

ARENDT ON THE POLITICAL

What is politics? How is politics different from other spheres of human life? What is behind the debasement of political life today? This book argues that the most illuminating answers to these questions have come from Hannah Arendt. Arendt held that Western philosophy has never had a “pure concept of the political,” and that political philosophers have been guided and misguided by the assumptions implicit in their metaphysical questions. Her project was “to look at politics . . . with eyes unclouded by philosophy,” and to retrieve and refine the non-theoretical understanding of politics implicit in ancient Greek literature and history. David Arndt’s original and accessible study shows how Arendt reworked some of the basic concepts of political philosophy, which in turn led her to a reinterpretation of the American Revolution and to a profoundly original reading of the US Declaration of Independence.

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Preface

Near the end of her life, Hannah Arendt praised Socrates as a philosopher who thought at the highest level and yet spoke in a way that was open to all. He was

A thinker who was not a professional . . . a man who counted himself neither among the many nor among the few . . . who had no aspiration to be a ruler of men, no claim even to be particularly well fitted by his superior wisdom to act in an advisory capacity to those in power, but not a man who submitted meekly to being ruled either; in brief, a thinker who always remained a man among men, who did not shun the marketplace, who was a citizen among citizens . . .¹

Socrates taught no doctrine, charged no fee, established no school of thought, she said, because his role as a philosopher in politics was not to teach esoteric truths, but to introduce serious thinking into the public sphere through dialogues open to citizens and strangers alike. “The role of the philosopher, then, is not to rule the city but to be its ‘gadfly,’ not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful.”²

In her praise of Socrates we glimpse an ideal Arendt set for herself. She aimed to think at the highest level, but she wanted to be more than a professional thinker, a bureaucrat of the intellect, an expert who spoke only to other experts in the esoteric language of a tiny elite. She wanted her thinking to shed light on human existence in a way that was open to all. Her books were written for other political thinkers, of course, but also for the widest possible audience.

In this book I have tried to follow her example. My aim has been to think at her level, and yet to write as simply and clearly as possible. One task of the book is to lay out a reading of Arendt that will offer new

¹ *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1: *Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 167.

² *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 15.

insights to scholars and theorists. But another task is simply to make her work accessible to citizens and strangers alike. Whether I have succeeded is not for me to say. But my hope is the book will speak to several audiences at once: experts on Arendt; political thinkers in general; and anyone who cares about politics and the question of the political.

Acknowledgments

If I had known how hard it would be to write this book, I never would have started. Fortunately, I was inspired from the start by a total lack of realism. In Homeric terms: if Odysseus was most loved by Athena, and Paris was most loved by Aphrodite, the goddesses who love me most are Hope and Delusion. To them I am profoundly grateful.

I owe more than I can say to J. Hillis Miller, Jacques Derrida, Andrzej Warminski, Shoshana Felman, and Juliet Flower MacCannell. Many others also read early versions of this book and freely offered insight and encouragement. I am especially grateful to Rodolphe Gasché, Karsten Harries, Paul Kottman, Sam Zeitlin, Jennifer Forsyth, John Ronan, and Julie Park. Words of gratitude seem inadequate to their generosity.

Arendt has been the subject of a vast secondary literature, without which I could not have written this book. My debts are too numerous to list here; in the footnotes I try to show how much I owe previous writers on Arendt. Heartfelt gratitude to all.

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I would especially like to thank my brother, Michael, who supported and encouraged me without fail for many, many years, and without whom this book might never have seen the light of day.

Above all, I am grateful to Deep Springs College. This book is dedicated to its students and friends.

Abbreviations

BPF	<i>Between Past and Future</i> (New York: Penguin Books, 1968)
CR	<i>Crises of the Republic</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972)
EJ	<i>Eichmann in Jerusalem</i> (New York: Penguin Books, 1963)
EU	<i>Essays in Understanding</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994)
HA	<i>Hannah Arendt</i> , ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979)
JW	<i>The Jewish Writings</i> (New York: Schocken Books, 2007)
KPP	<i>Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982)
LMT	<i>The Life of the Mind</i> , vol. 1: <i>Thinking</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978)
LMW	<i>The Life of the Mind</i> , vol. 2: <i>Willing</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978)
MDT	<i>Men in Dark Times</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968)
OR	<i>On Revolution</i> (New York: Penguin Books, 1962)
OT	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951)
OV	<i>On Violence</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969)
PP	<i>The Promise of Politics</i> (New York: Schocken Books, 2005)
RJ	<i>Responsibility and Judgment</i> (New York: Schocken Books, 2003)
TWB	<i>Thinking without a Bannister</i> (New York: Schocken Books, 2018)
WP	<i>Was Ist Politik?</i> (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1993)