Hannah Arendt

Twenty Years Later

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The Political Dimension of the Public World: On Hannah Arendt’s Interpretation of Martin Heidegger

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In a speech presented to the American Society of Political Scientists in 1954 entitled “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought,” Hannah Arendt referred to an aspect of Martin Heidegger’s thought that was, in her eyes, especially pertinent to her own philosophical endeavors. As she explained:

It lies in the nature of philosophy to deal with man in the singular, whereas politics could not even be conceived of if men did not exist in the plural. Or to put it another way: the experiences of the philosopher—insofar as he is a philosopher—are with solitude, while for man—insofar as he is political—solitude is an essential but nevertheless marginal experience. It may be—but I shall only hint at this—that Heidegger’s concept of “world,” which in many respects stands at the center of his philosophy, constitutes a step out of this difficulty. At any rate, because Heidegger defines human existence as being-in-the-world, he insists on giving philosophic significance to structures of everyday life that are completely incomprehensible if man is not primarily understood as being together with others.1

Hannah Arendt underlines here Heidegger’s interpretation of human existence as being-in-the-world, in other words the characterization of human existence as inherence in a common world that is prestructured by a network of relations to things and to other people. If Arendt emphasizes this Heideggerian interpretation, it is because, as she herself indicates, it seems to present the possibility of a preliminary overcoming of what she designates as the traditional isolation of the philosopher from the common world of human affairs. And, in her own writings, Hannah Arendt seeks to surmount precisely this traditional isolation on
the basis of political theory. She intends, above all, to place in question a tradition that to her mind has not sufficiently recognized the philosophical implications of political interaction in the context of a public world.

In spite of the importance she accords to Heidegger's interpretation of being-in-the-world, reflection on what she took to be this traditional relation between philosophy and politics led her to criticize Heidegger's thought. This criticism concerned not only Heidegger's official support of the Nazi regime as rector of Freiburg University from May 1933, until February 1934, but above all the absence of specifically political reflection in *Being and Time*, in spite of Heidegger's claim, in the framework of his analysis of being-in-the-world, to account for human existence in a *public* world. For Hannah Arendt, Heidegger's neglect of the political dimension of human existence in *Being and Time*, far from designating a simple omission in his thinking, represents one of its salient characteristics. The absence of specifically political reflection in Heidegger's work signifies for Arendt a depreciation of political experience that, at the very least, bore an indirect relation to Heidegger's engagement in favor of the Nazis.

It is not my intention in this context to enter into the discussion on Heidegger's political activity during the Third Reich. By means of Hannah Arendt's critique of Heidegger's account of the public world, I seek rather to place Arendt's own conception of the public world in sharper relief and to determine its role in her theory of politics. I will attempt to demonstrate that Arendt, far from proposing her theory of politics as a mere supplement to the Heideggerian interpretation of being-in-the-world, places the political dimension of the public world a: a far more radical level of investigation: from her point of view, indeed, the fundamental philosophical problem of truth cannot legitimately be addressed unless the discussion is grounded in political reflection. If the very words "public world" take on a meaning in Arendt's thought that sharply differs from Heidegger's understanding of this theme, I will attempt to illustrate that this difference, beyond a simple terminological distinction, provides an important indication for comprehending the originality of her approach to the question of truth.

In the preface to *Men in Dark Times* Hannah Arendt evokes the specific aspect of Heidegger's interpretation of the world that stands at the heart of her own critical reflection. In this preface, Arendt quotes
Heidegger's assertion in *Being and Time*, "Die Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles" ("The public obscures everything"). Without indicating her own intervention, however, Arendt reformulates Heidegger's phrase—it is not clear whether intentionally or inadvertently—in terms of a paradox. She writes: "Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles" ("The light of the public obscures everything"). In section 27 of *Being and Time*, nonetheless, Heidegger merely wrote: "The public obscures everything, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone."

Although Heidegger here refers to the "public," and not to the public character of the world, the chapter of *Being and Time* from which this quote is drawn is nevertheless entitled "Being-in-the-world as Being-with and Being-one's-self. The 'they,'" and the "public" clearly signifies the public character of the world. As Heidegger explains in the course of this chapter, the darkening arises essentially from publicness as a structure of being-in-the-world.

