The Concept of Nature in the Thought of Hannah Arendt

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Abstract

The concept of nature plays a key role in the thought of Hannah Arendt, though it has not been explored to the same degree as other elements of her political theory, even when the latter is employed in environmental political thought. This paper seeks to rectify this oversight, showing that the concept of nature is imbedded in Arendt's conception of the political—not merely one issue among others—and thus has a more complex part to play in environmental thinking than is generally assumed. The first chapter of the paper lays exposes the phenomenological core of the concept of nature in Arendt's thought, showing how it is intertwined with her views on the human condition. The second chapter explores Arendt's notion of world alienation as a feature of modernity, resulting in a new concept of nature as the object of scientific inquiry. The subsequent manipulation of this concept by totalitarian regimes is accorded a separate section in chapter 2. In the third chapter, the emergence of the inherent value of life as a principle guiding modern society is analyzed with a view to showing how the naturalization of human beings paradoxically threatens the natural world. The conclusion deals with Arendt's theory of the political value of promising, arguing that it is among the most helpful tools available to environmental politics given the historical context in which action currently takes place. Throughout, the emphasis is on the need for direct and embodied relationships to the natural and human environments as a precondition for human plurality. While many of Arendt's ideas give only one side of the contemporary predicament, they are explored here in depth so as to make connections and criticisms more accessible to future scholarship, as well as to situate the context of political responses to environmental issues today.

Foreword

By exploring in depth one particular thinker whose interests in many ways match my own, I have endeavoured to find an appropriate lens through which to meet the goals set out in my Plan of Study. Hannah Arendt combines phenomenology, political theory, and historiography in her studies of the contemporary moment. Thus, through her thinking, I have engaged with the various disciplinary methods I set out to explore. In terms of phenomenology, I opted to follow Arendt's focus on the human, instead of singling out the phenomenology of water, but I steered the emphasis toward human relations with the environment. In stressing Arendt's understanding of nature as "swinging," I was influenced by my earlier preoccupation with the nature of flow stemming from a preoccupation with water. While infrastructure anthropology does not appear in Arendt's work, I dedicated significant space in my writing to her writings on technology and its influence on human social organization. I dwelt at particular length on the question of appearance and the role of technological systems in disrupting our connection to sensory experience. Further, I theorized how her thinking on "action into nature" could be applied to contemporary telecommunications networks as a process of rewriting the communicative potential of the airways. Concerning economics, Arendt offers an alternative reading of Marx and the tradition of political economy, which I explored in connection to the concept of nature. I stressed the "ecological economics" angle of her discussions on the labouring society and the transformation of the public realm into a social domain for the protection of private wealth. While I emphasized the natural environment component of my plan of study, I took into account its intertwinement with the built environment, which belongs to Arendt's concept of "world," as well as the media environment, which contributes to the phenomenon of world alienation and loneliness.

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INTRODUCTION

Dearest Mary: The Kant quote: In German “Die schönen Dinge zeigen an, dass er Mensch in die Welt passe und selbst seine Anschauung der Dinge mit den Gesetzen seiner Anschauung stimme.” [...] Rough translation: “The beautiful things in the world (meaning natural things) indicate that man is made for and fits into the world and that his perception of things agrees with the laws of perception.”

It was good to hear your voice. I keep thinking of you.

Hannah

Hannah Arendt
Letter of November 14, 1970 to Mary McCarthy[1]

Darling Hannah,

Yesterday about 8 p.m. I finished my novel. In the ultimate version your Kant quotation is in. I thought of a way. And I’ve found a marvel for the dedication page. Wait and see.

Mary McCarthy
Letter of December 1, 1970 to Hannah Arendt[2]

1 BF 268.
2 BF 271.

Mary McCarthy dedicated her 1971 novel *Birds of America* to her longtime friend Hannah Arendt. Quoting Karl Jaspers, another of Arendt's friends, it reads:

> "*…to attempt to embody the Idea in an example, as one might embody the wise man in a novel, is unseemly… for our natural limitations, which persistently interfere with the perfection of the Idea, forbid all illusion about such an attempt."*
>
> *To Hannah*[3]

The gesture was appreciated, with Arendt writing that the dedication would be "a great lasting joy."[4] The novel, which recounts the confrontation of an earnest American boy with high ethical standards and a changing natural and social landscape, was poorly received by critics. But Arendt saw something valuable in it beyond the personal consideration. "This nature novel," as she called it, "old fashioned at first glance, strikes me as the most 'relevant' piece of fiction one could possibly read, hitting this whole technological question of the time at its most human and most neglected point."[5] Importantly, here as elsewhere, it is clear that for Arendt the technological question is related to concerns about nature.[6] In the final scene of the novel, the protagonist, Peter, convalesces in a Paris hospital when he is visited by a vision of his mentor, Kant, who declares to him: "Nature is dead, *mein kind.*"[7]

Arendt had supplied McCarthy with images of Kant to flesh out her physical description of him, as well as the quote that McCarthy would use to set up her pithy closer. The quote, above, is taken from a note Kant scribbled on a letter he received from an acquaintance.[8] In her translation of the quote, Arendt inserts her interpretation of the "beautiful things in the world" to

3 McCarthy 1971, dedication page. Italicized in original.
4 BF 277.
5 BF 277.
6 E.g. HC 148.
7 McCarthy 1971, 344.
8 The letter, from Markus Herz dated 9 July 1771, can be found in the correspondence section of the *Akademie Ausgabe* edition of Kant's works, vol. X, 68, p.124-27. Kant's note can be found in the miscellaneous notes section, under "Logic," vol. XVI, 1820a, p.127.

mean “natural things.” However, neither the note nor the letter seems to suggest any obvious relation between the beautiful and the natural. Nonetheless, it is Arendt’s contention that the natural things, and our perception of them (perhaps *as* beautiful), are what prove our belonging to the world. By contrast, McCarthy’s dedication, which takes from Jaspers’ own reading of Kant,[9] suggests that nature is what prevents us from belonging exclusively to the Idea. Here, then, are two different readings of Kant: We all belong to the *world* by virtue of being natural; yet by the same token our relation to the *ideal* is limited. What can this mean, then, if Kant is presented as the messenger of nature’s death? Does it mean that we have left behind the world and live as strangers on this planet? Or is it that we now have complete access to the ideal realm and are now finally free to bring the perfection of the Idea into the here and now? Maybe these are the same thing, after all. And what role did technology have in this development?

These reflections emerge today in the context of accelerating climate change and species extinction, events which could be, and have been, formulated as the death of nature.[10] Ours is a situation of environmental crisis if we agree with Arendt that a crisis means “we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realizing they were originally answers to questions. A crisis forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case direct judgments,” and surely the ideological and technological approaches to the natural environment of the past century appear increasingly inadequate to contemporary problems.[11] A crisis is not simply one problem, but a deeper disjunction that makes itself felt in many domains; as such the environmental crisis is not simply one issue, but a fundamental misjudgment about how to deal with the natural that leads to a series of environmental problems felt by different beings at different places. Arendt felt that crises were

9 Cf. BF 279.
10 As in, for example, McKibben 1989, one of the first popular books on global warming.
11 BPF 174.

opportunities to reevaluate these questions and consider new answers, and it is my conjecture that reflecting on Arendt's thought can illuminate aspects of our environmental crisis. While Arendt was likely unaware of the specific dangers emerging now, it would seem she saw environmental crisis even in her own time. Her correspondence with McCarthy reveals a preoccupation with the state of nature that is everywhere present but often obscured in her major writings.[12]

Two complementary beliefs motivate this paper. The first is that the concept of nature plays a far greater role in the thought of Hannah Arendt than is ordinarily recognized, and that an appreciation for the specific way she understands the concept of nature will illuminate her political theory to an important degree. The second is that, through both this understanding of nature as well as her political theory in general, Arendt's thinking can make important contributions to the discourse on environmental issues and climate change that are infrequently heard. My hope is that this paper will come to the aid of thinkers wishing to engage more deeply with Arendt's thought as well as add a valuable perspective to contemporary approaches to dealing with impending environmental catastrophes. To me, these two efforts have been linked in my daily life. To others, at best this paper will convince them that, as Arendt often suggested, to think can be an important way of being active in the world and that phenomenological and historical clarity is a powerful tool in the effort to challenge a regime of ecological devastation. However, I make no attempts to tell readers how to apply these ideas.

Many scholars, beginning in the 1990s, have turned to Arendt's work for insight into the environmental crisis. There are two major sets of discussions about the relevance of Arendt's

12 Even the letters are not fully explicit, making reference to an ongoing conversation the two writers carried out in the time they spent together over many years. This hidden conversation (ephemeral, as Arendt likes to remark on the nature of speech) makes appearances in their respective writing, like geysers announcing an underground stream. They are both clearly influenced by one another though on many points they diverge. Thus, I occasionally use McCarthy's ideas to illustrate Arendt's thought.

work to environmental thought. On the one hand, there is a group of authors who use her ideas on labour and work to critique the impact economic activity has had on the natural environment. Their main concern is with "productivism," meaning the incessant growth demanded by a capitalist economy, and they reference Arendt's comments on the waste economy, obsolescence, consumption, and the labouring society.[13] Paul Voice is representative of this group, stating that his mission is "to distinguish an Arendtian view of environmental sustainability that differs in important ways from the usual interpretations of this notion."[14] These thinkers typically rely on Arendt's account of the *vita activa* to make general arguments about how the economy fails to consider externalities. However, by suggesting that, according to Arendt, "the human condition is disordered," they misread Arendt as proposing some "correct" way to order society.[15] Furthermore, they tend to neglect the question as to how and why the economy became structured in such an unsustainable way, on which points Arendt is perhaps most helpful.

On the other hand, there is a looser group of scholars who focus on the possibility of making environmental issues political. Some are more interested in technology and "action into nature;"[16] others with the difficulty in organizing action around issues like climate change which lack the visibility to appear in public.[17] Thus, Jill Hargis writes that "Arendt provides an outline of political action upon which environmental thinkers can draw to theorize politics and empower people to act."[18] And while her understanding of Arendtian politics and its use for contemporary environmental issues is of high calibre, a conceptual gap remains between Arendt's observations on nature and her political theories. There is no evidence in these authors of how Arendt's ideas about nature are linked to her political theory as a whole.

13 See Whiteside 1994; Szerszynski 2003; Ott 2009; Constable 2013; Voice 2016.
14 Voice 2016, 179.
15 Voice 2016, 182.
16 See Cooper 1988; Macauley 1992; Smith 2006. For a definition of this concept, see chapter 3 below.
17 See Whiteside 1998; Sandilands 1999; Torgerson 1999; Bowring 2014; Greear 2016; Hargis 2016.
18 Hargis 2016, 476.

In both groups, finally, most of these commentators settle for asking Arendt straightforward questions and drawing out a few key concepts to try to answer them in a neat and tidy way. More often than not, scholars import their own frameworks and attribute terms to Arendt that she would not have used. And while they agree on the importance of "world alienation," a key concept in Arendt's understanding of modernity, they tend to lack the historical awareness that was at the core of everything Arendt wrote.[19] That said, the insights of these scholars are of great value and I will therefore try not to cover the same ground, though much overlap is inevitable. In this paper, I work through Arendt's major texts, showing how the concept of nature is threaded through each of these concerns.[20] In my view, the two sets of discussions in the scholarly literature are intricately related in Arendt's thought, and can be better understood according to the historical framework within which Arendt operates and which gives meaning to her various ideas. Thus, while this paper reiterates some of the same insights as those of others, my conclusion differs dramatically from those of others since it takes into account the context in which Arendt's ideas must necessarily be placed.

Additionally, I have chosen to pursue an "immanent thinking" approach to the study of Arendt's thought. Rather than adapt Arendtian categories to our contemporary predicament, I prefer instead to delve as deeply as I can into Arendt's own way of thinking through related topics, in order to come out with some ways of thinking through our present situation as she might have. This method I learned from the great scholar Jean Trouillard, whose masterful study of Plotinus, *La purification plotinienne*, I had the fortune to translate. Trouillard describes his method as follows:

19 Especially Macauley 1992; Whiteside 1998; Greear 2016.

20 *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is notably absent in this paper. A separate chapter on the connections between evil, violence, and nature would be a valuable extension of the topic treated here and would profit from the insights of that work, but was unfeasible given the constraints surrounding the writing of this paper.

> to understand a philosophical work requires a double effort. One must awake in oneself the exigency from which all reflection proceeds, without which one is blind. One must espouse the particular form this exigency has taken in the thinker one wishes to understand, by continually immersing oneself in their thought, and allowing it to take root. This is a work of deepening and openness, which leads us to pose our problems to the author in order to enter more and more into her own, to see with her eyes, restoring her reality and perspective to their authentic significance.[21]

I seek to restore Arendt's own thinking on the concept of nature, that is, to view the contemporary environmental situation through the questions she would have asked, rather than asking her to answer my own questions. When a topic arises that has been treated in greater detail or with greater acuity by another scholar, I make reference to them in the notes, but otherwise I limit myself as closely as possible to Arendt's own words.

To understand how Arendt registered environmental concerns, it is necessary to appreciate the particular way she understood the concept of nature. Arendt relies on a concept of nature to inform her wider view of the human condition, though she never turns to it as explicitly as she turns, for example, to education or science. The closest she comes to a direct engagement with the concept is in "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern" in which it serves as a foil to the titular subject, but even here we do not find the complete picture.[22] As a result, retrieving this concept requires a bit of archaeology. It also requires some conjecture, or rather some creative cross-referencing. In my reconstruction, I have traced the concept through three distinct stages: phenomenological definition, object of scientific inquiry, and societal value. Each of these forms the basis for a discrete chapter.

Like all concepts, for Arendt, nature finds its original, distinct meaning in experience, and as a result I look to her phenomenological writings to clarify this stage. The major text for

21 Trouillard forthcoming (my thanks to Liz Curry-King, my partner in translation). I have changed the pronouns to reflect my particular case.

22 BPF 41-90.

this analysis is of course *The Human Condition*, whose central chapters attempt to illustrate an experiential distinction between the activities of which humans are capable: labour, work, and action. As I relate in chapter 1, Arendt finds proof of this distinction in language, which, harkening to a pre-alienated world, reveals in its etymology the authentic meaning of words. In my reading, I find that the concept of nature emerges from the phenomenological experience of human solidarity with other creatures and cycles. It is the domain to which we belong by virtue of being bodily, and whose patterns are discovered in the intercourse of our biological life with other human and non-human living beings; in short, it is the horizon according to which we understand ourselves in labour. But if we sense our participation in the natural realm by virtue of being labourers, at the same time we recognize our separation from that realm by the activities of work and action, thus discovering that we are not wholly natural, or rather that we are both natural and unnatural. I then explore some ways in which human beings interact with nature through these various activities, emphasizing especially the political process by which human beings decide collectively how to organize their relationship with nature.

The second stage concerns the transformations undergone in the context of growing world alienation, which is the subject of chapter 2 and appears in two parts. Over the course of the modern age, the set of phenomena that was encompassed by the term "nature" is cut off from its direct experience in the body and, while it continues to bear the name, this "natural" sphere comes to be defined by the conjectures and findings of experimental science. This removal from the human scale of meaning and understanding recasts nature as a discrete entity, a category against which others, like culture, are qualified. It becomes the object of dispute and argument, as scientists, philosophers, and demagogues attempt to circumscribe the "laws" that govern its movement, rather than the principles by which it is conceived. This scientific conception of

nature was influenced equally by the discovery or change in attitude by Europeans towards other continents; the emergence of capitalism in the public domain; and the rising importance of technologies that replaced the senses as the primary intermediary between mind and world, beginning with Galileo's use of the telescope. It produced an abstract concept of nature, conceived as a process either opposed to human and cultural life or completely subsuming it. As I discuss in the second part, this concept would ultimately lend itself to ideological manipulation and form the basis for a new mode of political organization—totalitarianism. Such regimes would discover the full potential of "the force of distance" inherent in alienation by learning to change nature itself.

The last stage, which I explore in chapter 3, is more extrapolation than reconstruction. I read in Arendt's analysis of the contemporary view of "life as the highest good" a transformation of the concept of nature into an ideal that takes absolute priority in human affairs. I argue that placing life above all other values has led us both to ignore our specifically human need of worldliness and to organize our societies for the sole purpose of extending the life process of humankind. While the social organization of humanity has transformed us into a kind of invasive species, our capacity to unleash processes has been turned against nature to try to write death out of existence. This single-minded pursuit has in turn led to many of the environmental issues we currently face, from climate change, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification, to accelerated mutations, soil erosion, and resource depletion. I show that the same ideal that is at the source of destructive behaviours with regards to the environment organizes society in such a way as to incapacitate political action on these same issues.

In conclusion, like other scholars, I develop my own Arendt-inspired approach to addressing the environmental crisis. I offer this contribution as a supplement to the many

important approaches that will be required in the coming years. I argue for the value of political promising, which gains importance in the modern, alienated world as a means of re-establishing spaces of political solidarity, which can be foundational in developing a contemporary environmental politics. The clearest prototype Arendt provides for this is in her analysis of the early American system of covenants, by which individual persons bind themselves together around a shared experience of wilderness.

Arendt's ideas shed light on facets of the concept of nature that are obscured in its daily usage, but they are not without fault. Her analyses bear resonances with parallel discourses, especially work done under the rubric of biopolitics, but are subject to criticism from other important fields of inquiry. Thus, for example, in her judgments on the life-value inherent in contemporary society, she fails to recognize that not all lives are considered equally valuable; the locus of "life" tends to shift from the individual to the society when the lives of marginalized people interfere with the smooth operation of a system imbued with White Supremacy, as the theorists of necropolitics would argue.[23] Arendt tends to universalize her notions of the human, life, and nature, centering Eurowestern experiences as representative of those of all peoples.[24] In her dedication to a common world which makes plurality possible, she tends to neglect that for many, the world to which she harkens was based on exclusion. These criticisms are no doubt deserving of more room than I am here giving them, but I am obliged by the constraints of this paper to leave them to the side. By placing the analysis within a historical framework, I try to emphasize the limited scope of Arendt's terminology and I endeavour to make clear that a post-alienation common world will have to be built through collaboration between people of many backgrounds and with the recognition of the partiality of Eurowestern contributions.

23 E.g. Mbembe 2003.

24 Her starting point on human experience, to the exclusion of non-human entities, is itself a point of contention with scholars of the post-humanist stream.

Much as I might like to be teasing out perfectly distinct strands from the complicated knot Arendt has tied, the more accurate picture is that I am merely reorganizing that knot in a new shape in such a way as to emphasize one particular segment of it, namely the concept of nature. If I stitch together some strings under the name phenomenology, and others under the name alienation, etc., it is only because, to me, these have seemed the best arrangements under which to reveal the many loops and bows in which nature is wound in Arendt's thought. Or, to use a different metaphor, it is as though one were to flip a tapestry upside down, revealing how a single cord, by winding its secret way from one place to another, managed to find itself at numerous discontinuous points on the front. My task then becomes one of showing why in each of its appearances it happened to take on certain shapes or maintain certain associations with other cords.

I suggested above that we are facing an environmental crisis, in Arendt's sense, on multiple fronts but especially on that of climate change. If this is the case, we cannot merely repackage the solutions that have worked (or, at best, postponed the crisis) in the past. As Arendt writes, "a crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgments, that is, with prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides."[25] I see the present situation as not devoid of hope and I have tried to respond to it as an opportunity for reflection as Arendt did her own crises. It has often been pointed out that Arendt, in a speech delivered shortly before her death, spoke of the "ray of hope" that was the burgeoning environmental movement.[26] Less well-known is the epigraph that remained in her typewriter upon her death, waiting to accompany the final work that would never be completed, *Judging*. The quote, from Goethe, reads: "If I could

25 BPF 174-75.
26 HTR 262.

rid my path of magic, / could totally unlearn its incantations, / confront you, Nature, simply as a man, / to be a human being would then be worth the effort."[27] If a crisis provides an experience of reality that has been obscured by prejudicial lenses up until now, can it be that the environmental crisis gives us a glimpse into nature that we had forgotten? Could Arendt have felt that, at the end of her life, the magic spells obfuscating our view of Nature were beginning to dissipate, that we were beginning to encounter nature again with our own simple senses, and that this revealed that the natural things in the world are in fact *beautiful*? And can it be that by relinquishing our desire for the "Ideal," and embracing our "natural limitations," in all their beauty, we will come to belong in the world once more?

27 The story is recounted by Carol Brightman, editor of the McCarthy-Arendt correspondence, at BF 390-91.

CHAPTER 1:

Swinging

Many contemporary ideas about nature derive from modern science, just as our understanding of the environmental crisis is mediated by the diagnoses of experts. Unfortunately, in the modern world, we can no longer understand the knowledge produced by and received from science as experiences of appearance available to all. As Arendt points out, science has a tendency towards ever greater technical precision in its language, thus retreating from the domain of ordinary language which centers on experiences common to all. This loss of a common language in which to discuss issues of shared concern now extends to all fields of knowledge. As Arendt describes the situation,

> There exists, however, a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right "to define his terms." Yet does not this curious right, which we have come to grant as soon as we deal with matters of importance—as though it were actually the same as the right to one's own opinion—already indicate that such terms as 'tyranny,' 'authority,' 'totalitarianism' have simply lost their common meaning, or that we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness, so that, short of being condemned to live verbally in an altogether meaningless world, we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of meaning and demand only that each of us remain consistent within his own private terminology?[28]

Without a common world to validate the meaning of words, any attempt to discuss the environmental crisis stands to lose, not agreement over fact or logic, but a basic sense of what these facts mean and what should be done about them. Yet insofar as this tendency is countered by attempts to transform and share scientific discoveries for the general understanding of all people—a necessary precondition of its political reality (namely that it appear)—there remains

28 BPF 95-96.

the potential for nature to enter the sphere of our political concern and to be shaped by discussions and actions towards the world we wish to inhabit. It is in this context that phenomenology emerges as a distinct project, meant to retrace those common meanings and square them against alternative forms of understanding.

