GERMAN SOKRATES:
HEIDEGGER, ARENDT, STRAUSS

Rodrigo Chacón
New School for Social Research
Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION
The Problem of a ‘Political Philosophy’ Or Why Neo-Socratism?

I. Why ‘Arendt and Strauss’?
II. Reading Strauss and Arendt: ‘The Philosopher’ versus ‘The Citizen’?
III. The (Non-) Foundation of ‘Political Philosophy’ by Socrates and His Contemporaries

CHAPTER ONE
The Young Heidegger’s ‘Political Philosophy’

I. “Wie Du anfiengst, wirst du bleiben?”: Heidegger’s Turn From Theology to Philosophy to ‘Political Philosophy’ (1911-1922)
   From theo-logy to ‘logic’ (1909-1915); From ‘theo-logics’ to ‘history and life’ (1916-1922)
II. Who is the True Philosophos? Heidegger’s Reading of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Alpha, 1-2 (1922)
   Metaphysics, Alpha, 1-2; The practicality of theory; The divinity of theory; The (im)possibility of ethics
III. Who is the True Politikos? Heidegger’s Reading of Aristotle’s Politics and Rhetoric (1924)
   The true philosophos is the philo-logos: philosophy as philology; Being More or Less Political: Politics, Book I: ‘To see is to listen’: Rhetoric, I.11; The limits of philo-logy: ‘the philosophers are the real Sophists’
IV. Heidegger’s Two Conceptions of ‘Political Philosophy’
   ‘Political philosophy’ I; ‘Political philosophy’ II

CHAPTER TWO
Descending the Magic Mountain to Begin a Socratic Ascent: Leo Strauss in Weimar

I. “Ethos anthropoi daimon?”: Strauss’s Becoming Strauss (1899-1933)
II. Political Science, Political Liberalism and Political Theology in the Dwindling Days of Weimar (1928-1933)
III. Götterdämmerung: the Davos disputation between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer (1929)
IV. Descending From Davos—What Did Leo Strauss Do? (1929-1931)
   Farewell to Zionism: Strauss’s polemic with Freud; The search for a Socratic ground beyond belief and unbelief: Strauss’s (exoteric) polemic with Mannheim and initial (esoteric) engagement with Heidegger
CHAPTER THREE
Hannah Arendt in Weimar: Beyond the Theological-Political Predicament?

I. Arendt’s Weimar Or How to do philosophy and theology as a German-Jewish Woman
   Philosophy and theology—“for me they belonged together”; To be in the world ‘as if not’? Situating Arendt’s theological-political problem

II. The German way to political theology: German Idealism, Liberal Theology, Dialectical Theology
   German Idealism as prelude to political theology; Liberal (political) theology; Dialectical Theology between political and un-political theology

III. Arendt’s early writings: from theology and philosophy to political philosophy
   Love and Saint Augustine; ‘Love and Saint Augustine’ as a Theological-Political Problem or The Dialogue with Dialectical Theology; ‘Love and Saint Augustine’ as a Philosophical Problem or The Dialogue with Heidegger

CHAPTER FOUR
Strauss’s Turn to Political Philosophy (1931-1936)

I. Maimonides in Weimar And His Critique of Heidegger: Strauss’s “Cohen and Maimonides” (1931)


III. Strauss’s Second Sailing (1935/36)

CHAPTER FIVE
Arendt’s Turn to Political Philosophy (1950-1958)
INTRODUCTION

The Problem of a ‘Political Philosophy’ Or Why Neo-Socratism?

[M]ir scheint die moderne Philosophie, zu ihrem Ende gebracht, an den Punkt zu führen, an dem Sokrates beginnt.

Leo Strauss to Gerhard Krüger

[A]ll problems of political philosophy begin where traditional philosophy, with its concept of man in the singular, stops.

Hannah Arendt

Among the ‘What is?’ questions of our philosophical tradition, the question ‘What is political philosophy?’ occupies a peculiar place. Questions of the type, ‘What is virtue?’, ‘What is courage?’ or ‘What is justice?’, that is, of various moral matters, were reputedly first raised by Socrates, who on that account is said to have been the first political philosopher. Yet Socrates did not raise the question, ‘What is political philosophy?’, and there is no record of him ever using the term.

Strange enough (or perhaps naturally so), the question ‘What is political philosophy?’ only began to induce Socratic perplexity in a century in which the most authoritative philosophers became anti-Socratics (such as Nietzsche) or pre-Socratics.

---

1 (‘[M]odern philosophy, brought to its end, appears to me to lead to the point where Socrates begins.’) December 12, 1932. In Leo Strauss, Gesammelte Schriften, Band 3: Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und Zugehörige Schriften – Briefe (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 2001), 415. (Hereafter, GS.)


3 See Cicero, Tusculanae Disputationes, V, 4, 10: “Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and to place it in cities, and even to introduce it into homes and compel it to enquire about life and standards and good and ill.” For an alternative account of the history of moral philosophy as beginning not with Socrates but with Pythagoras, compare J.B. Schneewind, The Invention of Autonomy, Epilogue: “Pythagoras, Socrates, and Kant: Understanding the History of Moral Philosophy” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4 As Heinrich Meier points out, “[t]he concept does not occur in Plato’s and Xenophon’s writings. In Aristotle, we find philosophia politike just once in Politics III, 12, 1282b23.” Leo Strauss and the Theological-political Problem (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), vii.
Rodrigo Chacón, *German Sokrates*

(such as Heidegger); or when moral matters concerning good and evil were revealed as prejudices and questions of the type, ‘What is virtue?’ were replaced by such questions as ‘What is Being?’ and ‘What is a Thing?’

When we nowadays talk of ‘political philosophy’ we take it to be a thing that requires little or no explanation. Yet on closer inspection its meaning proves to be as elusive and manifold as the meaning of ‘Being’.

Indeed, when we speak of ‘political philosophy’, the adjective ‘political’ may denote the *subject matter* of philosophy as in ‘philosophy of law’ or ‘philosophy of education’. It may also refer to a way of *treating* philosophy (namely, *politically*), that is, of being partisan for philosophy as a way of life. Or it may simply be *a pleonasm* as one could say that speaking of the ‘philosophy of life’ is like referring to the ‘botany of plants’, if the subject matter of philosophy is human life and human life is political life.

We confront similar problems when we try to explicate ‘political *philosophy’ focusing on the noun. For if philosophy is a contemplative activity, then it can hardly be partisan for anything (just as ‘philosophical party-member’ would seem to be an oxymoron). If it is a quest for knowledge, and knowledge is of things that can be known, and things that can be known cannot be other than they are, then its subject matter can hardly be *political*, since what is political or what pertains to the life of a political community can always be other than it is. And if it is a quest for knowledge of ‘all things’, then its focus on the human (political) things would be as ungrounded and partial as a philosophy of equine things would be for horses if they could philosophize. If, on the other hand, ‘political philosophy’ is a practical activity, then the question arises as to what makes it philosophical. Is it its movement from a concern with ‘all things’ to the

---

At the beginning of our philosophical tradition, the paradoxical character of political philosophy as a praxis lacking a concept was embodied in the figure of Socrates. Socrates spent his whole mature life reflecting on the political things and on the relation between the philosophical and the political lives without ever calling what he did political philosophy. The same can be said about Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss. Like Socrates, they believed that the one thing needful for our time is a philosophy of the human things or of the human condition, and like Socrates they devoted their mature lives to reflecting on the problematic relation between philosophy and politics. Like her Athenian predecessor, Arendt did not call what she did political philosophy. As for Strauss, he made ‘political philosophy’ the object of a Socratic quest which, just as Socratically, yielded no final answer. In spite of this, both became, willingly or not, founders of two of the most powerful schools of contemporary ‘political philosophy’.

This chapter begins to lay the basis for reading Arendt and Strauss as Neo-Socratics. Specifically, it suggests a fourfold determination of Neo-Socratism. This determination implies, first, a philosophical turn to the study of the human things or the political things. Second, an act of founding or re-founding since one can only speak of Socratic ‘political philosophy’ by interpreting a practice for which no such concept existed. Third, a critique of the tradition of western thought or of any previous understanding of the meaning of political philosophy (insofar as it inherits a concept without clarifying the experience behind it). And fourth, an at least partial acceptance of a
philosophical view (best represented by Heidegger) that rejects the use of ‘constructive’ concepts or generally of thinking that does not arise from experience or that corresponds to experiences that have somehow been lost.

