Strauss calls “bricolage.”<sup>22</sup> Once we recognize that we cannot know a solution in advance, deduced apriori from a set of philosophical principles, we are free to try different solutions, knowing that we may need to try several before getting it right, and even then, hardly for all time- “right” does not mean forever. In a pluralistic society, this can be done through public debate, taking into account different perspectives, values, and ideas. Divorced from an all-knowing philosophy, we are free to compromise and to entertain trade-offs. We must be humble about what we know and not suffer from epistemic arrogance.

Another advantage to the *bricolage*, pluralist approach is the low cost of failure. If a society gets the balance of liberty and equality wrong, it can be recalibrated. The *bricolage* approach is an empirical approach- we collect data, gather evidence, weight outcomes and adjust policy as necessary. As Berlin remarks, “utilitarian solutions are sometimes wrong, but, I suspect, more often beneficent.” On the contrary, an ideologically driven society is committed to one approach, and one only, and when the approach does not work, it cannot be recalibrated. Instead, coercion and violence are the answer and the price to be paid by members of society

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<sup>21</sup> PI, p. 12-13

<sup>22</sup> *Bricolage* means “to tinker” and can also mean handy-man work. There is an element of improvisation to *bricolage*. Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind*, The University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 17



who are outside the norm is of no consequence to its leaders. Thus, “living human beings” are sacrificed “on the altars of abstractions- nation, Church, party, class, progress, the forces of history...” In a dogmatic, idealistically driven society, the ideal may never be achieved, but “the reality of the sacrifice, the dying and the dead” will be entirely real.<sup>23</sup>

Berlin claims that plurality is not mere relativism. Relativism is a matter of taste, or personal preference within an issue for which there are no timeless standards- “You prefer coffee, I prefer champagne” is his formulation of the relativism as taste problem.<sup>24</sup> Pluralism is not devoid of these standards- “Ends, moral principles, are many. But not infinitely many; they must be within the human horizon.”<sup>25</sup> I agree, but am less certain that Berlin does enough to convince the reader that values and outright wrongs can be objectively differentiated. What if my neighbor “values” racism or religious intolerance? Clearly a pluralistic society would reject both those positions, but would it be able to say that racism is wrong if it is not actively doing harm? Berlin, however, does make important distinctions within relativism, beyond the trivial issue of taste. Relativism as a philosophy, or as worldview, “rests on the misuse of words, a confusion of ideas, and relies upon a logical fallacy.”<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the more important distinction to make in relativism is not what is true, but what is acceptable in public discourse, meaning, we may not be able to decide if there is a “right” side to the argument, but an argument with public consequences must nevertheless have ground rules. We recognize that values are different, but public positions and actions

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<sup>23</sup> PI, p. 16-18

<sup>24</sup> PI, p. 11

<sup>25</sup> PI, p. 12

<sup>26</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, “Historical Inevitability” from *Liberty*, op cit.

must be based on evidence and argumentation, not merely on one's personal tastes or beliefs. For example, we can allow that some believe that the world was created by god over 6 days around 6,000 years ago and that perhaps the fossil record was put in the ground by god in order to test our faith. However, we cannot allow a purely faith-based belief to be taught in our public schools as the equal to a scientific theory, perhaps Darwinism, that is in fact based on observation, evidence, and logic.

Overall, I find Berlin's account of pluralism convincing- the recognition of our similarities *and* our differences, that we hold different values, yet are all human. While the philosophical foundations of many of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies that ended in mass murder may not have ever supported these outcomes, Berlin is right to mistrust dogmatic adherence to an ideology that can see the world only one way and is willing to mete out any cruelty to ensure that the world is re-created in the image they deem fit. While Berlin's line between pluralism and relativism is not always entirely clear, he does give one firm piece of guidance- "The first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering."<sup>27</sup>

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*Where ends are agreed, the only questions left are those of means... That is why those who put their faith in some immense, world-transforming phenomenon, like the final triumph of reason or the proletarian revolution, must believe that all political and moral problems can thereby be turned into technological ones*

*-Two Concepts of Liberty, p. 166*

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<sup>27</sup> PI, p. 18

As I turn to Berlin's "Two Liberties," positive and negative freedom, and their foundation in pluralism, I quote from the first page of the "Two Concepts of Liberty" essay. Berlin begins with his often-stated view that where "ends are agreed," i.e. where the final truths are known "with certainty," there is no more debate to be had on the substance of what makes us human, and so the only conversation to be had is one of which methods brings society to these perfect ends. However, it is this closing off of debate about the ends of life (or society or even humanity) that is a direct affront to our humanity. The assertion that there is one true end of life and that it can be known with certainty implicitly states that there are, in fact, no political or moral problems, only technical problems, problems for engineers instead of politicians, or perhaps computers instead of people. For Berlin, one of the most important things about being human is that same discussion, debate, and persuasion that goes on in the public life, thus "the hallmarks of plurality are absent" in a world view that does not recognize the multiple ends of life that are the essence of Berlin's pluralism.

Given Berlin's coupling of political and moral philosophy, the elimination of political problems by philosophical fiat closes off consideration of moral problems on the level of society. However, it is exactly these problems that, for Berlin, can never settled, and remain some of our most important moral and political questions. Berlin, in this essay investigating liberty, focuses on the political questions: "Must I obey?" and "If I disobey, may I be coerced?" and of course, "By whom and for the sake of what?"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> TCL, p. 168

These questions prompt Berlin's thinking on freedom (he uses "freedom" and "liberty" interchangeably throughout), a concept "whose meaning is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist,"<sup>29</sup> which for Berlin is all the more reason to give as specific account to it as possible. He sees freedom as divided into two closely related, but different categories and much of the essay is his attempt to distinguish between the two. At the most basic level, the two types of freedom answer two different questions:

*"What is the area within which the subject- a person or group of persons- is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?"; and*

*"What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?"<sup>30</sup>*

The answer to the former question has to do with what Berlin calls "negative liberty," or "liberty from" and the latter question with the concept of "positive liberty," or "liberty to." The distinction can also be thought of as the difference between "permitted" and "determined" or, as I suggest, between "choosing" and "being."

Negative freedom, again, is the answer to the question, "What am I free to do without interference?" and is the "degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity."<sup>31</sup> Familiar examples from the political realm come from the U.S. Bill of Rights, in which many of the amendments have wording such as, "prohibiting the free exercise thereof"

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> *TCL*, p. 169

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

(Amendment I), “shall not be infringed” (Amendment II), and “shall not be violated” (Amendment IV). This is classic negative freedom language which clearly describes the nature of negative liberties, such as freedom of religion or to bear arms.

This notion rests heavily on the question of choice- to have this type of freedom, I need to have the ability, free from interference or coercion, to choose to do one thing over another, or potentially nothing at all. It is important to note that for Berlin, “ability” does not mean physical, or perhaps mental, ability. That I may not play professional basketball because I am not tall enough, is not actually a curtailment of my freedom to choose, in this case. Lack of freedom, in a coercive sense, means deliberately prevented from doing something or seeking and attaining my own ends in life by another human being. However, Berlin would take issue with the lack of certain other types of ability, say economic ability, and freedom of choice. What good is freedom to access health care or abundant food if my minimum wage job does not allow me to afford them?

Berlin’s negative freedom is a direct result of the pluralism of ideas. The recognition that the possible ends of life are many is to see that one must be free to make choices suitable to one’s own ends of life without interference. Of course, not all ends harmonize, and one person’s pursuit of their own ends frequently comes into conflict with another, on an individual level. On a values level, we find the same phenomenon- freedom is a value, but so is “justice, or happiness, or culture, or security, or varying degrees of equality.”<sup>32</sup> Both on the individual and values level rationales for the curtailment come from the same pluralist ideals that inspire

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<sup>32</sup> TCL, p. 171

negative freedom in the first place- I must be free to pursue my ends, and you yours, but both within reasonably agreed limits that acknowledge our mutual rights to pursue our own goals, as long as a certain “minimum area” is not violated. Compromise must, indeed, be found if we are to balance ends and come to some equality of liberty, itself.

How should that minimum area be defined? As “that which a man cannot give up without offending against the essence of his human nature.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, the answer to the question how one defines the essence of human nature is one of the big questions in any area of philosophical enquiry. Having made the assertion that human nature is the boundary of liberty, we might expect a more precise answer from Berlin about where that boundary might lie. However, Berlin, puts off a formal answer to that question. For him, what matters is that no matter what principle of human nature or political arrangement one assumes, be it “natural law or natural rights, or of utility, or the pronouncements of a categorical imperative”<sup>34</sup> that liberty means liberty from coercion, a life of choice of personal ends.

The idea that human nature itself draws the boundary around which negative freedoms should not be violated comes to Berlin via both the French political philosopher, Benjamin Constant, and, perhaps most of all, from J.S. Mill, whom Berlin quotes from *On Liberty*, “The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way.” Berlin seems to have further inherited from Mill the idea that a civilization of individuals pursuing individual ends will naturally thrive, rather than be “crushed by the weight of

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<sup>33</sup> TCL, p. 173

<sup>34</sup> TCL, p. 173-4

collective mediocrity” of society.<sup>35</sup> Where Berlin may differ from Mill on this issue is Berlin’s recognition that “freedom for wolves is death to lambs,” or strong boundaries and enforcement are necessary if the strong are to be prevented from completely overcoming the weak. Perhaps Berlin could be said to not share all of Mill’s optimism about human nature.

