Go Your Own Ways

Senior Thesis Submission
By: Paul Weisser
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Leiner
Reader: Dr. Orlando
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When referencing major works by both Nietzsche and Arendt, I have made use of abbreviations for the sake of brevity. The tables below are a complete list of these for reference. Full citations can be found at the end of the thesis. Finally, all references to Nietzsche’s works refer to section, rather than page number, to enable easier referencing across editions or translations.

**Nietzsche**

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<td>BT</td>
<td><em>The Birth of Tragedy</em></td>
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<td>UAH</td>
<td><em>The Use and Abuse of History</em></td>
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<td>BGE</td>
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**Arendt**

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<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td><em>The Origins of Totalitarianism</em></td>
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<td>HC</td>
<td><em>The Human Condition</em></td>
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<td>EU</td>
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Image of modernity: the pit of Tartarus, a swirling void of chaos. Over it, the ancient floor of Platonism and Christianity, the dual supports of our hereditary belief, providing a basis for the possibility of accessing universal truth. On their backs rests the floor of Western Civilization, the foundation for all our progress and development. Are they sufficient? Centuries of inquiry and use wear at the pillars, it is questioned and weakened, worn down by the unceasing scrutiny of thinkers and the increasingly problematic and incomprehensible nature of the world. The fall is predicted, the pillars crack, shatter--and nothing remains above the void. Only small fragments to which some cling desperately, now faced with the stark horror and absurdity of reality. The single question left-how to proceed?\footnote{It should be noted that this thesis is not concerned with proving or debunking these systems (Platonism, Christianity). Their truth or error does not enter into the fact that within the past two centuries, they have lost their place as the principal guides of humanity. This loss of authority constitutes a central part of both Nietzsche and Arendt’s arguments, and shall be detailed in the exposition of their theories. However, I am primarily concerned with the monumental change this loss of influence engenders. Significant portions of the world are no longer bound by their authority and claims, as was true for centuries beforehand; therefore they no longer seem to provide the answers for the world as a whole. Hence I wish to investigate how, in the aftermath of this change and loss of authority, we may characterize the path forward, both in terms of intellectual and philosophical investigation, and political action.}

The image crafted above represents a brief sketch of the crisis of modernity. In the wake of harsh criticism and the violent upheavals of the past few centuries, it has been asserted that traditional, systematic thought, based upon universal and objective truths has been proven inaccurate and invalid. Our primary mode for comprehension of the world has been discarded, leaving humanity lost, drifting, without precedent or rules for action. However, this uncertainty does not indicate apathy or a lack of possible solutions. Two thinkers of particular relevance confront this frightening possibility of contemporary existence and offer their attempts to face
the horror of the void through a new understanding of humanity and reality by which mankind may be saved from aimless nihilism and a meaningless reality.

The first is Friedrich Nietzsche. He tested the floor, felt its weakness, and foretold its collapse. For him, the old ways of thinking were not only intellectually dishonest and false, but were slowly being revealed as such. In place of systems of objectivity, inimical to life, he proposed his theory of the Übermensch and the will to power. He eagerly looked forward to the philosopher of the future, who would also recognize reality in this light and overcome the past, starting a new age in which the nobility of life could be affirmed and lived.

Amid the ruins of the old order stands Hannah Arendt. She too recognized this fundamental break from the tradition, as both an intellectual crisis and as a primary cause of totalitarian government. Much of her writing focuses on characterizing the world which had just been born, and considering the new modes of action it necessitates. Considering both the contemporary loss of faith in the old order and the totalitarian reaction, Arendt questions the validity of traditional philosophy, and vehemently opposes the ‘solution’ of ideological systems. She instead proposes that the individual capacity to act, to contribute to the formation and pursuit of common goals through the sharing of words and deeds, must be the cornerstone for the future. Placing her emphasis upon the political realm she prescribes the construction of communities and collective action as the necessary methods to ensure a more secure world.

2 My study of Nietzsche’s philosophy will focus primarily upon The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, and The Antichrist. In Ecce Homo he indicates that these (particularly Zarathustra and The Gay Science) are the centerpiece of his philosophical work. However, I have also made ample use of his early writings, particularly The Birth of Tragedy and The Use and Abuse of History, as well as occasional references to The Will to Power. While I recognize that Nietzsche’s philosophy underwent significant changes during his writing career, this does not necessitate the acceptance of only one period or work and the exclusion of all his other writings. Certain elements and themes are present across these shifts in emphasis or opinion, and can be fruitfully incorporated to augment one’s view of Nietzschean philosophy, hence my use of a wide range of texts. Generally, any uses of either early writings or collected notes in The Will to Power has been due to their congruence with the central themes of the main works I have referenced. However, additional and specific information has been provided in many of the places these texts have been cited to demonstrate their relevance and agreement with the central texts.
Though Nietzsche and Arendt are by no means philosophical allies, the commonality between their work is a hatred for dogmatic, ideological thought and a faith in the strength and capabilities of individuals as the only viable alternative. The decisive difference is found in their conceptions of the sort of individuals who ought to step into the vacuum left by the destruction of tradition, and the manner in which these individuals can redeem the world. In light of this analysis, one can then ask the critical question: does Arendt or Nietzsche, or perhaps both, offer the best solution to the chaos of modernity? To understand Nietzsche, one must begin with his harsh attacks on traditional thought. These vitriolic critiques span the entirety of his work, and relentlessly castigate Christianity and Platonism for denying life and its instincts, instead placing faith in pure reason and an afterlife. Observing their supposedly erroneous thought, Nietzsche then sets forth the task of the philosopher of the future: a revaluation of values which will rend a tradition of ‘no-saying’ in favor of values which affirm life. With these efforts and the establishment of a new nobility, the world might be saved from those forces which have hitherto controlled thought and propagated hatred of the world.

Arendt adopts a less hostile opinion of the Western tradition but maintains its recent weakness and failure. The decay and even self-destruction of modern philosophy was an essential prerequisite to the rise of totalitarian movements, which relied upon the collapse of traditional systems to impose new and horrifying ideologies in their stead. The crux of this transition was the bulk of society, which only became amenable to totalitarian government in the absence of the old principles which had formed the basis of political society. For Arendt, therefore, the modern world lives or dies by the status and strength of the political community, which heavily influences the actions of its constituent members for good or ill. Hence the
solution lies in the proper conception of government and the individual’s role in politics, and a revitalized understanding of how we must associate and act politically.

   Faced with two solutions to the collapse of the Western tradition, we are forced to consider which offers the better solution for modernity. In the most general sense, Nietzsche supports the power of the independent, unfettered individual while Arendt’s acknowledgment of individual creativity requires that it be ensconced in a political community. Tension between their prescriptions will generally revolve around this question, of whether the individual who has shrugged off the mantle of tradition can carry on through the force of his own will, or whether that individual must associate with others and rely on the strength of the community. In the course of investigating these alternatives, it shall be demonstrated that Arendt and Nietzsche’s theories both offer valuable insights into the crisis of modernity, and complement each other to a degree. But Arendt’s greater focus upon the political community, a matter to which Nietzsche’s philosophical approach pays insufficient attention, will recommend her response as more comprehensive in confronting the dissolution of tradition. Her advice explicitly addresses the political repercussions of a loss of systems, tradition, and principles, and attempts to avoid the desperate political conditions which arose in the wake of such a revolutionary change. By framing her answer as a solution for the world and not merely for the strong-willed and exceptional few, Arendt gives humanity as a whole a way to understand and respond to this crisis of modernity.

   

   Tomorrow and the Day After Tomorrow
The fundamental Nietzschean observation concerning the contemporary world condemns its decadence, its many errors and failures. But it is telling that despite the constancy of this view, Nietzsche generally does not open his works with these condemnations. Rather, his prefaces are often exuberant shouts of hope which reveal the affirmative nature of his philosophy. He starts and often ends on such high notes; while much of the middle of his works consists of negating the eminently problematic and untenable factors of Western society and thought, his first and last impressions on the reader radiate joyous affirmation of the possibility of a revolution of sorts, the initiation of a new age.3

For Nietzsche himself, this necessity of rebirth from a dying tradition is not spontaneous, but responds to the prevailing attitudes of his day. Entwined with and inseparable from modernity’s decadence is its historical sense, the pervasive cognisance of the present as the resolution of the past. The Hegelian conception of history as an organic life process concludes just beyond the present; historical development nears completion and redefines modernity as a geriatric world. But more than just the historical studies perceive an elderly, exhausted reality; Western thought and culture have entered into stagnant and unreflective complacency, sure of their eternal truth and its vindication. From the historical sense is generated the conception of the denizens of modernity as Epigoni, last men, plodding along stupidly and carelessly towards an imminent end of history. Arising from an age where progress has ceased, “historical culture is really a kind of inherited grayness, and those who have borne its mark from childhood must believe instinctively in the old age of mankind.”4 But nothing could be more dangerous to life’s

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3 *The Gay Science* is the best example of opening and closing with affirmation, with some negation in between. Nietzsche whole writing career may in fact be a further example, with much affirmation in his early works (through *Zarathustra*), followed by a period of negation (characterized by BGE and GM), with his plans for the proposed *Revaluation of All Values* possibly tending towards a final and definitive affirmation, though this is uncertain. See EH, particularly the first section under “Beyond Good and Evil,” for Nietzsche’s own understanding of the development of his writing.
4 Nietzsche, UAH 8.
bounding, creative vitality; and hence a revival of life must shatter the monotonous decay to which philosophy and morality have relegated the world. Rather than passively attending an end of history as an external delivery of salvation, “the world were better redeemed by being redeemed from these ‘men’ and ‘graybeards.’ For then would come the reign of youth.”

This ‘reign of youth’ offers a concise statement of the Nietzschean project, its alternative solution to the troubles of the world. For while Nietzsche recognizes, almost in accord with Hegel, that humanity’s current path may soon reach a terminal point, Nietzsche’s talent for foresight enables him to perceive a path beyond that end, one calling for new feet leading one on a different journey. He frankly admits how necessary this conception must be, asserting through the mouth of Zarathustra, “the now and the past on earth...that is what I find most unendurable; and I should not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which is to come. A seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future.” The bulk of Nietzsche’s philosophy, then, should be viewed as the preparation and construction of that bridge. But to build up he must first tear down the errors of the past, and from these missteps one may glean the first glimpses of the future beyond the Nietzschean bridge.

**Spiritual Tyrants**

The “tomorrow and the day after tomorrow” that Nietzsche augurs is naturally a direct antidote to the sickness of yesterday and the day before yesterday. Through this affliction Europe
was paralyzed historically and culturally, and thus only by its negation can the world be remedied. This subtle, seemingly innocuous poison is none other than morality, the product of philosophy since the days of ancient Greece, now the apparently indispensable support of Western culture. It originated as a natural impulse, a necessity for human life, but spiraled far beyond its simple basis due to error and misunderstanding, increasing its hypnotic and tranquilizing power synonymously with its banality. As its dictates ensconced themselves comfortably in their original culture, its source transcended the human mind and its needs and assumed divine status, presuming a universal and objective validity for all. That veiled and perhaps unconscious bid for power poses a heinous threat on two fronts. Presently, moralities attempt to tyrannize over the individual through commands for obedience, “[addressing] themselves to ‘all,’ because they generalize where generalization is impossible,”\(^9\) and establishing the maxim ‘good for one, good for all.’ A set of maxims developed by one culture and conducive to their specific conditions will not necessarily yield beneficial results for others; “‘good’ is no longer good when your neighbor takes it into his mouth.”\(^10\) Morality is decidedly subjective; it is perpetually bound to the time and the place whose conditions made its maxims necessary. In the near future, the revelation of the inherently empty and false nature of all moralities which appropriate universal authority will initiate the advent of nihilism, a central historical event in the passage to Nietzsche’s envisioned future. Given the recognition of morality as a present and future obstacle, it behooves an inquiry into its nature, effects, and efficacy. Nietzsche proposes to undertake that exploration, observing “nobody up to now has examined the value of that most famous of all medicines which is called morality; and the first

\(^9\) Nietzsche, BGE, 198, 221.
\(^10\) Nietzsche, BGE, 43.
step would be-for once to question it,”11 a task which he sets and adheres to throughout his works, exposing the fundamentally hostile and problematic moral tenets at the heart of Western civilization. By analyzing the genealogy of morality, Nietzsche first exposes its corruption via Western philosophy and religion and its opposition to the instincts of life. He then claims that the error inherent in this tradition cannot last, and its imminent unveiling will lead to the downfall of both morality and the entire culture it supported. While this void of belief will at first present modernity with the temptation of nihilism, it will also provide the freedom for individuals to obey their personal ideals, elevating human greatness far beyond contemporary moralistic limits.

Though morality became a problem, it did not originate as such. Morality in its infancy responded to a vital necessity of humanity, that of political association. Each moral code is neither universal and objective nor arbitrary and spontaneous; “wherever we encounter a morality, we also encounter valuations and an order of rank of human impulses and actions. These valuations and orders of rank are always expressions of the needs of a community and herd.”12 As an eminently practical creation, morality codifies those actions and ways of living which are most beneficial to the society. “An ancient will to power,”13 it expresses the most desirable form of existence for a specific people and posits their wish for the ideal condition of society. Morality develops from and allows the advancement of communities, and as such it is necessary and even praiseworthy, the “greatest labor”14 of humanity.

By deconstructing morality and tracing it back to its origin, Nietzsche illustrates the fundamentally subjective nature of morality. Human right and wrong do not descend from

11 Nietzsche, GS, 345.
12 Nietzsche, GS, 116.
13 Nietzsche, Z, “On Self-Overcoming.” “What the people believe to be good and evil, that betrays to me an ancient will to power.”
14 Nietzsche, GS, 76. Nietzsche also claims here that “man’s greatest labor so far has been to reach agreement about very many things and to submit to a law of agreement-regardless of whether these things are true or false.”
transcendent forces of good and evil locked in a Manichean struggle; “men gave themselves all their good and evil...only man placed values in things to preserve himself.”  15  Our moral judgment does not rely upon reference to ultimate justice, but only upon a personal and subjective understanding of how the thing in question benefits or injures us. This construction results in a surprisingly simple, even utilitarian calculus of interest: “what is good? All that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, and power itself in man. What is bad? All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is increasing, that resistance has been overcome.”  16  In an almost Spinozistic sense, the human reaction to the world accords directly to how one’s power of acting is augmented. Morality is only this feeling of power writ large; a group’s codification of the actions which lead to the aggrandizement of their power. While this installation of the conditions which advance life at the head of a society is natural for its preservation, it becomes fatal when misunderstood and misused. According to Nietzsche, the failure to acknowledge morality’s subjectivity and the accompanying expectation of objectivity transformed morality into a tyrannical beast rather than a healthy will to power.