The argument of the chapter is divided in three sections. The first section provides an overview of the lives of Arendt and Strauss and of the way their thought is commonly understood. Beginning with the common opinion that they belonged to different worlds and partly justifying that opinion, it nevertheless begins to show that the way they started as students of Heidegger as well as their fates as determined by the history of the 20th century gave rise to fundamental coincidences—most importantly, to their protracted engagement with the question of the necessity and possibility of a political philosophy.

The second section provides a closer look at how Arendt and Strauss have been read by turning to some of the recent attempts to commence a dialogue between them. In this section I show how these attempts have over time approximated what I take to be the truth about both the relation between Arendt and Strauss and the core of their thinking. I thus show how the latest Socratic reading of Arendt and Strauss by Dana Villa improves on earlier attempts to understand their relation, notably by Ronald Beiner, as thinkers belonging to opposite Platonic (Strauss) and Socratic (Arendt) traditions. Further noting how German scholar Harald Bluhm complements (and partially corrects) Villa’s analysis by tracing the origins of their understanding of philosophy as an activity of radical questioning to Heidegger, I conclude the section by suggesting that even this reading fails to fully grasp the implications of accepting the Heideggerian critique of the tradition of philosophy. As I shall argue, accepting that critique, as Arendt and Strauss both do, means to ultimately reject any form of Aristotelianism (and hence any reading of Arendt
as recovering Aristotle, such as Villa’s) and any form of Platonism (and hence any reading of Strauss as ultimately a Platonist, such as Bluhm’s). Instead, accepting Heidegger’s critique of the tradition, however partially, means for Arendt and Strauss returning to its Socratic origins.

The third section provides an account of what it means to speak of a tradition of ‘political philosophy’ and of a problematic relation between philosophical theory and political praxis. By specifying the traditional origins of our philosophical and political vocabularies, which, I shall argue, still determine how Arendt and Strauss are read, I seek to begin to explain why a critique of the tradition as attempted by Heidegger is necessary and why, if consistently followed as Strauss and Arendt suggest, it necessarily leads to Socrates and to ‘political philosophy’.

I. Why ‘Arendt and Strauss?’

Who were ‘Arendt and Strauss’? Thus far I have referred to these authors as one refers to ‘Plato and Aristotle’ or ‘Marx and Lenin’—thinkers, who despite their differences, shared a common view of the world and of man’s place in it, and which thus are naturally discussed together. In fact, however, it rarely occurs to anyone—and especially to so-called Arendtians and Straussians—to even be seriously interested in the work of both, as if their assumptions and aims were fundamentally antithetical. There are, however, some notable exceptions to this rule as we shall see—not the least, Arendt herself seems to

6 The most extensive ‘Straussian’ interpretation and critique of Arendt is Thomas L. Pangle’s, in *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), ch. 6, 48–61. The
have taken Strauss’s work seriously\footnote{7}—and there have also been recent attempts to
commence a dialogue between both thinkers.\footnote{8} In order to frame our discussion of these
title of the chapter summarizes the argument: “The Philosophic Roots, in Arendt and Heidegger, of the
Contemporary Longings for, and the Misconceptions of, Classical Republicanism.” Along the same lines
see also the implicit critique of Arendt in Thomas L. Pangle and Nathan Tarcov, “Epilogue: Leo Strauss
and the History of Political Philosophy,” in \textit{Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey} (eds.), \textit{History of Political
Philosophy}, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 928. For reviews of Arendt’s work (or of
works on Arendt) by Strauss scholars, see Werner Dannhauser, “Hannah Arendt and the Jews,”
\textit{Commentary} 67 (1979). For a very favorable appraisal of Arendt by Irving Kristol (an intellectual
commonly associated with Straussianism—at least in his later years) see his “The American Revolution as
a Successful Revolution,” in American Enterprise Institute (ed.), \textit{America’s Continuing Revolution} (Garden
City, N.J: Doubleday Anchor Books), 1976. Further favorable critiques of Arendt by Strauss scholars
include, Joseph Cropsey, Review of \textit{The Human Condition, Social Research}, 26:1/4 (1959); Steven B.
1985, 362-364. William A. Galston, Review of Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, \textit{The Journal of
\footnote{7} Even though Arendt disliked Strauss, she had a very high opinion of him as a scholar.
Responding to Karl Jaspers’ query in 1954 concerning “Leo Strauss…an orthodox Jew of strong rational
powers?”, Arendt responds: “Leo Strauss is professor of political philosophy in Chicago, highly respected.
Wrote a good book about Hobbes (as well as one about Spinoza). Now another about natural law. He is a
convinced orthodox atheist. Very odd. A truly gifted intellect. I don’t like him.” Several years later, in
1963, the year she joined the University of Chicago where Strauss had been named (in 1960) Distinguished
Professor of Political Science, and in the midst of what Arendt called the “Eichmann affair” (the heated
controversy generated by her report of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem), she writes to Jaspers from
Chicago: ‘The Eichmann affair continues on its merry way… I spoke on the campus here, with very good
success… The only person here on campus who is agitating against me is Leo Strauss, and he would have
1992), 241, 244, 535. Arendt had good reasons to believe that Strauss would have agitated ‘in any case’.
In 1956, after returning from Chicago where she delivered the lectures that would result in \textit{The Human
Condition}, she reports to Kurt Blumenfeld that even though, “people were at first quite perplexed
(\textit{verblüfft}) about a new ‘approach’ [one must bear in mind that Strauss himself in 1949 and Eric Voegelin
in 1951 had given their own programmatic Walgreen Lectures presenting their approach to political
philosophizing], they then became after all quite satisfied.” Again, however, it was Leo Strauss who had
reacted critically to her ‘approach’ (“\textit{Inzwischen bin ich aus Chicago (wo mich Leo Strauss schönstens
geschnitten hat) wieder zurück…”)). Yet again, Arendt shows her appreciation of Strauss’s scholarship.
In 1956 she writes: “He is very useful in this land, whatever one may otherwise think about him. He has
learned something and teaches the youth to read. That then some of them come to the ‘insight’ that one can
find everything, but then really everything, in Aristotle, that is not exactly a catastrophe that the world
will not survive. Most human beings have by far more absurd views.” See Ingeborg Nordmann and Iris Pilling
(eds.), \textit{Hannah Arendt, Kurt Blumenfeld}, “\textit{In Keinem Besitz Verwurzelt}” (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1995), 141,
149-50. Most importantly, Arendt regularly assigned Strauss’s works in her courses, and considered his
work, together with that of Voegelin and Alexandre Kojève, as among the only existing attempts to do
political philosophy. In a course she taught at the New School in 1969, under the title, “Philosophy and
Politics: What is Political Philosophy?” she thus suggests that “So far as political philosophy still exists it
is being taught by traditionalists—Voegelin, a Platonist, Strauss, an Aristotelian, and Kojève, a Hegelian.
Each of them believes that tradition is valid…and that the main problems are being solved” (24420).
\texttt{http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mharendt_pub&fileName=04/040460/040460page.db&recNum=5&tempFile=/temp/~ammem_4Sm9&filecode=mharendt&next_filecode=mharendt&prev_filecode=mharendt&itemnum=2&ndocs=81}.
attempts a few words should be said to explain the reasons for which one rarely speaks about ‘Arendt and Strauss’.