One objection to the concept of negative liberty is as a framework for political organization, one which we will see again in the work of Hannah Arendt and one which Berlin shares, is that “liberty in this sense is not incompatible with some kinds of autocracy [...] and is not, at any rate logically, connected with democracy or self-government.”<sup>36</sup> One could imagine an enlightened despot, perhaps of the kind to whom Kant appeals in “What is enlightenment” who wishes to give his subjects as many freedoms as possible, without giving them the right to determine by whom they are ruled, or what laws will govern them. Perhaps these freedoms can even become justification for the autocracy itself.

Ultimately, to have negative freedoms is better than to not have them, but Berlin wants to carefully distinguish between their use as a barometer of freedom in a given political society from their use as a justification for any type of government, liberal or autocratic. Negative freedom should never be mistaken for an organizing principle of a society. That still leaves the importance of distinguishing the question of “Who governs me” from “How far does government interfere with me?”<sup>37</sup> The latter question is, as is now clear, the issue of negative freedom. The former question leads us to positive freedom.

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<sup>35</sup> TCL, p. 174. Berlin quotes from J.S. Mill’s *On Liberty*, chapters 1 and 3, per Berlin’s footnote 1.

<sup>36</sup> TCL, p. 176-7

<sup>37</sup> TCL, p. 177

Positive freedom is, again, the answer to questions about who controls or rules me. It may be what we think of when we imagine pure freedom, limitless self-determination. The language that Berlin uses to describe it gives it a characterization that when compared to the dry language of negative liberty- "prohibiting the free exercise thereof" or "shall not be infringed"- sounds absolutely exhilarating: the individual as "his own master;" "instrument of my own not of other men's acts of will;" "a subject, not an object, moved by reasons, by conspicuous purposes;" and, most of all, "I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer- deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if were a thing, or an animal, or a slave, incapable of playing a human role."<sup>38</sup> This is inspiring language- more "Invictus" than the Bill of Rights; more Patrick Henry than James Madison- "Give me liberty or give me death!"

Berlin will argue that it is also the language of pure tyranny.

To understand why, we must first return briefly to the comparison between negative and positive freedom and see that they are really not so far apart. What does it mean to have the right to self-determination, or to be "a somebody?" Ultimately, all the ideas of positive freedom come with an unspoken, unwritten sub-clause, "...and nobody can stop me!" But this is precisely the essence of negative freedom, for in any political society organized among humans, there are limits and rules and those who enforce them, so even positive freedoms assume the absence of a power that would block one's self-determination. The distinction remains, but the lines are quite a bit more blurry than first imagined. Berlin will argue that

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<sup>38</sup> TCL, p, 178



though the two freedoms are close in origin, that they historically developed in completely opposite directions, and that was, at least in part, due to their individual characteristics, in addition to the language employed in their promotion.

According to Berlin, the different conceptions of freedom are based on different views of the self, and that the positive concept of freedom relies on splitting the personality in two: “the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desire and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel.”<sup>39</sup> According to this view, the self may be divided into a higher part, the real part, described as “ideal” or “at its best” or, importantly, the rational self. The true, rational self seeks freedom. The other part of the self is the lower part, conversely the not-as-real self, baser, a “slave to nature” and desires rather than seeks freedom.<sup>40</sup>

Further, in the hands of power “the real self may be conceived as something wider than the individual, as a social whole of which the individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a race, a Church, a State.”<sup>41</sup> These larger, powerful social entities, having used the concept of positive liberty to split the self, use this as justification to coerce some individuals by imposing the will of the collective on the will of the individual, in the name of setting that individual free; giving the individual the freedom that they would grasp for themselves if they were not mired in ignorance, for their own sake. The reasoning goes, that if it is for my own good to be coerced, it must be what my rational self would will if it were not blinded, therefore, there is no coercion—“the argument used by every dictator, inquisitor and bully.”<sup>42</sup> According to this way of

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<sup>39</sup> TCL, p. 181

<sup>40</sup> TCL, p. 179

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> TCL, p. 197

thinking, freedom is recognized, but only positive freedom, and that sort of freedom is not “freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid or wrong.”<sup>43</sup> Berlin, perhaps following J.S. Mill again, would argue that being allowed to do something irrational or stupid is exactly what freedom should mean, and is very much the concept of negative freedom. In addition, the view of human rationality necessary to prefer positive freedom is not in accordance with reality. Reason is not the same to every mind. Humanity is much messier than can be accounted for by rationalist political ideologies, which is another reason to prefer negative freedom to positive. By way of example, and in a bit of unintended, and somewhat unfortunate, timeliness, Berlin cites forced vaccination- “I must, in the end, force you to be protected from smallpox, even though you may not wish it.”<sup>44</sup>

Politics, as positive freedom, becomes somewhat like math or logic. Given that one’s true self in a rational self, not only does the real self understand the necessity of a particular set of values, but to be rational is, in fact, to will them. To do otherwise would be irrational, Q.E.D. In this way, Berlin argues, liberty becomes identical to mere authority because the rational values, the solutions given, are given by those in power, according to their particular ideology, even if in the name of “the people.”

Berlin associates this line of thinking with Rousseau: “Whoever refused to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than he will be forced to be free.”<sup>45</sup> By freedom, Rousseau does not mean negative freedom, but “the

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<sup>43</sup> TCL, p. 194

<sup>44</sup> TCL, p. 196

<sup>45</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *On the Social Contract* (1762), Book I, Ch., 7

possession by all [...] of a share in the public power which is entitled to interfere with every aspect of every citizen's life."<sup>46</sup> Berlin holds that Rousseau's version of rule by all recognizes no barriers to the destruction of any individual's liberty, which, Mill and his followers pointed out is simply tyranny of the majority, or "prevailing opinion and feeling."<sup>47</sup> Benjamin Constant saw this conflict most clearly and recognized that a change in sovereignty due to a revolution does not necessarily increase liberty, "but merely shifts the burden of slavery."

The problem becomes "not who wields this authority, but how much authority should be placed in any set of hands." Berlin would have us limit the accumulation of power under any sort of government as one of the best protections of freedom, and he recognizes that even democracy "can still crush individuals as mercilessly as any previous ruler." In order to address this problem, to make a society truly free, two principles would need to govern: first, "that no power, but only rights, can be regarded as absolute;" and second, "that there are frontiers, not artificially drawn, within which men should be inviolable." The second condition underlies Berlin's belief that the true freedom present in a political society is measurable by the extent to which negative freedoms, including the freedom to oppose the majority, or even norms of society, are protected from all interference. The first of these conditions is a more fundamental view on the nature of government. Berlin has argued that Rousseau, and those rationalists who would follow him, confuse freedom with authority, and that perhaps any person or group in power would be glad to be so "confused" as to prioritize its own authority or the rights of individuals. To Berlin, this is no freedom at all, not even positive freedom, and his case is as much moral as it is political- there is a "moral validity- irrespective of the laws- of

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<sup>46</sup> TCL, p. 208

<sup>47</sup> TCL, p. 209, Note 2

some absolute barriers to the imposition of one man's will on another. The freedom of a society, or a class or a group, in this sense of freedom, is measured by the strength of these barriers."<sup>48</sup>

It is important to note here that Berlin views the coercive potential behind positive liberty as inherent in the concept itself, and so any connection between positive liberty and tyranny is of a very different nature than the potential connection between negative liberty and tyranny noted above. In the negative freedom case, Berlin notes nothing about negative freedom per se that invites tyranny, much less anything inherent in the idea itself. His view of positive liberty is that it breeds tyranny, despite its basis in Enlightenment reason, and perhaps only in the wrong hands, but it is nevertheless endemic to positive freedom itself. Positive freedom redefines the individual into higher and lower, true and false, and "enough manipulation of the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes."<sup>49</sup> In short, negative freedom may be not incompatible with tyranny, but it is not identical with it, while positive freedom can be tyranny's calling card and cudgel.

The connection to Berlin's account of value pluralism is evident here, as well. A political outlook based on negative freedom is consistent with the idea, as noted above, that the ends of life are plural, and so one should be free to pursue those ends without obstruction. Coercion, in this case, faces a much higher bar, for example in the name of public health or safety, or at the very least some known harm to others. Positive freedom faces no such hurdles- it is more consistent with a values outlook that sees only one solution to political problems where values themselves do not conflict. Coercion, in this case, is simply the road to "freedom."

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<sup>48</sup> TCL, pp. 209-211

<sup>49</sup> TCL, p. 181

Berlin, however, is sympathetic to one element of positive freedom- the longing for status. Individuals, as well as groups, nations, or peoples, understand being “ruled, educated, guided, with however light a hand, as being not quite fully human, and therefore not quite fully free.” This, too, is a conception of the self, both individual and plural. No person is mere “disembodied reason [...] nor Robinson Crusoe, alone upon his island,”<sup>50</sup> and all people must live among others, the fundamental observation of Hannah Arendt’s account of plurality. What further constitutes the self is the longing for recognition, to be seen and treated as an individual and not another cog in the machine. One may not always seek the security from coercion that negative freedoms provide and which are the bedrock of liberal constitutions, but a person will never want to be seen as a “featureless amalgam without purposes of his own.”<sup>51</sup> This is the power of positive freedom both on an individual and group basis. The search for status has been the inspiration for revolution and rebellion from the time of the American and French revolutions to 20<sup>th</sup>-century post-colonial struggles for nationhood against paternalism, “the greatest despotism imaginable.”<sup>52</sup> Berlin praises these struggles as “the most powerful and morally just public movements of our time.”<sup>53</sup>

Ultimately, Berlin’s account of the two liberties very much rests on his case for value pluralism developed over many years and present in almost everything he wrote. He sees human nature itself in the pursuit of the many different goals and ends of life held by people both in a single society at a point in time, as well as between societies over time and geography.