There is an element of reconstruction in deliberately phenomenological thinking. As I will show in chapter 2, specific historical events have led to the situation outlined above. But in order to understand just what changed, it is necessary to understand what preceded it. As a result, it belongs to anyone wishing to think today to carefully refill this empty space where once the world existed.[29] Only then can a level plane be reestablished on which to examine the changes brought about in the modern age. Thus, the most appropriate way to approach the phenomenological form of analysis is to set aside any knowledge gained second-hand, whether the findings of scientists or the opinions of parties, and to check it only against the experience of the bodily senses. Determining the meaning of a concept is a project that must be undertaken politically, since it concerns the common world, but it begins with individual efforts at thinking.

In this chapter, therefore, I articulate the phenomenology of nature that Arendt adopts in her reconstruction of the Eurowestern vocabulary prior to world alienation. I examine how the concept of nature is informed by the three forms of activity Arendt focuses on in her important work, *The Human Condition*: labour, work, and action. Further, I connect these ideas with Arendt's writings on art to show how an emphasis on making nature appear creates the potential for political action on environmental issues. I conclude, however, by noting that, though we continue to articulate scientific discoveries in terms of stories, comparing and contrasting them

29 I am here summarizing the introduction to *Between Past and Future* according to the notion of phenomenology by which I intend to capture the mode of understanding Arendt employs there and elsewhere.

with our own experiences and those of our relations, our contemporary predicament problematizes action on these issues, as I discuss in subsequent chapters.

Arendtian Phenomenology

Even though she never uses the term herself, I am by no means the first to read in Arendt's work a form of phenomenology.[30] But before I proceed, I must outline what it is I mean by phenomenology, so that I do not stray too far from Arendt's chosen self-conception. For one thing, there is the lineage argument, i.e., the fact that Arendt studied with and maintained an ongoing conversation with some of the twentieth century's most notable self-titled phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl.[31] Given Arendt's commitment to them as both thinkers and friends (publicizing their thought in the United States, discussing their ideas in her own works, avowing herself an inheritor of the tradition of German philosophy,[32] maintaining a correspondence, and so on), it seems reasonable to investigate the phenomenological influence in her thought as a product of her education. More fundamentally, I refer to the primacy of appearance in Arendt's thinking. The word *phenomenon* comes from the Greek φαίνω, meaning "to appear."[33] Phenomenology traces the way concepts reify common experiences of appearance. As I understand the tradition, phenomenology takes for granted the reality of appearance, meaning the direct experience of the bodily senses. As Arendt writes, "appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality."[34] From this basic experience of reality, we develop concepts to make understanding possible: "thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must

30 E.g. Canovan 1998; Borren 2010; Donohoe 2017.
31 An argument employed especially in the scholarship of the 1980s and1990s. See for example Hinchman and Hinchman 1984 and Taminiaux 1996.
32 See CAS 206.
33 http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dfai%2Fnw
34 HC 50.

remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings."[35] Whether or not there is something "behind" appearances is irrelevant, for what can be captured in conceptual language is only that which appears.

The reason for this is that concepts, for Arendt, belong to the world, not to thinking subjects, which is to say that they are always held in common. The world, for Arendt, is simply what "relates and separates" us and it is made of things, that is, reified appearances.[36] As I read her, a concept can be a thing in the same way as a chair can, for it is objective and worldly, meaning that it exists in a common world and can be viewed and used by anyone.[37] Only appearance can be corroborated by others and therefore be entered as things into the world. Thingliness, the result of reification, can only be ascribed to what appears. While that which does not appear may have substance and importance to someone or something, it can never be confirmed through shared experience and communication, which are the cornerstones of worldliness.[38] As such, it cannot assume conceptual form.

This connection between concept and appearance explains why it is so difficult to put into words experiences which are by definition personal and subjective. Arendt uses the example of pain, which she describes as "the most private and least communicable of all" and "so subjective and removed from the world of things and men (sic) that it cannot assume an appearance at all."[39] I think also of the experience of smelling, which is always described through some specific connection ("this smells like *x* other thing") and is often so memory-soaked it

35 BPF 14.
36 HC 52.
37 BPF 95-96.
38 "There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he may be. Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves" (HC 4).
39 HC 50-51. Arendt repeatedly uses the term "man" and "men" to designate human beings, though she was aware of debates over the issues around using the gendered pronoun as a default for the entire species. I shall quote her as she wrote and henceforth not mention it, for the sake of legibility. In so doing, I do not endorse her decision.

cannot even be expressed outside the experiences of an individual life ("like something that once happened to me..."). Or the famous "ineffability" of mystical experience, which tears one out of the world and brings one into direct, non-sensory relation with something beyond appearance.

Concepts, for phenomenologists, describe a set of appearing experiences that are available to all people through the human senses, and especially the clearest and most public senses of hearing and sight.[40] But only Arendt insists on the collective nature of experiences as a prerequisite for conceptual formulation. As such, concepts are always already political. Experiences are reified as concepts when they are sufficiently corroborated, at which point they are given a name and entered into the worldly apparatus of language. A concept thus escapes individual ownership and becomes available to all who share a language (and thus a certain dimension of the world), to be employed and discussed like all worldly things. If a specific person is considered the authority on the meaning of a concept, it is because that person has given it expression most perfectly, but not because they "invented" it or have claim to its ownership. Thus, when Arendt turns to major authors to explain a specific concept, it is not because she considers them its creator or owner, but because they are the greatest spokespersons for it and likely had a strong connection to the experience at its core (which in turn usually results from their position at the emergence of the experience in human history).[41] A concept, from the phenomenologist's perspective (by contrast with that of the intellectual copyright owner or the professional academic, both constantly seeking the new and the idiosyncratic), is

40 Setting aside for the moment the range of exceptionalities and disabilities that may affect access to common experiences.

41 See for example Arendt's take on Rousseau's discovery of "intimacy" (HC 38-39, OR 88) or Augustine's formulation of "will" (BPF 161, LMW *passim.*). That Arendt seldom explored authors outside the conventional canon is likely the source of some biases in her writing (cf. the note on the male pronoun above). She was indeed reticent to allow people to challenge their definitions. But, at least theoretically, her thought is built around a deliberate attempt to make space for new voices, and pragmatically her own fearless entry into discussions on these concepts shows that she had no qualms about women or people of diverse backgrounds becoming authorities on a concept.

anonymously authored and communally shared, to be expressed rather than defined, and most of all neither relative nor subjective but worldly and objective.

The experience of appearances provides the content of a given concept, but to be corroborated and reified, the experience has to demonstrate certain repeatable properties. Tracing the experiential connections inherent in concepts reveals what I like to call "packages," or what Arendt at one point calls "constellations,"[42] the set of associations and relations that obtain in a concept and that, so long as the latter is not alienated from its experiential roots, tend to reappear together. Thus, as we shall see, nature is itself a conceptual package, grouping related concepts such as generality and cyclicality. Packages show that concepts do not refer to things—they *are* the things—but to related sets of patterns and functions. Thus, what is "natural" is not a definite and distinct set of objects, as compared to unnatural or artificial things, but rather anything that happens to reflect the associations involved in the concept-package "nature." This understanding allows things to be more or less natural, as they reflect package properties to a greater or lesser degree. There is no nature and there are no purely natural things, metaphysically speaking, only things that exemplify the pattern of appearances that are contained in the concept of nature. The natural is not a class of objects; it is a mode of existence, phenomenologically speaking.

Thus, if thinking in phenomenological packages works at the level of appearances, it does not claim to represent the essence of a thing to the exclusion of a competing or antithetical category or package. While the natural is defined in opposition to the worldly or the political, for Arendt, this opposition does not mean that a single thing cannot embody all of those concepts. Indeed, it is precisely in the same entity—the human—that she finds the clearest example and the source of these concepts. A concept helps explain a thing insofar as it appears according to the pattern of other like things, thus providing the experience of a single concept. But if that same

42 HC 6.

thing also, at different times, in different places, or even in the same time and place, appears as something else, according to other patterns and in ways similar to other things, then it can also be explained by those other concepts. Thus, to define the human, one cannot simply say that it is natural, or worldly, or political, but that it is all three, and other things besides, in contradistinction to other entities that have different multifaceted properties (though, for Arendt, the human is the *only* political thing that exists).

The Human Condition

Arendt's phenomenological account of nature, in this sense, is chiefly to be found in *The Human Condition*, though it is presented intertwined with several other topics as well as historical and exegetical analyses. *The Human Condition* is a "phenomenology of human activities,"[43] or of what Arendt calls the *vita activa*. Arendt's concern is with the "kinds of active engagement" of which humans are capable and she focuses on the three primary activities of labour, work, and action.[44] Labour concerns the immediate sustenance of the living organism; work means the craft of useful or durable objects; action is the capacity to speak and perform deeds in a web of human relationships. Arendt applies this categorization to see in what ways Western civilization has historically valued, structured, or misunderstood itself by the ways it has promoted or reduced the importance of each of these human activities.[45] It should be noted in passing that this framework does not cover the range of human life or capacities in Arendt's view: the *vita activa* as a whole is contrasted with the *vita contemplativa*[46] and is also only one way of classifying human activity, not a set of universal metaphysical categories. In accordance with the view of

43 Canovan 1998, xiii.
44 HC 14.
45 HC 6.
46 As well as the mysterious "life of pleasure" to which Arendt alludes at HC 13 and 14 without much explanation.

phenomenology I have proposed above, we must keep in mind that these activities are concepts, not discrete sets of exercises, and that an empirical practice can embody more than one, or parts of several, or none at all.

The concept of nature only appears as such in *The Human Condition* in relation to these activities and the related topics with which Arendt is concerned (the public and the private, technology, religion, etc.). I follow this approach, tracing the concept of nature as it appears in relation to labour, work, and action, not only as a convenient way to structure this chapter, but also because, as I shall demonstrate, what Arendt shows is that the concept of nature is intimately related with the components of the *vita activa*. I shall argue that the very concept of nature is constituted in the process of self-understanding through which we devise categories and terms to understand the activities of which we are capable. Nature, then, is not an environment, but a plane of existence that we discover by the very fact that we both exist on that plane and distinguish ourselves from it by our simultaneous existence on other planes. We are both natural and artificial, and the one through the other.

Labour; Experiencing Nature in the Body

The activity of labour provides the first perspective on the experience of nature. Arendt's most succinct definition of labour is the following: "Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself."[47] Every human being by virtue of being bodily and alive relies on the provision of consumable goods for the reproduction of their own life and that of the species, and the means by which we obtain these goods is labour. Thus the human is, in part,

47 HC 7.

what Arendt calls an *animal laborans*, the animal that labours. (This does not mean that every single individual does or must labour to live, since, as Arendt notes, "[labour's] power is not exhausted when its own reproduction has been secured, it can be used for the reproduction of more than one life process."[48] This basic overproductivity, which Marx first theorized as labour power, is what enables us to take care of those who are not able to labour themselves, but it is also the basis for "violent oppression in a slave society or exploitation in [a] capitalist society."[49] Nonetheless, even the most privileged person can appreciate that their bodily existence is always predicated on some-body's labour understood as the counterpart of consumption.) Nature emerges as the domain relative to which humans understand their labour: "Nature seen through the eyes of the *animal laborans* is the great provider of all 'good things,' which belong equally to all her children, who 'take [them] out of [her] hands' and 'mix with' them in labor and consumption."[50] Nature is the collective biological existence to which humans belong with all other living beings, each obtaining their own life from one another. In labour, the human being is entirely integrated with nature, without distinction of subject and object, bodily metabolizing with other living things.[51]

This reliance of the body on nature's provisions and the endless toil of labour places the realm of nature under the sign of necessity. "Necessity and life are so intimately related and connected that life itself is threatened where necessity is altogether eliminated," writes Arendt.[52] Life is inseparable from the sphere of nature, for "all human activities which arise out of the necessity to cope with [the biological process in man] are bound to the recurring cycles of nature."[53] She likewise makes liberal use of Marx's statement "labor is the eternal natural

48 HC 88.
49 HC 88.
50 HC 134-5. Arendt's own quotations are from Locke. See also HC 100.
51 See HC 115 and 136-7.
52 HC 71.
53 HC 98.

necessity to effect the metabolism between man and nature."[54] In ancient societies, the realm of necessity was held to be private, concerned as it is with the body and the family above all: "Natural community in the household therefore was born of necessity."[55] The realm of nature, and by extension all human places that are dedicated to the natural facets of human existence, i.e., to bodily and species reproduction, is found to be unfree, forceful, and dedicated to the perpetuation of life on penalty of death. If this sounds grim, it is only because of the human "repugnance to futility," but in practice the yoke of labour in compensated by the "sheer bliss of being alive which we share with all living creatures," and especially "the fleeting, though intense pleasure of laboring itself which comes about if the effort is co-ordinated and rhythmically ordered, and which essentially is the same as the pleasure felt in other rhythmic body movements."[56] Thus, necessity justifies itself by the goodness of life, and becomes enjoyable in the experience of symmetry and rhythm through which it can be organized.

Nature, in this sense, is the endless reproduction of biological existence, while labour is the mode in which humans participate in the "ever-recurrent cyclical movement of nature."[57] We discover the repetitive quality of nature's motion by analogy with our own bodies. Writes Arendt, "cyclical, too, is the movement of the living organism, the human body not excluded, as long as it can withstand the process that permeates its being and makes it alive."[58] This perpetual motion is often described as "swinging" and nature is nothing more than the complete circle in which all of life "swings."[59] For the Greeks, nature is immortal, since identified precisely as the life process that flows through each of the elements it encompasses, it would be a contradiction in terms if

54 HC 99n34.
55 HC 30.
56 HC 121, quoting Adam Smith; HC 106; HC 140.
57 HC 96.
58 Ibid.
59 HC 1, 15, 96, 97, 106, 137, 146, 246; BPF 42.

nature were to die.[60] Moreover, the endlessness of natural cycles including the reproduction of species assures that on the general level nothing truly dies: "All living creatures, man not excepted, are contained in this realm of being-forever, and Aristotle explicitly assures us that man, insofar as he is a natural being and belongs to the species of mankind, possesses immortality [...] 'Being for living creatures is Life,' and being-forever (ἀεὶ εἶναι) corresponds to ἀειγενές, procreation."[61] The fact that something is not alive at a particular moment (rocks and streams as much as carcasses and humus) is irrelevant to whether it is natural or not, for what matters is its participation in the life process itself, in the endless circle of nature. Thus, "through the recurrent cycle of life, nature assures the same kind of being-forever to things that are born and die as to things that are and do not change."[62] Concerning what is natural about us, we are just like every other member of our species—"our natural equipment [is what] we share with everybody"[63]—and as long as the species exists so does our natural being.

Thus, the natural is also the general. The natural is what applies to every member of a species, while something is natural to the extent that it is like every other thing of its kind. That is why we speak of the "nature" of something as what is general to all instances of that category.[64] Arendt argues that "animals exist only as members of their species and not as individuals" and that "the *animal laborans* is indeed only one, at best the highest, of the animal species which populate the earth."[65] This perspective does not mean that individual animals do not exist, only that their existence as animals is identical with their membership in the species. Consequently,

60 BPF 42. Arendt writes similarly of "the indestructibility of nature" from the Roman perspective at LMW 214.

61 BPF 42.

62 BPF 42.

63 BF 293.

64 For the same reason, we cannot speak of "human nature" because what is rightly called *human* is precisely what transcends nature; it is a *who* rather than a *what* (HC 9-11; see also 84, 193). This idea, for which Arendt draws on Augustine, is taken to the furthest limit by the ninth century philosopher Eriugena who argues that being created "in the image of God" refers to the fact that the human cannot know its own nature, just as God is beyond being circumscribed by a nature. We are like God because, like God, we cannot know what we are. The same idea is suggested in the *docta ignorantia* of Nicholas of Cusa. Cf. Chapter 2.II below.

65 BPF 42; HC 84.

insofar as human beings are *animal laborans*, they are identical to one another and merely animals.[66] Our fundamental bodily reliance on nature makes us all one and the same. "This one-ness," writes Arendt on the topic of labour power, "indicates the unity of the species with regard to which every single member is the same and exchangeable."[67] Humanity as a species, as *animal laborans*, is only one of the many products of nature and, considered as such, individuality is of no consequence.

In the same way that applying a natural lens entails viewing things in their generality, it views them as a process, only existing so long as they "swing." There is no distinction, from this perspective, between the various stages in life: "the natural thing's existence is not separate but is somehow identical with the process through which it comes into being: the seed contains and, in a certain sense, already is the tree, and the tree stops being if the process of growth through which it came into existence stops."[68] This process is automatic, so to speak, in that it goes on without direction or intention. It does not rely on a conscious being to control it: "It is characteristic of all natural processes that they come into being without the help of man, and those things are natural which are not 'made' but grow by themselves into whatever they become."[69] Indeed, for the Greeks, not even divinity is directly responsible for their growth as they "come into being by themselves without assistance from men or gods—the Olympian gods did not claim to have created the world."[70] Arendt finds this quality in the etymology of the term, as she writes, "this is also the authentic meaning of our word 'nature,' whether we derive it from its latin (sic) root *nasci*, to be born, or trace it back to its Greek origin, *physis*, which comes from

66 HC 22, 84.
67 HC 123.
68 HC 150.
69 Ibid.
70 BPF 42. See also LMT 143.

phyein, to grow out of, to appear by itself."[71] For Arendt, then, nature in its phenomenological meaning is self-moving and uncreated.

Being in perpetual motion and process, having "no beginning and no end," nature does not lead anywhere or have a goal; it is inherently futile, "purposeless and turning within itself," as suggested by the quality of necessity noted above.[72] In itself, life does not produce anything other than its own reproduction, whether on the organism or species level. This does not mean that natural things do not need to bother, but only that their efforts will not lead to anything beyond what already exists, as in the example of the tree that would stop living if it ceased to grow. In the case of humans, writes Arendt, "it is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends upon it."[73] Moreover, nature's movement is meaningless as it does not tell a story. It is "without rhyme or reason" as McCarthy writes.[74] In nature, "there is no *tale* of the manifold kinds or of the names they bear, nor truly were the tale worth reckoning out; whoso will know it, let him [...] learn likewise how many grains of sand eddy in the west wind on the plain of Libya, or count [...] how many waves come shoreward across Ionian seas."[75] The infinite grains of sand and the waves endlessly hitting the shore exemplify how in this domain there is no beginning or end, no differentiation which could

71 HC 150. *Nasci* is a present active infinitive. McCarthy chooses the intransitive *nascere* for a similar etymology in "One Touch of Nature," which was changed to the perfect active participle *natus* in the posthumous reprint edition (1970, 191). The future active participle *naturus* makes the connection most clearly.

72 HC 98; BPF 42.

73 HC 87.

74 1970, 209. Cf. 191, where she writes that "genetics [...] have a 'plot,' mutation, a 'storyline.'" Here, however, she is already speaking from the perspective of modern science, which departs from the immediate experience of nature as cyclical.

75 Virgil, quoted at LMW 213. Emphasis is Arendt's.

bring meaning to its activity. Its "circling years produce no tales worth telling" for "it never 'produces' anything but life."[76]

Work; Crafting Nature into a World

In Arendt's view, the capacities of *animal laborans* are augmented by the capacity of the human being to exceed the natural condition of life in the work of *homo faber*, "man the maker."[77] In the experience of work, we appreciate our difference from the rest of nature and set against its norms those of an enduring world. As Arendt describes it, "work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings."[78] As *homo faber*, humans reverse nearly all natural qualities: their production is teleological, or rectilinear, and ends when the product is finished; the production process is controlled by a rational mind and based on an ideal model; workers work with their hands rather than metabolizing with their bodies; they work with dead things and their production is inorganic; their products are useful but not necessary; this product is durable and, while it outlasts individual lives, it tends toward decay or gets used up, without self-reproducing, and therefore is not immortal.[79] The environment created by *homo faber* is a world, distinct from nature by its durability and specificity; indeed, we can "erect a man-made world only after destroying part of God-created nature."[80] The world created through fabrication is the environment in which specifically human life occurs.

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76 LMW 214; HC 88.
77 HC 304.
78 HC 7.
79 HC 143; HC 141; HC 136; HC 169; HC 154; HC 136-37. See also BPF 44: "The works of human hands owe part of their existence to the material nature provides and therefore carry within themselves some measure of permanence, borrowed, as it were, from the being-forever of nature."
80 HC 139.

From this "unnatural" perspective, we turn to nature and see it differently. Nature does not change, it goes on moving in its cycle, but we notice our ability to interrupt its processes. In these interruptions, we discover material, and nature itself comes to appear as a repository of resources. As Arendt writes, "this material itself is not simply given and there, like the fruits of field and trees which we may gather or leave alone without changing the household of nature. Material is already a product of human hands which have removed it from its natural location, either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which must be destroyed in order to provide wood, or interrupting one of nature's slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble torn out of the womb of the earth."[81] In short, the human experience of work, "whenever men pursue their purposes, tilling the effortless earth, forcing the free-flowing wind into their sails, crossing the ever-rolling waves,"[82] introduces a new dimension to nature: mortality. In work, the human imports its own mortality into its dealings with nature. Whatever *homo faber* touches becomes mortal, cut off from the life process and introduced into a fabrication process. Material is nature viewed through the lens of mortality.