What may first come to mind when these thinkers are mentioned is that their aims were exactly opposite. The aim of Arendt’s work as a whole may be said to be the rehabilitation of the active political life, the *vita activa*, both from the neglect it has been subjected to by a philosophical tradition that has typically seen the contemplative life as the highest, or indeed as the only life truly worth living, and from the modern privatization of life—the modern turning inward or subjectivization—which also results in a blindness to the inherent dignity of the life of action. Without such a rehabilitation, without the life of action, which is the *sine qua non* for the constitution of a world as a common world, Arendt would argue, the right to have rights, that is, the right to live in a world that could become our home could never be made a reality. Strauss’s aim, by contrast, can be said to be the rehabilitation of philosophical contemplation as the highest life and indeed as the essential means—paradoxical as this may sound—to keep the political life in motion. That is, his aim, one could argue, was to affirm the freedom of the mind to raise the one question that matters—the question concerning the right life, or the question, How should I live?—not only by defending the life of free insight from the subjection to any authority—be it the authority of religion or of ‘science’ or of any tradition, including the philosophical tradition, or finally of any moral and political order—but by *proving* the superiority of such a life. In short, the first impression that

---

Arendt stood predominantly for ‘the citizen’ (and largely against ‘the philosopher’),
while Strauss stood predominantly for ‘the philosopher’ (and rarely praised the life of the citizen *per se*) would appear to be justified.

Further differences become apparent when one considers some basic facts about their lives. Strauss (1899-1973) grew up in the small rural town of Kirchhain, Hessen in what he characterized as a “conservative, even orthodox Jewish home,” and seems to have been affected his whole life by the necessity of becoming an atheist in order to become a philosopher. Arendt (1906-1975), by contrast, grew up in cosmopolitan Königsberg, in a non-religious family of German-Jewish progressives. Strauss took an early interest in religion and politics; specifically, in political Zionism and in the dialogues of Plato. Arendt took an early interest in German philosophy—in the philosophy of Kant. In his youth Strauss became an anti-revolutionary conservative, and according to Hans Jonas’ memoirs, an early supporter of Mussolini. Arendt was the daughter of a fervent admirer of Rosa Luxembourg and would later become engaged to a participant in the Spartacist uprising of 1919 (Heinrich Blücher). Both Arendt and Strauss were driven into politics, we may say, by a combination of world-history and their Jewish origins, yet their valorization of the political life (at least in their later years) was altogether different. Strauss, who was politically active in his youth, came to see political

---

life as but a potentially tyrannical expression of self-love.\textsuperscript{15} Arendt, on the opposite extreme, who was uninterested in politics at first—very much like other intellectuals she would then criticize\textsuperscript{16}—vowed, in the early 1930s, “never again [to] get involved in any kind of intellectual business”\textsuperscript{17} and became politically active for twenty years, expressing soon thereafter, in 1958, that an inactive life that was not engaged with the ‘public things’, was as good as “dead to the world.”\textsuperscript{18}

Not coincidentally, the work of Strauss and Arendt found resonance in rather different intellectual circles as they emigrated to the United States (respectively in 1938 and 1941). Arendt’s work, on the one hand, found an early audience among a circle of highly influential Berkeley political theorists including Norman Jacobson, John Schaar, Sheldon Wolin, and Hannah Pitkin. These theorists read Arendt as engaged in their own quest to rescue “the political” first from behaviorism and later from the “unpolitical” political theories of, for instance, Michael Oakeshott or John Rawls—theories which, they argued, either view politics with hostility or see it as merely instrumental (i.e., as a means for attaining order and stability), and which thus fail to value and to understand politics as an end in itself, or, that is, as the creative potentiality of an egalitarian demos.\textsuperscript{19} Strauss, on the other hand, became the founder of a school of thought whose most influential representatives (at least as far as cultural questions are concerned) have


\textsuperscript{17} “Conversation with Günter Gaus,” 11. “I lived in an intellectual milieu, but I also knew other people. And among intellectuals \textit{Gleichschaltung} was the rule, so to speak. But not among others. And I never forgot that…” (Ibid.)


been anti-egalitarian conservatives (among them, Allan Bloom, Harry Jaffa, Werner Dannhauser, and Thomas Pangle). 20

These clear differences in the basic motivation behind their most famous works which respectively praise the active and the philosophical lives; in what we may call their fundamental political dispositions; and in their following in America, have quite naturally made the mention of ‘Arendt and Strauss’ unusual.

And yet all of these differences are part of a broader context of equally striking coincidences. Arendt and Strauss both belonged to the same generation which had, as it were, one foot in the “lost world” of the relatively peaceful and hopeful nineteenth century. They were both part of the same intellectual milieu, first around Martin Heidegger and his circle of students at the universities of Freiburg and Marburg and later among the Zionist youth in Berlin, where they had common acquaintances such as Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin. Their way of thinking was shaped and would later develop in dialogue (with some extending their whole mature lives) with members of the same philosophical community (to which belonged Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, as well as their students, Günther Stern, Jacob Klein, Gerhard Krüger, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, among others). They were both émigrés who became American citizens, and they both became professors of political philosophy at the New School for Social Research and at the University of Chicago.

20 Yet it would be a mistake to characterize all ‘Straussians’ as conservatives. As Steven Smith points out, “Even recently, a distinguished student of Strauss [William Galston] served as a prominent member of the first Clinton administration.” Also, it must be mentioned that there were among Strauss’s students some, most notably Seth Benardete and Stanley Rosen, who became among the most highly respected classicists and philosophers of our time, whose work does not directly address political questions. (Strauss may have thought of Benardete, above all, as his best student. With no other student did Strauss sustain a continued and extensive exchange. See Heinrich Meier’s introduction to GS 3, XXXIV, XXXV.) On the relation of Straussianism to political conservatism, see Steven Smith, Reading Leo Strauss (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3-4.
Even though they seem to have known each other personally from their Berlin years, and even though they also coincided at the University of Chicago (Arendt taught at Chicago from 1963 to 1967; Strauss from 1949 to 1968), Arendt and Strauss were not on friendly terms with each other and they did not discuss each other’s views, at least not openly. Yet one could say that if there should have been an obvious dialogue between the students of Heidegger mentioned above, that dialogue would have taken place between Arendt and Strauss. The reason is that none of those thinkers came to believe, as did they, that the crisis of modernity is essentially a political crisis, which as such needs to be addressed by a form of thinking that is not moral, or scientific, or religious, or philosophic, but likewise distinctively political (or, more exactly, political-philosophical). Consequently too, though many were masterful readers of the philosophic and religious traditions, none of the thinkers in the community of thought around Heidegger to which Strauss and Arendt belonged devoted their efforts to a critical reading of the tradition of political thought for the sake of rethinking, and if possible, reviving political philosophy. In short, we can say that while the ramifications of the thought of Arendt and Strauss are widely different, it grows from a common experiential and philosophical soil. Or to put it in rather crude but telling terms: Arendt did not assign Wolin, or Pitkin, or Jacobson in her courses, but (among others) Strauss and Werner Jaeger and Eric Voegelin. Strauss, for his part, does not draw on the insights of any of his American followers in his work, but he does build and expand on the work of Jacob Klein, Gerhard Krüger, and Hans-

---

21 According to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl: “Strauss…met with Arendt at the Prussian State Library and made an effort to court her. When she criticized his conservative political views and dismissed his suit, he became bitterly angry. The bitterness lasted for decades, growing worse when the two joined the same American faculty at the University of Chicago in the 1960s. Strauss was haunted by the rather cruel way in which Hannah Arendt had judged his assessment of National Socialism: she had pointed out the irony of the fact that a political party advocating views Strauss appreciated could have no place for a Jew like him.” For Love of the World, 98.
Georg Gadamer. Above all, if their work as a whole is marked by an unnamed presence, it is the presence of Martin Heidegger.

II. Reading Strauss and Arendt: ‘The Philosopher’ versus ‘The Citizen’?

Perhaps the most common understanding of the political philosophizing of Arendt and Strauss is that they stood for opposite traditions. According to this view, Leo Strauss represents the tradition from Plato to Pascal according to which, in Ronald Beiner’s words, “what makes the philosopher a political philosopher…is first and foremost the concern for his own survival.” Hannah Arendt, to the contrary, “represents but the latest expression of […] [that other tradition] running from Machiavelli to Heidegger,” which “celebrates ancient practice at the same time that it denigrates ancient theory” (239). Thus Beiner argues that “on the decisive question” of philosophy and politics “Arendt assumes a position […] that is as radically antithetical to Strauss’s as any can be” (247). From this perspective Strauss is said to be fundamentally a Platonist, while Arendt is said to be at bottom a Kantian (at least, as concerns the question of the relation between philosophy and politics). In particular, Strauss is said to stand for the view that there is “an automatic correlation between intellectual gifts and natural entitlement to rule” (246), or that “philosophers […] possess an intrinsic claim to political knowledge that surpasses that of artists, novelists, lawyers, diplomats, and even professional politicians” (245). In sharp contrast, Arendt is read as a Kantian who saw Kant’s “fundamental achievement” in his

---

redefinition of our understanding of philosophy “such that the community of philosophers and the community of ordinary citizens were no longer fundamentally at odds with each other” (248), and who thus understood that there is “a reason for concerning oneself as a philosopher with politics that [is] not chiefly dictated by the preoccupation with brute self-preservation” (248).