Having outlined the genealogy of morality and its ultimately subjective genesis, Nietzsche then turns to address the misunderstandings and errors which have occurred in the development of morality, rendering it harmful rather than beneficial. The origin of this corruption of our agreements on values lies far back in the history of thought. The expectation of universal validity and the dogmatic character of previous philosophizing is, according to Nietzsche, equivalent to the history of philosophy itself. With Socrates and Plato began the demand for philosophers to produce systems of thought by which the entire world and its

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15 Nietzsche, Z, “On the Thousand and One Goals.” “Men gave themselves all their good and evil...only man placed values in things to preserve himself-he alone placed values in things to preserve himself-he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning.”

16 Nietzsche, AC 2.
phenomena could be categorized and explained. The Socratic faith in knowledge, to which the West still adheres, elevates human rationality to omniscience and supremacy over the natural world.\textsuperscript{17} “Socrates is the prototype of the theoretical optimist who with his belief in the explicability of the nature of things, attributes to knowledge and perception the power of a universal panacea, and in error sees evil in itself,”\textsuperscript{18} thus forging the first commitment to truth as supremely valuable and attainable. Socrates initiates the claim that truth may be comprehended by perception and thought of a monistic principle from which all existence descends. But while the Socratic project intimates reckless optimism, Nietzsche contends that all philosophy remains trapped in its shadow. “Our whole modern world is entangled in the net of Alexandrian culture. It proposes as its ideal the theoretical man equipped with the greatest forces of knowledge, and laboring in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates,”\textsuperscript{19} and whose end of unveiling the nature of universal Truth remains predominant.

The Socratic attempt to resolve reality into a univocally explicable matter proves especially harmful, in Nietzsche’s eyes, when morality is considered. With the addition of an objective demand upon subjective actors, morality surpasses its original boundaries and becomes harmful, even immoral. This is the philosophical heritage of the West, inherited from Plato and carefully kept through the days of Kant. Philosophers: “they are one and all advocates who do not want to be regarded as such, and for the most part no better than cunning pleaders for their prejudices, which they baptize ‘truths,’”\textsuperscript{20} their personal truths which cannot apply to all.

\textsuperscript{17} Nietzsche, BT 15. “This illusion consists in the imperturbable belief that, with the clue of logic, thinking can reach to the nethermost depths of being, and that thinking can not only perceive being but even modify it.”
\textsuperscript{18} Nietzsche, BT 15. Nietzsche’s early criticisms of Socrates are upheld throughout his writings. Though generally dismissive of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, Nietzsche highlights the importance of his insights concerning Socrates and his characterization as a “typical decadent.” (EH, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 1.) For Nietzsche’s more mature reflections on Socrates, see TI, particularly “The Problem of Socrates.”
\textsuperscript{19} Nietzsche, BT 18.
\textsuperscript{20} Nietzsche, BGE, 5.
Through erudition and force of intellect the philosophers imposed their personal theory, constructed from and for their particular situation and experience, as the mandatory rule for all. As a tyrannical will seeking to overpower all, the hypocritical and dishonest nature of morality is revealed by Nietzsche, who slyly inquires, “is moralizing not-immoral?” With this incisive discovery, “Nietzsche’s destruction of old psychological assumptions revealed the extra-philosophical, psychic, and vital energies that actually motivated philosophers to philosophize,” providing the groundwork for the rending and razing of traditional thought executed by Nietzsche’s work.

Having unveiled the prejudices of philosophers that corrupted morality, Nietzsche turns to harm done to humanity through the fallacious pursuit of “truth.” The immoral force of moralizing presents itself through a refutation of individuality in favor of the dogmatic system. By positing a singular, objective answer and asserting a normative type, the deviation, the exception, and the nonconformist are instantly reviled. “It [morality] destroyed the faith in his ‘virtues’ in every single individual,” replacing the proper, ancient concept of virtu as one’s particular strength with a moralistic and prescriptive virtue. Rather than the exhortation to become ourselves, and to stride forward fully into a distinctive, vital personality, morality demands the restriction to a uniform type, arbitrarily elevating one standard above any variants.

21 Nietzsche, EH, “Why I am a Destiny,” 7. Through Platonic philosophy, the suppression of nature and instinct, antinature itself received the highest honors as morality and was fixed over humanity as law and categorical imperative.
22 Nietzsche, BGE, 228.
24 Nietzsche, GS, 122. Nietzsche himself uses the Italian phrase, highly intentionally, meaning to elicit a connection to Machiavelli and the Renaissance. In the latter’s humanism, Nietzsche recognized a true revival of the ancient world’s definition of virtue-the praiseworthy strength and outstanding ability of a great and magnanimous individual, with a specific connotation of ‘manliness.’ This, and not sickly, moralistic, Christian ‘virtue’ is what Nietzsche hopes to revive as the true definition of virtue. For Nietzsche’s comments on the Renaissance, see WP 75, 93, 98, and 100, and AC 2. Not also the connection to the 18th century, Rousseau, and possibly Goethe. For comments on Machiavelli, see WP 304 and 776. The former is particularly noteworthy for its endorsement of Machiavellian politics.
as the rule. Such a demand opposes itself to the natural order of life, which in a state of health produces multiplicity in abundance. By contrast, “everything unconditional belongs in pathology” as the product and preservative of the diseased and sickly herd animal. A decaying world promoted by stifling doctrine is anathema to Nietzsche, but this is precisely the world Nietzsche approaches. For him, “the question is to what extent [a judgment] is life-advancing, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding,” and on this count the failure of the anno Domini West stands unrivaled. In both form and content, the philosophical tradition and its moralistic products corrupted the world and its life. The Platonic model and its Christian descendants which Nietzsche so often maligns abused the formative power of morality, resulting in the creation of a world of Epigoni and herd animals rather than abundant and overflowing human life.

For Nietzsche, the weakness of modern humanity represents the undeniable result of the abuses and errors of morality, its application of restrictive rules to individuals who ought to be free. Imposing categorical imperatives upon diverse individuals eliminated their ability or desire

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25 Nietzsche, EH, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 271. Nietzsche also indicts Socrates with the charge of initiating this antinatural morality. In The Birth of Tragedy, “Socrates is recognized for the first time as an instrument of Greek disintegration, as a typical decadent. ‘Rationality’ against instinct. ‘Rationality’ at any price as a dangerous force that undermines life.” Both the tripartite soul and the city in speech elevate reason above the passions, asserting that rationality ought to triumph over the instincts of life. The uniformity and straightjacket of reason are preferred by Socrates to the unpredictable variability naturally occurring within humanity.

26 Nietzsche, BGE, 154. See also GS, 116-117. In these sections, Nietzsche observes the general desire of the masses to be part of the herd and to be commanded, rather than having the courage to take the initiative and be an individual. Morality trains one for this, and depletes the desire to move away from the herd and its unconditional moral laws. Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that formerly, individuality was a punishment; to be different, to be alone was either a misfortune or a punishment. Nietzsche hopes that his philosophy will reveal the pleasure of being sentenced to individuality, and the curse of conformity.

27 Nietzsche, BGE, 4.

28 Nietzsche, BGE, 6, 9. Indeed, Nietzsche himself seems to admit that a certain tyrannical element cannot be escaped in philosophy, as he claims “every drive is tyrannical: and it is as such that it tries to philosophize.” Furthermore, “[philosophy] always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to ‘creation of the world.’” The historical failure is not in the tyrannical force itself, but in a lack of honesty. The divine guise of morality conceals its true nature, and is therefore a fundamentally dishonest attempt to gain support through supernatural endorsement. For Nietzsche, the overwhelming force of a philosophy is not to be condemned, but its adoption should be based in the reflection and experience of an individual, and not commanded by a phony appeal to the divine.
to develop their particular *virtu* and live by their own code. With the vehicle for the development of human greatness nullified, humanity regressed into an obedient, mediocre, unremarkable herd. In the aftermath of the Platonic-Christian revolution, “morality is no longer the expression of the conditions of life and growth, no longer the most fundamental instinct of life, but it has become abstract, it has become the opposite of life, Morality as the fundamental perversion of the imagination, as the ‘evil eye’ for all things.”

Moral codes no longer erect and defend the conditions under which life flourishes for a people, but instead deny a wide range of people the freedom necessary to discover and effectively utilize their personal strengths. The freedom of the latter option would allow the whole race to advance through its most capable examples, while the latter restrains humanity at a deplorable mediocrity. Contra a constructive morality as a code for the preservation and advancement of life, the Christian rendition with its universal aims devalued life and established its own supreme and unrivaled reign of illness. Christianity thus reneged on the progress of antiquity and its steady construction of a vibrant world, obliterating its promising *virtu* in favor of sickly moralistic ‘virtues.’

By embracing universality and objectivity, Christianity rejected what Nietzsche views as most powerful and constructive: the subjectivity and variety of individuals. Rather than embodying those principles best suited for advancing humanity and increasing its power, Christianity adopted alternatives which immobilized and denigrated humanity by denying individual strength. That personal dimension is essential to Nietzsche, for whom “a virtue *must* be our invention, our most personal defence and need...each should discover *his* own virtue, his own Categorical Imperative.”

29 Nietzsche, AC 25.
30 Nietzsche, AC 59.
31 Nietzsche, AC 11.
concomitant elevation of a singular ‘categorical imperative’ provokes a comparison to castration, by which the demand for obedience sacrifices one’s ability to create in a unique and unlegislated manner. Both the goal of increasing one’s power and the necessarily individual means are condemned as immoral vanities by Christian morality. Instead, “virtue to them is that which makes modest and tame,” disarming the individual rather than encouraging the pursuit of one’s greatest potential through strength. Moderation, pity, humility, and equality: these are the virtues which tame masses and allow them to be meekly led. They do not question; they obey, seeking conformity to the herd ideal. Rather than becoming a free spirit, one becomes a camel encumbered with hostile, alien, burdensome ideals and led by another, unreflectively following the caravan.

But the camel metaphor is not restricted to the person alone; the monotonous, banal world of the herd is reminiscent of the camel’s desert home. The stultifying obedience commanded by the purportedly divine law drains humanity of its diversity and multiplicity, replacing them with carefully bred camels. These moral commands, directed towards the redemption of human sinfulness, derive from an additional danger in Christian thought. By insisting upon the fundamentally fallen nature of the world, “the Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad.” This misunderstanding of the inseparable condition of conventional good and evil results in the emphasis upon the latter. Good

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32 Nietzsche, EH, “Why I am a Destiny,” 4. “To demand that all should become ‘good human being,’ herd animals, blue-eyed, benevolent, ‘beautiful souls’...would deprive existence of its great character and would castrate men and reduce them to the level of dessicated Chinese stagnation.”
34 Nietzsche, Z, “On the Spirit of Gravity,” 2. In this section, Nietzsche’s characterization of man as a camel relates to humanity’s willing acceptance of a foreign burden—that of the demands and beliefs of morality. Though we do not need to bear this burden, humanity has done so, with deleterious effects. Worn down by an alien load, the world becomes a strange, inhospitable desert to us. Belief in and acceptance of false ideas destroys this world, providing an additional reason to reject this burden.
and evil are bound together; every individual contains much of both. But the Christian view recognizes only the evil, and creates a separate, ideal, ‘true’ world free from the inescapable faults of the present world. The tendency to emphasize evil and ignore the good of this world is furthered by the Christian vitiation of the Nietzschean good, i.e. *virtu*. Hence Christianity reduces the apparent world to the evil found in it, a dangerous tendency which further devalues the earthly life which Nietzsche so highly values. And the solution, the promise of a heavenly kingdom and eternal reward, fails to remunerate the damage done. “With a ‘Beyond’ *this life* can be killed,”36 reduced to nothing but painfully attending the passage to the next and better stage. But this world, the cause of all evil, is beyond saving, and must therefore be denied. And not only the world but also one’s individual virtue must be denied through the ascetic life, rejecting much that is good in oneself in the world in favor of a sterile existence. These negations fail to see that instead of representing a total lack of goodness, the world contains in it all that is good and praiseworthy. Individuality, nonconformity, and instinct are not indictments but the highest praises; in these, the best way to live, one discovers the *virtu* and lives to their greatest potential. As for the result of the Christian program, “man is the most botched and diseased of all animals, and he has wandered furthest from his instincts,”37 away from his individuality and the world he inhabits. Morality can corrupt, but Christian morality corrupts absolutely, bringing forward the lowest types of humanity and elevating them as saints.

36 Nietzsche, AC 58. See also *Ecce Homo*, Preface, 2. “One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world.” Compare to the Platonic/Socratic implication that life is a disease for which death is the cure—hence Socrates’ request for sacrifices to Aesclepius on his deathbed (*Phaedo*, 118a and TI, “The Problem of Socrates,” 12). Furthermore, consider the discussion of the body-soul relationship both earlier in the *Phaedo* and throughout the Republic. The body does little more than interfere with the soul’s pursuit of philosophy, and philosophy in turn is the proper preparation for death. Additionally, in the *Apology*, among other places, Socrates urges his fellow Athenians to grant more concern to philosophy, and life after death, than to their business and personal affairs. Throughout, Socrates advocates for concern with the Beyond over earthly life—precisely the crime of which Nietzsche accuses Christianity.