It is for this reason, Arendt points out, that work contains a fundamental element of violence. As workers, human beings "do violence to nature because they disturb what, in the absence of mortals, would be the eternal quiet of being-forever that rests or swings within itself."[83] Indeed, "this element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature."[84] Like work, violence "is ruled by the means-end category" and based on the use of "implements," in contrast

81 HC 139. Compare Heidegger's notion of "standing reserve," which he takes to be a modern development. Arendt, in a way like Ursula Franklin, sees this as one of two or more views existing in the pre-modern world, granted it comes to dominate our treatment of nature only in the modern age.
82 BPF 42.
83 BPF 42.
84 HC 139.

to the futile and bodily character of nature.[85] Weapons create unnatural advantages between one organism and another. Without tools and weapons, organisms must rely for survival on the natural advantages built into their bodies and shared among members of the same species: teeth and claws, camouflage and shells, venom and webs. In Arendt's view, one living organism attacking and consuming another does not constitute violence; as an ordinary reality in the natural realm, it belongs to the general category of necessity.[86] Once killed, the prey is instantly incorporated into the life process of the predator, whereas the worker maintains its material outside the realm of nature, fixed in the durable world. Nature is "forceful" but not violent, for its compulsion is that of movement and necessity, not of strength augmented by tools.[87]

If the worker's intervention in nature takes the form of violence, nature's cyclical motion manifests itself as growth and decay from the perspective of the world. While fabrication tries to freeze in death the material it has obtained from nature, the latter reappears to reintegrate worldly objects into the life process by "overgrowing or decaying it."[88] In this respect, however, the activities of labour and work can support one another. *Homo faber* enlists *animal laborans*, whose "human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay."[89] In cleaning and repairing, the "monotonous performance of daily repeated chores," we return to the endless cycle of nature, only this time in reverse: it is the "protection and preservation of the world *against* natural processes," as though to resist nature's cycle one had to create a miniature cycle within it

85 OV 4.

86 At HC 129, Arendt finds the same relation of pain to nature and necessity in torture, quoting Wallon: "On croyait recueillir la voix même de la nature dans les cris de la douleur." [It was believed the voice of nature itself was heard in cries of pain.] Completing the circle, Arendt earlier notes that the etymological root of the French word for labour, *travail*, lies in *tripalium*, "a kind of torture" (HC 80). Incidentally, this is the same root as the English *travel*.

87 OV 44-45; HC 140. Cf. OR 83: "goodness, because it is part of 'nature', does not act meekly but asserts itself forcefully and, indeed, violently." This, however, occurs in Arendt's reading of Melville's *Billy Budd* as a response to the revolutions and their associated "state of nature" doctrines. The intent of the story is to rebut a political theory and its subject matter is morality. The judgment of violence derives from the law, and is therefore already outside the domain of nature.

88 HC 98.

89 HC 101.

which turned in the opposite direction.[90] Meanwhile, as *homo faber*, we come to assist in the labouring process by inventing tools to make the toil easier and the burden lighter. As Arendt writes, "from the standpoint of labor, tools strengthen and multiply human strength to the point of almost replacing it, as in all cases where natural forces, such as tame animals or water power or electricity, and not mere material things, are brought under a human master."[91] Nonetheless, neither the labour that protects the world from nature nor the worker's tools that assist the labourer change the essential facts about their respective domains: tools belong most properly to the domain of fabrication and while they may help the labourers, they cannot completely replace them (labour continues to be required, if only to maintain the tools); at the same time, the satisfaction of consumption that normally accompanies labour is lost when it serves the world's needs, such that chores become a "fight" requiring "endurance."[92]

With that said, there is perhaps more middle ground than readily appears. Arendt often speaks of things being more or less natural, more or less worldly, and more one insofar as it is less the other.[93] I noted above that animals do not lead individual lives and exist only as members of species. However, Arendt seems to allow that they too can be wrenched from the general life process and enter the worldly sphere, as indicated in the reference to "tame animals" as "natural forces [...] brought under a human master."[94] In this way, animals can inhabit a zone in between natural life and worldly use. Let us take this reflection further. She earlier writes that "only if we consider nature's products, this tree or this dog, as individual things, thereby already removing

90 HC 100, emphasis added.

91 HC 122.

92 HC 122; HC 100, 101. Cf. the account in Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, Bk. VIII, of the delight that comes from organizing and maintaining a household. This, however, may relate rather to the concept of beauty, which is discovered in the arrangement of things, rather than satisfaction in the chores itself: "And what a beautiful sight is afforded by boots of all sorts and conditions ranged in rows! How beautiful it is to see cloaks of all sorts and conditions kept separate, or blankets, or brazen vessels, or table furniture! Yes, no serious man will smile when I claim that there is beauty in the order even of pots and pans set out in neat array, however much it may move the laughter of a wit. There is nothing, in short, that does not gain in beauty when set out in order."

93 E.g. HC 96, 172.

94 HC 122.

them from their 'natural' surroundings and putting them into our world, do they begin to grow and to decay."[95] Thus, merely by conceiving them in their individuality, we implicate animals in our world and, consequently, in mortality. This, indeed, would be the price to pay for conferring on animals the privilege of human beings, which is to have an "individual life, a *βίος*, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, ris[ing] out of biological life, *ζωή*."[96] By welcoming animals into the human realm, they too come to possess individuality, originality, and, as McCarthy suggests, "personality."[97]

And what of the tree mentioned alongside the dog? Turning to human-plant relations, we discover that some of Arendt's most curious writings deal with agriculture. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt asks whether it is true that agriculture is a case of "labor transforming itself into work."[98] She concludes in the negative for the reason that the "product" of agriculture, cultivated land (not to be confused with the "goods" that are reaped there, which are unequivocally the fruit of labour), does not possess its own durability and will not last as an object for any longer than it continues to be tended; "the tilled soil, if it is to remain cultivated, needs to be labored upon time and again."[99] It is not "a true reification."[100] However, a lingering doubt remains, which Arendt seems to want to rush past, concerning the suggestion that, so long as land *is* being laboured, it does remain cultivated. But is that not a basic property of worldly things, as noted above? Does not furniture get worn down and require reupholstering and oiling to persist in being? Indeed, even great works of art, which Arendt considers the most worldly things of all, are continually retouched by experts so as not to decay and disappear.[101] So while

95 HC 98.
96 BPF 42.
97 1971, 234.
98 HC 138.
99 HC 139.
100 HC 139.
101 HC 172.

cultivated land is not the end-goal of a fabrication process, and is in fact produced only incidentally by labouring for other things, it does *tend* toward the worldly—it has worldly potential—much like humans or the animals they domesticate.

This idea is taken further in "The Crisis in Culture." Here Arendt contrasts Roman and Greek approaches to agriculture. The latter "tended to consider even agriculture as part and parcel of fabrication," thus in direct opposition to Arendt's view in *The Human Condition*.[102] The Greeks associated agriculture with work because they emphasized the violent element in it, its reliance on "'technical' devices," by which one "tore from the womb of the earth the fruits which the gods had hidden from men."[103] The Romans, on the other hand, held agriculture "in very high regard [...] in opposition to the poetic and fabricating arts."[104] They conceived it rather as "cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation."[105] In other words, this Roman conception of agriculture, which Arendt finds useful for her theory of culture (see below), occupies an intermediary space between labour and work, nature and world. By *preparing* the land for habitation, agriculture anticipates the world, opens a space within nature for the world to surface, and yet it is neither one nor the other—it is "tended nature."[106] As McCarthy notes, perhaps not coincidentally taking Italy as her example, "the works of man—agriculture—are so woven into the primal fabric as to be a second nature. This is plain even to the most insensitive tourist in an 'old' country like Tuscany where windbreaks and olives and grapevines seem inseparable from the geological pattern of peaks and valleys making up the original scenery."[107] And while Arendt disparages the possibility that this approach is capable of reaching the heights of fabrication or worldliness ("great art"), it is suggestive of a third way of

102 BPF 213.
103 BPF 213.
104 BPF 212.
105 BPF 212.
106 BPF 212; see also D.
107 McCarthy 1970, 203.

viewing nature, neither as subsistence-seekers, nor as prospectors, but, in "an attitude of loving care," as stewards of the life of the Earth.[108]

McCarthy also suggests a further possibility for crossover between nature and world. In this case, it is not nature that takes on features of the world, but what might normally be considered products of work take on a natural cast. She suggests that some buildings and objects, those we might call "vernacular," are actually "natural" rather than artificial.[109] There are several points on which these objects fail to meet the criteria for work set up by Arendt: they are representative of "species," meaning human societies, rather than individuals; they are made from local materials with which they integrate rather than separate; they are not made according to a plan or model; and, I might add, they typically develop gradually, according to need, rather than resulting from a closed fabrication process. In Arendt's terms, these buildings could only be fully natural if they were also short-lived and consumable. Nonetheless, Arendt does provide for a grey zone between the world that outlasts individual lives and direct metabolism with nature in her understanding of a "home on earth," referring to pseudo-natural buildings like the temporary dwellings of nomadic peoples.[110] McCarthy's Tuscan buildings may likewise be "homes on earth" for their inhabitants, which Arendt would likely also consider pre-worldly.

Action; Deliberating and Deciding Our Approach to Nature

Action, the third activity Arendt includes in her account of the *vita activa*, appears to ignore nature altogether and set itself in opposition to its ideals completely. Arendt defines action as "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, [and which] corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live

108 BPF 212. It is equally unlikely that it will lead to political greatness, according Arendt; see LMW 213.
109 1970, 204. For a succinct and nuanced definition of vernacular architecture, see Oliver 2006.
110 BPF 210.

on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life."[111] Action is made up of "words and deeds," which disclose the actor's unique self but are "*about* some worldly objective reality."[112] In this sense, action occurs only if and when these acts take place among a group of peers who act as witnesses. Indeed, what makes action is only that revelation of unique individuality, which, without observers, would not exist, and yet which can trigger chains of events through the whole of the web of human relationships.[113] Action, for Arendt, is the proper origin of politics, and politics is whatever concerns and surrounds this capacity for action. If politics has come to mean government or diplomacy or other related concepts, it is because these have their origins in the plurality of human beings on earth and initially formed around the issues of living in common. For Arendt, politics denotes precisely those realms of human existence, whether concerned with government or not, in which the plurality of human beings and the disclosure of the self to perceiving others, is at play.

While work opposes labour in many ways, action typically inverts it much more dramatically. While everyone depends on labour by virtue of the necessity of maintaining life, workers are interchangeable so long as they possess the same understanding of the models that direct work and the skills to bring them into being.[114] By contrast, a person's actions are utterly their own, tied to the absolute uniqueness of who they are, such that the same deed performed by two persons has a different meaning in each case. Action corresponds to the specificity of an individual, whereas labour corresponds to people in their generality and commonality and work

111 HC 7.
112 HC 182, emphasis in original.
113 HC 178.
114 HC 140-41.

to their knowledge and abilities within a given practice.[115] On the other hand, while our natural bodies and learned abilities provide each of us with unequal properties and capacities, politics is predicated on the artificial preservation of civil equality before the law and the community.[116] Furthermore, labour and work are essentially speechless, making use of language for the purpose of organization or communication only, as if to make several individuals act as one and in concert.[117] Action, on the other hand, is present wherever speech is used to reveal oneself to another, and conversely all politics is predicated on the possibility of speaking to one another in a shared language.[118] Finally, while labour is futile in the sense of producing nothing but itself, action likewise has no tangible product; and yet, it is in action that we impart meaning on our lives and derive the stories that result from setting off processes throughout the web of human relationships.[119]

Arendt does not consider action to have an inherent relationship with nature, unlike work which transfigures nature into material and carves out a place for the world within the natural environment. Life is a prerequisite for political action, since one must be alive in order to act, but neither its condition as it is for labour nor its material as it is for work. Though human plurality is predicated on our "life on earth," the *sine qua non* mentioned above, it completely transcends this mere life when in action it is illuminated "without the intermediary of things or matter."[120] Action concerns itself with the world, as an important piece of politics is working out as a community what shape we wish our world to take, or in other words, making choices about what models of fabrication will be employed to produce the world we will inhabit and on the

115 HC 176.
116 OT 301.
117 HC 179.
118 HC 177-78.
119 HC 181ff.
120 Ibid.

basis of what principles we make those decisions.[121] Work is undertaken within the rubric of utility and ends-means efficiency. But, as Arendt points out, this is never enough to completely determine the choices we will make in creating the world. For, she pointedly asks, quoting Lessing, "what is the use of use?" In other words, if something is useful, it must useful *for* something, but this something cannot be determined by usefulness alone.[122] Only when a space is created for people to come together and decide together how usefulness is to be applied and to what principles our world is to be aligned is a properly political process at work for shaping the world. This is the place for action. Under all other circumstances where decisions proceed as if the usefulness of certain options were taken for granted, there are hidden assumptions about which values are prioritized and whose voices are heard. And without a forum to discuss these assumptions and make opposing cases, politics is undermined, and either mere life or some other principle (e.g. religion) monopolizes the capacity to make change.[123]

However, until recently (with the advent of technologies that unleash cosmic processes into nature), it was not possible for action to make such decisions directly on the shape of nature. If human beings were not also fabricators, tending nature for the sake of erecting on and out of it a stable world, or political, concerned with the form that world takes, their natural existence would in no way have political qualities; other natural things are not political and their naturalness is insufficient to make them so. Conversely, action does not inherently turn to nature and add new dimensions to it as fabrication does. Action's meaning lies in itself; it deals with the public realm, which by definition does not concern the "private" domain of the body or the household; its principle is freedom rather than necessity; and its effect is nothing but the story that unfolds to the community of witnesses. In short, action is as indifferent to nature as nature is

121 BPF 223-24.
122 HC 154.
123 See chapter 3.

to it, and overlap between labour and action is inconceivable.[124] While nature is the cycle in which the labourer participates and a collection of resources to the fabricator, it is nothing at all to the political person, whose "environment" is properly only the other people among whom action takes place[125] and whose "content" and "product" are both words and deeds.

The most telling example Arendt gives for this incompatibility is that of the French Revolution, in which political actors attempted to resolve "the social question," meaning the public provision of private goods.[126] Politics took up the burden imposed on us by the condition of necessity and, that door opened, found itself swept up in the "force of nature" that was the peasants' rage.[127] Authentic action, or freedom, as Arendt defined it, was undermined in the spontaneously organized political councils while the capricious "general will" held sway and demanded unwavering conformity: "the result was that the power of the old regime became impotent and the new republic was stillborn; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself."[128] A consequence of this irreconcilability is that politics, in Arendt's understanding, requires a certain degree of what we today would call privilege. So long as our basic needs are untended, we cannot be expected to leave aside our own personal or class interests. Our actions are motivated by the same animal need that everyone else possesses, rather than by revelation of our perfectly unique selves. Our decisions about how to structure the world will revolve around how best to provide the fruits of labour to ourselves or to all, reducing the world to a servant of life's necessity, rather than focus on the principles we would like to see shaping the world for its own sake, enjoyed in perfect freedom.[129] The exclusivity of politics from

124 Perhaps in this connection Arendt would reference the story of Cincinnatus who must abandon his farm to become dictator of Rome, and retire his laurels to return to the plow.
125 The frequently misunderstood "space of appearance" (see for example HC 199ff.).
126 OR 54.
127 OR 105-106.
128 OR 54.
129 For a discussion of how this is built into contemporary society so as to limit political resistance, see chapter 3.

this perspective is a penalty we must accept if we are to apply this mode of understanding, at least until such a time as all people are permitted and supported to obtain their own basic necessities. It is the responsibility of those with privilege to see to it that they make use of it for the betterment of the world.

If nature is incompatible with action insofar as to be preoccupied with the provision of natural goods devolves the political sphere into one of mere "administration of things,"[130] it does not follow that we cannot enact our natural existence, or the encounters between our worldly and natural existences, in the stories we tell as political beings. This function comes to the fore in Arendt's discussion of the political virtue of judgment, as related to the concept of culture. Judgment, for Arendt, is the faculty by which human beings are able to step outside themselves and view things from another person's perspective, so as to arrive at a reasonable conclusion taking into account multiple points of view.[131] This faculty is intimately related to the importance of appearance. Judgment can only be undertaken when considering the multiplicity of perspectives on things that appear, for it is inherent in judging that it deals with things that are accessible to all.[132] That which I cannot see and hear myself, at least potentially, I cannot properly judge. It is therefore necessary to make nature appear in order to make it the object of political judgment.

The same importance of perception is the lesson that Arendt wishes to draw from her survey of classical approaches to agriculture, discussed above. Her argument is that our concept of culture incorporates both Roman and Greek aspects and that these are related to their agricultural practices. From Rome, we inherit the notions of "developing nature into a dwelling

130 BPF 19, quoting Engels.
131 BPF 221.
132 Thus, it is noteworthy that McCarthy appeals to the senses to justify her contention of the naturalness of certain kinds of buildings—"take it visually," she says (1970, 204).

place for a people as well as [...] taking care of the monuments of the past,"[133] and from Greece we add "that curious and ill-defined capacity we commonly call taste."[134] Culture comes to encompass the care-taking of nature in anticipation of the building of a world, the preservation of those things that make up the world, and most importantly for Arendt, the political capacity to deliberate about and judge the objects of the world and thus to make collective decisions about "how this world [...] is to look and sound."[135] Judgment, or taste, comes to play a key role in the political process of developing culture by which we decide on the form of our world. But in retracing these steps, I am also suggesting that the role of political judgment has its roots already at the cultural stage where we prepare the world in our intercourse with nature, as discussed earlier, and that as such the way we treat the natural realm is a question of political consequence. Concern for the common world is the principal way in which politics impacts nature. Though political action cannot decide how nature looks or control its movement, nonetheless by making decisions about worldly matters, political actions will have an impact on the natural environment on which the world relies. If there is a necessary stage of preparing nature for the world in the construction of the latter, then it is reasonable when introducing opinions on how the latter should look to take into consideration the stage of preparation and its effects on both nature and world.

Likewise, coming together politically, i.e, as equals in a space of appearance, to marvel at and discuss nature, we are already on the path to making decisions about how to make our world in the midst of it. For it is through the sharing and judging of experiences of nature that we truly give meaning to the natural realm. In so doing, we constantly invite nature into the space of worldly appearance, but at the same time we recognize its otherness, as we saw above when

133 BPF 213.
134 BPF 215.
135 BPF 222.

considering the tree and the dog in their individuality. The most elementary form this storytelling of nature takes might be mythology. Arendt's own phenomenological conceptualization, which I have tried to outline here, derives from the Eurowestern tradition, where nature possesses a primarily temperate and seasonal form. But there are also different experiences of the natural, such as those of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island or African and Asian perspectives, and from places where the natural is experienced as more or less extreme, wetter or drier, tropical, arctic, or equatorial. What is perhaps of most importance for political action is to develop a view of nature appropriate to where one lives and acts. In the stories we tell about nature, we invite a plurality of voices to share their experience and to contribute to a common, though ever-changing, conception of the natural world. The artist or storyteller crafts these experiences into worldly artifacts at the disposal of the community of actors, who are invited to judge and reflect on them. For it is among the functions of art to make things appear.[136]

Caveat

We cannot help but make an impact on the course of natural cycles. But we can choose what approach we will take in both our labouring and our working. We can choose, for example, whether to emphasize the violent aspect of wrenching materials from the Earth or we can opt for an attitude of loving care, mitigating the damage we wreak and attenuating the necessary violence of work. At a time when we have the technological capacity to make especially large impacts, this reflective consideration is of the utmost importance. Judgment is Arendt's solution for consciously considering multiple points of view, while action is the means by which we can make these decisions collectively. Only by carving out a space for people to judge and act

136 Returning to my previous examples, then, we may consider Bacon's rendering of the experience of pain or Bernini's depiction of mystical rapture as efforts to make the private appear in public.

together will this be possible, and only insofar as we recognize the appropriate scope of human interference in nature. We can only act for the world, with the understanding that it is maintained and supported by nature's bounty, while we must remain attentive to the intrusion of questions of necessity or private and social interest in these deliberations.

This view of nature feels in some ways familiar, and in others completely backwards or in conflict with our sensibilities. As will become clear, this is because these connotations survive alongside alternative forms of understanding that challenge and redefine the concept of nature. Indeed, even the definition of what a concept is changes according to the mode of discourse one employs. In this chapter, I have briefly shown what I take a concept to be from the perspective of phenomenology and I have analyzed how Arendt defines the concept of nature in a phenomenological mode. In the next section, I shall focus on those discourses that have gained dominance in the modern age alongside and in connection with what Arendt calls world alienation. These forms of understanding, especially modern science, while shedding light on dimensions of reality previously unimaginable, at the same time require that we surrender our attachment to the world and approach experience from a removed perspective. It is in the vacillations between longing for worldliness and connection, on one hand, and the undeniable findings of science, which undermine some of the basic presuppositions of common worldliness, on the other hand, that we currently live. It is therefore our challenge to find ways to reconcile them, for it cannot be possible to live fully, and to appreciate fully, our lives as human beings, nor to approach the environmental crisis, without them both.

CHAPTER 2

I: Laws of Nature

In this chapter, I examine Hannah Arendt's analysis of world alienation as a growing problem of the modern age and its role in the construction of a new concept of nature. The "modern age" refers to the period that "began in the seventeenth century [and] came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century [...] with the first atomic explosions,"[137] and it is in this period that Arendt locates the seeds of many contemporary issues. As she writes, "the purpose of the historical analysis [in *The Human Condition*] is to trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins, in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age."[138] Understanding how world alienation emerged in the modern age climaxing in the rise of totalitarianism and the atom bomb, in other words, provides a key to understanding the crisis of nature in the contemporary moment.