In short, according to this understanding, ‘political philosophy’ for Strauss means the ‘politics of philosophy’, or the political defense of philosophy on the part of a philosophical class of citizens that claims for itself a right to rule on the basis of an alleged superior knowledge of political things. Arendt’s turn to ‘political philosophy’, by contrast, is understood to be grounded on the fact that the mode of being of philosophy is political, that is to say, that the conditions of thinking lie in the human (political) condition of plurality (or, in Kant’s terms, in the public use of reason). Philosophy must thus be ‘political’ in order to establish the conditions of both truthful living together and truthful thinking (or philosophizing).

German political theorist, Harald Bluhm, provides an alternative understanding of the two traditions Strauss and Arendt are said to represent.23 Bluhm, like Beiner, reads Strauss as a Platonist, while Arendt, he claims, attempted to develop a fundamentally new way of thinking about political life drawing on the model of Socrates (916). These contrasting approaches, Bluhm argues, are an expression of their different understandings of the origins of the tradition of political philosophy in Socratic-Platonic thought. For Arendt, the consequence that Plato drew from Socrates’ trial represents the end of genuine political thinking given Plato’s decision to (un-Socratically) turn away from the

realm of opinion to the contemplation of the truth and thus to replace Socrates’ public questioning with a private thinking that is completely separated from political experience (924). Strauss, by contrast, Bluhm tells us, saw Plato’s reaction as the beginning, or we may say as the condition for the possibility, of political philosophy, for what Plato did was to combine the power-political way of Thrasydamus with the intransigent philosophical questioning of Socrates (924). 24 ‘Political philosophy’ thus becomes a way of protecting philosophy from politics (precisely as a reaction to the fate of Socrates): again, a form of ‘philosophical politics’. Given what Strauss considers to be the essentially precarious situation of philosophy (as expressed most dramatically by Socrates’ trial), political philosophy is from this perspective a form of esoteric wisdom that protects itself through a public or exoteric teaching exalting the civic-friendliness of

---

24 This understanding of Plato dates back to the founder of philosophy in Islam, Alfarabi (c. 870-950), who reproached Socrates for having addressed the people in a way that is only suitable to the elite, thus precipitating his condemnation. Socrates’ way of philosophical questioning must therefore be complemented by the suitable use of political rhetoric as practiced by Thrasydamus of Chalcedon (c. 459-400 BC) whose art has been immortalized in Plato’s Republic. Both together produce the Platonic art of writing. See Alfarabi, Philosophy of Plato 10, paragraph 36, in Mushin Mahdi (ed.), Alfarabi’s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (NY: Glencoe, 1962), 66-67. For the relation between Socrates and Thrasydamus in Plato’s Republic, see Catherine Zuckert, “Why Socrates and Thrasydamus Become Friends,” Conference Papers. American Political Science Association (2006). The idea that philosophy is essentially a form of legislation for which Plato’s art constitutes the original model is held among the moderns most notably by Nietzsche. “Plato has given us a splendid description of how the philosophical thinker must within every existing society count as the paragon of all wickedness: for as a critic of all customs he is the antithesis of the moral man, and if he does not succeed in becoming a lawgiver for new customs he remains in the memory of men as ‘the evil principle’.” Nietzsche goes on to argue that it is therefore no wonder that Plato “intended to do for all the Greeks what Mohammed later did for his Arabs: to determine customs in things great and small and especially to regulate everyone’s day-to-day mode of life…A couple of accidents more and a couple of other accidents fewer—and the world would have seen the Platonisation of the European south.” Daybreak, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), book V, 496. For a reading of Strauss as a Platonic-Farabian-Nietzschean political philosopher along these lines see Laurence Lampert, Leo Strauss and Nietzsche (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially 146-147. For a general historical-philosophical treatment of the relation between philosophy and legislation see Rémi Brague, The Law of God. The Philosophical History of an Idea (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
philosophers, while at the same time covertly or esoterically attempting to replace accepted opinions by an approximation to the truth.25

Noting some of the fundamental agreements between Arendt and Strauss, Bluhm further argues that they were both primarily concerned with making normative political thinking possible again after the crisis of the western tradition that culminated in totalitarianism. Yet while Strauss’s quest was for “the simply good order, for a qualitative standard with reference to which all concrete political orders could be measured” (916), Arendt, by contrast, was above all concerned with thinking the conditions for the possibility of political action. Strauss’s quest for “the simply good order” becomes manifest in his reading of Plato’s parable of the cave. According to Strauss, Plato’s cave is the image of the city, and as such—insofar as philosophy is a dialectical ascent from ordinary opinions to knowledge of the truth—it constitutes a positive model for political philosophizing and for the quest for the best political order. Arendt, by contrast, saw Plato’s cave simile as a fateful distortion of the image of the ‘true’ city, that is, for her, of the pre-philosophic city or the ‘Homeric agora’ which embodied the preconditions for the practice of isonomy (viz., rule by plurality, the absence of war, and an agonistic culture of self-display and the quest for immortality) (923). In this way, we can say, Bluhm again underscores the ‘two traditions view’ according to which Strauss glorified ancient theory against ancient practice, while Arendt did the opposite.

Even though he does not develop this point at length, Bluhm also draws attention to what I will argue is the most important commonality between Arendt and Strauss, namely the influence that Heidegger exerted upon their thinking. As Bluhm notes, this is

25 See Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 16-17.
manifested in their understanding of philosophy as an anti-systemic and anti-traditional activity of radical questioning that is also coessential to the human condition. In this way, Bluhm adds to the debate on the relation between Arendt and Strauss a new element that elucidates the meaning of *philosophy* in ‘political philosophy’. As we have seen, political philosophy is said to be *political* for Strauss because of its treatment of philosophy (viz., its defense of the way of life of philosophers), while Arendt is said to have understood the political aspect of philosophy as residing in its mode of being (viz., in the fact that the conditions of philosophical thought are given by the political condition of plurality).

What Bluhm now suggests is that political philosophy for Strauss and Arendt is political *philosophizing*, and in that sense a practical activity or even perhaps a way of life.

Nevertheless, Bluhm does not further consider how this understanding of philosophizing could undermine the view that Arendt and Strauss stood for opposite (Platonic versus Socratic) traditions. (For, simply put, if Strauss was a Heideggerian at least in the sense that he saw philosophizing as essentially a form of radical questioning yielding no final answers, he cannot at the same time be said to have been a Platonist in the sense of someone who believes in the possibility of finding ‘*the* simply good order’.)

Dana Villa reads both Strauss and Arendt as Socratics in key respects. Thus, we could say, he overcomes the limitation of Bluhm’s reading to which we have just referred. In “The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates,” Villa argues that there is a “curious intersection in the political theories of Arendt and Strauss” in that “[b]oth point to the possibility of a philosophical or Socratic form of citizenship…that undercuts the dichotomy of philosophy versus politics which otherwise

---

structures so much of their work” (157). Rather than seeing their thought as mutually exclusive, Villa argues, Arendt and Strauss should be read as providing a model for “alienated (or philosophical) citizenship” that, in contrast to the dominant “broadly contextualist or hermeneutic view of political theory” “where John Rawls turns out to be just as historicist as Michael Walzer or Richard Rorty,” would have “the extraordinary capacity to take us out of the ‘cave’ of liberal democracy” by confronting us “with the question—the Socratic question—of what is the political?,” thus persistently reminding us “of the finitude of our horizon” (176-79).