37 Nietzsche, AC 14.
The Christian elevation of the worst in man was, for Nietzsche, not the haphazard product of historical events but the intentional result of concerted efforts; reason and morality’s opposition to nature and the preparatory work of antiquity required a conscious installation in the Roman order. According to Nietzsche’s understanding of the history of morality, the Church came not to save but to enslave, to create the herd and pronounce itself the Good Shepherd. Employing their doctrines concerning the guilt of individual and world, the Church brought whole nations desiring salvation into the fold. The masses were ordered upon that proposition that they were in fact fallen and sinful, and that the Church lent the benevolent hand of the priest as the deliverance from damnation. “The actual ulterior motive of the whole of the Church’s system of salvation is to make people ill,” and therefore dependent upon the priest as the sole source of grace and redemption. And naturally, the fabrication of illness undertaken through salvation actually made many ill, at least in Nietzsche’s eyes. The impotence of the modern world lay in its total subjection to Christianity, its hypnotic obedience to the Church and its herd animal ideal. “In the total accounting the hitherto sovereign religions are among the main reasons the type ‘man’ has been kept on a lower level-they have preserved too much of that which ought to perish,” too much of the humility, moderation, and pity which tamed rather than elevating. Christianity alone bears the responsibility for the destruction and waste of the centuries of preparatory work of Greece and Rome, by abandoning its robust praise of the individual and the world. The Christian alternative, “the great rebellion against the dominion of noble values,” elevated to divine status the lowest and the worst in man, from the Nietzschean perspective, and gave humanity a fallacious idol of sympathy and pity. Hence Nietzsche

38 Nietzsche, AC 51.
39 Nietzsche, BGE, 62.
40 Nietzsche, AC, 51, 58-60.
41 Nietzsche, EH, “Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic.”
responds: “we regard what has been revered as ‘God,’ not as ‘divine,’ but as wretched, absurd, pernicious; not as an error, but as a crime against life.”42 It is against this false life that Nietzsche proposes rebellion, against manifold mistakes restraining and reversing mankind’s unparalleled potential. The time is ripe for such an attempt, as the errors of the past reveal themselves through the erosion and imminent implosion of the Platonic-Christian tradition into nihilistic disorder.

This uncanny foresight in Nietzsche’s writings is by no means coincidental. Speaking of Nietzsche, Eric Voegelin commented, “a philosopher who is sensitive to symptoms of decay in the spiritual situation of his age will be able to chart the course of social disintegration for a considerable time ahead. Nietzsche had this sensitiveness in the highest degree;”43 he attributed this prophetic power to his own work, proclaiming his prescient intuitions concerning the ultimate fate of decadent European morality.44 The coming years would apparently bear witness to the truths Nietzsche claims to have uncovered, bringing the final stages of the Platonic-Christian drama to their dark conclusion. The voice in the wilderness crying ‘God is dead’ shall be heard by all, and its message shall pass from arcane prediction to dire fact of reality. Madman shall be joined by commoner in this proclamation as the dissolution of the philosophical tradition gives birth to a new age.45 “There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us-for

42 Nietzsche, AC 47.
43 Voegelin, Eric. “Nietzsche, the Crisis and the War,” The Journal of Politics vol. 6, no. 2 (May 1944), 177-178.
44 Though much of Nietzsche’s work is written with the future in mind, his most overt claim of precise insight is found in WP, Preface and Book I, and EH, “Why I am so Clever” and “Why I am a Destiny,” 1, 7, and 8. In the former, his claim of being dynamite illustrates the impact he believes his work will have due to its perspicacious knowledge of contemporary Europe. Additionally, his self-characterization as an “untimely man” illuminates his belief that his philosophy will be best suited for a future time. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is TI, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” 50 and 51, in which he claims that both he and Goethe are misunderstood by Europe despite their truth and importance.
45 Nietzsche, GS, 125. The parable of the madman is perhaps the central Nietzschean motif, though its emphasis is often misunderstood. The energy surrounding the death of God is undeniable, but construing this event as a purely joyful one is certainly not true. The madman’s commentary on the death of God recognizes just how revolutionary the moment is, and just how lost humanity will be without divine guidance. God’s death means that the world has lost the compass by which it oriented all its actions, and both Nietzsche and the madman doubt that most of humanity is prepared to endure that reality. But if the shock can be endured, those who live after it could belong to
the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto,”46 a history free
from antinature and opened to the possibility of abundant, overfull life. But while Nietzsche
believes himself to have personally completed that transition, crossing the nihilistic bridge from
the moralistic past towards a future replete with possibilities for creation, the rest of humanity
lags behind.47 Thus his work illustrates the disillusionment and nihilism which will necessarily
result from Platonism and Christianity, priming the world for an age characterized by the reign of
creative individuals rather than restrictive moralities.48

In Nietzsche’s eyes, the progression from faith to unbelief was incorporated into

Christian morality from its origin. By founding itself on lies, it promoted a false ideal whose
unveiling as such would shatter the entire structure. And this day presses close; “the belief in the
Christian god has become unbelievable...some ancient and profound trust has been turned into
doubt...our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger,
‘older,’”49less compatible with the idyll of Christian virtue and its ‘true’ world. Humanity begins
to arise from its dogmatic slumber and shake off its Platonic enchantment with reason and
against instinct. The world itself condemns Christian tameness and moderation, its artificial
separation of good and evil. Experience vilifies the Christian solution; “the whole of history is

the greatest epoch of human history, once the need for the divine has been renounced and humanity recognizes their
own power. Yet the final paragraph of the parable of the madman indicates that the death of God has not yet
occurred, or at least not yet been widely recognized. This demonstrates Nietzsche’s ‘untimeliness,’ for he believes
himself to have lived through the next several decades of the European experience, and discovered how Christianity
leads inevitably to nihilism. Soon, the rest of Europe must face that revelation, and attempt to confront a world
which lacks its guiding principle.

46 Nietzsche, GS 125.
47 Nietzsche describes himself as “the first perfect nihilist of Europe who...has even now lived through the whole of
nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself.” (WP, Preface, 3) Interestingly, Nietzsche seems to consider
himself a case study of the future progression of European thought, the first to make the movement that much of the
world will soon make. Additionally, the sentiment expressed in this passage ought to rescue Nietzsche from
accusations of complete nihilism, particularly when coupled with his adamant opposition to Christian morality
outlined above.
48 Nietzsche, WP 7. “Now that the shabby origin of these values is becoming clear, the universe seems to have lost
value, seems ‘meaningless’-but that is only a transitional stage.”
49 Nietzsche, GS, 343.
the refutation by experiment of the principle of the so-called ‘moral world order.’”

Humanity proves by its actions both the lack of a univocal solution and the disutility of the imperative to love thy neighbor as thyself. Thus the Christian solution must appear false, if history illustrates its dissonance with human experience. But with the revelation of the erroneous “mendaciousness of millenia” comes the question “how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it?”

Given the ubiquity of Christian influence, only a truly unparalleled upheaval may be expected. For “whoever uncovers morality also uncovers the disvalue of all values that are and have been believed,” discrediting the entire system of valuations which flowed forth from Christianity. Intertwined with the entire European culture which it influenced and developed coextensively with, little that is Western can claim to be disconnected from Christianity. Therefore the overthrow of Christianity shakes the entirety of the Western world, exploding its assumptions and the entire cultural structure situated upon the Platonic foundation. As examples, Nietzsche cites its influence “in present-day sociology, in present-day music, in present-day pessimism,” all products of the reigning philosophical persuasion. Nothing which stood in Nietzsche’s Europe could stand unaltered after the realization he foretells; the old order of things in the broadest sense must pass away. As to the disillusioning effects upon the general

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51 For the best expression of the latter, one should turn to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. Here the possibility of altruism in politics receives its harshest criticism. Morality grants at best a fleeting positive reputation, and risks the loss of one’s power to those willing to employ brutality and guile. It is no mistake that Nietzsche proclaims that the only future politics can be Machiavellian, as the deficiencies of the virtuous approach to politics and life are revealed and morality dismantled (WP 304).
52 Nietzsche, EH, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 1, and GS, 343.
54 Nietzsche, WP 12A. “The overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of ‘aim,’ the concept of ‘unity,’ or the concept of ‘truth.’ Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking...we have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world.”
55 Nietzsche, WP 32.
public, Nietzsche starkly forecasts a turbulent, chaotic result. Though it certainly contains
tremendous promise, “the uncovering of Christian morality is an event without parallel, a real
catastrophe”\(^{56}\) which carries with it substantial risks. The danger is that of nihilism, which
threatens to swallow the West whole upon the realization of the erroneous and illusory nature of
its supposed truths. When the message of God’s death strikes true, “as we thus reject the
Christian interpretation and condemn its ‘meaning’ like counterfeit, Schopenhauer’s question
immediately comes to us in a terrifying way: \textit{Has existence any meaning at all?}”\(^{57}\)

For the believer turned skeptic, if not atheist, by the human evidence against God and
reason, the question is initially answered in the negative. No alternative is possible; the
destruction of their former belief leaves only a void. Thus, “nihilism represents the ultimate
logical conclusion of our great values and ideals,”\(^{58}\) the inevitable conclusion of the Platonic
experiment in reason. By founding itself upon moralistic lies, the values of the West necessarily
end in a loss of faith and a nihilistic doubt in the value and meaning of existence.\(^{59}\)

“Nihilism...is the recognition of the long \textit{waste} of strength, the agony of the ‘in vain.’
Insecurity...being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had \textit{deceived} oneself all too long...now
one realizes that becoming aims at \textit{nothing} and achieves \textit{nothing},”\(^{60}\) that the whole project of
over two thousand years founded itself on error and chased chimeras, and that despite its fantasy
it enraptured the world. The profound disillusionment at the deception of reason and the betrayal

\(^{56}\) Nietzsche, EH, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 8.
\(^{57}\) Nietzsche, GS, 357. The fundamental difference between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer lies with their divergent
answer to this question to which both are driven. Schopenhauer answered this question through observations of
worldly suffering, concluding that this could be the only meaning of the world surrounding us (See “On the
Sufferings of the World”). Nietzsche rejects this pessimistic spirit, affirming life and existence itself while radically
denying and negating most of the manners in which life has been hitherto conducted.
\(^{58}\) Nietzsche, WP, Preface, 4.
\(^{59}\) For a more complete account of the progression from Christianity to nihilism, see Book I of WP, particularly
sections 12, 13, 20, 30, 55, 57, and 65.
\(^{60}\) Nietzsche, WP, 12.
of faith, by eliminating the widely if not universally accepted answer leaves only the void of nihilism.61 But nihilism, like dogmatism, reflects an apathetic reaction to existence. In both cases the ‘facts’ of existence are imposed upon the mind, presented as the commanding interpretation of the world. Neither necessitates an active engagement with the character of reality, but exist with a passive, unquestioning assent. Thus neither can be an appropriate solution to the human situation but in fact deny the potential of humanity. Rather, an energetic, affirmative, active response avoids the apathy of mere acceptance and by providing an avenue for individual creation, redeems humanity from its fallen, moral state.

**Philosophizing with a Hammer**

As even the casual reader of Nietzsche will note, vocal opposition to the established order, forms the primary thrust of his philosophy. In his solution to the Christian-nihilist progression he adheres to this rebellious attitude, rejecting the ‘inevitable’ trajectory of the belief of his contemporaries. At the outset of *The Gay Science* he asserts that “man has to believe, to know, from time to time why he exists: his race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life—without faith in *reason in life*.”62 The nihilistic response renounces the previous faith but fails to supply a solution and resurrect trust in life through an alternate ideal. Thus the appropriate alternative involves an energetic response to Christianity; creation, and not a sheepish, herdlike

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61 Nietzsche, WP 55. “One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain.”
62 Nietzsche, GS, 1.
acceptance, constitutes the path forward. We ought to tear down in order to create anew, opposing the ancien regime in favor of a new order.

The slogan of the Nietzschean revolution is the imperative to reevaluate all values. By this, Nietzsche intends the total reconsideration of the concepts which have hitherto been granted the greatest values. Each must determine for themselves the order of values, not accepting the judgments of another in such matters. The first matter to be undertaken is the sounding out of idols, “not just idols of the age, but eternal idols that are touched here with the hammer as with a tuning fork.” Our objects or ideals of devotion must be subjected to the test, to the critical eye and ear to determine their truth, their fitness as guides for life; and by this standard of judgment Nietzsche anticipates their final, damming judgment. The subsequent response to the hollowness of modern idols can only be their destruction and replacement, for they dishonestly hold the allegiance of many through their divine masquerade. Furthermore, Nietzsche maintains destruction to be a condition of creation; “negating and destroying are conditions of saying Yes.” In order to affirm life, as in The Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra, a period of negation is required to raze the opposing premises. The inseparability of creation and destruction actually constitutes the primary objection to the traditional good-evil dichotomy, as it demonstrates the eternal link between these supposedly irreconcilable forces. Evil accompanies

63 In this sense, Nietzsche prefigures Camus’ homme en revolte who, faced with the absurdity of the world, rebels against the lack of meaning and lives in defiance of it. Acceptance and resignation cannot be acceptable responses to an incomprehensible world; one ought to oppose it as an individual who dares to live their own unique life. However, as Camus argues, the homme en revolte cannot just rebel and run wild; like Nietzsche free spirit he defends a certain order of valuations, but revolts because the existing order fails to validate those valuations.

64 In this project, Nietzsche may be seen as Descartes’ successor in this command to destroy the edifice of one’s knowledge and reflect upon its assumptions and valuations. The essential difference, of course, is that while Descartes believes his method will yield identical results, Nietzsche’s foretells vastly different results between various individuals. The revaluation depends upon an honest confrontation with one’s virtues, and the formulation of one’s own Categorical Imperative based upon those things which are of most value to each.

65 Nietzsche, TI, Foreword.
good in the creative process; one who abandons contemporary values to create their own makes use of both and redefines them. One must be harsh and even evil with their hammer in order to create and resculpt matters afterwards. Furthermore, the willingness to critique and destroy old values and affirm what was hitherto condemned demonstrates a rejection of good and evil as generally understood. One sees evil in contemporary virtue, and beauty and strength in the taboo. Such an adjustment of one’s vision is absolutely necessary, particularly if that which bears the name good ultimately becomes harmful and has something of evil in it. For Nietzsche, the currently reigning values’ nihilistic termination cannot be escaped, short of an annihilation and reconstruction of values. Only by completely reshaping our understanding of our world, placing its foundations on rock rather than sand, can life be redeemed and its purpose rediscovered. Confronted with the question, “in what do you believe?,’’ the only suitable response may be: “in this, that the weights of all things must be determined anew.”