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<sup>50</sup> TCL, p. 203

<sup>51</sup> TCL, p. 201

<sup>52</sup> TCL, p. 203, quoting Kant, note 1

<sup>53</sup> TCL, p. 214

To declare any of these the only right answer to humankind's problems is to ignore an essential element of the human condition. Thus, Berlin mistrusts dogmatic certainty in ideology and sees in it only the possibilities of cruelty and suffering.

Pluralism, on the other hand, "with the measure of negative liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal" because of its recognition that "human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another." Perhaps it is less satisfying or less inspiring to offer up one's ideas to constant revision rather than take comfort in more permanent seeming truths, but this is the way that leaves open the human need to make choices and pursue ends. "Principles," after all, "are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> TCL, pp. 216-17

## HANNAH ARENDT- Plurality and the Polis

*The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man.*<sup>55</sup>

Hannah Arendt, like Isaiah Berlin, witnessed the worst of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was perhaps even more of a participant. In 1933, she was arrested for handing out Zionist literature and detained by the Gestapo. Fearing the increasing antisemitism in Germany, she fled to France, then to the United States where, like Berlin in London, she made her career and did her most important writing.

In her 1958 book, the *Human Condition*, Arendt developed the idea of plurality- from whence it comes, the relationship to action and speech, and its role in the public realm. Arendt also shows how plurality is the basis for power in a political society, how plurality/power underlie the functioning of politics, and how its erosion leads to conditions that encourage tyranny and violence. We are plural, a group, by virtue of our birth, long before political bodies are formed or social contracts are “signed” and to lose that plurality is to lose the human basis for togetherness that underlies our mutual promises.

Arendt places plurality within the broader scope of human life through her use of the Latin term, *vita activa*, the translation of Aristotle’s *bios politikos*, “a life devoted to the public-political matters.”<sup>56</sup> For Aristotle, this was the life of authenticity and excellence, chosen, like the life of the philosopher, in freedom. Arendt leans heavily on Aristotle’s conception of the

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<sup>55</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1958, hereafter HC, p. 9

<sup>56</sup> HC, p. 12

importance *bios politicos* in her own account of the good life lived in the public sphere. So much so, that it can be hard to tell in the text, at times, where Arendt's account of Aristotle ends and her own version of politics begins. This confusion is exacerbated by Arendt's frequent use of the term, "polis," meaning "city" in Greek, by which she usually refers to what she thinks of as the golden age of Greek democracy in the time of Pericles and before, rather than the "Golden Age" Athens of Plato and Aristotle. Because Aristotle's thinking on politics is so entwined with Arendt's, at least in this particular work, I will assume that her account of Aristotle here is her own *interpretation* and as such also counts as her own political philosophy, deserving of its own treatment. In any event, Arendt's work is clearly no regurgitation of Aristotle's.

Arendt divides *vita activa* into three distinct areas: 1) **Labor**- the biological sustenance and maintenance of the human body, the importance of which, besides staying alive, is that the *bios politikos* is only possible once one is free from laboring and has free time to dedicate to the body politic. During the classic age of the *polis* this work was usually done by slaves and women; 2) **Work**- the human condition of worldliness, provides the artificial things which are meant to outlast and transcend our physical, individual existence on earth, but which exceed the fulfillment of the biological necessities of labor. Both labor and work receive extensive theorization by Arendt in *The Human Condition*, and each are vital parts of Arendt's overall political work. However, I will focus in this paper on the third category, action.

Action, in this Aristotelian/Arendtian sense, is the activity of the public/political sphere that constitutes the *bios politikos* and is inseparable, at least from Arendt's point of view, from plurality. "All human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only



action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men."<sup>57</sup> The realm of human affairs requires action which establishes and sustains it. Labor and work, of course, have their activities, but these are, in a sense, solitary or private, confined to household or studio. However, these activities, while not undertaken in freedom (quite the opposite), are necessary to create the freedom to choose the active space of the political realm. Action alone, freely coming together for joint purposes in equality and distinction, requires the presence of others, which is exactly plurality.

For Arendt, plurality and action are not just correlated, "plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live."<sup>58</sup> I make two observations here that will be important in the development of Arendt's thought on pluralism: first, that human action is taken as a group, it is initiative, an act of "natality," or founding, and these acts are taken as a people, together. Second, that there is a certain paradox of plurality described here and recognized by Arendt- "human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings."<sup>59</sup> What makes up an important part of our common humanity is that we are all unique, and in that way, we are the same.

Only speech is coequal to action in human affairs and is indeed political action "transacted in words" and words settle arguments by persuasion. This element of the political life is crucial- debate and disputes were settled with words, not with force and violence. That is

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<sup>57</sup> HC, p. 22

<sup>58</sup> HC, p. 8

<sup>59</sup> HC, p. 176

why the occurrence of violence is outside of the political realm- “only sheer violence is mute, and for this reason can never be great.”<sup>60</sup> Action and speech require being together, and so appearing in *public* is what constitutes the political. While speech and action need much further treatment, the role of the public/political space must first be accounted for before continuing.

Arendt distinguishes the public/political realm from the private/household realm. The public realm is the realm of freedom from the necessities of life (via labor) that are taken care of in the household realm, and this is the condition for public freedom. While the household is not to be considered a “state of nature”, or even analogous to one, the Greeks thought of it as pre-political. The head of the household rules- there is neither plurality nor equality which exists by appearing in public. To be free meant to be free not just from biological needs, but from the inequality of the household as well.

The public realm is the political realm, and by “public” Arendt means two things: first, that what appears in public- the appearance of humans, their speech, their joint actions- everything can be seen and heard by everybody. Second, “public” signifies a common world and is distinguished from our private, or household world. We live together in a world of things that we share in common, “as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> HC, p. 26

<sup>61</sup> HC, p. 52

The most crucial consequence of this view of the public sphere is that “appearance- something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves- constitutes *reality*.”<sup>62</sup> While it is not in the scope of this paper to take on the epistemological issues raised by this statement, the political ramifications are no less important. Again, ignoring the philosophical, capital “R” notion of reality or capital “T” truth, Arendt’s assertion about public reality is crucial to the rest of her account of the public/political life. While we may choose to believe anything we want for any reason we want while in our private household, once in public, we must stick to the fact or facts of what was witnessed by us all. Another way to put this is that in public deliberation, there is a wholly empirical nature to the facts that are eligible for admission to our discussion. The assertion of private beliefs, particularly as a sort of fact which was not witnessed, or verifiable, by the community, cannot be allowed.

Without a shared reality, discourse and action become fruitless, if not impossible. The failure to perceive the world from our diverse human perspectives brings about the destruction of the common world- plurality and the political fail as one. When we no longer see and hear each other in public, when speech is no longer, then we are no longer capable of mutual action and the end of our common world, the world on which we base our common humanity, all that entails and risks, is near.

The reality of the public realm itself derives first from pluralism. Arendt argues that action and speech are foundational to the public/political realm, but their significance derives from being seen and heard, not just by many, but by a many who see and hear “from different

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<sup>62</sup> HC, p. 50, emphasis added

positions". This is the essence of plurality in the public sphere- "Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear."<sup>63</sup>

The phrase "sameness in diversity" shows the somewhat paradoxical nature of public plurality. We are the same in our humanity, that is what we most have in common, but we are all unique- our difference is our commonality- "human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings."<sup>64</sup> Our different points of view, shared in public, and valued from their individual perspectives is what we gather strength from as a people, and it is what generates the power that holds together our communities and institutions and signals the equality amongst those who appear.

Plurality itself has the character of equality and distinction. While these terms could be seen as somewhat contradictory, Arendt explains that the two are closely related in the public sphere, and that both are closely related to speech and action. Her argument is negative in nature- "If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them."<sup>65</sup> Of course, there is a sense in which non-equals do understand each other, but that occurs only after the public sphere has already broken down and takes place in a ruler/ruled context instead of between equals.

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<sup>63</sup> HC, p. 57

<sup>64</sup> HC, p. 176

<sup>65</sup> HC, p. 175

Arendt argues for the importance of distinction as an element of plurality even within the context of equality. She claims, "If men were not distinct [...] they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood."<sup>66</sup> In other words, the citizen, or even humans, seen as a mass would have all the same needs and all the same ends. We would still communicate to the extent that we must in order to provide for our daily requirements, but nothing beyond that would be possible. We will see later on that one effect of tyranny is to reduce us to this state of indistinction in order that no political speech in opposition would be possible, and when taken to this extreme becomes totalitarianism.