In her historical analyses, Arendt leaves behind her phenomenological approach and opts for an unusual historiography involving political theory, art criticism, and philosophy that is distinctly Arendtian. I include under this rubric not only the historical segments that bookend *The Human Condition* but also and especially the seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to

137 HC 6.

138 HC 6. In the latter sections of *The Human Condition*, Arendt distinguishes between world alienation and earth alienation (264). However, earlier on and in "The Concept of History," the two are combined under one umbrella, which is how I shall proceed (BPF 89). For one, I do not believe the distinction is as pivotal to her thought as some, like Macauley 1992, have maintained. It is, after all, mentioned only once. If one were to emphasize it, one should also include the "innerworldly alienation" mentioned at HC 251, which has received next to no scholarly attention. Moreover, while world is strictly speaking distinguished from both Earth and nature, the present study aims to show their interdependence, such that world alienation necessarily encompasses earth alienation. My view is corroborated, finally, by the passage just quoted.

which the former were initially intended as a follow-up.[139] There, Arendt deploys an extraordinary amount of historical scholarship, together with readings of representative works of literature and philosophy, to make sense of unprecedented historical phenomena and adds a meta-theoretical analysis of how experience and events shape and are determined by emerging systems of understanding. In my reading, I alter the order of composition of these works, showing how, in *The Human Condition,* Arendt was seeking to supplement her earlier book through the notion of world alienation, which prepares the way for antisemitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism. Responding to accusations of obscurantism in *Origins*, Arendt supplied a phenomenological framework, together with a historical account of alienation, which together illuminate the information contained in the earlier work. In this chapter, I focus on how the concept of nature is transformed by historical changes and, conversely, how its resulting form is deployed in totalitarianism.

In these writings, Arendt details the emergence of a new concept of nature, inscribed within the gradual rise of previously marginal forms of understanding, notably empirical science. The concept of nature that arose in the context of alienation is marked by several key differences from the phenomenological concept developed in the last chapter. Below I give a complete picture of how I understand this concept. The principal difference, however, lies in the understanding that nature is something *beyond the reach of appearances*. For Arendt, the turning point in our relationship to the natural environment, which in turn would shake the human sense of worldliness to the core, was the discovery that our senses could mislead us, indeed could not be trusted, and that reality was sneaking around *behind* appearances. As she sums up the new position: "whatever human senses perceive is brought about by invisible, secret forces, and if through certain devices, ingenious instruments, these forces are caught in the act rather than

139 Young-Bruehl 1982, 278.

discovered—as an animal is trapped or a thief is caught much against their own will and intentions—it turns out that this tremendously effective Being is of such a nature that its disclosures must be illusions and that conclusions drawn from its appearances must be delusions."[140] Nature, along with all other modes of being, retreated behind a veil beyond which we could never properly access, only speculate about. These speculations frequently took the form of a search for the "laws of nature."

Thus, in the present chapter, I will attempt to trace how this new concept of nature, defined by its remoteness from direct human experience, emerged in the modern era. Doing so, I try to keep in mind that for Arendt, as she repeated frequently, "not ideas, but events change the world."[141] Thus, I shall follow Arendt in her discussion of the three major events that produced world alienation as a general phenomenon, with particular attention to the way in which human views of nature played a role in these events and were in turn shaped by them into what I have described above. Subsequently, I assess the connection of the concept of nature to the ideology and structure of totalitarianism. But first, it is imperative to understand what Arendt means by world alienation, for as Arendt writes, "the event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it."[142] Only if we can appreciate the situation of world alienation that has emerged in contemporary times are we prepared to isolate and make sense of the history that produced it, as well as the environmental crisis it has, in turn, produced.

World Alienation

Arendt provides numerous images to explain her view of what has happened to us in the modern age. She is fond of quoting Tocqueville's comment that "since the past has ceased to throw its

140 HC 276-277.
141 E.g. HC 275.
142 EU 319.

light upon the future the mind of man wanders in obscurity."[143] The image here is of a solitary individual trying to make sense of things, but finding no precedent to appeal to and no guiding thread to hold onto, she stumbles blindly in the dark. It is reminiscent of another image Arendt conjured later in her life: "thinking without a banister."[144] In a sense, the solitary individual is the most important part of this image, since the figure illustrates the fact that the guideposts we seek would normally be shared by many; in other words, our *isolation* in our attempts to understand is the problem. But of course the fact that the models of the past no longer match new realities is equally problematic, testifying not only to how important stability and precedence are for our understanding, but also for our ability to communicate with one another, to find each other through the obscurity. The endless novelty of contemporary events protracts an inability to find grounding for understanding and for communicating. World alienation is this radical isolation in which we "either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass. For a mass-society is nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who are still related to one another but have lost the world once common to all of them."[145] When we resort to familiar concepts like nature, we are seeking banisters that may no longer be applicable to contemporary experiences. We are using a language that developed in another world entirely, straining to make its terminologies fit heterogeneous situations. How these concepts have served as organizing bonds in a mass society will be explored below.

Another image that recurs in Arendt's work is that of the world as table. As she writes, "to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-

143 For example, at BPF 7, 77; OR 50, 114.
144 Young-Bruehl 1982, 453.
145 BPF 90.

between, relates and separates men at the same time."[146] Understanding the world as a table in this way helps to portray the situation of world alienation: "the weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic seance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible."[147] World alienation refers to a situation such as this one, in which there is neither any intermediary world "relating and separating" people, nor any stability in the organization of humans as a society, nor any meaningful framework to which humans can look to escape the "melancholy haphazardness" of human history, as Arendt notes in reference to Kant.[148] The table is important because it is distinct from the people who sit around it, yet accessible to them all; it creates a direct, though mediated connection. In a situation of alienation, a void lies between each person and the outside world. Individuals are "atomized," neither able to connect to others nor to distinguish themselves among them.

146 HC 52.

147 HC 53. I recently came across a passage from Chesterton, which seems written as if intentionally to offer a parable of world alienation, similar to this one. I include it here as a helpful supplement, of which I believe Arendt would have approved:

> Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamp-post, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen, "Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If Light be in itself good —" At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their un-mediaeval practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily.
>
> Some people have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamp-post, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, to-day, to-morrow, or the next day, there comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark" (original in *Heretics*, quoted in Leys 2011, 524n1).

148 E.g. BPF 82; LMW 154.

"World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age," Arendt writes.[149] How did this happen? In *The Human Condition*, Arendt isolates three distinct events at the dawn of the modern age that have each in their own way contributed to the emergence of world alienation as a ubiquitous condition. These three events are the discovery of the Americas by Columbus, the Reformation, and the invention of the telescope.[150] Through the histories they initiated, these events also have important ramifications on the concept of nature. World alienation transforms our ways of relating to the Earth. Alienation takes the human perspective to a viewpoint outside the cycle of the life process and the limitations of earthly existence, which Arendt, playing on an aphorism by Kafka, describes as "the discovery of the Archimedean point."[151] Like Archimedes who looks for a point outside the earth from which to move it, the modern perspective places itself outside the immediate relation to nature, simultaneously questioning its basic properties and turning it into a metaphysical category to be uncovered and defined. In each of these events, humans placed themselves, either physically or mentally, at a remove from their embedded relation to the natural environment. Without a common world, the potential for a consensus on the meaning of nature is equally lost, so that nature follows the world to the other side of an abyss separating us from what lies "behind" the senses. Thus, nature becomes something radically other, on the far side of an inside/outside binary. In the following, I shall examine each event in turn, outlining the specific ways the concept of nature comes to be transformed through them, and relating them to larger themes in the analysis of world alienation and the origins of totalitarianism. This will then provide the basis (though not the full story) of the modern alienated concept of nature, whose role in society and politics will subsequently be explored.

149 HC 254.
150 HC 248.
151 HC 248.

The Columbian Venture; Mapping Lands and Peoples

The discovery of the Americas sparked a globe-spanning project of exploration and mapping—as well as colonization—by Europeans that, in Arendt's time, had "only now begun to come to an end."[152] The consequence of these endeavours was "the famous shrinkage of the globe" for "nothing can remain immense if it can be measured, [...] every survey brings together distant parts and therefore establishes closeness where distance ruled before."[153] Earth became no longer the all-embracing, discontinuous, and life-providing ground on which humans live, but a territory, "small and close at hand," across which humans can travel at will and whose image is the "globe [in] our living rooms."[154] This horizontal shrinking, however, was achievable only through a vertical separation implied in the map and the globe, as it could only be conceived from a place outside of, and far from, the sphere of the earth: "any decrease of terrestrial distance can be won only at the price of putting a decisive distance between man and earth, of alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings." In other words, it required an escape, at least in thought, from the situated position wherein humans are themselves natural, so as to view nature not as a condition of existence but as a category of landscape.[155]

The distance that these adventurous Europeans placed between themselves and the earth in order to map and measure it was exacerbated by their experience in natural landscapes wholly unlike their own. These were extended sojourns in places where the traditional European categories of understanding were not prepared to accommodate other realities. The experience

152 HC 250. Arendt, who was writing during a tide of independence movements, would have to reconsider her timeline in light of more recent developments and additional information.

153 HC 250.

154 HC 250; 251.

155 The idea of the "human" that emerges from this development is intricately connected to the role of colonizer. The related question as to when Arendt is using the term in this way or in her phenomenological mode is a difficult one to grapple with. Her discussion, or critique, of this period of European history is very intimate, showing a failure to make clear whose perspective she is exploring at any given point. Cf. Wynter 2003.

of such alien forms of nature, and of the people who inhabited them and with whom the sojourners could not seem to communicate, reinforced the idea of nature as radically other. Arendt expresses the feelings of Europeans in Africa when she states that they encountered "a horrifying experience of something alien beyond imagination or comprehension" in the form of human beings who acted dramatically different from themselves.[156] To these outsiders, the native peoples were "human beings who apparently were as much a part of nature as wild animals."[157] They could not accept that these were people in the same right as themselves, for they seemed so dramatically different—the Eurowestern picture of human nature in its generality was insufficiently large to embrace such a contrast. To retain their own self-worth, they had to look for a new explanation for this fundamental challenge to their belief in human difference from nature: "the 'white men' could not but reconsider their own humanity and decide that they themselves were more than human and obviously chosen by God to be the gods of black men."[158] Whereas, from a phenomenological perspective, everyone has to an equal degree the need to labour and preserve their life process, constituting their natural selves, the new explorer's perspective saw different *kinds* of humans (rather than different kinds of human activity), some of whom were wholly natural and others who were utterly not. By extension, "natural" people are unable to speak, for speech is political and nature is speechless,[159] and any protest made in a language other than that of the occupiers could only be heard as an animal cry.

In sum, the universality of concepts phenomenologically derived from experiences in one particular place was challenged by experiences in other places. Rather than amend their understanding of nature and worldliness, the explorers applied their mapping techniques,

156 OT 195.
157 OT 194.
158 OT 195.
159 See chapter 1.

predicated on distance and alienation, to Indigenous peoples. There is a persistent blindness at work in this categorization, whose motivations we cannot discuss here.[160] And it is not without some discomfort that we find Arendt reproducing this failure and misrepresentation, through her own proximity to European methods and vocabulary, though this is in fact a useful exemplification of the very incongruity between a crumbling phenomenological worldview and emerging systems of power and understanding. It seems that the simple degree of difference in forms and patterns in the ways of living of different groups of people was too great to allow for the transposition of phenomenological concepts derived from one group to the other. The distance placed between experiences of difference and established forms of understanding suggested a kind of alienation, to which the explorers were apparently accustomed and prepared to employ. Thus, they opted to elevate themselves to the rank of gods in the same way they elevated themselves above the globe, compounding the alienation from non-human nature with a division within humanity itself between "natural" or "savage" humans and cultured ones.

This self-aggrandisement, Arendt argues, only served to engross the supposed cultured group in the pursuit of "natural" superiority and "natural" laws. As she writes, "when the Boers, in their fright and misery, decided to use [Indigenous people] as though they were just another form of animal life, they embarked upon a process which could only end with their own degeneration into a white race living beside and together with black races from whom in the end they would differ only in the color of their skin."[161] Becoming so caught up in mastery of nature,

160 The one-sidedness of this approach was occasionally recognized by contemporaries, such as Victor Segalen, about whom Simon Leys writes, "in contradistinction to the writer-tourist, Segalen sets out to depict less the effect of the surroundings on the traveller than the effect of the traveller on the surroundings" (2011, 91). Segalen noticed that his fellow adventurers "have told what they saw, what they felt in the presence of unexpected things and people the shock of whose encounter they had sought out. But have they revealed what these things and people thought themselves, or what they thought of them, the visitors? For there is perhaps also a shock delivered by the traveller to the spectacle before him, a reverse shock that affects what the traveller sees" (quoted, ibid.). Despite these astute observations, Leys argues, Segalen still fell short of his own ambitions.

161 (OT 194). See also OT 197; 465ff.

the occupying Boer colony ended up completely subsumed by natural processes. Having first externalized the concept of nature, mastery over it required a complete submission to its supposed "laws." The Boers' racist society in Africa, Arendt argues, is like "a laboratory test" for the full-fledged racist state of Nazi Germany, to which I shall turn below.[162]

Exploration created not only a physical distance between the explorers and nature, but produced a concept of nature as foreign and hostile. As a whole, nature appeared to be hiding secrets, such as other continents. At the same time, in the different forms of life, human and non-human alike, exploration revealed a number of differences irreconcilable within established categories of understanding. This challenge to the understanding was met with facile and arrogant notions of superiority and progress, which would later blend with scientific ideas of evolution to produce racist doctrines. Nature as historical and external was discovered in the bodies of foreign peoples and species, demarcating some as more or less evolutionarily developed, but ultimately enveloping them all in a total natural process without place for a common world.

The Reformation; Capitalism as Natural Growth

162 OT 196. Though perhaps not directly related to the project of world exploration, another process of "naturalization" occurred around this time. Arendt calls it a transition "from crime to vice" (OT 79ff). Whereas certain categories of people, namely Jews and homosexuals, had had their actions criminalized in pre-modern society, this was mainly to enforce a particular civil order. But in the nineteenth-century salons, "personalities" from these groups were exoticized and allowed to enter *société* in order to titillate the desire of their hosts to "be bad." The corollary of this was that homosexuality and Jewishness were no longer the qualities of people who lost some rights based on what they believed or did, but examples of intriguing, alien types. Homosexuality and Judaism was naturalized, they became what one *was*. Consequently, when such "vices" as being gay or being a Jew fell out of fashion or became the subject of political controversy (as in the Dreyfus Affair), these people were not merely punished for what they did or believed (which assumes that one can of course not do or believe such things), but persecuted for what they were. Belonging to a category that fell outside the accepted norms of a society now permanently banished one from that society, making one unprotected from the hatred of one's fellows, subject to violence or exile.

For Arendt, the salient of factor of the Reformation, the second major event at the start of the modern age, is not the religious schism it caused, but the expropriation of land it sparked.[163] In the vein of Max Weber, she ties the Protestant movement with an economic system in which land is changed from a private part of the common world into a capital asset.[164] The new view of land is mirrored in the new view of workers whose "labour power"—the capacity to produce a surplus of goods beyond the basic requirements of the labouring organism itself—is now released. "Expropriation," she writes, "the deprivation for certain groups of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life, created both the original accumulation of wealth and the possibility of transforming this wealth into capital through labor."[165] It was the birth of capitalism.

For Arendt, capitalism is an economic system modelled on the natural world. The expropriation triggered by the Reformation led to a growing bourgeois class, unlike any class that had existed so long as the public realm was protected from private interests and land was not used as capital. Early witnesses of these events such as Adam Smith understood that they had to do with the release of labour's capacity to produce surplus, and therefore turned to the natural realm to explain the phenomenon:

> Historically, political theorists from the seventeenth century onward were confronted with a hitherto unheard-of process of growing wealth, growing property, growing acquisition. In the attempt to account for this steady growth, their attention was naturally drawn to the phenomenon of a progressing process itself, so that [...] the concept of process became the very key term of the new age as well as the sciences, historical and natural, developed by it. From its beginning, this process, because of its apparent endlessness, *was understood as a natural process and more specifically in the image of the life process itself*. The crudest superstition of the modern age—that "money begets money"—as well as its sharpest political insight—that power generates power—owes its plausibility to the *underlying metaphor of the natural fertility of life*. Of all

163 HC 252.
164 HC 254-256; 68ff.
165 HC 254-255.

> human activities, only labor, and neither action nor work, is unending, progressing automatically in accordance with life itself and outside the range of wilful decisions or humanly meaningful purposes.[166]

Notably, this metaphor leaves out the swinging cyclicality of nature, emphasizing only fertility and growth and ignoring the death and decay that typically accompany it. Both labourers and land are valued only for the excess they are capable of producing, but this excess, which is called wealth, is not reintegrated into the swinging cycle of nature as it would "naturally" be: it is accumulated and redeployed as capital for continued growth. As Arendt writes, "without the process of accumulation, wealth would at once fall back into the opposite process of disintegration through use and consumption."[167] This is what she calls the "unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural" by which "the growth element inherent in all organic life [has] completely overcome and overgrown the processes of decay by which organic life is checked and balanced in nature's household."[168]

The metaphors of nature applied to an economic system carry unexpected consequences if, as I have argued, concepts tend to move in packages. Thus, with the advent of a new capitalist regime and its use of the notion of overproductivity, or fertility, a new form of corporeality is created. Organic growth is measured relative to the confines of a defined body; likewise, the capitalists must establish clear boundaries within which the growth process can be measured. The definitive example of such an abstract body is the nation-state. "The bourgeoisie," writes Arendt, "had developed within, and together with, the nation-state, which almost by definition ruled over and beyond a class-divided society."[169] The nation-state purports to represent a

166 HC 105-106, emphasis added.
167 HC 69.
168 HC 47.
169 OT 123. For Arendt, the class-based society is a phenomenon of the modern age, which even by her own time was no longer applicable. She quarrelled with Marxists at length on this point. Its connection to "the rise of the social" as a realm neither private nor public is certainly relevant here, but a full analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. It is the hidden link between the previous section on the classification of peoples with this one on capitalist economics. It would be worthwhile pursuing this topic at greater length, though the scope of this paper

coherent body made up of a homogeneous human population inhabiting a definite territory to which the people have a historical relationship: "Nations entered the scene of history and were emancipated when peoples had acquired a consciousness of themselves as cultural and historical entities, and of their territory as a permanent home, where history had left its visible traces, whose cultivation was the product of the common labor of their ancestors and whose future would depend upon the course of a common civilization."[170] For Arendt, France is the nation-state *par excellence*, capable of demonstrating a distinct cultural and ethnic identity tied explicitly to a particular geographic area.[171] It is from the perspective of such a politically organized economic body that the commonwealth is calculated and accumulation measured.

Arendt's description of the economic workings of the nation-state can be clarified through her analogous study of the household in pre-modern ages. Humans hold property in order to carve out a piece of nature to serve as the basis for their labouring, thereby maintaining their individual life processes (and those of anyone who depended on them).[172] Property in this sense is marked by a dual character, as natural from the inside and as worldly from the outside: "one's location in a particular part of the world."[173] The growth and procreation of individual bodies should therefore be limited by the amount of sustenance provided by their allocated property, whether it be agricultural land, forest for foraging and hunting, etc. Conversely, it would be in the interest of a property-owner or steward to ensure they do not deplete the land such that it become unable to sustain life. Economy would dictate that larger gains could be reaped over time by not reaping everything at once. Arendt argues that, in the modern age, the state becomes increasingly concerned with occupations formerly limited to the household, while

prevents me from doing so.

170 OT 229.

171 OT 50. According to Arendt, all other countries that have attempted to organize themselves on the nation-state model have done so to a greater or lesser degree of failure, sometimes to catastrophic results.

172 HC 30.

173 HC 61.

society is conceived as one large "super-human family."[174] The term "economy" (etymologically rooted in "home management," as is often noted) is extended to the boundaries of the state; "political economy" is conceived at this time, which would otherwise have been a "contradiction in terms."[175] The public realm becomes concerned with private interests, the deceptive notion of the "commonwealth," which in reality is not common at all, since it is primarily owned by the bourgeois class that profits from the labouring class.[176]

Like the head of a household making the most of their resources to grow private wealth, the bourgeois buys and trades goods and establishes production facilities on a national scale to grow the supposed wealth of the whole. Nonetheless, though the nation-state constitutes a body from the perspective of economic calculation, it hides many distinct factions within itself. As a landowner manages a homestead—its land, livestock, facilities, slaves—the bourgeois class deals with the labouring population and the natural resources of the nation merely as assets intended to produce a surplus. Thus, just as the private property of land has a twofold appearance, being worldly from the outside and natural-economic from the inside, so too does the nation-state present a unified front to other nations while internally it subsists from class distinctions.

But where the scope of the body and the measure of value become abstract, referring to the set of assets available to a capital-wielding class, the scale of potential labour surplus appears indefinite. Unlike the household, which is intended to produce only so much wealth as will liberate its head from the need to labour in order to engage in higher callings such as politics and philosophy, the national wealth seeks to continue growing indefinitely, even at the cost of the political sphere altogether. The wielders of power within the capitalist system are alienated from the source of their wealth, namely labourers and natural processes, concerned instead with the

174 HC 29.
175 HC 29.
176 HC 68-69. See below on erosion of political life by economic interests.

pseudo-natural process of wealth accumulation. They are therefore careless with regard to maintaining its sustainability. Thus, Arendt's claim above that the idea that "money begets money" is a crude superstition.[177] What in fact begets money are the processes that produce commodifiable goods, but the capacity of these processes to reproduce themselves is destroyed when value, as money, is alienated from its sources.