What proves to be especially pertinent for Hannah Arendt's interpretation is the specific way in which Heidegger relates publicness and the darkening it engenders to the phenomenon of the world. As all readers of *Being and Time* know, for Heidegger the phenomenon of "worldhood" (*Weltlichkeit*) is by no means equated with an external cosmos with which humans interact. Worldhood for Heidegger designates the way of being of *Dasein* itself, as the necessary precondition for any possible meaningful relation to things and to other *Dasein*. The priority of worldhood as an ontological structure of human existence expresses itself in the direct interpretability of the everyday environing and common world (*alltägliche Um- und Mitwelt*), to which *Dasein* most immediately relates and on which all comprehension of singular ontic circumstances is founded. In the context of this everyday world *Dasein* never encounters objects or individuals in the abstract, but things or other *Dasein* already engaged in a complex web of meaningful relations.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger relates this priority of the world as a coherent structure existing before any encounter with isolated individuals or singular objects to the common accessibility and openness of the everyday world, characterized above all by its continuity and its permanence: it is the everyday structure of the world that, as a way of being of *Dasein*, exists for everyone at all times. This continual openness of the
everyday world constitutes an anonymous field of action, wholly indifferent to Dasein in its fundamental singularity—the field of action of the "they" (das Man)—and it is this anonymous everyday field of action that Heidegger terms the "public world" (öffentliche Welt).

According to Heidegger, tools, ordinary objects, and in a broader sense, pathways and streets, nature, and the environing world, as well as Dasein itself, existing in a web of everyday relations, may constantly be interpreted in a public light. Whereas tools and ordinary objects wear out or are overtaken by progress and streets fall into disrepair, nature and the environing world continually change while death claims human individuals. What reveals itself to be the ontological kernel of the unity and continuity of the world, however, plays a particularly important role, as we will later see, in Heidegger's interpretation of truth: the world in its public, everyday dimension, accessible to everyone at each moment, which always precedes the ontic life of each individual and continues after his or her death. This durability of the public world embodies for Heidegger the anonymity of human relations, founded on total indifference to Dasein's singularity, whose essential feature resides in its mortality. It is this durability of the public world that comes to expression for Heidegger in the temporal permanence of the "they" ("the 'they' never dies"); this permanence, as the source of the inauthentic interpretation of existence, provides Dasein, through the sheer durability of an anonymous, public mode of existence, with the possibility of dissimulating the finitude of its own mortal existence.

With the qualification of the public world in terms of permanence and durability, we encounter the theme of the temporal foundation of Dasein, which will prove particularly important to our present investigation. As we will see, Heidegger's analysis of the temporal structures of the public world in Being and Time constitutes the focus of Hannah Arendt's critical reflections concerning his interpretation of the "public" world.

In the second section of Being and Time, entitled "Dasein and Temporality," Heidegger grounds the public interpretability of the world in what he terms "public time." If in everyday existence Dasein utilizes tools or encounters other Dasein in the common, everyday world, such modes of being-in-the-world necessarily depend on the possibility of a public interpretation of time. Indeed the durability of the everyday world, open to everyone at each moment, presupposes for Heidegger the possibility
of general access to a common measurable time, Heidegger states in
*Being and Time*: "Thus when time is measured, it is made public in such a
way that it is encountered on each occasion and at any time for everyone
as 'now and now and now.'"  

Heidegger designates this measurable time, which has "for ever been
rendered public" and which can be infinitely extended, as "world time"
(*Weltzeit*). Given the domination of the public interpretation of time in
its ordinary, everyday dimension, it is by no means accidental, for Hei-
degger, that this interpretation has also determined the Western idea of
time at the theoretical level, from Aristotle to Kant and Hegel—and up
to the present.

If for Heidegger "the public obscures everything," this is because the
public world overshadows original time by means of the domination of
public time. Precisely when it interprets itself in light of the durability of
public time, *Dasein* is able to dissimulate the finitude of its own temporal
existence and thus unburden care arising from mortal being, which is "in
each case my own." This dissimulation or "looking away from finitude"
(*Wegsehen von der Endlichkeit*) is at the same time the source of the idea of
temporal infinity: by means of this refusal to confront finitude, "the for-
getful 'representation' of the 'infinity' of public time can in the first place
take hold."  