However, it would appear that all philosophy has intended a sounding out of idols and a re-weighing of values. Does not each philosopher reject a previous truth and propose an alternative understanding in its place? But Nietzsche’s concern and condemnation lies with the presentation of each philosophy as the derivative of universal truth. As such, each thinker bestows upon their system the divine crown and the keys to the kingdom, transforming their truth into an omnipotent god. Contrary to this style of philosophizing and positing values, Nietzsche proposes a model by which each pursues individual virtue, their own particular creative strength, i.e. virtu. Doing so will bolster humanity and allow it to attain heights never before dreamt of;

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68 Nietzsche, Z, “On Self-Overcoming.” Here Nietzsche proposes, “whoever must be a creator in good and evil, verily, he must first be an annihilator and break values. Thus the highest evil belongs to the highest goodness: but this is creative.” See also BGE, 153. One should recall this aphorism which lends its final words to the title of the work: “that which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.”

69 Nietzsche, GS, 269.
“perhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to flow out into a god.”70 Our gods, our idols, are nothing more than our own creations, and by recognizing the human source of divinity a new level of beauty and possibility opens itself to humanity.71 By rejecting the transcendent answer and destroying its idols, humanity realizes the role it had always fulfilled: creators and judges of values.72 There remains no need for idols, no need for the divine, once humanity recognizes that these are the creations of mere mortals, projections of human ideals. The dogmatic stage is left behind; a way of life and a code of values no longer seek justification through reference to an ultimate truth. Finding the power of gods in their hands, humanity can sanctify its own valuations without reference to myth or legend. The will is unchained; the will assumes divine power, not in Schopenhauer’s sense, negating itself, but in a creative, life-giving sense, the force which drives and gives life to the world. With this newly recognized power humanity shall not only freely posit values in accordance with their will, they shall elevate themselves as their own ideal.73 What is highest, strongest, most beautiful, and most worthy of praise is humanity, and the goal of human activity is to exhibit that divine potential fully. Hence rather than placing idealized saints in the clouds, one should “lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away...back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning.”74 Practically, this ideal materializes as an individual confident in their virtues because they have invested significant time and effort in cultivating them. Unafraid to stand outside the reigning values, away from the herd, their status as the highest type of individual is exemplified

70 Nietzsche, GS, 285. See also WP 136. “Religion has debased the concept ‘man;’ its ultimate consequence is that everything good, great, true, is superhuman and bestowed only through an act of grace.”
72 Nietzsche, Z, “Upon the Blessed Isles.” “God is a conjecture; but I desire that your conjectures should not reach beyond your creative will.”
73 Nietzsche, TI, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” 19. “In the beautiful, humanity posits itself as the standard of perfection... at bottom, human beings mirror themselves in things.”
74 Nietzsche, Z, “Upon the Blessed Isles.”
by their actions, in which the richness of their noble spirit overflows and manifests itself. In the realm of art, Nietzsche praises both Goethe and Bizet for doing so, and indicates Renaissance art as an additional example. These are the individuals upon whom the salvation of humanity and the world rests. The destruction of the apparent world achieved by the doctrine of the true world can only be reversed by the physical, unique, human meaning which individual virtues bestow on reality, and the unparalleled greatness these virtues pursue.

Confronted by unsustainable dogmatism, Nietzsche summons the creative individual, the unchained artist, as the sole alternative. With him, “the dangerous and uncanny point is reached where the grander, more manifold, more comprehensive life lives beyond the old morality; the ‘individual’ stands there, reduced to his own law-giving, to his own arts and stratagems for self-preservation, self-enhancement, self-redemption.”

This artist-legislator recognizes the grand metaphysical meaning of the death of God, and, taking his own path, responds like Zarathustra: “this is my way; where is yours?”-thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For the way-that does not exist.” This answer to the seekers of truth illustrates its necessarily individual pursuit, reliant upon the particular conditions and person of the seeker. For Nietzsche this ought to transcend reflection upon and acceptance of a pre-established answer; one grasps and advances one’s humanity only as an annihilator and then the creator of their personal code of valuations conditioned to their particular existence and needs. “He...has discovered himself who says, ‘this is my good and evil;’ with that he has reduced to silence the mole and the dwarf who say, ‘good for all, evil for all;’” he has overthrown the

75 For his praise of Goethe, see TI, “Raids of an Untimely Man,” 49-51. Bizet is advanced as the antipode to Wagner in the first two sections of The Case of Wagner. For comments on the Renaissance, see note 24.
76 Nietzsche, TI, “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fiction,” and “Morality as Anti-Nature.”
77 Nietzsche, Z, “Upon the Blessed Isles.” “Creation-that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s growing light.”
78 Nietzsche, BGE, 262.
model of the herd and accepted his own way as the only way. In doing so, the original, classical meaning of *virtu* revives itself; one proceeds according to one’s instincts, one’s nature, rejecting the uniform antinature of morality. Thus one actually returns to the original conception of morality, which judges decisions and lives based on their efficacy, on how they increasing the power to create. No power higher than the individual evaluates, destroys, and creates, serving the ascendant, artistic power of humanity. The cure for nihilism rests upon each individual and their ability to confront a chaotic and godless world, creating their own meaning in manic, Dionysian fashion.

*The New Nobility*

This account of Nietzsche’s condemnation of tradition and dogma and his subsequent search for salvation in individual creation naturally drives one to ask precisely how these individuals will act. We have briefly taken note of the Nietzschean ideal, referring to a ‘free spirit’ or the ‘philosopher of the future.’ But what precisely is intended by these terms, and how does Nietzsche picture the coming generations which will live out his spiritual conflict? In a phrase, “a new nobility is needed to be the adversary of all rabble and all that is despotic and to write anew upon new tablets the word ‘noble.’” A radical and revitalized approach to life itself differentiates them from their predecessors. They will have the boldness and strength to stride forward independently, their values entirely self-determined, eschewing reliance upon systems and disdaining discipleship. In positing their own ideal, they shall advocate for values which

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81 Nietzsche, GS, 109. “When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to ‘naturalize’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature.”
stand in opposition to tradition, preaching harshness, strength, and power rather than meek and humble self-sacrifice. Finally, they shall be wary of being duped by the masses into being mere servants; they shall adhere to no truth but their own, and even draw mankind towards their ideal by their example. For their message contains the means by which man may be overcome, and through robust and energetic activity bring forth the overman, the exemplar of humanity’s possibility.

By returning to Nietzsche’s critique of Hegelianism and its greybeards, it becomes apparent that his ideal indicates those who refuse to accept an imminent end or an ultimate answer and choose only to begin anew. The highest individuals are those who intuit the nihilism of Christianity and venture beyond rather than remaining trapped in its web of bland stagnation. This recognition of life’s unanswerable question, the lack of an immutable and eternal answer to existence resurrects through these chosen ones the proper, artistic response. The truly free spirit, gazing into the placid, rational, deceptive interpretation of reality, possesses the strength and capability to bear this horrifying revelation. But the void is not merely endured; it spurs frenzied, joyous creation. The philosopher of the future, after annihilating the Christian illusion, avoids a nihilistic relapse by instituting a unique, human meaning into reality. Man reclaims the role of the measure of all things; values are reordered to correspond to the individual experience.

The confrontation with the chaos and utter meaninglessness of reality and one’s response to it constitute the decisive ‘proof of strength’ for Nietzsche. Those unable to accept this reality

83 Though the Dionysian type is derived mainly from The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche articulates the reality to which they respond best in GS 109: “the total character of the world...is in all eternity chaos...let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities.”
84 Nietzsche, Z, “Upon the Blessed Isles.” “This is what the will to truth should mean to you: that everything be changed into what is thinkable for man, visible for man, feelable by man.”
have no recourse but to retreat to a dogmatic shelter which conceals the void by erecting a wall of fallacious ‘meaning.’ But the philosophers of the future prove themselves as such by rejecting a comforting but illusory systematic response. This dichotomy neatly divides humanity into adherents of either master morality or slave morality, obedient to their own law or the law of another. While the latter will always exist, they have lately come to dominate, calling for a revival of daring individuals who posit their personal, noble ideal.

Confronted with a ‘nation of shopkeepers,’ the modest, tame, unremarkable herd of dogmatic sheep, Nietzsche turns to the extreme case as the cure. He continually praises the rebellious, reckless spirit, proclaiming, “we are delighted with all who love, as we do, danger, war, and adventures, who refuse to compromise, to be captured, reconciled, and castrated.”\textsuperscript{85} Paralyzed by virtue, humanity requires a dose of boldness, adventure, even unreason. Rebell ing against purportedly universal dictates, the preordained and uniform solution, the explorers of the coming generations seek new coasts, a new meaning for life beyond the pale of traditional interpretation. As early as \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, Nietzsche provides fanciful descriptions of them, impelling one to

“imagine a rising generation with this bold vision, this heroic desire for the magnificent, let us imagine the valiant step of these dragon-slayers, the proud daring with which they turn their backs on all the effeminate doctrines of optimism that they may ‘live resolutely,’ wholly, and fully.”\textsuperscript{86}

No small degree of courage is demanded to slay modernity’s dragons, and no small amount of iconoclasm either. For the subversion of Christian values must be the prelude for positing opposing values, often as a direct assault upon the former. In doing so one mixes good and evil, having surpassed such antiquated valuations. Nietzsche’s Dionysian vision at the conclusion of

\textsuperscript{85} Nietzsche, GS, 377.
\textsuperscript{86} Nietzsche, BT, 18.
Beyond Good and Evil relays this message from the drunken god, that humanity ought to become “stronger, more evil and more profound; also more beautiful.”\(^{87}\) These qualities result from the misguided Stoic imperative to live according to nature, which when properly understood means “daring to be immoral like nature.”\(^{88}\) That immorality consists in the audacity to will as an individual, determined by oneself rather than external dictates.

This is the essence of the noble, of master morality: eschewing the mundane and the beaten path to pursue one’s own ideal. Directly defying the role given to authoritative teachers, “the noble type of man feels himself to be the determiner of values, he does not need to be approved of, he judges, ‘what harms me is harmful in itself,’ he knows himself to be that which in general first accords honour to things, he *creates values.*”\(^{89}\) Nobility of character will not suffer to be commanded by an ordering of values foreign to personal experience, and as such it revolts against the contemporary sentiment which reduces everything to banality, merely a function of the reigning philosophy. The noble stands outside and above the common milieu, the realm of slave morality. Unable to create for themselves, slavish masses live by another’s values, by the code and organization most conducive to maintaining social cohesion. As such, they are the simple but sturdy basis for the soaring projects of the ‘higher men.’ Among nobles, their “fundamental faith must be that society should *not* exist for the sake of society but only as foundation and scaffolding upon which a select species of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and in general to a higher *existence.*”\(^{90}\)

With these few, humanity transcends itself; the bridge of man is crossed to reach the destination of overman. Through the towering achievements of the artistic few, centuries, even millenia, of preparatory labor by the masses are justified and brought to fruition. Though he quickly

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87 Nietzsche, BGE, 295.
88 Nietzsche, WP, 120.
89 Nietzsche, BGE, 260.
90 Nietzsche, BGE, 258.
jettisoned his hope in the “impending rebirth of Hellenic antiquity,” and the new, German spirit also proved itself a disappointment, something of their initial promise might be replicated. In the spirit of antiquity, the resumption of the potent affirmation of human virtu and ability which was stunted as it approached its triumph by the innovations of Platonism and Christianity might be partially resurrected and placed before humanity as an example. The exceptional individual is once more recognized as the greatest product of humanity, the pinnacle of achievement which may grow higher still once the limiting notion of God is removed. With this creative will, the few give meaning not only to themselves but to society, validating and preserving it. “The state and the domestic sentiment cannot survive without an assertion of the individual personality;” the state gains its vital power not from dogma but from the energy and individuality of a creator. This constitutes both the key for understanding truly noble societies and the remedy to modern lethargy. The world cannot be given meaning on a higher level than the individual; this is the final word against universal morality and for an individual and human meaning. With this knowledge, “the time will come when we shall wisely keep away from all constructions of the world-process, or even of the history of man; a time when we shall no more look at masses but at individuals, who form a sort of bridge over the wan stream of becoming.” Against the

91 Nietzsche, BT, 20. The “good European” becomes something of an alternative to the “good German” of Nietzsche’s pro-Wagner youth.
92 Nietzsche, UAH, Preface.
93 Nietzsche, BT, 21. But compare this passage to TI, “What the Germans are Missing,” 4, where it is claimed, “culture and the state… are antagonists: the ‘cultured state’ is just a modern idea.” While these two quotations are not necessarily incompatible, the tension between them may reveal a shift in Nietzsche’s thought over the course of his career. At the very least, it seems safe to say that both culture and state require for Nietzsche the creative impulses of the individual, although the demands of culture and state upon individuals may be directly antagonistic.
94 Nietzsche, UAH, 9. This comment clearly responds to the Hegelian conception of history. Rather than continuing to understand the world via processes or systematic philosophies, we ought to turn to individuals as those whose illuminating actions stand out above the monotonous stream of history. Possibly, the world cannot be interpreted on any level higher than the individual. And although this comment and UAH as a work are saturated with Nietzsche’s early romanticism, the dedication to the value and capabilities of the individual rather than systems or masses remains consistent in Nietzsche’s later works.
systematic, restrictive “mendaciousness of millenia,” only the creative, noble individual provides salvation and a path to the future.