This was proven in the late nineteenth century, when the capacity to produce and accumulate wealth was reaching a crisis point in industrial European nations due to the incapacity of the land to produce more wealth, while the accumulated wealth had nothing left to invest in (and therefore grow). Thus, the capitalist classes of the nations could only find one way to maintain the momentum of accumulation and resist the process of disintegration: expansion. This was the imperialist period, which Arendt defines as "the three decades from 1884 to 1914."[178] As Arendt writes:

> Innocently enough, expansion appeared first as the outlet for excess capital production and offered a remedy, capital export. The tremendously increased wealth produced by capitalist production under a social system based on maldistribution had resulted in "oversaving"—that is, the accumulation of capital which was condemned to idleness within the existing national capacity for production and consumption. This money was actually superfluous, needed by nobody though owned by a growing class of somebodies. The ensuing crises and depressions during the decades preceding the era of imperialism had impressed upon the capitalists the thought that their whole economic system of production depended upon a supply and demand that from now on must come from "outside of capitalist society." Such supply and demand came from inside the nation, so long as the capitalist system did not control all its classes together with its entire productive capacity. When capitalism had pervaded the entire economic structure and all social strata had come into the orbit of its production and consumption system, capitalists clearly had to decide either to see the whole system collapse or to find new markets, that is, to penetrate new

177 There are traces in Arendt (e.g. OT 135) of the more modern assessment of financial speculation as the ultimate aim of capitalism, whose inherent wish is to be rid of natural processes altogether and to deal with money solely as an abstract value to be manipulated and reproduced indefinitely. This art would reach its apogee in the late twentieth century.

178 OT 123.

> countries which were not yet subject to capitalism and therefore could provide a new noncapitalistic supply and demand.[179]

For Arendt, the real loser in the imperialist venture was not so much the occupied peoples, but the sphere of politics in general. Though political and bourgeois forces had been in tension for some time within their own countries, the imperialist project resolved conclusively for the latter. As Arendt writes, "imperialism was born when the ruling class in capitalist production came up against national limitations to its economic expansion. The bourgeoisie turned to politics out of economic necessity; for if it did not want to give up the capitalist system whose inherent law is constant economic growth, it had to impose this law upon its home governments and to proclaim expansion to be an ultimate political goal of foreign policy."[180] The bourgeois classes commanded for themselves the means of violence in order to tear into their colonies, challenging at every turn the politicians who had naively assumed their occupation forces were being used for the betterment of foreign peoples. As their power accumulated, that of the politicians diminished, such that eventually a "boomerang effect" was produced, whereby the bourgeois successively took over their own governments.

In the end, the turmoil sparked by the expropriation of land, the first jab at worldliness predicated on having a stable, private place in a common world, came full circle when the natural process replaced government through the organization of society on a capitalist model. The final stage in this process is what we today call globalization, "the economic and geographic shrinkage of the earth, so that prosperity and depression tend to become world-wide phenomena. [...] Just as the family and its property were replaced by class membership and national territory, so mankind now begins to replace nationally bound societies, and the earth replaces the limited

179 OT 147-148.
180 OT 126.

state territory."[181] But this world-wide economic process is not to be confused with a rediscovery of the world. "Whatever the future may bring," writes Arendt, "the process of world alienation started by expropriation and characterized by an ever-increasing progress in wealth, can only assume even more radical proportions if it is permitted to follow its own inherent law."[182] And, "the process of wealth accumulation, as we know it, stimulated by the life process and in turn stimulating human life, is possible only if the world and the very worldliness of man are sacrificed."[183]

Galileo's Discovery; Modern Science and Radical Doubt

The third event is without question for Arendt the most decisive for the modern age's world alienation, and its influence on the concept of nature is no less fundamental. And yet, though it occurred early in the seventeenth century, its effects were not fully perceived except by a small circle of experts until centuries later.[184] The invention of the telescope and the discoveries made by Galileo by means of it are for Arendt an event unprecedented by the earlier speculations of a heliocentric universe, for the latter were mere hypotheses, useful for speculation but ultimately unverifiable.[185] Galileo provided concrete evidence at a specific historical moment: "Ideas, [...] as distinguished from events, are never unprecedented, and empirically unconfirmed speculations about the earth's movement around the sun were no more unprecedented than contemporary theories about atoms would be if they had no basis in experiments and no consequences in the factual world. What Galileo did and what nobody had done before was to use the telescope in such a way that the secrets of the universe were delivered to human cognition 'with the certainty

181 HC 257.
182 HC 257.
183 HC 256.
184 HC 258, 268.
185 HC 259.

of sense-perception'."[186] The telescope was the first instrument "at once adjusted to human senses and destined to uncover what definitely and forever must lie beyond them," and thus this event marked a decisive "challenge to the adequacy of the senses to reveal reality."[187] Through his studies, Galileo demonstrated that the evidence of the unmediated human senses was equivocal and could be disproved by technological findings. By reaching outside the usual limits of the human senses, by means of technology, one found that things are not always as they appeared at the human scale.[188] A more accurate truth, one infers, is always lying behind appearances, whether it is the movement of the stars, disease-causing germs, or personality-constructing neurons.

The capacity to imagine oneself out of embedded existence and to view the Earth from the outside is what Arendt calls the Archimedean point, which defines the approach of modern science. Regarding scientific modes of representation, she writes "these are no longer ideal forms disclosed to the eye of the mind, but are the results of removing the eyes of the mind, no less than the eyes of the body, from the phenomena, of reducing all appearances through *the force inherent in distance*."[189] The full development of the potential of this force, namely that, as Archimedes had predicted, finding a point outside the Earth would grant the ability to manoeuvre

186 HC 259-60.

187 HC 258, 261.

188 To illustrate how dramatic this change is, I find it useful to consider a passage in St. Augustine's *De Magistro* (1995, 3.11.26). Augustine reflects on how a straight stick appears to bend when dipped in water, a distortion today called refraction. He notes that, though we know the stick itself has not bent, both the straightness of the stick and the appearance of bending are *real*. The illusion of a bent stick is the product of the transformation of light rays as they pass through water, but that does not make it less real, as we can understanding by means of "common sense, the sixth and the highest sense," the kind of reasoning that takes into account the various, sometimes contradictory data of the senses and makes sense of them by incorporating them into reality as it is commonly known to be and disregarding momentary illusions (HC 274). This reasoning is always available to the immediate human perspective when it is in touch with common sense, and therefore with a common world. By contrast, Galileo's discoveries suggested that our very place in the universe, our positionality and scale, hide certain realities from us, implying that we have to leave behind our situated point of view altogether to discover what is "real." Thus, "the old opposition of sensual and rational truth, of the inferior truth capacity of the senses ad the superior truth capacity of reason, paled beside this challenge, beside the obvious implication that neither truth nor reality is given, that neither of them appears as it is" (ibid.).

189 HC 267. Emphasis added.

it at will, would not come into its own until the twentieth century.[190] This development, in Arendt's view, is far more significant than all the events defining world alienation dealt with here and will therefore be covered in the next chapter. Within this timeframe, the most important effects of Galileo's institution of modern science were the changes it wrought in ways of knowing.

The first to appreciate the full significance of this event for human understanding was Descartes, "the father of modern philosophy."[191] With his radical doubt, Descartes formalized the experience that was revealed in Galileo's discovery, namely that "intelligibility to human understanding does not at all constitute a demonstration of truth, just as visibility did not at all constitute a proof of reality. This doubt doubts that such a thing as truth exists at all, and discovers thereby that the traditional concept of truth [...] had rested on the twofold assumption that what truly is will appear of its own accord and that human capabilities are adequate to receive it."[192] Whereas the history of Western philosophy had heretofore consisted in a series of inversions of the order of such phenomenologically derived categories as Labour and Work or Faith and Reason, the modern tradition had to deal with the possible meaningless of them all, for now "Being and Appearance part company forever."[193] Thinkers of the nineteenth century like Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietszche attempted to comprehend these changes by operating "a much more radical turning-about [of ideas] than the mere upside-down operations" of pre-modern philosophy.[194] Nonetheless, in Arendt's words, they could do no more than "record the darkening of the clear sky where those ideas, as well as other presences, had once become visible to the eyes of men."[195] In the end, philosophers found themselves seeking truth anywhere from radical

190 HC 271.
191 HC 271-72.
192 HC 275-76.
193 HC 275.
194 BPF 38.
195 BPF 40.

faith to radical relativism, and finally to abandoning stability altogether for solipsism or belief in a process of perpetual change, whether conceived under the umbrella of history or nature.

The most important part of these changes for the concept of nature concern the loss of common sense deriving from Cartesian doubt and the accompanying turn to mathematical and experimental methods of discovering truth. When all content is suspect, the only basis for continued learning is the acceptance that "even if there is no truth, man can be truthful, and even if there is no reliable certainty, man can be reliable."[196] What unites people in their understanding is merely the form or structure of a particular line of reasoning, for the reality of a common world given to all through appearance and by the senses is lost. Appearance can no longer be trusted and therefore there is no need to corroborate one's understanding either by checking with other people for similar experiences or with one's own sensory experiences. Thus, "common sense, which once had been the one by which all other senses, with their intimately private sensations, were fitted into a common world, just as vision fitted man into a visible world, now became an inner faculty without any world relationship. This sense was now called common merely because it happened to be common to all" in form, not because it was genuinely shared by all through a relationship to a common world.[197] The highest form a purely structural consistency of thought takes is that of mathematics, and therefore all scientific knowledge in the modern age seeks above all to express itself in mathematical language. "The modern *reductio scientiae ad mathematicam* has overruled the testimony of nature as witnessed at close range by human senses" such that behind any given set of appearances, some higher law or pattern is always present, waiting only to be discovered and formalized.[198] From this perspective, the best guarantor of the "truthfulness" of a theory of natural laws is its consistency; a theory does not

196 HC 279.
197 HC 283.
198 HC 267-268.

necessarily have to be corroborated by appearance, since these are known to be deceptive. At the limit, working within the strict confines of logical reasoning, any given starting point could be chosen from which to derive a theory of nature, and to "prove" it one need merely bring about the expected consequences by means of technology.[199]

Consequently, as Arendt writes, "Cartesian reason is entirely based 'on the implicit assumption that the mind can only know that which it has itself produced and retains in some sense within itself.'"[200] Since it was a specific technology, the telescope, and not any creative reasoning or contemplation that first made clear the inadequacy of human-scale knowledge, it was concluded that "only interference with appearance, doing away with appearances, can hold out a hope for true knowledge."[201] Modern science likewise proceeds on the assumption that it must constantly test its hypotheses, verify them against new experiments, and devise new technologies to "produce" the "phenomena and objects it wishes to observe."[202] The consequence is that "instead of objective qualities, [...] we find instruments, and instead of nature or the universe—in the words of Heisenberg—man encounters only himself."[203] On one level, this means that the interests that motivate research will always appear in its results. In other words, because we no longer trust the accuracy of our senses or our ability to create our own interpretations of appearances with reference to a common world, we must always devise technologies to reveal the truth, yet the very fact that these devices are made for a given purpose and by human hands means that they cannot reveal anything other than what we are seeking. On a deeper level, the very structure of reasoning, of the human mind engaged in mathematical and

199 This conclusion is, in Arendt's estimation, a key feature of ideological thinking and the driving force of totalitarianism (OT 457-58). See below.

200 HC 283. Arendt's quotation, which she uses as a motto for the scientific enterprise, is from Whitehead.

201 HC 274.

202 HC 284. The *credo* of modern science is helpfully given by a character in Robinson's *Red Mars* (unsurprisingly a scientist devoted to the relentless pursuit of knowledge): "There is this about the human mind; if it can be done, it will be done. [...] We can do it, so we will do it" (1993, 213).

203 HC 261.

logical deduction, are the only possible findings of science: "scientists formulate their hypotheses to arrange their experiments and then use these experiments to verify their hypotheses; during this whole enterprise, they obviously deal with a hypothetical nature."[204] Consequently, the "real" nature perpetually retreats beyond the capacity of understanding.

As Arendt sees it, "all the processes of the earth and the universe have revealed themselves either as man-made or as potentially man-made. These processes, after having devoured, as it were, the solid objectivity of the given, ended by rendering meaningless the one over-all process which originally was conceived in order to give meaning to them, and to act, so to speak, as the eternal time-space into which they could all flow and thus be rid of their mutual conflicts and exclusiveness."[205] The technologies invented throughout this pursuit are most definitely capable of extending our reach, but at a significant cost. "The rise of natural sciences," writes Arendt, was accompanied by "a demonstrable, ever-quickening increase in human knowledge and power" as well as "the hardly less demonstrable increase in human despair."[206] Scientific knowledge relies on technology, which as it becomes more refined and specific to certain experiments, retreats further from the everyday experience available to all. It is therefore unrepresentable by the words which are derived from common experience, and interpretation of scientific experiments must resort to highly technical language. Its findings, in sum, are meaningless to most, such that even when they are expressed in everyday language, they distort its common-sense meaning and become highly liable to misinterpretation or manipulation. This results in differing meanings for each new listener, even while the ordinary meanings are reduced to one of several competing and arbitrary interpretations. Nature, constantly evading the comprehensive and conclusive understanding of scientists—who forget that it is always already a

204 HC 287.
205 BPF 89.
206 HC 261.

construction of their perception—yet removed from the sphere of common sense, becomes the container for any consistent theory of universal laws to which increasingly despairing humans might cling.

The New Concept of Nature

These three events—global exploration and conquest, the rise of capitalism, and the development of modern science—and the changes they effected in and on the world had three important consequences for the concept of nature. (These three consequences are not linked respectively to the three events, but emerge from the interactions of their entangled histories and are each contained to some degree, as I have attempted to suggest, within each event and more specifically within the emergent phenomenon of world alienation as a whole.) First, nature is *externalized*. It is no longer an experiential level in which the human exists, characterized by its own principles and forms, but an environment in which one finds oneself, dictated by laws. It is a *class* of beings rather than a *mode* of being, and humans are considered as either wholly separate from that class or wholly subsumed under it. It is opposed to culture rather than constituting its ontological basis and continuous material source. It is likewise removed from the immediate given of the senses and always hidden beyond and above the particular. It is the nature of the Romantics.[207]

Thus, second, it is *universalized*. This is not the general in the sense of that which is shared among all things we actively perceive as belonging to the same species, but the universal in the sense of embracing and explaining the particular, yet never visible and only approached by hypothesis. Nature is conceived as one universal set of laws that are everywhere applicable regardless of regional variation. In fact, prior to the discovery of the Archimedean point, the

207 See McCarthy 1970.

earth and sky were always held to be sharply distinguished, governed by different principles. But in its alienated form, natural laws cover even the movement of the stars: "the same kind of exterior force should be manifest in the fall of terrestrial and the movements of heavenly bodies."[208] At its extreme, life itself is merely an epiphenomenon of physics differing in degree only from the motion of all other matter. The new laws are "valid even beyond the coming into existence of organic life and the earth herself."[209]

Third, nature is *historicized*. By overemphasizing only one direction in its otherwise cyclical motion, it is viewed as always reaching forward towards greater growth and surplus, while even the steps of waste and decay are merely payments made toward an economically greater gain. This forward motion is conceived as a law of nature guiding always toward a desired future and away from an imagined past, whose history is discovered and interpreted in scientific study. Evolutionary laws are believed to guide biological variation while thermodynamic laws govern physical change. Science is able to distance itself sufficiently from the human perspective to conceive of natural processes on a universal scale and timeframe, discovering thereby the historicity of the Earth and the gradual evolution of life.

208 HC 258.
209 HC 263.

II: Everything is Possible

In this section, I show the ways in which totalitarianism draws on this new concept of nature predicated on world alienation as it emerged through historical events. First, it is helpful to understand exactly how world alienation itself affected European civilization in such a way as to prepare it for totalitarianism and its deployment of the concept of nature. For Arendt, totalitarianism was neither the result of a chain of cause and effect nor a repetition of some age-old pattern or form of government. It was, rather, something new, the confluence or "crystallization" of many factors, some of which belonging among the histories I have been tracing.[210] Among these factors are: the development of race-thinking and the naturalization of differences in human diversity; the impending collapse of the nation-state as a result of imperialism undermining its political legitimacy to rule over a specific nationally organized territory; backlash from offshore colonies that began to develop national consciousness; the hyper-organization of the state and industry (mirrored by the organizational tendencies of modern science) and its creation of "stateless people"; the creation of entire classes of "superfluous" people by the relentless wheel of economic progress; the growing meaninglessness of ordinary language and common-sense; the growing powers of science and technology, together with its emphasis on empirical testing and experimentation.

The net effect of these changes—and the spiritual counterpart of world alienation—was a ubiquitous sense of loneliness. Arendt contrasts loneliness with solitude, the latter occurring when one is alone with oneself, free to engage in a "dialogue between me and myself"; "in

210 Hence her frustration over the title of her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which could never quite capture the vision of history, or causality, she proposed; hence also the confusion of her critics, who found it a most unusual style of argument (EU 403; Young-Bruehl 1982, 202). See "Understanding and Politics" for Arendt's ideas about historiography and "crystallization" (EU 307-27).

solitude, [...] I am 'by myself,' together with my self, and therefore two-in-one."[211] While this conversational solitude is fruitful, allowing one to engage in extended thinking, it also requires a split within the self, which leaves one uncertain about one's identity. It therefore ordinarily demands a return to the company of others to complete itself, for in their presence one returns to oneself as a single individual: "for the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them 'whole' again, saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person."[212] By contrast, loneliness is the situation in which one is among others, yet at the same unable to communicate, be heard or be seen. Referring to Epictetus, Arendt states that "the lonely man (*eremos*) finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed."[213] To be lonely is to find oneself expelled from a space in which one can appear in one's perfect uniqueness, be confirmed in one's identity, and is offered a place to contribute and act. It is when others are everywhere intervening on one's solitude, yet inaccessible and uncomprehending to one's appearance.

Loneliness occurs when the common world that connects us to others slips away.[214] For then the common sense by which we check the information of our senses against the common world confirmed by other people is lost.[215] Likewise, the capacity to work and act disappears, since these are predicated on a stable world, while "only the sheer effort of labor which is the

211 OT 476.
212 OT 476.
213 OT 476.
214 Loneliness as an increasing concern in today's society is of course no coincidence. What is most fascinating is how it is almost always conceived as a problem mainly to human health, as though the only issue with being lonely is that it could lead to digestive issues (e.g. Wright 2020). Cf. chapter 3.
215 "Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience" (OT 476).

effort to keep alive is left and the relationship with the world as human artifice is broken."[216] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt described what she later came to call world alienation in terms of "uprootedness and superfluousness," stating that "to be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all."[217] When an entire society is uprooted or deemed superfluous, the result is "a society of men who, without a common world which would at once relate and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass. For a mass-society is nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who are still related to one another but have lost the world once common to all of them."[218] Mass society was the pervasive situation in pre-war Europe, while world alienation was "the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and [has] become acute with the rise of imperialism and social traditions in our own time."[219] In *The Human Condition*, Arendt complemented these considerations of the effects of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism with her astute study of the impact of the sciences on our basic trust in the human senses and appearance in general. The conclusion is that, having placed a distance between themselves and the world, by transforming the earth into a globe, by turning land into capital, and by placing technology between themselves and their senses, Western peoples gradually eroded their capacity to connect across a shared experience of worldliness. They effectively staged an assault on the conditions of plurality.

Arendt felt that loneliness was the basic experience underlying totalitarianism, which can even be said to have "answered the needs" of lonely men living in a mass.[220] On the basis of

216 OT 475.
217 OT 475.
218 BPF 89-90.
219 OT 475.
220 OT 474. There is here a key to the rather tricky problem regarding why a people would put itself in the situation of being governed by a totalitarian movement. It turns out that, in a world out of control where one feels utterly

this increasingly everyday experience, the concept of nature came to play two major functions in the emergence of totalitarianism: in the first, which is specific to the case of Nazi Germany, nature is an ideology around which the movement rallies; in the second, which is a structural feature of totalitarianism in general, nature is the model for the organization of a society as a whole.

Nature as Ideology

Totalitarianism "prepares" its subjects for domination through ideology and ideology is the last mode of human understanding available to lonely people.[221] An ideology is "quite literally [...] the logic of an idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the 'idea' is applied; the result of this application is not a body of statements about something that *is*, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change. The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same 'law' as the logical exposition of its 'idea'."[222] The way an ideology functions is to pick an idea, or more specifically a given premise (such as "class struggle" or "the survival of the fittest"), and pursue its consequences through a rigorous process of logical reasoning or dialectics. The next step is to treat this line of reasoning as the law that dictates the movement of all of history. As Arendt writes, "the movement of history and the logical process of this notion are supposed to correspond to each other, so that whatever happens, happens according to the logic of one 'idea.' However, the only possible movement in the realm of logic is the process of deduction from a premise."[223] Because it proceeds by logical reasoning, the ideology conceives of

superfluous, one would rather be validated in that feeling than accept solutions to the sources of the problem, since the latter are typically empty promises or attended by paternalism. Ideology and terror *make sense* to a society that has been heading toward greater alienation and loneliness.

221 OT 477.

222 OT 469.

223 OT 469.

all reality as an endless process, just as logic constantly produces new premises from the conclusions derived from past premises.

