ARENDT’S POLITICAL THOUGHT:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
TRUTH AND POLITICS

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Valeria Pashkova

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The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Valeria Pashkova

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Valeria Pashkova

Sydney, Australia
Abstract

In the scholarship on the thought of Hannah Arendt we find a recurrent view that she sees truth and politics as not just distinct but mutually exclusive phenomena. In this thesis I argue that this is not an adequate understanding of Arendt. It has been pointed out in the previous scholarship that Arendt asserts the importance of at least one kind of truth for politics, namely “truth of facts.” I argue that this view of the relationship between truth and politics is more complex than that. In Arendt’s writings we can see a sustained enquiry into the relationship between politics and truth, in which truth includes, but is more than, “truth of fact.” To demonstrate this, I proceed from the assumption that Arendt sees “thinking” as the vehicle of this relationship between truth and politics. Thus my investigation of Arendt’s conception of the relationship between truth and politics foregrounds an exploration of Arendt’s conception of thinking. As I indicated above, in Arendt we find a fascinating and provocative suggestion that thinking concerns “the quest for meaning.” Understood as such, thinking is not released from truth-seeking. Truth here is something other than fact, although it may need to be informed by fact. Truth-seeking in relation to meaning, for Arendt, loses any connection to definite results because it has to become adequate to what she calls plurality as well as to the need of humans to “reconcile themselves” to the world that they share with others.

By providing a close textual analysis of five essays in which Arendt enquires into what is thinking, I will show that Arendt associates thinking, understood as the quest for meaning, with the willingness to express one’s doxa (or opinion), the willingness to think for oneself (selbstdenken), the willingness to engage in storytelling, the
willingness to practise the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” the willingness to face up to reality and the related willingness to recognise and accept factual truth, and, finally, the willingness to assume personal responsibility for judgment. I suggest that the quest for meaning in all these different modes must involve “truthfulness” – truthfulness in the sense of an opening to the truth of what is disclosed. This kind of truth is neither irrefutable nor refutable – it belongs to the domain of significance and profoundly concerns human experience. It is not an “objective” truth that exists independently of humans. This truth is a phenomenological achievement that demands of humans that they actively engage in an unending process of discovering this truth and are willing to seek truth. An orientation to truth involved in the quest for meaning is expressed especially in the willingness to engage with “the fact of human plurality” – perhaps, for Arendt, the quintessential “fact.” For truthfulness requires of a thinker a willingness to articulate and maintain one’s own perspective on the world, which in turn demands an orientation towards others and recognising them as unique individuals.
Chapter One. Does Arendt hold truth in opposition to politics?

1. The relationship between truth and politics in the literature on Hannah Arendt’s political thought

In the scholarship on Hannah Arendt, we find a recurrent view that she sees truth and politics as not just distinct but mutually exclusive phenomena. For example, the well-known French philosopher Alain Badiou (2005) argues that politics in Arendt’s sense is “neither the name of a thought (if one admits that all thought, in the realm of its philosophical identification, is in one way or another bound to the theme of truth) nor the name of an action” (Badiou 2005, 11). He thus claims that Arendt undertakes a “double negation” (11) and divorces politics simultaneously from the theme of truth and from political action. He claims that, for her, politics “only concerns public opinion” (13), and that public opinion, as she sees it, is shaped during political debates that exclude any truth procedure. He argues that “as soon as ‘politics’ [in Arendt’s sense] finds its sole rightful place in public opinion it goes without saying that the theme of truth is excluded from it” (13). He quotes the Arendt scholar Revault d’Allonnes to justify his claim that, for Arendt, politics and truth are incompatible: “‘the antagonism of truth and opinion, of the mode of philosophical life and the mode of political life,’ [is] the matrix of Arendt’s thought” (13).

Thus Badiou suggests that Arendt maintains a strict binary between truth and politics. He argues that “the antinomy of truth and debate is a bad joke” (Badiou 2005, 14). He further wonders whether Arendt’s attempt to rescue politics from truth opens politics to lying and falsity and speculates that, for Arendt, “debate, which confers rights without norms upon
falsity and lying, constitutes the very essence of politics” (15). He concludes that what Arendt achieves in her conception of the political is a glorification of “debate as a plural confrontation of opinions without truth” (16).

It must be noted that in Metapolitics Badiou does not claim to offer a comprehensive analysis of Arendt’s works. Badiou confines his analysis to a single work – her Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy – and largely relies on the commentary that the French translator Revault d’Allonnes delivers in her Postface to the French edition of Arendt’s Lectures. Even though Badiou’s account of Arendt’s view of politics cannot be considered comprehensive, certain aspects of it seem to be shared by a range of Arendt scholars.

The claim that Arendt insists on an incompatibility between truth and politics is often made. For example, Chiba (1995, 506) argues that “it is a well-known fact that Arendt made a consistent attempt to fend off any external [emphasis in the original] political factor, whether it be truth, goodness, or love, from encroaching upon the discourse proper to the public realm.” Or take, for example, the following statement: “Arendt…would have us believe that claims to truth have no place in the political arena for the simple reason that they destroy political life by ending debate” (Aboulafia 2001, 52).

Ronald Beiner, the editor of Arendt’s Kant’s Lectures on Political Philosophy, argues that Arendt provides a “misleading and obfuscating account of truth” (Beiner 2008, 123). Beiner wonders why Arendt insists on the “pessimistic thought” that politics and truth are incompatible and can only corrupt each other (127). He proposes that “it seems intensely paradoxical that Arendt’s depiction of politics as in its nature antithetical to truth could be compatible with the very elevated conception of politics to which she was committed, rather than leading her to a strong indictment of politics” (128).
That these Arendt critics believe she seeks to expel truth from the political realm is often due to an assumption that she has no other conception of truth than the Platonic one, as Arendt understands it: a metaphysical truth which has the character of an absolute and which is viewed by philosophers as the source of absolute standards for the political realm and political opinion. According to these critics, Arendt directs her efforts towards vindicating political opinion against the Platonic idea of truth, yet fails to offer any other conception of truth that is not antithetical to politics. For example, Phillips (2013, 99) says that “in her efforts to rehabilitate opinion, Arendt makes do with an uncontentious, indeed unsophisticated, understanding of truth,” that is, the Platonic idea of truth, as she interprets it.

Unlike Phillips, Canovan (1990) provides an account of truth in Arendt’s thought that brings out the complexity of Arendt’s understanding of the relationship between truth and politics. Canovan suggests that Arendt’s works have more to offer on the theme of truth than a critique of the “philosophers who were looking for a single truth to override plural opinions” (139). Canovan demonstrates that one of the important themes in Arendt’s writings is concerned with how it is possible to re-think philosophy itself. Arendt was critical of the Western tradition of philosophy, that is, the Platonic tradition of metaphysics that defined the life of the philosopher through the single experience of solipsistic contemplation (the *vita contemplativa*) which is oriented by the search for the metaphysical truth and which is necessarily opposed to the life in the realm of human affairs (the *vita activa*). According to Canovan, Arendt seeks another way of practising philosophy which is not “solitary, antipolitical, and sympathetic to coercion” (1990, 150). Canovan emphasises that Arendt is interested in exploring whether philosophical thinking can be brought into “harmony with free politics” (150). Yet, Canovan seems to argue at times that despite Arendt’s attempt to see a
relationship between philosophy and politics that is non-conflictual, she still could not decide whether truth has a place in the political realm:

Arendt appears to distinguish between two kinds of thinking, one of which is authentically political because it is oriented toward discourse between citizens with different views of the common world, whereas the other is authentically philosophical because it is solitary and oriented toward truth. Truth and solitude, it seems, still separate philosophy from politics. (Canovan 1990, 153)

In this particular passage, Canovan seems to side with those critics who believe that Arendt fails to provide a conception of truth which is different from the metaphysical truth and which is compatible with thinking about the political. On the other hand, Canovan provides a very important insight which I will draw upon in this thesis: Arendt seeks to articulate the kind of thinking that does not respond to the criterion of truth in the singular and that is not solipsistic and anti-political, but that is adequate to the world of human affairs and to the plurality of human beings who are positioned differently in relation to the world and who share this world in action and speech.

Perhaps one of the most influential articles to have contributed to the view that Arendt failed to provide a conception of truth that agrees with politics and political opinions is “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power” by Habermas (1977).¹ The article suggests that Arendt failed to recognise the implications of her own theory of action and judgment, one that Habermas calls “communicative.” According to Habermas, Arendt fails to see that actors in the political realm can arrive at an agreement about the truth of a practical issue at stake as a result of an exchange of rational arguments (1977, 22). He argues that a weakness of Arendt’s account of politics is that it offers no procedure for establishing the
truth of statements, with the result that competing political opinions cannot be subjected to any process of rational validation. Thus Habermas believes that Arendt fails to articulate a “cognitive foundation” for politics and that she fully identifies the realm of the political with untested opinions. As Habermas (1977, 23) puts it, Arendt saw “a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion that cannot be closed with arguments.”

At times Arendt herself seems to give reason for such criticism. There are a few statements in her writings which, when taken out of context, can be interpreted as evidence of an intention to separate truth and politics. For example, she starts the essay “Truth and Politics” with the statement that “[n]o one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues” (Arendt 2006, 223). In the same essay she writes that she wants to “reopen” the problem of “truth versus opinion” (232, emphasis added), and she continuously invokes, to be sure, in a manner of questioning rather than assertion, a “suspicion that it may be in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms” (235).

In another essay, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” devoted to Gotthold Lessing, Arendt also seems to imply that truth can have adverse consequences for the political realm. She praises Lessing for discovering “the possible antagonism between truth and humanity” (1968b, 28) and for his readiness to sacrifice truth to the possibility of debate and contestation in the political realm. She approvingly notes that, for Lessing, “the truth, if it did exist, could be unhesitatingly sacrificed to humanity, to the possibility of friendship and of discourse among men” (27).
These statements, when taken at face value, and out of context, can make it look as though Arendt indeed intends to exclude truth from politics and sees them as mutually opposed phenomena. If this were so, Badiou and others who argue that Arendt keeps truth and politics separate would seem to have a point. Certainly, we can point out that Arendt asserts the importance of a particular kind of truth for politics, namely “truth of facts.” Indeed, Arendt places considerable value on the role of factual truths in the political realm, suggesting that they are akin to “the ground on which we stand” (2006, 259). Arendt’s emphasis on the importance of acknowledging and respecting facts is widely discussed in the literature (see, for example, Zerilli 2012; Herzog 2002; Phillips 2013; D’Entrèves 2000; Canovan 1995).

However, in this thesis I argue that even if we acknowledge Arendt’s views on the importance of the “truth of facts” in the political realm, we still do not do justice to the way Arendt sees the relationships between truth and politics. I submit that in Arendt’s writings we can see a sustained enquiry into the relationship between politics and truth, in which truth is something other than either the “truth of fact” or Platonic metaphysical truth. To support this claim I take the following approach: I propose that, for Arendt, “thinking” – thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning rather than the production of knowledge – becomes the vehicle by which she brings truth and politics into relation. Thus my investigation of the relationship between truth and politics in Arendt’s writings must foreground an exploration of Arendt’s conception of thinking as the quest for meaning.

In Arendt’s posthumously published manuscript *The Life of the Mind*, we find Arendt attempting a final statement on a line of enquiry that she has pursued throughout her work – namely the distinction between metaphysical thinking and a kind of thinking that is concerned with how to conduct and orient oneself in the world of human affairs. In the first volume of this work, “Thinking,” Arendt unpacks her conception of thinking in relation to the world of
human affairs by adopting Kant’s distinction between *verstand* (intellect) and *vernunft* (reason). It is the distinction between thinking as the quest for knowledge, which corresponds to the faculty of intellect (or cognition), and thinking as the quest for meaning, which corresponds to the faculty of reason (Arendt 1978, 15). Both reason and cognition are modes of “thinking,” and for Arendt, “thinking,” in all its modes, is not daydreaming, idleness or pure fantasy. Thinking makes no sense without a relationship to truth and therefore, in all its modes – be it the quest for knowledge or the quest for meaning – it must involve an orientation to truth-seeking. It is thus reasonable to ask how Arendt conceives of the relationship of truth to both of these modes of “thinking”: truth in relation to intellect or cognition and truth in relation to reason.

What Arendt means by truth in relation to intellect or cognition is relatively well explored in the literature on Arendt’s thought (see, for example, Peeters 2009). Arendt explicitly says in *The Life of the Mind* that intellect has as its “highest criterion…truth” (Arendt 1978, 57), by which she means here truth in the specific sense of achieving results that appear to the human mind as certain, irrefutable and verifiable by means of logic or evidence. Yet, not enough attention is paid to the role of the sense of truth in relation to reason and the quest for meaning in Arendt’s thought, and it is this sense of truth that I place at the centre of my enquiry in this thesis. As I propose, the possibility of such a conception of truth in Arendt’s thought opens up the way for re-evaluating how Arendt sees the relationship between truth thus understood and politics.

I am aware that when I argue that Arendt’s writings can be read in a way that brings the notion of truth in relation to meaning, I go against the common view that Arendt opposes truth and meaning. This interpretation can be summed up in the Kateb’s (2002, 338) statement that “Arendt stages a struggle between meaning and truth.” To be sure, Kateb acknowledges that
Arendt attempts to bring meaning and truth in relation, but he still suggests that this can be only a relationship of “competition” (338). This view that, for Arendt, truth and meaning are incompatible is often justified precisely by a reference to the distinction Arendt made between intellect and reason in *The Life of the Mind* that I referred to above. For example, Peeters (2009, 347), drawing on the volume “Thinking” in *The Life of the Mind* and Arendt’s distinction between reason and intellect, argues that, for Arendt, “the use of the term ‘truth’ has no meaning in relation to thinking [in the sense of a quest for meaning], only in relation to knowledge” (emphases in the original).

Contrary to Peeters’ interpretation, I argue that the quest for meaning can bring about its own truth. If we take a closer look at Arendt’s argument, we can see that when in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt argues that “truth and meaning are not the same” (Arendt 1978, 16), she means “truth” in the specific sense of certain “ostensible” results that are confirmed to the human mind by logic or any other procedure of “objective” validation, so that this truth appears as absolute. As she puts it, “what science and the quest for knowledge are after is *irrefutable* truth” (Arendt 1978, 59, emphasis added). Therefore, the fact that in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt insists on the distinction between intellect and reason, “irrefutable truth” and meaning does not exclude the possibility that there is another sense of truth in Arendt’s writings which is compatible with, and mutually related to, meaning. In other words, thinking, understood as the quest for meaning, is not released from truth-seeking, but truth here is something other than the irrefutable truth that intellect seeks to achieve. Truth in relation to thinking as the quest for meaning is the truth of how reality is disclosed to us as individuals and as an intersubjective political community in our efforts to endow with meaning the world of human affairs, the phenomena in it and our own existence.

In this thesis, I examine the problem of the relationship between truth and politics from the vantage point offered by Arendt’s posthumously published manuscript *The Life of the*
Mind, in which she explores the importance of practising thinking understood as a quest for meaning. I argue that Arendt explores the idea of thinking as a quest for meaning throughout her writings and returns to this idea in different contexts. I show that Arendt associates thinking understood as the quest for meaning with the willingness to formulate one’s doxa (or opinion), the willingness to think for oneself (selbstdenken), the willingness to engage in storytelling, the willingness to practise the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” the willingness to face up to reality and the related willingness to recognise and accept factual truth, and, finally, the willingness to assume personal responsibility for judgment. All these modes of thinking belong to thinking as the exercise of reason which is oriented by the search for meaning and therefore, they must involve truth-seeking in relation to the quest for meaning.

In this thesis, I use the idea of meaning in the sense of a human orientation towards the world that is mediated by the activity of thinking. Meaning is understood here as that which is constituted in the process of thinking if thinking is inspired not by the desire to generate knowledge but by the need to endow with significance phenomena of the world of human affairs – for example, a human life, a political event, or the words and actions of oneself or other people – and to understand what it means for these phenomena to be and how they came into being. Meaning here is not a matter of knowledge, determination or outcome but rather an ever-evolving process of a phenomenon being interpreted and becoming significant for an individual and the community of individuals.

My goals in this thesis are to explore what truth in relation to thinking understood as a quest for meaning involves, how this conception of truth illuminates for us what Arendt means by “politics” and how she sees the relationship between “politics” and truth thus conceived. My hypothesis is that truth in this sense is not only compatible with but is essential for politics, if politics is conceived in Arendt’s particular sense – as the “web of human
relationships” that arises among the plurality of human beings who speak and act in concert, thereby disclosing their unique identities and sharing the world with one another. To demonstrate this, I offer a close textual analysis of five essays in which Arendt, in different contexts, enquires into what is thinking: “Socrates,” “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” “Understanding and Politics,” “Truth and Politics” and “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship.” This thesis will thus consist of five substantive chapters, each of which will analyse one of the essays mentioned above. The methodological approach I attempt to employ in this thesis is a close textual analysis of these essays that focuses on uncovering the idea of truth in relation to thinking as the quest for meaning – an idea which, as I argue, is not antagonistic to but compatible with and essential for “politics.”

These five essays were selected for this analysis for a number of reasons. Firstly, they all refer in one way or another to the human activity of thinking qua reason. Therefore, they allow for the identification of a sense of truth which corresponds to thinking understood as the quest for meaning and thus is different from the senses of truth often invoked by Arendt’s critics – such as truth in terms of definite results, metaphysical contemplation or fact – in their attempt to demonstrate that Arendt sees the relationship between politics and truth as mutually antagonistic. Secondly, the selected essays belong to two different periods of Arendt’s thought, which enables me to demonstrate the consistency of her inquiry into the relationship between truth and politics and, at the same time, to highlight how her approach to this topic may have evolved over time. “Socrates” and “Understanding and Politics” were written in the first half of the 1950s, and the essay on Lessing is based on an address delivered in 1959. The other two essays – “Truth and Politics” and “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” – were written in the 1960s. These two groups of essays were separated by the publication in 1963 of Arendt’s report on Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem and controversy
around this report, which, as we will see, let to a change in the angle from which Arendt explored the relationship between truth and politics. Finally, I sought to choose essays that each discuss the relationship between truth and politics in a different context and whose analysis could flesh out different aspects of this relationship, as understood by Arendt.

The sequence in which I analyse the essays in this thesis is defined by a combination of thematic and chronological considerations. I start with one of the earliest of the five essays, “Socrates,” which illuminates the issue of truth and politics through the lens of the relationship between politics and philosophy. Analysing this essay allows me to lay out the key concepts of the thesis as well as outline Arendt’s phenomenological understanding of the world, which is essential for the present inquiry. Next, I turn to the essay “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” which enables me to deepen the insights gained through the analysis of “Socrates” and at the same time to consider the notion of truth against the backdrop of a new set of themes emerging out of Arendt’s reflections on what it means to live and think in “dark times” – which include, but are not restricted to, the advent of totalitarianism – as well as to reflect on these times once they have passed. The discussion of how Arendt approaches the task of thinking about the experiences of totalitarianism feeds into the analysis of the next essay – “Understanding and Politics” – which provides an in-depth exploration of what it takes to pursue “true understanding” of the event of totalitarianism and the unprecedented challenges it brought forth.

I then turn to the two later essays, both of which were written in response to the controversy around Arendt’s report on Eichmann’s trial. “Truth and Politics” considers the issue of truth from the perspective of lying in politics, and, in particular, a new phenomenon she perceived, that of “organized lying,” which she saw as characteristic of totalitarian regimes and democratic societies alike. “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” is
concerned with judgment and responsibility for judgment – one of the key preoccupations in Arendt’s thought in the 1960s and 1970s. I conclude the thesis with this essay as its analysis allows me to discuss the significance of thinking *qua* reason in terms of the commitment to judge for oneself and take personal responsibility for such judgment – something that, as I argue, becomes crucial for the development of an ethical stance under the conditions of the systematic pressures of the Nazi regime towards evildoing.

In the literature on Arendt’s thought, there are a number of works that advance a proposition similar to the one I defend in this thesis – that in Arendt’s writings we find another sense of truth that is not hostile to the political. For example, Canovan, in her contribution to the book *Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives* (1988), offers an interpretation of Arendt’s view on the relationship between truth and politics which is different from the one she gives in the article “Socrates or Heidegger?” (1990) mentioned above. This interpretation suggests the possibility that Arendt’s writings may contain an idea of truth which is not opposed to the political. Canovan (1988, 185) suggests that “what Arendt is opposing as a danger to free politics and human plurality is often not truth itself (in so far as this is attainable) but rather an *ideal of truth* and certainty that continually tends to distort human affairs.” By ideal of truth, Canovan means here the “traditional ideal of truth” (184), which, for Arendt, negates the possibility of political spaces in which humans can speak and act in concert:

According to Arendt, the traditional ideal of truth is unpolitical and anti-political precisely because it threatens this space of free movement. In the place of a constantly changing plurality of perspectives it sets unanimous recognition of the right answer, while in the place of freely chosen opinions it sets arguments which demand assent as the reward of logical proof. (Canovan 1988, 184)
By traditional ideal of truth, Canovan understands an ideal of absolute certainty such as that which humans seek to find in procedures of strict logical and mathematical reasoning. Canovan does not want to argue that Arendt rejects the importance of logical reasoning as such. She shows that Arendt is only concerned with situations in which logical reasoning and logically examined evidence are turned into an absolute that humans are *compelled* to accept, which prevents them from engaging in thinking about something further and exploring it for themselves. As Canovan (1988, 185) puts it, “Mesmerised by the notion of absolute truth, people cling to the areas where certainty seems to be attainable (notably logic and mathematics) and ignore or despise the modes of thinking that are actually appropriate to the political capacities of human beings.” By these “modes of thinking” Canovan means “plural opinions rather than a single truth, common sense rather than certainty, persuasion rather than proof, and judgement rather than calculation” (185). Canovan does not elaborate on this explicitly, but I would like to propose that these “modes of thinking” “appropriate” to politics require the exercise of what Arendt (after Kant) calls reason, rather than merely the exercise of intellect. As we saw above, for Arendt, the faculty of reason is oriented toward meaning. Thinking as “reason” does not seek to produce and accumulate knowledge but involves the pursuit of an unending quest for meaning. As I show in this thesis, for Arendt, the formulation of opinions or *doxai*, persuasion in the original sense of *peithein* and judgment are all related to the process whereby humans engage in constituting meaning.

Zerilli is another scholar who is interested in rethinking the common assumption that suggests an opposition between truth and politics in Arendt’s writings. Zerilli (2012, 56) explicitly states that she wants to “question the central claim of her [Arendt’s] critics, namely that she excludes the problem of truth from the political realm.” Zerilli argues that “Arendt was not indifferent to but deeply concerned with the loss of truthfulness in political life” (56).
Zerilli also proposes that Arendt “resists the idea that there is only one form of truth, namely that which demands the strictest criteria of proof” (57). Similarly to Canovan, Zerilli argues here that in Arendt’s writings there is an important sense of truth as something other than unequivocal absolute truth – the type of truth that intellect or cognition holds as its criterion. This other conception of truth, Zerilli suggests, must be of a kind that does not coerce our mind but discloses something to us about the realm of human affairs. I base my investigation in this thesis on the same assumption – that in Arendt’s writings there is a sense of truth that is different from truth that responds to “the strictest criteria of proof.” My approach is different from Zerilli’s in that I propose that this kind of truth is associated with thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning.

There is another insight of Zerilli into the concept of truth in Arendt’s writings that I find particularly interesting. Zerilli refers to the “truthfulness” of political actors as one of Arendt’s major concerns. Moreover, she suggests that when discussing truth and politics in Arendt’s thought, it is important to explore not only whether political actors can make truth claims but also what kinds of “demands” these truth claims pose for the political sphere: “what it means to make them, to hear them, and whether, once they enter the political realm, claims to truth can survive” (Zerilli 2012, 57). The way Zerilli formulates these questions about truth claims in politics opens up a productive line of enquiry about what it takes to be truthful in the realm of politics.

I am going to develop this line of enquiry in my thesis by exploring what truthfulness can mean in relation to thinking which involves the quest for meaning. My main proposition about “truthfulness” in this thesis is that when it comes to truth-seeking in relation to the quest for meaning, humans are not merely passive receivers of truth. Truth demands of an individual that they put the effort into an unending process of endowing past and present
phenomena with meaning. I will seek to demonstrate what specifically this commitment to truth-seeking in relation to the quest for meaning involves and what it takes to engage in this quest without avoiding, perverting or misinterpreting it.

Assy (2005, 2008) also makes a significant contribution to the proposition that Arendt’s thought contains an idea of truth that is not opposed to politics. Assy works with Arendt’s notion of opinion in the Socratic sense of doxa, the world “as it appears to me.” She shows that Arendt seeks to relate the notion of opinion, doxa, to Heidegger’s notion of truth as aletheia in the sense of “unconcealment” or disclosure (Assy 2005, 8). Assy argues that by connecting truth as aletheia to doxa as “that which appears,” Arendt significantly departs from Heidegger’s interpretation of truth. As Assy puts it, “Arendt leads Heidegger’s notion of truth as Un-verborgenheit ‘unconcealment’ to the notion of opinion, doxa, borrowed from Socrates. It springs out a complete reversal on the concept of truth towards a phenomenality of the appearance…attained in the shape of opinion, doxa” (8). Assy thus believes that she is able to demonstrate that, for Arendt, truth as aletheia becomes compatible with opinion (doxa) and with the domain of the political as such. She concludes that at least in one of Arendt’s works (the essay “Philosophy and Politics”), Arendt discusses “truth as aletheia, as ‘that what is disclosed,’ – which takes place through appearance and displaces the notion of truth from the domain of noumena to the doxastic political action” (14). However, Assy tends to assume that after Arendt wrote the essay “Philosophy and Politics” in 1954, she abandons the notion of truth as “that which is disclosed” and does not seek to articulate it in relation to politics.

Assy’s approach to the relationship between truth and politics in Arendt’s writings is insightful because she reflects on this relationship in the context of placing importance on the phenomenological character of Arendt’s thinking. I agree with Assy here that a recognition
of the phenomenological approach in Arendt’s works is essential for understanding how she engages with the question of the relationship of truth and politics. I too emphasise Arendt’s phenomenological approach throughout this thesis. Likewise, I propose that the notion of truth that Assy is interested in – truth as “that which is disclosed” and as that which is related to the domain of appearances – is suggestive. However, I also suggest that there is a way of showing that this notion of truth does not lose its relevance for Arendt after the early essay “Philosophy and Politics” and, what is more, is operative in other works she wrote in the 1950s and 1960s.

Dana Villa (1999) also discusses Arendt’s notion of doxa in relation to the notion of truth, but he draws our attention to a different aspect of this relationship: the connection between truth and the fact of human plurality, the key political fact, for Arendt. Unlike the common view that Arendt asserts that truth can threaten human plurality, Villa wants to emphasise the opposite. He shows that in “Philosophy and Politics,” Arendt refers to the figure of Socrates in order to demonstrate that truth can, in fact, be compatible with the fact of human plurality. He argues that in “Philosophy and Politics,” Arendt portrays Socrates as someone who sees an opinion (doxa) as “the locus of a particular and valuable truth” (Villa 1999, 212). Villa thus suggests that Arendt portrays Socrates as someone who is interested in the uniqueness of every human opinion rather than in establishing a single metaphysical truth. Arendt’s Socrates sees truth in every opinion (doxa) and thus believes in the possibility of multiple truths. As Villa formulates it, “in cultivating the partial truths given through individual perspectives on the shared world, the Socrates of ‘Philosophy and Politics’ reveals a human world characterized by the absence of any absolute truth, yet one that is made beautiful by the availability of innumerable openings upon it” (1999, 212, emphasis in the original).
Thus, contrary to the camp of Arendt scholars who argue that she sees the relationship between truth and politics as antagonistic, there are other Arendt scholars who argue that her writings indicate a notion, or notions, of truth that is not antagonistic to the political. Like these scholars, I also attempt to demonstrate that Arendt’s understanding of truth is not limited to the Platonic idea of the metaphysical truth or the “irrefutable” truth that human intellect seeks to establish. However, I want to emphasise two points that will distinguish my approach to the problem of truth and politics in Arendt’s thought from theirs.

Firstly, some of these scholars assume that this other sense of truth as not hostile to politics is a feature of Arendt’s early writings and, in particular, of the essay “ Philosophy and Politics.” I agree that this essay offers a productive entry point for investigating the relationship between truth and politics. I start this thesis by analysing this essay (working with the republished version titled “Socrates”). However, I submit that there is a way of showing that the insights this early essay offers into the mutual connections between truth and doxa, between truth and the political realm, do not lose their relevance in relation to other works Arendt wrote in the 1950s and the 1960s. The sense of truth we find in this essay – truth in relation to the quest for meaning, as epitomised in the quest for formulating one’s doxa in its truthfulness – and the argument that truth thus conceived is both compatible with and necessary for the political realm can be shown to be pertinent to four other essays from the 1950s and 1960s: “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” “Understanding and Politics,” “Truth and Politics” and “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship.” I provide an interpretation of these essays that explores the possibility of the presence of the idea of truth in relation to the quest for meaning in all these essays and illuminates how each of them contributes to our understanding of this idea and its relationship to politics.
Secondly, what also differentiates my approach to exploring truth and politics in Arendt’s works from previous scholarship is that I propose that “thinking” can be conceived as the vehicle for how Arendt constructs the relationship between truth and politics. I thus take Arendt’s concept of “thinking” as an entry point for the project of investigating the relationship between truth and politics and, in particular, I draw on Arendt’s idea of thinking as the quest for meaning, as distinguished from the quest for knowledge, which she articulates in The Life of the Mind. I show that Arendt’s preoccupation with thinking as the quest for meaning can be traced back to the essay on Socrates and that it runs through the other four essays I consider as a red thread. This reading further reveals the complexity of how Arendt understands the concept of thinking as the exercise of reason – as I argue, it can be shown that Arendt implies that such thinking can happen in different modalities, as it were, and that it has different aspects and facets – such as the formulation of doxai, the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” Selbstdenken or thinking for oneself, “true understanding,” and storytelling. For Arendt, what unites all these diverse modalities of thinking is that they all demand of humans that they engage their reason, rather than merely their intellect, to explore meaning and endow with significance everything they encounter in the world – events and incidents, the actions and words of others and of their own, the past and the present, their own lives and identities, the world itself and all the phenomena in it.