Villa begins by highlighting the main difference between both thinkers with respect to the question of philosophy and politics. Implicitly correcting Beiner, Villa notes that “Strauss emphasizes the fact of [the conflict between philosophy and politics] no less than Arendt, seeing it as rooted in man’s fundamentally divided nature as a thinking and acting being.” “However,” he continues agreeing yet again with Beiner and Bluhm, “in direct opposition to her, he turns to political theory, not to save politics from philosophical distortion, but to preserve the possibility of a philosophical politics” (156).

This basic difference is reflected in their contrasting understandings of Socrates. According to Arendt, the Socratic function of philosophy is “to establish the kind of common world, built on the understanding of friendship, in which no rulership is needed” (159). The aim, however, is not reducible to the establishment of ties of solidarity through dialogue (i.e, to the discovery of common purposes and the cultivation of common virtues), but rather it is to cultivate thoughtfulness. Essentially, this is achieved through Socratic discussion—a ‘talking through’ of problems that liberates the faculty of
judgment from the tyranny of rules and custom, thus forcing citizens to ‘stop and think’ by dissolving the ground of their unreflective opinions and inducing perplexity (166).

For Strauss, to the contrary, Villa points out, Socrates is a teacher and not a “citizen among citizens.” His dialectic method is not primarily meant to establish a common world by ‘improving’ the citizens’ opinions, one at a time, but “to ascend from the many (doxai) to the one (truth).” The political philosopher has a privileged position of judgment (he is, as it were, an umpire) due to the fact that “[h]is inquiry into the ‘What is?’ questions (what is justice, piety, virtue, etc.) directs him toward knowledge of the good life and the good society.” Philosophers and non-philosophers cannot have genuinely common deliberations (172). And political life is not an end in itself but derives its dignity from something higher, namely from the life of the philosopher (175).

It would seem, then, that the understanding of Socratic philosophizing of Arendt and Strauss could not be more different. And yet, Villa points out, there is “another Strauss, a more genuinely Socratic Strauss, a Strauss oddly akin to Arendt” (172). For this skeptical Strauss, “human wisdom is knowledge of ignorance,” and there can be “no unqualified transcending, even by the wisest man as such, of the sphere of opinion”; philosophy is not a form of foundationalism (i.e., a quest for standards of the good life or the good society), but rather the severest challenge to authority in all its forms; and “the ‘discovery of nature’ may be the work of philosophy, but ‘nature’ turns out to be...no more than a kind of ‘regulative ideal’, a symbol not of ready-to-hand yardsticks or banisters, but of a desire to avoid the identification of the moral with the conventional [that historicism facilitates]” (172-73). This is the Strauss for whom political idealism is the gravest danger, and for whom it is the role of philosophy precisely to challenge all
movements that, claiming to be in possession of the truth, “attempt to use theory as a blueprint for political practice, social reform, or societal transformation.” Thus, in the same way as Arendt, this “Strauss wants to open up a space for judgment—a space he sees endangered by both historicism and ‘idealist’ or ideological thinking” (173).

Summing up the discussion so far, we could say that Bluhm’s insight into Arendt’s and Strauss’s understanding of political philosophy as a form of philosophizing inspired by Heidegger—that is, as a form of radical questioning rather than a quest for a trans-phenomenal truth or for a ‘system’ of thought—is elucidated by Villa in such a way that both thinkers appear as Socratics. Yet whereas Bluhm traces this commonality to the influence of Heidegger, Villa, who otherwise has done much to further our understanding of the Heideggerian sources of Arendt’s thought, neglects to note the equally important way in which Strauss’s thought was shaped by the thought of the German master of Messkirch. Hence, as I shall argue, the still limited understanding of the meaning of the problem and the potentialities of political philosophizing for Arendt and Strauss.

III. The (Non-) Foundation of ‘Political Philosophy’ by Socrates and His Contemporaries

So far, drawing on the scholarly literature, we have understood the differences and similarities between Arendt and Strauss in terms of two traditions—‘Platonic’ versus ‘Socratic’—and in terms of the dichotomies between ‘philosophy and politics’ and ‘theory and practice’. This, however, presupposes the validity of a tradition which Arendt and Strauss did not take for granted: indeed, as we shall see, their return to Socrates is

largely an attempt to redefine that tradition by returning and reinterpreting its roots. Thus, in order to clarify the terms of the discussion—and to see its significance in the first place—it is necessary to provide at least a general view of the traditional understanding of philosophy and politics and their relation.

We begin by noting a central difficulty: the way the western tradition has understood the meaning of philosophy and politics—or, more generally speaking, of (philosophical) theory and (political) praxis—is a function of their relation, and that relation, it seems, has never been clear.\textsuperscript{28} That is to say, philosophy as an activity that takes place within a political society and which must justify itself before that society defines its own meaning and thereby also, at least negatively or by exclusion, the meaning of political life. This was done with such effectiveness by the founders of the philosophical tradition—mainly Plato and Aristotle, who first used and defined the term ‘philosophy’—that our understanding of ‘philosophizing’ and ‘politicizing’, both before that founding moment and after it, has been, strictly speaking, derivative: before that founding moment because the pre-history of the Socratic school was largely written by

\textsuperscript{28} According to the author of perhaps the most thorough analysis of the concepts of theory and praxis in Western thought, Nicholas Lobkowicz: “…contrary to all appearances, when taken in the strict sense there never was an account of theory and praxis, in any event not of their relation to one another. There were discussions of various types of praxis and various sorts of theory; there were discussions of the relation between theory and production, between theory and history, and between theory and experience. But the real problem, which the famous passage in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} poses, has never really been genuinely discussed: namely, is it possible to develop a theory relevant to praxis which actually is a theory and which is actually relevant just to praxis and not to every other possible thing?” “Origins: On the History of Theory and Praxis,” in Terence Ball (ed.) \textit{Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 25. (For Lobkowicz’s larger treatment of the problem of theory and praxis see his \textit{Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx} (Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967).) For similar arguments, see Günther Bien, “Das Theorie-Praxis Problem und die politische Philosophie bei Plato und Aristoteles,” \textit{Philosophisches Jahrbuch}, vol. 76, 1968-1969, 264-314, 268; Franco Volpi, “The Rehabilitation of Practical Philosophy and Neo-Aristotelianism,” in Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, \textit{Action and Contemplation: Studies in the Moral and Political Thought of Aristotle} (SUNY Series in Ancient Greek Philosophy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 18. Hermann Lübbe, \textit{Politische Philosophie in Deutschland} (Basel: Schwabe, 1963), 11.
that school itself, and after that moment because—as we shall see—from very early on western thought began to understand itself in terms of categories borrowed from the classic thinkers, and in particular in terms of a distinction between theory and praxis and ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ lives that did not exist, at least in those terms, for the founding thinkers.  

Given this difficulty, that is, given the fact that one cannot speak of the meaning of philosophy and politics and their relation without posing a question to thinkers for whom this question did not exist in the terms we use—for instance, when we speak of ‘political’ or ‘practical’ versus ‘metaphysical’ theory, of the ‘vita activa’ versus the ‘vita contemplativa’, or of the life of praxis in contrast to the life of theory—we shall limit our discussion, first, to recalling the temporal origins of our philosophical and political
vocabularies and, second, to specifying on this basis why it is necessary to return again to the question of the possibility of a ‘political philosophy’ as Arendt and Strauss do.