Ideological thinking is convincing to lonely people because, on the one hand, logical reasoning is "the only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function safely."[224] Separated from others and uprooted from the world, a lonely person can find some refuge in a system of thinking that by its perfect logic forces its conclusions on the mind with the certainty of utter consistency. So long as the original premise remains unquestioned, no corroboration from reality is required for ideological thinking to assert its legitimacy, and corroboration is precisely what loneliness teaches one to forego. Consequently, "ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that *no experience can teach anything* because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction."[225] On the other hand, ideologies can be attractive in their universality, for so long as the same premise is accepted, any number of people will derive all the exact same conclusions. Ideology steps in as a surrogate world, something agreed upon that will unite otherwise atomized individuals. It therefore assumes the character of a last resort for a civilization facing impending collapse, a "suicidal escape from this reality [of everyday loneliness]."[226]

Among the "isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise," the two that were fully developed into totalitarian ideologies in Germany and Russia respectively were the nineteenth-century doctrines of racism and communism.[227] The latter will not concern us here. The former, derived from a

224 OT 477.
225 OT 470. Emphasis added.
226 OT 478.
227 OT 468, 470.

bastardization of Darwin's evolutionary theory, functioned as a premise from which to deduce all historical processes, particularly the eventual rule of a master race on earth and the elimination of races "unfit to live."[228] So whereas the Boers had submerged themselves in their own racist doctrine of nature, they still trusted that their supposed superiority over Indigenous peoples would be validated by natural laws (with the help of slavery); the Nazis, by contrast, transformed racism into a law that their society would implement, actually bringing about the "survival of the fittest" through genocide. Ironically, facing the impending collapse of a capitalist civilization that partially modelled itself on the processes of nature, the people of Germany opted into an ideology purporting to have unveiled the laws of nature and intending to play them out on a global scale.

Racism is a nature-ideology and if it purports to explain all the movements of history, it is only because in "Darwin's introduction of the concept of development into nature, his insistence that, at least in the field of biology, natural movement is not circular but unilinear, moving in an infinitely progressing direction, [...] nature is, as it were, being swept into history, that natural life is considered to be historical."[229] Needless to say, this is not at all what Darwin had in mind, who would have been horrified by this misreading and misappropriation of his ideas, and it is not through an inherent property that they lend themselves to ideological thinking anymore than other ideas about patterns in history. Nonetheless, it is only an alienated perspective on the concept of nature that could allow itself to set aside appearances and the phenomenon of plurality and to treat human beings as merely members of a given race or species, which must either become supreme overlords or disposable vermin. Darwin's theory emerged in the context of world alienation as a universal, externalized, and historical concept of

228 OT 466.
229 OT 463.

nature, for it required a deliberate distancing to view biological life on a millenial timeframe together with a mapping approach to life forms, and this combination made it liable to deformation by the dogmas of racism.

Such a concept of nature can become ideological in a way that the phenomenological concept cannot. Ideological racism assumes that our natural existence is all that we are, that no other human categories or qualities are of any relevance. Yet it does so considering our naturalness not as the mode of existence we all share, whereby we all need to eat and sleep, to labour and reproduce, but as the determinant of the class of beings to which we belong. We are either of inferior or superior nature, depending on what species we supposedly represent. Furthermore, whereas the phenomenological conception of nature reveals to us in appearances that nature goes on swinging just as our daily labouring and consumption keeps us alive, the ideological conception concludes that nature will dictate which of us is fated to live and which to die according to its laws of movement, based not on appearances but on supposed hidden essences. Lastly, in its externalization, the modern concept of nature can serve to justify the "inevitability" of an ideological conclusion. In Arendt's phenomenology, nature is the precondition of our capacity to build a world and to act, a domain which we could collectively choose how to treat to produce the world in which we want to live. For ideologists, on the contrary, since natural laws are determined to be "above" all human design, being a process at work behind appearance, but which we accidentally hinder in our stubborn human desire to act freely, it follows that only by quenching human spontaneity will nature's laws become fully active and its logical end realized on earth.

Nature as Organizing Principle

Loneliness is a "natural" state, in the sense that it precludes the specifically human capacities of work and action and throws each person into the precarious state of mere survival, of their generalized existence as *animal laborans* indistinguishable one from the other.[230] Without a world in which to appear, one is also bereft of the ability to be confirmed in one's specific identity. But it is also a specifically human response to natural existence, for it arises from the recognition that to be exclusively natural is not natural for human beings.[231] Loneliness as a widespread condition is the situation of human beings who are aware that despite their inherent uniqueness, their desire to belong and to contribute to a world in their own way, they have been reduced to exchangeable and superfluous creatures. Much as one ant is like all the others, one's existence or extermination mean nothing to the ant colony as a whole. Totalitarianism aspires to the universal superfluity of human beings.[232] Its appeal is in the assertion that, though one is no more valuable than a single ant, at least it can demonstrate that the life or death of an ant is part of a universal process which lends it validity and meaning. Totalitarianism deploys the tactics of organization to reduce all human beings to the status of merely living, so that it can achieve its aim of turning the plurality of human beings into "One Man of gigantic dimensions," while its subjects consent in the hopes that such an organization will integrate them into something higher than their mere existence.[233]

Besides the choice of ideology which dictates the "natural laws" meant to govern the activities of the totalitarian society, the form of totalitarian governance is itself modelled on a concept of what is natural. I do not mean here Arendt's image of the onion, which is perhaps only coincidentally how she described totalitarian organization.[234] Rather, I refer to the constant

230 OT 475.
231 OT 475.
232 OT 457.
233 OT 465-66. At least in the first stages; once a totalitarian regime is in power, consent is as much a form of freedom as resistance and must be squelched (OT 451).
234 OT 413, 430; BPF 99-100. The shape refers to the various layers of indoctrination that separate each social stratum from the less ideological and normal layer outside itself as well as from the more radical layer further inside.

movement of the totalitarian system, which, unlike the swinging motion of nature, follows instead the image of nature as an unfolding unilinear process. The eighteenth-century revolutionaries conjectured an imaginary "state of nature," which was meant to provide the hypothetical backdrop and permanent source of the civil law they would put into place.[235] Totalitarianism instead attempts to directly institute the state of nature as the organizing principle of society, since it is supposedly higher and truer than any human law, and it imagines such a state as a constant process leading inexorably toward a final end.[236] As Arendt writes, "totalitarian lawfulness, defying legality and pretending to establish the direct reign of justice on earth, executes the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right and wrong for individual behavior."[237] Totalitarianism is headed by "movements" rather than by parties. Like capitalist wealth accumulation, totalitarian power accumulation must keep moving or crumble: "if they do not pursue global rule as their ultimate goal, they are only too liable to lose whatever power they have already seized."[238]

Further, what totalitarianism perfects is the form of government by decrees, which initially developed in connection to colonial bureaucracies.[239] In order to respect the unfolding of the natural law of becoming, totalitarian leaders must continually undermine any semblance of permanence, eliminate the formation of any legal system that would bring order to society, and silence any evidence that seems to contradict its claim to total validity. As Arendt reminds us, "one should not forget that only a building can have a structure, but that a movement [...] can have only a direction, and that any form of legal or governmental structure can be only a handicap to a movement which is being propelled with increasing speed in a certain direction"

235 OR 163; OT 463.
236 OT 465.
237 OT 462.
238 OT 392.
239 OT 216.

and "a stabilization of its laws and institutions would surely liquidate the movement itself and with it the hope for eventual world conquest."[240] The rule of process is meant to dictate the shape of society directly, without any translation into the stability of a legal and political framework, such that all decrees are made on an *ad hoc* basis. The totalitarian society is deliberately "shapeless" as in the realm of nature where all is interconnected without any clear ruler or hierarchy.[241] This in turn means that no one can at any time determine whether what they do is lawful or not, whether it will demand punishment at some later date when it becomes retroactively illegal. Subjects of totalitarian domination are placed into a day-to-day insecurity, never sure of whether they, or their families, will tomorrow be targeted by the regime; the best they can do is try to fulfill their orders as closely as possible and hope that they will be forgiven for having tried to protect themselves, even if this means killing others.

Along with the constant flow of unclear orders, totalitarian powers achieve their aim of ensuring the perpetual movement of the system and the insecurity and superfluity of its subjects through the method of multiplying every role in society, so that at any given time, various offices complete the same functions and tasks. "The inhabitant of Hitler's Third Reich," writes Arendt, "lived under not only the simultaneous and often conflicting authorities of competing powers [...], he could never be sure and was never explicitly told *whose* authority he was supposed to place above all others."[242] Much as in nature, where organisms typically produce far more

240 OT 398, 391.

241 To the rejoinder that there is an obvious leader in both totalitarian regimes, Arendt rebutted that "the Leader represents the movement in a way totally different from all ordinary party leaders; he claims personal responsibility for every action, deed, or misdeed, committed by any member or functionary in his official capacity. This total responsibility is the most important organizational aspect of the so-called Leader principle, according to which every functionary is not only appointed by the Leader but is his walking embodiment, and every order is supposed to emanate from this one ever-present source. This thorough identification of the Leader with every appointed subleader and this monopoly of responsibility for everything which is being done are also the most conspicuous signs of the decisive difference between a totalitarian leader and an ordinary dictator or despot" (OT 374). In the fabricated version of nature created by totalitarian regimes, Nature's supreme laws order each individual directly, while the leader is no more a head than any other, except that they are the manifestation of Nature should others' direct access to Nature be clouded by other considerations.

242 OT 399. Emphasis added.

offspring than is strictly required for the reproduction of the species, so too the totalitarian movement ensured its resilience and control through the multiplication of every strata of society: "a continuous competition between offices, whose functions not only overlap but which are charged with identical tasks, gives opposition or sabotage almost no chance to become effective."[243] And just as natural over-reproduction has evolved in the expectation that most of the offspring will die prematurely in their scramble for maturity, the duplication of offices exists so that at any time one may be dispensed with to fulfill some secret requirement deduced from an ideological line of reasoning. Writes Arendt, "the multiplication of offices was extremely useful for the constant shifting of power; the longer, moreover, a totalitarian regime stays in power, the greater becomes the number of offices and the possibility of jobs exclusively dependent upon the movement, since no one office is abolished when its authority is liquidated," until, to be sure, its members are executed at a later date without any clue as to why.[244] Unlike capitalism, which is interested in harnessing the profit potential of labouring, totalitarianism reflects the experience of those capitalism neglects in its single-minded attention on the growth aspect of nature. For totalitarianism embodies the way in which growth always occurs at the cost of enormous waste, and in fact implemented wastefulness and impracticality in its transformation of society into a mass of superfluous people. Constantly undermining the normal prerogatives of economics—profitability, efficiency, flexibility—it makes everything equally expendable to the process it

243 OT 404.

244 OT 401, 404. The increasing dependence of jobs on the state apparatus ensured, as Arendt points it in "Organized Guilt and Collective Responsibility," that at a certain point everyone is implicated in some way in the carrying out of crimes against humanity (EU 121-132). The gradual elimination of public individuality and the reliance on each person's basic need to protect their private interests meant that the "jobholder" became the ideal subject of totalitarian regimes and the most reliable agent to carry out genocidal plans. This organization of the masses into one collective system, fuelled by the basest instincts of each of its members, is a deliberate reproduction of a "state of nature," guided always by the perceived laws that would direct it towards the "survival of the fittest." Can any one lion be blamed if the gazelle goes extinct?

supposedly incarnates, even at the cost of its own success, as when Nazi Germany deployed military personnel urgently needed in the war to carry out the genocide of the Jews.[245]

However, the most crucial method by which totalitarianism models itself on nature is by stripping its subjects of their civil and political personhood, effectively reducing them to their naked existence. Any semblance of worldliness that survived the gradual alienation of the preceding centuries is systematically destroyed by the instruments of terror. The ways in which totalitarian regimes destroyed normal life for its subjects, by pressing them together into a mass connected not by a common world but by an ideology and a ceaseless movement, by undermining all possibility of authentic relationships through the use of secret polices and auto-surveillance measures, and so on, pale in consideration with the total domination exercised in the camps. In Arendt's view, "the concentration and extermination camps [...] serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is verified," while the ultimate aim of a totalitarian movement would be the transformation of the entire globe into one large concentration camp.[246] As Arendt writes, "it is in the very nature of totalitarian regimes to demand unlimited power. Such power can only be secured if literally all men, without a single exception, are reliably dominated in every aspect of their life."[247] The concentration camp is the institutionalization of a radical loneliness and thus the fulfillment of the totalitarian dream.

In the camps, people are "reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other."[248] This is accomplished first by disconnecting its residents from the outside world, enclosing them within an environment

245 OT 404, 409-12.
246 OT 437.
247 OT 456.
248 OT 438.

that is under complete control. In the concentration camp, one is made to feel as if in a dream, without any solid connection to the outside world and without the capacity to act freely.[249] Next comes the gradual breakdown of the juridical person, which seeks to find some justice, or at least a civil logic, in one's fate. Criminals are denied trial and punishment, and political dissenters, criminals, and perfectly innocent people are thrown together for no humanly comprehensible reason.[250] Then, the moral person is murdered. In the camps, martyrdom is made impossible, insurrection meaningless and useless. Meanwhile, inmates are implicated in the functioning of the machine of mass murder or made to make morally unbearable choices. "Through the creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible," writes Arendt, "the consciously organized complicity of all men in crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made total."[251] Finally, any markers of individuality are removed, such that inmates lose any sense of uniqueness and therefore any appreciation of their capacity for spontaneity. This is achieved through humiliating conditions, the removal of markers of difference such as hair, and torture. Writes Arendt, "the aim of all these methods [...] is to manipulate the human body—with its infinite possibilities of suffering—in such a way as to make it destroy the human person as inexorably as do certain mental diseases of organic origin.[252] The superfluity of human existence and plurality is carried to its final conclusion in the total reduction of human beings to the imagined state of nature in which all are against all and everything happens without meaning.

Totalitarian regimes learned racism and bureaucratic rule-by-decree from colonial experiments. They took over the "unnatural growth of the natural" from capitalist growth

249 OT 438.
250 OT 447-451.
251 OT 452.
252 OT 453.

economics, expanding it to include the excessive waste and superfluity that attend evolution and growth. Their knack for organization and their use of experimentation was learned from the natural sciences.[253] But totalitarianism goes beyond the point of placing itself outside the earth so as to perceive nature from the Archimedean point, creating the conditions to test its hypotheses about how nature truly is. Totalitarianism attempts to *enact* its version of nature, and in this way takes from the emerging science of its day, which began to "act into nature."[254] This is what marks the full realization of, and thus the conclusive break with, the modern age, placing us who have known totalitarianism and quantum science on the other side of a gaping abyss from all prior history. The central belief of totalitarianism, which it learned from the dramatic new directions of modern science, looking optimistically at its new potential to unleash cosmic forces on earth, is that "everything is possible."[255]

Malleable Nature

The camps are centres for the "mass production of corpses," people who have been turned into "a mere thing, into something that even animals are not; for Pavlov's dog, which as we know was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang, was a perverted animal."[256] In this sense, totalitarianism goes far beyond the view of nature as it had developed in the modern age. Not only is nature universal, externalized, and historical, but it is in fact *malleable*. Attempting only to bring about what the ideology dictated should be the case anyway, totalitarianism accidentally stumbled on a method to change what is. Although, Arendt points

253 "It is indeed, as Whitehead once remarked, 'no accident that an age of science developed into an age of organisation. Organised thought is the basis of organised action,' not, one is tempted to add, because thought is the basis of action but rather because modern science as 'the organisation of thought' introduced an element of action into thinking" (HC 271n26).

254 HC 231.

255 OT 387 and *passim*.

256 OT 447, 438.

out, "until now, the totalitarian belief that everything is possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed."[257] In the camps, the totalitarian regimes operated their experiments in transforming human nature. What is clear from all appearances is that human beings are endlessly unique, or in other words, that human nature is precisely not to have any one defining feature. Yet, as Arendt writes, "the experience of the concentration camps does show that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal, and that man's 'nature' is only 'human' insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man."[258] By creating a place in which human plurality is utterly eliminated, totalitarianism effectively alters human nature; it produces something that is no longer properly human and no longer properly natural, for to become exclusively natural is, for humans, a perversion of nature.

The totalitarian version of nature is in many ways antiquated, a distortion of a scientific theory already problematic, yet its attempt to enact nature, to bring about its idealized nature against all appearances, was ahead of its time. This active engagement with nature is a far cry from the care-taking approach outlined in chapter 1. From a phenomenological perspective, one appreciates that nature is a distinct mode of existence to which humans belong with all other living and moving processes and that this form of existence is the basis for the erection of a human world in which one can act. Consequently, efforts to make that world as one wishes must take into consideration how nature is prepared for the world, and this consideration takes the form of a political process in which art and judgment play a key role. By contrast, the radical alienation, or loneliness, that lies at the heart of totalitarianism can see nature as nothing more than another field of intervention, in which to unleash processes, manipulate developments,

257 OT 459.
258 OT 455.

"pervert" animals, and otherwise attempt to arrange destiny. Similarly, acting on human beings, this form of engagement does not seek to "resolve" the bodily condition of necessity, which is doomed to failure (as in the French Revolution) but not inherently evil; rather it wishes to re-create bodies in the way one imagines they "ought" to be. In my reading, this is an early form of "acting into nature," by which Arendt describes the new frontiers of science in the early twentieth century.

What the totalitarian experiment exposes is that withdrawal from appearances is implicitly a rejection of human plurality. If there is always some more "real" process hiding away behind appearances, it follows that the different perspectives that different people take on one same thing are null, for these perspectives are all equally illusions relative to the reality which we cannot perceive. A phenomenological approach to developing concepts, that is, one based on the primacy of appearance, deems it legitimate that each person should look for patterns and repetitions in appearances, tie these to a given concept, and take that definition to the community of peers who corroborate, supplement, critique, and integrate that concept through a sharing of perspectives. By contrast, alienation judges each person's sensory experience equally invalid before the evidence of technological intervention, which consistently demonstrates that we can never know what the "real" meaning of a concept is. As Arendt concludes, "if the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, least of all the unnatural conformism of a mass society, can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality."[259] If I touch the trunk of the proverbial elephant, and you touch its tail, our differing experiences are only equally valid if we agree that there is one same elephant linking both.

259 HC 58.

In the face of such confusion, ideologies seem to offer a redeeming thoroughness, by starting from a conjecture about a real process and deducing from it a perfect explanation for all phenomena, regardless of whether these seem to agree with the ideology or not (since they are just illusions anyway). Under these conditions, no added perspectives are needed, as these would only confuse the perfect consistency of the ideology. And consequently, if the process hidden behind appearances is to be fully manifest, all human plurality and spontaneity must be abolished. If "everything is possible" now that we can see behind the appearances that hid from us our true potential, then one single person should suffice to know and do everything; there is no need for the plurality of human beings on the planet, each bringing their unique individual selves to a common world.

CHAPTER 3

Life as the Highest Good

In the aftermath of the Second World War, while totalitarianism had been defeated in Germany and was slowly imploding in the Soviet Union, Western countries largely returned to their old ways, more self-sure then ever since their victory had proven they were on "the right side." Failing to recognize in what ways they replicated conditions in pre-Hitler Germany, they did not feel the need to make fundamental systemic changes. What they really ignored was that, as Hannah Arendt would have said, while the rise of totalitarianism did occur in Germany for specific, historical reasons, it in no way followed that it was a "German" tendency or problem (and the same goes for Russia). Totalitarianism now exists as a possibility in the modern world because of certain irreducible historical facts and changes to the human condition, with which the entire human world must contend. So far, it would seem Western countries have managed to avoid a new totalitarianism, in Arendt's definition of the term, though the number of other atrocities that have been committed since is sickening enough. However, what remains are histories of accruing world alienation, by which the concept of nature continues to inform the way we structure our society, even as we rewrite the content of the concept. To this has been added an extraordinary power, the power to act into nature, which we should by no means consider confined to the totalitarian past. In many ways, Nature continues to be the dominant model for our society's institutions and the principal setting for our most radical experiments.

There is an apparent contradiction in the story I have been telling so far. At the dawn of the modern age, nature escaped its bounds outside the worldly sphere and insinuated its logic into every domain of human existence, until the systems that structure every aspect of our existence, our social and racial categories, our economies, our sciences, and our politics, take on

the form of forces of nature. These new institutions are outside our control, riding on their own momentum, endlessly growing and evolving, throbbing and swinging with the lifeforce of each of us as we contribute to their infinite generative and integrative capacities. They have an irrevocable quality; they are the product of human efforts yet somehow more real, more intuitive than anything we might wish to replace them with. They have become natural to us. But the contradiction is that, to all appearances, the domain that stands to lose the most from activities undertaken under the umbrella of these same systems is the natural world, both human and non-human. Adding to the threat of totalitarianism, a new danger looms on the horizon: that of complete ecological catastrophe.

I have stated a few times now that we are facing an environmental crisis. Yet, the exact nature of the crisis eludes many of us, with conflicting information provided by the media and the scientific establishment, misdirected or mistaken arguments deployed by all sides, and a range of issues whose connections are fuzzy at best. Is the issue climate change? Biodiversity loss? Pollution and resource depletion? How is it connected to political and economic structures? To many, this crisis does not feel real at all. Aren't natural disasters commonplace? Don't planetary temperatures fluctuate as a matter of course? Why does it matter if it gets warmer again? Isn't extinction just a part of natural selection and aren't we just proving our superiority over other animals? If mistakes like a tailings dam spill or a reactor explosion occur, can't we just tighten up security and precautions and leave it at that? Aren't estimates of resource scarcity overplayed and, anyway, can't we just keep recycling old things if we run out of resources? Those who argue for recognition of a crisis cannot seem to agree on what we mean when we talk about "environmental issues," while those who disagree find ample ambiguity to exploit in their

refusals. In one sense, then, it seems the environmental crisis is in fact a crisis about what the environment is and how we are impacting it—in other words, a crisis of understanding.

In this chapter, I shall endeavour to resolve the contradiction mentioned above by showing how the environmental crisis is in part a result of attempting to replace nature as it stands with an alienated model of it; this is achieved both by transforming society to match a vision of "ideal" nature, as well as by moulding nature itself to that ideal. I conjecture a third concept of nature which, derived from the labouring mode of activity, is stripped of its material content by its disconnection to the world, thus reorganizing human collectivity as a "society of laborers."[260] I wish to recast, one last time, Arendt's concept of nature as it stands, quasi-purified, as the ideal of contemporary society, which in turn poses the greatest threat to natural organisms and processes we have ever seen. The last concept of nature is not a phenomenological aspect of being, nor a scientific hypothesis, nor an ideology, but an abstract value—Life itself. In contemporary times, life takes precedence over all other notions of the good. In contemporary society, all productive efforts are directed toward the continuance of life, while the new capacities of technology are deployed for the elimination of death. I will also consider how Arendt approached crisis as an opportunity to make constructive change and I will examine some obstacles that the present system throws up against such change.