After the Tragedy

In contrast to Nietzsche’s visionary stance, Arendt occupies an analytical role in the wake of what she characterized as a monumental and total schism with the tradition of the West. The central event with which she contends, the Second World War, brutally illustrated the recent rejection of traditional values which Nietzsche foretold. As such, Arendt’s project exhibits a high degree of similarity to Nietzsche’s. Both intuited the collapse of ancient morality and venerated metaphysical and political answers which manifested itself on an international scale between their writing lives and, recognizing the epochal significance of that moment, sought to provide responses appropriate to the changed world. Furthermore, both Arendt and Nietzsche decried restrictive system-thinking as detrimental to humanity, and proposed alternative understandings of reality and politics based on the creative initiative of individuals. But their responses diverge upon encountering the political realm. While Nietzsche’s solution relies on the individual qua individual, as an independent entity, Arendt’s draws upon the political nature of humanity and the necessity of finding solutions for communities, not just specific noble individuals. For Arendt, the “death of God” has presented itself as both an individual and a common experience;

95 I do not mean to imply an identity between systematic philosophy, e.g. Platonism, Hegelianism, Kantianism, or others, and ideology. Arendt gives a highly specific definition of ideology which certainly does not include Platonism or Christianity as conventionally understood. Additionally, while the dogma Nietzsche detests constitutes a threat over generations, by softening humanity and promoting degrading ‘virtues,’ the threat of ideology is far more immediate, particularly when embodied in totalitarian movements or regimes. However, the general critique runs along similar lines: these ways of thinking which confine the broad range of humanity to a single truth and a monistic understanding of reality vitiate humanity and threaten our demise. The imposition of a false ideal on humanity can only have harmful consequences, whether over the millennia-long taming of nations or their immediate destruction at the hands of ideological extremists. In response to their negative experiences with these all-encompassing systems of thought, both Arendt and Nietzsche recognize the individual and subjective as potential remedies.
the loss of spiritual and philosophic authority is felt almost simultaneously in the private and political realms. That event was not merely a personal existential crisis but rather a regime and culture threatening one, which resulted in a new and terrifying interpretation of reality in a godless world. Arendt’s exegesis of the philosophical background of our total collapse is therefore accompanied by an analysis of its social and political component, an account of the mass experience of the collapse of Truth. And for a political problem there must exist a political remedy. Thus to counter the vacuum of the godless world Nietzsche unveiled, Arendt structures a response on the basis of action within human communities. Individuality still animates this approach, but it is individuality within the confines of active political communities. To arrive at this solution, Arendt considers the philosophical background of the decline of the West and the destruction of its foundational beliefs. She then analyzes the social and political components of this collapse found in an atomized, somewhat nihilistic mass which was the efficient cause of totalitarianism. From the existential threat of totalitarian politics, Arendt constructs her solution of action to respond directly to the pre-totalitarian deficiencies which allowed this novel form of government to arise. Her observations of masses philosophically lost and isolated from their fellows led her to focus upon the construction of vibrant communities in which action and communication could elevate both the individual and the community.

**The Origins of the Maelstrom**

Arendt’s consistent dedication to restructuring political communities results from the complete perversion of thought and politics practiced by totalitarian government. By totalitarianism, Arendt means a form of government fundamentally different from and far more
nefarious than simple tyranny or even fascism or authoritarianism. Whereas classical tyranny was predicated upon the selfish rule of one, totalitarianism claims that everything—individuals, personal or communal interests, even entire generations—are disposable and easily sacrificed to a historical or natural movement which transcends and encompasses all of humanity. Tyranny is driven by blind self-interest, but totalitarianism relies upon an ideology as its central directive, a principle which “[thinks] in continents and [feels] in centuries.” 96 Adherents of the ideology seek to ease its historical progress, to remove all obstacles to the tide of history. Given this grandiose goal, absolute control of humanity is necessary to eliminate sporadic human actions which could oppose and retard the universal motion. Totalitarianism thus seeks a more complete obedience than traditional tyranny ever dreamed of, conformity in private as well as public life. 97 Tyranny, from Aristotle to Machiavelli and Hobbes, had no need to control private life so long as one’s private actions did not threaten the tyrant’s rule. But to direct an entire society, or the whole world (for this is totalitarianism’s goal, world domination), unquestioning obedience in all matters is indispensable. Totalitarianism is thus far harsher and far more comprehensive than all other forms of government, tyranny, fascism, and authoritarianism included. 98

96 Arendt, OT, 316.
97 The harshness and control totalitarianism must exert is key. Arendt references the incredible difference between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia on the one side with Mussolini’s Italy on the other. Fascist Italy was remarkably lenient compared to truly totalitarian regimes in terms of the harshness of punishment (executions, lengths of sentences, and even finding some individuals innocent—we see police brutality and nationalism, but not extermination camps, in merely fascist regimes). This fact, among others, leads Arendt to classify Mussolini’s Italy (and presumably Tojo’s Japan) as merely nationalistic, fascist, and authoritarian, as compared to the totalitarianism present in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Furthermore, their goals seemed more modest—the creation of a new Roman Empire or a Japanese Pacific Empire as compared with Nazi or Soviet dreams of complete global dominion. The fact that Arendt can refer to Tojo or Mussolini as ‘lesser’ threats when compared with the likes of Hitler or Stalin when the former would have been considered tremendously ambitious and power-hungry in any age emphasizes just how far beyond the pale of traditional political categories totalitarianism went.
98 For a more extensive explanation of the nature of totalitarianism as a novel form of government, see Arendt’s essays “Ideology and Terror” and “On the Nature of Totalitarianism.” Material from these essays will be explored in some detail in section 8 below.
Such corruption was only possible in an increasingly chaotic world which was already sacrificing its religious and philosophical underpinnings. As the murderer rather than the inheritor of the Western legacy, “Nazism owes nothing to any part of the Western tradition...Nazism is actually the breakdown of all German and European traditions, the good as well as the bad.” Nazism (and Soviet Communism) could only arise in and speak to a doubting world which ultimately abandoned its philosophical history and the truths it proclaimed. However, the enemy of traditional thought was not external but internal; the failure of the West concluded a process a half-millennia old which set philosophy on a self-destructive course. Beginning with the birth of modern philosophy, Arendt charts the precarious course of Western thought which brought us from the stable belief of the High Middle Ages to the Nietzsche’s total rejection of immutable truth which predicted the godless world from which totalitarianism sprang.

The conclusion of the modern chapter of the history of philosophy, which Arendt defines as a growing feeling of doubt and uncertainty, finally leads to the Nietzschean proclamation of God’s death. Nietzsche’s experience, which poetically speaks for much of “modern philosophy...begins with the overpowering and shocking perception of an inherently empty

99 Voegelin, Eric. “Nietzsche, the Crisis and the War,” The Journal of Politics, vol. 6, no. 2 (May 1944), 193. “A society has to be deeply undermined to make meaningful the existence of a Nietzsche.” Voegelin makes this comment while discussing Nietzsche’s concept of the transvaluation of all values, stating that only in a breaking, desperate world could Nietzsche come to be. Nietzsche is essentially a philosopher of crisis, of a transitional period, though this is not to say that he cannot speak to more stable times.

100 Arendt, EU, “Approaches to the ‘German Problem,’” 108-109. One should note that the disconnect between past and present for Arendt is in ideological rather than historical terms. Totalitarianism certainly had historical roots, in imperialism, anti-semitism, and particularly in the industrial revolution and its effects on political society. However, in the realm of ideas, Arendt stressed its independence and rejection of the previous philosophical tradition. It could come to be only in a vacuum of belief, and became a maelstrom which devoured and destroyed whatever was left of that tradition to create a new world in which totalitarianism alone could rule.

101 Descartes and Kant form the primary landmarks in this development. For Arendt, Kant is a figure of far greater significance, whom she attributes an incredibly significant role to. For more on Arendt’s interpretation of Kant, see “What is Existential Philosophy?”
reality.” 102 Humanity’s solitude, our lack of a metaphysical crutch, dominates the modern experience from Nietzsche through existentialism. Without safe havens in faith or reason, “man was cut off from the absolute, rationally accessible realm of ideas and universal values and left in the midst of a world where he had nothing left to hold onto.” 103 Entering a nihilistic age, “the young man has become homeless: he doubts all ideas, all moralities,” 104 adrift in a chaotic world lacking apparent meaning. Only under such conditions could totalitarianism seize power, once gods were slain and truths discarded. Totalitarianism required the self-induced exhaustion of Western thought and the nihilistic homelessness that accompanied it in order to impose a new understanding of reality and a new organization of society. 105

With this characterisation, the failure of the West with regard to the World Wars possesses for Arendt the same monumental meaning as Nietzsche’s proclamation of God’s death. Confronted with an ultimate challenge in totalitarianism, Western morality and thought proved unable to cope with that new terror, and in many cases were simply annihilated by totalitarian domination. In analyzing Nazism and Communism, particularly their extermination camps, “not only are all our political concepts and definitions insufficient for an understanding of totalitarian phenomena, but also all our categories of thought and standards for judgment seem to explode in

102 Arendt, EU, “What is Existential Philosophy?,” 167. ‘Contemporary’ may actually be a better term to define the philosophy Arendt refers to here. She speaks mainly of post-Nietzschean philosophy, but also claims that the direct source of this philosophical tendency is Kant’s separation of thought and Being.
103 Arendt, EU, “What is Existential Philosophy?,” 169.
104 Nietzsche, UAH, 7.
105 It must be noted here that I do not wish at any occasion to assign to Nietzsche the title of ‘proto-Nazi’ or even assign him a causal relationship to Nazism. Eric Voegelin’s article “Nietzsche, The Crisis and the War” defines the connection between Nietzsche and Nazism quite well, noting that if we consider Nietzsche a central cause, we practically claim that Nazism and the Second World War could not have occurred were it not for a single German philologist writing a half century earlier. Rather, as both Voegelin and Arendt indicate, Nietzsche understood his times, perhaps better than any other, and could therefore intuit their future trajectory. He is more a witness than a founder, more a prophet than an activist and was no direct cause of the future, but rather a predictor of it. One should take particular note of Arendt’s essay “Approaches to the German Problem,” in which she characterizes Nazism as the rejection of all tradition, Nietzsche included. For commentary on Nietzsche’s connection to Nazi values and ideology, see Walter Kaufmann’s Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist.
our hands the instant we try to apply them.” 106 A prime example of extant thought’s ineptitude in comprehending and confronting totalitarianism can be found in the Nuremberg Trials. Here the prosecution faced the imposing task of indicting defendants whose crimes were entirely unprecedented, outside the scope of the Ten Commandments or any other articulation of morality. 107 And in contending with the politics of totalitarianism, Allied leaders struggled to understand a system which rejected modernity’s political framework and discovered a fundamentally novel solution to all political problems in ideology. Nazism and Soviet Communism, founded upon a rejection of the Western tradition, forcefully proved through total rule the fragility of such systems and exploited their decay as an opportunity for a new political and ideological structure. The widespread support which such movements garnered illustrates the weakness of the tradition;

“The appeal totalitarianism exerts on those who have all the information before them… bears eloquent witness to the breakdown of the whole structure of morality, the whole body of commands and prohibitions which had traditionally translated and embodied the fundamental ideas of freedom and justice into terms of social relationships and political institutions.” 108

Allegiance to totalitarianism in supposedly reasonable individuals demonstrates not only the desperate state of a tradition in which faith had been lost, but also the clear existence of a political corollary to the philosophical collapse. Equally essential to the rise of totalitarian government was a dismantling of political structures which paralleled modernity’s implosion in the realm of ideas.

Alone in the Crowd

107 Arendt, EU, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” 240-243. It seems that one possible differentiation between murder and the Holocaust is that the former is personal and passionate, while the latter is the cold and systematic elimination of millions. Arendt implies that no former understanding of law, either religious or civil, was prepared to confront such hideous crimes, and had no tools for assessing and judging the guilty parties.
Alongside the arcane philosophical understanding of modernity’s chaotic state, “the Nothing from which Nazism sprang could be defined in less mystical terms as the vacuum resulting from the almost simultaneous breakdown of Europe’s social and political structures.” Simply put, the mass society lacks cohesion and unity. The ultimate effect of the dissolution of spiritual guidance and political organization was the evacuation of the public realm, where beliefs can be discussed and common goals formed. The Industrial Revolution uprooted the age-old class structures upon which political interaction was based, and the triumph of modern philosophy annihilated the values which had transcended those classes and bound them together in meaningful national, political, and religious entities. Lacking the impetus to associate, members of a world without unity retreated into their private lives, abandoning the space between them. In the mass society, “the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them,” to create out of many a political entity. Without a shared space, individuals are unable to rise to prominence and excellence as Nietzsche desired,

109 Arendt, EU, “Approaches to the ‘German Problem,’” 111.
110 Arendt, EU, “Understanding and Politics,” 315. Arendt refers to Montesquieu on this point, and his assertion that nations ought to be held together by both laws and morality, by spiritual as well as political forces. “Montesquieu outlines the political dangers to a political body which is held together only by customs and traditions...by the mere binding force of morality.” Both are necessary for a vibrant polity, and prior to the Second World War, both were lost across Europe.
111 Arendt, EU, “Understanding and Politics,” 314-315. Arendt cites Montesquieu’s understanding that custom and tradition are the true forces that stabilize human relations and allow for the construction of all higher culture. However, she argues in The Human Condition that custom and tradition have been wiped away, particularly by the Industrial Revolution. For this argument, see HC, section VI.
112 Arendt, EU, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” 128. The importance of one’s private life under mass conditions becomes evident from Arendt’s comments on the banality of evil. What drove the majority of the population of Nazi Germany to allow atrocities was not an active commitment to evil, but rather the disinterest and self-centeredness which her account of the mass man highlights. Under Nazi rule, “it became clear that for the sake of his pension, his life insurance, the security of his wife and children, such a man was ready to sacrifice his beliefs, his honor, and his human dignity.” Without a common political purpose to unite behind, individuals were thrust back upon their personal lives, acting according to self-centered motives alone. For more on Arendt’s accounts of the banality of evil, see “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” The Origins of Totalitarianism, and Eichmann in Jerusalem.
113 Arendt. HC, p. 53.
nor are they able to resist through physical or spiritual cooperation the imposition of perverted regimes or ideologies.