What concerns us in Heidegger's analysis is less the theme of tem-
porality per se than its relation to the interpretation of truth. And most
important in this regard is Heidegger's argument that the universal val-
didity (*Allgemeingültigkeit*) of the criteria of truth arises from the generality
of a public world that is accessible to everyone at each moment, and
consequently, from the neglect of finite time in favor of public time.

According to *Being and Time*, the criteria of truth presupposed by
the Western metaphysical tradition only serve to reinforce the everyday
domination of the public interpretation of the world and of world time.
This is the tradition stemming from the Platonic identification of ideas
with immutability and eternity and from the Aristotelian doctrine of
substance as "ousia" or permanent presence. In positing the atemporal
permanence of being, it is precisely the temporal finitude of *Dasein* that
these criteria either set aside or hold to be merely secondary. It is by
no means accidental for Heidegger if, on the basis of this domination
of the public interpretation of the world and of time, modern scientific
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theories of truth have adopted the criteria of "universality," even after they have abandoned all claims to metaphysical validity. The very fact that "objective" scientific truth is also "universal"—that is to say, uniformly accessible to everyone at all times—is for Heidegger the clearest testimony to the domination of the public interpretation of the world and of time. The laying bare of this tendency to dissimulate truth that is rooted in finitude provides the occasion for reflection on the idea of scientific theory, which concerns, above all, historical science, whose object is *Dasein* itself. In this regard, Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*:

In no science are the "universal validity" of standards and the claims to "universality" which the "they" and its common sense demand less possible as criteria of "truth" than in authentic historical inquiry.¹⁰

We set aside in this context the question, which Heidegger himself barely examines, concerning how authentic science, in the light of the finitude of *Dasein*, might be envisioned. Although granting that even such authentic science, rooted in Dasein's being-in-the-world, can never entirely extract itself from the inauthentic dimension of existence, our question concerns the direct relation designated by Heidegger between the criteria of universal validity and inauthenticity. Must this claim to truth, valid for everyone at all times, necessarily be equated with the modes of comprehension dominated by the "they," rooted in inauthentic temporal existence? It is precisely this question that we will now examine in the perspective of Hannah Arendt's thinking.

As the starting point for the second part of this analysis, let us return to the quotation from Arendt's book *Men in Dark Times* which was referred to at the beginning. Here is the entire passage in the context of which Hannah Arendt presented her paraphrase of Heidegger's sentence "The public obscures everything:"

In [Heidegger's] description of human existence, everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of "mere talk" that irresistibly arises out of the public realm, determining every aspect of everyday existence, anticipating and annihilating the sense or the nonsense of everything the future may bring. There is no escape, according to Heidegger, from the "incomprehensible triviality" of this common everyday world except by withdrawal from it into that solitude which philosophers since Parmenides and Plato have opposed to the political realm. We are here not concerned with the philosophical relevance of Heidegger's analyses (which, in my opinion, is undeniable) nor with the tradition of philosophic thought that stands behind them, but exclusively with certain
underlying experiences of the time and their conceptual description. In our context, the point is that the sarcastic, perverse-sounding statement, *Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles* ("The light of the public obscures everything"), went to the very heart of the matter and actually was no more than the most succinct summing-up of existing conditions.  

In this passage we immediately notice how Arendt adapts Heidegger's interpretation of the public world to her own ends. Whereas for Heidegger *Dasein* always exists in a public world, and the facticity of *Dasein* presupposes its rootedness at all times in an everyday public world, Arendt relates Heidegger's analyses to "certain underlying experiences of the time" rather than to human existence per se. Heidegger conceived existence in the public world and its obscuring of truth as a mode of being of *Dasein*. We will see that Arendt transforms the meaning of Heidegger's thought. But what is the purpose of this apparently insignificant modification of Heidegger's analyses? Might it lead us to the heart of a critical reinterpretation of Heidegger's philosophy?  