History of a Value

Hannah Arendt states in *The Human Condition* that, of the various principles of value derived from the various activities and capacities corresponding to the human condition, nothing is so precious to the modern sensibility as life itself. We believe in "life as the highest good."[261] The

260 HC 46 and *passim.*
261 HC 313ff.

story begins, unsurprisingly, with the Greeks. In their discovery of the *vita activa*, which Arendt finds permeating all of Eurowestern history, language, and culture, they recognized themselves as different from the natural world that surrounded them, even as they shared in animal life on a certain level. Compared to immortal nature and the immortal gods of Olympus, human beings noted their own mortality. Unlike animals and plants who, though they die, live on as a species in which each individual is no different from the others, and gods who, though they have individual existence, never die, the Greeks recognized that human beings are each utterly unique and that their death is therefore the irrevocable and radical destruction of something that would never again exist. "Imbedded in a cosmos where everything was immortal, mortality became the hallmark of human existence," as Arendt expresses it.[262] But humans could attain immortality through their own avenue, "their ability to produce things—works and deeds and words."[263] And for Arendt the search for immortality was the reference point for the value of each human activity; the goodness of an activity was measured according to its capacity to impart immortality on its doer. Thus, by a strange paradox, the only way for humans to be immortal is to separate ourselves from immortal nature and exercise the worldly activities of work and action. Those who occupied their lives with labour alone, according to the Greeks, were considered merely natural and their death would not be a significant loss.[264] Properly *human* immortality was necessarily worldly.

A change occurred once the philosophers discovered contemplation and found that eternity, by contrast with immortality, could be accessed by turning away from both nature and world. In speechless wonder, the philosopher experienced an eternal reality that transcends this world altogether, and this experience outside of time was deemed more real than any immortality

262 HC 18.
263 HC 19.
264 HC 19.

within temporal existence could ever be.[265] The discovery of the *vita contemplativa*, however, would not oust the primacy of action until the end of Antiquity, when the immortality of the human-made world was put in question. It was at this time, when Rome, the Immortal City, began to collapse, that trust in the *vita activa* began to wane and Christianity took on increasing importance as it preached the vanity of all worldly striving and the immortality of life ensured by an eternal God.[266]

The belief in life as the highest good has its roots in the Christian worldview, which "has survived, and has even remained completely unshaken by, secularization and the general decline of the Christian faith."[267] At the centre of this worldview is the revelation of the sacredness of individual human life, which itself is a reversal of the "ancient relationship between man and world" in which humans are the only mortal things within an immortal world. Now, the world was continually passing away and would someday end completely, but individual lives were assured of immortality through the grace of God. Allying itself with the *vita contemplativa* of the philosophers, Christianity dictated that immortality was in fact ensured by the eternal. The God that surpasses this world, by contrast with the gods who coexist with human beings, is the ultimate source of any potential immortality. This view structured society in the West throughout the Middle Ages, which, even though it had not yet suffered the world alienation that put into doubt all the evidence of reason and the senses, was suspicious of the capacity of the world to impart meaning to human existence and therefore downplayed the activities of work and, especially, action. Basing itself on the values of faith, charity, and a goodness that hides from the view of others,[268] the Middle Ages were defined generally by the

265 HC 19.
266 HC 21.
267 HC 314.
268 HC 74.

search for God in contemplation and immortality in the life to come. Work and action persisted but were ancillary to the overall structuring of society.

The modern age challenged this arrangement. Galileo's discovery brought about Cartesian doubt, which affected not only our relationship to the world, but to contemplation too, since access to the eternal is equally predicated on the senses, namely "the eyes of the mind which can see the sky of ideas or the voice of conscience listened to by the human heart."[269] Thus, contemplation was stripped of its authority in providing access to eternity:

> After being and appearance had parted company and truth was no longer supposed to appear, to reveal and disclose itself to the mental eye of the beholder, there arose a veritable necessity to hunt for truth behind deceptive appearances. Nothing indeed could be less trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching truth than passive observation or mere contemplation. In order to be certain one had to *make sure*, and in order to know one had to do.[270]

Nevertheless, the system of values did not revert to what it had been prior to the Middle Ages. Though contemplation was humiliated and replaced by an urge to produce knowledge, thereby elevating the active life once again, the latter suffered its own internal reversal. The worldly activities were just as threatened by the new distrust of the senses as contemplation, with labour alone surviving the assault.

Furthermore, "the modern reversal operated within the fabric of a Christian society," and thus the emancipation of the *vita activa* from the *vita contemplativa*, was incorporated within the earlier Christian reversal of life and world.[271] The Christian sacredness of life was originally

269 BPF 54.

270 HC 290. Emphasis in original.

271 HC 314. This sentiment was echoed later by Ivan Illich, who argued that modern society is defined by an attempt to institutionalize the values it has inherited from Christianity. Thus, for example, rather than serve the hungry, we pay taxes so that the government can establish and fund soup kitchens to do so on our behalf. Illich finds this situation abhorrent and a distortion of the good things intended by the Christian spirit and finds many compelling arguments to denounce the failure of these structures. What is significant, however, is his repeated claim that the "corruption of the best is the worst" (*Corruptio optimi quae est pessima)*, meaning in part that the worst things result from the misapplication of the best intentions. The modern world contains so many evils, he believes, because it distorts the Christian message from the highest calling of individual charity and forgiveness into a system of enforced aid. He finds that the modern preoccupation with life, divorced from the notion of gift and grace that justified its placement at the height of human values, constitutes an idol.

prevented from becoming a morbid obsession with death by the promise of everlasting life in the next world as much as by the unquestioned value of contemplation, which characterized the Middle Ages and resulted from the early alliance of Christian theology with Greek philosophy. But the prizing of life over world was not inseparable from these factors. Life remained paramount, but only because it could be recognized in the activity of labour as well as in the hereafter. Thus, Arendt writes,

> no matter how articulate and how conscious the thinkers of modernity were in their attacks on tradition, the priority of life over everything else had acquired for them the status of a 'self-evident truth,' and as such it has survived even in our present world, which has begun already to leave the whole modern age behind and to substitute for a laboring society the society of jobholders. But while it is quite conceivable that the development following upon the discovery of the Archimedean point would have taken an altogether different direction if it had taken place seventeen hundred years earlier, when not life but the world was still the highest good of man, it by no means follows that we still live in a Christian world. For what matters today is not the immortality of life, but that life is the highest good.[272]

In our time, immortality has ceased to capture the imagination: we know all worldly things perish eventually, we cannot trust the vision of eternity, and we cannot believe anymore in an afterlife. Yet unleashed from its attachment to embodied human beings, life grew into an abstract value, which merely runs through us and has to be preserved in us, over and above our own political and artistic capacities. Without belief in an afterlife to legitimize the sacredness of personal lives, we take desperate measures to extend this-worldly life on a general level. The futility of this effort produces the unshakeable anxiety at the heart of modern existence.

Illich's debt to Arendt is unstated as far as I know, but I have found one reference to his having read and admired her work. It is to be found in the introduction to *Ordres et Désordres* (1982) by Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Illich's French translator and friend. Dupuy tells the story of visiting Illich at his home in Mexico, where he enthusiastically presses a copy of *The Human Condition* into Dupuy's hands.

272 HC 319. The problem which arises when one considers that, if the desire for immortality is the basis for judging the value of activities, then life has secretly been the highest good all along, determining the relative good of everything else, does not seem to have concerned Arendt. In this connection, it would seem a basic *conatus* was the driving force behind work, action, and contemplation, which has only just been bared naked. The only other solution I can think of is that, having discovered activities beyond the mere reproduction of life, human beings experienced *genuine* immortality, or another source of value, which *supplants* the initial drive to live forever. The choice of interpretations, I believe, belongs to each reader.

As I noted in the previous chapter, the full practical ramifications of modern science were unforeseen, even by the small group of learned people who appreciated its spiritual and theoretical consequences at the time. World alienation, which was sparked by a few key events but took centuries to play out in the various realms of human life, only pervaded all of Eurowestern society around the early twentieth century. Through the long centuries that preceded this pervasiveness, a history can be traced in which the notion of life as the highest good gradually transforms all of worldly existence into a ceaseless labour while scientific endeavours change in the opposite direction, becoming increasingly concerned with action. This development culminated in the rise of totalitarianism and the use of atom bombs, which are like the opening ceremony announcing the complete victory of life as the highest good that defines the new age in which we now live. In my view, the two tendencies by which labour dominates everyday life while science employs the methods of action are at the core of the environmental crisis, which can thus be traced back to the sole preoccupation with life.

Life Contra Nature

Labour is the activity that corresponds to the human condition of life. Consequently, in a context of world alienation, labour assumes the highest place among human activities: "the modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society."[273] The institutional shape this took, which I analyzed in chapter 2 in its specifically economical form as capitalism, is what Arendt more generally calls "the rise of the social."[274] As she writes, "society [in a technical sense] is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public

273 HC 5.
274 HC 38ff.

significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public."[275] The social realm, as it gradually devoured both the private and the political spheres, "transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders; in other words, they became at once centered around the one activity necessary to sustain life."[276] One by one, the other activities were reduced to mere labouring: "Action was soon and still is almost exclusively understood in terms of making and fabricating, only that making, because of its worldliness and inherent indifference to life, was now regarded as but another form of laboring, a more complicated but not a more mysterious function of the life process."[277]

All activities are therefore structured and managed as forms of labour, regardless of the discrepancies in the actual shape these activities take. "Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society, and among the intellectuals, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living," writes Arendt.[278] The emphasis is on perspective, not on the actual nature of the activity; this is an institutional change, not a material one: "to have a society of laborers, it is of course not necessary that every member actually be a laborer or worker [...] but only that all members *consider* whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families."[279] This occurs when people are divorced from the results of their activities and attend exclusively to the activity itself as a means to sustain life.

This has important environmental consequences. Resource extraction, manufacturing, social work, or administration are equally legislated as forms of labour and compensated by exclusively monetary means. Yet while money circulates endlessly, in an imitation of the natural

275 HC 46.
276 HC 46.
277 HC 322.
278 HC 5. Emphasis added.
279 HC 46.

cycle, these activities have dramatically different effects on natural systems. In an industrial society, the products of our labour have incommensurate impacts on the natural environment which are not reflected in their cost. Only the human contribution to the process of bringing a commodity or a service to a customer is considered, while the depletion of resources, waste by- or end-products, and energetic consumption are ignored. Likewise, if all activities, regardless of whether they directly ensure the life process of the actor (i.e., regardless of whether they are authentically labour), are legislated and managed as labour, then the objects of work have to be produced at least as quickly as the goods of labour. But as the goods of labour are quickly consumed and returned to the natural cycle, the objects of work accrue. "The process can continue," Arendt points out, "only provided that no worldly durability and stability is permitted to interfere, only as long as all worldly things, all end products of the production process, are fed back into it at an ever-increasing speed," and if they cannot be fed back they are expelled.[280] The durability of products produced by work is treated as undesirable, since it inhibits the process character that is supposed to reign in the economy. The very idea of durability is written out of our relation to the object, whose "life-span" does not cover its millennium-spanning decomposition. Writes Arendt, "under modern conditions, not destruction but conservation spells ruin because the very durability of conserved objects is the greatest impediment to the turnover process, whose constant gain in speed is the only constancy left wherever it has taken hold."[281] Durability becomes the exclusive prerogative of waste. It is a "waste economy," as Arendt calls it.[282] What is consumed is, in many cases, a by-product of the work process as it slowly produces durable waste. Thus, for example, e-waste, plastics, nuclear waste, and greenhouse gases, are the end-products of a process which was enjoyed as connectivity, convenience, power, or

280 HC 256.
281 HC 253.
282 HC 252.

transportation. Many environmental issues—pollution, ocean acidification, climate change, and so on—can be interpreted as the effects of a banished world clogging up nature's capacity to reintegrate waste into the life process. Forgetting that what we as humans do is more than natural, we transform our worldliness into a life process, thereby infringing on many other life processes in nature.

While the refusal to recognize the incommensurable material properties of work and labour explains some of modern society's harmful effects on natural processes, it would not amount to as much if it were not for a destructive relentlessness at work within labour itself. As Arendt writes,

> the laboring activity, though under all circumstances connected with the life process in its most elementary, biological sense, remained stationary for thousands of years, imprisoned in the eternal recurrence of the life process to which it was tied. The admission of labor to public stature, far from eliminating its character as a process—which one might have expected, remembering that bodies politic have always been designed for permanence and their laws always understood as limitations imposed upon movement—has, on the contrary, liberated this process from its circular, monotonous recurrence and transformed it into a swiftly progressing development whose results have in a few centuries totally changed the whole inhabited world.[283]

This is because, for the first time, the social body is *identified with the life process*. In a perspective that can only be achieved through deliberate alienation, we no longer judge and act on the world from our own embodied perspective, but in consideration of the whole society as one large organism. As Arendt writes, "socialized mankind is that state of society where only one interest rules, and the subject of this interest is either classes or man-kind, but neither man nor men. [...] What was left was a 'natural force,' the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted [...] and whose only aim, if it had an aim at all, was survival of the animal species man."[284] Yet this situation is untenable, holding within it the

283 HC 46-47.
284 HC 321.

seeds of its own destruction. Arendt points out that "the monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows for only one interest and one opinion, is ultimately rooted in the one-ness of man-kind. It is because this one-ness of man-kind is not fantasy and not even merely a scientific hypothesis [...] that mass society, where man as a social animal rules supreme and where apparently the survival of the species could be guaranteed on a world-wide scale, *can at the same time threaten humanity with extinction*"[285]

The situation calls to mind an image offered by Arendt near the end of *The Human Condition*. She states that "if, in concluding, we return once more to the discovery of the Archimedean point and apply it, as Kafka warned us not to do, to man himself and to what he is doing on this earth, it at once becomes manifest that all his activities, watched from a sufficiently removed vantage point in the universe, would appear not as activities of any kind but as processes, so that, as a scientist recently put it, modern motorization would appear like a process of biological mutation in which human bodies gradually begin to be covered by shells of steel."[286] Contemporary techno-scientific society imagines itself from the outside, from an alienated position, as just such evolving organisms: "we look and live in this society as though we were as far removed from our own human existence as we are from the infinitely small and the immensely large."[287] All of human civilization appears as the development of a particularly resilient, and frankly invasive, species.[288] The perpetual growth of the human population and its power, reach, and unanimity would constitute an overly-healthy example of an organism adapting to changing circumstances and outwitting its competitors.

285 HC 46. Emphasis added.
286 HC 322-323.
287 HC 323.
288 This Archimedean perspective is challenged by many whose existence is written out by such a generalization, especially Indigenous thinkers.

For Arendt, this is no mere metaphor. In the previous chapter, I detailed just how widespread the superfluity of individual lives became during the modern age, due to the reduction of all human existence to natural existence, and that this constituted the creation of a mass-society. From a political point of view, the danger to humanity lies in the attempt to sediment this situation, forcibly eliminating the spontaneity of human beings and thereby effectively destroying human nature, even as natural existence is preserved. From an environmental point of view, mass society is equally dangerous, as is becoming clear in our time. The very logic of life itself, carried to its extreme, shows the incapacity of such a society to sustain itself. This logic is expressed in the command, "'Be ye fruitful and multiply,' in which it is as though the voice of nature herself speaks to us."[289] Nature demands that life grow indefinitely, and if death intervenes, it is only so as to ensure the greater life of the whole. Human beings before the modern age did not heed this command, since they did not conceive of themselves are solely natural or of immortality in terms of the species—the public realm kept the life process confined to the private sphere.

However, what has become clear in recent history is that when humans reject their worldliness and devote themselves wholeheartedly to growth, we are exceptionally skilled. Our labouring is employed to the highest capacity, dedicated to deriving as much surplus as possible. Thus, "only when the *vita activa* had lost its point of reference in the *vita contemplativa* could it become active life in the full sense of the word; and only because this active life remained bound to life as its only point of reference could *life as such, the laboring metabolism of man with nature, become active and unfold its entire fertility.*"[290] Human beings, by contrast with other natural things, require their worldly activities to keep their growth in check. While life was

289 HC 106.
290 HC 320. Emphasis added.

immortal in a spiritual sense, where infinitude is possible, there was no inherent danger of overgrowing our impact beyond the regenerative capacity of the natural environment. But the primacy of life in a this-worldly sense could only lead to ecological catastrophe. In the situation of one overly successful species, the ecosystem collapses, and the successful species itself must move on to a new system or perish. Ecosystem exhaustion is what spawned imperialism in the nineteenth century and it is what human civilization as whole, understood in this light, is at risk of doing. Only, at present, it has nowhere else to go. Modelling itself so strictly on the life process, it has ignored that to be too successful at living is to damn oneself in the long run.

Saving Lives

When natural processes progressively cease yielding ever-greater resources and goods, and when lives stubbornly continue giving way to death, drastic measures are taken to redesign nature according to our need for more life. The new age in which we now live deploys the capacity to mould nature, with which totalitarianism had experimented in order to produce its ideological fantasy, instead to take the pre-totalitarian demands for infinite expansion to new heights. To do so, it must re-make natural existence without death. If conservation spells the end of the social life process, it does not follow that things are allowed to die. For death is not opposed to worldliness, but to life. Death is to life what conservation is to production. Conservation is not the same as staying alive; it is a form of durability, which like death is an end to a particular process—production in the first case, life in the second. What must be maintained is the process itself. This obsession with denying things the ability to die is visible in the proliferation of vintage and retro fashions, the endless collection of artifacts in museums and archives, and the fascination with digitizing or digitally recording every aspect of human life, none of which

reasserts worldliness, but instead feeds individual patterns of consumption (as they are used in our society). But most of all, it is clear in the obsessive need to keep people alive at all costs.[291] To this end, our society has implemented the capacity to "act into nature," with which the contemporary age began.

The modern scientific endeavour, which, as we have seen, began with Galileo, is rooted in the conviction that we can only know that which we have made. Over a long series of experiments, this conviction led to the discovery of ways of not only making that which nature makes in order to understand it, but to release processes wholly alien to earthly nature. Arendt sums up this history as follows:

> This started harmlessly enough with the experiment in which men were no longer content to observe, to register, and contemplate whatever nature was willing to yield in her own appearance, but began to prescribe conditions and to provoke natural processes. What then developed into an ever-increasing skill in unchaining elemental processes, which, without the interference of men, would have lain dormant and perhaps never have come to pass, has finally ended in a veritable art of 'making' nature, that is, of creating 'natural' processes which without men would never exist and which earthly nature by herself seems incapable of accomplishing, although similar or identical processes may be commonplace phenomena in the universe surrounding the earth. Through the introduction of the experiment, in which we prescribed man-thought conditions to natural processes and forced them to fall into man-made patterns, we eventually learned how to 'repeat the process that goes on in the sun,' that is, how to win from natural processes on the earth those energies which without us develop only in the universe.[292]

Arendt calls this new art "action into nature," for "the actual underlying human capacity which alone could bring about this development is no 'theoretical' capacity, neither contemplation nor reason, but the human ability to act—to start new unprecedented processes whose outcome remains uncertain and unpredictable whether they are let loose in the human or the natural

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291 The refusal of contemporary society to accept death and mourning is beautifully explored in Adam Phillips's *Darwin's Worms* (2001). However, the qualitative distinctions (of race, gender, etc.) that remain enforced within the contemporary definition of life are ignored here as in Arendt's work. See Introduction.

292 HC 231.

realm."[293] Space exploration and nuclear technology are among her usual examples for these actions that set off processes that introduce to terrestrial existence processes whose outcomes are utterly unknown.

In my view, this definition can be expanded to numerous other technologies. The key idea here is that the natural processes triggered by our new technologies "without men never would come into existence." As Arendt points out, "this is a far cry from 'cultivating,' 'breeding,' domesticating wild animals, in brief from agricultural activities where we follow the hints of nature and by 'imitating' her prepare the earth for the use of men."[294] Unlike the activities explored in chapter 1, these actions do not merely prepare nature to make a space for our world, redirecting or replicating nature's own processes for our purposes, but introduce new processes that would not exist on earth at all without us. Examples include genetically modified organisms, telecommunications, and medical life-support systems. In each of these technologies, earthly nature is re-made so as to allow for more life than could be possible without us. Yet, though their outcomes could not have been predicted at their beginnings, we are now starting to see some of the boomerang effects of these endeavours. As Arendt reminds us, "if, therefore, by starting natural processes, we have begun to act into nature, we have manifestly begun to carry our own unpredictability into that realm which we used to think of as ruled by inexorable laws."[295] Thus, GMO crops may be contributing to the erosion of topsoil, the reduction in biodiversity, and the deterioration of genes in humans who eat them.

Likewise, information technology, which lately has been at the frontiers of history- and nature-making action, rewriting the possibilities available to human beings, seeks to expand the very ether into an infinitely growing domain of knowledge and communication, so that each life

293 HC 231.
294 D.
295 BPF 61.

can at the same time experience all other lives. This growth in a "virtual" realm is believed to be indefinite, since ideas by nature are endlessly replicable. But what we forget is that ideas need to be stored when they are not in use, if they are to remain available to perpetual circulation. Books were the low-tech, still place-bound repository of ideas that first replaced the human mind as a repository for information. In the digital age, these have been replaced by servers, which in order to function require constant energy and material inputs, and in order to circulate to any place in the world require vast physical and energetic infrastructure. The erection of these networks, in my view, constitute an action into nature by which we redesign the very landscape of the earth and its orbit to better serve our information technologies. But they are most definitely still material, and their effects are notable in the radiation they emit, the heat pollution they exude, the sound vibrations that infringe on their surroundings, and the electricity they consume (leaving aside their various political, social, and economic effects).