Both equality and distinction are revealed through speech and action, through which individuals reveal their inherent distinctness. The initiative we take in revealing ourselves to each other in public to create this distinction is an important initiative, one which to Arendt, we cannot be fully human without- "A life without speech and without action [...] has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men,"<sup>67</sup> i.e. no longer pluralistic. Arendt appears here to approve of what the *polis* Greeks might have meant by distinction, which is something akin to "heroism" or "renown." While I do not believe that Arendt exhibits the type of nostalgia for which she has been accused, I do agree with Dolan<sup>68</sup> that she mourns the loss of the active participation in political affairs that she argues was much more common during this age and disappeared in ours. Of course, there are issues of scale- the governance of an ancient

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<sup>66</sup> HC, p. 175-6

<sup>67</sup> HC, p. 175

<sup>68</sup> Dolan, Frederick, "Arendt on Philosophy and Politics" from *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, ed. D. Villa, p. 264

city of a few ten-thousands cannot be replicated in a nation of hundreds of millions.

Nevertheless, her regret at its loss is no simple sentimentality for Homeric deeds and wonders.

With a view of the public arena in which politics takes place in mind, we can return to action and speech, first to see how action, itself, means in Arendt's account to take initiative, or, particularly, to make a beginning. When something new is started, we cannot know for certain how it will turn out. It follows from this "character of startling unexpectedness"<sup>69</sup> that once events are set in motion, their results are uncertain, and may not turn out as planned. Not knowing the ultimate effects of an action means that we should be very careful with what we set in motion, particularly given the frailty of human institutions.

Even the laws that protect our political existence, like the fences that protect private property, can be overwhelmed by the boundlessness of human action- "the limitations of the law are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from within the body politic, just as the boundaries of the territory are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from without."<sup>70</sup> Boundlessness together with the unpredictability of new actions create a danger for the political realm, but for Arendt, it is a greater danger to eschew political action, despite its unpredictability and occasional catastrophic failure. A city without action, lacks not only plurality, but vitality. A city without action cannot remain free for long.

It is the boundlessness and unpredictability of action that, according to Arendt, appalled Plato, and to a lesser extent Aristotle (the "Socratic school"), and caused them to turn away

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<sup>69</sup> HC, p. 178

<sup>70</sup> HC, p. 191

from action and toward a politics of stability and moderation. Their desire to “escape from the frailty of human affairs into the solidity of quiet and order”<sup>71</sup> led them to rely on a politics of craftsmanship, legislation and bureaucracy (or “city-building”), which belongs to the realm of work where “men act like craftsmen,”<sup>72</sup> and thereby keep the worst of unintended consequences of action to a minimum. But for Arendt this is an unacceptable trade-off. She acknowledges the risks of the unpredictability of action (they are great), but sees them as more than outweighed by the rewards- a vibrant political community and a populace dedicated to involvement in their own governance, which in turn is its own defense against the type of tyranny that feeds upon apathy.

The way of the philosophers, for Arendt, is pure rulership, and indeed one can plainly see the evidence in both Plato and Aristotle’s enumeration of the types of government- monarchy, rule by one, aristocracy, rule by few, and democracy, the rule by many, or “the people”- the stress always on “rulership.” Arendt sees in their analysis a sensible inclination toward “stability, security, and productivity” but the emphasis on control, can only “pave the way to an inevitable loss of power, even though the actual disaster may occur in a relatively distant future.”<sup>73</sup> Further, Arendt sees in the philosophers’ turning away from the active life and toward the contemplative life, a betrayal of the plurality of the polis, a rejection of politics, and, in Plato’s case, an embrace of utopian authoritarianism.

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<sup>71</sup> HC, p. 222

<sup>72</sup> HC, p. 195

<sup>73</sup> HC, p. 222

Arendt states that speech and action are equals in the public sphere, and even characterizes speech as “action in words.” Speech initiates action and action begins by being “disclosed by the word” in order to constitute action.<sup>74</sup> Speechless action, on the contrary, is impossible because there would be no actor without speech. This is especially true of the action in concert that is required in political life.

On an even more fundamental level, “speech is what makes man a political being,” so I would argue that speech is a pre-condition to action and thus to the political sphere in Arendt’s philosophy. Speech is, in this pre-political sense, how one crafts and experiences meaning in the public world. As a mode of communication, speech allows us to “make sense to each other” and ourselves.<sup>75</sup> Arendt frequently refers back in her writing to the “two-in-one” Socratic dialogue that one has with oneself, and which is fundamental to her moral philosophy.<sup>76</sup> We could call this conversation with oneself an interior monologue, or perhaps just listening to one’s conscience, but can we imagine it going on without some sort of language? While philosophically, and perhaps scientifically, this subject takes us very far afield, I believe Arendt would answer that we need speech to accomplish this basic communication with ourselves that makes moral thinking, even entirely outside of the political, possible. Speech not only reveals our distinctness and equality (as discussed above), it is the “actualization of the condition of human plurality.”<sup>77</sup> It is only in speech that we can answer for who, not just what, we all are.

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<sup>74</sup> HC, p. 179

<sup>75</sup> HC, p. 4

<sup>76</sup> See esp. “Thinking and Moral Considerations” from *Responsibility and Judgement*, Random House, 2003, ed. J. Kohn

<sup>77</sup> HC, p. 178



Returning to Arendt's political realm, and with her view that political action and speech are equals, and that action frequently takes place in words (even "finding the right words at the right moment" constitutes political action!),<sup>78</sup> we can focus on a development of a political realm with speech at its center.

Speech discloses and speech communicates, and the communication with others in the political realm discloses a self from an individual, distinct perspective. In the political realm, where decisions about the community must be made, this communication of perspective frequently functions in order to convince, or persuade. In Arendt's analysis of the Greek *polis*, this type of persuasion was undertaken as a political project in lieu of violence- to be political was to decide "through words and persuasion and not through force and violence."<sup>79</sup> According to Arendt, to undertake politics as speech is a commitment to renounce violence, and because action and speech are so closely tied to plurality, indeed one cannot do without the other, politics as persuasion in words is a commitment to plurality and a commitment to each member of society, however defined, as seen and heard- each having a voice in the community.

The abandonment in the political realm of speech as political persuasion ends in violence, and "only sheer violence is mute."<sup>80</sup> The implications to Arendt's argument are worth exploring. Violence happens when we are finished with talking to each other- the conversation goes silent. Violence is what happens, as Berlin believes, when we no longer recognize in each

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<sup>78</sup> HC, p. 26

<sup>79</sup> HC, p. 26

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*

other any values by which one could possibly live. The destruction of plurality, seen from both Berlin's perspective of values and Arendt's of fundamental togetherness, ends in violence.<sup>81</sup>

Violence is "mute" because in violence we give ourselves over to a silent, irrational rage that follows from the abandonment of the commitment to mutual discourse. When we hold fast to a commitment to political discourse based on evidence, facts, and logic can continue and there will always be an issue to discuss. As noted above, plurality and politics can fail together when we no longer share a common view of the reality that ultimately stems from plurality and give ourselves over to our private, irrational realities. When there is nothing left to logically discuss, when persuasion becomes a lost art, violence will seem, to some, the only alternative.

What can cause this rupture in the political sphere? To understand Arendt's position, we must go back to the fact that the *polis* arose out of togetherness, and this togetherness creates the space of appearance, the public/political space, out of which all action and speech flow- "the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the 'sharing of words and deeds.'"<sup>82</sup> The togetherness of the *polis*, of the people, is mirrored by the togetherness of word and deed, whose collaboration supports the operation of power within the political community :

*Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company,  
where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil*

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<sup>81</sup> The discussion is about violence within a single *polis*, not violence or war between states, though certainly analogous ideas may hold- when diplomacy breaks down, war follows.

<sup>82</sup> HC, p. 198

*intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.*<sup>83</sup>

In the quote above, we come to two new and very important concepts, and so I have quoted it in full. “Word and deed” parting company shows a new direction in Arendt’s analysis. For the first time, we see Arendt’s public/political space not as the Greek ideal, but in a more politically realist light. We now must consider the effect of bad faith in action (veiled intentions) and untruth in speech (empty words) on the polis. One effect of bad faith is the attempt to “create new realities.” As noted above, the only way for a political community to function is with a shared reality. An intentional departure from that shared reality can only have bad intentions, and certainly bad effects- notice the direct reference to violence here, “deeds not brutal.” This intentional departure from truth can be called what it is: lying.

The second new concept introduced above is power. Power is fundamental to Arendt’s account of political life, so I will explore power first, and later on return to Arendt’s account of the loss of a commitment to truth in the public realm.

Arendt is a great maker of distinctions, and thus an acute definer of terms, sometimes idiosyncratically so. Arendt says much *about* power, but we would like to have a concise definition of Arendtian power rather than to just describe its qualities. Let us say, provisionally, that power can be analogized to gravity- the attractive force that is generated between two or more physical bodies. When bodies are far away, or sparse, the attraction of gravity is very

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<sup>83</sup> HC, p. 200

weak. When physical bodies are closer together, or massive in size, the force of their attraction can be inescapable (think black holes).

So, too, human power. Human power “corresponds to the condition of plurality” and “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”<sup>84</sup> That power is the condition of plurality shows that the nature of power for Arendt is somewhat different than our common definition. We may speak of a powerful individual, or office, for example, “the President of the United States is powerful.” For Arendt, though, that is decidedly not true. The president has strength, and certainly access to force and violence, but as a single individual, never power. Power can only come from a multiplicity of people acting together, not a single individual, as in our presidential example. As long as the people remain in unison action together, they imbue their institutions, such as the presidency, with the power and legitimacy needed to govern, but the minute plurality disbands is the moment the public ceases to act as “a people”, and the power of its institutions weakens.