‘Politics’ and ‘Praxis’

Our political vocabulary dates back to the rise of democracy in the 5th century B.C. It was during the time when the affairs of the polis became the affairs of the citizen body that terms such as politeia, meaning the constitution or the regime broadly speaking; politeuma, a closely related idea; and politeuesthai, meaning to be politically active, were coined.30 As for the idea of human praxis, referring more generally—at least in one of its meanings—to human activity as guided by deliberation (in the political, ethical-individual, or economic domains), it only began to be used terminologically, that is, in the context of the study of human action, by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). Thus it is notably absent from the work of Thucydides’ (ca. 460-395 B.C.) who was otherwise one of the first thinkers to try to account for the ‘laws’ governing human action, and it was also left largely unexplored as such by Plato (424-348 B.C.).31 Finally, the notion of a political life, or bios politikos, as part of a general discussion concerning the best way of life (viz., whether it is political, philosophical or something else) also dates back to the Socratic school and to Plato in particular.32 It must further be noted that this discussion did not refer to the more general difference between bios praktikos and bios theoretikos (let alone

30 See Christian Meier, “Politeia,” in Historisches Wörterbuch Der Philosophie (Basel: Schwabe, 1971), Vol. 7, 1034-1036. (Hereafter HWPh.) The terms ta politka (politics) and e politike (‘the political’) which are substantivized forms of the adjective politikos itself derived from polites also date back to that period. Meier, “Politik,” in Ibid., 1038.
‘active’ versus ‘contemplative’), which are distinctions that became relevant—and apparently only began to make sense—for post-Aristotelian thought.33

‘Philosophy’ and ‘theory’
As for our philosophical vocabulary, though it also began to be developed in the 5th century Periclean age, it was only completed or consolidated after the demise of the Athenian democracy (in 404). Thus the verbal and adjectival forms ‘to philosophize’ and ‘philosophical’ appeared towards the end of the 5th century, while the noun ‘philosophy’ only emerged around the 380s, that is, after the trial of Socrates in 399.34 Finally, theoria only began to be used as a technical term of philosophical knowledge by Plato, while the adjective ‘theoretical’ was not used before Aristotle.35

‘Philosophizing’ and ‘politicizing’
Herodotus (c. 490 B.C.-420 B.C.) refers to the Athenian lawgiver Solon (c. 638-558 B.C.) as someone who ‘philosophized’ and ‘theorized’36 and, insofar as his quest was for ‘the invisible measure’ of human affairs—namely, justice—he could be seen as the first to both philosophize and politicize, or as the first to philosophize about the (political)

34 W. Halbfass, “Philosophie,” in HWPPh, Vol. 7, 573. (The earliest reputed ‘philosophers’ from Ionia referred to their investigations as istorie (=inquiry). Pythagoras (c. 582-500 B.C.) is reputedly the first thinker who called himself a ‘philosopher’ and was also known in antiquity as such, yet that seems to be rather a projection of the term to a time when it did not exist. Ibid. See also Pierre Hadot, What is Ancient Philosophy? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 15.
36 Herodotus, Histories, I, 30. “My Athenian guest, the rumor of your wisdom [sophie] and your travels has reached us. We hear that since you have a taste for wisdom [philosopheon], you have visited many lands because of your desire to see [theories eineken].”
order of human life. Yet again, though, quite obviously, the fact of living together in community and the act of thinking exist prior to the emergence of political living together and philosophical thinking, the raison d’etre for the existence of ‘political philosophy’ or of an ‘art’ or ‘techne’ of politics is still absent in the pre-democratic times of Solon. This because there is no need for general political education, or one could also say, because the question of the right order of living in community is not yet strictly speaking a question.

‘Political science’

The term ‘political science’ appears in the second half of the 5th century in a time in which, at the wake of Athens successes in the Persian Wars (490-479) and the coming Peloponnesian war (431-404), the question of the right order of living together becomes an urgent one. The thinkers associated with the Sophist movement of the fifth century B.C. seem to have been the first political scientists insofar as it is through them that the quest for wisdom was directed for the first time primarily to the world of human experience and specifically to the experience of living in community. From what is preserved of their writings, and from the (admittedly biased) records of Plato and others, we find in the work of some of the most notable Sophists such as Protagoras, Callicles and Thrasymachus a political science that raises such questions as the origins of the political community, the basis of the ‘social contract’, and the nature of justice and

---

37 The first political articulation of the idea of ‘measure’ (and of the related notions of moderation and temperance) dates to Solon. K. Mainzer, “Mass,” HWPh, Vol. 5, 508. According to Solon, “What is most difficult is to perceive the invisible measure, which nevertheless alone has the limits of all things.” Fragment D 16. In Solon, Dichtungen (Munich: Heimeran), 1945, 46f.

38 Initially by the linking together of the adjective politike to techne, episteme, or dunamis. Meier, “Politik,” in HWPh, Vol. 7, 1038.
political equality.\footnote{Protagoras (c. 490-420 BC) was born in Abdera and put on trial by the democracy somewhere around the year 411. He supported Pericles around the years 450 to 444, under whose approval he drafted laws for the colony of Thurioi (founded in 443 in southern Italy). Of Callicles, we only know through Plato’s dialogue \textit{Gorgias} and an occasional reference in Aristotle. He is often seen therefore as a fictitious character. Still, his views exercised considerable influence on thinkers of the stature of Machiavelli and Nietzsche. Thrasymachus (c. 459-400 BC) was born in Chalcedon in the Bosphorus. He appeared in Aristophanes’ “Diataleis” in 427 and was well-known in Athens at that time as a Sophist. His conversation with Socrates in the \textit{Republic} can be fixed to the year 413. Little else is known about his life. His epitaph names ‘Sophistry’ as his profession (\textit{e techne sophie}).} It is only at this point in western history, it seems, that one can begin to speak of a relation between thought (and/or knowledge or wisdom in general) and political practice.\footnote{On this point and more generally on the Greek ‘discovery of the political’ see Christian Meier, \textit{Athens: A Portrait of the City in its Golden Age} (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 14-15, as well as Ernst Vollrath, \textit{Was Ist Das Politische?: Eine Theorie Des Politischen Und Seiner Wahrnehmung} (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), 24.}

The question of course is, what kind of ‘thought’ is this—is it ‘philosophical’, ‘scientific’, ‘technical’?, and wherein does its interest in political practice lie? These are questions that have been disputed ever since the meaning of philosophy itself became a question, most notably with Plato in his dialogue \textit{Sophistes}. On one extreme, it can be argued that the wisdom sought and sold by the Sophists was concerned with almost everything, except for wisdom for its own sake (what we would call today ‘pure theory’), and that what the Sophist movement stands for is the unfettering of the will to power and recognition from the traditional order of goods and values that had hitherto constrained the free shaping of a common (and individual) life.\footnote{Ralf Elm, “Ethos, Vernunft und Freiheit. Zum Zusammenhang von praktischer und theoretischer Lebensform in der klassischen griechischen Philosophie,” in R. Elm (ed.), \textit{Vernunft Und Freiheit in Der Kultur Europas: Ursprünge, Wand, Herausforderungen} (Freiburg: K. Alber, 2006), 20, 23.} On the opposite extreme, it could be said that the Sophists were really no different from other ‘philosophers’, and particularly from Socrates, insofar as they were concerned with ‘the human things’ but also with ‘all things’\footnote{Thus, for instance, Gorgias could write a treatise “On What is Not, or On Nature.”} and insofar as their quest was—arguably, just like Socrates—not (or at least
not only) cynically ‘technical’ (e.g., overcoming a geometrician in debate without knowing anything about geometry), but ‘emancipatory’ (e.g., showing that ‘justice’ really means the advantage of the stronger). Thus there seems to be no safe way of distinguishing the relation between ‘wisdom’ (sophia) and practice (especially political practice) in the work of ‘Sophists’, on the one hand, and of ‘philosophers’ on the other.\(^{43}\)

‘Philosophy of human things’ I: Socrates

The traditional view is that Socrates was the first philosopher to make “human affairs” the center of philosophical attention.\(^{44}\) More particularly, it can be said that it was Socrates who first attempted a ‘theory of praxis’ or who first made human praxis a matter—and perhaps the matter—of philosophical investigation by famously affirming—here, at least, in sharp contrast to the Sophists—that virtue is knowledge or that sound praxis is intimately linked, or indeed may be nothing other than ‘sound’ theory. To explain what this means it is necessary to provide at least an outline of the Socratic way of questioning, and in particular of what is known as the ‘Socratic turn’.\(^{45}\)

\(^{43}\) That is to say, one cannot possibly understand the different (‘sophistical’ versus ‘philosophical’) origins of political thought in terms of such categories as “traditional theory” —allegedly concerned with ontology and driven by an ultimately religious interest typically ascribed to Plato and Aristotle—, “empirical-analytic” theory driven by “technical” interests (which would correspond to the Sophists); “historical-hermeneutic” theory with “practical cognitive” interests—namely, with the “preservation and expansion of the intersubjectivity of possible action-orienting mutual understanding”— and “critical theory” with an “emancipatory cognitive interest” achieved through self-reflection. The Sophists just as much as ‘philosophers’ like Socrates, one could say, pursued all of these types of theorizing for ‘practical’, ‘technical’, ‘theoretical’, ‘emancipatory’ reasons. (Whereby the point is not: ‘they did; why can we not do this? But: ‘has it ever been possible to dissociate ontology and ethics, metaphysics and morals, thinking and ‘building’/’edifying’, ‘science’ and ‘weltanschauung’ and so on? And what do we miss—precisely by way of possibilities of ‘emancipation’—when we fail to raise these questions?). For the (contrary) view that the distinctions are sound and also necessary see Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 301-317.