One might be tempted to underestimate the implications of Arendt's assertions for her own conception of the world. Arendt indeed explains that she does not wish to put forward her own judgment concerning the philosophical relevance of Heidegger's analyses, and her statement would seem to confirm rather than question Heidegger's conceptions. Does Arendt not limit the range of Heidegger's analysis to a diagnosis of the period, whereas Heidegger placed the accent on *Dasein*'s mode of being per se, beyond any determinate period? To support the correctness of this thesis, one might appeal to statements in *Being and Time* itself: according to Heidegger, even if it is impossible to completely sever one's roots in the public, everyday world, the task of *Dasein*'s authentic mode of existence is to resist the type of interpretation this world fosters, and to strive to interpret itself in the light of its finitude. Moreover, the domination of the public world is variable in its intensity, as Heidegger indicates in *Being and Time* when he writes that "the extent to which its [the 'they's'] dominion becomes compelling and explicit may change in the course of history." Nonetheless, the domination of the "they" and the darkening of truth that proceeds from this domination belong to the original constitution of *Dasein* as such, independent of any consideration of its historical context. Yet here, too, Arendt would seem to agree when in the preface to *Men in Dark Times* she asserts that "dark times" hardly represent anything truly new or specifically modern.
One could not justifiably try to determine Hannah Arendt’s fundamental position in regard to Heidegger on the basis of these isolated remarks, as suggestive as they may be. More decisive for her critique of Heidegger is the distance between them that reveals itself in their respective concepts of the philosophical “tradition.” Whereas Heidegger defines this tradition essentially in terms of the tacit question of the finitude of *Dasein*, from Arendt’s very different perspective the theme of the public world provides the touchstone for understanding this tradition from the time that Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle took positions on this topic. For this reason we will examine the critique of Heidegger that Arendt advances in light of the philosophical tradition that she herself designates as her fundamental target.

Like Heidegger, Arendt attempts to place the modern scientific tradition in question in relation to what she takes to be the domination of a specific historical form of the philosophical concept of truth. However, whereas Heidegger as we have seen defines the tradition in relation to its claim to the temporal permanence and universal validity of the criteria of truth, Arendt’s radically different interpretation of this tradition proceeds from a theme specific to her own manner of investigation: for her, the concept of truth since Plato and Aristotle gives testimony above all to the philosopher’s hostility to the polis, which has traditionally predominated in the West and has given rise to a depreciation of the political realm in comparison to pure thought.15 In her essay “Tradition and the Modern Age,” which originally appeared in German in 1957 in a work entitled Fragwürdige Traditionsbestände im politischen Denken der Gegenwart (Questionable Elements in Contemporary Political Thought), Arendt describes the allegory of the cave in Plato’s *Republic* as the starting point of this tradition:

The beginning was made when, in The Republic’s allegory of the cave, Plato described the sphere of human affairs—all that belongs to the living together of men in a common world—in terms of darkness, confusion, and deception which those aspiring to true being must turn away from and abandon if they want to discover the clear sky of eternal ideas.16

Following Plato, according to Arendt, Aristotle also accepted this depreciation of the world of human affairs when he accorded a superior role to the “bios theoretikos” in relation to the “bios politikos.”
During the years just after World War II, when Arendt began to search for the traces of this philosophical tradition in her contemporary context, she focused her investigation primarily on Heidegger. Her early examination of Heidegger's thought in this light led to a provocative article originally published in 1946 under the title "What Is Existenz Philosophy?" In this essay, Arendt articulated a sharp critique of Heidegger's tendency to separate the authentic task of philosophy from human affairs in the public world. For her, this tendency gives testimony to the subtle influence Heidegger pays to the Aristotelian tradition, above all in regard to the privilege this tradition accorded to pure philosophical contemplation. Be this as it may, Arendt later substantially moderated this critique and, in her 1954 talk entitled "Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought," as mentioned earlier, she even went to the point of representing Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world as a first step toward overcoming this tradition. Nevertheless, Arendt did not refrain in this same talk from criticizing Heidegger's thinking, above all in regard to his interpretation of the public world. In this vein she wrote:

Thus, we find the old hostility of the philosopher toward the polis in Heidegger's analyses of average everyday life in terms of das Man (the "they," or the rule of public opinion, as opposed to the "self"), in which the public realm has the function of hiding reality and preventing even the appearance of truth.