It follows that Arendtian power can be sought, but never taken. An individual could decide in a democracy to seek public office, whether for noble or selfish reasons may not matter. It could be argued that anyone seeking election to public office is in some way power seeking. The winner of an election will gain power, but only in as much as the plurality underlying the governing institutions stays in-tact. However, this is not to imply that Arendtian power is only compatible with a democratically elected government. Indeed, King Louis XVI found out the hard way that even a monarch serves at the pleasure of the citizen plurality.

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<sup>84</sup> HC, p. 200-1

Plurality in our 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal democratic societies absolutely, though not exclusively, means expressing our voice in public by voting, but one could imagine a benevolent dictatorship where the people had the right to free expression, but not necessarily a role in choosing their own leaders or laws. In a similar way, if power is sought legitimately, again in our society through election, it does not matter if the choice of an individual to a leadership position was unanimous or highly contested. What matters is that the political community acts together in good faith in an exercise of their own pluralistic power and that everyone accepts the results of that exercise. Plurality is not unanimity, but multiplicity with a voice.

To take power, in Arendt's sense of the word, is impossible. To take, or wrest power away from, is an act of force, or in Arendt's vocabulary, perhaps an act of strength (see below), and can only be done by destroying the plurality of the community- whether by turning it against itself, or by limiting its participation, which is destroying plurality in the purest sense- in a misguided attempt to secure power, for what is gained is not, by definition, power. What is gained may be the rulership of a community, but not power. Power disappears when plurality disappears, and plurality disappears when split by force. For Arendt, seizing rulership of a community by force is most likely when power has already waned. When a community no longer acts together, power, by its nature, dissipates, and with it the ability to resist a tyranny that would take control by force and violence.

Plurality precedes power, and plurality's dissolution precedes power's crumbling. This lack of power is ably described by the cliché, "power vacuum." Lack of power becomes lack of

organizing principle for the community, which cannot persist. And so, other sources of authority/organization must step in to replace the pluralist power that has been lost. The seizure of power by these other sources must be accomplished, since it is not through plurality and public action, through some means. That means, the ultimate means to an end, is frequently violence, such as the end of the Weimar Republic.

The paradox of power is that when absolute power is sought, it ends in destruction of all power. Any “aspiration toward omnipotence” must first destroy any power that stands in its way, which is the power of plurality. The pursuit of power for its own sake divides the political realm and splinters the plurality that supports it. Fanatical leaders, in the pursuit of power, destroy the public sphere that can be their rival. Without the ability to speak in the public realm, to be seen and heard, there can be no plurality and no power. This power vacuum, as noted, invites violence. What the new masters of the nation are left with is strength and force. A powerless rulership structure then can only resort to terror and violence in order to exert control.

To better understand this phenomenon, we need to have a better grasp on Arendt’s vocabulary. Arendt tends to use terms in an idiosyncratic, but precise and thoughtful way that allows her, and her reader, to make the fine distinctions necessary to understand her thinking. We need to take time to understand her vocabulary, idiosyncratic or even implausible, on her own terms while addressing her arguments. If at that point we still need to restate her meaning in more common language, so be it, but the work of understanding her will be well along. The most important terms are:

*Power* is the “human ability not just to act, but to act in concert” and is “never the property of an individual.”<sup>85</sup> Again and again, one sees the importance of pluralism to Arendt. Power is not individual; it is communal and exists only so long as people come together to act. When the people disband, or when they are driven apart, or forced into isolation, power ceases to exist.

*Strength* is individual, not of the group, and so is of an independent character. While we often speak of a powerful person (by virtue of office, fame, or wealth perhaps), Arendt would say that it is the people, the plural, who generate power. An individual, then, wields power, only so long as the people who empowered the office to begin with stay together- it is the office that is empowered, not the individual. As above, power dissipates when plurality dissipates, and the power of an office with it. So while power and strength are similar in some respects, Arendt reserves these terms for the plural and the individual respectively.

*Force*, for Arendt, is not a synonym for violence, but refers solely to “the forces of nature or the forces of circumstances, to indicate the energy released by physical or social movements.” As a political example, Arendt thinks of the French revolution as an expression of political force released that is beyond anyone’s control, or even the comprehension of the participants.

*Authority* is a property of individuals and sometimes institutions- “Its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed.” Authority can occur in many contexts, but requires a certain measure of respect to be

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<sup>85</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *On Violence*, Harcourt, Inc., 1969, hereafter OV, p. 44

had on the part of those subject to the authority- “The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter.”<sup>86</sup>

*Violence* “is distinguished by its instrumental character” and is phenomenologically close to strength. Violence is a tool that is used to multiply natural strength so that the few are able to subjugate the many. “The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All.”<sup>87</sup>

These category definitions apply to their purest forms; in practice they frequently overlap. Institutionalized power often displays itself as authority. Even violence and power, which should exclude each other, can be found together. Even when mixed, there are important distinctions that remain between violence and power. The legitimacy of power derives from the initial gathering together of a people to act. Also, power “needs no justification,” while “violence can be justifiable, but will never be legitimate.”<sup>88</sup> For example, violence can be justified in the case of self-defense in which the danger to self is immediate, thus the end of using violence is immediate. Violence becomes much harder to justify when its ends go further out into time. This parallels Berlin’s view that ideological violence often occurs to further ends farther into the future, while the suffering is borne by those unfortunate enough to be on the wrong side of history in the here and now.

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<sup>86</sup> OV, p. 45

<sup>87</sup> OV, p. 42

<sup>88</sup> OV, p. 52



While power may initially predominate over violence when combined, due to the unpredictability of events as they unfold, it is easy for violence to overwhelm power: “Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience.” Note that violence because it is instrumental can leverage the use of “tools” and thereby dominate, even destroy, power, but violence can never be power itself. When violence tries to rule in the absence of power, it is impotent by definition, and that power vacuum breeds the conditions for more violence: “To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high.”<sup>89</sup>

Impotence, being without true power- the plurality of citizens acting together- is further temptation to violence. A ruler, already weakened by restoring to divisive strategies, feels his power ebbing and succumbs to the use of violence as a political weapon. This is the beginning of terror.



As noted above, power dissipates when “word and deed have parted company.” What does this phrase suggest about the role of truth in politics, and what is the relationship with plurality?

The public space is the space of our unity, based on a common reality and purpose; reality in turn relies on truth, as well as a measure of good faith. Lying in politics tears the common fabric of reality, weakening plurality with divisiveness. Plurality creates the power

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<sup>89</sup> OV, p. 53

that supports our institutions. Lies weaken plurality again through divisiveness, and weakened plurality is directly weakened power which is weakened institutions and weaker defenses against tyrants and demagogues. With reality no longer in common, from false premises come false conclusions and false conclusions are the prelude to dissolution and violence.

In the 1967 essay, *Truth in Politics*, Arendt argues that truth and politics are not just historically at odds, but in some way fundamentally incompatible. She asks “is it of the very essence of truth to be impotent and of the very essence of power to be deceitful?”<sup>90</sup> And if so, one could ask, what good is it? The reason for this incompatibility is not that all politicians are inherently immoral or corrupt. The problem is the nature of the type of truth that matters in politics, which is factual truth, and the nature of the public space in which politics takes place. Politics is the realm of action, and truth- simple, factual truth- is not about action; it is about the status quo, or what exists now. Truth does not seek to change the world, it describes it; truth does not seek to persuade, it merely asserts its own validity, “stubborn” and somewhat “opaque.”

Lying, on the other hand, naturally participates in political life. Because it is an untruth, lying must, and can, persuade; lying acknowledges other opinions, which is, of course, the essence of reasonable group decision making (truth, conversely is unable to acknowledge other possibilities, despite its contingent aspects). Lying plays to its audience’s expectations, and in that way can seem more plausible than a truth which may be unusual or unsettling (cf. “Don’t

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<sup>90</sup> Arendt, Hannah, “Truth in Politics” (1954) from *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, 2006, hereafter TP, p. 223

look up"). Lying, in all those ways, can seem to embrace the plurality of the public sphere while simultaneously undermining it.

Arendt, always making fine distinctions between types, defines what for her are the different kinds of truth, their opposites, and how they function in the public space. She first distinguishes between rational truth- the "capital T" truth of the philosopher, born of introspection- and factual truth, the stuff of politics. The category of rational truth contains, since the dawn of the modern age, not only the philosophical truths, but scientific and mathematical, as well. The opposite of a rational truth in the sciences is "error and ignorance" while the opposite of a truth of philosophy is illusion, not seeing the true nature of the world, or opinion, the fickle, not-eternal truths of everyman.<sup>91</sup>

Factual truth concerns facts and events, "the invariable outcome of men living and acting together,"<sup>92</sup> which is exactly the nature of plurality and the political realm, and so underlies the plurality of the public space. Facts "constitute the very texture of the political realm" as well as, I would add, the texture of our common reality. Factual truth is what was witnessed by all, or known to have happened. This is the type of truth that is the concern of the public/political sphere since unlike philosophical truth, it is not arrived at alone, via thinking and introspection, but by being together in the world with others and speaking to each other. This is also, in an important way, how we know, or recognize truth. By being together, we witness the facts of the world together and can testify to each what was seen, or what happened. There is an interesting correlation between plurality and truth in this aspect of

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<sup>91</sup> TP, p. 228

<sup>92</sup> TP, p. 227

Arendt's thinking- being together and observing together- plurality- establishes the facts of our world and guarantees our common reality. Without the pluralist aspect, and thus a shared version of truth, we cease to have any common reality upon which we can base an arrangement of living together.