However, some of the more persistent problems emerge from the deployment of social and medical engineering to preserve human lives at all costs. Our society acts on the assumption that human beings should in theory live forever, and that death is an unspeakable abomination that must be exorcised. This is not the fear of death that recognizes that each individual death is a loss of an utterly unique individual, but the attempted recuperation of an abstract phenomenon, life, which permeates each of us and which must be shielded from the accident that is death. We do not save people, we "save lives." The first and highest priority of society is to save lives from that which interrupts an otherwise infinite growth. Vast amounts of debt are accrued to preserve human lives, which is functionally theft from future generations so long as we do not spend that debt restoring or regenerating the natural processes and resources we consume. Social technologies are employed to restrict and sway the movements of people in order to quarantine

those with contagious illnesses from others. The hyper-medicalization of human life introduces pharmaceutical and biotechnological elements into everyday existence whose material side-effects on the human body are frequently unknown, as was asbestos at an earlier time. (Even funeral arrangements are designed to refuse nature the reabsorbtion of the human body, as in the burial of air-tight, metal casks.) Thus, through several devices, what once was seen as a natural part of existence, namely death, is banished altogether. Human nature is being remade so as to exclude death, at any expense—"nothing is off the table" as our politicians remind us. The environmental consequences of a species that is not allowed to die remain to be seen.

Momentum

Society, a natural species whose only prerogative is to maintain its life process, and the concomitant specialization of the capacity for action into the domain of science for the same sole purpose, is the form taken by human beings whose highest good is life. Within society's perspective, it cannot be said that this way of doing things is wrong, for the determinant of right and wrong is the model of the good that is employed, which in this case is life above all else. If what we wanted was more life, we have been successful, and even the loss of other life forms, or the eventual extinction of the species *homo sapiens*, could not take that away. More life is not the same as living-forever, a goal we finally abandoned with the loss of faith in an afterlife, but rather the attitude expressed in the saying YOLO—you only live once.[296] If human beings are going to become extinct anyway, who cares when it happens? We may as well do as much as we can now, for no other reason than that we can.

296 It is not surprising, then, that the artist who popularized the word YOLO would eventually release an album called *More Life.*

However, Hannah Arendt teaches us to think through these matters, which means engaging in a dialogue that bounces this perspective against others. From an environmental perspective, we discover sets of unanticipated, and deeply problematic, consequences deriving from this arrangement. The environmental crisis, or the various environmental issues that add up to a crisis, reveals to us that the answer to the question "what is the highest good" cannot be life if we wish to impart a habitable world to our descendants or to mitigate the violence we do to other natural beings. If we desire instead to rediscover or invent new standards for the shape the world is to take, we must ensure that these become clear in the manner by which we go about making them happen. That is to say, we must engage all our worldly capacities to bring about a world in which we are satisfied to live—and to die. Before approaching considerations for how this might be possible, it is first important to conclude this section on contemporary fascination with life with an analysis of the obstacles we might encounter by trying to displace a dominant model of human society that has acquired the momentum of life itself.[297]

The first, most obvious and yet quite implacable, obstacle to changing the current state of affairs is that, as society has monopolized the labour of all, it has divorced each person from the actual fruits of labour, so that the vast majority of people are dependent on the national economic system for their livelihood. Very few are those who labour directly and enjoy the fruits of their labour, and thus the maintenance of their lives, without passing through the social-economic system. In our society, suppression of dissent is unnecessary, since everyone depends on the system and is therefore unlikely to overturn it.[298] Consequently, challenging this system must either be preceded by creating the conditions by which everyone is capable of living either

297 "Life finds a way," as Jeff Goldblum's character states in *Jurassic Park.*

298 By this, I don't mean that changes in the power dynamic will be allowed, for of course those in power which to stay that way. When the marginalized seek to displace the powerful, they will naturally be suppressed. But ideas which *fundamentally* challenge the nature of the system, such as Arendt's, are allowed to disseminate without any real fear of change.

directly from labour or through non-official means of obtaining a livelihood—which is extremely unlikely, as society has everything to gain by making sure this does not happen and deploys the instruments of violence to ensure it does not—or else it must be accompanied by the loss of lives. This in itself is an extraordinary impediment, since even those who wish to abolish the system are often still under the sway of life as the highest good. If we mean to replace this system by another which is still configured for the sole purpose of maintaining the life process, we will be unwilling to sacrifice lives to get there. Getting clear then about what it is we want and how we are willing to get there, including the sacrifices it will entail, is a first step.[299]

The second obstacle is that action in the present state of affairs is increasingly confined to a small group of experts, so that the decisions to unleash a process are not arrived at politically, that is by collective deliberation about *why* we would want to do so. As Arendt notes, "the action of the scientists, since it acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships, lacks the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence. In this existentially most important aspect, action, too, has become an experience for the privileged few, and these few who still know what it means to act may well be even fewer than the artists, their experience even rarer than the genuine experience of and love for the world."[300] Instead, political decisions are often only considered according to the calculus of life; how many lives they will save or support. To the extent that ordinary citizens are willing to protest these decisions, and therefore exercise their capacity for action, they frequently fall into the trap of simply demanding further or more stringent life-ensuring decisions from the professional decision-makers. What must

299 Arendt provides some examples of alternative political goals which she believes are untenable, such as compassion. What is desirable is a manner for collective deliberation.

300 HC 324.

instead be demanded is the right to self-organize, the assurance that we are all welcome to enter the political sphere and to contribute our voices and be heard in conversations about decisions that affect us all, yet cannot be reduced to mere administration or mathematics. This is what Arendt promotes in her discussions on councils, the "lost treasure of the revolution," which as of yet have never been given sufficient space to be tried out, threatening as they are to formal government.[301] There are many ways to address climate change; the important thing is to ensure that the choice of solutions is arrived at politically.

A third threat to authentic politics from the current arrangement is that, in "action into nature," a key component of political action is lost, namely that of forgiveness. In the human sphere, a process can be interrupted or negated by means of forgiveness. For Arendt, "the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving."[302] Forgiveness is the means by which one is released from the chain of reactions that are sparked by the beginning of a new process, and it can only be spoken by the person who is affected by the action. In nature, which is speechless, a process that is unleashed cannot be called back. Nature does not listen and natural processes are irrevocable. As Arendt writes, "because the remedies against the enormous strength and resiliency inherent in action processes can function only under the condition of plurality, it is very dangerous to use this faculty in any but the realm of human affairs. Modern natural science and technology, which no longer observe or take material from or imitate processes of nature but seem actually to act into it, seem, by the same token, to have carried irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm, *where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done*."[303] Consequently, political action now must

301 BPF 65; OR 215ff.
302 HC 237.
303 HC 238.

learn to act within and through a planet that has been dramatically altered by human actions; that is, it must learn how to operate without the possibility for forgiveness, and this means being much more attentive and conscientious. This is no longer the politics of ancient Greece, where people could happily show off all their great words and deeds, sure that any offence would be forgiven. It is a more careful, gentle, and mature politics that accepts responsibility for actions and tries to do better.

Finally, and most critically, the issue with establishing an authentic political space to handle environmental issues as well as other goals for society is the very reason why life alone has emerged as the driver of human activity: we are fundamentally mistrustful of appearances and consequently all worldly reality is suspicious to us, so that the only certainty is the simple fact of living. World alienation, indeed, lies both at the bottom of the environmental crisis as well as our failure to understand that crisis. Without a confident sense of the changes occurring to the natural environment, we rely on the findings of scientists to explain these phenomena. Yet the findings themselves are on such a scale and of such a complexity that they tend to escape the possibility of being expressed in ordinary language, requiring the development of technical languages inaccessible to most and which, by their nature, make assumptions about what we are looking for and how to deal with it. Environmental issues, therefore, tend to preclude a multitude of perspectives on a common world, replacing them with a multitude of interpretations of data, behind which no concrete reality is ascertained. They therefore preclude human plurality, dispersing human beings into atomized individuals who attempt to cope each according to their personal interpretations, and unable to act together and develop political power.[304] This, at

304 "Modern 'history-making' and contemporary 'nature-making,' both of which are in fact ways of acting, are initiations that exclude plurality. [...] 'making' nature has the effect of undermining the stability of the world, the human artifice, and eventually the habitat of the earth itself" (Cooper 1988, 329).

bottom, is the crisis of understanding that lies behind the incredible failure to act human beings have shown in the face of overwhelming signs that a collapse is impending.

CONCLUSION

> If without action and speech, without the articulation of natality, we would be doomed to swing forever in the ever-recurring cycle of becoming, then without the faculty to undo what we have done and to control at least partially the processes we have let loose, we would be the victims of an automatic necessity bearing all the marks of the inexorable laws which, according to the natural sciences before our time, were supposed to constitute the outstanding characteristic of natural processes.[305]

Perhaps the surest sign of the sorry state of politics today is an almost universal contempt for promises. Politicians are frequently thought of as nothing else than someone who makes "empty promises." Broken treaties define the relationships of national governments with Indigenous peoples living on the same territory. And governments consistently fail to meet the goals to which they commit themselves at any number of summits and conventions. Yet for Arendt, the faculty of promising is among the chief political capacities available to human beings. Arendt provides several activities which she deems inherently political, insofar as they are predicated on human plurality (judgment, imagination, speech, great achievements, etc.), but promising is, with forgiveness, the only faculty that "redeems" action as a whole.[306] Without being able to make promises, our actions would constantly escape us and we would be swept up in them as we are in natural forces. Promises are what make the realm of politics free.

By making promises, we bind our future selves to the commitments we make now, thereby ensuring a continuity of identity between who one is today and who one will be tomorrow, and further we organize and control the enormous capacity of human beings to begin

305 HC 246.
306 HC 236-37.

new things. Thus, "the function of the faculty of promising is to master this two-fold darkness of human affairs and is, as such, the only alternative to a mastery which relies on domination of one's self and rule over others; it corresponds exactly to the existence of a freedom which was given under the condition of non-sovereignty."[307] By making promises, we are able to ensure that a person's actions are in tune with a community of fellow actors, rather than each interrupting everyone else's. We can achieve more through promises, because they enable us to work together toward a common goal that we could not achieve acting separately. As Arendt writes, "we mentioned before the power generated when people gather together and 'act in concert,' which disappears the moment they depart. The force that keeps them together, as distinguished from the space of appearances in which they gather and the power which keeps this public space in existence, is the force of mutual promise or contract."[308] While a human network of peers is all that is needed to act individually, promises are required to act in concert.

In my view, this redemptive faculty is perhaps the most direly needed tool we have at our disposal to address the environmental crisis. In concluding this paper, I want to explore some ideas for how a kind of "covenantal politics," inspired by Arendt's more hopeful ideas, can be employed on pressing environmental issues today. Arendt herself is famously not forthcoming on practical solutions to the problems she outlines. At one time, describing the loss of tradition which has accompanied the gradual rise of world alienation and the eventual collapse of the modern age, she was accused by a critic of dwelling on problems. She responded with the idea that it could actually be a positive opportunity:

> He concludes with construing as a "dilemma" what actually is a factual description and was meant as a hopeful one. Since tradition and authority have broken down, I said, we are "confronted anew…without the protection of self-evident standards of behavior…by the elementary problems of human living-

307 HC 244.
308 HC 244-45.

> together." [...] For him this constitutes a "dilemma"—for me it is no more than a challenge, albeit a serious one.[309]

In Arendt's work, there are no easy solutions, and no simplification either. For me, the environmental crisis is a crisis in the concept of nature, but this too can be a challenge and an opportunity. With this in mind, I here sketch out some broad lines for a possible course of action, trusting that the details will, necessarily, have to be filled out by those who undertake to resolve issues that concern their particular communities. I join to the end of this outline some examples I have come across of communities who have done just this work.

A covenantal politics can not only join people together for particular actions, but can in fact act as the foundation of a political community that makes responsible approaches to human engagements with nature possible. I take as my cue in making such a claim a historical event analyzed by Arendt in *On Revolution*. In this unprecedented event, a group of people who faced a bewildering and intimidating encounter with "wilderness"—nature unprepared by human beings for the establishment of a world—made a pact to one another that would found not only mutual respect and support, but a political structure in which direct engagement was available to all. The event in question was the Mayflower Compact and the political institution it founded were the town-hall meetings. (That this event occurred during the colonization of America, and neglected the fact that the "wilderness" had in fact been home to Indigenous peoples for thousands of years is an issue, but not for the argument. For what matters is that the landscape was a wilderness *to them*, who indeed had never seen the landscape at the time of making the pact, and still they were able to found a political community in the midst of it.) Arendt's astonishing reading of this event is as follows:

> Power—as the men of the American Revolution understood it as a matter of course because it was embodied in all institutions of self-government

309 D.

> throughout the country—was not only prior to the Revolution, it was in a sense prior to the colonization of the continent. The Mayflower Compact was drawn up on the ship and signed upon landing. For our argument, it is perhaps of no great relevance, though it would be interesting to know whether the Pilgrims had been prompted to 'covenant' because of the bad weather which prevented their landing farther south within the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company that had granted them their patent, or whether they felt the need 'to combine themselves together' because the London recruits were an 'undesirable lot' challenging the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company and threatening to 'use their owne libertie.' In either case, they obviously feared the so-called state of nature, the untrod wilderness, unlimited by any boundary, as well as the unlimited initiative of men bound by no law. [...] The really astounding fact in the whole story is that their obvious fear of one another was accompanied by the no less obvious confidence they had in their own power, granted and confirmed by no one and as yet unsupported by any means of violence, to combine themselves together into a 'civil Body Politick' which, held together solely by the strength of mutual promise 'in the Presence of God and one another', supposedly was powerful enough to 'enact, constitute, and frame' all necessary laws and instruments of government.[310]

The town-hall meetings were created to allow a space for those who had entered into this compact to discuss and shape the laws that would govern their society, as well as to make decisions about specific initiatives. Arendt calls these meetings "the original springs of all political activity in the country," for it was there that the early Americans learned about action and developed a taste for democratic politics that would inform the Constitution of the future United States.[311] They are fundamentally akin to the council system, the only political system Arendt seems to have endorsed unequivocally, which spontaneously emerges in revolutions throughout the world, but which are unfortunately quickly dismantled by the power-hungry. What is significant for me is that these councils succeeded especially when they were formed without reference to a higher body, and explicitly in order to create a shelter for human action surrounded by an unmitigated natural landscape. They are designed for the sole purpose of

310 OR 167-68.

311 OR 239. That the Constitution failed to incorporate the town-hall meetings into the newly formed political structure is, in Arendt's view (and Jefferson's) one of its key faults, which we could view as a major factor leading to the eventual corruption of the entire edifice (OR 235-36).

preventing human collectivity from existing within a state of nature and are dedicated to the specifically human, political capacity for action.

In our time, as conventional politics has become the handmaiden of society and largely serves the life process, it seems as though we face a dual wilderness: that of mass-society and that of the natural realm into which we have acted with unpredictable results. It is not likely, nor has it ever been, that a political space can fully resist or dominate these natural forces. This dream is one we must abandon, since it is based on an exteriorization of nature. Instead, covenantal politics must be based on non-violent and non-coercive organization. This requirement was discovered by the early Americans in their journey. Arendt speculates that they may have been informed by their knowledge of the covenants that founded the ancient nation of Israel, writing that "if there was any theoretical influence that contributed to the compacts and agreements in early American history, it was, of course, the Puritans' reliance on the Old Testament."[312] Indeed, she writes elsewhere that "we may see [the political faculty of promising's] discoverer in Abraham, the man from Ur, whose whole story, as the Bible tells it, shows such a passionate drive toward making covenants that it is as though he departed from his country for no other reason than to try out the power of mutual promise in the wilderness of the world, until eventually God himself agreed to make a Covenant with him."[313] But beyond the influence of the Old Testament, which perhaps planted the idea in their heads, the reason it was tried out at all was that the very nature of the event demanded it: "Nothing but the simple and obvious insight into the elementary structure of joint enterprise as such, the need 'for the better encouragement of ourselves and others that shall joyne with us in this action', caused these men to become obsessed with the notion of compact and prompted them again and again 'to promise

312 OR 172.
313 HC 243-44.

and bind' themselves to one another."[314] They found that in a land surrounded by wilderness, their only succour would be from acting together, without rulership and without a higher source of law than the promise itself. This translates to the natural realm itself, regarding which, incidentally, Arendt also appeals to the Bible, noting that "according to the Old Testament, man is the master of all living creatures (Gen. 1), which were created to help him (2:19). But nowhere is he made the lord and master of the earth; on the contrary, he was put into the garden of Eden to serve and preserve it (2:15)."[315] Thus, new political configurations intending to deal with environmental issues must not seek to dominate the earth, but to find ways of *serving* it that can be equally conducive to building a world.

We cannot however return to the innocence of pre-alienated trust in appearances. Arendt is very clear that a return to the past of tradition is impossible. But if phenomenology can effect a reconstruction of concepts on the basis of appearance, if thought now ("between past and future"[316]) has perhaps a better vantage point than ever, then perhaps promising is also better suited now than ever to establish a new worldliness in action. It is, after all, in the promise that the Americans first discovered their political enthusiasm, which would translate into the revolution, and "revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning."[317] Promises are useful because they are made in a state of non-sovereignty, and this can apply equally to the not-knowing of contemporary alienation. We can re-create a sense of worldliness by promising to trust our senses and the testimony of others, by giving up the illusion of more correct information from technological sources and demanding that scientific knowledge be translated to ordinary language. And most of all we must

314 OR 173.
315 HC 139.
316 BPF 12-15.
317 OR 21.

refuse to accept data as a guide for action; making use of it, yet making sufficient space for people to offer their own perspectives on what it means and how to act on it, so that decisions can be made collectively. Promises are a *choice* to listen to others, fallible and different though they may be, rather than to seek for optimal solutions derived from expert or computed conclusions, which by definition deny the plurality of views on a given issue. Consequently, this means adapting the concept of nature to mean the realm of being in which we share with all other living beings, gleaned from appearance, while *also* incorporating new scientific findings in a way that doesn't relinquish our plurality.

A covenantal environmental politics will necessarily be small-scale. We cannot trust our senses for those things that necessarily come to us by way of distance. Issues that are not directly accessible to us cannot be understood except in terms of technical language. We will never truly understand the issues of those across the world from us, and to attempt to solve them from here is a form of domination. This does not preclude a community from dealing with larger issues by combining with other communities with whom environmental boundaries and networks are intertwined. In fact, the covenantal council is ideally suited to collaboration, since "the mutual contract where power is constituted by means of promise contains *in nuce* [...] the federal principle, the principle of 'a Commonwealth for increase' (as Harrington called his utopian Oceana), according to which constituted political bodies can combine and enter into lasting alliances without losing their identity."[318] Power is strengthened by joining with other powers, not by one dominating the other. By creating an alliance, two communities can achieve greater things than they could alone, so long as they do so in the form of a non-sovereign contract, just as individuals do in the formation of a covenantal body. However, the original political body must be maintained and focused on its small-scale domain. For a large body of territory, "obviously

318 OR 171.

direct democracy would not do, if only because 'the room will not hold all' (as John Selden, more than a hundred years earlier, had described the chief cause for the birth of Parliament)."[319] But this is not conducive to the active elicitation of voices from all who wish to partake in political decision-making. Furthermore, large-scale politics tend to demand catch-all solutions which are both unadapted to local conditions and issues, and negate the plurality of approaches that must constitute a properly political relationship with nature.

At this stage, these ideas are still extremely vague. That is because, in keeping with the demand for plurality and specificity that this approach demands, no one shape can be prescribed for every political configuration everywhere. However, there is good evidence to show that communities pursuing activities in keeping with these ideas are emerging across the globe. Elinor Ostrom showed long ago how powerful and sustainable self-governing commons-based approaches to natural resource use could be.[320] More recently, Anna Tsing has documented the early signs of a "latent commons" approach of communities who seek livelihood in the "blasted landscapes" that follow in the wake of capitalism (and, we might add, action into nature).[321] And Robin Wall Kimmerer has begun to popularize ways in which scientific knowledges can be accommodated and integrated with traditional Indigenous knowledge systems based on what I would call phenomenological approaches to nature.[322] These are just some examples that I've come across as I have been writing, but no doubt there are countless others. In my view, they testify to sites in which explicit or implicit covenantal politics are developing as methods to deal with small-scale environmental problems in the face of world alienation and the "natural" forces of a labouring society.

319 OR 236.
320 Ostrom 1990.
321 Tsing 2015.
322 Kimmerer 2013.

In her communications with Mary McCarthy, Arendt noted that "if nature is dead culture will die too, together with all the artifacts of our civilization."[323] Nature as that set of processes in which all of life is included, cannot die so long as a single life form continues to exist, though it can be altered by the introduction of new processes whose outcome is unknown. We cannot undo those processes. But we can appreciate that nature continues to swing, even now, with a new swirl. However, we have tasted our capacity to cause irrevocable damage to natural processes and we know also that, even if nature is not killed, human civilization can be. The order of dependence goes only one way. We also know that to be perfectly natural is for human beings a threat to our own nature, as well as potentially to the life of numerous other beings. We must take care in our relationships with nature in order to preserve that which gives meaning to our lives, *for love of the world*, for even though we may mutilate a good part of nature, we will not kill it short of actually destroying the planet. In times of precarity, due to the uncertain state of the natural environment as well as the equally collapsing state of the society we have created in mockery of it, promising can act as a way of banding together, creating our own security, and allowing space for human beings to live out their full plurality.

323 BF 293.

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