In relation to our present theme, we have emphasized that Heidegger identifies the public world primarily with an inauthentic mode of existence of Dasen, which continually serves to hide original truth. And it is precisely the unmitigated character of this interpretation that poses a problem: if politics can hardly dispense with a foundation in the everyday public world, how can one marshal support on the basis of Being and Time for a theory of the political realm that is invested with a dignity beyond mere inauthenticity? Granted that Heidegger allows for the possibility in Being and Time of an authentic human community, the ontological analysis of this authentic community is nonetheless enunciated in its distinction from a public world that would be capable of serving as an authentic ontological foundation for the political realm. And given that Heidegger's analysis of the public realm hardly accords a space for political existence or for "ontic" political activity grounded in authentic
public being-in-the-world, it can only be of minor interest for the reconsideration and revaluation of politics in the Western tradition that constitutes Arendt's primary aim. It is thus in terms of this aim that we can comprehend the implications of her interpretation of the public world.

Sharply distinguishing her interpretation from any analysis that would derive the everyday public character of the world from Dasein's quest to dissimulate its finitude, Arendt's fundamental presupposition approaches the public world from a very different perspective. In her work, the public world is above all portrayed as a symbolic, communicational space—an "interspace." That, far from arising out of the radical singularity of Dasein, finds its source in an original plurality whose essential significance can in no way be reduced to a finite ontology of human existence.

In her book *The Human Condition*, as in her collection of essays *Between Past and Future*, Arendt attempts to demonstrate that the "public" character of the world cannot be grasped on the basis of the mere mortality of isolated human existence. For her the durability of the public world does not stem from an inauthentic interpretation of Dasein in flight from its own finitude, but on the contrary designates the space itself in which human existence protects and preserves itself. In this sense the public realm designates a common world as the sphere of what Arendt terms the *situ activa*, with its different modes of work, fabrication, and action, the latter of which constitutes the authentic political domain.

From Arendt's standpoint, the durability of the public world does not originate, as for Heidegger, from a mode of existence characteristic of Dasein per se; on the contrary, as the framework of human activity, the world proves to be essentially problematic. Its continuity is precarious, given that as a public "interspace" it is subject to historical endangerment. And this historical fragility of the world does not by any means correspond to the ephemerality of mortal Dasein. For Arendt, the disappearance of the public world does not necessarily involve the disappearance of the human beings who inhabit this world. In her essay "On Humanity in Dark Times," Arendt describes the possibility of "worldlessness," to which persecuted minorities above all are subject when "the interspace we have called world ... has simply disappeared." What proves to be particularly problematic for Arendt is not the falleness of a Dasein that interprets itself in terms of the public world, but rather the threat to the
public world itself. For this reason she insists on the importance of sus-
taining the public realm through human activity.

Provided with Arendt’s characterization of the public world, we are
now able to reexamine more closely her rendition of Heidegger’s sen-
tence: “The light of the public obscures everything.” Taken exactly, this
darkening does not result, as for Heidegger, from the public dimension
of the world as such, but from the distortion of this dimension. This dark-
ening describes a historical phenomenon that is increasingly accentuated
during the modern period. As Arendt explains in her 1959 speech, “On
Humanity in Dark Times”:

The public realm has lost the power of illumination which was originally part of
its very nature. More and more people in the countries of the Western world,
which since the decline of the ancient world has regarded freedom from politics
as one of the basic freedoms, make use of this freedom and have retreated
from the world and their obligations within it. This withdrawal from the world need
not harm an individual; he may even cultivate great talents to the point of genius
and so by a detour be useful to the world again. But with each such retreat an
almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and
usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individ-
ual and his fellow men.30