The opposite of factual truth is not error or opinion, but the deliberate lie- the denial of facts as witnessed by all. While in a theoretical way, this may seem preposterous, in the political sphere, as enacted, lying is not only common but frequently more credible than truth-telling. The truth about factual truth, the stuff of the public realm, is that its surest nature and greatest weakness is that it is contingent- it could always have been otherwise. This is quite different than with rational truth- the truths of mathematics and logic are said to be true in all cases, if not all possible worlds, and many philosophers seem to consider their own version of truth to be eternal. Thus to deny a fact is really quite easy, especially when that fact may be implausible, or simply inconvenient. Hobbes understood this centuries ago when he wrote in *Leviathan*, "such truth as opposeth no man's profit nor pleasure is to all men welcome."<sup>93</sup>

The political liar can adjust his facts to the expectations of the people, making his own lies more credible than the factual truth, particularly given its contingent nature. "The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed." The demagogue is also prone to claiming universality for his truth in an effort to mislead the multitude, but this claim "strikes at the very roots of all politics and all governments."<sup>94</sup> This type of lie is reminiscent of Berlin's thoughts on ideologically dogmatic political leaders who seek ultimate power. Berlin

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<sup>93</sup> Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, 1668, Hackett Publishing Co., 1994, §17, p. 497

<sup>94</sup> TP, p. 227-9

recognized the danger of monist, absolutist thinking, but from Arendt's point of view, the demagogue's political claim might be better categorized as an outright lie that attacks the very nature of the pluralist public space. Ultimate truth, the terrain of philosophers more than politicians, may not even be desirable in the public space because "the inexhaustible richness of human discourse is infinitely more significant and meaningful than any One Truth could ever be."<sup>95</sup> This quote says much more than at first glance. Yes, I personally would rather discuss, or even argue, politics with a neighbor than stay inside and read the truth in some revered text, and I expect many, but not all, would agree.

Arendt's further claim here is that human discourse, the action of speaking and hearing in public, the heart of plurality, is itself a kind of truth, perhaps neither entirely rational nor factual, but truth nevertheless. Human discourse is significant and meaningful because it brings people together into the public sphere, where we take the actions that define our lives, and create the common fabric of our reality. We may even discover something of the human condition, or perhaps virtue- call it the Socrates project. Compare this to the cave dwellers in Plato's famous allegory, attacking the philosopher once he returns with the One Truth. Perhaps they did not care to trade the truth of human experience and interaction for the eternal, but untouchable truth of Plato.

Another type of political lie is the bad-faith opinion, or the intentional blurring of the line between fact and opinion, which is not to say that there is no connection between fact and opinion. Opinions, when they are of good faith, base themselves on facts; they are informed by

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<sup>95</sup> TP, p. 229

the facts, but are not facts themselves. That the correct interpretation of fact may not be possible is not a reason to doubt that facts are the proper foundation of opinion. The issue of intent is meaningful. A good faith opinion, arrived at based on a survey of the facts as understood, can be aired in public along with others. They can be compared and weighed, and ultimately one may be chosen by the group as the provisionally the correct explanation of the facts. If we call opinion the hypothesis, then this very much resembles the modern scientific method with its hypotheses, testing, publishing, peer review, and eventual consensus.

However, this process can be deeply corrupted. For example, politically or economically interested parties, say cigarette manufacturers or oil companies, have long been able to find the one scientist greedy enough to be paid to go out in public and claim that there really is no scientific consensus, that smoking and health, or the warming of the planet, is still a matter of debate, and that even scientists do not all share the same opinion. This one scientist in a million, always on the payroll, claims that smoking just might not be hazardous to your health. So while agreement might not be unanimous, when 99.999% of scientists and researchers agree, and the remaining dissenter is economically interested in the outcome, we cannot possibly believe that there is serious debate. The very same could be said about our current “debate” over climate change, or even vaccines.

In politics, the liar can claim that his outright lie is just another opinion, to which we are all entitled- it can all sound so reasonable! But there are grave problems here. As Arendt points out, what is at stake here is not just another opinion in the mix of the common world of opinions, but factual reality itself. Truth, which should “guarantee reality of existence,” instead disappears in the cacophony of voices, while the lies of the demagogue rise about the crowd.

The disappearance of that shared reality makes any whim, even any fantasy, of the demagogue or tyrant come true.

The truthteller, under these circumstances, has a hopeless mission, for the truthteller is not a person of action, and thus outside of the political realm (the truth, itself, does not seek to change the world, it only reports on the status quo). They may be respected, or even believed by some of the population, but being outside the political realm, they can have no impact, cannot “act”. The only way for the truthteller to have an impact is to join the public political realm and become part of a faction, or just another interested person. This act, however, compromises their reputation of impartiality and independence that may have given any credibility they had to begin with. They become just as tainted as any other politician, for “there is hardly a political figure more likely to arouse justified suspicion than the professional truthteller who has discovered some happy coincidence between truth and interest (246).

The only exception to this is when lying has become the norm, where “a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle,” such as in a totalitarian regime. In this case, to be the truthteller is to take action, to engage in the political world because now the action of telling the truth is not merely reporting on the state of the world, but becomes an attempt to change its nature. This is risky business- Arendt’s caveat to this exception is “in the unlikely event he survives.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> TP, p. 247

This sort of all-encompassing lying stands in contrast to the traditional sort of political lying, which is done strategically, perhaps dancing around the facts, or misrepresenting them, but not done as an expression of official policy or as an assault on truth itself. Lying in this new, totalitarian sense is a “case of rewriting contemporary history under the eyes of those who witnessed it,” and the lie itself, according to Arendt frequently “harbor[s] an element of violence; organized lying always tends to destroy whatever it has decided to negate.”<sup>97</sup>

For example, the description by the Republican National Committee of those who took part in the January 6, 2021 violent insurrection at the Capitol as “ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse” is not just a lie, but an attempt to change the historical record “under the eyes” of all of us who watched the riot unfold live on television. Given the millions who witnessed the violence, the lie about it can only be one of those attempts to change the historical record that Arendt writes about. In this particular case, the violence was lied about, but let us not forget that it was another lie that preceded the violence- the lie of the “stolen election” was clearly the prelude to violence, inspired the violence, and even “harbored the element of violence” about which Arendt wrote.

Lying of this nature, an attack not just on a particular truth but on the notion of truth itself, is the hallmark of the totalitarian, or aspiring totalitarian, regime. The attack on truth itself, either absurdly, directly in the face of the witnessed in public space historical record, or the assertion of opinion in place of a set of “disputed” facts, when allowed to continue for long enough erodes the reputation for truth at all in the public space- it destroys “the sense by which

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<sup>97</sup> TP, p. 247-8



we take our bearing in the real world.” The long-term result of the all-encompassing lying, is a wide-spread political cynicism and a refusal on the part of the populace to believe anything:

*The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, and the distinction between true and false no longer exist.*<sup>98</sup>

While political lying exists in any regime to one extent or another, it is the move to all-encompassing lying as not a means, but as the ends of politics that is the hallmark of totalitarian rule, which is the subject of Arendt’s famous book, *Origins of Totalitarianism*. In its concluding chapter, “Ideology and Terror,” Arendt argues that use of terror, abetted by ideology, is what separates totalitarian rule from mere tyranny. Her argument in “Ideology and Terror” is directly relevant to her account of pluralism, and so I will explore it here.

Totalitarian governments not only crush, and then “outlaw” all resistance and opposition, but specifically seek to destroy all traces of pluralism in society. Its goal is to bind individuals in “a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions.”<sup>99</sup> Initially, this can be done using violence instrumentally (before violence, as an end in itself becomes terror), but its ideology also seeks to “transform classes into masses.”<sup>100</sup> This is what I described in the introduction to this paper as the insidious underside of the unity in *E pluribus unum*. Arendt

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<sup>98</sup> OT, p. 474

<sup>99</sup> OT, p. 465-66

<sup>100</sup> OT, p. 460

uses much the same wording in describing the effect under totalitarianism- “In the iron band of terror which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of the many the One [...]”<sup>101</sup>

Arendt sees that totalitarianism, in order to gain and maintain total control, must abolish pluralism by abolishing individuation of the individual. Indeed, it would be impossible to attribute a unanimous wish of the people, upon which totalitarianism, via its ideology, claims some supposed legitimacy, if any variation in belief were allowed.

Totalitarianism has other explicitly anti-pluralist elements. One of the chief aims of totalitarianism is to allow the “laws” of history and nature, with which they supplant positive law, to work their inevitable logic “unhindered by any spontaneous human action... terror seeks to stabilize men in order to liberate the forces of nature of history.”<sup>102</sup> However, “spontaneous human action” is exactly what Arendt celebrates in her political theory, perhaps above all else but pluralism, from which it cannot be separated, and is indeed impossible without.