\(^{44}\) See note 3 above.

At least in Plato’s account, Socrates underwent a conversion, or perhaps a series of conversions, as he learned his unique art of philosophical investigation. Socrates is said to have turned away from natural philosophy to political philosophy, whereby it is of the essence of the latter that it begins—and in a way ends—with the investigation of human opinions. The story of this turn is told in the *Phaedo*. In a very abbreviated form, and just to mention the beginning and end of the story, it is this:

When I was a young man I was wonderfully keen on that wisdom which they call natural science, for I thought it splendid to know the causes of everything, why it comes to be, why it perishes and why it exists. [...] [Until] finally I became convinced that I have no natural aptitude at all for that kind of investigation [...] So I thought I must take refuge in discussions and investigate the truth of things by means of words [*logoi*].

Socrates tells the story of his youthful passion for the study of nature and subsequent turn to the human world during the last day of his life. In another late dialogue, *Theaetetus*, Plato elucidates what it means to be a philosopher and in particular to study “human affairs.” In perhaps the most famous passage Socrates explains that being a philosopher means “never condescending to what lies near at hand” and refers to Thales as “an instance”:

---

[T]hey say Thales was studying the stars…and gazing aloft, when he fell into a well; and a witty and amusing Thracian servant-girl made fun of him because, she said, he was wild to know about what was up in the sky but failed to see what was in front of him and under his feet. The same joke applies to all who spend their lives in philosophy. It really is true that the philosopher fails to see his next-door neighbor; he not only doesn’t notice what he is doing; he scarcely knows whether he is a man or some other kind of creature. The question he asks is, What is Man? What actions and passions properly belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings? This is what he wants to know and concerns himself to investigate.  

Here we see the relation (and the movement) between theory and praxis that characterizes the Socratic way. Socrates says that his investigation is primarily of human words (or opinions, logoi)—and what could be ‘nearer at hand’ than that? Yet the instance of the philosopher “in the highest sense” remains Thales, in Plato’s account, a stargazer—the ‘theoretician’ par excellence. The philosopher asks about human praxis: “What is Man? What actions and passions properly belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings?,” and yet he “doesn’t notice what he is doing” and “scarcely knows whether he is a man or some other kind of creature.” Socrates, like Thales, is a ‘theoretician’, yet in contrast to Thales and the rest of his predecessors, his theory is a theory of praxis (viz., of the “actions and passions [that] properly belong to human nature”).

What does a theory of praxis do? Ultimately, as we have seen, it may be said to show that ‘ethics is an optics’, or that somehow theory and praxis are interdependent or may even be the same thing. But primarily, without necessarily reaching such a conclusion, it can be said that what a ‘theory of praxis’ does is to raise the question of the nature of ‘true’ praxis and of ‘true’ theory.

---

49 Here I draw on Hans Blumenberg, *Das Lachen Der Thrakerin: Eine Urgeschichte Der Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).
Very simply put, to raise the question of true praxis means to raise the question of the good, that is: ‘truly human’ actions and passions are supposed to make us ‘good’ and this goodness is supposed to make us happy. As for raising the question of true theory it means, similarly, to ask whether we can ‘truly’ know what a thing is without first knowing what good it is. To see why this may be the case it is necessary to say more about Socrates’ turn.

The main reason why Socrates turned from an investigation of nature to an investigation of human opinions is the following. The so-called ‘natural philosophers’—to whose aims and methods presumably the young Socrates subscribed—sought “to know the causes of things, and why a thing is and is created or destroyed” (Phaedo, 96a ff.) on the basis of universal substances such as breath or air or fire or blood or of fundamental principles such as ‘mind’ or ‘intelligence’ (Anaxagoras). However, Socrates argues, they all failed at the point when it came to account for the reason why it is good that things are as they are.

Now, this would hardly convince anyone today as a scientific objection: who cares if it is ‘good’ or not if the world is made up of ‘quarks’ or ‘neutrinos’ or merely atoms? For Socrates, however, this is a scientific objection. One way to see this, which may not necessarily be Socrates’ way but which makes sense to some even today is this. If the way we see the world, that is, if the way we understand the ‘stuff’ out of which the world is made generates conflict and suffering this means not that life in this world is suffering but that we are somehow not seeing correctly.

50 See Zuckert, “The Socratic Turn,” 192.
51 For a brilliant exposition of this way of thinking across various traditions and philosophical genres see Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (New York: Penguin Press, 1993). For the opposite point of view, see Friedrich Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, § 50 (“…why in the world should it be
Socrates’ own account begins with the claim that his own actions, and specifically the fact that he was spending the last day of his life philosophizing in prison and not somewhere else as a fugitive, could not be explained by any ‘material’ causes—we would perhaps say today, by the chemical composition of his brain in that particular day—but only by the fact that he thought it good to be doing so. However, the question remains: why make the good the criterion not just of sound ‘human science’ but of all science? The reason (as we will see more clearly in the next chapter) is that we are related to reality in a practical way and thus in a way that is guided by some opinion concerning the good. Hence our primary access to reality is through the opinions we have of it and so through speech. Indeed, thought itself, Plato would argue, is a form of reasonable speech. Any theory, however ‘abstract’, is ultimately a human articulation of the world—an opinion, a ‘hypothesis’ or logos—of the world as encountered in everyday practice. Thus to place any theory on a sound basis its origins in human opinions (which express our practical encounter with the world) must be investigated. Specifically, the question must be raised whether our theories are anything other than reproductions of what we already ‘believe anyway’. For Aristotle, who in this follows the Socratic ‘program’, this meant to question, for example, with respect to Thales’ claim that water is the universal primary substance, whether this does not simply restate the Homeric notion that Ocean and Thetys are the parents of creation. For us, we may say, it would mean to

---

52 “Are not thinking and reasonable speech the same, except that the former, which takes place inside as a voiceless dialogue of the soul with itself is called by us thinking?” (Sophist, 263E).

53 Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1.3. 983b27. See Joachim Ritter, “Die Lehre vom Ursprung und Sinn der Theorie bei Aristoteles,” in Metaphysik Und Politik. Studien Zu Aristoteles Und Hegel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), 29. This is emphatically not to deny that such ‘myths’ as arise from our pre-scientific awareness of the world may just as well ‘hit the truth’ in other cases—indeed in perhaps the most important...
question whether our understanding of the world in terms of ‘quarks’ and ‘neutrinos’
does not uncritically presuppose that ‘string theory’—or indeed any other version of
modern mathematical science—is the highest form of ‘science’ if by ‘highest’ we mean
the science that makes less arbitrary presuppositions and hence allows the most
immediate access to the ‘things themselves’.  

This will have to suffice for now by way of an explanation as to how the Socratic
turn seeks to place theory on a sound basis through a better understanding of human
opinions which in turn result from our practical—and insofar as we are political animals,
political—engagement with the world. As to how Socrates sought also to question the
nature of true praxis, it is the same principle that may be said to apply. For now, an
example will be enough to illustrate this. Pericles was and is known as the paradigm of
the practical wisdom of a great statesman. Yet, Socrates would say, he was not in fact a
great statesman because he did not make the people better. Somehow, then, the praxis
he stood for—say, the practice of life he commends in the Funeral Oration—is not ‘true’
praxis or does not correspond to the actions and passions that make us truly human.