Arendt’s description of the mass man’s impotence stands directly opposed to Nietzsche’s ideal but provides optimal raw material for totalitarianism. The essential term for defining him is superfluous; he is uprooted and alienated even among his supposed fellows. In this context, “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.” This lack of connection to the world and their fellows is a direct result of the collapse of all the principles, religious, social, and political, which governed their lives, and represents the common experience of pre-totalitarian masses in light of which their development must be understood. As this indicates, mass men must be viewed in relation to their society and its members, for these are the factors which bestow on them their title. His “chief characteristic...is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships.” He has no significant connections; neighbors, coworkers, and the stranger on the street are all equally foreign to him. Any connections made with others are passing, not dwelling on matters of real substance or cementing a basis for relationship. Particularly conspicuous is a lack of any common goal or benefit, for the masses have no “consciousness of common interest and they lack that specific class articulateness which is expressed in determined, limited, and obtainable goals. The term masses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a

114 There is something of the mass man which is frighteningly similar to the ‘last men’ Zarathustra describes early in Z. Arendt, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” 323. While Nietzsche characterizes himself, as well as his noble ideal, in terms of ‘untimeliness’ and recognizes their position outside the common milieu, there is a high degree of intentionality in this differentiation. The philosopher of the future recognizes their exceptional character, and chooses to act upon it outside the normal social confines. But the mass man does not consider himself exceptional, nor does he fully recognize and act upon his separation. Furthermore, the mass man shares this isolation with most if not all of society, while the Übermensch experiences it as a differentiating experience which sets one apart from the mass. 116 Arendt, OT, 317.
combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest.”

As a result, he is no ideologue, and instead adopts a rather disinterested attitude in all matters, even his own. He is altogether alone, and in that loneliness he is vulnerable to totalitarian ideology.

The distinctive mass character was not randomly generated, but rather “grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness...had been held in check only through membership in a class.” Quintessential features of the mass did not develop as a result of the reduction from classes to masses, but were in fact already present in society prior to this event. It was the decay and collapse of the class system which laid bare the true “apolitical character” of the individuals composing society, and “[carrying] with it the whole fabric of visible and invisible threads which bound the people to the body politic...the fall of protecting class walls transformed the slumbering majorities behind all parties into one great unorganized, structureless mass of furious individuals who had nothing in common except their vague apprehension that the hopes of party members were doomed, that, consequently, the most respected, articulate, and representative members of the community were fools and that all the powers that be were not so much evil as they were equally stupid and fraudulent.”

Arendt’s analysis reveals both the mass which lurked behind the seemingly secure class system and the disillusionment which penetrated them. The pre-mass men had tacitly supported one party or another without actual dedication to their ideals or goals. This fickle allegiance, dependent upon one’s class identity, vanished completely when those classes dissolved. All that remained was their disillusionment; the collapse of classes revealed their carelessness and lack of

117 Ibid, 311.
118 The fact that totalitarianism requires a particular and unique type as the foundation of government is illustrative of a further difference between it and tyranny. Whereas the tyrant depends upon his own power, will, political savvy, etc. to obtain power, totalitarian movements “command and rest upon mass support” (OT 306). Arendt opens the third section of OT with this observation, noting how indispensable masses are to totalitarianism, as opposed to tyranny.
120 Ibid, 314-315.
identity. The last definition for the individual was gone, a development which only served to better illuminate his isolation behind a superficial and ultimately meaningless classification.

With the facade wiped away, the troubling features of a mass with no common interest and no political or social affiliations became apparent. The only common factor was a “new terrifying negative solidarity,”¹²¹ that of loneliness, which cannot unify at all but is based upon division. This experience, once rare, now became “an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century.”¹²² As such it became the dominant factor which would dictate both the pre-totalitarian collapse of the human person, i.e., the loss of their individuality without a community for essential personal connection, and the political structures which would arise from such conditions.¹²³ And it is certain that true loneliness will eventually destroy the individual, for “what makes [it] so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals.”¹²⁴ The solitary man is by himself, but only for a time; though he converses with himself, he will return to the company of his fellows where he may discuss his solitary reflections. The lonely man has no recourse to others; “he loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experience at all.”¹²⁵ Without a community to return to, isolation becomes loneliness and individuality itself is lost; “mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home.”¹²⁶ One’s individuality can be understood only in light of others, and without this connection, one eventually becomes sterile and thoughtless, producing the

¹²¹ Ibid, 315.
¹²³ Arendt, HC, 254. “World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age.”
¹²⁴ Ibid, 325.
¹²⁵ Ibid, 325.
¹²⁶ Arendt, HC, 59.
disinterest of the mass man. The atomized society constitutes the perfect forerunner to the totalitarian regime; the lack of common interest eliminates real interaction, and once “people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them...men lose the capacity of both experience and thought.” Loss of community, loss of self, loss of experience and thought: from these desperate experiences spring totalitarian rule.

Starting from the bare facts of isolation and unbelief, totalitarianism presents the absolutist solution to the disinterested and divided political situation of the prewar period. In the absence of class structures or unifying philosophical tenets, Nazism and Soviet Communism imposed their novel truth upon reality through a politics of total control, using force to unify where apathetic humanity would allow political disintegration. Their central principles actually transcended the old faith in natural law or similar principles by claiming allegiance to the forces of Nature or History themselves rather than their derivative laws. By this understanding, “Nature and History are no longer stabilizing sources of authority for laws governing the actions of mortal men, but are themselves movements,” a proposition amenable to doubting modernity in its use of a perpetually mutable singularity as the ultimate authority. The motion of these universal forces, which totalitarian movements alleged to have decoded, pursue final goals like the Aryan race or the classless society. Given the purported inevitability of such movements’ ends, the totalitarian conception of human duty consists in alliance with the movement and the acceleration of its process via the elimination of unfit races and dying classes. Hence the role of totalitarian parties and states lies in the elimination of all possible opponents, which is

128 Arendt, EU, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding,” 340. The difference from the previous understanding lies in the conception of the metaphysical principle or unity not as a static reality to which we can constantly refer ourselves and our reality, but rather as a fluctuating force, a movement. This change responds to the rejection of a monistic understanding of reality, but adheres to mankind’s conditioned need for certainty, for a system which explains and addresses all. It is universal but never unchanging.
synonymous with the suppression of all free thought and particularly any association which can posit a goal outside the confines of the universal movement. “Every means is taken to ‘stabilize’ men, to make them static, in order to prevent any unforeseen, free, or spontaneous acts that might hinder freely racing terror,”129 actions which would delay Nature or History’s progress by uniting against its relentless march. The indifferent, unquestioning unity which totalitarianism intends demonstrates why the mass society was its necessary predecessor. Total domination in all spheres of life, the end of totalitarian government, was simply impossible while men retained ties to others and, by virtue of those ties, strong individual identities. But as these dissolved and loneliness predominated, a new system could develop to correlate to the new experience. The totalitarian

“demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member...can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party.”130

Totalitarianism responds to a world in which all gods have been slain; but instead of freeing individuals to “go their own ways,”131 it replaced the bondage of morality with the harsher imperatives of subjection to universal history. In doing so, “totalitarian tyranny is unprecedented in that it melds people together in the desert of isolation and atomization and then introduces a gigantic motion into the tranquillity of the cemetery,” maintaining and even increasing humanity’s apolitical inaction in service of a higher movement.132 That step was eschewed even by classical tyranny, which could condone freedom in the private sphere so long as one exhibited public loyalty. Totalitarianism’s terrifying innovation necessitates the control of the entire person

130 Arendt, OT, 324.
to ensure their subjection and willingness to play the required role in the movement. Thus while the isolated indifference of the mass society exhibited a readiness and an amenability to totalitarianism, further steps annihilating individual freedom and initiative were compulsory to complete the project. While the dissolution of classes into masses vacates the space between men, “total terror destroys [it].” 133 The indifferent classless society is, to be sure, lacking in freedom and creativity, but the few vestiges which remain cannot be tolerated by totalitarian rule. Razing completely the communal space, “it substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions.” 134 Here is the nadir of freedom and the height of totalitarianism. The lonely individuals of the mass, drawn into the movement and indoctrinated by the logic of the idea, are immobilized by terror, their ideas and freedom completely extinguished in order to hasten the progress of the idea. This is totalitarianism’s alternative to Nietzsche or Arendt’s individualistic solutions. Lacking a principle of organization, unruly humans cannot be left to their own devices, for this only leads to anarchic chaos. Instead, a new law must be imposed to replace the old, a new order arising from the ruins of the old and the corpse of God. This world is among the possibilities opened to humanity in a godless world where everything has become possible, thus if it is to be prevented, an alternative theory must be proposed.

To Live, Perchance to Act

134 Ibid, p. 312.
Against totalitarianism’s absolutist solution, which denies the possibility of human association and prefers the silencing of humanity’s spontaneity, Arendt proposes a model founded upon an ancient understanding of discourse and action within proper political structures. Given the doubt which has been cast upon systems, doctrine, and tradition, only the individual remains as a touchstone for politics. For Arendt, modernity might be saved by the revitalization of the public realm as a space where individuals can escape from the solitary reflections and driving necessity of private life into a permanent and enduring public space. Existing between citizens, this space becomes an arena which glorifies human greatness, immortalizing our transient actions and words through their memory and effects. It is in this space that humanity can act in Arendt’s sense of the term. This refers to the unlimited human capacity to begin and create, to propose new policies or persuade the community through speech. In action, one communicates an essential aspect or belief of theirs to the political community, and encourages response in the form of other actions. Thus while action is necessarily individual, though it must occur in the presence of others. This public realm incorporates affairs which are truly held in common, exerting their import upon the whole community, and upon which each citizen can act. Words and deeds enacted in pursuance of such matters, being public and individual, are properly political and constitute Arendt’s remedy for fading societies. Her theory of action, seeking to escape the misguided ends-means model for government, intends to reestablish a public realm in which the actions of individuals, and not the oppressive force of ideologies, can be known as the fundamental political phenomenon.

This highly individualistic ideal, diametrically opposed to the uniformity of totalitarian ideology, actually provides the best resistance to it by attempting to prevent either artificially
imposed or naturally occurring isolation and indifference in politics. Thus action attacks totalitarianism at its source by organically unifying individuals in causes in which they are genuinely interested rather than allowing the mass disunion which tempts totalitarian attempts to bind masses together to a single, homogeneous entity. And within the totalitarian regime action undermines ordered lifelessness by introducing the vitality of free, uncommanded, and unpredictable thought. The guiding ideology, “with its own beginning and end, can only be hindered by the new beginning and the individual end which the life of each man actually is.”

Remaining fully human, refusing to be reduced to an automaton obedient to Nature or History, demonstrates that these supposedly irresistible forces can be resisted by the uniquely human capacity to create and begin in the face of all forces and probabilities. The innateness of this initiative bears further witness against totalitarianism, for it illustrates that the fundamental human condition is highly resistant to mummifying ideology so long as action is embraced, and that with every individual lies the creative power to oppose the totalitarian dream of the silent, motionless graveyard. Cognisance of this capacity, so capably hidden by the senselessness of beginning in a mass society, draws together individuals, multiplying their individual power of creation into a potent political opposition. “Any group of people joined together by some common interest is the supreme threat to total domination,” preventing the annihilation and assimilation of individuals with a display of willed individual identity. It resists the monolithic, immobilizing force of ideology with the spontaneous actions of driven individuals, disrupting the charted silence totalitarianism prepares. The threat it poses to ideological government eloquently speaks in favor of the theory of individual action as a viable alternative. In this opposition, one

finds its two attributes which respond to and preserve the human condition: the power to begin and the ability to do so despite all odds.

For Arendt, these unique and foundational qualities of action illuminate it as the highest human capacity. Action attains its distinguishing and liberating traits in comparison to the inferior but necessary capacities of labor and work. The former refers to responses undertaken to satisfy the vital needs of our physical bodies: obtaining food, water, and shelter, and preserving our existence. Subjected to the unceasing demands of the life process, our labor can never be free or political. To understand why labor is unfree, one must recall the Greek definition of freedom which Arendt utilizes: being free from compulsion, able to determine one’s own course of action. We are all unfree in the sense that we are subject to the demands of life: we must eat, drink, and sleep. But for the Greeks, the laborer was unfree because his ability to survive depended on his daily work; unless he labored for another he would not have the means to provide for his own sustenance, and was thus unfree to choose how to spend his days. The landowning citizen was free because his wealth granted him choice in how he would live. Labor, the process of obtaining life’s essentials, is thus unfree: we are all forced to labor, or obtain the food, drink, and shelter which human life requires (though the labor of a farmer and the labor of a businessman will be vastly different, and her criticisms of industrialization center around the reduction of all professions to the status of labor, completed for no reason other than to obtain our daily bread).

Work and action are undertaken by choice, i.e., are not required by life’s demands. Despite, or perhaps because of, its ephemeral products and the constant need for it, labor, particularly efficient labor, necessarily precedes work, which pursues and creates more than simple sustenance. While products of labor are necessarily perishable and transient, consumed by the needs of life, the products of work endure, and increase the efficacy of our labor. As simple as
household items and as grand as entire cities, work generates lasting objects which outlast *homo faber*, their creator.\textsuperscript{138} Work quite literally constructs our world, endowing it with a permanence spanning generations, and thus creating the physical prerequisite to the active political realm.

Like the labor which precedes it, work must direct us beyond itself to action. For

“while only fabrication with its instrumentality is capable of building a world, this same world becomes as worthless as the employed material, a mere means for further ends, if the standards which governed its coming into being are permitted to rule it after its establishment,”\textsuperscript{139}

if work is mistakenly conceived of as humanity’s *telos*. The action which takes place within the world prepared by work possesses the teleological significance which work and labor lack by incorporating both human plurality and the human desire to transcend one’s limited, death-bound existence.\textsuperscript{140}

Action in its most basic sense “is essentially always the beginning of something new,”\textsuperscript{141} to initiate new things in a free, uncommanded manner. As an escape from the necessities of labor and work, action is a liberation from the deterministic life process. In action, individuals create through word and deed, manifesting the fundamental human condition of natality, the fact that each human being represents the possibility of a new beginning.\textsuperscript{142} This power of beginning is not merely freeing, but also constitutes the “central category of political thought”\textsuperscript{143} the condition *sine qua non* without which politics is impossible. For in action, one conveys their thoughts and

\textsuperscript{138} Arendt presents a fascinating commentary on *homo faber*, or man the maker of things, in HC, chapters 20-21 and 29.
\textsuperscript{139} Arendt, HC, 156.
\textsuperscript{140} Though both work and action seek to transcend labor and the life-process, they do so in different ways. Work always contributes a tangible product: tools, machines, even buildings and vehicles. They outlive the creator, but are created as tools which assist and ease the process of labor. Action is not necessarily concerned with instrumentality as work is; its products will rarely ‘do’ something like a created tool does. Actions are often intangible, and convey something of the actor’s personality and views, whereas objects created by work are generally ‘mute’ in that the individual creator does not speak through the work.
\textsuperscript{141} Arendt, EU, “Understanding and Politics,” 321.
\textsuperscript{142} Arendt, OT 478-479.
\textsuperscript{143} Arendt, HC, 9.
brings them into the public realm, where they collide with the actions and thoughts of others. The interaction and cooperation of individual actions is identical with politics; “the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds.’”