The impersonal forces (see above for Arendtian definition of *force*) of nature and history carry with them their own incontrovertible logic which is also in opposition to human, not impersonal, action, and these forces are bigger than any human concern. Thus, any flourishing of plurality within a totalitarian regime will be met with the argument that individuals attempting joint action are not only in defiance of the state, but behaving illogically- “guilty is he who stands in the way of the natural or historical process” and has become an “objective

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<sup>101</sup> OT, p. 466

<sup>102</sup> OT, p. 465

enemy.”<sup>103</sup> This element of totalitarianism helps explain why totalitarianism must destroy truth, or even the idea of true and false, as discussed above- “consistent elimination of conviction as a motive for action” is the goal. The importance of the destruction of truth and conviction as motivation to action reveals the hidden totalitarian fear of rebellion, and the natality of action of which humans are capable in a pluralist political realm.

Totalitarian regimes offer, in place of pluralist action, monist ideology- “An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea.” The idea in question is the ideology’s ability to “explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise,” including “the mysteries of the whole historical process.”<sup>104</sup> This is the end result of the long chain of events that began with lying as an end in itself, not a means through which to conduct politics; it is the end of the need for public discussion, the hearing and seeing from different points of view that constitutes plurality in the public space. Having destroyed the notion of truth, and having destroyed the ability for the citizens to attain any conviction, destroys their capacity for action and subsequently their ability to act out or speak out against the totalitarian regime.

The “single premise” may be highly questionable, or outright bogus, but it is now unquestionably true. The logic that proceeds from the “single premise” on the other hand, will not be suspect, but entirely valid, and this is the strength of this move of totalitarianism- its logic is unassailable. Having accepted the premise, now the only one available, one must agree to any conclusion, no matter how awful, even distasteful to the totalitarian masters themselves.

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<sup>103</sup> OT, p. 465

<sup>104</sup> OT, p. 468-9

One must agree and prepare “for the role of executioner and the role of victim” as called upon by the state.<sup>105</sup>

While Soviet-style communism and fascist racism became the dominant ideologies of the mid-twentieth century, Arendt believes that all ideologies contain totalitarian elements, but which are apparent only upon becoming politically dominant. She cites three totalitarian elements in common to all ideological thinking: first, that ideologies explain “not what is, but what becomes, what is born and passes away,” and thus especially concerned with history and the explanation of why these have to become in accordance with the ideology, even if they are not at the moment; second, that “ideological thinking becomes independent of all experience form which it cannot learn anything new,” hence the totalitarian can claim that even what was witnessed by all is not true because it cannot be logically true according to its own terms. This is lying as a way of politics, as an end and not means, that is the direct destruction of our “common sense” and reality. “Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things.”<sup>106</sup> The element of totalitarian ideology here is strongly reminiscent of Arendt’s critique of the philosopher within the polis, and I would argue that Arendt’s move here is intentional. Still highly critical of philosophy’s move away from plural politics and toward the singular, contemplative, Arendt’s phrase about a truer reality behind the apparent one is exactly the Platonic philosophy of the forms. While Platonic philosophy is not the direct subject of this section, I believe Arendt’s intention here was to connect it with totalitarian ideology.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> OT, p 470

The final common element of ideology the “emancipation of thought from experience through certain methods of demonstration.” This device is another way for totalitarians to convince a people to not believe the evidence of their eyes or their memories by basing their version of reality on its own axioms and proceeding to its truths with “a consistency that exists nowhere in nature.” Taken together, these elements contribute to an assertion of an unquestionable reality, very unlike the “common sense” reality that is the achievement of a plural political society. From this asserted reality, with no benefit from the multiple perspectives seen from political plurality, any conclusion is possible, no matter how violent- “It is in the nature of ideological politics that the real content is devoured by the logic with which the idea is carried out.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> OT, p. 471-2

## ARENDT and BERLIN- The Conversation

Berlin, borrowing an idea from Bertrand Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy*, suggests that behind the cleverness of a philosopher's argumentation or system, lies a much simpler idea, an animating principle, "the inner citadel itself, which is usually comparatively simple, a fundamental perception which dominates his thought and has formed his view of the world."<sup>108</sup> Do Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin have such ideas, inner citadels which may be more intuition than argument? Another way to phrase the question- "What is axiomatic in Arendt and Berlin's thinking about pluralism? What are their first principles that support all that comes after?"

It should be evident by now that I surely do argue that pluralism is central to both philosophers' writing, the key to understanding their broader view of politics and people. While pluralism, human or value, and certainly the political, was a primary concern for both Berlin and Arendt, how they each arrived at pluralism is very different. I believe that to trace their respective paths to the centrality of pluralism is to understand what their "inner citadels" may hold, and also to understand better why we profit from examining these two very different thinkers together. Their views and the issues they focus on are often quite different and their overall philosophies complement each other to a great degree. However, a reading of Arendt and Berlin together also allows us to put them into conversation with each other, and the questions they would ask of one another serve to highlight both areas of strength, as well as occasional shortcomings.

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<sup>108</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, "The Rise of Greek Individualism" from *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1995, hereafter BGI. cf. Russell Ch. 23

For Berlin, pluralism is the conclusion to his argument against dogmatic idealism and the suffering it invariably inflicts; it is idealism and its historical consequences, the empirical data of history as he sees it, that constitute his premises and argument that end in pluralism as buttress against cruelty and tyranny. In essay after essay, Berlin asserts that belief in absolute, final answers to the political and human questions that have vexed us for millennia is mistaken, even when well-intentioned (which is not always). This mistaken belief, when applied to politics, can have disastrous consequences- “prophets with armies at their backs.” There is no single solution to political or social problems because the values that people live by are different from person to person, from time to time, and from place to place. Pluralism, that there exists a variety of values that one may live by and still be human, is the conclusion to these premises. Berlin’s intuition, his first principles, is that a society built on the recognition of pluralism is less prone to support the atrocities of the kind witnessed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is axiomatic for Berlin that a political society built on a single, all-certain, ideology culminates in immense human suffering inflicted by society itself, and often in the name of that society’s redemption.

Arendt’s argument is in some respects the other way around. Arendt starts, not ends, with the observation that “Not man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth.”<sup>109</sup> There is not just one person on this earth, there are many. There is a “we” whether we like it or not, and not even a hermit’s life is possible without the “presence of other human beings.”<sup>110</sup> Pluralism is Arendt’s axiom- a premise, not a conclusion. If Arendt were to have a “state of nature” argument (she does not), I believe it would be simply that pluralism is the

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<sup>109</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt Inc., 1971, p. 19

<sup>110</sup> HC, p. 22

original condition and all else flows from that observation, and indeed much of Arendt's own political and philosophical writing does grow out of that assertion. Nothing is more important to Arendt than this original, human condition- that we inhabit the world together.

These differences in first principles- pluralism as human premise versus pluralism as empirical conclusion- entail significant consequences. What can we say about placing human pluralism first before value or idea pluralism? For one, it situates the person at the center of a significant portion of Arendt further political philosophy. For example, her accounts of power, action, and appearance are all human centered- power is generated from a multiplicity of people appearing and acting together. Further, by starting with the human, Arendt is able to place the political in the context of the full public and private life, alongside labor and work. Berlin lacks this more robust view of human life. Arendt's result is a broad account of human life in political society that is based on *togetherness*, not a cheap "we're all in this together," but a theory of how plurality as togetherness makes a successful politics, and successful people, possible.

Berlin's pluralism, the result of argument instead of the premise of argument, cannot alone be the basis of a broader political philosophy- it remains narrower than Arendt's. However, this is not to say that Berlin was unaware or unconcerned with the human element. The idea of "negative freedom" stems from his conception of, and care for, human life- we must prioritize negative freedom because in this way one is free to pursue one's own values and ends towards self-fulfillment and actualization, and this is precisely what Berlin means when he speaks of the recognition of the multiple ends that one may seek and remain human. Berlin does not start with the person, but he is as engaged by the human condition as Arendt and



sometimes along the same lines. For Berlin, “communication is by definition a relationship with others [...] part of what we mean by men, a part of the definition of human beings as a species,”<sup>111</sup> a passage reminiscent of Arendt’s account of public speech as action. Berlin also sees, as noted above, negative freedom as a consequence of the human condition, for “variety is of the essence of the human race, not a passing condition.”<sup>112</sup> Individual life has value for Berlin in itself and as the ends of moral behavior. Thus, he asserts that politics is morality applied to society at large. The person may not be where Berlin starts, but is a central concern.

Despite this, Arendt’s axiomatic approach to the centrality of human pluralism encompasses an account of the potential of human greatness- the great things that can be achieved and the greatness to which an individual can aspire- when people act together. Action, acting together and not alone, is an expression of the power that builds on our human plurality, and while that power, in Arendt’s sense, may not fully accrue to the individual, its benefits certainly do, for greatness goes well beyond the ancient Greek ideal from which Arendt starts. Greatness can be a more just society; it can be peace among nations; it can be unity (but not unanimity!) in times of strife. It is fundamental for Arendt that through our togetherness we achieve a fulfillment that Berlin sees achieved only on an individual basis.