2. The Life of the Mind: truth in relation to the quest for knowledge and the quest for meaning

Given that I suggest looking at the problem of the relationship between truth and politics in Arendt’s thought from the vantage point offered by The Life of the Mind, before proceeding with my investigation, I propose to explore in more detail what Arendt can mean by truth in
relation to the two faculties of the human mind she explores in the manuscript – the faculty of intellect, responsible for the quest for knowledge, and the faculty of reason, responsible for the quest for meaning. Let me first consider what Arendt can mean by truth in relation to intellect. In *The Life of the Mind* Arendt draws on Leibniz to show that truths in relation to intellect or cognition can be of two types: truths of fact and rational truths. Both these types of truth have a compelling character. As Arendt puts it, “truth is what we are compelled to admit by the nature either of our senses or of our brain” (Arendt 1978, 61). Factual truths are those that humans can grasp by means of their sensual perceptions and that are dependent on sensory evidence. Rational truths – such as mathematical truths or logical truths – are established by the sheer power of the human brain. Even though factual truths and rational truths are different, it is intellect or cognition that ensures the human ability to grasp and postulate both types.iii Truth thus becomes the criterion for thinking when thinking is applied to searching for and producing knowledge.

Yet as I argued above, Arendt insists that human beings can and should do more with their ability to think than produce knowledge and achieve definitive results. Arendt emphasises that humans also can and should deploy thinking in order to pursue the quest for meaning. When inquiring into the meaning of phenomena, humans start exercising reason rather than drawing on intellect. In the course of the quest for meaning humans do not ask whether a phenomenon exists or what this phenomenon is – the question that intellect is concerned about. Instead, a thinker asks the question of the meaning of a phenomenon: she wonders “*what it means for it to be*” (1978, 57, emphasis in the original). Moreover, as I proposed above, thinking – be it in a form of the quest for knowledge or of the quest for meaning – is inconceivable without truth-seeking. This allows us to open a line of enquiry that explores another sense of truth in Arendt’s writings and its relationship to the political –
the sense which is different from “the truth of facts” or mathematical or logical truths. It is the sense of truth in relation to meaning.

Truth-seeking in relation to meaning, for Arendt, loses any connection to definite results. The truth that an individual can constitute if she commits herself to the quest for meaning is neither refutable nor irrefutable because it belongs to the domain of significance, in which the criterion of “objective” truth is not applicable. For example, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt gives the following example of a meaningful statement that is not a “truth” in the sense of a verifiable and irrefutable truth, and yet is true in its own right. She refers to a fragment of the poem by Auden:

Unpredictably, decades ago, You arrived
among that unending cascade of creatures spewed
from Nature’s maw. A random event, says Science.
But that does not prevent us from answering with the poet:
Random my bottom! A true miracle, say I,
for who is not certain that he was meant to be?
But this being “meant to be” is not a truth; it is a highly meaningful proposition. (Arendt 1978, 60)

In the last line of the passage Arendt uses the idea of “truth” in the sense of a “truth” that the intellect seeks to establish by way of “irrefutable” logic and verifiable evidence. No such evidence can be found when an individual seeks to understand the reason for her birth and life as a unique human being – it is a “miracle” that cannot be definitively explained by logical reasoning or scientific facts. And yet Arendt agrees with the poet that everyone who engages in the quest for meaning in one’s life becomes somehow “certain” that she is “meant to be,”
that one’s life has significance and meaning and that one was born for a reason. Here we see Arendt providing us with an example of a truth in relation to the quest for meaning. This example is a good illustration of why I suggest that this kind of truth is neither irrefutable nor refutable – the proposition that one was born for a reason cannot be disproved or proved by means of logical or mathematical method. Neither can it be shown to be true or false in the “factual” sense. Yet for every particular individual this proposition that she is “meant to be” is meaningful and, therefore, truthful.

In The Life of the Mind Arendt specifically emphasises that humans not only have the ability to endow phenomena with meaning but also the “need” for doing it. She adopts from Kant the expression “‘the urgent need’ of reason” (Arendt 1978, 14) to demonstrate the pressing importance for humans to engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, that is, to endow with significance and importance everything they encounter in the world. To understand why Arendt argues that humans have the “need” to engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, we need to put this proposition in the context of her phenomenological approach to the world and reality, which informs all of Arendt’s writings but which she elaborates in the most comprehensive way in The Life of the Mind. Arendt starts the volume “Thinking” in The Life of the Mind with the chapter “Appearance” and section “The world’s phenomenal nature.” She starts the section with the proposition that the world and the phenomena in it do not merely exist “there” independently of humans. Rather, everything that is “appears” to a “spectator” who is able to receive this appearance, confirm it and respond to it:

Nothing could appear, the word “appearance” would make no sense, if recipients of appearances did not exist – living creatures able to acknowledge, recognize, and react to – in flight or desire, approval or disapproval, blame or praise – what is not merely there
but appears to them and is meant for their perception. In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, Being and Appearing coincide. (Arendt 1978, 19, emphasis in the original)

What Arendt is getting at here is that the world has a phenomenal nature. The reality of the world depends on the presence of the plurality of sensual beings who receive the world in the mode of appearance and respond to these appearances – “acknowledge, recognize and react to” them – thereby confirming that they are real. Moreover, human beings are themselves appearing beings: “sentient beings – men and animals, to whom things appear and who as recipients guarantee their reality – are themselves also appearances, meant and able both to see and be seen, hear and be heard, touch and be touched” (Arendt 1978, 19). What Arendt proposes here is that living creatures, including humans, cannot be certain of their reality unless they appear to others and others confirm their appearances.

What then follows from these reflections is that reality does not speak for itself: it requires “spectators,” in the plural, who are open to appearances and are ready to respond to them, to receive and confirm them. Therefore, “everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth” (Arendt 1978, 19). In other words, not only is the world, and the reality of the world and everything in it, phenomenal, it is also relational – nothing and no one can come into being without coming into relation with others.

When Arendt discusses the phenomenal and relational nature of the world in The Life of the Mind she refers not only to human beings but to sentient beings in general. Yet, for her, there is something that distinguishes humans from other living beings – a human way of responding to an appearing reality is by endowing it with meaning. If we turn to the Introduction of The Life of the Mind we can acquire further insight into the relationship
between humans, their ability and the need to undertake the quest for meaning, and appearance, as seen by Arendt. In the Introduction to The Life of the Mind, Arendt provides yet another entry point into the conception of thinking as the quest for meaning. She explains that one of the reasons she decided to undertake her enquiry into “the life of the mind” was her encounter with the “desk murderer” Eichmann during his trial in Jerusalem, which Arendt attended as a reporter for the New Yorker (Arendt 1978, 3). As a result of this encounter, Arendt published her report Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (Arendt 1963). The report itself became the subject of major controversy in the United States and abroad, and one of the many reasons for this was Arendt’s use of the phrase “the banality of evil,” which many critics thought somehow trivialised the significance of the evil deeds of the Nazis.

In The Life of the Mind, Arendt reflects on what led her to coin the phrase “the banality of evil” to characterise Eichmann and, as we shall see, this phrase has nothing to do with an attempt to trivialise evil. Arendt says that by this phrase she wants to indicate that the traditional theories of evil that describe an evildoer as “demonic” and “monstrous,” as an “incarnation” of a diabolic force (Arendt 1978, 3), cannot help us to understand the conduct of Eichmann and why he so eagerly administered the horrific Nazi crimes. What could explain his participation in the Nazi crimes was his “thoughtlessness” (4). By calling Eichmann “thoughtless,” Arendt does not mean that he was stupid or did not possess cognition or intellect in the sense of verstand. What Arendt means is that she witnessed in Eichmann an absence of an attempt to engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, that is, to exercise reason in the sense of vernunft. For Arendt, the primary evidence for Eichmann not having made an effort to engage in the quest for meaning was his tendency to speak in clichés, which produced, as Arendt puts it, “a kind of macabre comedy” (Arendt 1978, 4). In
the following passage Arendt elaborates on why she finds so significant the fact that Eichmann’s speech was full of clichés:

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in that he clearly knew of no such claim at all. (Arendt 1978, 4)

As emerges from the passage quoted above, an encounter with Eichmann demonstrated to Arendt that even though all humans have the need and ability to engage in the quest for meaning, not all of them actually do so. Humans are able and often choose to evade or avoid this quest completely – and reverting to clichés is a way of doing it – and allow themselves to live automatically, as it were, that is, to be carried away by a flow of events and incidents without seeking meaning in what happened or is happening to them.

What Arendt sees in Eichmann’s crimes is this unwillingness to “stop and think” (Arendt 1978, 4, emphasis in the original). In other words, Eichmann became so easily susceptible to the systemic pressures of evildoing under the Nazi regime because he failed to extricate himself from the automatic routines of everyday life and wonder about the meaning of his actions, his words, his thoughts and the events he was involved in – to “examin[e] whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content” (Arendt 1978, 5) – hence Arendt’s question of whether thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning can help humans “abstain from evil-doing” (Arendt 1978, 5). Therein, for Arendt, lie important moral implications of thinking.

Arendt’s comments on Eichmann’s crimes demonstrate that, for Arendt, the quest for meaning requires a deliberate decision on the part of individuals to “stop and think” and their
commitment to, and responsibility for, putting constant effort into thinking \textit{qua} reason and doing so for as long as they are alive. This raises the question of “truthfulness” – a term that, as I show in this thesis, Arendt uses in some of her works, such as, for example, the essay “Socrates,” where she explores thinking. By “truthfulness” I mean the willingness of individuals to respond to the demands that thinking \textit{qua} reason places upon them and to withstand the temptation to short-circuit and circumvent such thinking by, for example, treating its tentative insights as “objective” knowledge, expecting from such thinking final and definitive results or substituting it with ready-made answers provided by others. In this thesis, I thus attempt to interpret the essays I have selected for analysis as offering the reader a sustained enquiry into what it takes for an individual to engage in thinking as the quest for meaning so as to be able to constitute truth in relation to this quest.

There is a sense in Arendt’s works that by depriving themselves of the quest for meaning, humans not only render themselves susceptible to evildoing, as happened with Eichmann who chose to shut down this quest. By failing to activate their faculty of reason, humans also deprive themselves of the possibility of “reconcil[ing] themselves to reality” (Arendt 1994a, 307). Both in the essay “Understanding and Politics,” which plays the key role in this thesis, and in \textit{The Life of the Mind}, Arendt calls every individual a “newcomer” or “stranger” (Arendt 1994a, 332; Arendt 1978, 7, 100; Arendt 1994a, 304) who is born into a world that existed before her, and thus she has the task and need to reconcile herself to the world and to others with whom she can potentially share this world. This need is never fully satisfied and humans can respond to it only by constantly engaging their faculty of reason, that is, by constituting meaning as long as they are alive.

The ideas of meaning and appearance thus have existential significance in Arendt’s political thought – the world is that which “\textit{appears}” to humans, the reality of the world depends on whether the “same” world \textit{appears} to the plurality of spectators, humans
themselves can come into their full existence only if and when they “appear” to others and others recognise and confirm this appearance. On the other hand, there is nothing automatic in the process whereby humans recognise, confirm and reconcile themselves to that which “appears” to them. This demands of humans that they constitute the meaning of appearance. Without the faculty of reason that allows humans to endow appearances with significance, humans would have remained forever alienated from the world and from other humans, and would have remained merely “homeless” “strangers.”

Therefore, I submit that there must be, in Arendt’s writings, a sense of the truth that individuals constitute through their efforts to generate meaning and “reconcile themselves to reality.” This is not the Platonic idea of truth, as truth which can be discerned in such efforts is related to appearances which Plato conceived as illusory and the opposite of truth. Neither does this truth relate to intellect or cognition. By employing the faculty of intellect, as Arendt sees it, humans can establish results that present themselves as certain, verifiable and irrefutable, at least until they are disproved by other evidence. If thinking qua reason could have produced any “objective” and final results that are valid for all, it could not have played the existential role that Arendt ascribes to such thinking – the role of assisting unique individuals to “reconcile themselves to reality” and to others. Therefore, the kind of truth that, as I argued, thinking qua reason can bring about – such as, to take Arendt’s example, the proposition that every individual is “meant to be” – is never stable and is never truth in the singular. It is the truth of how the world “appears” to each particular individual in the course of her quest for meaning that can take place in a variety of contexts and life situations. There can be, therefore, not one but the plurality of such truths that corresponds to the plurality of individuals who are willing to engage in this quest.

This brings me back to the question that I set myself to explore in this thesis: how truth in relation to the quest for meaning is related to politics in Arendt’s particular sense of the
“web of human relationships” that arises among the plurality of human beings speaking and acting in concert in public spaces, starting new initiatives and seeing them through together, disclosing their unique identities and sharing the world together. I attempt to show not only that the truth which humans can constitute through the quest for meaning is compatible with politics in Arendt’s sense but also that politics thus understood stands in need of individuals being willing and able to constitute such truth in the course of their efforts to think, that is, to use their faculty of reason.

3. Summary of substantive chapters

In Chapter Two I analyse the essay “Socrates” (delivered as a lecture in 1953, first published in 1990 as “Philosophy and Politics” and republished in 2005 under a different title – “Socrates” – in the collection of essays The Promise of Politics edited by Jerome Kohn). At the centre of this chapter’s argument is Arendt’s conception of the “truths of opinions,” which she opposes to the Platonic idea of truth – the idea of a metaphysical truth that is incompatible with opinions. Arendt refers to “truths of opinions” in the context of her discussion of Socrates’ art of “midwifery,” the art of helping citizens articulate their opinions and discern the truth that inheres in them. I unpack what Arendt might mean by “truths of opinions” firstly by exploring Arendt’s understanding of opinion as doxa – as the world “as it appears to me.” My key proposition here is that doxa and the process of articulating doxa are relational in their nature: an individual can formulate and apprehend her doxa only in making the effort to learn about and apprehend the doxai of others. This is why, as I show, Arendt’s Socrates found it so important to assume the role of a facilitator who helps an individual to articulate her doxai by bringing it into relation with the doxai of others. Secondly, I demonstrate that thinking as a quest for meaning plays a key role in the process of formulating doxai. I argue that the dialogues that Arendt’s Socrates initiates in order to facilitate the process of
discerning “truths of doxai” provoke an individual to enquire into the meaning of how the world appears to her and to others, to endow phenomena in this world with significance and to reflect on the implications of how she “sees” the world and understands its meaning.

My argument is thus that “the truth of opinion” is an example of truth that corresponds to thinking understood as the exercise of reason. It is the truth of that which is disclosed to an individual through the quest for the meaning of her own doxa and of the doxai of others. I also introduce and discuss the idea of “truthfulness” as a characteristic of an individual in relation to her willingness to engage in the process of inquiring into truth thus conceived. Moreover, I explore Arendt’s concept of thinking as a dialogue of the “two-in-one” and demonstrate in which sense Arendt suggests that, for Socrates, it was the key criterion for someone being able and willing to be “truthful” in articulating the truth of her doxa.

In Chapter Three I proceed with exploring the idea of truth in relation to the quest for meaning by engaging with Arendt’s essay on Lessing, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing” (delivered as a public address in 1959, first published in 1968). This essay addresses the challenge of living in “dark times” – times which include, but are not limited to, totalitarianism. In “dark times” humans choose to, or are forced to, withdraw from public spaces – in so doing losing their ability to relate to one another through speaking and acting in concert. For Arendt, “dark times” are always accompanied by the destruction of public places – places which Arendt describes as the world that appears between individuals and which both separate and connect them. Moreover, “dark times” always carry the risk that humans will lose their sense of the reality of the world since whether humans can acquire a sense of reality depends on whether the world is seen from a plurality of perspectives and whether humans are willing and able to share these perspectives with one another.

Arendt views Lessing as an important figure in helping us recognise the peculiar kind of destruction that “dark times” involve, to understand what it is that we can do to preserve
the common world and a sense of the reality of this world in such times, and to reflect on these times once they are past so as to avert them in the future. I argue that Arendt ascribes particular significance to Lessing’s commitment to think for himself (selbstdenken) which allows him to preserve his ability to face up to “reality” and to maintain his commitment to the world even when the world itself has become inhumane. Thinking for oneself, as I show, in turn informs Lessing’s understanding of friendship, in the particular sense of “political” friendship, which Arendt opposes to “fraternity.” For Arendt’s Lessing, friends are those who are committed to thinking for themselves and to asserting their diverse opinions in the discourse of friendship – the discourse about the world that lies “between” friends and in which friends share a common interest. As Arendt sees it, such friendship can become a political principle of conduct in “dark times.” For friendship can ensure that humans refrain from accepting any doctrinal or ideological truth liable to endanger their relationships of friendship, which, for Arendt, is the prototype for the relationship of plurality.

Contrary to the view commonly held by Arendt’s critics that Arendt uses the figure of Lessing in order to articulate and counter the threats that the idea of truth can pose for the political realm, I argue that we cannot understand the complexity of Arendt’s account of truth in her Lessing essay without allowing for a sense of truth that is not antagonistic to politics – a sense of truth that corresponds to the domain of meaning. That Arendt foresees the possibility of such truth manifests itself in a number of themes she addresses in the essay: her emphasis on Lessing’s demand that every friend speak what “he deems truth”; her reflections on how Lessing sought to defend the “relative rightness of opinions,” which, I argue, echoes Socrates’ concerns about truths of doxai; and her exploration of how it is possible to enable individuals who lived under the Nazi regime to face up to the reality of the past without attempting to “master” it once and for all. In all these instances, as I demonstrate, there is a way of speaking of truth as that which is related to the human need to constitute meaning.
In Chapter Four I turn to Arendt’s essay “Understanding and Politics” (drafted between 1951 and 1954, first published in 1954). My analysis of this essay allows me to consider the notion of truth in relation to the quest for meaning in the context of Arendt’s discussion of how can we “understand” the event of totalitarianism which she saw as the key political event of the twentieth century. As I argue, in the essay Arendt uses the notion of “understanding” in the sense of thinking as the exercise of the faculty of reason. I emphasise that, for Arendt, the role of understanding totalitarianism is not to produce definitive and conclusive answers about this event but to help humans endow it with meaning. My analysis of the essay highlights that understanding as the quest for meaning is an activity without end that every individual should undertake for herself and which can take as many paths as there are unique positions that individuals occupy in the world. This is because the quest for meaning is driven by the need of individuals to “reconcile themselves to reality” (Arendt 1994a, 307). For every individual comes to the world as a “stranger” and hence has the need to relate to the world and to others and to orient herself in the world.

I argue that thinking can satisfy this need of individuals to “reconcile themselves to reality” only when individuals are attentive to the “new” that constitutes the unique “nature” of every event, including that of totalitarianism, and only when individuals refuse to subsume the event under general laws of causation and traditional frameworks of concepts and theories. This is why Arendt calls upon historians and actors to open themselves to thinking about the “nature” of totalitarianism as a unique phenomenon and to pursue a “true understanding” that will allow them to face up to the horrific originality of totalitarianism. I explore Arendt’s concept of “true understanding,” demonstrating that by highlighting the significance of thinking in the sense of an exercise of reason, Arendt does not seek to downplay the role of the quest for knowledge that corresponds to intellect but rather argues that the quest for knowledge should be oriented by the search for meaning.
In Chapter Five I investigate Arendt’s essay “Truth and Politics” (first published in 1967). At the centre of this essay is the notion of the “truths of facts” and Arendt’s discussion of how these truths have been put in danger by the phenomenon of “organized lying.” I show that in the essay Arendt assigns to truth and truth-telling an important political role – that of ensuring the continuity and endurance of the world so that humans can share the world with their contemporaries and with their ancestors and future generations. Arendt’s argument about the importance of the “truths of facts” for the political realm is well explored in the literature. My emphasis in analysing “Truth and Politics” is on the relationship that can be elicited between facts, as Arendt understands them, and truth in relation to the quest for meaning. I unpack this relationship firstly by exploring the two-way connection between truths of facts and truths of doxai (the world as “it appears to me”), which in the essay Arendt describes in terms of “validity of opinions.” I seek to demonstrate that opinions and facts are not opposed, for Arendt, but distinct and interrelated. On the one hand, I propose that the activity of “representative thinking” that helps articulate doxai must be grounded in the recognition of facts as given and unchangeable. On the other hand, I emphasise that in order to ensure that facts are recognised and remembered they need to be contextualised and interpreted in the discourse about doxai.

Secondly, drawing on the insight of Peg Birmingham (2012), I argue against the charge by some of Arendt’s critics that in “Truth and Politics,” she derives her conception of facts from a kind of positivist-empiricist understanding of reality. For Arendt reality is more than the mere sum of facts, as the process of recognising reality involves a process of constituting meaning of phenomena, and hence the exercise of reason, not only of cognition or intellect. I show that in order to be established, preserved and remembered, facts need more than a dutiful recorder who mechanically reports on what happened or is happening: I demonstrate that, from Arendt’s perspective, facts need to be endowed with meaning, which becomes
possible by virtue of exercising reason in the form of storytelling. Storytelling is initiated by a historian, and while telling a story, the historian must leave the basic factual content intact, must not modify or manufacture it. Yet the task of the historian is to present facts in such a way that they become meaningful for her audience. To be able to conduct this process of transforming facts into a meaningful story, a storyteller needs to know how to be “truthful,” that is, to see and represent the events of the past from the standpoint of “situated impartiality” and to pay equal tribute to all participants in the story and their experiences, regardless whether they are “winners” or “losers.” From truth-telling thus understood arises the ability of individuals to judge, that is, as Arendt puts it in *The Life of the Mind*, “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (Arendt 1978, 193).

A separate section in Chapter Five is devoted to the phenomenon of self-deception, which Arendt argues is a characteristic feature of the modern phenomenon of “organized lying,” in contrast to traditional lies. “Self-deception” occurs when a liar starts believing in her own lies. Unlike the common view of self-deception, Arendt does not consider it as a mitigating consequence, as though self-deception makes the individual herself a victim of lying. Instead, Arendt describes liars who deceive both themselves and others as more dangerous and disagreeable than those who remain aware that they tell lies. By considering Arendt’s view of “self-deception,” I further explore the question of the relationship between facts and thinking as the exercise of reasoning. Drawing on the insight of Marguerite La Caze (2013), I relate the problem of “self-deception” to the absence of the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” that is, the dialogue of thought that allows an individual to start questioning and doubting that which is presented to her as truths. The discussion of Arendt’s argument concerning “self-deception” allows me to introduce the question of the personal responsibility of an individual for searching and establishing factual truths. This will prepare the ground for my last chapter, in which I consider the essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship”
(the address delivered during 1964 at American universities and over both BBC radio in England and Pacifica Radio in America, first published in the BBC magazine *The Listener* in the same year).

Chapter Six allows me to explore the question of what distinguishes those individuals who are willing to engage in the quest for meaning and are open to the possibility of constituting truth through this quest from those who, like Eichmann, shut this quest down altogether. Through an investigation of Arendt’s essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” I show that in order to answer this question Arendt brings into discussion the notions of personal responsibility and judgment. Arendt explores these notions in two different contexts: firstly, why so many of the actors who lived under the Nazi regime failed to judge for themselves the advent of totalitarianism, a situation without precedent, and became complicit in the crimes of the regime, and secondly, why so many “spectators” who look back at the Nazi totalitarian past flee from the challenge of judging the conduct of these actors. In regard to the second aspect of judgment, Arendt observes a common fear of passing judgment on the conduct of individuals who lived under Nazi rule. However, her argument is that we cannot adequately understand Nazi crimes and prevent such crimes from happening again unless we start judging individual human beings, their conduct, their choices and actions, rather than the totalitarian system itself or the general historical laws that allegedly brought about this system. It is only by recognising that part of the responsibility for Nazi crimes rests with humans, rather than seeing humans as mere “cogs” in the system, that we can restore the dignity of being human.

On the other hand, in Chapter Six I focus on how Arendt explores why some few individuals who lived under the Third Reich were able to assume personal responsibility for judging for themselves this new situation of totalitarian rule, thus avoiding collaboration with the regime, while others failed to take such responsibility, thereby allowing themselves to go
with the flow of events and become complicit with the Nazi criminal system of rule. I explore Arendt’s argument that what distinguished those individuals who took personal responsibility for judging for themselves and thus did not cooperate with the regime was not a formal education in morality or an attachment to a strict moral code. What enabled individuals to preserve their personal integrity in the time of total Nazi domination was an ability to exercise a kind of judgment that is not based on rules, one that produces its “own principle” for every specific situation. The willingness to exercise such judgment protected individuals from engaging in or commissioning evil deeds as mandated by the criminal order that the Nazi powers created.

I conclude Chapter Six by showing that, for Arendt, only those individuals who were committed to the Socratic practice of the dialogue of the “two-in-one” were capable of such non-rule-based judgment. This is because the dialogue of thinking enables the individual to form a relationship with herself, to ask herself whether she will be able to live together with herself if she commits an evil deed. Arendt’s observation is that in most cases under totalitarian rule, this practice of “living explicitly together with oneself” led individuals to withdraw completely from the world and abstain from any action in the public realm. However, Arendt does not believe that this inaction was a sign of weakness. Her argument is that recognising one’s impotence provided a means for humans to preserve some of their dignity and power. She proposes that if more individuals had committed this act of “civil disobedience” and consciously avoided doing anything, the conditions would have been created for the possibility for bringing the system down.

That Arendt consistently returns to the figure of Socrates in her writings highlights how important this figure is for her and for her reflections on the relationship between truth, meaning and politics. This further justifies an approach I adopted for this thesis – to choose Arendt’s essay on Socrates as an entry point for my investigation into the sense of truth in
relation to the quest for meaning, and the relationship of truth thus conceived and politics. It is to the analysis of the essay “Socrates,” to which I now turn in my next chapter.
Chapter Two. Socrates and the disclosure of the truth of opinion

In this chapter I analyse one of Arendt’s early essays, “Socrates.” At the centre of the essay, as we shall see, is the figure of Socrates, to whom Arendt turns in an attempt to discern a pre-Platonic vision of the relationship between philosophy and politics which is unburdened by the legacy of the Platonic tradition of metaphysics. Having observed the trial of Socrates, which led to his teacher’s death sentence, Plato comes to despise opinions and turns away from the political realm towards the realm of Ideas in search of absolute metaphysical truth. Plato uses the knowledge of this truth to justify the absolute rule of the philosopher over the polis. On the other hand, Socrates, as Arendt portrays him in the essay, is committed to his self-assumed mission of being not a ruler but a “midwife” and “gadfly” of the polis. Arendt’s Socrates understands his mission as running together the articulation of the opinions of his fellow citizens and the examination of these opinions in a way that discerns the truth in each of them. When discussing the Socratic understanding of truth, Arendt uses the expression “the truth of one’s opinion” (Arendt 2005, 19), which I see as strong evidence in support of my argument that in Arendt’s writings, there is a sense of truth as not antithetical to politics. My reading of the Socrates essay is thus that by engaging with the Socratic insights, Arendt explores the proposition that truth may be disclosed in the process of examining, debating and discussing opinions.
I further emphasise that in the essay Arendt refers to “opinion” in the Greek sense of *doxa* – the world as “it appears to me.” *Doxa* is understood by Arendt as an expression and comprehension of how an individual sees the world from her unique standpoint, one that is different from everyone else’s position in the world. Socratic “midwifery” (maieutics) consists thus in assisting an individual to communicate to others how the world appears to her and at the same time receive an insight into how the world appears to others. In turn, by encouraging his fellow citizens to talk about their *doxai* and bringing them in relation to each other, Socrates helps individuals to see that it is the “same” world (Arendt 2005, 14) that appears to all of them, albeit from different perspectives. I thus argue that, for Arendt, the process of discerning truth that “invariably adheres” to *doxa* (Arendt 2005, 19) plays an important political role as it can help individuals see the world as common to them.

Furthermore, I show that thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning can be seen as a vehicle for the relationship between truth and political opinions. As I argue, the quest for meaning is necessarily involved in the process of illuminating the truth that potentially inheres in every opinion. I also reflect on Arendt’s understanding of thinking as the “dialogue of the two-in-one” and consider how thinking in this sense may be relevant to the process of articulating and examining *doxai* and discerning truth in them.

Before turning to the analysis of the essay, I would like to make two preliminary notes. Firstly, the materials that constitute this essay were originally developed for the lecture series “Philosophy and Politics: The Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution,” which Arendt presented in 1954. The original notes of the lecture series are available in the electronic archive *The Hannah Arendt Papers* at the Library of Congress (Arendt 1954). They subsequently appeared in a special issue of *Social*
Research in 1990 under the title “Philosophy and Politics” (Arendt 1990). They were further edited by Jerome Kohn and published in 2005 as a separate essay called “Socrates” in the collection of essays The Promise of Politics (Arendt 2005). In this chapter, I work with this latest edition of the essay.

Secondly, for the sake of the argument I make in this chapter, I accept Arendt’s view that Socrates and Plato are two historical figures with distinct, and often conflicting, teachings. Commenting in The Life of the Mind on debates regarding the relationship between Socrates and Plato, Arendt says the following: “I personally believe that there exists a sharp dividing line between what is authentically Socratic and the philosophy taught by Plato” (Arendt 1978, 168). So, though conceding that most elements of Socratic thought are known to us through Plato, Arendt contends, albeit with some reservations, that Socrates’ original philosophy can be distinguished from Plato’s systematising approach. She nonetheless emphasises that the line of demarcation which separates Socrates from Plato is often difficult to draw because the ideas of both thinkers are subtly infused by Plato’s early and late dialogues. Arendt, therefore, is fully aware of the “controversy about the historical Socrates,” but states that she will chiefly “ignore it” for the purpose of engaging with the insights of the Socratic thought (Arendt 1978, 168).

1. Plato’s and Socrates’ understanding of truth

I begin my analysis by looking at section I of the essay, its two-page introduction. An examination of Arendt’s notes in the electronic archive The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress (Arendt 1954) reveals that this fragment was not a part of the original lecture on Socrates she delivered in 1954. This means that Arendt’s editor
Kohn, in preparing the essay for publication, added this section to the essay – he must have seen it as thematically linked to the content of the Socrates essay. This piece was written by Arendt in the same time period as the Socrates lecture: it occurs in Arendt’s lecture series “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” delivered in 1953 (Arendt 1953a).

This introductory section is of interest to us as in it Arendt refers to thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning. The focus of this section is on the beginning of the Western tradition of philosophy, which, as Arendt remarks, started with the writings of Plato and Aristotle. In this section, Arendt points out the fact that the two philosophers were profoundly influenced by an experience of “a politically decaying society” in the fourth century BC in Greece (Arendt 2005, 6). As a result, she argues, the whole tradition of Western metaphysics which takes its cue from the Platonic school came to distrust political experiences such that “the gap between thought and action” opened up (Arendt 2005, 6).