The account just given of the Socratic turn gives rise to several questions. With
respect to praxis or politics: What, then, is ‘the good’ of human praxis and how can it be
found? With respect to theory or science: How far can the dialectical investigation of
human opinions lead? But perhaps the most important question for our purposes is
whether there ever was a ‘Socratic turn’, or whether this is not rather a Platonic reaction

---

34

ones. See specially, Metaphysics, 1074 b1 ff. where Aristotle claims that the ancients’ view that the “first
substances” are “gods” was in fact “divinely spoken.”

34 For different ways of raising this very intricate question, see Victor Gourevitch, “Philosophy

35 Plato, Gorgias, 515e-516d3.
to the execution of his master? If this is the case, then the question arises—some at least believe—if it is philosophically legitimate at all to introduce the question of the good—and thus in a way *morality*—into philosophy as Plato did? What, then, would ‘political’ philosophy mean if not politicized (or moralized) philosophy? We shall leave these questions open—they will be addressed in subsequent chapters—in order to turn to one last answer to the question, Why ‘political philosophy’?—Aristotle’s.

‘Philosophy of human things’ II: Aristotle

Socrates philosophized about “the human things” to “examine in them the truth of realities,” and in that sense his study of ‘the political’ may have been but a means of access to ‘the metaphysical’, or put differently: the ‘political things’ may have been the clue to what really concerned him as a philosopher, namely, ‘all things’. Aristotle, by contrast, is typically considered to have been the first thinker to make the political things, and more systematically, human praxis, the subject of an independent and self-enclosed science—of what he called the “philosophy of human affairs.”

---

56 For the argument that Socrates, contrary to Aristotle’s claim in *Metaphysics*, 987b1, may not have neglected the study of nature in fact (even in his later years), see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II, 45; Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 4.6.1. Cf. H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 249. It must be noted that in the *Phaedo* itself, Socrates resorts back to cosmology and myth (Ibid., 250-51).

This view is based on Aristotle’s famous distinctions between theoretical and practical wisdom; between the political and the philosophical lives; and between a theoretical philosophy, which deals with what happens necessarily, and a “philosophy of human affairs,” which deals with what happens only “for the most part.” Departing (at least on the surface) from the interconnection of right seeing and right acting that is presupposed in Socrates’ negative judgment of Pericles as well as in his exemplification of paradigmatic philosophizing as a form of theorizing (à la Thales) that is nevertheless centered on the question, What is man?, Aristotle’s legendary example contrasted the wisdoms, dispositions, and scientific concerns of precisely such ‘natural philosophers’ as Thales and Anaxagoras with those of a statesman like Pericles. Thales and Anaxagoras, Aristotle suggested, are wise (sophos) but not prudent (phronimos); they are not after human goods because they do not regard man as the highest thing in the world; and their science is not of things that can be achieved by human action but of things that cannot be other than they are.

This is why it is said that men like Anaxagoras and Thales have theoretical but not practical wisdom: when we see that they do not know what is advantageous to them, we admit that they know extraordinary, wonderful, difficult, and superhuman things, but call their knowledge useless because the good they are seeking is not human.

und die politische Philosophie bei Plato und Aristoteles,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 76, 1968-1969, 264-314, 313. Since no one, it seems, would disagree that Aristotle sought to emphasize the heterogeneity of the practical and the theoretical, perhaps the question is whether he did this merely exoterically or not. In other words, the problem is that he clearly and openly says both things: perhaps most clearly that theory is a form of praxis (in *Politics* 1325 b18). That the question needs to be rethought from its grounds will be the argument of the next chapter.

58 More exactly, Aristotle characterized the theoretical and the practical as different manifestations of human rationality, as different moral and intellectual dispositions, and as different sciences dealing with different regions of being. R. Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle’s Ethics*, 13.

What was Aristotle’s intention in developing an allegedly independent “philosophy of human affairs”? This is a much contested and enormously complicated issue which cannot be fully addressed here. It will have to suffice to say the following.

When Aristotle at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* says that his aim (there and in the *Politics*) is to complete “as far as possible” the “philosophy relating to human affairs” he may be said to be doing several things. One hypothesis is that Aristotle’s aim was to complete the task that Plato, for whatever reason, neglected in his own examinations of (political) life most notably by analyzing more than a hundred-and-fifty constitutions in order to systematize a political theory. This raises the question whether in turn this was meant, so to speak, for theory’s sake, that is, to make ‘a better theory’ which could accordingly be ‘applied’ in a ‘technical’ way for the preservation of political regimes be they tyrannical or democratic, or whether this science was to serve the *pedagogical-ethical* purpose of educating future legislators and was thus strictly speaking a ‘practical’ rather than ‘poietical’ (technological) science. Under the first assumption the (Socratic-Platonic) unity of the questions, ‘What is it?’ and, ‘What good is it?’ would be severed while under the second it would be preserved. Under both assumptions the (Socratic-Platonic) view that sound theory and sound practice are ultimately the same would be abandoned, that is, the view that one becomes happy and good and ‘wise’ at the same time. Another hypothesis is that the “philosophy of human affairs” comprising ethics and politics is meant to *complete* the Socratic-Platonic program according to which encountering phenomena in their disclosure “is always a matter of ethos”; that is to say that the means of access to both ‘the human things’ and ‘all things’ is through the science

---

60 *NE*, 10.1181b12-15.
Aristotle calls *politike* and which comprises ethics. 62 ‘Political science’ is accordingly either a prelude to the study of ‘all things’—the science known as ‘the first philosophy’ or ‘metaphysics’—or it is *itself* ‘the first philosophy’. In any case, under this hypothesis, the *rhetorical*-political intention behind Aristotle’s demarcation between the practical and the theoretical becomes central: it is the *popular or exoteric* message that says that politics and philosophy, praxis and theory belong to different worlds—whereas we could say that ‘every true philosopher knows’ that ethics/politics is the all-encompassing, that it is both the access to what is human and to what reaches beyond it.

‘Political philosophy?’

The notion of a “philosophy of human affairs” appears only once in Aristotle’s writings. 63 The same holds for the phrase “political philosophy.” 64 Another term that is often used to characterize Aristotle’s achievement, “practical philosophy,” does not appear in the corpus. It is not necessary to discuss now what Aristotle may have meant by referring once to a task that requires a special kind of reflection he calls “political philosophy.” What has been said so far suffices to draw the necessary conclusions.

The question these considerations concerning the problem of a ‘political philosophy’ raises is this. Simply put: Does it matter at all that we mostly think in terms that were handed over to us by a tradition of readers of the classics? Do we commit a ‘mistake’, for instance, when we speak of ‘political, not metaphysical’ theory; of something that ‘holds in theory but is not true in practice’; of the life of ‘action’ as

---

64 The sole occurrence is in *Politics* III, 12, 1282b23.
opposed to the life of ‘contemplation’; or of ‘Platonic political philosophy’? Do we not construct concepts all the time to account for changing realities? Are not clear definitions enough to know what we are talking about? Even with respect to the classic thinkers: Aristotle may in fact never have used the word ‘ethics’ as a *terminus technicus* in his writings, but can we sensibly deny that there is an ethics in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Are not the questions of the ‘Metaphysics’ *metaphysical* questions? Is there really no ‘political philosophy’ in Plato even if he never used the term in his writings?

A final hypothesis must be considered as to why the founders of ‘political philosophy’ in fact pioneered the philosophy of human affairs but almost never called it that, namely this: they may have seen the task of a philosophy of human affairs—in the fundamental sense of a theory of human praxis—as extremely difficult if not indeed impossible. If a political philosophy cannot be written, then one should not even mention the name, let alone call oneself a political philosopher.

Yet again: if anything characterizes and distinguishes, perhaps from all later thought, the work of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, it is its attention to political reality—*for both political and philosophical reasons*. Indeed, if thinking is a form of inner dialogue and in that sense a form of speech, then we only know what we are thinking if we know what we are talking about, that is to say, if we know what phenomena we mean when we talk about acting or doing or willing or thinking itself. We only know these

---

phenomena, however, if we look closely at what we are doing, and this means: if we look at we are doing politically as the political beings that we are.

In short, there is no political philosophy handed over by the classics which we could somehow learn and teach. But we find in them the example that every generation must take up anew to Socratically think what it is doing. The chapters that follow offer a reading of the work of Arendt and Strauss as the most important Neo-Socratic thinkers of the twentieth century.