Action provides a successful political model by prioritizing the individual’s role as actor while also utilizing that public space for the formation of common interests in pursuit of which individuals can act.

Intertwined with the close affinity between politics and action is the recognition both give to plurality as a fundamental human condition. Chief among Arendt’s criticisms of totalitarianism is the attempt to forge humanity into a single entity, to annihilate the plurality of mankind and replace it with unnatural and restrictive unity. The Nietzschean denigration of morality applies a near identical criticism, castigating moralists for their attempts to mold all mankind into a single image deemed perfect for all. But while Nietzsche characterizes traditional morality as the triumph of the system over the individual, Arendt laments the decay and disappearance of the individual as a political actor which precedes ideology’s destruction of individuals. Rather than deny and restrict individuality, Arendt recommends “action, [as] the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, [and] corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”

Though we share our human condition, humanity cannot and ought not abide by static and constant laws which disregard the variety within mankind. Given this reality, “plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.” The common ground of our humanity provides the basis for communication, a stage and

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144 Arendt, HC, 198.
145 Arendt, HC, 7.
146 Arendt, HC, 8.
a background on which our actions can assume meaning for fellow humans. But while we share this medium for expression, the singular uniqueness of each human ensures that the dramas and comedies they personally enact on that public stage could be performed by no other actor. Action is thus eminently communicative and wholly unique, speaking to the common human experience from an individual perspective. Plurality is indispensable; as “the basic condition of both action and speech, [plurality] has the twofold character of equality and distinction” which simultaneously separates and unites us. Without that balance between isolation and total unity we cannot communicate in word or deed, and politics is rendered impossible. But “men in the plural...men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness... because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves.”

This world is only accessible due to its being shared, but this sense of meaning can only be uncovered if communication between individuals is rendered possible. Action serves this purpose, transforming divisive differences into a communal space in which a genuine politics founded upon communication can occur.

The uniting tendency of action, exhibited in word and deed, establishes true political power via consensus, as compared to totalitarianism’s use of external force to bind communities together with mute terror. “Action...always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries,” to unite in spite of apparently divisive plurality. Totalitarianism finds only chaos and no hope in human plurality which can tend towards isolation, and action’s remedy of perpetual beginning. To the totalitarian mind, disunity prevents the absolute power necessary to expedite the progression of the Idea, and

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147 Arendt, HC, 175.
148 Arendt, HC, 4.
149 Arendt, HC, 190.
action threatens to oppose it by purporting that individual initiative can be superior to obedience to the Idea. Only the silencing of individuality can provide the state with the requisite and total power over each person to obtain totalitarian goals. But force cannot form a legitimately political foundation; Plato recognized this in the Republic and Arendt revived that basic fact. Totalitarianism is in fact anti-political, for “to be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence.” Power, particularly political power, is not equivalent to mere force, which actually represents a paucity of power. Found not in the resort to brute force,

“Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”

Action’s revelatory capabilities increase power, particularly in the political realm, by establishing those relationships between individuals. As a new and self-determined beginning, action unveiled some portion of one’s internal state and communicates oneself to an audience, the political community. Each action is an opportunity by which others come to know a given individual, and these others are invited to respond with actions of their own. Politics, as the interaction between individuals in pursuit of shared goals, becomes possible through action’s revelations. And action creates a permanence which even the products of work cannot attain. Because of our shared world, our separate experiences can possess a significance and a meaning which can transcend a particular individual and even a particular time and place. Action refuses

150 Plato, Republic, 548b. Speaking of the ‘regime slide’ in which aristocracy fades to timocracy and then oligarchy, Socrates finds the deficiency in the young in that “they weren’t educated by persuasion but by force.”
151 Arendt, HC, 26.
152 Arendt, HC, 200.
153 Cities, as Plato first noted, found themselves upon souls, upon individuals and not classes or groups. The political character of a city derives itself directly from the attitudes and mores of the population. This is most clear in the Republic, Books VIII and IX, in which the strengths and weaknesses of citizens’ souls dictate what the regime as a whole desires and how it develops.
to be spatially or temporally bound, meaning that the political response to our human condition becomes an immortal conversation.154

The ability to partake in and contribute to a developing and never-ending conversation illuminates action as the highest and most enduring human activity, which elevates individuals to the greatest possible significance. While the deeds of private life are lost to history, the action which occurs in the public realm have the potential to be etched in the fabric of cultures and the minds of others. The significance, meaning, and import of a given action are quickly realized and praised; and since all action is self-revelatory, praise of the action carries with it a certain praise of the actor’s character. Through the memories and stories of actions, individuals can attain the highest prestige and be recognized as the founders of institutions and movements and as repositories of human greatness and virtue. But this elevation of individuals and their actions always requires “the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.”155 The eloquence of Pericles, the humility of Cincinnatus, and the vision of the American Founders, among others could not have occurred without the glory of the public realm, and would be forgotten to history were they not self-revelatory actions addressed to their contemporary political community, and perhaps to the future and the world at large. Only together, only in community, can human greatness be realized, against the background of a shared yet pluralistic world.

“Men’s life together in the form of the polis seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made ‘products,’ the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable,”156

154 Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?” In this essay, Strauss characterizes the work of political philosophy to be the transformation of many monologues (the voices of individual thinkers) into a dialogue between them. Arendt’s theory of action has the potential to transfer that model to the common man and the specific political community.  
155 Arendt, HC, 180.  
156 Arendt, HC, 197-198.
as the unparalleled achievements of humanity. Action, seemingly the most transitory and ephemeral human activity, defies human death to become a beginning which is never forgotten and whose repercussions can be continually felt. To this day, the legends and actions of the Greeks serve as examples, warnings, and motivations; their actions did not die with them but remain present and influential in our day and will persist “to the latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know.”\(^{157}\) Action itself is endless, for the forces, ideas, and images that humans introduce to the public realm set unpredictable chains of events in motion with everlasting effects.\(^{158}\) Through action, individuals as members of communities can hope to contribute in a lasting way to human greatness, the highest achievement possible for the living whose nature is to begin.

For Arendt, the modern problem arises from discarding the theory of action as the best model for political interaction. Two vital weaknesses arise from this transformation: the adoption of the categories of ends and means and the destruction of the individual will to be an actor and thus participate in politics. In speaking of action, Arendt eschews the ends-means language which she claims has dominated modernity and instead discusses it in terms of virtuosity. True action is not primarily concerned with the outcome, nor is it performed merely as a means to an end, “the end is not pursued but lies in the activity itself.” Rather, the skillful performance of the act itself is the chief concern. The act and its virtue are self contained; “the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process but is imbedded in it; the performance is the work.”\(^{159}\) This evaluation of human activity leaves the emphasis precisely where it ought to be for Arendt: upon

\(^{157}\) Lincoln, Lyceum Address.

\(^{158}\) Arendt, HC, 233. “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end.” In a way, this is Arendt’s own refutation of Hegel. Action is not directed towards a designated end, nor can it be predictable, but is a never-ceasing web of human interactions.

\(^{159}\) Arendt, HC, 206.
the individual actor and their performance of said act. But thinking in terms of ends and means
removes the onus of action from the individual, and places it instead with a process directed
towards an end of which the individual is merely a part. With categories of ends and means, no
activity is self-contained; nothing is done for its own sake, but only in the service of the
predetermined end. The virtuosity of a given action is rendered superfluous; the only question
asked concerns the products or contributions to a larger project. Individuals are thus greatly
diminished in their value and significance, and their role in politics experiences a similar decline.
Without the necessary value placed upon the individual and their active and creative capabilities,
a vibrant political community declines into the stagnant masses which Arendt fears. This
reduction of the individual role to insignificance removes the impetus and ability to truly act.
Rather than being self-revelatory, human activities pursue ends beyond themselves, and the
public realm focuses upon large-scale achievement and not individual virtuosity. Hence in mass
societies, the belief has been lost that the individual action can reach others or exert an effect in
the public realm. Public affairs no longer seek community, but only the efficient prosecution of
selected ends; the space between us is no longer the shared and relatively permanent agora or
forum but an ever evolving factory. The sterile space between individuals in modern states deters
communicative action and the sharing of individuality as the foundation of community. Those
bold enough to genuinely act find their words and deeds falling on blind eyes and deaf ears at
best, and often their words echoing in the barren, abandoned desert which was once filled with
those engaged in interaction. While this is not the inevitable end of all modern political and
philosophical thought, the emphasis upon ends and means and the elevation of systematic
thought, particularly by Hegel, tend in the direction of isolation and even inaction. In a
completely logical and systematic world, such as the one unveiled by Hegelian dialectic, action
becomes superfluous, for the individual is merely a helpless and inefficacious blot born on the
tide of history. Reducing history to a theory of the clash of suprahuman forces robs individual
action of all meaning and purpose, crushing the impetus to associate and act. If totalitarianism, as
a novel response to this modern situation, is to be avoided, then a revival of politics based upon
individuals and their public interaction must occur.

Against the violent and seemingly hopeless darkness of totalitarian domination of masses,
Arendt perceives a dim beam of hope in the possibility for individuals to resist the entropy of
isolation by reuniting in communities. In fact, the very destruction and horror of the Second
World War may prove itself a catalyst, causing the emotional reaction of ‘never again’ as well as
research such as Arendt’s which seeks totalitarianism’s causes in order to prevent them. But for a
remedy, the thought of the past is dubious; “the trouble with the wisdom of the past is that it dies,
so to speak, in our hands as soon as we try to apply it honestly to the central political experiences
of our time.” 160 The old authorities, in politics, philosophy, theology, etc. fell from grace and no
longer provided the requisite guidance or could prescribe the appropriate response. With Arendt
as with Nietzsche, the individual is all that remains in a world where gods have been slain and
systems rejected. In the aftermath of such destruction, “there are no longer nations and peoples
but only individuals.” 161 We can no longer flee to established systems for metaphysical comfort;
each must be their own person in a world lacking clear and decisive answers. 162 With the unity
and security of a simple solution destroyed, “the only thing of importance is not philosophies but
the truth, that one has to live and think in the open and not in one’s own little shell.” 163 The

162 Scheler points out in The Human Place in the Cosmos that the goal of our philosophizing is not to create a sense
of metaphysical comfort and security, but to reach the truth. Arendt (and Nietzsche) would certainly agree that the
purpose of thought is not directed towards comfort (for Nietzsche this is the utter corruption of thought) but towards
living the best lives in their respective understandings.
163 Arendt, EU, “Dedication to Karl Jaspers,” 213.
pursuit of truth cannot be accomplished in the private construction of philosophical systems, but in the public conversation between thoughtful and dedicated individuals. While the individual offers action to the community, the individual receives a secure place in a complex world, an audience for their actions, and a sense of meaning from their political participation, all of which prevent the mass man’s tendency towards superfluity, isolation, and apathy. Our modern challenge consists in initiating those conversations in spite of the tendency towards private isolation. But Arendt remains hopeful that a unifying experience is already simmering in the personal lives of many. In her Dedication to Karl Jaspers, while discussing the difficulty of facing European problems without the benefit of national or political unity, she wrote

“Today something may perhaps be taking place in the purely personal realm that cannot yet found a world order because it is only given to individuals, but which will perhaps someday found such an order when these individuals have been brought together from their dispersion.”

Though Arendt does not explicitly state the content of this potentially unifying experience, an eligible candidate would be the horrified reaction to the debacle of Nazism, the ‘never again’ that swept over Europe and the world as a tide of solidarity. Such a reaction to the crimes of the war, the terrible possibilities that sprang from a world with no established meaning and no guiding principles could serve as a warning concerning the danger of a world without a God. Were such a recognition to occur, it might serve as the impetus behind a movement to find some substitute for the tradition and the principles that had been overthrown. Whatever shape this unified alternative

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164 To this end, ancient dialogues provide a strong model for the pursuit of truth. However, this should not be viewed as a simple resort to ancient truths, for Arendt critiques the conclusions of the Republic in particular. Furthermore, as Leo Strauss asserts in “What is Liberal Education?,” such dialogues are always a discussion between a teacher (Socrates, Scipio, Cicero, etc) and several interlocutors of lesser intelligence or skill who are being educated. Strauss contends that it is our mission as students of the liberal arts to bring those great minds into conversation with one another, rather than letting each speak in a sort of echo chamber. In terms of practical politics, conversations on similar topics to those of the Platonic dialogues take place between equals, where there is no clear leader in knowledge but rather several honest participants contributing to a search for truth.

to totalitarianism takes, the experiences of individuals must be the driving force behind politics, to build true communities and not artificial unities. Action, the prerogative of public, political individuals, enables the construction of community within a common world through its self-revelatory power of beginning. Arendt’s potent support of this faculty revives faith in individuals and their capacities despite our limitations and brevity. Though we are bound by death, as many existentialists remind us, dying and ending are not our purpose. “Men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin,” to create and act in ways which will transcend ourselves and our mortality. Only individuals engaged in the actions of community can possess this greatest of human faculties, and by this activity the world might escape the ideological, totalitarian threat which a lack of individuality and action has aroused.

**Politics or Philosophy?**

“I am a prelude of better players, O my brothers! A precedent! Follow my precedent!”