To understand what Arendt means by “the gap between thought and action” I refer to Canovan (1990, 142), who argues that in Arendt’s lecture notes from 1953–1954 on which the Socrates essay is based, we can find “sketches for a kind of myth of a philosophical Fall – a story which she [Arendt] evidently found tempting, although not entirely convincing.” This is how Canovan describes this “myth”: “The story goes like this. In the days of the early Greek polis, before academic philosophy had been invented, the citizens of Athens lived a life in which thought and action were united. This primordial unity was symbolized by the word *logos*, which meant speech as well as thought” (1990, 142). Canovan continues saying that by “unity” of thought and action Arendt means that “in the citizens’ endless talk, action disclosed thought, while
thought itself informed the actions of the citizens as they persuaded one another” (142–143). The trial of Socrates was a turning point in the story of the relationship between thought and action. This trial led Plato to justify a separation of philosophy and politics, and, as Canovan remarks, in Arendt’s opinion, this separation had negative implications for both thought and action: “once action and thought were separated from one another, each tended to degenerate into coercion that denied the plurality and freedom, action by degenerating into speechless violence, and thought into a kind of single-track logical reasoning that was no less hostile to human plurality and spontaneity” (Canovan 1990, 143).

Now we are in a better position to understand why in her Socrates essay Arendt is concerned with the opening up of the “gap” between thinking and action in ancient Greece. In the introductory section of the essay, we find a claim which is consistent with Canovan’s commentary. Arendt is concerned with a decline in both thinking and acting as a result of their separation under the impact of the beginning of the Platonic tradition of metaphysics. As she puts it, “all thinking activity that is not simply the calculation of means to obtain an intended or willed end, but is concerned with meaning in the most general sense, came to play the role of an ‘afterthought,’ that is, after action had decided and determined reality. Action, on the other hand, was relegated to the meaningless realm of the accidental and haphazard” (Arendt 2005, 6). Here Arendt conceives of a kind of thinking that is a non-utilitarian activity which is devoted to a search for meaning rather than to a production of results. Arendt is concerned here with the fact that the Platonic tradition of thought downplays the role of thinking as a quest for meaning. Thinking, in this non-utilitarian sense, is regarded by the tradition as having little significance for inspiring and orienting political action. In turn, political
action came to be seen by the tradition as having no meaning of its own, as futile and arbitrary. For from the perspective of the Platonic tradition of metaphysics, the meaningful and the significant for humans is located not in the political realm but in the superior realm of Being, which is accessible to the philosophers only.

This reference to thinking as a quest for meaning offered by Arendt in 1953 demonstrates that there is remarkable consistency in how Arendt approaches the activity of thinking throughout her writings. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, in *The Life of the Mind* lectures delivered in 1973, she is likewise concerned with the activity of thinking as more than a quest for final answers and definitive results, and which is concerned with constituting meaning. Kohn is fully justified in his editorial decision to start the Socrates essay with the piece in which Arendt reflects on thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, in contrast to thinking *qua* intellect that can bring definitive and certain results. What concerns Arendt, as we saw above, is that thinking as reason is given only a secondary role in the framework of the Platonic tradition of thought. In this chapter I argue that there is a way of reading the Socrates essay such that thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning comes to play a key role in the life of the polis. For thinking thus understood constitutes the core of Socrates’ maieutics or midwifery – an activity which is concerned with assisting individuals in articulating their opinions and discerning truth in them.

The next section of the essay, after the introductory section about the opening up of the “gap” between philosophy and politics, is devoted to the impact of the trial of Socrates on Plato’s thought. Arendt shows that having witnessed the trial and death of Socrates, Plato came to distrust the polis – “the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates’ teachings”
One of the “fundamentals” that Plato questioned was the Socratic attitude to persuasion. Plato, Arendt says, came to “doubt the validity of persuasion” (Arendt 2005, 7, emphasis in the original). Having witnessed how Socrates failed to persuade judges of his innocence with his presentation of his apology at the trial, Plato came to create his own apology to defend Socrates as part of his Phaedo dialogue. Plato’s apology in the Phaedo, Arendt argues, attempts to convince the audience by instigating fear and invoking remunerations – ending with “a myth of the Hereafter, complete with bodily punishments and rewards” (7). Arendt shows that by attempting to address the citizens of the polis in that way, Plato perverts the very idea of persuasion. As Arendt notes, in Athens, “to persuade, peithein, was the specifically political form of speech, and since the Athenians were proud that they, in distinction to the barbarians, conducted their political affairs in the form of speech and without compulsion, they considered rhetoric, the art of persuasion, the highest, the truly political art” (7). If for the Athenians persuasion was an alternative to coercion, Plato came to believe that the most efficient persuasion is effected through coercion – not by physical force but by using words to force others into certain beliefs and conduct.

The second “fundamental” of Socratic thought that Plato came to question under the impact of the trial of Socrates is the Socratic attitude to opinion. Arendt suggests that, unlike Socrates, Plato was influenced by “the spectacle of Socrates submitting his own doxa [opinion] to the irresponsible opinions of the Athenians, and being outvoted by a majority” (Arendt 2005, 7–8). The trial of Socrates thus convinced Plato that opinions cannot be trusted with defining life in the realm of human affairs. Opinions are constantly changing, they are unpredictable and unreliable, and finally they can threaten the life of the philosopher and his ability to engage in philosophising. This led Plato,
Arendt remarks, to “despise opinions and yearn for absolute standards” (Arendt 2005, 8).

Arendt further proposes that Plato found the source of these absolute standards for the realm of human affairs in his doctrine of eternal Ideas. As Arendt puts it, Plato was first “to use the ideas for political purposes” (Arendt 2005, 11). Arendt remarks that originally the notion of the Idea, for Plato, was “purely philosophical” (8), but after the Socratic trial Plato came to regard the eternal Ideas as “standards and measurements” (8) for the political realm. By transforming the doctrine of Ideas in that way, Plato believes that he is able to justify that the philosopher should “become the ruler of the city” (Arendt 2005, 9) and replace the *phronimos* – a Greek word for “an understanding man whose insights into the world of human affairs qualify him for leadership” (9). Arendt remarks that Plato, by arguing that the philosopher is the fittest to run the polis, went against a long-established belief that philosophers are “good for nothing” (9) – that is, of no use in the political realm.

Arendt emphasises that by justifying the ruler of the philosopher over the polis, Plato is concerned with the best interests of the polis since he believes that the philosopher alone has access to the knowledge of the Idea of the Good – the highest in the Platonic hierarchy of Ideas. Therefore, for Plato, the philosopher alone can know best what is “beneficial and useful” for the polis (Arendt 2005, 9). Furthermore, Plato sees the rule of the philosopher not only as a way of securing the best government for the polis but also as a way of preserving the philosopher’s physical safety and “earthly immortality,” both in constant danger, as he concludes after having witnessed the conflict between Socrates and the polis (12). Arendt specifies that the “earthly immortality” of the philosopher, that is, the preservation of remembrance about him, is
as important for Plato as the philosopher’s physical survival. She thus points out that Plato concludes from the trial of Socrates that “only rulership might assure the philosopher of that earthly immortality which the polis was supposed to assure all its citizens” (Arendt 2005, 12). To understand what Arendt means here, I refer to The Human Condition, in which Arendt describes the ancient polis as “a kind of organized remembrance” (Arendt 1998, 197) which ensured that the significance and memories of the “great” human deeds, actions and thoughts are preserved and can survive beyond an individual life span. This preservation becomes possible due to the fact that speech and action within the polis are witnessed by others, and that its citizens can “share their words and deeds” among themselves (197).

In the Socrates essay, Arendt shows that Plato became aware that the truth which the philosopher contemplates when he opens himself to the experience of the eternal cannot be preserved in the same manner as human deeds and words are preserved in the polis, that is, by sharing this “eternal truth” with the multitude of other citizens and subjecting it to discussion and debates. Plato became convinced under the impact of the trial of Socrates that “as soon as the philosopher submitted his truth, the reflection of the eternal, to the polis, it became immediately an opinion among opinions” (Arendt 2005, 12). Therefore, for Plato, the “eternal truth” of the philosopher – the metaphysical truth which has the character of an absolute and which accords with the eternal Ideas – cannot coexist with opinions. Arendt thus remarks that in Plato’s writings, opinions are always opposed to “truth” in the Platonic sense – “Platonic truth, even when doxa is not mentioned, is always understood as the very opposite of opinion” (Arendt 2005, 7–8).

In response to Socrates’ trial, Plato then attempts to devise a way of conducting political life that does not rely on citizens’ opinions about what is good for the polis and
on persuasion in the original sense of *peithein* that seeks to ensure the support of the citizens through speech: “Plato designed his tyranny of truth, in which it is not what is temporally good, of which men can be persuaded, but eternal truth, of which men cannot be persuaded, that is to rule the city” (Arendt 2005, 12). In other words, Plato attempted to subordinate the relationship between philosophy and politics to his concerns about keeping intact and preserving the “eternal truth” of the philosopher.

Arendt claims that Plato’s vision of opinions and truth as incompatible was a major break from the original insights of Socrates, who did not regard opinions and truth as mutually exclusive: “The opposition of truth and opinion was certainly the most anti-Socratic conclusion that Plato drew from Socrates’ trial” (Arendt 2005, 8). Arendt shows that Socrates, like Plato, also believed that the philosopher should play a role in the polis and tried to bring philosophical thinking, as he understood it, in relation to politics. However, unlike Plato, Socrates did not believe that the role of the philosopher is to “teach” his fellow citizens and legislate for the polis according to absolute truth. Socrates was certain that “as a philosopher truly he had nothing to teach his fellow citizens” (11). Neither did he presume that the political realm should be subordinated to absolute truth in the Platonic sense. Instead, Socrates was interested in how he could help the citizens of the polis “to see in every doxa truth and to speak in such a way that the truth of one’s opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others” (19). Here Arendt shows that Socrates was concerned with what truth is from the perspective of the polis and the persona of “the citizen,” who lives in the company of others, rather than from the perspective of the philosopher who chooses to devote his life to the solitary contemplation of the eternal.
Socrates’ concerns about truth in relation to the polis inspired him to assume the mission of being a “midwife” of the polis. Socrates uses the metaphor of maieutics or midwifery, Arendt remarks, as he wants “to help others give birth to what they themselves thought anyhow, to find the truth in their doxa,” that is, opinion (Arendt 2005, 15). Socrates’ midwifery thus consists in bringing together the articulation of opinions of the citizens and the examination of the opinions in a way that discerns some truth in each of them. Arendt further states that the “method” of the Socratic midwifery, that is, delivering truths inherent in opinions, was dialegesthai. She defines dialegesthai as the practice of “talking something through” (13).

Arendt proposes that both Plato and Aristotle have the concept of dialegesthai in their teachings, but their interpretation of dialegesthai is different from the Socratic one. She shows that as a result of the experience of Socrates’ trial, Plato came to consider dialegesthai as a specifically philosophical form of speech and the opposite of persuasion and rhetoric (Arendt 2005, 12). What this means is that, for Plato, the practice of dialegesthai or dialectics should be reserved for philosophers and philosophical matters only, that is, for the study of the immutable, universal and eternal Ideas. As Arendt remarks, for Plato, “the chief distinction between persuasion and dialectic is that the former always addresses a multitude (peithein ta plēthē) whereas dialectic is possible only as a dialogue between two” (13). From Plato’s perspective, persuasion, in turn, should be used to deal with the unreliable and fleeting opinions of the many who are not deemed by Plato to be fit to engage in dialegesthai.

Moreover, as we saw above, Arendt emphasises that Plato radically diverts from the original Greek definition of “persuasion” as peithein, that is, as settling affairs by means of speech rather than coercion (Arendt 2005, 7, 13). For Plato, persuasion
acquires the connotation of violence – for him, “persuasion is not the opposite of rule of violence, it is only another form of it” (13). Therefore, as I read it, for Arendt, the Platonic opposition between *dialegesthai* and persuasion, and the corresponding opposition between the few and the many, are part and parcel of the Platonic “tyranny of truth” (12) over opinion: only the few, the philosophers, are deemed fit to practise *dialegesthai* and aspire to ascend to absolute truth, while the multitude of citizens is seen as incapable of knowing the truth in the Platonic sense. Therefore, Plato asserts that it would be best for them if the philosopher decides what opinions they should hold according to the philosopher’s knowledge of the truth and enforces these opinions on them.

As Arendt points out, Socrates’ approach to *dialegesthai* was different: “Although it is more than probable that Socrates was the first who had used *dialegesthai* (talking something through with somebody) systematically, he probably did not look upon this as the opposite of or even the counterpart to persuasion, and it is certain that he did not oppose the results of this dialectic to *doxa*, opinion” (Arendt 2005, 13–14). What Arendt aims at here is to show that the tension between dialectical conversation, *dialegesthai*, and persuasion was alien to the original Socratic teachings. For him, *dialegesthai* can and should be used *in order to* examine an opinion and to discern the truth of the opinion in the process of this examination. To illustrate this, Arendt describes how at the trial Socrates chose *dialegesthai* as a method for his defence: “Socrates insisted in talking the matter through with his judges as he used to talk about all kinds of things with single Athenian citizens or with his pupils; and he believed that he could arrive at some truth thereby and persuade the others of it” (13).
There is another important feature of the Socratic vision of *dialegesthai* that is of particular interest to Arendt. The Socratic view that *dialegesthai* is not opposed to persuasion means that Socrates, as Arendt portrays him, saw no binary between the few and the many, the “professional thinkers” who are deemed to be experts in thinking and ordinary citizens – the binary that became prominent in Plato, as we saw above. For Socrates, *dialegesthai* is not an elite activity that only philosophers are qualified to engage it. *Dialegesthai* can and should be practised by all citizens as every citizen has an opinion, and in every opinion truth can potentially inhere.

Now we are in a better position to understand why it is the figure of Socrates that Arendt is interested in when reflecting on the relationship between truth and politics. Socrates provides Arendt with an example of a philosopher who did not consider thinking – and as I show below, *dialegesthai* is a mode of thinking – as a prerogative of the chosen few but as potentially accessible to everyone. In another essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (Arendt 2003b), in which Arendt also discusses the figure of Socrates, she claims that “the faculty of thinking, as distinguished from the thirst for knowledge, must be ascribed to everybody; it cannot be a privilege of the few” (166). To understand what Arendt means here by “the faculty of thinking” we need to look at a distinction that Arendt adopts from Kant – “between reason, the urge to think and to understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge” (163). It is the same distinction that Arendt discusses in *The Life of the Mind* – between intellect, which engages in the quest for knowledge, and reason, which is concerned with “the quest for meaning” (Arendt 1978, 15). Therefore, when Arendt argues in “Thinking and Moral Considerations” that “the faculty of thinking, as distinguished from the thirst for knowledge … cannot be a privilege of the few” (Arendt
2003b, 166), she refers to thinking in the sense of an exercise of reason which allows humans to pursue the quest for meaning. Her point is that every human being, regardless of whether one is a “professional thinker” or not, has the ability to generate meaning. And every human has not only this ability but also the “need” to endow with meaning and significance the world and phenomena in it: “man has an inclination and, unless pressed by more urgent needs of living, even a need (Kant’s ‘need of reason’) to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with his intellectual abilities, his brain power, than to use them as an instrument for knowing and doing” (163).

By extending the practice of dialegesthai to everyone in the agora, Arendt’s Socrates thus affirms this belief that thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning is an ability and a need everyone has, not only philosophers. Furthermore, as I argued above, for Socrates, the practice of dialegesthai is concerned with helping the citizens to discern the truth that inheres in each of their opinions. If we bring together these two ways of seeing Socratic maieutics, then, I submit, there is a way of reading the Socrates essay so that the truth that Socrates seeks to disclose by way of examining opinions is the truth of “reason,” not “intellect,” and to disclose this truth, an individual should be willing to engage in a quest for meaning. I elaborate further on this claim later in the chapter after I consider the Socratic conception of opinion as doxa, which Arendt adopts in her Socrates essay.

So far I have discussed how Arendt articulates the difference between the Socratic and Platonic approaches to dialegesthai and persuasion, to the role of the philosopher in the polis, and to the relationship between truth and opinion. I showed that for Socrates, unlike for Plato, truth and opinion are not opposed to each other since Socrates believes that truth in the sense of “reason” can emerge from the exploration of opinions by
means of *dialegesthai* – a form of dialogue about opinions that is accessible not only to the few who are philosophers but to everyone. In the Socrates essay, after comparing Plato’s and Socrates’ teachings, Arendt proceeds by arguing that Socrates’ commitment to helping his fellow citizens articulate their opinions and discern truth in them is rooted in his understanding of opinions as *doxa* (plural: *doxai*) – the world as “it appears to me” (Arendt 2005, 14). In the next section, I will consider what Arendt means by *doxa* and what the conception of opinion as *doxa* contributes to our understanding of truth as that which is not antagonistic to opinions.

**2. Doxa as the world “as it appears to me”**

Arendt remarks that “to Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, ‘of what appears to me’” (Arendt 2005, 14). She clarifies this as follows:

This *doxa* had as its topic not what Aristotle called the *eikos*, the probable, the many *versimilia* (as distinguished from the *unum verum*, the one truth, on one hand, and the limitless falsehoods, the *falsa infinita*, on the other) but comprehension of the world “as it opens itself to me.” It was not, therefore, subjective fantasy and arbitrariness, but was also not something absolute and valid for all. (Arendt 2005, 14)

What Arendt implies in this passage is that *doxa*, as conceived by Socrates, is closely linked to the understanding of the world as phenomenal: the world does not simply exist as a “thing” awaiting to be discovered and grasped by humans. Rather, the world appears or is disclosed to human beings. Each human being receives the appearance of the world in a unique way as each occupies her distinct standpoint in the world that is
different from everyone else’s position. *Doxa* is thus both a “formulation” (expression) and “comprehension” of this distinct perspective on the world that a particular individual possesses (Arendt 2005, 14).

Arendt’s use of Socrates to offer this rich and phenomenological idea of *doxa*, opinion, is exemplary of her “perspectivism” (see, for example, Brennan & Malpas 2011; Villa 1999; Tavani 2013). Arendt’s “perspectivism” is an assumption that the world is perceived by individuals from distinct perspectives which correspond to their unique positions in the world. Therefore, there always exists a plurality of different outlooks which are not reducible to one single perspective on the world. Dana Villa discusses how Arendt’s “perspectivism” is influenced by Nietzsche. Quoting from Nietzsche, he demonstrates that Arendt is interested in Nietzsche’s idea that “there is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing’” (Villa 1995, 97, emphasis in the original). As Villa sees it, what Arendt finds attractive in perspectivism is that “this position frees us from the despotism of the ascetic will to power/will to truth (an ideal which ‘permits no other interpretation, no other goal’), affirming instead the essential pluralism of the world” (97). Villa further argues that perspectivism is reflected in Arendt’s views on truth and politics: “Arendt’s politics of opinion, her emphasis on the constitutive role of perspective and the coercive nature of truth, can be seen as a specifically political version of Nietzschean perspectivism” (97). What Villa means here is that critically adopting the perspectivist approach to the world, Arendt is able to counter the Platonic idea of the “tyranny of truth” and Plato’s reductive views of opinion.

Let me elaborate on this insight in regard to the Socrates essay. If we accept perspectivism, then opinion in the sense of *doxa* is not something that can be
transcended and overcome for the sake of the metaphysical truth, as Plato intended it. Plato’s understanding of truth neglects the fact that for humans the world can exist only in a mode of appearing, that is, in a mode of *doxa*. *Doxa* is always partial – it reveals the world from a specific perspective which is limited by an individual’s position in the world. In the Socrates essay, Arendt represents Socrates as committed to this kind of “perspectivism.” She praises him for “accepting the limitations of truth for mortals” (Arendt 2005, 19), that is, for accepting that there can be no truth for humans independently of their particular existence in the world, independently of their *doxa*. For Arendt, *doxa* is beyond the truth/false criterion if by truth we mean the Platonic absolute truth, that is, the absolute view on the world from a standpoint outside and above the realm of human affairs. In so far as the world is disclosed to humans in the form of *doxa*, every human being sees the world from a particular perspective but never in its totality. Therefore, there is no single true perspective on the world in relation to which *doxa* can be measured, no single “objective” truth that can provide a benchmark for judging *doxa*.

Here it is important not to confuse Arendt’s perspectivism with relativism – a charge that is sometimes raised against Arendt’s understanding of opinion. I agree with Bernstein (2011), who argues that Arendt has her own unique way of thinking about truth which goes “beyond objectivism and relativism.” Canovan similarly remarks that Arendt’s views on truth can be subsumed under neither relativism nor objectivism:

Arendt was very far, then, from the purely subjectivist view that opinions on matters of politics and morals are simply private and incorrigible. While believing, however, that free discussion amongst reasonable individuals is the way to more realistic judgments and better-founded opinions, she did not believe
that at the end of that road lay anything remotely resembling universal concurrence in objective truth. (Canovan 1983, 108)

In turn, Villa insightfully argues that Arendt’s conception of truth as seen in the Socrates essay has a twofold character of unity and diversity. Villa (1999, 212) suggests that, for Arendt’s Socrates, “a human world [is] characterized by the absence of any absolute truth, yet one that is made beautiful by the availability of innumerable openings upon it.”

In the Socrates essay, Arendt does not say that doxai being relative are subjective, arbitrary and idiosyncratic. Arendt is careful to specify that doxai are not purely “subjective.” What distinguishes doxai from a subjective and relativist view is that they all provide an opening to the “same” world. This is how Arendt clarifies it:

The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man according to his position in it; and that the “sameness” of the world, its commonness (koinon, as the Greeks would say, “common to all”) or “objectivity” (as we would say from the subjective viewpoint of modern philosophy), resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world – and consequently their doxai (opinions) – “both you and I are human.” (Arendt 2005, 14)

In this passage, Arendt clearly states that doxai are not deprived of objectivity. This “objectivity,” however, is defined by Arendt in a particular sense: it is not related to some sort of pre-existing rationality but rather arises from an awareness that diverse doxai correspond to the “same” world. The sameness of the world, for individuals, consists in the fact that humans, regardless of their differences, are able to communicate
their doxai to others so that others understand how the world appears to them. Therein they are able to develop reciprocal insights into each other’s doxa and to see the world as “common” to them.

Let me clarify here that I do not want to argue that Arendt believes that those who take part in Socratic dialogues and communicate their opinions to each other will reach an agreement and as a result arrive at one truth about the world that will cancel out all the differences in their opinions. Socratic dialogues may enable humans to “see” the world as common to them but this does not mean that humans have to agree on one truth about this world. For Arendt, awareness about the commonness of the world is constituted through awareness that the world “appears” to humans in different ways, that there is an irreducible plurality of doxai. Therefore the communicative model proposed by Habermas (1977) cannot adequately describe Arendt’s approach to truth. While Habermas wants to push Arendt’s writings towards a conception of rational agreement that arises from communication between political actors, I submit that this model is foreign to Arendt’s works. For Arendt, the participants in the Socratic dialogue may never come to an agreement. Canovan in her reply to Habermas says that “the most fundamental point is that Arendt did not share Habermas’s crucial belief in the possibility of rational consensus on political questions. She did not believe that the ‘common convictions’ he refers to were to be had amongst free people” (Canovan 1983, 108). Let me illustrate Canovan’s insight with the Socrates essay – as I read it, dialogues initiated by Socrates enable individuals to “see” the world as common to them by accentuating differences between the positions of individuals and without resulting in any concurrence or harmony. For Arendt’s Socrates the value of the dialogues is that the individuals can walk away from them with an awareness that they
share the “same” world in common, albeit they may have come to realise that they see
the world from conflictual perspectives.

To better understand what Arendt means by the term “common world,” let me
recall Arendt’s famous metaphor of the table. As Arendt puts it in *The Human
Condition*,

to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between
those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around
it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.
The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our
falling over each other, so to speak. (Arendt 1998, 52)

If we relate this metaphor of the table to Arendt’s understanding of *doxa*, then
*doxa* corresponds to a perspective that opens up from a unique place that every human
has at the “table,” that is, in the world. Drawing on this metaphor, we can develop
further insight into what it means for an individual to articulate her *doxa*. Firstly, it
means to see how a perspective that opens up to me from my own “seat” is distinct
from everyone else’s position at the “table.” For this, I will need to engage in
conversation with those who sit around the “table” and learn how the world appears to
them from their “seats.” That way, I become more aware of where I am positioned at
the “table” in relation to others and how my position is distinct from theirs. Indeed, as
Arendt puts it in the essay, “*doxa* reveals itself to him [a human] in distinction from all
others” (Arendt 2005, 19). Consequently, by talking with all those with whom I share
the table, I will be able to see the commonality of the table itself, that is, the
commonality of the world which lies “between” me and others, dividing and uniting us at the same time.

Let me now relate these reflections on the notion of *doxa* as the world “as it appears to me” to Socratic maieutics as described by Arendt in the essay. In his maieutics Socrates is concerned with bringing together the articulation of opinions. Opinions are in turn understood as *doxai*, both as an expression and an understanding of how every individual receives the appearance of the world. Socrates’ maieutics thus attempts to give a voice to every *doxa*, to every unique perspective on the world and, as the second step, to help individuals to become aware of their *doxai* by inviting them to reflect on how their *doxai* are distinct from *doxai* of others. But why does Arendt’s Socrates believe that individuals need assistance with articulating and understanding their *doxai*? It is because, as I show below, *doxai* are relational in nature and, therefore, for an individual to be able to articulate *doxa*, she needs to engage in the intersubjective process involving a dialogue with others.

Firstly, I note that, as shown by Arendt in the essay, *doxai* are not self-evident. They require effort to be articulated, and such effort cannot be undertaken in private – the formulation of *doxa* requires the presence of others. This is what distinguishes opinion in the sense of *doxa* from an “opinion poll.” This is insightfully explained by McClure in the following terms:

To have an opinion, in Arendt’s lexicon, was not, as it is for modern survey research, a matter simply of responding to a question or registering one’s “feelings” on an imaginary thermometer of differential affect. Rather, it was a consequence of judgment. By the same token, the public deliverance of one’s
opinions, be it in speech or writing, in Arendt’s view of such things bore little resemblance to the conventions of subjective enunciation that elicit either a conventional nod of agreement or the equally conventional sign of its refusal, “That’s just your opinion.” Instead – crediting Kant with the discovery that even thinking, seemingly the most solitary of activities, depends on others – to deliver one’s opinion in public was to “communicate and expose to the test of others…whatever you may have found out when you were alone (Arendt 1092, 40).” (McClure 1997, 59)

McClure’s point in this passage is that the methodology of opinion polls treat opinion as a private matter, taking for granted that opinion can be simply recorded as personal statements, the sum of which will represent the view of the majority in a given society. The assumption here is that people form opinions independently of each other and announce them to others after they have been already formulated. For Arendt, however, the formulation of opinions is never a private and solipsistic enterprise. The articulation of doxai is a relational activity that requires addressing others in a form of speech and being willing to probe and question together with others what it is that one may hold as one’s opinion.

In the Socrates essay, Arendt puts great emphasis on the fact that doxai are not self-evident. As she highlights it, neither Socrates nor his interlocutors know their own doxai or the doxai of their dialogical partners before the beginning of a conversation: “nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion” (Arendt 2005, 15). This is why Socrates always begins with a question that aims at eliciting an account of doxai from his dialogical partners. Thus the first
condition of possibility for formulating one’s doxa is the presence of someone like Socrates who facilitates this process.

Furthermore, this facilitation cannot happen in the private realm as the articulation of doxa requires the “light” of the public space. As Arendt puts it, doxa “is related to the political realm, which is the public sphere in which everybody can appear and show who he himself is” (Arendt 2005, 14). In order to be able to articulate one’s unique perspective on the world, one’s doxa, an individual should leave her private environment and enter the public realm, that is, she must appear to the plurality of other individuals who have distinct perspectives in the world. Arendt, therefore, emphasises that “no doxa is possible” in private because “to assert one’s own opinion belonged to being able to show oneself, to be seen and heard by others” (Arendt 2005, 14). Here Arendt again uses the language of appearance – but this time, not only in relation to doxa (the world as “it appears to me”) but in relation to an individual who must appear to others if she wants to be able to articulate her doxa. Arendt thus emphasises that humans themselves are appearing beings. They need to “show themselves” or appear in the public realm. This appearance can happen through speech and action, whereby individuals distinguish themselves and disclose “who” they are. This disclosure of “who” one is, of one’s unique identity, is not possible without the presence of others – the appearance of an individual needs to be recognised by others, her speech and action needs to “be seen and heard.”

The relational nature of appearance is fully articulated in Arendt’s last manuscript The Life of the Mind. In its opening passage, Arendt emphasises the relational dimension of appearance as follows: “Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator. In other words, nothing that is, in so far as
it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is meant to be perceived by somebody” (Arendt 1978, 19, emphasis in the original). To clarify this statement, Arendt remarks that the act of appearing needs not only an appearing subject, but also a “spectator” (Arendt 1978, 19) – a recipient of appearance who is capable of perceiving one’s appearing and acknowledging it as such. Arendt’s point here is that we need others so that they can acknowledge our appearing, thereby assisting us to come into reality and to confirm our existence.

In the Socrates essay written in 1954 – almost 25 years before *The Life of the Mind* – Arendt likewise emphasises the primacy of appearance for humans and the relational nature of appearing. In the essay, Arendt defines the Greek polis as a space of mutual appearance – the only space that can allow humans to come into reality as unique individuals. The polis is described in the essay as “the public-political realm in which men attain their full humanity, their full reality as men, not only because they are (as in the privacy of the household) but also because they appear” (Arendt 2005, 21). What Arendt means here is that the reality of human existence depends on whether one’s appearance is perceived from a multitude of different perspectives. The polis in turn can provide a space in which one’s words and deeds can be seen and heard by the plurality of spectators, thus confirming their reality. Here we can see how Arendt anticipates her argument in *The Life of the Mind*, in which she states that “Being and Appearing coincide” (Arendt 1978, 19). However, we can also see here how Arendt’s thought developed over time – in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt extends her account of the relational nature of appearance beyond the public-political realm to include the existence of humans as well as nonhumans. In *The Life of the Mind*, she argues that
“dead matter, natural and artificial, changing and unchanging, depends in its being, that is, in its appearingness, on the presence of living creatures” (Arendt 1978, 19).

So far in my reading of Arendt’s account of the polis in *The Human Condition*, I have proceeded from the assumption that Arendt positively evaluates political life in the Greek polis and takes it as a model for political action and public space. That said, Arendt’s conception of the Greek polis was not without reservation. As Tsao (2002) argues, on the basis of a detailed textual analysis of the passages about the polis in *The Human Condition*, comes to the conclusion that Arendt is critical of the Athenian polis as a historical phenomenon because of the highly individualistic conception of action held by the Athenians, their prioritisation of action at the expense of work and labour, and their failure to experience a common world in their relationships with one another. As we will see below, Arendt raises a similar criticism in “Socrates,” and it is this failure of the polis’s citizens to constitute a common world that Arendt’s Socrates tries to address by helping his fellow citizens bring their *doxai* in relation to one another.