Here we can appreciate the extent to which Arendt’s analysis—in spite
of the use of certain topics familiar to Heidegger—distinguishes itself
from the basic tendency of his thinking. When Arendt claims that the
darkening that overshadows the “public” dimension of the world is only
meant to characterize “certain underlying experiences of the time,” this
is less because it inheres in the temporal and historical structure of 
Dasein
per se than by virtue of its link to the historical movement of one specific
epoch: that of modernity. If the main current of the Western philosophical
tradition has devalued political action in the public realm, the mod-
ern darkening of the public world, as Arendt qualifies it, corresponds
precisely to the culmination of this tradition in its contemporary, apo-
retic situation. And Heidegger’s phrase “the public darkens everything”
may indeed prove of particular value in the diagnosis of this situation,
even if Heidegger’s philosophy itself participates in the modern process
of darkening of the public realm. Certainly, in Arendt’s opinion, Hei-
degger’s philosophy cannot be considered to be an ultimate “cause” of
this darkening.
It is with this characterization of Arendt’s interpretation of the public world that we return to our primary question: in what sense do her reflections on the public world as a framework of political action involve a specifically philosophical investigation concerning truth?

Before directly addressing this question, we should first dissipate a possible misunderstanding. If Arendt relates this philosophical investigation to the political domain, it is not only to advance a claim that philosophers have not sufficiently dealt with politics—in spite of the great number of political writings that belong to our philosophical tradition. The real difficulty concerns the traditional lack of comprehending the problematic relation between politics and the question of truth. For Arendt, because Heidegger’s thought stems from this tradition and plays an important role in its final articulation, it is hardly surprising that the consequences of this tradition for the problem of truth appear in a particularly clear light in her interpretation of the Heideggerian conception of the public world.

In our analysis of Heidegger, we have already recalled how for him the problem of truth relates to everyday existence in the public world. If the tradition of Western metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle has generally conceived of truth in terms of eternal, immutable presence, it is because this criterion of truth, for Heidegger, expresses Dasein’s everyday tendency to rely on the durability of the public world as a means of dissimulating its own finitude. And according to Heidegger, this same “turning away from finitude” comes to expression precisely where the modern sciences—especially the human historical disciplines—suppose that truth inheres in a permanent and universal standard of objectivity. Even after having abandoned the metaphysical claim to ultimate truth, it is thus this same inauthentic quest for eternity that inspires the “scientific” presupposition of the permanence of the criteria of truth.

The originality of Arendt’s reflections on the problem of truth becomes apparent in her subtle distinction between “eternity” and “immortality.” She establishes this distinction between the original ancient Greek conception of temporal perdurability of the public world and the eternity of truth presupposed by contemplative philosophy. In the first instance, Arendt refers to the essentially political signification of the ancient conception of speech and of action that, despite their “material futility, possess an enduring quality of their own because they create their own
remembrance” and prove capable therefore of attaining immortal glory.21 It is at the same time in relation to this capacity to endure that Arendt identifies the specific character of action insofar as it “engages in founding and preserving political bodies,” which in turn “creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history.”22 Conceived in these terms, the temporal significance of immortality consists less in avoiding mortality—which instead characterizes the contemplative thought of eternity—than in creating an earthly dwelling space for human beings in the establishment of a “public world.”23 In the creation of a framework for human plurality, the quest for immortality represents the supreme political activity. It aims at opening a field of action that, in spite of the precariousness and unpredictability typical of human affairs, endows itself with a perdurability capable of extending beyond the short life span of mortal beings. In this context, Arendt refers to the foundation of cohesion and of continuity in the public interspace constituted by the “products of action and speech” that she terms the “fragile web of human relationships.”24 This web overlays the tangible objects of the public world with a multiplicity of interpretations emanating from different agents. Along with these objects, the web of human relationships constitutes what Arendt terms the “reality” of this world. Far from establishing themselves in terms of fixed structures, the opening to the world depends for Arendt upon the possibility of convergence of a multiplicity of perspectives in the identification of the same objects of interest.25 This convergence is founded on what Arendt terms “common sense,” the capacity to fit “into reality as a whole our five strictly individual senses and the strictly particular data they perceive.”26 In making accessible a common public world, common sense, according to this usage, makes it possible for our opinions to pass beyond the limits of a particular viewpoint to encompass the viewpoint of others. It permits our opinions to move beyond the horizon of purely personal interests to rise to the level of an “impartial generality.”27 At the same time, with the advent of uniform, socially conditioned behavior in an increasingly standardized mass society, there is a danger that common sense might atrophy through the loss of its capacity to illuminate a plurality of heterogeneous perspectives at the heart of the public world.28