Thus cried Zarathustra from the mountaintop, proclaiming a new path and offering an escape from dogmatism through an affirmation of one’s particular virtues. Confronted with a not incongruous problem of ideological thought at the expense of individuality, Arendt also turns to individual initiative as the sole bastion of human hope following the downfall of traditional thought. But within these broad contours of similarity, their proposed solutions exhibit a significant divergence on the particular characteristics and types of individuals who are expected to salvage the world and “give it a meaning, a human meaning.” The dichotomy is defined

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166 Arendt, HC, 246.
168 Nietzsche, Z, “On the Gift-Giving Virtue,” 2. There is also a worthwhile difference to be noted in the genesis of oppressive systems. For Nietzsche, Christian morality forcefully imposed itself, overwhelming the classical ideal,
neatly by Arendt as the distinction between politics and philosophy, between the public and private life. Nietzsche’s approach concerns the individual as such, as a potential ‘free spirit’ who ought to leave the masses behind. In many cases he is highly critical of politics, and warns those following his precedent to avoid the public realm and its mediocrity. For Arendt, this sort of approach is unsuitable, for it disregards the fundamental plurality of mankind. Arendt looks to individuals as members of communities and not individuals in their philosophic isolation, as the proposed solution. Hence while Nietzsche presents readers with useful tools in reconsidering their particular evaluation of the world and their place in it, Arendt attempts to reform both individuals and their communities. The broader scope of Arendt’s thought allows her to better address modernity’s problems, and thus recommends her understanding of the role of individuals as the superior solution.

The Nietzschean adulation of the free spirit wandering in mountains and traversing vast seas indicates a rejection of a communal and political solution among the many in favor of the individual philosophical reflections of the few. Conflict between the masses and the few occupies a central role in Nietzsche’s thought, and his preference of the latter stands as one of his rare unequivocal assertions.169 And the hallmark of those free, philosophical few lies in their independence from the mundane standard of the many, which can only be preserved provided that the few refrain from establishing their exception as the rule.170 Free spirits must remain independent exceptions rather than mass leaders, refusing to abdicate their independence through

and the time has come for a subversion of the Christian usurpation. According to Arendt, however, totalitarianism only arose following the failure of both systems and communities, the latter of which followed from the abdication of individuals as actors and participants in communities. While Nietzsche portrays a forceful and tyrannical suppression of the individual will, Arendt recognizes humanity’s own failings which made totalitarianism viable.169 Note that the Nietzschean disdain for the masses does not attempt to eliminate them; the masses serve as a necessary backdrop for exploits of the many, a mundane multitude whose dullness allows the free spirit to shine all the more brightly. The many are indispensable, but far inferior to the few.170 Nietzsche, GS, 76.
the political company of inferiors or the acceptance of their valuations.171 “It is a sublime urge
and inclination for cleanliness which divines that all contact between man and man—‘in society’—
must inevitably be unclean. All community makes somehow, somewhere, sometime—‘common,’”
and therefore repulsive.172 Being drawn into the filth of contemporary and decadent political
interaction is antithetical to the pure and unadulterated independence of the free spirit; the
accursed mediocrity of the crowd must be resisted to remain exceptional and pursue one’s own
ideal. Contemporary, petty politics can produce no other result than vitiating morals, democratic
weakness and equality, and the oppression and enslavement of the few by the many, all of which
devalue life and subvert its strength. The political world as it stands can thus only ensnare and
innervate the remarkable aspects of humanity, trampling it in favor of what is equal and
common. As an alternative,

“let us rather raise ourselves that much higher. Let us color our own example ever more
brilliantly. Let out brilliance make them look dark. No, let us not become darker
ourselves on their account, like all those who punish others and feel dissatisfied. Let us
sooner step aside. Let us look away.”173

This is the path Nietzsche proposes, exemplified by the actions of Zarathustra. Tempted on
multiple occasions to adopt a political course of action, he finally “turned [his] back on those
who rule when [he] saw what they call ruling: haggling and haggling for power—with the
rabble.”174 Flatly refusing to partake in this dynamic, Zarathustra wanders the mountains in an
allegorical separation from the life of the city and the marketplace.175 He is loath to accept even a

171 Nietzsche, BGE, 26. “All company is bad company except the company of one’s equals.”
172 Nietzsche, BGE, 284.
173 Nietzsche, GS, 321.
175 The allegorical dimension of Zarathustra’s journeys is important to note. To be a “free spirit par excellence” one
need not physically leave society behind; the distance and the separation are spiritual rather than physical. In fact,
the common, political world should serve as a rather drab backdrop to the daring exploits of the free spirit, which
accent and emphasize the vibrant colors with which the exceptional individual paints. Distinguishing oneself from
what is average only increases the flamboyance and greatness of those notable few. However, Nietzsche’s personal
group of disciples, fearing their dedication to his person and ideals. Urging them to think and live freely rather than blindly accepting his teachings, he abandons his followers, declaring, “let Zarathustra speak not to the people but to companions. Zarathustra shall not become the shepherd and dog of a herd. To lure many away from the herd, for that I have come.” But this mission does not indicate the formation of a new herd; Zarathustra preaches in order to liberate, not indoctrinate in a new order. And by speaking to companions, not rabid disciples, Zarathustra intentionally avoids leadership in favor of philosophical discourse. He does not command collaboration or the formation of a new political community to oppose the old. Rather, the exhortation is: “Flee, my friend, into your solitude and where the air is raw and strong,” away from stuffy politics and its corruption. Only the philosophical answer discovered in solitude, independently, can redeem and elevate humanity; petty politics will mislead and debase.

While this apolitical approach to life may be suitable for the philosopher, it remains insufficient for the majority of humanity. The imminent and widespread realization of the death of God which Nietzsche augurs will pose the philosopher’s questions of morality and belief to whole communities; hence a response is required for man as a political animal and not just as an independent individual. Philosophy’s perpetual weakness, according to Arendt, derives from its reluctance to attend to the latter concern, resulting in political philosophies which acknowledge only the necessities, and not the joys, strengths, and glory, of political associations. As Nietzsche so eloquently witnesses, philosophy’s request is often a petition to remain apolitical, left to engage in reflection on its own terms. Silence and solitude, not the chaos of the marketplace, are retreats to Sils-Maria and the Italian countryside may be emblematic of a need for those few to physically escape the crowds to remain strikingly bold and not fade into monotony.

177 Zarathustra’s desire to speak to equals and not followers couples nicely with the previously cited aphorism from BGE. This is the only good company for him, the company of equals. The implication would then be that leadership, in which one is among inferiors, cannot be good company and ought to be avoided.
necessary for the contemplation of being, knowledge, and truth, creating a palpable tension between politics and philosophy. But the philosopher’s petition for solitude is unsustainable as the basic fact of a political order, for

“not only do [philosophers] have one supreme interest which they seldom divulge—to be left alone, to have their solitude guaranteed and freed from all possible disturbances, such as the disturbance of the fulfillment of one’s duty as a citizen—but this interest has led them to sympathize with tyrannies where action is not expected of citizens.”

The unpredictability of action, coupled with its inherent invitation for response, threatens to disrupt the vita contemplativa, thus leading participants in the latter to envision a political structure under which such interruptions are limited or eliminated. Even if tyranny is not recommended, “what the philosophers almost unanimously have demanded of the political realm was a state of affairs where action...would be either altogether superfluous or remain the privilege of the few.” While Plato’s philosopher kings are the most evident examples of this demand, Nietzsche’s philosopher of the future also shares in this ideal. The few, exemplary, wise, and bold, whose actions illustrate humanity’s potential, are the only ones who actually act; the many trudge through bland and insignificant lives and make possible the Herculean labors of the few. And though advantageous to philosophical pursuits, action as the exclusive prerogative of the few is antithetical to politics, which ought to accept a broader human potential for action and incorporate it through the building of community and the sharing of words and deeds. But the latter understanding of politics, which derives from the evident condition of plurality, lies outside the experience and the interests of philosophy. The philosophers’

“experience in solitude has given them extraordinary insight into all those relationships which cannot be realized without this being alone with one’s own self, but has led them to forget the perhaps even more primary relationships between men and the realm they constitute, springing simply from the fact of human reality.”

180 Arendt, EU, “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought,” 429.
Philosophy’s metaphysical and epistemological exploits, valuable though they are to humanity, do not form the backbone of human experience; as Plato indicates, they develop at a relatively advanced stage of society. Philosophical solitude, generally an experience of the few, cannot be a common experience, and is therefore unfit to be considered a fundamental fact for founding political communities. An overtly political theory which starts from the fact of plurality and the potential for action, the undeniable human condition, must supplement and even supersede a purely philosophical account.

The necessity of Arendt’s political prescription was driven forcefully home by the events of the twentieth century. Without a sense of spiritual or political unity or guidance, loneliness and homelessness ran rampant. To be fair, Nietzsche was not entirely oblivious to this danger; he understood God’s death and the overthrow of conventional morality to be an event both momentous and fraught with risk. Liberated from ancient constraints, humanity could reach its highest potential through individuals who lived by their own valuations, and not those of religion or society. But for the many, the risk became terrifyingly apparent in the lack of cohesion and the numbing isolation of an atomized society lacking an orienting principle. In a godless world those who required a ‘slave morality’ to direct their actions became listless and apathetic without guidance. Historical events bore witness to Nietzsche’s proverb, “where someone rules, there are masses; and where we find masses we also find a need to be enslaved;” conditioned to obey by morality, the masses needed guidance in its absence, rendering them easy prey for totalitarianism. Most individuals were simply not prepared to traverse the godless landscape of

182 Republic reference city of utmost necessity-philosophy is not primary, it cannot come into existence until leisure is present
183 Nietzsche, GS, 125.
184 Nietzsche, GS, 149. Nietzsche is far from alone in voicing this sentiment. Montaigne (Of Custom), Rousseau (The Second Discourse), and Tocqueville (Democracy in America) in particular all noted that being ruled, even democratically, conditions humanity to that state. If the ruling force, be it a monarch, a religion, the influence of
a world without predetermined values; they could not react to the exposition of primordial chaos with Dionysian joy, as the philosopher of the future could. But though the many were unable to confront a post-Nietzschean world in solitude, Arendt proposes that action, possible only when one is not merely an individual but part of a community, could redeem humanity and prevent its decay into an atomized mass, astray without guidance. Unless significant attention is paid to the political realm, Nietzsche’s efforts to elevate the individuals which compose it will ultimately be insufficient.

Given the real and historical fallout of the failure to explicitly address humanity’s political nature, it is evident that our courses of action following the death of God must consider the situation of the many as well as the few. By addressing the political dimension of individualism, Arendt supplements purely philosophical accounts with conclusions on how humans in a necessarily plural state can best live. Faced with the horror of the void and unable to find shelter in traditional responses, their salvation may be found in each other, by constructing a common world in which action and permanence become possible once more. This plan corresponds to “the danger totalitarianism lays bare before our eyes… [which] springs from rootlessness and homelessness and could be called the danger of loneliness and superfluity.”

While Nietzsche fears the moralistic forces that bind us together, Arendt finds a greater evil in the forces which drive individuals apart and isolate them, preventing the formation of vibrant communities. Through action and inter-action, these forces of decay and atomization are reversed and political communities drawn tightly together. Collaboration in both the building and the running of the polis establishes for the citizens a renewed sense of permanence in the face of culture, or the force of public opinion, is removed, those who formerly relied upon that authority will naturally seek a new ruler. Hence the removal of morality left the slavish masses without guidance and in need of a new source of authority.

a changing world, and instills a faith in both one’s fellow citizens and in the *polis* itself. Through this reaffirmation of community, Arendt’s conception of action and politics possesses the potential to draw humanity out of the uncertainty and chaos which Nietzsche’s revelations unveiled. It offers the means to reestablish a shared world as an alternative to the homelessness and superfluity threaten states today. It is a solution for all, essential for confronting the challenges of modernity.

Faced with the question of whether we ought to promote Nietzsche’s philosophic answer or Arendt’s political one, we ought to place a greater emphasis upon the latter, though the two are generally compatible. This is not to discount the importance of Nietzsche’s advice; his imperative to revaluate values remains of paramount importance for the individual attempting to determine their beliefs and the sort of life they should live. But this isolated search for meaning must be brought into contact with the reflections and lives of others through a robust communal life, which prevents the sudden collapse into a mass society once the old values are removed. Nietzsche does not adequately define or defend this political dimension; hence he provides only half a solution. But Arendt does, without undermining the isolation reflections of Nietzsche’s free spirit. Action in a common world promises a similar elevation of the individual, with the additional benefit of contributing to the shared world of the *polis*. The human greatness which Nietzsche so fervently pursued is not denied, nor is it gained for the few at the common expense. And while Arendt’s model of politics does not solve the essential philosophical questions posed by Nietzsche, it provides a forum in which new philosophical thoughts may be voiced and listened to, while also sheltering the denizens of modernity from fading into an atomized mass society. Arendt’s model can easily incorporate philosophy, but with an additional safeguard protecting the life of the community. The philosopher is certainly tolerated, and is free to
contribute to the life of the *polis*. But the average citizen is never assumed to be a philosopher, nor are the aims of the philosopher elevated above those of other citizens, steps which Arendt finds lacking in most philosophical accounts of politics. Finally, though the differences between them are essential, their common conclusion must also be remembered. Neither thinker provides a comprehensive or universal solution to the apparent collapse of the Western tradition. They instead provide a general method, a precedent, susceptible to modifications and reliant upon contingent application. Each potentially free spirit must revaluate their own values, and each community must cultivate action within the confines of its unique situation. This particularity illuminates the individualism which lies at the heart of both writers’ theories. After the death of God and the flux of all beliefs, the individual person is looked to as the alternative to grand principles. In the creative actions, the words and deeds of individuals, humanity can find hope and redemption and move onwards despite the chaos into which it was recently thrown. Among individuals are the seeds from which a new world can arise to replace the one which was cast down. But though the responsibility lies with individuals, their ability to execute it well if left to their own devices may be doubted. If God is truly dead as Nietzsche contends, anything has become possible for humanity, from the vilest and most oppressive tyranny to the highest affirmation of human power and potential. Either is feasible, but perhaps most likely is the atomization and isolation of many individuals whose common interests and ties were destroyed. The political nature of humanity remains unfulfilled, ruining those forced to endure the loneliness of an apolitical society. Arendt’s theory of action seeks to replace this experience of an empty and uncaring void with the stability of a political community. Through interaction and the pursuit of common goals, a new source of authority is found which prevents the aimless terror of the void. Arendt reminds us that the political becomes even more necessary when faced
with uncertainty, becoming perhaps the last bastion of security in an uncertain world. And her conception of the political, by emphasizing action, promotes the individual to the most important role and thus provides the best solution to a widespread loss of faith in tradition and systems.

Works Cited


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