Reflections on the relational nature of *doxai* allow me to formulate a twofold condition of the possibility for formulating *doxai* and discerning truth in them. For an individual to be able to articulate her *doxa*, first and foremost, she should be able and willing to appear to others. In the Socrates essay, Arendt particularly emphasises that this appearance can happen only if an individual steps into the public realm. Secondly, for *doxa* to be formulated, an individual requires the presence of others who, like Socrates, can acknowledge her appearing, provoke her to voice her *doxa* and then assist her with reflecting and examining it.
Now we can consider the following question: What can the above discussion of the notion of opinion as *doxa*, as the world as “it appears to me,” and the conditions of possibility for its articulation, add to our understanding of the concept of “truth of one’s opinion” (Arendt 2005, 19)? Given that *doxa* is partial and relative, truth of one’s *doxa* is not the “objective” truth that can be refuted or proved through a reference to established criteria. However, neither is truth in the sense of “truth of one’s opinion,” a relativist or subjectivist type of truth which is concerned only with what is true for *me*. For the process of articulating *doxai* is intersubjective – this process requires the presence of others who invite and provoke an individual to find a voice and share with them her perspective on the world and who share with her their *doxai* in response. Therefore, the process of articulating *doxai* also requires an individual to bring her *doxa* in relation to other *doxai* and reflect on how her perspective on the world is different as compared to the perspectives of others with whom she interacts – this is what Arendt means, I submit, when she says that “*doxa* reveals itself to him [a human] in distinction from all others” (Arendt 2005, 19, emphasis added). This process whereby individuals bring their *doxai* in relation to one another and mutually articulate them allows individuals to see the world as “common” to them, to open and maintain “in-between” spaces that, like the surface of a table, both unite and separate them. “Truth of one’s opinion” (Arendt 2005, 19) can be understood as that which is *disclosed* to an individual in the process of the articulation of *doxai*. This is a disclosure of that which is distinct about my *doxa* as compared to *doxai* of others and at the same time that which is common between them – that they all can provide an opening onto a world, thereby enabling the world to “appear” to individuals as common.
What then is the political relevance of this process of formulating doxai and discerning truths of doxai? In line with Tsao’s argument (2002) that Arendt is critical of the Athenian polis, we see how in “Socrates” she also points to a highly individualistic understanding of action on the part of the Athenian citizen, engaged in “ceaselessly showing oneself to be the best of all” (Arendt 2005, 16), and the citizens’ failure to constitute a common world in their relationships with one another. As Arendt emphasises, Socrates was aware that for the polis’s citizens, “the commonness of the political world was constituted only by the walls of the city and the boundaries of its laws” (16, emphasis added). As Arendt puts it, what preoccupied Socrates was that in Athens, “the political world… was not seen or experienced in the relationships between the citizens, not in the world which lay between them, common to them all, even though opening up in a different way to each man” (16, emphasis in the original).

Therefore, Socrates believed that his practice of maieutics helps the citizens to actively constitute a world as common to them, rather than merely taking for granted that a common world is already there by virtue of a common wall of the polis and its legal code. Socrates regarded this mission as urgent – he was concerned that life in the polis represents “an intense and uninterrupted contest of all against all” (Arendt 2005, 16). Arendt emphasises here a disruptive force of self-interest that turned the citizens of the polis into competitors, preventing them from realising that, despite their disagreements and competition, they share a world among them. What Socrates then wants to achieve by his maieutics is to assist the citizens to become aware that they do share a world in common and that they are equal partners in this world.

Arendt argues that Socrates himself believed that as a “midwife” of the polis that assists the citizens to become aware of the commonness of the world, he had an
important political role to play. She explains in the following passage why this role is “political”:

If we wanted to define, traditionally, the one outstanding virtue of the statesman, we could say that it consists in understanding the greatest possible number and variety of realities – not of subjective viewpoints, which of course also exist but which do not concern us here – as those realities open themselves up to the various opinions of citizens; and, at the same time, in being able to communicate between the citizens and their opinions so that the commonness of this world becomes apparent. If such an understanding – and action inspired by it – were to take place without the help of the statesman, then the prerequisite would be for each citizen to be articulate enough to show his opinion in its truthfulness and therefore to understand his fellow citizens. Socrates seems to have believed that the political function of the philosopher was to help establish this kind of common world…in which no rulership is needed. (Arendt 2005, 18)

In the passage quoted above, Arendt considers the traditional belief that the “statesman” is required to have an ability to ensure the commonness of the world by developing insights into the greatest possible array of human circumstances in which people find themselves so that she is able to mediate between them. Socratic maieutics has political significance as it inspires the citizens to acquire the same kind of insight as the “statesman” should possess – the insight into a variety of positions that people have in the world. This can be achieved if citizens engage in the process of reciprocal understanding – continue talking to one another as Socrates talks to them, thereby developing reciprocal insights into their respective doxai. Therein Arendt’s Socrates
believes that the citizens can themselves establish and maintain the common world without delegating this task to the “statesman.”

I further submit that it is possible to compare this insight of “statesman” into the plurality of doxai that Socrates wants all individuals to acquire to an insight offered by “enlarged mentality” – the notion that Arendt adopts from Kant and that she uses in a number of her writings and, in particular, in Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (Arendt 1992). I believe that this comparison is justified by the fact that in Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Arendt introduces the idea of “enlargement of thought” in the section in which she discusses similarities between Kant’s and Socrates’ thinking. She suggests that both thinkers realised the importance of “publicity” for thinking, that is, of “the testing that arises from contact with other people’s thinking” (Arendt 1992, 42). To clarify what she means by this “testing,” Arendt quotes from Kant as follows:

You know that I do not approach reasonable objections with the intention merely of refuting them, but that in thinking them over I always weave them into my judgments, and afford them the opportunity of overturning all my most cherished beliefs. I entertain the hope that by thus viewing my judgments impartially from the standpoint of others some third view that will improve upon my previous insight may be obtainable. (Arendt 1992, 42, internal citation from Kant’s letter to Marcus Herz)

Arendt comments on this passage by emphasising that this “impartiality,” this “third view” that Kant sought to achieve is not the position of a detached umpire above and beyond opinions. Arendt indicates that this impartiality is still a standpoint amidst opinions since it is acquired by expanding one’s thinking in breadth and relating it to
diverse positions of other thinkers. Following Kant, Arendt calls this process “enlargement of thought” – a process which involves “comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others, and…putting ourselves in the place of any other man” (Arendt 1992, 43). She further highlights the importance of the faculty of imagination that allows an individual to represent the viewpoints of others in one’s mind without entering in a face-to-face conversation with them. As she puts it, “to think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (43). By “visiting” Arendt means examining and taking into account the viewpoints of others. Yet, she is careful to clarify that “visiting” does not mean to leave one’s own standpoint and to endorse and condone the opinions of others. If this were the case, then one would achieve “no more than passively accepting their thought, that is, exchanging their prejudices for the prejudices proper to my own station” (43). The point of “enlargement of thought” is, on the contrary, an attempt to liberate one’s thinking from “what we usually call self-interest” (43), that is, from those random prejudices and accidental biases that can narrow down and compromise our perspectives on the world.

Even though Arendt does not use the language of doxa in Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, it is possible to read her account of the “enlargement of thought” as a continuation of the process of formulation of one’s doxa that Arendt describes in the Socrates essay. As we saw above, Socrates aspires to assist his fellow citizens with developing a political insight that is traditionally required from “the statesman.” This insight, I submit, is similar to that offered by the “enlargement of thought” – in order to develop this insight, an individual should attempt to encounter as many different individuals as possible, learn about their diverse doxai and bring her own doxa in relation to them. Yet, there is a possibility that this process of “enlarging” one’s doxa
proceeds further so that an individual continues relating her *doxa* not only to *doxai* of those whom she encounters in a face-to-face dialogue but also to *doxai* that she can represent to herself using the power of her imagination. In turn, constant practice in the “enlargement of thought” can bring one’s *doxa* to another level – to make it “impartial,” that is, to liberate it from prejudices, self-interest and uninformed biases as far as it is possible for humans.

This incidentally answers the criticism raised by Kateb (1994) against the Socrates essay. He argues that the practice of maieutics, as described in the Socrates essay, does not allow for any qualitative enhancement of opinions. Kateb thus finds Arendt’s interpretation of Socratic maieutics unsatisfactory as, according to that interpretation, maieutics merely delivers that which is already ingrained in *doxa*. As Kateb puts it, in the Socrates essay,

Arendt makes no room for citizens who try to influence one another: her concept of *doxa* implies such a close tie between one’s opinion and one’s person that it is difficult to imagine breaking out of oneself, except falsely… More precisely, only when citizens are not true to themselves, are not trying to deliver themselves of their respective truths, can they affect one another. That is, they can corrupt but not improve one another doctrinally. (Kateb 1994, 772)

In contrast to Kateb’s reading, I suggest that Arendt does foresee a qualitative transformation in *doxa* in the course of dialogue with others. Throughout the essay, Arendt emphasises that *doxai* can acquire “special articulateness” (Arendt 2005, 16) and can be “improved” (15) and become more “distinct” (19), that is, more lucid and enunciated. Furthermore, I attempted to show that there is a way of comparing the
“enlargement of thinking” that Arendt introduces in Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy to the political insight of the “statesman” that Socrates wants every citizen – the insight that a citizen can acquire if she brings their doxai in relation to as many doxai of other citizens as possible. This gives us further clarification of what this “improvement” of doxa may consist of – namely in making doxa “impartial,” that is, in freeing it from subjective biases and limitations.

The comparison between “enlargement of thought” and an insight that Socrates wanted to help the citizens to develop brings me back to the question of what is the role of thinking in Socratic maieutics. I referred earlier on to a distinction that Arendt makes in the essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations” and in The Life of the Mind – the distinction between intellect, which is concerned with the quest for knowledge, and reason, which is concerned with the quest for meaning. I proposed that Socrates’ maieutics and his method of dialegesthai should involve thinking about doxai – thinking as the exercise of reason. Therefore, truth, which Socrates believes can be discerned in every opinion, should be considered as truth in relation to thinking as reason rather than thinking as intellect. I also started this chapter by analysing the introductory section of the essay, in which Arendt is concerned that thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, in contrast to thinking qua intellect, is given only a secondary role in the framework of the Platonic tradition of thought. In the next section I would like to deepen the interpretation of Socratic maieutics that puts an emphasis on the role of a quest for meaning in formulating one’s doxa and discerning truth in it.
3. Thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning and its role in Socratic maieutics

To demonstrate that thinking is involved in the process of formulating *doxai*, I begin by analysing the passage in which Arendt provides further explanation of the Socratic activity of maieutics:

The method has its significance in a twofold conviction: every man has his own *doxa*, his own opening to the world, and Socrates therefore must always begin with questions; he cannot know beforehand what kind of *dokei moi*, of it-appears-to-me, the other possesses. He must make sure of the other’s position in the common world. Yet, just as nobody can know beforehand the other’s *doxa*, so nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion. (Arendt 2005, 14)

It follows from this passage that the activity of maieutics starts with a question that Socrates poses to his interlocutor – what is your opinion? This question arises because Socrates does not want to assume that he knows how his interlocutor is positioned in the world, how she sees the world, from which angle the world is disclosed to her. Socratic maieutics thus demands of an individual the effort of finding and giving voice to her opinion. However, Socrates does not stop here. He proceeds with asking his interlocutor questions, thus requiring an individual to engage in the process whereby she can come to “see” and reflect on her opinion in relation to the opinions of others. Furthermore, if we remember the questions that Socrates asks his interlocutors – What is justice? What is piety? What is knowledge? What is courage? – these questions are not concerned with verifiable information and certain knowledge.
These questions do not ask for final answers but are meant to provoke reflections and discussions about what it is that appears to an individual as justice, piety, knowledge or courage. What is the meaning of these phenomena, that is, what is their significance and importance for her? How does she understand this significance and what are the implications of this understanding? Socrates’ questioning thus involves thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning.

That the Socratic dialogues are concerned with enquiry into meaning can be also gauged by the way Arendt emphasises and highlights their aporetic nature. She notices that the dialogues “frequently conclude inconclusively, without a result. To have talked something through, to have talked about something, some citizen’s doxa, seemed result enough” (Arendt 2005, 15–16). Let me compare this description of the Socratic dialogues to how Arendt describes thinking in *The Life of the Mind*. In the manuscript, Arendt insists on the endless nature of thinking in the sense of the exerciser of reason and compares it to Penelope’s web: “the business of thinking is like Penelope’s web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before” (Arendt 1978, 88). What unites the Socratic dialogues and thinking as illustrated by the metaphor of Penelope’s web is that they are not aimed at producing verifiable and irrefutable answers. The Socratic dialogues do not achieve resolution because they pursue the quest for meaning, a quest which is endless in its nature and, therefore, can never lead to an unequivocal conclusion. The Socratic dialogues are aporetic as they can proceed indefinitely: every new question will provoke another question and yet another question as the questions are concerned with the meaning of a phenomenon at stake – every new turn in conversation may “undo” what has been said earlier on, but it allows an individual to delve deeper into how she understands the meaning of this phenomenon and what the
implications of her understanding can be. Thus the Socratic dialogues are driven by generating and sharing meaning among individuals, and it is this quest for meaning, I submit, that allows them to learn about their respective positions in the world in respect to one another and hence about the commonality of the world itself.

What I have showed above is that Socratic maieutics involves the quest for meaning in relation to how the world appears to me. On the other hand, as I argued earlier on, Socrates sees the practice of this maieutics as helping citizens to examine opinions and discern the truth in them. If we link these two points together – about the role of thinking qua reason in Socratic maieutics and about its ability to help to reveal the truth inherent in doxa – we will be able to elaborate on what kind of truth is disclosed to individuals in the process of formulating doxai. Earlier on I suggested that we can think about this truth in terms of a disclosure of that which is distinct about doxa, how it is different in relation to doxai of all other individuals and, simultaneously, a disclosure of what is common to individuals – the world that they share. Now I would like to add another dimension to this interpretation of truth. If I am right in my reading of Arendt’s interpretation of Socratic maieutics, and it is the meaning of doxai, the meaning of appearances, that is at stake in dialegesthai, then it would seem that the truth which is disclosed to individuals in the process of articulating doxai is concerned with meaning. In fact, this truth is meaning being constantly articulated and elucidated – meaning of a world whose appearance I receive from my unique standpoint and meaning of phenomena in this world, their significance and gravity, their relevance to my life and the lives of others.

Here I would like to open yet another dimension of Arendt’s account of Socratic maieutics in the Socrates essay. In the essay, she employs not only the notion of truth –
for example, “truth of one’s opinions” – but also the notion of truthfulness, as can be seen in the following phrases: “to speak truthfully his own doxa” (19), “to be articulate enough to show his opinion in its truthfulness” (18), “the truthful dialogue” between friends (18). There is a difference in how Arendt uses the notions of “truth” and “truthfulness” – truthfulness is not a characteristic of opinion but of an individual in relation to the process of articulating this opinion. An individual can be truthful or untruthful in how she articulates her doxa, and in turn, depending on her truthfulness, her expression of doxa may or may not disclose the truth that potentially inheres in doxa.

Socrates calls himself not only a “midwife” of the city but also its “gadfly” (Arendt 2005, 15). For he is not satisfied with any account of doxai given by his interlocutors. He believes that he had to provoke them to speak about their doxai in a truthful manner. The facilitation that Socrates offers to others in formulating their doxai would not succeed unless an individual herself was truthful in how she thinks and speaks about her doxa. Socrates thus expects truthfulness from his interlocutors when he initiates his dialogues. As Arendt puts it in the essay, Socrates was convinced that “for mortals the important thing is to make doxa truthful, to see in every doxa truth and to speak in such a way that the truth of one’s opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others” (Arendt 2005, 18). This then raises the question of truthfulness – what does it take for someone to be truthful in one’s thinking about doxa, in one’s quest about the meaning of doxa? What does it mean to speak so that a truth inherent in doxa can appear? Let me consider in more detail these demands of truthfulness that Arendt’s Socrates places on his interlocutors.
I argue here that the truthfulness of an individual in relation to the process of articulating her *doxa* should be understood in terms of an individual’s willingness to engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning. As I argued above, the first step for an individual to start articulating her *doxa* is to voice her *doxa* in the presence of others. However, this condition is not sufficient given the notion of truth that corresponds to thinking as the quest for meaning. To be able to articulate truth thus conceived, an individual should be willing to put effort into searching for the meaning of how things appear to her, thus endowing them with significance and importance, and then to proceed to understand the implications of this meaning.

To further demonstrate the role that the quest for meaning plays in Socratic maieutics and to further elaborate on what it means to be truthful when articulating one’s *doxa*, let me explore how Arendt likens the Socratic dialogues to the dialogue of friendship: “It is obvious that this kind of dialogue [the Socratic dialogue], which doesn’t need a conclusion in order to be meaningful, is most appropriate for and most frequently shared by friends” (Arendt 2005, 16). What Arendt means here is that friends talk to each other not because they want to achieve some final and conclusive result but because they want to “share” the world and whatever comes to pass in this world.

The meaningfulness of the dialogue between friends, therefore, consists in the very activity of thinking together and conversing about the meaning of *doxai*, the meaning of the world as it appears to friends. What is essential for Arendt is that this meaningful dialogue between friends about their *doxai* is concerned with the world that lies in between them: “by talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them. It gains not only its specific articulateness, but develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a little world of its own
which is shared in friendship” (Arendt 2005, 16). I will consider the notion of the world as that which lies “in between” humans in the next chapter, on Arendt’s essay devoted to Lessing. For now let me refer again to Arendt’s metaphor of the “table” – the world as the surface of the “table” lies between humans, thus bringing them together and at the same time preventing them from falling onto each other. If this “table” is constantly shared by people, they become friends who fill the spaces between them with stories, conversations and debates so that sitting around the “table” together becomes a meaningful experience. Similarly, Socrates believes that if citizens engage in dialogues about their doxai, they can make the world that lies “in between” them meaningful, thus further realising the commonness of the world they share and in that sense becoming “friends.” As Arendt puts it, “politically speaking, Socrates tried to make friends out of Athens’ citizenry” (Arendt 2005, 16). Socrates came to see this political friendship as vital for the future of ancient Athens in light of the increasing disintegration of the polis where the agonal spirit and political rivalry were overshadowing genuine political speech and action.

In the dialogue of friendship that Socrates wants to extend to all the citizens of the polis, a friend is required to think not only about the meaning of her own doxa but to enquire into the meaning of doxa of the other – not only why this or that phenomenon or experience is significant and important from my perspective but also what its significance and importance is from the perspective of my potential or actual friend. This is how Arendt describes this reciprocal nature of the dialogue of friendship:

The political element in friendship is that in the truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other’s opinion. More than his friend as a person, one friend understands how and in what specific articulateness
the common world appears to the other, who as a person is forever unequal or different. This kind of understanding – seeing the world (as we rather tritely say today) from the other fellow’s point of view – is the political kind of insight par excellence (Arendt 2005, 18)

In this passage, Arendt suggests that friendship gives rise to the need and desire to think about the world from the perspective of the other. For the dialogue of friendship to proceed in a meaningful way, both friends need to engage in the quest for meaning in what it is that the other experiences and goes through. Friends are thus able to acquire insights into each other’s doxai, into how the world appears to each other and into how their doxai are both similar and different. It is this process of reciprocal understanding that allows friends to develop an understanding of the world as common to them. In other words, Arendt shows that care for the common world starts with care for others and for others’ perspectives on the world. The concept of “care for the world” is very important in Arendt’s writings – it refers to an appreciation of the world, a readiness to take responsibility for the world and a desire of individuals to share the world with others. As I argue in the next chapter on the Lessing essay, Arendt is profoundly concerned about care of the world being damaged in the twentieth century by a paramount tendency for people to withdraw to the privacy of their concerns and their inner lives.

This comparison of the Socratic dialogues with the dialogue of friendship, which is a dialogue about meaning, adds a new dimension to truthfulness in regard to the process of formulating doxai. Truthfulness involves not only the expectation that individuals be willing to disclose to each other their thoughts without hiding or wilfully distorting them. It also means a genuine intention to engage with the perspective of the
other and a commitment to seek the meaning of how the world appears to others as well as to oneself. Without this commitment, without an openness to the perspectives of others, there will be no disclosure of the truth which potentially inheres in *doxa* – that is, no disclosure of *doxa* both as distinct from other *doxai* and as illuminating the common world in which friends are equal participants.

Let me reiterate what I have argued so far. Socrates wanted to instil an experience of the commonness of the world in the citizens by helping them articulate their *doxai* and put their *doxai* in relation to one another. In order for the practice of maieutics to proceed, there are two demands that Arendt’s Socrates makes of individuals: firstly, individuals should be truthful in the sense of being ready to enquire into the meaning of their *doxai*, and secondly, individuals should be truthful in the sense of being willing to seek out others, listen to them and attempt to generate the meaning of how the world appears to them. This twofold truthfulness allows for seeing *doxai* in their distinctiveness, simultaneously creating an awareness of the commonness of the world lying between individuals. There is, moreover, a third sense of truthfulness, I submit, in relation to the process of articulating one’s *doxa*. This sense is connected to the willingness of an individual to develop an insight of “statesman,” which I compared to “enlargement of thinking.” To be truthful to the process of the articulation of *doxa* requires of an individual the willingness to proceed with examining the greatest possible array of diverse *doxai* in a face-to-face dialogue as well as in one’s imagination. This is to bring one’s *doxa* in relation to all the diverse *doxai* of others so that *doxa* may acquire an “impartiality,” that is, become free of subjective limitations, prejudices and biases.
This threefold definition of truthfulness does not directly address what is traditionally thought to be necessary for truthfulness – honesty. If we understand honesty as the quality of being sincere and genuine in expressing one’s thoughts, then honesty falls under the first aspect of truthfulness – the expectation that an individual will answer Socrates’ questions by saying what she really thinks without trying to deceive him. Yet, as follows from the definition of truthfulness provided above, honesty thus understood is not enough for being truthful. For after an individual speaks one’s mind, she needs to be willing to further engage in the exploration of her doxa by taking the doxai of others into account and relating her doxa to theirs. On the other hand, if we understand honesty as the adherence to facts, then, as I see it, in “Socrates” Arendt is not directly concerned with this aspect of truthfulness. Arendt was to elaborate on the role of facts in the essay “Truth and Politics,” which will be analysed in Chapter Five of this thesis.

These three aspects of truthfulness are all concerned with the fact of human plurality. For Arendt, human plurality is the foundational political fact. As she puts it in The Human Condition, human plurality corresponds to “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 1998, 7). She further defines plurality as “the paradoxical plurality of unique human beings” (176). Plurality is “paradoxical” as it has two features – equality and distinction. Human beings are “equal” in the sense that they are capable to understand each other and engage in speech and action in concert. At the same time, through speaking and acting, human beings assert themselves as “unique,” that is, they disclose to others their distinct identities – their “who” which transcends a sum total of all their “qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings” (179).
Socratic maieutics, as I read it, is premised on the assumption that individuals are willing to recognise and accept the fact of human plurality. Indeed, all the three criteria of truthfulness required for formulating one’s doxa demand an orientation towards others in the plural. In order to articulate her doxa, an individual needs others who will facilitate and acknowledge the account of her thoughts. Furthermore, an individual can gain a deeper understanding of her own doxa only by simultaneously trying to understand doxai of others. Finally, “enlargement of thinking” requires an individual to use her imagination to mentally represent, and engage with, the plurality of viewpoints. For this, an individual should be ready to recognise that all viewpoints, all doxai have equal significance – whether an individual agrees with them or not – and that they all are worth “visiting” and being examined.

On the other hand, what the Socrates essay and Arendt’s discussion of Socratic maieutics contribute to our understanding of the concept of human plurality is that plurality is not something to be taken for granted. In the Socrates essay, Arendt talks about plurality in the sense of the plurality of doxai, and this plurality of doxai is never pre-given. Articulating plural doxai in their distinction from one another requires constant effort. This effort is concerned with bringing these diverse perspectives into relation with one another so that humans can see themselves as distinct individuals and at the same time as those who share a world in common.

Where does this leave us with regard to the exploration of the relationships between truth and politics? Human plurality is, for Arendt, the foundational condition of political life. As shown above, the process of articulating doxai contributes to the actualisation of the relationships of human plurality. By articulating their doxai, humans become able to see their doxai as unique and at the same time as opening onto a world
in which they can be equal partners in action and speech. Truth of doxai can be, therefore, understood as precisely a disclosure of that which human doxai have in common and that which makes them unique and distinct. Truth thus conceived is truth that corresponds to the domain of meaning and can be constituted by individuals if they engage in thinking in the sense of an exercise of reason. This type of truth is not antagonistic to politics but is political in its very nature as it contributes to the actualisation of human plurality as the plurality of both distinct and equal beings.

As I mentioned above, whether an individual is able to articulate truth of her doxa, depends on whether she can stay truthful in the process of formulating and understanding her doxa. There are further questions that can be raised in regard to what the truthfulness of an individual means in this context. What does the ability and willingness to be truthful depend on? What distinguishes a truthful from an untruthful individual? Some answers to these questions can be found if we explore Arendt’s engagement with the Socratic notion of thinking as the dialogue of the two-in-one.

4. **Thinking as the dialogue of the “two-in-one”**

In this section I explore the notion of thinking as a dialogue of the “two-in-one” that Arendt borrows from Socrates and show what it can contribute to our understanding of the ability and willingness of an individual to be truthful in the process of articulating her doxa. Arendt indicates that “for Socrates the chief criterion for the man who speaks truthfully his own doxa was ‘that he be in agreement with himself’ – that he not contradict himself and not say contradictory things, which is what most people do and yet what each of us somehow is afraid of doing” (Arendt 2005, 19). Arendt shows here that Socrates relates truthfulness to the principle of non-contradiction. This principle
follows from the Socratic discovery that thinking is always conducted as “a dialogue between the two-in-one” (Arendt 2005, 20). What Socrates discovered, according to Arendt, is that thinking has a dialogical form. When one thinks, one converses silently with oneself, in one’s mind, as though one speaks with another invisible interlocutor: “he talks with himself as though he were two” (Arendt 2005, 20). Arendt consistently refers to thinking as the dialogue between the two-in-one throughout her writings and, therefore, this characterisation deserves special consideration.

In the Socrates essay, Arendt introduces the conception of the two-in-one by setting up her reading of a passage from the dialogue Gorgias. She reads this passage thus: “It is much better to be in disagreement with the whole world than being one to be in disagreement with myself” (Arendt 2005, 21; emphasis in the original). Now, although Arendt had at least three English versions of Gorgias, it would appear that, here, she offers her own translation. This is not simply a matter of linguistic precision. How Arendt translates this passage is important for understanding the inferences she makes about the concept of the two-in-one. There is, for instance, one key difference between Arendt’s version of the passage and the 1952 Helmbold translation, which appears in the online collection of Hannah Arendt’s personal library and hence was known to Arendt. Helmbold’s English rendering of the passage is as follows:

And yet, for my part, dear friend, I do believe that it would be better for me that the lyre or chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that my single self should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me. (Plato 1952, 482b; emphasis added).
Apart from omitting the metaphors of the chorus and lyre, Arendt elects the word-combination “being one” where Helmbold prefers the phrase “my own single self.” The discrepancy is not trivial; Arendt, when discussing the Socratic two-in-one, picks up precisely on the fact that “being one” is not quite the same thing as having a “single self.” The expression “being one,” coupled with Socrates’ concerns about the potential for self-contradiction, indicates that the inner life of a human being is never “single.” So to speak about a single self is misleading because, “insofar as I am one, I will not contradict myself, but I can contradict myself because in thought I am two-in-one; therefore I do not live only with others, as one, but also with myself” (Arendt 2005, 20).

Arendt further suggests that all human beings who engage in the dialogue of the two-in-one come to acquire “the fear of contradiction” (22). In other words, because we are potentially two-in-one, that is, have two voices inside us, we are capable of experiencing anxiety about a possible disharmony with ourselves, about potential estrangements from ourselves and the inability to maintain dialogue with ourselves.

The second approach that Arendt uses to describe the Socratic conception of the dialogue of the two-in-one is by referring to the Aristotelian theory of friendship, which, as she sees it, clarifies more comprehensively Socrates’ insight:

Because I am already two-in-one, at least when I try to think, I can experience a friend, to use Aristotle’s definition, as an “other self” (*heteros gar autos ho philos estin*). Only someone who has had the experience of talking with himself is capable of being a friend, of acquiring another self. The condition is that he be of one mind with himself, in agreement with himself (*homognœmonei heautœ*), because somebody who contradicts himself is unreliable. (Arendt 2005, 20)
What Arendt points out here is that only by developing and nurturing a special relationship with myself do I also learn to develop and nurture bonds of friendship with other persons who are initially foreign to me. This relationship that I form with myself can exist only as long as I am able to be a good interlocutor for myself, that is, that I do not contradict myself — to be consistent in my thinking to an extent that allows me to discuss an issue with myself in an orderly manner, rather than being fickle and changing my mind abruptly without reason.

The medium of the dialogue of the two-in-one, as Arendt emphasises, is speech: when thinking, I literally speak with myself, although silently. Speech, for Arendt, is always associated with the fact of human plurality, and she believes that the dialogue of the two-in-one is a powerful manifestation of this connection: “The faculty of speech and the fact of human plurality correspond to each other, not only in the sense that I use words for communication with those with whom I am together in the world, but in the even more relevant sense that speaking with myself I live together with myself” (Arendt 2005, 20). Conversely, Arendt makes the point that when we engage in thinking dialogue with ourselves, we engage — although in a specific way — with the fact of human plurality, which is, for Arendt, perhaps, the quintessential political fact.

To be sure, the dialogue of the two-in-one is “the dialogue of solitude,” that is, in order to be able to talk to myself I need to be “strictly by myself” (Arendt 2005, 20), to withdraw from the worldly concerns of human affairs and from the company of others. This state of solitude, however, is not absolute. Arendt’s point is that by virtue of being able to engage in the inner dialogue of thought, every human being is able to acquire an inner dialogical partner so that potentially there exists “the plurality inherent in every human being” (Arendt 2005, 21). In the essay, Arendt does not elaborate in more detail
on how the two kinds of pluralities – the inner plurality of the two-in-one (being together with oneself) and the outer plurality (being together with others) – are interrelated, but she seems to presuppose that this connection exists. Arendt seems to endorse the Socratic insight that “living together with others begins with living together with oneself” (Arendt 2005, 21).