With this notion of “common sense” as an opening to the public world, we reach the precise point where Arendt engages her critique of
the traditional presuppositions concerning truth. Indeed if modern criteria of truth as scientific objectivity and universality have become problematic, it is not because, as for Heidegger, the ideal of the permanence of truth tacitly expresses *Dasein*’s continual tendency to avoid its own finitude. If these criteria have become problematic, this is on the contrary because the human sciences have proven increasingly incapable of orienting themselves, on the basis of common sense, in a public world that has become unstable. Far from equivalent to the criteria of universal validity, which for Heidegger express *Dasein*’s quest for eternal, immutable truth, the ability to judge according to the very criteria of objectivity and impartiality risks disappearing, for Arendt, along with the common sense in which they are grounded. Thus the problem becomes less one of the scientific ideal of universal truth that, like the common world, is supposed to be continually available to everyone, than the capacity to identify— notwithstanding all truth claims of the human sciences—the common aspect of the world that, in permitting us to place ourselves in the perspectives of others, is the source of the very possibility of attaining objective and impartial judgments.39

We observe here how for Arendt the political dimension of the public world does not merely represent a theoretical problem for philosophers, but evokes at its very core the original question—and that means the eminently political question—concerning truth. If Arendt continually returns to this theme in relation to the Greek polis, it is by no means due to nostalgia for antiquity, but to lay bare what she designates as the profound disparity between the traditional idea of truth and opinion—*doxa*—grounded in common sense in the framework of the public world. The fact that the criteria of impartiality and of objectivity have become problematic in the human sciences only demonstrates to what extent they have lost their original grip in public affairs. In her essay, “The Concept of History,” published in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt devotes a particularly evocative passage to the idea of an original relation in Greek antiquity between the idea of impartiality and objectivity and the public world, a relation that has to her mind become increasingly problematic in the course of modern times. She writes:

In this incessant talk the Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view. In a sheer inexhaustible flow of argu-
ments, as the Sophists presented them to the citizenry of Athens, the Greek learned to exchange his own viewpoint, his own "opinion"—the way the world appeared and opened up to him (dokē mi, "it appears to me," from which comes doxa, or "opinion")—with those of his fellow citizens. Greeks learned to understand—not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects. The speeches in which Thucydides makes articulate the standpoints and interests of the warring parties are still a living testimony to the extraordinary degree of this objectivity. . . . What has obscured the modern discussion of objectivity in the historical sciences and prevented its ever touching the fundamental issues involved seems to be the fact that none of the conditions of either Homeric impartiality or Thucydidean objectivity are present in the modern age. 25

It is at this stage of our analysis that we are able to consider the scope of Arendt’s reflection concerning the Platonic origins of our philosophical tradition. Plato was the founder of this tradition for Arendt because his hostility toward the polis led to the devaluation of doxa, which comes to expression in a plurality of publicly supported opinions, in favor of the monolithic character of an episteme held to be eternally valid and shed of all traces of the public world. During the nineteenth century, the critique of metaphysical claims to truth represented an important step toward overcoming this tradition. And it is in this perspective that Heidegger’s critique of the traditional criteria of truth and his attempt to remodel these criteria in relation to the finitude of Dasein constitute a first step for Arendt toward the overcoming of the traditional idea of absolute, metaphysical truth. And this attempt to overcome the tradition falls prey to its blindness to the implications for the problem of truth of the modern fragility of the common public world. 31 Consequently, Heidegger’s interpretation of truth is the clear sign, as Arendt writes in regard to a quote from Walter Benjamin characterizing contemporary philosophy in general, that the “consistency of truth . . . has been lost” because truth no longer possesses those qualities that it “could acquire only through universal recognition of its validity.” 32

In her essay “Tradition and the Modern Age,” Arendt notes that tradition may only reveal its full force once it seems to have been overtaken. 33 If Heidegger’s interpretation of truth is to be grasped in the perspective of this tradition, it is because—if we adhere to Arendt’s explanation—after renouncing all claims to eternal, absolute truth, he remained incapable of surmounting the traditional separation of philosophical
truth from the polis to identify truth that might be at the same time "authentic" and rooted in the public world. Here, above all, the question of truth refers to the fundamentally political problem that the public world continually raises.