Berlin’s concept of the individual is, from Arendt’s point of view, too individualistic, too “libertarian” to put it in contemporary political terms. His account is closer to the neo-orthodox economics view of society as a collection of individuals, all free to pursue their own goals in their own ways, and via some realization brought about through rational choice, eventually

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<sup>111</sup> BGI, p. 293

<sup>112</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, “Liberty” from *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1995

work together to achieve selfish ends (selfish is not a pejorative in this view), and this is called freedom. Moreover, from a public and political perspective, it is not clear what role the individual can expect to play in public life in Berlin's conception. Perhaps we cannot all aspire to the public greatness idealized by Arendt, but in Berlin the individual seems entirely absent. In answer to these objections- in answer to the question "Where is the individual in politics?"- Berlin would certainly reply, "Wherever they want to be!" The individual is as free to ignore politics and attend to family or career as they are to run for president or foment revolution. For Berlin, as in much of the liberal tradition, freedom *from* politics is as important as freedom to participate in politics. Even Arendt recognizes this- "Indeed, do we not rightly measure the extent of freedom in any given community by the free scope it grants to apparently nonpolitical activities...?"<sup>113</sup> In some ways, this argument mirrors the negative/positive freedom debate, but, ultimately, in a less satisfying way. The idea that an individual should be free to not participate in politics is not controversial (but would be highly regrettable choice to Arendt), but to not have an idea or concept of the individual's role in politics is most regrettable, and to Arendt, and impoverished views of both the person and the public.

While I believe that Berlin is aware of the "human element," a more primary focus on human plurality and the capacity to act together in the public arena would give more force to his argument that plurality is, in fact, a defense against tyranny. Bernard Williams noted exactly this problem in an essay on value pluralism - "But more is needed if the pluralist is not to spend too much of his time as a rueful spectator of political change which is itself powered

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<sup>113</sup> Arendt, Hannah, "What is Freedom" from *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, 1961, hereafter WF, p. 148

by forces which have nothing to do with values at all..."<sup>114</sup> Williams asks here how it is that pluralism can, in essence, defend itself from less scrupulous political forces without a theory of individual action. As he notes, "more is needed" from Berlin on this question, but if Williams had asked Arendt if pluralism would be a bystander to political action, her reply could only be, "Hell, no!" Arendt's version of pluralism as togetherness, as well as her account of power, is inseparable from action and participation in public life. Arendt's pluralists may not necessarily be armed to the teeth and ready for battle, but they are definitely no bystanders; they are prepared for the struggle in way that Berlin's more atomized individual is not.

From Berlin's point of view, Arendt's account of political life in the polis, grounded as it is in plurality as togetherness, may promote a version of positive freedom at the expense of negative freedom. Who or what controls what I may be or do in Arendt's polis? Surely, some sort of freedom is necessary for the individual to pursue action within the plurality of the polis. What of individual liberty, or "negative freedom?" Yes, a multiplicity of people can be seen and heard in public, and the observer hearing and seeing them together form a plurality in the public realm. But in Arendt's public realm, can it be said that one has the *right* to appear? To speak? To say whatever one wants, to promote any opinion or idea short of inciting violence?

Since it is "men not man" that inhabit the earth, since plurality is primary, then, from Berlin's perspective, one might conclude that when weighing the governance of a political society, it is the group, not the individual, that has priority. What is to prohibit the group, even called something as high-minded and liberal as "plurality," from ruling autocratically? All this

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<sup>114</sup> Williams, Bernard, "Conflicts of Values" from *The Idea of Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 1979, ed. A. Ryan, p. 221

means, so far, is that the “inviolable sphere” of individual freedom is perhaps smaller than not. But how small can this sphere be made without eliminating all substantial individual self-direction? How far can one’s choices be constrained by the group and still remain human? In Arendt’s public/political space, there is speech and recognition of distinctness, but it does not follow from this that one is entitled to not have one’s choices constrained by the collective. Limited to this perspective, one could find Arendt’s thought to be not inconsistent with a coercive majority, whether or not she intended it to be so. I would argue that this is an area in which Berlin’s concept of individual, negative freedom serves to complement and extend Arendt’s.

However, this perspective is severely constrained, for when we go beyond the false dichotomy of positive/negative freedom and allow ourselves to follow Arendt’s thinking, we see that she offers us a third, and very compelling option- neither positive nor negative freedom, but *public freedom*. Public freedom is not the freedom to do or the freedom to become; it is the freedom to participate and consists in “the citizens right of access to the public realm, in his share of public power.”<sup>115</sup> Arendt traces the idea of public freedom back to the American and French revolutions, as well as to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, enlightenment *philosophes* who proceeded it:

*Freedom for them could exist only in public; it was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity, it was the man-made public space [...] where freedom appears and becomes visible to all.*<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *On Revolution*, Penguin Books, 1963, hereafter OR, p. 118

<sup>116</sup> OR, p. 115

What all of these fought against was not the denial of individual freedom, i.e. for negative liberty, but the denial of access to the public space and to access to power. Arendt points to the Americans in particular as further equating public freedom with public happiness, the pursuit of which was the experience of freedom itself- "They enjoyed the discussions, the deliberations, and the making of decisions."<sup>117</sup> I would add that what the American founders also discovered was the joys of plurality- "freedom needed, in addition to mere liberation, the company of other men who were in the same state, and it needed a common public space to meet them."<sup>118</sup> This is also the joy of joint action- the creation together of something new, or what Arendt calls *natality*.

Arendt argues that no amount of negative freedom would have satisfied the American founders (she is less sanguine about the leaders of the French revolution). If Berlin would characterize this as positive freedom, then let us also recall that Berlin explains that, in theory, positive and negative freedoms are very close, very similar:

*"The freedom which consists in being one's own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing... seem concepts at no great logical distance from each other - no more than negative and positive ways of saying much the same thing."<sup>119</sup>*

The true problem with positive freedom is not conceptual, but rather how it developed. We might say that there is something about positive freedom that lends itself to abuse by tyrants,

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<sup>117</sup> OR, p. 110

<sup>118</sup> WF, p. 147

<sup>119</sup> TCL, p. 178

but that does not rule out a productive, even positive, account of positive freedom. I argue that this is exactly what Arendt has accomplished “in answer to” Berlin.

There is an interesting open question for Arendt and Berlin on the potential tradeoffs between plurality and democracy. Berlin seems more willing to make these tradeoffs- he asks, only somewhat rhetorically, in the introduction to his essays on liberty- “Should democracy in a given situation be promoted at the expense of individual freedom?” He responds with resounding ambivalence, “where ultimate values are irreconcilable, clear-cut solutions cannot, in principle, be found.”<sup>120</sup> Is Berlin right to feel that civil liberties can be protected by an enlightened despot? Or is Arendt correct in her understanding of plurality as ultimately irreconcilable with autocratic government of any type? Is this in the main a difference in their respective conceptions of plurality, government, or something else? I would argue that the clear difference in approach is a consequence of Arendt’s broader account of plurality and its direct connection to action and power. Deprived by even the most benevolent, beloved monarch of the ability to act, to create something new in the public/political sphere, plurality breaks down and power erodes. In this way, rulership does ultimately and greatly matter to Arendt.

The problem with this position, as far as Berlin is concerned, is connected to his narrow view of plurality as both a real and theoretical basis of civil liberties. Not connecting pluralism with power and action, Berlin is much more willing to make the tradeoff if protections for freedoms are part of the bargain. What we see in Arendt’s broader concept

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<sup>120</sup> *Liberty*, Introduction, p. 42

is simply the opposite danger of tyranny of the majority, plurality or no- “The most obvious salvation from the dangers of plurality is monarchy, or one-man-rule, in its many varieties, from outright tyranny of one against all to benevolent despotism and to those forms of democracy in which the many form a collective body so that the people ‘is many in one’ and constitute themselves as monarch.”<sup>121</sup>

Stemming undoubtedly from their shared experience of turmoil, war, and atrocity, and perhaps from the shared experience of being refugees, Arendt and Berlin both have an aversion to human suffering and a loathing of repressive regimes. Their work originates from the same historical experience, with an idea of the importance of common humanity which allows us to understand and communicate with each other. This is borne out by the unique/same paradox- Arendt and Berlin share the idea that what makes us the same, our common humanity, is the fact that we are all different, whether we phrase that as seen and heard from our own unique perspectives, or phrased as that we all pursue our own ends in our own ways. Our difference is our sameness is our plurality, and to destroy that in the name of unity or cohesion is the deepest betrayal of both ideas of plurality.

Human life is a priority for both and I would argue that both would indeed prefer a peaceful, enlightened oligarchy to a bloodthirsty, repressive, but elected government (this idea might have sounded like an oxymoron 30 years ago, but in the year 2022 I believe it clearly possible). Uncomfortable tradeoffs must be made “when the chips are down,” as Arendt would put it. I would also argue that both Arendt and Berlin would prefer that a political situation not

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<sup>121</sup> HC, pp. 220-21

become so bad as to require this sort of choice, and if we are aware of the "devastating costs of avoiding civic responsibility,"<sup>122</sup> these choices may be avoided. The goal, for Arendt, Berlin, and I think all of us, would be for bloodthirsty tyrants and repressive autocrats to not get as close to power as to require this choice. It would seem we have yet to figure this out.

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<sup>122</sup> Villa, Dana, *Public Freedom*, Princeton University Press, 2008