Arendt’s writings point to tension within the activity of thinking itself. On the one hand, as I argued above, Socratic maieutics requires thinking about doxai, opinions, which is relational and social in nature – thinking which happens in the agora, in the midst of others, and which demands of an individual that she share her thoughts publicly. On the other hand, Arendt suggests that there is a dimension of an experience of thinking that can happen only in solitude, when an individual is by herself and converses silently with her inner dialogical partner. Both experiences appear to be important, for Arendt, and she does not seek to resolve this tension between thinking as a public dialogue in the company of others and as a dialogue of the two-in-one. Quite the contrary, as I see it, there is a way of seeing these experiences as interrelated. For, as Arendt argues, the inner “self,” the inner interlocutor with whom I converse, “represents to me, while I am by myself, all men, the humanity of all men” (Arendt 2005, 22).

That the two experiences – being together with myself and being together with others – are closely related can be seen from Arendt’s emphasis on the ethical implications of the dialogue of the two-in-one. Arendt suggests that the Socratic discovery of a dialogical form of thinking touches on “the problem of conscience in a purely secular context” (Arendt 2005, 21): namely, whether human beings can formulate incentives for ethical conduct independent of religious confession and
obedience to the law. Consider the example which Arendt herself gives: “The reason why you should not kill, even under conditions where nobody will see you, is that you cannot possibly want to be together with a murderer. By committing murder you would deliver yourself to the company of a murderer as long as you live” (22). In other words, Arendt entertains the proposition that it is the fear of losing an inner dialogue of thought, of being alienated from oneself and not being able to relate to oneself, that can prevent someone from engaging in evildoing. An individual who is aware that she is the two-in-one and that she is bound to live with herself as well as with others is less likely to commit a crime since she is fearful of being deserted by her inner partner or by living with a self that she cannot bear to talk to.

Arendt’s point is that the murderer may escape justice, may avoid the fear of a divine Last Judgment or an earthly court of law, but the murderer can never escape her own “murderous self.” In other words, for Socrates, and Arendt seems to follow him here, in order to be able to act well, an individual should be able to think well, that is, to practise the inner dialogue of the two-in-one. To clarify this point, Arendt (2005, 22) refers to the Socratic belief that “virtue can be taught.” What can be taught is not a code of norms of conduct and moral dogmas but “the awareness that man is a thinking and an acting being in one” (22); namely, the twofold awareness that how I act will impact on my ability to maintain a dialogue of thought with myself, and, on the other hand, how I think will define my ability to make choices about acting together with others.

Importantly, in the Socrates essay Arendt connects her line of argument about the profound ethical and political implications of the thinking dialogue of the two-in-one to the problem of the separation of philosophy from politics as established and practised by the Platonic tradition of thought. For Arendt, Socrates has demonstrated that solitude
should not be considered “the professional *habitus* of the philosopher only,” as the Platonic tradition of philosophy came to regard it, and that an experience of solitude is not “anti-political” (Arendt 2005, 24). Instead, she takes Socrates to provide an example of how solitude is “the necessary condition for the good functioning of the polis, a better guarantee than rules of behavior enforced by laws and fear of punishment” (Arendt 2005, 24). Here Arendt entertains the possibility that thinking, its solitary character notwithstanding, is in fact much less in opposition to politics than Plato and his followers wanted to represent it.

Arendt is concerned that the Socratic emphasis on the ethics of the two-in-one went into near oblivion in the evolution of Western philosophy from Plato onwards. Arendt remarks that it was only the tragic advent of totalitarianism in the twentieth century that proved Socrates to be right. Arendt’s argument is that by eliminating solitude, that is, by depriving people of an opportunity to engage in the inner dialogue of thought, totalitarian regimes in many cases succeeded in paralysing human conscience. Only the very few – those figures who did not lose the internal moral compass that is preserved in the dialogue of thought – warned about the dire consequences of the radical perversion of the legal system and moral rules that happened under the Nazi regime in Germany. The figure of the “desk murderer” Eichmann, on the contrary, becomes for Arendt an example of someone who was “thoughtless,” that is, someone who did not practise the inner dialogue of thought and who lacked the awareness that he is two-in-one – the awareness that he lives with himself as well as with others. Thoughtlessness thus rendered Eichmann vulnerable to the systematic pressures of the Nazi regime towards evildoing and prevented him from facing up to the reality of his actions. I will return to the concept of the two-in-one and
its importance for preserving personal integrity under a totalitarian rule in the last chapter of this thesis which is devoted to Arendt’s essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship.”

Having considered these characteristic features of the thinking dialogue of the two-in-one, I now reflect on how this dialogue can be related to the ability and willingness of individuals to be truthful during the process of formulation of their doxai. In the previous section I articulated three senses of truthfulness and I now argue that the dialogue of the two-in-one is relevant to truthfulness in all these senses. Firstly, as I argued, truthfulness involves the willingness and ability to engage in the quest for the meaning of how the world appears to me, that is, to put efforts into generating the meaning of how things appear to me, to endow them with significance and to understand the implications of what I think. Now the maintenance of a healthy dialogue of the two-in-one nurtures the ability to engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning for when I am left alone with myself I continue generating meaning for what occurred to me and what may happen in the future. I ask myself what things, events, incidents, words and actions of others as well as my own can mean and what their significance and implications may be. Someone who regularly speaks to oneself thus acquires an aptitude for thinking in the sense of exercising reason and pursuing a quest for meaning.

Secondly, as I pointed out, truthfulness involves an openness to doxai of others, that is, the ability and willingness to develop an insight into the world as it appears to others, to think about the world from other people’s perspectives. Here the dialogue of the two-in-one can be again seen as an important precondition of truthfulness. For the practice of the dialogue of thought allows an individual to acquire an experience of
relating to “another self”: I first relate to myself as a friend, that is, acquire an inner dialogical partner, and then I learn to relate to other selves in the outside world. Therefore, by engaging in the dialogue of the two-in-one, I am preparing myself for thinking from the other person’s perspective, from encountering doxai of others. This point is insightfully explained by Moruzzi (2000, 129), who in her book Speaking Through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity makes the following comment about Arendt’s interpretation of the dialogue of the two-in-one: “in itself, thinking questions any absolute singularity, involves within itself another perspective. Thinking with ourselves, we come close to thinking as another.”

Finally, I indicated that there is a third sense of truthfulness with relation to the process of articulating one’s doxa – it is the willingness to proceed to the “enlarged mentality” and to relate one’s doxa to an infinite variety of doxai of others that I do not encounter in a face-to-face dialogue but represent to myself by the power of my imagination. As I interpret it, the dialogue of the two-in-one can be seen as preparation for a more extensive dialogue with an imaginary community of thinkers, that is, for the “enlargement of thinking” in Arendt’s sense. By practising the dialogue of the two-in-one, I train my imagination in representing an invisible interlocutor and therefore become more capable of stretching my thinking and relating myself to a greater number of doxai.

Ashley Biser (2014, 535) provides a different interpretation of the relationship between “enlargement of thinking” and the inner dialogue of thought. Biser suggests that “enlarged mentality” in Arendt’s sense cannot be defined through the dialogue of the two-in-one since it is “not simply an extension of the internal dialogue of thought to other participants.” Biser further argues that it is “misleading” to describe enlargement
of thinking “in terms of a dialogue (or even a trialogue)” (535). Instead, she argues that the enlargement of thought can be best explained by the metaphor of the human mind “visiting” various standpoints in one’s imagination and looking at an issue from different “it-seems-to-me” perspectives (535–536). The problem with this interpretation, as I see it, is that the process of “visiting” a different standpoint is impossible without mentally “conversing” with someone whom I imagine as a representative of the corresponding point of view. As I highlighted above, Arendt specifically emphasises that enlargement of thinking does not merely consist of passive learning about doxai of others but in active engagement with their perspectives – agreeing, disagreeing, testing, probing, refuting, challenging – something which in itself presupposes a dialogue.

To sum up my argument above, I submit that a sustained commitment to the dialogue of thought is essential for strengthening an individual’s ability to form her doxa, to be truthful in how she speaks about her doxa and to be able to understand doxai of others. Yet, I would like to emphasise that the connection between the dialogue of the two-in-one and the dialogue with others, between an experience of inner plurality and one of outer plurality, goes two ways. I refer again to Moruzzi to illustrate my point. As she puts it, “the reflexivity between plural mind and world cannot be premised on a privileging of the mind” (2000, 132). In other words, for Arendt, the outer plurality cannot be deduced from and considered as secondary to the inner dialogue of thought. Furthermore, Moruzzi argues that an encounter with the outer plurality is necessary to provoke the inner dialogue of thought in human beings in the first place:

Perhaps it is critical that they first experienced plurality as an encounter with the other in the world. Then they thought about it. Then, having thought about it in
the plurality of the mind, they encountered the other again, and recognized in the other the plurality of themselves – which they had, however, first encountered in the other in the world. (Moruzzi 2000, 132)

What Moruzzi argues here is that there is no simple one-way relationship between an experience of the outer plurality – an experience of living in the world together with others – and an experience of the inner plurality actualised in the dialogue of the two-in-one. Experiences of the inner and outer plurality supplement and reinforce each other, and yet, it is an encounter with others in the world that takes precedence. If we apply Moruzzi’s insights to the practice of Socratic maieutics, then we can say that the Socratic mission of encouraging others to talk about their doxai and articulate truths inherent in them plays an important role for the activation and development of the human ability to think. Socratic maieutics facilitates an encounter with others, which can in turn provoke an encounter with one’s inner self and activate the dialogue of the two-in-one. The reverse is also true – the practice of the dialogue of the two-in-one can enhance the ability to communicate doxa to others.

If we remind ourselves about a notion of truth that Arendt explores in the Socrates essay – as something which inheres in every doxa and which Socrates attempts to elucidate in his dialogues – then we can see that this truth is inseparable from the condition of human plurality and its two modes: the outerworldly plurality and the inner plurality of the two-in-one. Truth of doxa is a truth of how the world is disclosed to me and only me as distinct from all other people, and at the same time as common to me and others. If truth inheres in doxai, as Arendt appears to suggest in the Socrates essay, then the process of constituting truth coincides with the twofold process whereby an individual discovers herself as a “thinking being,” capable of the dialogue of the two-in-
one, and as an “acting being,” someone who lives alongside and together with others in the world.

To be able to constitute the truths of their respective doxai, individuals need to constantly move between the dialogue with oneself and the dialogue with others. Hence there is an innate affinity between truth and the condition of human plurality: the disclosure of truth that potentially inheres in my doxa requires of me a willingness to engage with the fact of human plurality as reflected in the twofold fact that I am two-in-one and that I live in the company of unique human beings. At the same time the process of delivering the truth inherent in every doxa reveals to individuals what they have in common – the world that they share regardless of the plurality of unique standpoints and perspectives that they possess. The quest for truth thus does not destroy the condition of human plurality – which for Arendt is a sine qua non of politics – but helps to sustain it by raising the awareness about the commonness of the world in which individuals are both distinct and equal.

In this chapter, I have argued that in the Socrates essay Arendt entertains a conception of truth that is different from the Platonic vision of truth as that which cannot coexist with opinions and life in the polis. I demonstrated that this conception of truth, as expressed in the phrase “truth of one’s opinion” (Arendt 2005, 19), implies that truth is not opposed to but rather adheres to opinion, which is understood as doxa, the world as “it appears to me.” I have shown that for Socrates, and Arendt seems to follow him, to discover the truth of doxa is to understand how a particular doxa is distinct from all others and at the same time to disclose what doxa have in common with others – the common world which individuals become aware of when talking truthfully about their doxai. The political significance of the notion of “truth of one’s opinion” consists
precisely in the fact that an articulation of opinions and a discernment of truth in them contributes to an awareness of the commonality of the world that lies between individuals and in which they are potentially equal partners in action and speech. An experience of the world as common is not something given to humans – it is a phenomenological achievement that is made possible if individuals set out to articulate truths inherent in their doxai by bringing their doxai in relation to those of others.

I argued that the process of discovering truth inherent in doxai requires thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning since it is the meaning of how the world opens up to me and to others which is at stake in the Socratic “midwifery,” the art of examining opinions in a way that reveals truths in them. I further argued that in order to articulate the truth inherent in opinions in a meaningful way, two preconditions are required: firstly, a facilitator who, like Socrates, will acknowledge the appearing of individuals in the public realm and provoke them to account for their doxai in relation to doxai of others; and secondly, that an individual herself be willing to appear to others and be truthful in how she articulates her doxa. I suggested that there are three distinct aspects to this truthfulness: willingness to find a voice and announce to others how the world appears to me, willingness to learn about and understand how the world appears to others and willingness to proceed to “enlarged mentality.”

These conditions of the possibility for formulating doxai are contingent and do not necessarily occur – there may be no facilitator who, like Socrates, will assume a mission of “midwife” of opinions, or there may be no public space into which individuals can step in order to encounter others, or individuals may not be interested in or willing to engage in the process of doxa formation, to take part in the quest for meaning and be truthful. If the commonness of the world depends on whether humans
engage in the process of mutual articulation of their doxai, then what happens to the world and to human beings if this process does not go ahead?

Arendt was painfully aware of the problem of people’s increasing disengagement from the world in the twentieth century. One of the key factors of people’s distrust in the world, as Arendt saw it, was the advent of totalitarianism – for her, the central political event of the twentieth century, to which she continually refers, from The Origins of Totalitarianism, first published in 1951, through to the “Thinking” volume of The Life of the Mind, first delivered in 1973 as part of the Gifford Lectures. What is important in the context of the current enquiry is Arendt’s emphasis on the totalitarian attempt to cut people off from “seeing” the world as common to them, to create conditions where it becomes impossible to relate to one another in action and speech, when any spontaneity and contingency is suppressed, no quest for meaning is possible, and only “sterile” and solipsistic logicality is allowed to proliferate.

In the Socrates essay, Arendt remarks on how totalitarianism seeks to prevent people from relating to others as well as to themselves. As I mentioned above, she refers to totalitarianism in the context of her discussion of the dialogue of the two-in-one and highlights how as a result of the advent of totalitarianism, humans lost the possibility to be in solitude, and thus their capacity to think, as solitude is necessary for the actualisation of the dialogue of the two-in-one.

“Dark times” is the term that Arendt uses for the situation where people choose or are forced to abandon the world and their responsibility for it such that they also lose their capacity to relate to one another, to share the world in common – as happened under totalitarian domination. Importantly, “dark times,” as Arendt sees it, did not come
to an end with the victory over the Nazi regime – in post-totalitarian societies individuals also are tempted to withdraw from the world into the privacy of their concerns. The questions that the phenomenon of “dark times” raises are as follows: what kind of relationships is possible between humans under these conditions of “dark times,” if any? What is the appropriate attitude to the world in these times? What happens to truth and its relationships to politics when we view them from the perspective of the challenges raised by “dark times,” and can thinking still remain the vehicle for the relationships between truth and politics? What new demands do “dark times” put on political actors in terms of their truthfulness? To explore these questions, I now turn to another essay written by Arendt in the 1950s – “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing.”
Chapter Three. Lessing: Truth and politics in “dark times”

In this chapter I consider the address Arendt made upon receiving the Lessing Prize in Hamburg in 1959, which was later published as a separate essay under the title “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing.” The expression “dark times” that Arendt used in this title was later used in the title of the entire collection of Arendt’s essays written between 1955 and 1968, published as *Men in Dark Times* in 1968. The essay on Lessing epitomises Arendt’s reflections on how it is possible to preserve an openness to the world and human plurality, even when the world itself is plunged into “darkness” – that is, when there is no possibility for relating to others in genuine speech and action, thus experiencing the world as common and shared. In Lessing Arendt finds an exemplary attitude towards the world in “dark times.” As Arendt suggests, “Lessing, too, was already living in ‘dark times,’ and after his own fashion he was destroyed by their darkness” (Arendt 1968b, 30): in Germany in the eighteenth century no genuine political action or speech was possible. Arendt is thus interested in the commitment and “passionate openness” (Arendt 1968b, 6) to the world that Lessing’s thinking and writing preserved, regardless of “dark times.”

Arendt believes that it was Lessing’s practice of *selbstdenken* or thinking for oneself that allowed him not to lose his love for the world in “dark times.” In this chapter I am interested in what Arendt’s exploration of Lessing’s *selbstdenken* can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between this mode of thinking, truth
and the world. *Selbstdenken* is neither a retreat into solipsistic introspection in an attempt to escape from the world nor an obstinate and blind insistence on one’s point of view. Rather, *selbstdenken* is a free and active mode of thinking that thrives on a polemical discourse with others. Practising *selbstdenken* requires of Lessing a refusal to take for granted any “truth” understood as pre-existing wisdom, doctrines or paradigms. Yet, I argue that Arendt’s Lessing believes that by thinking for oneself an individual can constitute a truth of a different kind. This is because thinking for oneself is open to a polemical discourse with other thinkers and in the process of this discourse an individual can understand and discern what it is that she “deems truth” (Arendt 1968b, 30) – that is, she can become more aware of what it is that she thinks about an issue at stake and make her position more articulate, mature and distinct from the positions of others. This is why Arendt particularly emphasises that Lessing was concerned about “the relative rightness of opinions” (Arendt 1968b, 7) which, as I show, resembles Socrates’ orientation to the truth of *doxa*.

For Arendt’s Lessing the commitment of an individual to discern, question and defend what she “deems truth” and to preserve “the relative rightness of opinions” acquires a particular political significance in “dark times.” By sharing and debating what she “deems truth,” an individual can establish and preserve distance from others, thus enabling things to become public and the world to “appear” between her and others – the world in Arendt’s specific sense of that which lies between individuals, binding and separating them at the same time.

Arendt’s interpretation of Lessing’s conception of friendship is particularly relevant for how the relationships between *selbstdenken*, truth and the world are to be understood. In this chapter I place particular emphasis on these relationships. Firstly, I
consider relationships between Lessing’s conception of friendship and the world as Arendt portrays them in the essay. I emphasise that Arendt calls this friendship “political” and contrasts this kind of relationship with “fraternity,” which, as she sees it, abdicates responsibility for the world. The dialogue of friends, for Lessing, is different from an intimate talk that is unburdened by concerns about the world. The dialogue of friends addresses the world – how the world looks and should look, how the world matters to friends and what common interests they have in the world. Therein the world “appears” to friends as something that they share, as a common reference for their relationships.

Secondly, I explore the relationship between Lessing’s conception of friendship and truth. I demonstrate that these relationships are complex. Despite the fact that Arendt praises Lessing for discovering that truth is in potential conflict with friendship—and the relationships of friendship in this context are, for Arendt, the prototype for the relationship of plurality – friendship, for Lessing, is not free of truth claims. Potential conflict between truth and friendship emerges when truth is understood as absolute truth – truth that should provide a conclusive and irrefutable answer to all human differences and disagreements. This is why Arendt’s Lessing demands of friends that they reject such truth because if they do not, their plural voices converge into a single voice that cancels all differences and distinctions and does not allow for the discourse of friendship to flourish. A potential conflict between friendship and a belief in absolute truth does not mean that friends should not make any truth claims. Quite the contrary: by rejecting the belief that there is an absolute truth which should act as the final word for settling human differences and disagreements, friends become capable of articulating what each of them “deems true” since they become able to think for
themselves and question, critically examine and defend their distinct positions in the world. In the chapter I explore what kind of understanding of truth emerges from Lessing’s expression “Let each man say what he deems truth!” (Arendt 1968b, 31) and “the relative rightness of opinions” (7) that Arendt is interested in the essay. I argue that these expressions indicate that, similar to the Socrates essay, in the Lessing address Arendt explores a sense of truth that is not antagonistic to the political and that is compatible with human plurality.

I. Hannah Arendt’s acceptance of the Lessing Prize in Germany in 1959

In this first section of this chapter I present some background information about the circumstances under which Arendt’s Lessing address took place and, in particular, look into the reasons why Arendt originally found the decision to accept the prize difficult. This will set the stage for an exploration of the theme of truth in the essay. I also look into Arendt’s notion of the world as it is the key notion in the essay that is essential for our understanding of Arendt’s argument in this work.

The Lessing address was originally delivered by Arendt as her acceptance speech for the Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg in 1959. At the start of the address, Arendt says that at first it was difficult for her to accept the award. As she puts it, “I admit that I do not know how I have come to receive it, and also that it has not been altogether easy for me to come to terms with it” (Arendt 1968b, 3). The Lessing Prize was awarded to Arendt only fourteen years after the end of World War II and the downfall of the Third Reich. In 1933 Arendt, a German Jew, had to leave Germany and became a refugee, first in France, and then in the United States. Even though in 1959
Germany had already undergone the so-called de-nazification program and Arendt had already visited Germany after the war in 1949, accepting the award was still an uneasy decision for her (Weissberg 2007, 187–188).

It is hard not to agree with Boos (2014) who suggests that this award did not acknowledge Arendt “as a unique and irreplaceable person and intellectual” (150). Rather, as a recipient of the Lessing Prize, Arendt was deemed to “fulfil a concrete sociopolitical function,” that is, to demonstrate that Germans “have abandoned the National Socialist racial doctrines and have become thoroughly philo-Semitic” (150). Other Jewish intellectuals in a similar position declined awards offered by German post-war institutions. For example, as Boos comments, “only one year later, in 1959, another Jewish intellectual, Mascha Kaleko, would decide to turn down the Fontane Prize, doubtless because it was used as a political tool for demonstrating commitment to an exiled German-Jewish author” (2014, 153). Arendt’s acceptance of the Lessing Prize, then, suggests a political decision on her part. She decided to accept this “humanitarian” prize and use her address on the occasion of receiving it to confront the audience with the example of Lessing, as she saw him, and use this example to raise uneasy questions about the attitude of the Germans towards the Nazi past and to explore an idea of humanity that recognises the reality of distinctions among people and affirms differences in their positions in the world.

The introductory passages of the speech give us a sense of why Arendt came to the decision to accept the prize. Arendt suggests that the event of an award gives an awardee an opportunity to show her appreciation of the world and what it offers her – “the honor…reminds us emphatically of the gratitude we owe the world” (Arendt 1968b, 3). This is how Arendt explains why individuals should be thankful to the world:
“In awards, the world speaks out, and if we accept the award and express our gratitude for it, we can do so only by ignoring ourselves and acting entirely within the frame of our attitude towards the world and public to which we owe the space into which we speak and in which we are heard” (Arendt 1968b, 3). In this passage, Arendt emphasises that granting and receiving an award is a public process whereby an individual is given an opportunity to appear in “public.” Birmingham (2006, 85), drawing on The Human Condition, indicates that there are two senses of the word “public” in Arendt’s writings. The first sense of “public” corresponds to an experience of “being among men,” that is, living alongside others in “the world of appearance” (85). The second sense of “public” “denotes a common world” and corresponds to an experience of “being with others,” that is, seeing and experiencing oneself as a part of the world that one shares with “a plurality of human beings” (85). Birmingham remarks that only the second sense of the word “public” is “properly intersubjective and political” (85). When in the Lessing essay Arendt comments on the public nature of an event of an award, I believe that she has in mind the second sense of “public” highlighted by Birmingham. For Arendt reinforces that an event of an award gives rise to a set of specific relationships among those involved in the award – they become part of the same common public space in which an individual can appear and in which others can receive her appearance. The gratitude for the world that an individual can express by accepting an award is the gratitude for the possibility of “being with others” in the sense of sharing the world with them through acting and speaking.

Arendt’s remarks suggests that accepting an award involves a deliberate decision and, that in this choice she not only shows her gratitude for the opportunity to appear in public but also assumes responsibility for the “common world” that may arise between
her and others as a result: “Since we can always reject the honor [conferred by the public], by accepting it we are not only strengthened in our position within the world but are accepting a kind of commitment to it” (Arendt 1968b, 3). As I see it, we should not take this claim as a proposition that an individual must always accept an honour offered to her by the public. If a decision to accept an award gives rise to a set of public relationships with those who offer this award, then one should reject an award offered by those with whom she does not want to share a common world. In fact, as she makes plain later in the essay, Arendt believes that in some circumstances, such as under the terror of Nazi rule, the only way to avoid being complicit with the regime is to withdraw from the common world and refuse to participate in any public activities. In case of the Lessing Prize, Arendt finds it possible to accept the recognition offered to her by Hamburg City, and her address itself can be considered as an attempt to initiate a conversation about Germany’s past and present so that to create a public space in which such issues can be properly addressed.

Arendt is aware that a concord between an appearing individual and the public who confirm this appearing is something not to be taken for granted. “That a person appears in public at all,” she says, “and that the public receives and confirms him, is by no means a matter to be taken for granted” (Arendt 1968b, 3–4). An individual can refuse to appear in the world – for example, by rejecting an award – or be refused the possibility of appearing. Appearing in the world thus requires two conditions: an individual willing to appear and a public willing to invite this appearance and endow it with significance – conditions which may not be fulfilled. Arendt continues by speaking about the contemporary challenge of preserving the world as a space for public appearances. This space is fragile as it is not guaranteed by any external factors but
rather depends on a human commitment to appear in the world and to accept appearances of others. Arendt declares that she is painfully concerned with a lack of such a commitment to the world in the post-war societies. She speaks about her observation that people choose to withdraw from the world into the privacy of their concerns and not to engage in politics – in Arendt’s sense of speaking and acting together with others. Arendt remarks (1968b, 4) that the majority of people desire a negative “freedom” from politics: more and more individuals “have retreated from the world and their obligations within it.” Arendt further clarifies that this retreat into the privacy of personal interests has far-reaching consequences for the world. As she puts it, “what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men” (Arendt 1968b, 4–5).

Here Arendt emphasises that the common world is not something pre-given to humans, something that exists independently of them. The common world is constituted by spaces that open up “in between” people when they appear to each other and close down when people refuse or are unable to appear in public. In the previous chapter, I referred to Arendt’s metaphor of the table that she often uses to clarify what she means by the world as “in between”: the world is like the surface of a table that both separates people and connects them, that prevents them from falling onto each other, yet brings them together at the same time. However, it is important not to be misled by this metaphor as though Arendt is concerned here merely with the material world and sees the world as the mere sum of things that somehow already exist between humans. Human artefacts, such as material objects created by the activity of work as well as objects of art, do not come to constitute a common world for humans unless these artefacts hold their common interests. To further elaborate on the rich idea of the world
as “in-between” and show its implications for human plurality I now turn to relevant sections of *The Human Condition*.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt explains what she means by common interests as follows: “These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-*est, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together” (Arendt 1998, 182). Arendt purposely draws our attention to the etymological origins of the word “interest.” “Interest” (from Latin) literally means “to be between”: “*inter*” (between) and “*esse*” (to be). What Arendt means here is that human artefacts come to constitute the common world only when and if it becomes a matter of public concern, when a plurality of human beings take a common interest in it, and these “in-between” spaces become public spaces. The world then can “appear” to humans as a common frame of reference for their actions and speech so that humans do not merely live alongside others but are also able to relate to each other.

Moreover, in *The Human Condition* Arendt emphasises that action and speech are always more than “‘objective’ intercourse” about the world (Arendt 1998, 182). For speech and action are accompanied by a disclosure of acting and speaking individuals. Individuals “disclose” themselves to others, that is, they reveal to others that which is unique about them. Arendt describes this disclosure as “a disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide” (179). This disclosure is possible only in public spaces which are formed, as we saw above, when humans are gathered together by their common interests in the world. Moreover, Arendt suggests that due to human engagement with each other through deeds and words, the “objective in-between” is outgrown with another layer of that which humans have in common – “intersubjective”
relationships which Arendt calls the immaterial “in-between” or the “web of human relationships” (182).

The world in a twofold sense of “objective” and “subjective” “in-between” has a close connection to human plurality. For Arendt, as she explains in *The Human Condition*, human plurality has “the twofold character of equality and distinction” (Arendt 1998, 175). Let me further elaborate on this passage. Humans are equal in the sense that they can “understand each other” (175) and they are “distinct” in the sense that every human life is singular and unrepeatable, and thus every individual is unlike anyone else. Not only is every human being distinct, Arendt says, humans also can actively “express this distinction and distinguish themselves” (175). This is why human plurality is not achieved by a passive “multiplication” of human beings – such multiplication suffices only for “inorganic objects” (175). Human plurality can come into appearance if and when humans act – if and when they take the “initiative,” that is, start new beginnings. However, as we saw above, humans do not act and speak in a vacuum but rather in relation to the world in a twofold sense of “objective” and “subjective” “in-between.” Speech and action – the activities whereby humans can form the relationship of plurality – requires the presence of public spaces that arise when humans share common interests in preserving and augmenting the world and are willing to appear to others.

The analysis above suggests that, for Arendt, there is a two-way relationship between the ideas of plurality and the world. This proposition is essential if we want to understand Arendt’s argument in the essay on Lessing. Let me explain what I mean by it. On the one hand, the ability of human beings to distinguish themselves as unique individuals and to form the relationship of plurality – the relationship of equality and
distinction – depends on whether they can see the world as that which lies “in-between” them and holds their common interests. As Canovan insightfully notices,

without the world, it is very hard for human beings to be plural individuals rather than interchangeable members of a species. Only the human world can provide the stable setting within which human beings can reliably appear as distinct individuals: only the world which they share can hold those individuals together while keeping them distinct. (Canovan 1995, 106)

On the other hand, it is only by orienting their speech and action towards the world, by acting in relation to the world and speaking about it, that humans create the “web of human relationships” or the “subjective in-between” whereby the world itself comes into being. It becomes the public world in the full sense of this word as now it can be seen from the plurality of different perspectives and hence can “appear” to humans as a common frame of reference for their action and speech. With this last point, I want to reinforce that, for Arendt, the world of human affairs is phenomenal in nature – it is a phenomenological achievement that may or may not occur. Barbour & Zolkos (2011) refer to the essay by Michael Janover “Politics and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt” to highlight Arendt’s concerns about a potential loss of the world. According to Janover, “where humans are pushed so far apart or so close together that nothing can properly be said to interest them, the world disappears as well. We become, as Arendt liked to say, ‘worldless’. We experience ‘world alienation’” (Barbour & Zolkos 2011, 3–4).

Arendt’s concerns about “worldlessness” brings us back to the essay on Lessing in which Arendt alerts us about the far-reaching consequences of the loss of the world
understood as that which lies between humans and that both separates and connects them. In the Lessing address, Arendt emphasises that human withdrawal from the world has profound implications for the political existence of humans, for their ability to form the relationship of plurality and disclose and assert themselves as unique human beings – “the public realm loses the power of illumination which was originally part of its very nature” (Arendt 1968b, 4). Arendt calls this situation “dark times.”