Notes


5. Ibid., p. 71.

6. Ibid., p. 424. We refer to Dasein's radical singularity in accord with Heidegger's own statements in Being and Time: "When it [Dasein] stands before itself in this way [before the possibility of its own death], all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone" (p. 250); "The non-relational character of death ... singularizes (évanouît) Dasein unto itself" (p. 283).

7. Ibid., p. 424.

8. Ibid., p. 417.

9. Ibid., p. 424.


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20. Ibid., p. 12.


22. Ibid., pp. 8–9.

23. Ibid., pp. 17–21, 55–56.

24. Ibid., pp. 95, 175–247.

25. Ibid., pp. 57–58, 207–212.


28. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in Between Past and Future, pp. 178–179; "The Crisis in Culture," in Between Past and Future, pp. 229–221. If this atrophy of common sense is by no means the result of a simple failure of philosophy, it nevertheless first came to expression in philosophical theories that are, for Arendt, symptomatic of what she terms the "alienation from the world." This alienation characterizes for her the relation of modern man to a world shared in common and emerges for the first time in theoretical form in Descartes' willingness to entertain the possibility of noncorrespondence between the representations of thought and real objects. Hobbes then pushed this problem to its radical extreme. Reason for Descartes, as for Hobbes, is a "calculation of consequences." This is for Arendt symptomatic of the loss of confidence in the sense thanks to which "the five animal senses are fitted into a world common to all men," underlying the conclusion that "human beings are indeed no more than animals who are able to reason, to reckon with consequences." See in this regard Arendt, The Human Condition, pp. 273–284. Deepening still further this "alienation from the world" marked by the modern hiatus between consciousness and world, the initial stability of Platonic ideas degenerates into the instability of values that are simply relative, "whose validity is determined not by one or many men but by society as a whole in its everchanging functional needs" (see Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," p. 49).
29. Later, in her last, uncompleted work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt notes Heidegger's reference to the term "meaning" (Sinn) in evoking the meaning of "sense" of being. Heidegger becomes entangled here for Arendt in the metaphysical fallacy par excellence, because he fails to distinguish between "truth" and Sinn or "meaning," which might also be translated as "sense" in this passage; see Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest/Harcourt Brace, 1971), p. 15. Given that the theme of politics does not occupy a central role in Arendt's examination of truth in this work, it would reach beyond the scope of the present essay to discuss it in this later context.


31. See in this regard Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics" (1954), *Social Research* vol. 57, no. 1 (1990), pp. 73–105. Later Arendt attempted to clarify this notion of truth in relation to politics in the essay "Truth and Politics," published in 1967. In this essay she further qualifies her idea of truth by introducing Leibniz's distinction between truths of reason, which are necessary and supposedly eternal, and factual truths, which are historical and contingent. Arendt explains that both types of truth are necessarily distinct from politics because, insofar as they require assent, they are unlike the simple opinions that animate political discussion. In its status as "truth," factual truth is not required, any more than is rational truth, to present itself as a matter of opinion or an object of political persuasion. Nonetheless, in spite of this radical distinction between truth and politics, the opinion that nourishes politics cannot remain indifferent to truth, above all to factual truth. Arendt specifies that precisely the respect for factual truth distinguishes the good opinion, capable of a measure of impartiality, from a bad opinion, which distorts the facts to the point of propagating manipulative lies. Although truth in this sense plays a fundamental role in regard to political judgment, the emergence of calculated lies and the fabrication of images by the mass media as a means of controlling mass society represents a particularly grave political danger. It is the danger of a loss of stability endowed by factual truth as a coherent network of interrelations. This loss endangers above all "the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world" "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*, p. 257).