What does Arendt mean by “dark times”? In the introduction to Men in Dark Times, the collection of essays in which the Lessing essay appears, Arendt explains that she borrows the phrase “dark times” from Brecht’s poem “To Posterity” (1968a, viii). Arendt borrows this metaphor of “dark times” for her own work. By “dark times” Arendt means times in which people are deprived of a political existence, of an ability to take part in the world by sharing deeds and words, of the joy of relating themselves to others. This is how Arendt characterises “dark times” in the introduction to Men in Dark Times:

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government,” by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality. (Arendt 1968a, viii)

In this passage Arendt refers to the situation in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. What she observed back then was a disappearance of public space which can be constituted
only if people hold common interests in the world and “appear” to each other through action and speech. This is not to say that people stopped uttering words or attempting to do something. What Arendt means here is that speech and action lost their revelatory capacity to disclose the unique identities of individuals – “who” they are as distinguished from “what” they are. Neither could individuals fully understand the meaning of the deeds and words being said and done, of events, incidents and situations unfolding in front of them. For in order to become meaningful for humans, these too need to be seen and heard in public whereby they are received and acknowledged by the plurality of actors and speakers. Instead, in “dark times” “public” spaces lost their public character. As Arendt comments, they were permeated by officious talk that spins facts and does not reveal, but rather covers up, the meaning of phenomena. As a result, Arendt says, “all this was real enough as it took place in public; there was nothing secret or mysterious about it. And still, it was by no means visible to all, nor was it at all easy to perceive it” (Arendt 1968a, viii). What Arendt means here is that in “dark times” humans are deprived of their ability to understand the world and make sense of reality. And what concerns Arendt is that in this situation when public places were violated, very few people in the early 1930s in Nazi Germany were able to register and make sense of the approaching “catastrophe” of totalitarian terror and genocide.

“Dark times,” for Arendt, are not limited to the period of Nazi totalitarianism. In the opening section of the Lessing essay Arendt talks about the post-war situation and implies that the world after the end of the war is still plunged in “darkness.” This is why she praises the organisers of the prize for having named it in honour of Lessing (Arendt 1968b, 5). Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) was a German writer, philosopher, dramatist, publicist and art critic whose writings had a profound impact on German
literature. He is considered to be among the prominent representatives of the German Enlightenment. However, as we shall see, Arendt herself creates a portrait of Lessing which problematises his full-fledged commitment to Enlightenment beliefs, arguing that a form of thinking that he practised – thinking for oneself (selbstdenken) – was too radical even by the measures of the Enlightenment. Arendt emphasises that Lessing himself lived in “dark times” (30), by which she means that the Germany of the eighteenth century (the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation) was an autocratic empire with no space for action and speech. No critique of the ruling despotism was possible, no action to resist injustice and slavery was foreseeable, while writing was subject to strict censorship. As Arendt puts it by drawing on Lessing himself, “he [Lessing] knew very well that he was living in what was then the ‘most slavish country in Europe.’ For it was impossible to raise ‘a voice for the rights of subjects…against extortion and despotism,’ in other words, to act” (Arendt 1968b, 9–10, internal citations from Lessing).

What interests Arendt in Lessing, as I see it, is that regardless of the lack of the possibility to engage in action and speech with others, he did not allow himself to abandon the world and his concerns about it. As she puts it, his “attitude…remained indebted to the world, never is always truth in the plural and of the world, and never went to the extreme of sentimental utopianism” (Arendt 1968b, 5). Throughout the essay, Arendt describes Lessing’s attitude towards the world in terms such as “commitment” (5), “partisanship” (8), “a passionate openness” and “love” (6). As I see it, in the figure of Lessing, Arendt finds an example of an attitude to the world in “dark times.” She is interested in how Lessing managed to “remain committed” to the world when the world itself seemed to become inhospitable to human action and speech. As I will argue, for
Arendt, it is a particular mode of thinking – thinking for oneself – that becomes, for Lessing, a medium of the relationship between him and the world, between him and the public – his readers, theatre audience and other thinkers. As I will show, the practice of thinking for oneself has a complex set of relationships with truth, and by considering what thinking for oneself involves we can arrive at an understanding of the conception of truth that Arendt offers in the Lessing address. By exploring what Arendt means by Lessing’s *selbstdenken*, I attempt to show that there is a sense of truth in the essay as not antagonistic to the political. In turn, this will allow me to consider which specific responses Arendt suggests in the Lessing essay to the challenge of preserving the world in “dark times.”

In the next section, I outline the characteristics of Lessing’s *selbstdenken* as presented by Arendt in the essay and show how this mode of thinking allowed Lessing to preserve his “commitment” to the world. By discussing these characteristics, I reflect on what the concept of thinking for oneself adds to our understanding of the notion of truth as something that is not hostile to politics. I focus on three characteristics of this modality of thinking: 1) a refusal to accept any given “truths” and a lack of “objectivity” (Arendt 1968b, 5); 2) affinity with passion and “tragic pleasure” (6); 3) concerns with the “relative rightness of opinions” (7).

2. *Selbstdenken*: a refutation of absolute truth and an affinity with “tragic pleasure”

Arendt begins her assessment of Lessing’s *selbstdenken* by articulating the relationship that this kind of thinking has with truth. As Arendt emphasises it, quoting from Lessing himself, he thought of himself as of one of “‘the wise men’ who ‘make
the pillars of the best-known truths shake wherever they let their eyes fall’’ (Arendt 1968b, 5). By truth, Lessing means here any doctrine that claims absolute authority and infallibility, any dogmas that are imposed on thinkers as immutable and unequivocal.

Lessing’s antagonism towards “the best-known truths” is more than an expression of the spirit of Enlightenment which subjects everything to an analysis of reason and opposes the truths of religion. As Disch comments, the “pillars of truth” that Lessing sought to oppose is “Lessing’s metaphor for both reason and faith” (Disch 1997, 299). This is not to say that Lessing did not want to think rationally. What Disch argues is that Lessing, as portrayed by Arendt, refused to be satisfied with any teaching that presents itself as the absolute truth – be this teaching based on religious revelation or constructed through rational investigation. In the Lessing essay, Arendt characterises Lessing’s attitude to truth as “highly unorthodox” for his times: “He refused to accept any truths whatever, even those presumably handed down by Providence, and he never felt compelled by truth, be it imposed by others or by his own reasoning processes” (Arendt 1968b, 26). The acceptance of any such truth would foreclose a possibility of exploring an issue at stake any further and of exploring it for oneself. Such truth coerces the mind and eliminates the urge for thinking for oneself.

Moreover, as Arendt emphasises, not only did Lessing suspend commitment to any truth that presents itself as immutable and irrefutable, he did not allow his thinking to rest content with final conclusions. As Arendt says, his selbstdenken consisted in the fact that “he explicitly renounced the desire for results, in so far as these might mean the final solution of problems which his thought posed for itself; his thinking was not a search for truth, since every truth that is the result of a thought process necessarily puts an end to the movement of thinking” (Arendt 1968a, 10). Once again Arendt places
emphasis on the fact that Lessing’s commitment to *selbstdenken* is not compatible with truth, “truth” used here in the specific sense of truth in the singular, truth that appears to the human mind irrefutable and immutable.

Canovan’s (1988, 185) comment on Arendt’s understanding of truth is helpful. Canovan proposes that when Arendt emphasises an incompatibility of truth and politics, she means truth in the sense of “the notion of [an] absolute truth” which has an ability to “mesmerise” people (Canovan 1988, 185). “The notion of absolute truth” that can be so seductive for people captures what Arendt means when she proposes that Lessing saw thinking for oneself as incompatible with truth. Arendt’s Lessing refuses to subdue his thinking to this idea of “absolute truth” as it would fascinate thinkers to the extent that it can stop “the movement of thinking” (Arendt 1968a, 10). Here we can see how Arendt refers to a theme that is recurrent in her writings – her emphasis on the ceaseless nature of thinking when the faculty of thinking is employed by an individual to engage in the quest for meaning. I already highlighted this theme on a number of occasions. For example, in the previous chapter, I referred to Arendt’s consideration in the Socrates essay that the Socratic dialogues are *aporetic* in nature. The Socratic dialogues end inconclusively as they are concerned not with a quest for knowledge and the achievement of certain and unquestionable results but with an articulation of *doxa*, opinion, which cannot be measured by the criterion of certainty applied to knowledge. I argued, therefore, that Socratic *dialegesthai* – “talking something through with somebody” – is a form of thinking which is concerned with generating meaning and thus is endless and ceaseless, very much akin to Lessing’s *selbstdenken*.

Lessing’s *selbstdenken*, Arendt remarks, was also characterised by a remarkable lack of “supposed objectivity”: “One component of Lessing’s greatness was the fact
that he never allowed supposed objectivity to cause him to lose sight of the real relationship to the world and the real status in the world of the things or men he attacked or praised” (Arendt 1968b, 5). What Arendt means here is that, for Lessing, there was no “objective” criterion or standard that defined his thinking and judging. Arendt says that she uses “objectivity” here “in the ordinary sense” (6). Richard Rorty’s depiction of the Western ideal of objectivity (1989) helps us understand what Arendt is getting at here. Rorty suggests that in the Western tradition of thought, objectivity means the requirement whereby a thinker “distances oneself from the actual persons around him not by thinking of himself as a member of some other real or imaginary group, but rather by attaching himself to something that can be described without reference to any particular human beings” (Rorty 1989, 167).

For Arendt, Lessing did not think and judge from a detached stance located outside the realm of human affairs. His thinking, instead, was concerned with the world, and took its standpoint from within the world, in the midst of the theories, views and ideas he engaged with. This is why Arendt suggests that Lessing’s thinking was not “subjective” either: “it is always framed not in terms of the self but in terms of the relationship of men to their world, in terms of their positions and opinions” (Arendt 1968b, 29). The idea of an absolute “objective” standard of judgment was rejected by Lessing for the sake of the ability to stay open to the world and to people’s positions in it and for the sake of being able to share the world with others.

A concern for the world informed Lessing’s attitude towards poetry and art. Arendt suggests that Lessing never criticised a work of art according to pre-given standards of “perfection” (Arendt 1986b, 6) and independently of its impact on “spectators.” Instead, what Lessing considered is how a given piece of art affects the
audience – whether it re-orient the audience towards the world and inspires a common interest in this world. In other words, Lessing was interested in whether a piece of art encourages the creation of a public space between spectators and the artist, in which a unique “who” of an actor – in this case the artist – can be revealed. As Arendt puts it, “he [Lessing] was concerned with the effect [of the work] upon the spectator, who as it were represents the world, or rather, that worldly space which has come into being between the artist or writer and his fellow men as a world common to them” (Arendt 1968b, 7).

The first characteristic of Lessing’s understanding of selbstdenken that Arendt considers is thus a refutation of the idea of truth in the singular – the belief that thinking can acquire its validity only if it responds to the criterion of immutable and irrefutable truth. Truth in this sense is self-contained as it claims absolute authority without any reference to the human world and to the existence of particular human beings. Lessing refused to accept such truth as the foundation for his own thinking. Likewise he refused to present the outcomes of his own thinking as such truth. Finally, he never judged others according to an absolute, “supposedly objective” standard of objectivity. Truth in the singular thus stands in the way of selbstdenken, thinking for oneself. However, as I argue below, selbstdenken is not free from concerns about truth if truth is conceived as something other than the idea of absolute truth.

Now I turn to the second characteristic of selbstdenken that Arendt considers – its connection to passion and “tragic pleasure.” This characteristic is also closely connected with Lessing’s commitment to the world. To explain what she means by passion, Arendt invokes the Greek doctrine of passions that distinguishes good passions from “evil” ones based on how they influence the capacity to experience reality. Thus
anger, Arendt says, is considered to be desirable passions as it helps to face up to reality, unlike hope and fear, which try to escape from the world into the self: “in hope, the soul overleaps reality, as in fear it shrinks back from it” (Arendt 1968b, 6). Lessing too, Arendt suggests, distinguishes passions based on whether they deepen the human sense of reality or weaken it. Quoting from Lessing, Arendt notes that the importance of passions, for him, consists in the fact that they “‘make us feel more real’” (6). The two passions that Arendt sees as most characteristic of Lessing’s writings are the anger and laughter that he seeks to provoke in his audience in order to make them more sensible to the reality of the world and of their own existence. It is worth commenting on why Arendt considers Lessing’s laughter a passion. Here she follows Aristotle, who defines passion as a strong sensory feeling that is accompanied by pleasure or pain. For Lessing, a burst of laughter, similar to a burst of anger, is an intense embodied response to the world, which makes it a passion in Aristotelian sense. Lessing wanted to provoke his audience to laugh so that they could overcome their indifference toward the world, and thus the world could appear to them as the object of their common passion and concern.

Arendt emphasises that for Lessing, those passions that can sharpen human sensibility in relation to reality are pleasurable. She says that for Lessing, “pleasure, which is fundamentally the intensified awareness of reality, springs from a passionate openness to the world and love of it” (Arendt 1968b, 6). Arendt does not say it explicitly but I propose that she has in mind here a kind of pleasure that accompanies thinking for oneself and comes from putting words around events, situations and circumstances in the world. For *selbstdenken* is not a solipsistic introspection that “pertains to a closed, integrated, organically grown and cultivated individual” (8) but an
activity which is open to the world and to others. In other words, Lessing’s pleasure is pleasure in the ability to share the world together with others.

The pleasure that accompanies Lessing’s thinking is not merely a positive or happy feeling in the everyday sense. Arendt says that pleasure, for Lessing, is engendered by an experience of tragedy – Lessing’s pleasures are “tragic pleasures” (Arendt 1968b, 6). The connection between “tragic pleasure,” thinking for oneself and a sense of reality becomes important to Arendt’s discussion of the human ability to reveal “the inner truth of the event” (20). Arendt will articulate this connection in the second part of the essay in the context of her reflections on the attitude to Germany’s Nazi past. To prepare the ground for a consideration of this notion of “the inner truth” later in this chapter, I examine here what Arendt means by “reality” or “the real.”

The categories “reality” and “world” are closely interrelated in Arendt’s works, and yet there is a different set of meanings associated with each of them. In Arendt’s writings the idea of “world” acquires different meanings depending on the context. Firstly, Arendt conceives of world as a space of appearance in a very general sense – a space into which humans appear upon birth, in which they dwell alongside others and from which they disappear at death. We come across this sense of “world,” for example, in the following passage from The Life of the Mind: “In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, Being and Appearing coincide” (Arendt 1978, 19, emphasis in the original). Secondly, as we saw above, Arendt conceives of “world” as public spaces formed by human common interests (inter-esse). These spaces lie “in between” humans and both separate and connect them together. “World” here denotes “the common world” that humans share. Thirdly, Arendt refers to the world in the sense of a “web of human relationships” – a
network of relationships that arise in the process whereby individuals speak to one
another and act in concert. “World” here denotes the emphatically human world as this
world resounds with the plural voices of actors and speakers and is endowed with
meaning and significance.

In order to start thinking about the idea of reality in Arendt’s writings, it is useful
to remind ourselves that in The Life of the Mind, Arendt uses the expression “the sense
of the real” (Arendt 1978, 57) or “the sense of realness” (Arendt 1978, 80). Therefore,
reality for Arendt is not a “what” as in the positivist conception of reality. The terms
“reality” and “the real” in Arendt’s writings correspond to how humans experience the
world, and this experience of reality takes place in the mode of appearance. In The
Human Condition, Arendt shows that the sense of reality depends on the presence of
others who confirm that what appears to me also appears to them. Quoting from
Aristotle, Arendt suggests that “to men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the
presence of others, by its appearing to all; ‘for what appears to all, this we call Being,’
and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream” (Arendt 1998,
199).

Reality, for Arendt, is thus a phenomenological achievement – for humans,
“reality” is that which appears to the plurality of spectators who see it from their
different standpoints and are willing to share their experiences. In The Human
Condition, she argues that the reality of the world depends “on the simultaneous
presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents
itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised”
(Arendt 1998, 57). Here Arendt puts particular emphasis on the fact that the reality of
the world needs not a singular “other” but the presence of diverse spectators who hold different perspectives on the world.

We can see here a recurrent theme in Arendt’s writings: that appearance – and the human experience of reality, as I argued above, takes place in the mode of appearance – is relational in nature. In the previous chapter, we saw how Arendt argues that doxa in the sense of the world as “it appears to me” cannot be formulated outside relationships with others. To formulate my doxa and be able to reflect on it I need others who invite my appearance in the agora, acknowledge it and encourage me to share my doxa with them. Arendt’s idea of reality is relational in nature as well – to experience the world as real I need to come into relationship with others and become aware of the different perspectives on the world that they possess. For it is not the mere presence of a large number of individuals which is necessary for constituting human reality but also the willingness of individuals to encounter others, to bring their perspectives in relation and recognise differences among them. In other words, here we need a “Socrates” who can incite us to face up to the presence of others and encourage us to learn about the differences between, and commonalities of, our perspectives on the world. Arendt’s Lessing thus plays a role of facilitator similar to that of Arendt’s Socrates. Lessing’s desire to draw the attention of others towards the world and intensify pleasure at the presence of others is at the same time a desire to intensify people’s sense of reality, to enable people to “feel real” in their relationship to their fellows, and to see the world as real.

The relational nature of Arendt’s idea of reality is well grasped by Kimberley Curtis (1999, 34), who develops the language of provocation to explain it: “the engendering ground of the real is the mutual provocation that occurs between appearing
beings” (emphasis added). Curtis also suggests that Arendt believes that the sense of the real is “mutable” (37) – depending on the historical conditions it can be weakened or intensified. For Arendt, modern historical conditions “dangerously attenuate the power of… ‘aesthetic provocation’” (37–38). This is why Curtis talks about a profound need that modern individuals possess: “Our need is to cultivate our tragic pleasure – our pleasure in the feeling of reality intensified through the provoking presence of particular others and the recalcitrant and plural quality of the world thus engendered” (38, emphases added). Curtis then refers to Arendt’s Lessing as such a “particular other,” as a provocateur who “provokes” individuals to turn to the world and face up to the plurality of human beings with their different positions.

This reading of Arendt’s Lessing as a provocateur is helpful for understanding the third and last characteristic of Lessing’s thinking that I highlight – its concerns with the “relative rightness of opinions” (Arendt 1968b, 7) which, as I argue, bear some similarities to the concerns of Arendt’s Socrates with “truth of doxai.”

As an entry point to the discussion of the idea of “relative rightness of opinion,” I would like to consider a curious claim that Arendt makes when she describes how Lessing evaluated works of art – that Lessing “could attack or defend [a work of art] in his polemics according to how the matter in question was being judged by the public and quite independently of the degree to which it was true or false” (Arendt 1968b, 7). In other words, Lessing has the courage to go against public opinion on an issue – Lessing may choose to defend a point of view when the public fails to recognise its merits and he may choose to attack a point of view if the public tends to accept it uncritically. Arendt is quick to clarify that this feature of Lessing’s thinking cannot be explained merely as pity and sympathy for those who are disparaged by the majority.
As she puts it, “it was also a concern, which had become instinctive with him, for the relative rightness of opinions which for good reasons get the worst of it” (Arendt 1968b, 7). What drives Lessing’s thinking is a desire to ensure that an opinion which is criticised can preserve its place in the discourse and, from Lessing’s perspective, every opinion deserves such a place, whether he himself agrees with it or not.

Note that here Arendt suggests that Lessing’s concern is with “the relative rightness of opinions…[which] for good reasons gets the worst of it” (Arendt 1968b, 7, emphasis added). Here she wants to highlight how Lessing’s contemporaries must have been uncomfortable with his criticism, which does not judge according to pre-established standards but takes its sides depending on the place of an opinion in the world. Arendt emphasises that Lessing’s greatness was not recognised in his lifetime in Germany, “where the true nature of criticism is less understood than elsewhere” (Arendt 1968b, 5). In other words, in an environment in which everyone was concerned with arguing over the final truth of the matter, Lessing’s concerns with the “relative rightness of opinions” were considered to be a sign of weakness rather than greatness, and Lessing’s intentions were misunderstood.

How then does Lessing, according to Arendt, keep different opinions in play? And what does this “relative rightness” mean? Lessing intended to accomplish this by inspiring a dialogue, or rather, polemics between thinkers. As Arendt notes, Lessing saw his mission as “scatter[ing] into the world…‘nothing but fermenta cognitionis’” (Arendt 1968b, 8). By fermenta cognitionis, Lessing meant the kernels of disagreement that could initiate polemics and provoke others to think for themselves. As Arendt puts it: “The fermenta cognitionis which Lessing scattered into the world were not intended to communicate conclusions, but to stimulate others to independent thought, and this for
no other purpose than to bring about a discourse between thinkers” (Arendt 1968b, 10). Lessing thus believed that he could help to do justice to different opinions by sparking polemics among thinkers. This discourse, he hoped, could provoke thinkers, including himself, to show the distinctiveness of their opinions from the opinions of others and thus strengthen their respective opinions. Therefore, as I read it, by “relative rightness of opinions,” Lessing means the quality that opinions acquire when they are tested and developed in discourse where they become stronger, more mature, more elucidated and distinct in relation to others’ opinions. This rightness is not absolute, but “relative” – it is not concerned with whether or not I am absolutely right but with how my opinion fares in relation to the opinions of others, whether it has been tested, strengthened and refined through debates. In turn, by strengthening relative opinions and provoking individuals to become aware of different opinions on the same issue, Lessing contributes to an opening of public spaces between individuals where the world can be seen from a plurality of perspectives simultaneously and the reality of the world can become apparent.

This meaning of “relative rightness of opinions” that Lessing sought to maintain can be illustrated by the example of discourse about Christianity and Lessing’s role in it, as described by Arendt (1968b, 7–8). To be able to clarify this example given by Arendt in the essay, the historical context of these debates needs some explanation. In Prussia in the eighteenth century there were at least two opposing views within Christianity – Lutheran orthodoxy and rational deism (Arendt calls the latter “the enlightened theology”). The former aspired to keep the Christian doctrine intact, preserving faith in the resurrection and divine revelation, while the latter wanted to fit religion into natural science and rational knowledge, thereby purifying it of references
to miracles and irrational beliefs (Yasukata 2003, 91). Arendt specifies that Lessing did not subscribe to either of these positions but instead came into a dispute with each of them. Moreover, his own position was not consistent. As Arendt noted (1968b, 7), quoting from Lessing himself: “he instinctively became dubious of Christianity ‘the more cogently some tried to prove it to me,’ and instinctively tried to ‘preserve it in [his] heart’ the more ‘wantonly and triumphantly others sought to trample it underfoot.’” Arendt explains that this lack of consistency in Lessing’s thinking was informed by his concerns about the “relative rightness of opinions.” “Where everyone else was contending over the ‘truth’ of Christianity,” Arendt says (1968b, 7), “he [Lessing] was chiefly defending its position in the world, now anxious that it might again enforce its claim to dominance, now fearing that it might vanish utterly.” In other words, Lessing saw his role in the debates about Christianity not in finding the final truth of the matter but in ensuring that the world is filled in with the plurality of different opinions and that individuals are aware of the presence of these diverse opinions.

By emphasising Lessing’s concern about the “relative rightness of opinions,” Arendt brings Lessing close to the figure of Socrates as a “midwife” and “gadfly” of the polis. Both thinkers were concerned not with postulating and upholding absolute truth but rather with assisting their fellows in articulating their relative points of view, their doxa, in their truthfulness or rightness. Therefore, I suggest that we can consider the Socratic concerns with the truths inherent in doxai and Lessing’s concerns with the “relative rightness of opinions” as two manifestations of the same conception of truth which, as I argue in this thesis, can be discerned in Arendt’s writings – a truth which is not antithetical to politics. Both Socrates and Lessing, as Arendt describes them, were
interested in articulating the plurality of truths as they believed that every perspective on the world that humans hold potentially inheres some truth that can be discerned if diverse perspectives are brought into relation to each other. Arendt’s Lessing is, like Arendt’s Socrates, a provocateur who actively stimulates others to defend their doxai, who sets different opinions at loggerheads and takes pleasure in the very process of debates and polemics. This mission, as both thinkers saw it, called for a special effort – the effort of bringing about human intercourse between individuals and facilitating an encounter between different perspectives on the world, thereby enabling a world that is held in common to appear.

As considered above, thinking for oneself involves the rejection of a singular truth, by which I mean the idea of an absolute, immutable and irrefutable truth that is self-contained and not bound to the existence of particular human beings. Truth thus conceived coerces the human mind and prevents an individual from inquiring into what it is that she thinks for herself. Selbstdenken is thinking not from the detached stance of “objectivity” but from my own standpoint in the world. It is an attempt to figure out for myself what it is that I think is true, how truth appears to me. This thinking engages in polemics and debates with other thinkers who have opposing standpoints but does not seek to dominate and impose one’s opinion upon others. Selbstdenken is committed to the world and takes pleasure in sharing this world with the plurality of other thinkers, speakers and actors. This thinking rejects absolute truth in order to strengthen the relative truth of one’s opinions – to make them stronger, more mature, more elucidated and distinct in relation to others’ opinions.
We can discern most clearly Lessing’s twofold attitude to truth in the final lines of the essay. It includes a quote from Lessing that, as Arendt puts it, “seems to draw from all his works wisdom’s last word”:

JEDER SAGE, WAS IHM WARHEIT DÜNKT,
UND DIE WARHEIT SELBST SEI GOTT EMPFOHLEN!

(Let each man say what he deems truth, and let truth itself be commended unto God!) (Arendt 1968b, 31)

What I have argued so far is that, for Arendt, Lessing’s idea of selbstdenken becomes a vehicle for the relationship between Lessing and the world under the conditions of “dark times” and allows him to preserve his commitment to this world. Moreover, Lessing’s thinking is of a kind that seeks to keep different opinions in play in order to open up public spaces between thinkers so that they can see the same world from the plurality of perspectives and so that this world can “appear” to them as real. Arendt suggests that contemporary thinkers “very much need Lessing to teach us this state of mind” (Arendt 1968b, 8). What contemporary thinkers can learn from Lessing is precisely his commitment to the world and his concerns with the reality of the world.

Hill (1979, 292) explains why Arendt was so preoccupied with the problem of “the reality of the world”: “The search for the reality of the world and one’s fellow citizens…emerges as the central political theme in Hannah Arendt’s thinking. This reflects her concern with the tenuousness of our grasp of reality, and, of course, with the radical destruction and the loss of the reality of a common world that she attributed to totalitarianism…” In the essay on Lessing we can see Arendt reflecting on both the loss
of the reality of the world and the complexity of this problem. Firstly, the problem of
the loss of the world is not limited to the conditions of totalitarianism – it is
characteristic of non-totalitarian societies as well. Secondly, it is often the case that a
withdrawal from the world is not a matter of choice but the result of persecution which
denies people the possibility of participating in the affairs of the world.

To illustrate how people can lose their sense of reality under certain historical and
personal conditions, Arendt provides two examples: the escape from the world of
persecution into relationships of fraternity and the “inner migration” into inner life
under the Nazi totalitarian rule. I consider these examples in the next section.

3. “Worldless” humanity: “fraternity” and “inner
emigration”

In this section I explore two examples Arendt presents in the essay to reflect on how
and why people can lose their sense or grasp of the reality of the world. Both examples
refer to Germany’s Nazi past – the example of the persecution of German Jews who
were thereby driven to find refuge in the worldless relationships of “fraternity”; and the
example of “inner emigration,” whereby people who were not persecuted or directly
involved in Nazi crimes were unwilling to face up to the horrific reality of the Nazi Reich.

Arendt conceives of “fraternity” as the natural response of “the insulted” and “the
injured” who have been forced to withdraw from the world in times of persecution and
terror directed against them (Arendt 1968b, 13–14). An escape into a community of
“brothers” who share a similar fate is their only chance to find some sense of security
and consolation. This community of “fraternity” allows the oppressed to feel “the
warmth of intimacy” (16, 30) and share the burden of persecution. In the context of her discussion of “fraternity,” Arendt emphasises one particular aspect of the experience of being a refugee – that under the burden of persecution, the persecuted are compelled to abandon their concerns for the world. The oppressed are barred from participating in the world while the relationship of “fraternity” cannot establish the world of its own – the oppressed find themselves “worldless” (Arendt 1968b, 13). What Arendt is getting at here is that the persecuted are pressed against one another such that they are deprived of the ability to see the world lying in between them; they cannot hold common interests in the world, in the literal sense of inter-esse – that which separates and connects them. It is as though fraternity erases the distances between people, combining them into a mass of undistinguishable beings: “the persecuted have moved so closely together that the interspace which we have called world…has simply disappeared” (Arendt 1968b, 13).

Moreover, as discussed earlier, a sense of reality depends on whether the same world “appears” to individuals from different perspectives. However, under the burden of persecution, humans fail to see that which lies “in between them” such that the world cannot appear as a common frame of reference for their interests, speech and action. This is why people subjected to oppression are prone to lose their grasp of reality – Arendt talks about an experience of “weird irreality” which accompanies “worldlessness” (Arendt 1968b, 17) resulting from the withdrawal from the world into a community of “fraternity.”

As a German Jew who had to flee Germany for her life, Arendt reminds her audience that she is familiar with the experience of persecution. As she puts it, she belonged to “the group of Jews expelled from Germany at a relatively early age”
(Arendt 1968b, 17). This means that Arendt’s reflections on the danger of losing sense of the reality of the world arises from her own experience as she knows first hand what it is like to be forced to flee from the world and to experience the feeling of “weird irreality” (17) that accompanies this flight. She comments that the only way she was able to resist the temptation to succumb to this “irreality” was to keep reminding herself that she was “on the run” (22). What she means here is that under the conditions of persecution, the oppressed have only one way to preserve some sense of the real. They have to face up to the fact of their escape and never lose sight of the world from which they are forced to flee: “They must remember that they are constantly on the run, and that the world’s reality is actually expressed by their escape” (22).

Arendt refers to the relationships of “fraternity” in two different parts of the essay. The first, which I considered above, is concerned with the experience of being a refugee. In the other, Arendt reflects on a specific Enlightenment idea of civic humanity – the idea based on the assumption that what brings humans together is not the common world but “human nature’ of such and such type” (Arendt 1968b, 16) – the nature that all human beings possess. The concept of “humanity” and “humanness” are of particular significance for Hannah Arendt. Her work can be seen as an ongoing enquiry into this idea and the historical conditions for its emergence. When talking about the idea of “humanity” in the Lessing essay, Arendt has in mind Rousseau’s proposition that human nature consists of the sentiment of “compassion, an innate repugnance…to see a fellow human being suffering” (12). She further emphasises that the idea of compassion provided the inspiration for the French Revolution and was deemed as a new paradigm for humanity. Humanity then becomes synonymous with “fraternity,” which is driven by compassion and encompasses all people – both those who are
persecuted and those who are not. As Arendt remarks, “through compassion the revolutionary-minded humanitarian of the eighteenth century sought to achieve solidarity with the unfortunate and the miserable – an effort tantamount to penetrating the very domain of brotherhood” (Arendt 1968b, 14). Arendt outlines a few objections against this eighteenth century idea of humanity based on the sentiment of compassion. Firstly, the idea of humanity seeks to reduce humanity, which is, for Arendt, a political concept, to the natural. Compassion is a “natural,” “instinctual” response to the sufferings of others (Arendt 1968b, 15). Therefore, any human relationships that can arise from this sentiment are also natural and as such lie beyond the realm of the political, which is characterised by the activities of action and speech and the phenomenon of human plurality.

Secondly, Arendt emphasises that compassion has “an egalitarian character” (Arendt 1968b, 12). The problem is that compassion, being an instinctual response, does not allow us to choose those with whom we empathise. Arendt emphasises that Lessing was very much aware of this when he remarked that “we feel ‘something akin to compassion’ for the evildoer also” (12). The natural sentiment of compassion thus works in the same way in relation to any human being regardless of how she appears to us as a speaker and actor. Compassion does not compel us to think about where other people stand in the world, which distinct positions they occupy and how they appear to us in every specific situation. Compassion is, therefore, very different from the “passions” that Lessing sought to inspire in his audience: firstly, as discussed in Section Two of this chapter, the passions of laughter and anger sought to draw people’s attention towards the world, and, secondly, they were concerned with particular situations, individuals and phenomena.
Another objection that Arendt raises against the eighteenth century idea of humanity is that compassion is “mute,” that is, it is not conducive to human discourse about the world. Compassion is a response to someone else’s pain, and pain “like everything instinctual, tends to muteness” (Arendt 1968b, 15–16). When humans see the sufferings of others they are moved to answer with bodily gestures or tears but not with an act of speech that can begin a dialogue. Arendt emphasises that “gladness, not sadness, is talkative, and truly human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is entirely permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he says” (Arendt 1968b, 15). Here compassion can be again contrasted to Lessing’s relationship to the world and to others: it was “pleasure” – even if it was “tragic pleasure” – that animated this relationship, pleasure at sharing the world with others who hold different opinions, and this pleasure, unlike compassion, was conducive to a continuous discourse about this world.

As I have shown, Arendt is concerned about the fact that compassion is “mute” and thus an individual driven merely by compassion cannot relate to others through genuine speech and action. Even when compassion inspires an individual to “act,” she “acts” with reference to herself rather than to others. If it were the case that compassion can provide the best inspiration for human action, then, Arendt remarks, we would have been left to wonder whether “human beings should be so shabby that they are incapable of acting humanly unless spurred and as it were compelled by their own pain when they see others suffer” (Arendt 1968b, 15). People who are moved by compassion when seeing the sufferings of others do not act but rather react, almost automatically, as though out of a fear that they themselves could have experienced the same sufferings. This is another reason why, for Arendt, compassion cannot provide a foundation for a
political idea of “humanity.” For her, it is not compassion which is always to a certain extent self-absorbed, but “selflessness” and “openness to others” that are “the precondition for ‘humanity’ in every sense of that word” (15).

So what are the dangerous implications of founding the idea of “humanity” on compassion? Birmingham (1995) argues that Arendt’s criticism of taking the feelings of compassion and pity as a foundation for humanity finds its manifestation in her portrayal of Eichmann. Birmingham’s point is that Eichmann’s testimony as presented in Arendt’s report on his trial shows that he was not a cold-blooded murder who lacked any compassion or pity. Quite the contrary, as Birmingham points out, Arendt is keen to demonstrate that

[Eichmann] testified of his distress at the suffering of those he saw in the camps and more than once of how he sought to alleviate this suffering. Arendt points out that this distress at the suffering of others reveals that pity and compassion are instinctive, natural reactions by which human beings are affected in the presence of suffering, for it was easy enough for Eichmann to turn these instincts around, directing them towards himself: “So that instead of saying: what horrible things I did to people, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders (Eichmann in Jerusalem, 106).” (Birmingham 1995, 136)

I find this comment provided by Birmingham important for thinking about why Arendt does not put her trust in compassion as that which can enable people to resist the systematic pressures of evildoing such as those put on people by the Nazi totalitarian government. Since the point of reference for compassion is the self rather than the other
and the world, compassion cannot provide us with a principle for relating to others, especially in such boundary situations as totalitarian domination.

In the Lessing essay, Arendt considers yet another example of worldless existence that undermines people’s capacity to recognise and face up to evil unfolding around them. She refers to the phenomenon of “inner emigration” which, as she shows, was widespread in Nazi Germany. The phenomenon of “inner emigration,” Arendt suggests, concerns those who were not subjected to persecution themselves but witnessed it as bystanders in Nazi Germany. Arendt explains that by “inner emigrants” she means Germans who remained in the country during the Third Reich but behaved as though they were foreigners (Arendt 1968b, 19), that is, as though nothing that was unfolding in front of them was their concern. These people conducted their lives as usual and continued fulfilling their everyday duties and chores without realising that in doing so, they supported systematic evildoing performed on a massive scale by the Nazi regime. The reason for this behaviour, Arendt explains, is that people chose to shut down the world and escape into “the interior life” (Arendt 1968b, 19). They bypassed the facts of the persecution of minority groups and the existence of concentration camps. The implication of this self-imposed alienation from the world is that human life loses its humanness and the human sense of reality atrophies: “How tempting it was, for example, simply to ignore the intolerably stupid blabber of the Nazis. But seductive though it may be to yield to such temptations and to hole up in the refuge of one’s own psyche, the result will always be a loss of humanness along with the forsaking of reality” (Arendt 1968b, 23). As I understand this claim, to live as an “inner emigrant” is possible, but this life is not going to be a fully human one since it would be deprived of the possibility of sharing the world with others.
Arendt makes an important clarification in that she does not suggest that in times of totalitarian rule withdrawal from the world is “unjustified.” Quite the contrary, she suggests that in this situation withdrawal from the world is the only “justified” manner of conduct:

…I certainly do not wish to assert that the “inner emigration,” the flight from the world to concealment, from public life to anonymity (when that is what it really was and not just a pretext for doing what everyone did with enough inner reservations to salve one’s conscience), was not a justified attitude, and in many cases the only possible one. Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is constantly acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped. (Arendt 1968b, 22)

What Arendt is getting at here is that under totalitarian domination all spheres of the world are coordinated through the totalitarian ideology. Any public action thus contributes to the perpetuation of the system, and the only way to avoid becoming complicit in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is to refuse to participate in any public activities altogether. However, this withdrawal from the public realm should be genuine, Arendt says. The system itself was driven by an imperative to carry out the mass extermination of selected groups of people and the system itself legitimises and normalises these crimes. Therefore, to be genuine, “inner emigration” should involve a decisive refusal to take part in any action within the totalitarian system. To be able to sustain such a genuine withdrawal from the world, individuals must adopt an inner stance of non-compliance, of non-acceptance of the regime, and think for themselves. An example of a figure who, for Arendt, was able to sustain this genuine withdrawal
from the world under the conditions of the Third Reich was her teacher and lifelong friend, the philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969).

The last point shows that the question Arendt is dealing with here is more complex than it might appear at first sight. As we saw above, she emphasises that her question is not whether one must or must not withdraw from the world in times of persecution and totalitarian domination – indeed, one must do it to avoid complicity in totalitarian crimes. Rather, her question is, “to what extent do we remain obligated to the world even when we have been expelled from it or have withdrawn from it?” (Arendt 1968b, 22). Here Arendt is concerned with how an individual can preserve a sense of reality when participation in the world is impossible or morally unsustainable. She does not elaborate further on this specific problem in the Lessing essay apart from saying that reality should not be “ignored” and the world should be seen as that which an individual must “escape” (22). In the last chapter of this thesis I analyse Arendt’s essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” in which Arendt specifically discusses the challenge of responding to the systemic pressures of evil doing under totalitarianism. She explores the experience of those who did not succumb to these pressures and never lost sight of the reality of the criminal nature of Nazi totalitarian rule. I show in the last chapter that Arendt believes that an individual is still able to preserve a sense of the reality of the world even when she had to withdraw from the world and cut public contact with others. But whether individuals are capable of doing this depends on their willingness to practise thinking in the sense of the dialogue of the “two-in-one” – the Socratic inner dialogue of thought. This dialogue of the “two-in-one” is not the same as thinking for oneself, but the two are interconnected. By conversing with oneself in the inner dialogue of thought, one learns how to formulate
and articulate what it is that one thinks; one acquires the courage to pass one’s own judgment on every new situation as well as further distinguish and strengthen one’s opinion in relation to opinions of other thinkers.

In the Lessing address Arendt draws the attention of her audience to the fact that “inner emigration” did not come to an end with the defeat of Nazism. Arendt is concerned with the fact that people in post-war Germany still could not face up to what happened during the years of the Third Reich. Thus, in the Lessing essay, Arendt points to “the widespread tendency in Germany to act as though the years from 1933 and 1945 never existed; as though this part of German and European and thus world history could be expunged from the textbooks; as though everything depended on forgetting the ‘negative’ aspect of the past and reducing horror to sentimentality” (Arendt 1968, 19). Arendt’s point here is that people in Germany at the time of her Lessing address still continued living in a state of “inner emigration” and fleeing from the reality of the past, the horrors of the Final Solution and other Nazi crimes. They behaved as though it were possible to leave behind the past with all the evils that happened and to somehow “master” it (20).

Arendt argues that there is no easy solution to the problem of the Nazi past. Even the most genuine attempts to “master” the past in post-war Germany were doomed to fail: “perhaps that [mastering] cannot be done with any past, but certainly not with the past of Hitler Germany” (Arendt 1968b, 20). Here Arendt is not moralistic. She recognises the difficulty of the challenge of facing up to such a horrific and unprecedented event as the advent of totalitarianism. However, as I argue in the next section, Arendt suggests that there is a way whereby humans can and should face up to the reality of a totalitarian past. Her response to this challenge involves the use of the
faculty of thinking. In this part of the essay, Arendt refers to the practice of storytelling – a practice which is closely related to thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning and in the sense of *selbstdenken*. I argue in the next section that Arendt sees the role of storytelling as enabling humans to relate to the past, to disclose its meaning and thereby “reconcile themselves to it.” It is in the context of her discussion of storytelling that Arendt introduces the notion of the “inner truth of the event.” This notion, as I show, can be seen as another illustration of a sense of “truth” in Arendt’s writings which is related to meaning and is not antithetical to the political.

4. Storytelling and “the inner truth of the event”

In regard to the problem of handling the Nazi past, Arendt suggests as follows: “the best that can be achieved is to know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring” (Arendt 1968b, 20). Here Arendt talks about a threefold process that can allow us to recognise the past. Firstly, those who want to come to terms with the past need to put together an account of a past event. Secondly, they need to be able to withstand the temptation to gloss over and extenuate any uneasy parts of this account – they need to “endure” knowing about them. Thirdly, individuals who seek to relate to their past need to be prepared to witness and experience a disclosure of something important about an event that can arise out of this experience of “knowing” and “enduring.” What can be disclosed, Arendt says, is “the inner truth of the event” (20). I find this expression of particular importance as it points to a sense of truth in Arendt’s writing that is different from absolute (Platonic) truth. Yet, here, I believe, we are dealing with a different instance of this sense of truth than in the case of “truth of doxa” or “relative rightness of opinions.” Let me explore
what Arendt means by “the inner truth of the event” by examining how Arendt describes the process of a disclosure of such truth in the Lessing essay.

As I mentioned above, Arendt introduces the notion of “the inner truth of the event” in the context of her discussion of how it is possible to face up to the reality of the Nazi past – a painful past that is hard to acknowledge and come to terms with, and that many people in post-war Germany try to ignore or to “master” once and for all. Arendt suggests that rather than attempting to “master” the past, we must open ourselves to an experience of “tragic pleasure” in regard to past events. She refers to Faulkner’s novel *A Fable*, about World War I, to provide an example of what this “tragic pleasure” involves. This story, Arendt argues, “so transparently displayed the inner truth of the event that it became possible to say: Yes, this is how it was” (Arendt 1968b, 20). What Arendt means here is that by letting ourselves be affected by the story, we can intensify our awareness of the reality of this event and come closer to seeing its “inner truth.” This disclosure of the truth of the event is related to the experience of “tragic pleasure” that the story induces. As Arendt puts it, “its [the story’s] end is tears, which the reader also weeps, and what remains beyond that is the ‘tragic effect’ or the ‘tragic pleasure,’ the shattering emotion which makes one able to accept the fact that something like this war could have happened at all” (Arendt 1968b, 20). By re-experiencing the past in form of a story about an event, the reader or the listener is able to experience a catharsis and thus establish some space in relation to the trauma this story represents.

Arendt further clarifies that she refers to “tragic pleasure” for a purpose: she says that she “deliberately mention[s] tragedy because it more than the other literary forms represents a process of recognition” (Arendt 1968b, 20). What Arendt means here is
that the past is not simply “there” and it does speak for itself. The past needs human efforts “to recognise” it – to see it and acknowledge it, and to try to understand it. The story enables the individual to set in motion the threefold process whereby humans can attempt to relate to their past that I described above – “to know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring” (Arendt 1968b, 20).

Storytelling allows an individual to face up to the reality of the past and to accept it. Arendt is keen to emphasise that this acceptance is different from “mastering” as it does not seek to overcome the past but rather recognise it and come to terms with it: “we can no more master the past than we can undo it. But we can reconcile ourselves to it” (Arendt 1968b, 21). In the next chapter devoted to analysing Arendt’s essay “Understanding and Politics,” I discuss in more detail what Arendt means by the need of humans “to reconcile themselves” to the world. I show that this need is related to what Arendt calls “strangeness” – the fact that humans are born into a world that existed before their arrival, which makes them “strangers” who have an urge to relate themselves to the world and to others. This process of reconciling oneself to the world can only happen when and if humans are willing to engage in the quest for the meaning of reality. This is how Hill (1979) describes this process:

For Hannah Arendt, reconciliation does not consist in discovering the cunning of reason in history. In her view it has to do with overcoming one’s strangeness in order to make oneself at home in the world. The meaning sought is: how does my experience come about in relation to others and events in the world? What is at issue is the relation of my singular self to the numbers of others in the world… (Hill 1979, 288–289)
What appears then is that the category of meaning is central for our understanding of Arendt’s idea of storytelling and its relation to “the inner truth of an event.” This can be illustrated if we look at how Arendt relates her concept of storytelling to the Greek tragedy: “The tragic hero becomes knowledgeable by re-experiencing what has been done in the way of suffering, and in this pathos, in resuffering the past, the network of individual acts is transformed into an event, a significant whole. The dramatic climax of tragedy occurs when the actor turns into a sufferer; therein lies its peripeteia, the disclosure of the dénouement” (Arendt 1968b, 20). In Greek tragedies, the inner truth of a narrative is disclosed to actors at the end of a story – during the “dénouement,” the final part of a play in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and the narrative of the story is explained. In this final part, the hero of the tragedy is made to recollect the plot of the whole tragedy again, which prepares him to see a chain of happenings and incidents as a coherent whole, that is, as an “event.” To be able to recognise an event means to be able to see a stream of incidents, happenings, actions and words as a significant totality, that is, to see it as meaningful. When an individual reads or listens to the story, it is as though she too goes through a “dénouement” and is enabled to see a chain of happenings as a meaningful whole. It is at this moment that the past can emerge to the individual as meaningful and “the inner truth of the event” is disclosed to the reader or listener of the story.

What follows then is that the “inner truth” of an event brought about by the experience of “tragic pleasure” is thus not the final and irrefutable truth that Lessing so arduously rejected in his thinking. This truth is of an altogether other register. Neither is it equivalent to the truths of doxai that both Socrates and Lessing tried to bring about through human discourse and polemics. This truth is connected to the disclosure of
meaning of an event. Hill (1979) insightfully captures this sense of truth in the following passage:

The story gives one the best chance to recapture or imagine what the experience was like, or how the event took place. The point is not that the story is true – or that storytelling leads us to “the truth” – but that it is faithful to the reality of what happened, and so conveys its meaning. What is at issue is simply whether one can recognize the experience in the story; and that recognition is indeed the hope that Hannah Arendt held out in her political thinking: the moment when what was too far away to see clearly, or too close to be seen at all, comes into focus in its worldly significance, so that we see where we stand in relation to what has happened and we can think what we do. (Hill 1979, 297, emphasis added)

Hill (1979) particularly emphasises that, for Arendt, storytelling is a human form of generating meaning – the meaning of the reality of the past that is truthful to the experience of those who lived through this event. And the process of disclosing this truth of the event to the readers and listeners of a story has profound political significance. Hill argues above that storytelling is the root of thinking politics – thinking about “what we do” as political beings who live together with others. Hill suggests that storytelling allows humans to establish proper distance between them and past and present events so that the past and present events can emerge to them in their meaningfulness.

Furthermore, in the Lessing essay, Arendt proposes that the political significance of the quest for meaning and for truth associated with this quest can be demonstrated by reflecting on the role that the process of generating the meaning of the past plays in
allowing humans to think about the world and to enable this world to emerge as common to them. By recounting past experiences as stories, Arendt suggests, humans are able to endow human action, which is notoriously fleeting and does not leave behind any tangible trace, with some stability and durability: by telling a story about an actor and her deed, the storyteller “establishes its meaning and that permanent significance which then enters into history” (Arendt 1968b, 21). Storytelling thus can guarantee actions and events a place in the common world in so far as a story is being recounted and its meaning is alive.

These “stories” are told by historians and poets: “In reification by the poet or the historian, the narration of history has achieved permanence and persistence. Thus the narrative has been given its place in the world, where it will survive us. There it can live on – one story among many” (Arendt 1968b, 22). By telling stories, poets and historians thus help to fill the world with narratives about the past and present and to create a relatively stable, common world for actors and speakers. Hereby lies the political significance of the process of meaning generation that is accompanied by storytelling.

A poet and historian may begin storytelling, but a story remains alive only if it is repeated by others. To be sure, this repetition is not merely a recitation of the same story. Each story is told each time in a new way as telling a story requires every storyteller, every listener and reader to think about the story from their own perspective. Here we return to the practice of selbstdenken, Lessing’s thinking for oneself. There is a strong connection between selbstdenken and storytelling. Arendt remarks that we can recognise and disclose the meaning of experiences narrated as a story only “by relating them to ourselves and others” (Arendt 1968b, 21). What Arendt means here is that storytelling can disclose meanings of events and elucidate their “inner truths” only if I
am willing to think for myself, that is, to engage in a quest for what this story means for me and how this meaning is similar and different from the understandings of this story of others. Here I agree with Disch, who insightfully suggested that, for Arendt, “tragic storytelling serves not to settle questions but to unsettle them and to inspire spontaneous critical thinking in its audience” (1993, 670, emphasis in the original). A narrator can invite me to pursue the quest for truth inherent in a story but this quest would not occur without my willingness to engage in selbstenken. “The inner truth of events” cannot be generated by a storyteller in a form that can be delivered to others as a ready-made product. It is the task of every listener of a story to “relate” to this story, to engage with the meaning of a story and to think it through.

What then appears is that the practice of storytelling, if individuals are able and willing to engage in it, allows for the past to be seen from multiple perspectives and for a plurality of meanings of what happened to be generated. This in turn allows us to connect storytelling to Arendt’s understanding of reality as phenomenal and relational. As I have already shown, for Arendt, for humans, the only way to access the reality of the world is to become aware that the same world is seen from a plurality of different perspectives – perspectives that correspond to unique standpoints that humans occupy in the world. I also pointed out that the reality of the world depends on the willingness of individuals to share with others how the world appears to them from their perspectives. Hill (1979) insightfully elaborates on the relationships between the reality of the world and storytelling in Arendt’s works. Hill emphasises that storytelling is not only

the primary form of thinking about experience, but also as the primary form of communicating with each other about experience. It makes possible the sharing of
experience and reality. Further, when others hear our stories and believe them, they confirm our sense of what has really happened. (Hill 1979, 290)

What Hill argues here is that storytelling allows humans to renew their sense of the real by sharing stories about experiences – as I understand it, not only their own experiences but also experiences that they think may have been involved in events of the past and the present.

If we relate this insight to the context of the Lessing essay, then we can better understand why Arendt devotes an entire section of the essay to storytelling. As I argued above in considering Arendt’s discussion of “fraternity” and “inner emigration,” Arendt is concerned with the loss of a sense of reality that accompanies human existence in “dark times.” Storytelling becomes, for her, one of the responses to the “weird irreality” of the world that can vindicate the reality of the world.

Another response to the challenges posed to us by “dark times” that Arendt considers in the essay is associated with the concept of “political” friendship, which Arendt creatively borrows from Lessing. I explore Arendt’s understanding of friendship as presented in the Lessing essay in the next section. This exploration allows me to further illuminate the sense of truth which is not antithetical to politics and to show how thinking can be a vehicle for the relationship between truth and the political realm. This friendship, as I argue, demands of friends a commitment to selbstdenken, on the one hand, and on the other, is based on the imperative that each friend tell what he “deems truth.”
5. “Political” friendship and truth-telling

I begin this section with a reflection on what Arendt means by friendship in her Lessing essay. She creatively borrows the concept from Lessing and is particularly interested in how friendship is presented in his play *Nathan the Wise*, in which Lessing sought to bring into relationship the three major religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is worth mentioning that the character of Nathan is in large part modelled after Lessing’s lifelong Jewish friend, Moses Mendelssohn. This friendship not only has a personal significance but also a historical impact on the position of the Jewish people in Germany: it is considered by some historians as an event which opened a way for Jewish emancipation (Bahr 1999, 842). As Bahr explains it, at the time when Lessing met Mendelssohn, “Mendelssohn had made the transition from the protected existence within the Jewish community, which had lived in the physical and intellectual isolation of the ghettos since the Middle Ages, to participation in the surrounding German and European life.” While the German intellectual community met Mendelssohn with extreme prejudice, “Lessing accepted him on equal terms” (842).

Before the Holocaust of World War II and the rise of Nazism, the Lessing-Mendelssohn friendship, and the *Nathan the Wise* drama in particular, was considered a symbol of successful German-Jewish co-existence. In the Lessing essay, Arendt is interested in Lessing’s idea of friendship that emerges from this drama. In the essay, she argues that friendship, as Lessing understands it, is different from the idea of fraternity, which, as we previously saw it, she conceives as worldless relationships in which people come too close together and the world lying in between them disappears. Arendt emphasises three characteristics that distinguish Lessing’s idea of friendship from fraternity. These are worldliness, selectiveness and discursivity.
Firstly, for Arendt, friendship, unlike fraternity, is an essentially worldly phenomenon. Arendt argues that in *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing describes a kind of friendship that is “not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world” (Arendt 1968b, 25). As I understand this claim, Arendt argues that Lessing’s understanding of friendship is not based on intimacy, closeness or warmth. Instead, this friendship demands that friends have common interests in the world and respect the world that lies “in between” them. This is the only way that these “in-between” places can turn into public spaces thereby the world can be seen from different perspectives and humans are able to grasp the reality of the world. Secondly, Arendt suggests that friendship is “selective” (12). The selectiveness of friendship means that we can know whom our friends are only after we enter into a dialogue with those whom we consider as potential friends. This brings us to the third feature of friendship that distinguishes it from fraternity – its discursivity. Fraternity allows only for an “intimate talk in which individuals speak about themselves” (Arendt 1968b, 24). Friendship, on the contrary, allows for the dialogue about the world that friends share. Arendt suggests that Lessing’s idea of friendship is close to the Greek understanding of it, which considered the discourse of friendship between citizens to be essential for the organization of the polis:

But for the Greeks the essence of friendship consisted in discourse. They held that only the constant interchange of talk united citizens in a *polis*. In discourse the political importance of friendship, and the humanness peculiar to it, were made manifest. This converse...is concerned with the common world, which remains “inhuman” in a very literal sense unless it is constantly talked about by human beings. (Arendt 1968b, 24)
In this passage Arendt shows that the Ancient Greeks understood friendship as a political phenomenon, for they believe that friendship holds the polis and its citizens together by bringing about a dialogue about the world and inspiring common interests in this world. In the process of this dialogue, the world itself becomes human, that is, animated by human care and love for the world, by people’s desire to share the world with others.

With these three characteristics in mind, I emphasise something that Arendt does not mention explicitly in the essay but which I think she presupposes – the relationship between friendship and selbstdenken. In order for a person to be capable of a political kind of friendship as described by Arendt, I submit, she should be committed to thinking for herself. Let me illustrate this by looking again at the three characteristics of friendship I referred to above – worldliness, selectivity, discursivity.

Firstly, thinking for oneself allows an individual to strengthen her opinion and elaborate on it in distinction from the opinions of others. An individual who practises selbstdenken always anticipates discourse with other thinkers; she is ready to investigate, question and cross-examine her opinion in relation to the opinions of others and thus keeps different opinions in play. The practice of thinking for oneself helps an individual resist the temptation to reduce the plurality of opinions to a “truth” in the singular that presents itself as irrefutable and immutable. By enabling individuals to articulate differences in their opinions, selbstdenken thus helps them to establish spaces between them that both connect and separate them – spaces in which the world can appear as common. Thinking for oneself thus enables friends to respect the world that lies between them, to develop common interests in this world and share this world among themselves. This is why selbstdenken is necessary to sustain the first
characteristic of the relationship of friendship as conceived by Arendt’s Lessing – its worldliness.

Secondly, friendship is selective. Without thinking for ourselves, we cannot learn how to be “selective” about our friends. Being “selective” about one’s friends involves the ability to recognise the nature of other people’s opinions and to position oneself in relation to them. This is not in order to make friends only with those people with whom one agrees. For Lessing, we can and should be friends with those with whom we disagree. In fact, as I argue below, it is the very task of friends to recognise, establish and respect their differences. Thinking for oneself is essential for friends being able to fulfil this task.

Thirdly, thinking for oneself is essential for sustaining a genuine dialogue of friendship, its discursivity. If friends do not think for themselves, if they succumb to absolute truth as their ultimate authority or if they unthinkingly accept the other’s opinion, then they are not capable of entering into a dialogue of friendship – a dialogue which requires that they have the courage to announce their own positions and to question, doubt and challenge their own views and the views of others.

In the essay Arendt argues that the kind of friendship Lessing articulates in his writings can be considered as the political principle that can inspire a proper attitude to the world and to others in “dark times,” that is, to assist with perceiving and preserving the world as shared with the plurality of human beings. To illustrate her point, she invites the reader to take part in a thought experiment and explore whether friendship which makes no recourse to moral and religious truth can resist the Nazi racial ideologies that draw their strength from pseudo-scientific thinking. As Arendt suggests,
the question that should be asked and answered in this respect is as follows: “Would any such doctrine, however convincingly proved, be worth the sacrifice of so much as a single friendship between two men?” (Arendt 1968b, 29, emphasis in the original). For Lessing and, I believe, for Arendt herself, the answer to this question would have been a negative one: no doctrinal, religious or scientific “truth” can be worth even one existing friendship or a potential friendship to come. Thus it is Arendt’s point that the relationship of political friendship can help resist the temptation to succumb to any “truths” that claim ultimate authority. The commitment to practising friendship in Lessing’s specific sense could prevent us from turning a blind eye on the perspectives and interests of other people with whom we share the world, to sacrifice human plurality for the sake of the idea of absolute truth.

However, Arendt does not end her thought experiment at this point. I submit that Arendt is well aware that a rejection of absolute truth which stands in the way of a potential friendship is not enough to inspire humans to face up to reality which includes facing up to the presence of others. Arendt suggests that the next step which is necessary to preserve “a bit of humanness in a world become inhuman” (23) is to recognise and respect “the reality of the distinction” (23) – that is, the reality of different positions in the world that friends hold and the reality of the experiences and challenges that they face. As she puts it, “in keeping with a humanness that had not lost the solid ground of reality, a humanness in the midst of the reality of persecution, they would have had to say to each other: A German and a Jew, and friends” (Arendt 1968b, 23). Arendt further says that if friends maintain their commitment to such friendship throughout times of persecution, then “a bit of humanness in a world become inhuman [is] achieved” (23). As I understand Arendt’s argument, she wants to show that a mere
friendship between a German and a Jew is not enough to preserve the common world between friends; this friendship must also openly acknowledge and face up to those differences – economic, religious, cultural, ethnic, physical – that put one friend in a position of greater privilege judged by the reality of the world.

My point here is that in order to be able to face up to “the reality of the distinction,” in order to have the courage to affirm it, and yet consider others as equal, both friends should practise *selbstdenken*, thinking for oneself. On the one hand, thinking for oneself does not shy away from potential disagreements and conflicts and allows friends to explore the differences in their opinions without false modesty or the desire to neutralise polemics, and yet this thinking does not resort to the absolute truth as the final word and recognises the “relative rightness” of opinions with whom one agrees and disagrees.

By introducing the practice of *selbstdenken* into the discussion of Lessing’s idea of friendship we can further illuminate a complex relationship that, according to Arendt, Lessing saw between friendship and truth. The Lessing essay is often referred to in the literature with the intention of showing that Arendt finds political friendship and truth to be incompatible. Indeed, Arendt praises Lessing for his discovery of a possible “antagonism between truth and humanity” (Arendt 1968b, 28). However, I argue that the issue is more complex. What Lessing sees as dangerous to humanity and friendship is absolute truth – the desire of a friend to appeal to an ultimate source of authority – the truth in the singular – and thus end the discourse of friendship. Such truth hinders the ability to think for oneself and does not allow friends to perceive and articulate their differences in a dialogue between friends.
Lessing was aware that without this discourse, human plurality is in danger. What Lessing was fearful of is that “all men would suddenly unite in a single opinion, so that out of many opinions one would emerge, as though not men in their infinite plurality but man in the singular, one species and its exemplars, were to inhabit the earth” (Arendt 1968b, 31). Here we can also see how Arendt wants to demonstrate that truth in the singular is antagonistic to the idea of the world in the sense of “in-between.” When individuals accept truth in the singular, they start talking in one voice, which means that they become united to the extent that the spaces between them shrink and they cannot develop any common interests in the world. As a result, the world does not appear and “in-between” distances cannot be transformed into public spaces that open up only when individuals bring together their diverse perspectives.

However, having postulated this antagonism between friendship and truth, Lessing demands of friends that each of them say what he “deems truth.” For, as Arendt puts it, he believed that “the announcement of what each ‘deems truth’ both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together comprise the world” (Arendt 1968b, 30). Here we can clearly see that Arendt refers to the figure of Lessing not with an intention to exclude truth from politics but, on the contrary, to show why truth is essential for the political realm.

Fenves (1999) persuasively shows the importance of truthfulness for Arendt’s conception of friendship. He first proposes that, for Arendt, Lessing is a thinker who is ready to “sacrifice” truth in the sense of “absolute truth”: “if truth means absolute truth, it must be abandoned” (Fenves 1999, 17). However, he also wants to show that by rejecting the “absolute truth,” Arendt’s Lessing seeks to affirm truth conceived in a different sense: “the sacrifice of truth is not, however, a sanction for lying. Nor is it a
reason to propose once again ‘a right to lie.’ This would be true only if the sphere of friendship was again drawn into the sphere of fraternity. Friends, as friends and only as friends...say what they deem to be true” (Fenves 1999, 17, emphasis in the original).

The demand that Lessing makes of “friends” – that they “say what they deem to be true” – is not the demand to say the absolute truth – truth that claims the source of its authority outside the human world. As Lessing saw it, “truth can exist only where it is humanized by discourse, only where each man says not what just happens to occur to him at the moment, but what he ‘deems truth’” (Arendt 1968b, 30, emphasis added). Here Arendt reflects on how truth can find its place in the world without jeopardising the phenomenon of human plurality. When humans think for themselves and articulate their opinions in relation to the opinions of others, truth finds its way into the human world by assuming the form of plurality – the plurality of the innumerable perspectives that individuals share, discuss and argue about in the discourse of friendship. This makes truth acceptable in the political realm.

Moreover, for Arendt, the human commitment to say what one deems truth has crucial political significance, as it assists humans with the preservation of the world. As I read Arendt, the act of truth-telling serves as both an invitation and a provocation for individuals to start a dialogue about the world, and thus to preserve “in-between” distances that both unite and separate them and be able to transform these distances into public spaces. By articulating what each “deems truth” and sharing it with others, individuals enable the world to be seen from multiple perspectives so that the world can “appear” to them as a common reference for their dialogue and as that which they share in common. At the same time, we can recall here Arendt’s understanding of reality as that which can be fully grasped by individuals only if this world is made public – that
is, made the subject of common human interests, concerns and responsibilities. Then it means that the pronouncement of what individuals “deem truth” also helps individuals protect and renew their sense of the reality of the world and all phenomena in it.

In this chapter I have considered the relationship between truth and politics through the lens of Arendt’s interest in Lessing’s ideas about the connection between thinking for oneself (selbstdenken) and political friendship. I showed that there is a clear affinity between the kind of thinking oriented to politics that Arendt finds in Socrates and the one she wants to see in Lessing. Similar to how Socrates attempts to bring doxai of his fellow citizens into relation to each other in order to discern truths that inhere in them, Lessing aspires to provoke his readers and theatrical audience to think for themselves and is committed to bring forth “the relative rightness of their opinions” or doxai.

Furthermore, I argued that even though Arendt’s Lessing refutes truth in the singular, there is a sense of truth that is essential for Lessing’s practice of selbstdenken and his idea of friendship. It is a truth that is disclosed when each individual, each friend, is willing to articulate what she “deems truth.” To be able to do this, to be truthful in the dialogue of friendship, an individual should be ready to challenge, question, defend and strengthen her opinions in the course of the dialogue of friendship and assert their opinions in distinction from the opinions of others. At the same time, the dialogue of friendship never loses sight of the world. Therefore, it requires truthfulness in yet another sense – as a commitment to the world, an interest in the world and its wellbeing, and a willingness to share this world with others. It is thus the love and partisanship for the world of an individual that defines whether doxa, opinion, can be articulated in its truthfulness or not. In turn, this partisanship for the world is
expressed in the willingness of friends to tell each other what they “deem truth,” that is, how truth appears to them. What is at stake in the dialogue of friendship is thus not the irrefutable truth that intellect seeks to establish but truth in relation to thinking as reason – thinking which is oriented by the need of humans to constitute meaning.

When subjected to the dialogue of friendship, truth ceases to be truth in the singular and assumes the form of plurality. Truth thus can exist in the political realm, but only when it is “humanised” by human discourse and appears to others in the form of what “I deem truth.” Not only can truth exist in the political realm, it also should be the subject of human concerns. As I have attempted to show, for Arendt, friendship in which friends abdicate truth in the singular but are committed to say what each “deems truth” becomes the political and ethical principle for one’s judgment and acting in times of political catastrophe. Moreover, as I also pointed out above, the commitment of individuals to what each of them “deems truth” enables humans to establish and protect the “in-between” distances between themselves – hence to open up the possibility for the common world to appear between them.

It would seem then that Arendt used the occasion of her Lessing address to examine again something which is of huge significance to her – the idea of truth in relation to politics – and thereby reveal different aspects of the idea of “the truth of doxa” which she refers to in the essay on Socrates. In the Lessing essay, she particularly emphasises a complex set of relationships between truth in this sense and a set of interrelated ideas that denote the key political phenomena, for Arendt – the world of human affairs, the orientation toward and ability to face up to “reality” of the world, the idea of humanity and the historical conditions for its emergence, the “political” friendship. As I attempted to show in all these cases, thinking in the sense of a quest for
meaning and the more specific sense of *selbstdenken* or thinking for oneself becomes a vehicle between truth and the political phenomena that she discusses.

I placed emphasis on how Arendt refers to thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning in her attempt to articulate a manner in which humans can “reconcile themselves” to the past – in particular, such a horrific and unprecedented event as the advent of Nazi totalitarianism. I indicated that there is a rich set of ideas and relationships that arise out of Arendt’s reflections on the relationship that humans whose lives were changed by the Nazi totalitarian regime have to their past and on the human ability to recognise, understand and come to terms with historical events.

The Lessing essay is not the only piece of work Arendt devotes to this problematic. In the next chapter I consider Arendt’s essay “Understanding and Politics,” which is fully devoted to the challenge of understanding totalitarianism – an event, for Arendt, without precedence in human history. Analysing this essay will allow me to further elaborate on what is involved, for Arendt, in thinking about political events and how this thinking can help humans “reconcile themselves to reality.” This investigation enables me to further elaborate on the sense of truth as that which humans constitute when they engage in the task of understanding the past.
Chapter Four. The quest for understanding totalitarianism

The essay I analyse in this chapter is “Understanding and Politics.” The particular issue at hand in this essay is the challenge of understanding a phenomenon that, as Arendt sees it, is without precedent in human history: the advent of totalitarianism. The understanding that Arendt seeks is difficult as it requires us to face up to the reality of Nazi crimes and atrocities, to be able to recognise their horrific and unprecedented character. Arendt argues in the essay that the intellectual tools we inherited from the Western tradition of thought cannot help us to adequately capture “the very nature” of totalitarianism (Arendt 1994a, 309). Her main question in the essay is thus how it is possible to understand this or any other novel phenomenon in human history that cannot be accommodated by existing frameworks of thought.

The importance of this essay for the present investigation consists in the fact that the essay allows us to situate the issue of the relationships between truth and politics with regard to one of the major preoccupations of Arendt’s political thought – the experience of totalitarianism. The notion of “true understanding” (Arendt 1994a, 311) introduced by Arendt in the essay strongly suggests that, for her, truth and meaning are interrelated. Understanding becomes “true” when it allows us to capture the novel character of an event, to illuminate its unprecedentedness and uniqueness. At the same time, “true understanding,” for Arendt, responds to the human need to generate meaning. I propose that the notion of “true understanding” represents a kind of “thinking” which Arendt, in The Life of the Mind, terms “the quest for meaning.” “True
understanding” belongs to this quest because it sheds light on a phenomenon in its significance, meaningfulness and gravity.

This chapter seeks to clarify the idea of “true understanding,” describe the demands that “true understanding” imposes upon those who attempt to practise it, and explore the relationships between understanding and knowledge as seen by Arendt. In addition, analysing this essay will also demonstrate that in this piece of writing Arendt does not seek to separate knowledge from meaning, as is often argued in the literature, but rather attempts to connect them.

What makes “Understanding and Politics” particularly relevant to the argument of this thesis about the relationship between truth and politics is that, as in her essays on Socrates and Lessing, Arendt ascribes to “thinking” – in the sense of a quest for meaning – an important political role. This quest enables humans to find their bearings in a world changed by the unprecedented event of totalitarianism and “to reconcile themselves” (Arendt 1994a, 308) to this world. “True understanding” can play this role as it opens up a space between an individual and the world, and between an individual and others, thereby enabling the world that is held in common to appear and become meaningful.

“Understanding and Politics” was first published in 1954 in Partisan Review, XX/4. Arendt initially titled this article “The Difficulties of Understanding,” but it eventually appeared under its present title. According to Jerome Kohn – the editor of a 1994 collection of essays in which “Understanding and Politics” was republished – this material was prepared as a set of lecture notes between 1951 and 1954. The manuscript containing the original lecture notes can be now found in the Library of Congress.
This manuscript has a second part which appears to be thematically connected to the “Understanding and Politics” essay (Arendt 1951–1954). Kohn includes this second part in the Essays in Understanding collection under the title “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding” (Kohn 1994, XIX). In this chapter I will engage with the second essay where it helps to illuminate the first. I agree with those Arendt scholars (see, for example, Hansen 2004, 3) who suggest that the “Understanding and Politics” essay can be read as Arendt’s reflections on The Origins of Totalitarianism and a continuation of her attempt to understand the nature of totalitarianism, which, for her, was the central political event of the twentieth century.

1. Understanding as the quest for meaning and the need to
   “reconcile oneself to reality”

Arendt starts the “Understanding and Politics” essay with a critique of those who want to gain an understanding of totalitarianism in order to be better armed against it (Arendt 1994a, 307). She disagrees with those “who say that one cannot fight totalitarianism without understanding it” (307). She adds rather ironically that “fortunately this is not true; if it were, our case would be hopeless” (307). Why is it that Arendt suggests that efforts towards understanding are misapplied if they are used as a means to directly fight against totalitarianism? In this section, I consider what Arendt means by the term “understanding” and how it is related to the human need to “reconcile oneself to reality” (308). I will also explore why Arendt believes that the efforts of many her contemporaries to understand totalitarianism lead to “indoctrination” rather than contributing to an understanding of this event as unique and unprecedented.
Arendt proposes that understanding is oriented towards the search for “meaning, which we originate in the very process of living in so far as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer” (Arendt 1994a, 309). Therefore, if we try to take a shortcut in the process of understanding and claim that we have found the toolkit containing the final and definitive answers about totalitarianism, we take away from others and from ourselves the incentive to engage any further in the quest for meaning. We erroneously assume that there could be one definitive picture of totalitarianism and deprive others of an interest in exploring what totalitarianism can mean for them. This is what happens, Arendt suggests, in the case of “many well-meaning people [who] want to cut this process [of understanding totalitarianism] short in order to educate others and elevate public opinion” (308).

Arendt sees this well-meaning project as flawed in at least two ways. First of all, while this desire to provide others with ready-made answers about totalitarianism so that we can fight back against it is based on the assumption that “words” can be “weapons,” Arendt emphasises that one cannot “fight with the words” (Arendt 1994a, 308). She clarifies that when words are used for a fight, we turn a political realm into “a realm of violence,” and violence, she comments, is speechless (308). In this regard, Arendt observes an alarming trend: that increasingly people operate with clichés in their daily conversations. The use of clichés, says Arendt, is a sign that people “deprive themselves of the faculty of speech” (308). This is not to say that people are somehow uttering fewer words but rather that they have robbed themselves of the revelatory power of speech. One way to understand the revelatory capacity of the faculty of speech is through her ideas in The Human Condition, in which she associates speech with a disclosure of unique identities of political actors. By accompanying their acts with
speech, humans are able to communicate their intentions to others, thereby disclosing to others “who” they are in contradistinction to “what” they are (Arendt 1998, 179). This distinctiveness of human beings – their “who” – comes by way of action. It arises from the ability of humans to “insert themselves into the human world” (176) as unique individuals through “beginning something new on their own initiative” (177). However, these “initiatives” cannot reveal a unique individual unless they are accompanied by speech. Every new actor, Arendt says, is to answer the question “Who are you?” (178) – that is, to declare her intentions and to explain the meaning of her “initiatives” to others. This is why, Arendt says, to be “the doer of deeds,” an individual should be simultaneously “the speaker of words” (178–79).

Yet, even if words accompany action, they are not necessarily able to reveal the identity of an actor and the meaning of her intended deeds. In the previous chapter, we already saw how Arendt describes the phenomenon of “dark times,” within which totalitarianism is included. These are times in which words lose their revelatory capacity and the public realm is permeated with “speech that does not disclose what is” (Arendt 1968a, viii), with the result that identities of actors and the meaning of their acts remain obscure.

Here we can also think about Arendt’s portrayal of the “desk murderer” Eichmann in her report on his trial in Jerusalem, published in 1963. In the trial, Arendt shows that one of Eichmann’s most remarkable characteristics was his lack of authentic speech: his words were empty and pathetic, they disclosed nothing, they consisted of “stock phrases and self-invented clichés” which revealed no unique person (Arendt 1963, 49). Arendt will famously describe Eichmann as “thoughtless” – not in the sense that he does not have a conscious mind, but rather that he does not respond to the need
to generate the meaning of reality around him and the meaning of his own actions. Eichmann’s way of speaking in clichés thus shows that he shuts down the quest for meaning in the events and experiences in his life. And it is this “thoughtlessness” of Eichmann, as Arendt will argue, that made him unable to resist the systematic pressures of evildoing under the Nazi regime.

In her “Understanding and Politics” essay, written at least ten years before the Eichmann trial and her report on it, Arendt is already well aware of the dangers of forsaking the quest for meaning in regard to totalitarianism. In the essay, Arendt argues that the temptation to take a “shortcut” in the process of understanding, even with good intentions, will inevitably lead to “indoctrination” (Arendt 1994a, 308). What concerns Arendt here is that people tend to masquerade tentative and never-final insights of understanding as final and definitive truths. As she puts it, many people “arbitrarily interrupt [the process of understanding] by pronouncing apodictic statements as though they had the reliability of facts and figures” (308). Arendt shows that this attempt to short-circuit understanding, from which indoctrination arises, “destroys the activity of understanding altogether” (308). This is because “indoctrination” does not take into account that the quest to understand totalitarianism can and should take different pathways for each individual since this quest is concerned with generating meaning, rather than producing any final results. “Indoctrination” removes the stimulus to engage in the quest for meaning for oneself – Lessing’s selbstdenken – and with it deprives humans of the ability “to reconcile themselves to reality” (Arendt 1994a, 308).

But where does the human need to “reconcile oneself to reality” which drives the quest for meaning come from? As Arendt explains, this need arises from the fact that “every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a
stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger. Understanding begins with birth and ends with death” (Arendt 1994a, 308). What Arendt argues here is that human beings are the newcomers to the world: they make their appearance in an unfamiliar world which is “strange” to them and in which they encounter others who are strangers to them too. Therefore, upon birth every human faces the challenge of how to relate herself to others and to the world, and a human way of doing this is to engage in the quest for meaning. As Arendt puts it towards the end of the essay, it is the “gift” of understanding that “makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and makes it possible for them to bear with us” (Arendt 1994a, 332). Understanding thus makes it “bearable” to share the world with others, which means that it helps us to establish those “in-between” spaces between ourselves and others that both unite and separate us. Without this quest for understanding we can either remain too “strange” to others, that is, too distant from them, or too close to others, as do those who, as we saw in the Lessing essay, retreat into the intimacy of fraternity. I suggest that there is a way of reading “Understanding and Politics” whereby it is the quest for meaning that can help us to transform the gap, or rather multiple gaps, that constitute the strangeness of the world into, first, “objective in-between” constituted by common interests of individuals in the world and then, perhaps, into public places which gather individuals together and allow them to appear to one another in speech and action, and assert their unique identities.

Now we are in a better position to understand why Arendt is critical of people’s attempt to use understanding as a means of producing final answers about totalitarianism so as to be able to fight it. By shutting down the quest for meaning, indoctrination thus deprives humans of the possibility of reconciling themselves to
reality since it is only through the generation of meaning that humans can face up to reality and “try to be at home in the world” (Arendt 1994a, 308). The use of the verb “try” is very important here as through it, Arendt indicates that feeling at home in the world is never guaranteed to human beings and should not be taken for granted. To feel at home in the world – especially in the world of the twentieth century, a world which had been profoundly changed by the unprecedented, barbaric and outrageous event of totalitarianism – requires constant efforts, that is, continual efforts of understanding.

That these efforts of understanding are of a continual nature can be seen from the fact that Arendt describes understanding as “an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world” (Arendt 1994a, 307–308). What she means here is that because understanding is driven by the need to reconcile ourselves to reality, the lens of understanding will vary together with our own “variation and changes.” As I read it, a path of understanding will depend, first of all, on a position that every particular individual occupies in the world; secondly, on a “variation” of her circumstances throughout her life; and, finally, on the historical situatedness of an individual, as every new generation will look upon the past from within their own historical context.

If the understanding of totalitarianism is inspired by the need to reconcile ourselves to it, then this understanding will and should keep changing without adding up to a complete and final account of this event. To attempt to shut down this quest for meaning means to deprive humans of the means to “reconcile themselves to reality” and, in fact, to deprive them of their life as humans. For Arendt, understanding is “the specifically human way of being alive” (Arendt 1994a, 308). By this she means that it is only by endowing with significance that which has happened to them and interpreting
what it may mean for them that humans can exist in the world as humans. For humans, therefore, the activity of understanding, the quest for the generation of meaning, never reaches a conclusion, provided one is willing to engage in this quest. For as long as an individual is alive, she has a need to make sense of herself and of the world. As Borren (2013, 234) comments with regard to Arendt’s notion of understanding, “understanding is not primarily something we do, an explicit intentional activity, such as the scholarly activity of interpretation or exegesis. Instead, understanding is something we are, our mode of being, the way we experience things, events, other people, ourselves, etc. namely as meaningful in some way or another” (emphasis in the original).

There is one misunderstanding that Arendt anticipates and seeks to dispel: that to “feel at home in the world” does not mean to accept unquestioningly everything that happens in the world, and to be able to bracket out all wrongdoings and evils. She suggests that “to the extent that the rise of totalitarian governments is the central event of our world, to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all” (Arendt 1994a, 308, emphasis added). What Arendt means in this passage is that to feel at home in the world after the event of totalitarianism is extremely difficult. This is so due not only to a sheer horror of totalitarian crimes but also to a realisation that these are humans who willingly or unwillingly allowed something like it to happen.

As long as totalitarianism is an event that has arisen from within the human world, understanding totalitarianism is a process of “self-understanding.” Arendt explains it as follows:
Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world (crystallizing elements found in that world, since totalitarian governments have not been imported from the moon), the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding. For, although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for. (Arendt 1994a, 310)

In this passage, Arendt argues that totalitarianism cannot be seen as an unfortunate incident or some kind of non-human virus planted amidst humans. Neither could totalitarianism be regarded as a result of a transcendent historical force. The event itself, she argues, has emerged from political conditions that had persisted for some time and which may not have disappeared after the initial defeat of the Nazi totalitarian regime. Arendt talks about “elements” of the non-totalitarian world (Arendt 1994a, 310) – currents of thought, events, incidents, institutions and relationships – which she likens to crystals that have unexpectedly arranged themselves into the present configuration of totalitarian regimes. To engage in understanding totalitarianism means to understand these elements that belong to the human world and thus to become aware of who we are and what kind of historical reality we live in. Only by engaging in these efforts of self-understanding will we be able to imagine how we can share the world with others in the future and to know what kind of world we are fighting for in our struggle against the totalitarian phenomenon. This is why Arendt argues that understanding “must accompany this fight if it is to be more than a mere fight for survival” (Arendt 1994a, 310). Note that this is different from using understanding in order to produce a final picture of totalitarianism so as to be better armed against it. For Arendt, understanding can assist in the fight against totalitarianism only if understanding is seen as an open-
ended process of searching for the meaning of this phenomenon, the meaning of its “elements” and the meaning of living in a world transformed by this phenomenon.

Furthermore, as I have mentioned above, Arendt’s point is that if we want to reclaim the world as our shared home, we cannot merely bracket out the reality of this phenomenon and all the crimes and horrors associated with it. Understanding this phenomenon demands recognising and facing up to the horrible things that humans allowed to happen, such as, first and foremost, the Final Solution and the concentration camps. Here Arendt’s position is consistent with her argument in the Lessing essay in which she seeks to show the futility of Germany’s post-war attempts to “master the past.” As I showed in the previous chapter, she insists that the past cannot be mastered but only re-lived through storytelling which prepares us for seeing “the inner truth of an event” (Arendt 1968b, 20). As I argued, this “truth” is neither the objective truth nor the final verdict on what happened. Truth that humans can constitute through storytelling is never truth in the singular because by telling or listening to a story, individuals relate its content to themselves, to their unique positions in the world. Moreover, the same story can be told many times in different contexts and each time an individual may “see” the truth in this story in a different way.

It is by no means accidental that in both the Lessing essay and “Understanding and Politics” Arendt uses the same phrase from Kafka about truth. In the Lessing essay, she renders it as follows: “It is difficult to speak the truth, for although there is only one truth, it is alive and therefore has a live and changing face” (Arendt 1968b, 28). In “Understanding and Politics,” this phrase appears as an epigraph to the essay and is given in German without translation: “Es ist schwer, die Wahrheit zu sagen, denn es gibt zwar nur eine; aber sie ist lebendig und hat daher ein lebendig wechselndes
“Gesicht” (Arendt 1994a, 307). I was able to trace this phrase to one of Kafka’s letters to Milena Jesenská, a Czech journalist, writer and editor with whom Kafka was in almost daily correspondence in 1920–1923. Kafka opens his letter to Milena of 23 June 1920 with this phrase. The English edition of the letters offers a slightly different translation of this phrase as compared to the one provided by Arendt in the Lessing essay: “It’s difficult to tell the truth, since there is only one truth, but that truth is alive and therefore has a lively, changing face” (Kafka 1990, 55). That this phrase appears at least twice in Arendt’s works means that she finds this insight particularly significant. Kafka’s phrase helps illustrate a perspectivist nature of understanding that, as I have argued, Arendt seeks to emphasise in her reflections on truth in relation to the political realm. The path that a quest for meaning takes depends on the unique perspective on the world that every individual possesses and the unique context in which this quest takes place. Therefore, the truth that individuals can constitute by engaging in the quest for meaning is never final and stable – it has, indeed, a plurality of “faces” and facets.

We can further clarify this proposition by looking at how in “Understanding and Politics” Arendt contrasts indoctrination and understanding so as to dissociate understanding, which is concerned with meaning, from “truth” in terms of final results. Indeed, as we saw above, understanding is oriented towards the search for “meaning” and is driven by the human need “to reconcile ourselves to reality.” Hence understanding is not separable from the ability of humans to apprehend the nature of reality. If this is the case, then the nature of that which provokes the human need to understand does not fit into the category of irrefutable and definitive truth. For truth in terms of conclusive answers cannot satisfy the human need to understand. Humans can respond to this need only by constantly engaging in the process of understanding itself, each constituting her own unique meaning specific to her historical and worldly
situatedness, to her particular life circumstances and conditions at any given moment. In other words, the quest for understanding will each day start anew and will lead us in different directions and towards different accounts of the same event or phenomenon.

What I have proposed in this section is that the fact that Arendt rejects the existence of “objective” truth in the sense of final, definitive and conclusive answers about phenomena in the human world does not mean that the notions of “truth” and “truthfulness” are, for her, inapplicable to “understanding.” As in the Lessing essay, in “Understanding and Politics,” I argue, Arendt works with an idea of truth in relation to the quest for meaning. I submit that there is a sense in which an infinite variety of plural representations of a phenomenon delivered by understanding can be “true,” in so far as the quest for understanding preserves its integrity.

In this section, we observed how the quest for understanding can lose its integrity as seen from Arendt’s concerns about “indoctrination.” This quest can be short-circuited and misapplied to generate final answers about totalitarianism; insights of this quest can be masqueraded as definitive results and objective knowledge. As I have argued, such “understanding” cannot satisfy the human need to generate meaning of what happened and to “reconcile themselves to reality.” By referring to the integrity or truthfulness of the quest for understanding, I thus mean that individuals allow understanding to freely proceed in a way that enables them to reveal an event in its full significance, gravity and meaningfulness. But what is required from individuals if they want to be able to see and experience an event in that way? I consider this question in the next section in which I focus on Arendt’s notion of “true understanding” (Arendt 1994a, 311). As I argue, for Arendt, “true understanding” is associated first and foremost with the ability to detect and recognise that which is “new” about an event, that is, to be able to see it as unique and unprecedented.
2. Understanding and the newness of the event

I would like to argue that, for Arendt, the quest to understand totalitarianism loses its integrity as soon as we lose sight of an unprecedented character of an event. Arendt criticises a widespread tendency of scientists to “[equate] totalitarian government with some well-known evil of the past, such as aggression, tyranny, conspiracy” (Arendt 1994a, 309). She understands why it may be tempting to resort to this approach – it gives us a sense of security: “Here, it seems, we are on solid ground; for together with its evils [of totalitarianism], we think we have inherited the wisdom of the past to guide us through them” (309).

However, Arendt is adamant that this sense of security is an illusion: “The trouble with the wisdom of the past is that it dies, so to speak, in our hands as soon as we try to apply it honestly to the central political experiences of our own time” (309). She further suggests that, on its own, purely scholarly analysis of totalitarianism or any other historical event does not allow us to recognise the newness of a phenomenon. As she puts it, dwelling “in the realm of pure theory and isolated concepts,” a thinker is inclined to search for parallels between totalitarianism and other political regimes and is prone to develop an illusion that “there can be nothing new under the sun” (Arendt 1994a, 309). Therefore, Arendt argues that by subsuming totalitarianism under general concepts and pre-existing categories, scholars fail to “focus on its very nature” (309), that is, on totalitarianism as a unique and new event which cannot be explained by that which we already know and for which we have a ready-made theoretical apparatus. What follows from this is that we can attempt to understand the nature of totalitarianism only if we are able to face up to its “horrible originality which no farfetched historical parallels can alleviate” (309).
For Arendt, the importance of recognising the unprecedented character of an event applies not only to totalitarianism but to any other historical event. However, in the essay Arendt makes it clear that there is something about totalitarianism that sets it apart from other events, and that is the fact that “its very actions [of totalitarianism] constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment” (Arendt 1994a, 309–310). She further explains it as follows: “In other words, the very event, the phenomenon, which we try – and must try – to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding” (310). Arendt argues here that the advent of totalitarianism made it apparent that the intellectual tools inherited from the tradition of Western thought cannot adequately capture the nature of totalitarianism. To put it differently, totalitarianism put us in the situation in which we have no other choice but to abandon the traditional frameworks of understanding and to try to think without any props.

Arendt illustrates this point with reference to how traditional legal approaches and categories failed in the case of judging the Nazi criminals (Arendt 1994a, 310). First of all, she points to the incommensurability between the crimes of Nazism – above all, she means here the Final Solution – and the most serious punishment foreseen by the legal code (that is, the death penalty). Secondly, she claims that the traditional legal and moral notion of murder becomes meaningless when applied to Nazi crimes: “No punishment could even be accepted as ‘legal,’ since it presupposed, together with obedience to the command ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ a possible range of motives, of qualities which cause men to become murderers and make them murderers, which quite obviously were completely absent in the accused” (Arendt 1994a, 310). What this example illustrates is that totalitarianism is beyond the structure of traditional legal categories which are based on an assumption about “normal” or utilitarian motives of
humans, such as revenge, utility, profit, self-interest, etc. When applied to totalitarianism and its crimes, these traditional categories become meaningless such that by using them, we cover up rather than expose its unprecedented nature and its crimes.

If we cannot rely on the traditional framework of approaches and concepts in our quest to understand totalitarianism, and if purely scholarly analysis that seeks to derive an explanation of totalitarianism from general causes and subsume it under pre-existing categories does not help us to recognise its nature, what kind of approach does Arendt suggest? To answer this question, we need to look at Arendt’s notion of “true understanding” (Arendt 1994a, 311) – an understanding which connects the quest for knowledge and the quest for meaning. To appreciate the complexity of Arendt’s argument about “true understanding,” I again refer to Arendt’s posthumously published manuscript The Life of the Mind (1978) and its first volume, “Thinking.” In this volume, Arendt critically appropriates Kant’s notions of *verstand*, intellect, and *verunst*, reason (Arendt 1978, 13). I suggest that we should understand this distinction not in terms of two separate and independent human capacities but in terms of distinction within the faculty of thinking itself.

In The Life of the Mind, Arendt proposes that thinking can either be used with the aim of producing knowledge (*verstand*) or employed in order to engage in the search for meaning (*verunst*). As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, Arendt proposes that the faculty of the intellect is oriented to “irrefutable” truth that can be established by logical reasoning and scientific evidence, while the faculty of reason is driven by the quest for meaning – it seeks to reveal “what it means for something to be” (Arendt 1978, 57, emphasis in the original). I also remarked previously that it is common in the literature to argue that by introducing this distinction between intellect and reason,
Arendt wants to divorce the quest for knowledge from the quest for understanding and to separate truth from meaning (see, for example, Kateb 1994; Peeters 2009). However, these accounts are not adequate to capture the complexity of Arendt’s argument. Firstly, they tend to bypass the fact that, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt suggests that the quest for meaning and the quest for knowledge, and the two corresponding faculties of intellect and reason, are closely interrelated. Arendt argues that it is only because human beings are able to ask the unanswerable questions of meaning that they can also pose the answerable questions of knowledge. In other words, the ability of intellect to produce knowledge is originally inspired by the need of reason to generate meaning (Arendt 1978, 62). Secondly, as I have been arguing so far, there is a sense of truth in Arendt’s writings that does not fit into the category of “refutable” or “irrefutable” truth but belongs to the domain of meaning and significance. This other sense of truth corresponds to that which is disclosed to me in my efforts to understand.

In regard to the “Understanding and Politics” essay, we can talk about the truth of that which is disclosed to me in my quest for an understanding of totalitarianism. This truth does not represent the single objective truth about this phenomenon. It is a truth specific to me and it can take one of many “faces” for me. This truth is revealed to me and only me from my unique position in the world when and if I am able to see the phenomenon as meaningful and significant for myself. But what is necessary for me to be able to endow a phenomenon with meaning? In “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt argues that we can achieve this only by connecting the quest for knowledge with the quest for meaning. Let me explore this argument in more detail.

As we saw above, Arendt does not consider that the traditional methods of social scientists help us in apprehending the novel character of totalitarianism because they
explain totalitarianism by likening it to other political phenomena. As Arendt puts it, “historical description and political analysis can never prove that there is such a thing as the nature or the essence of totalitarian government, simply because there is a nature to monarchical, republican, tyrannical, or despotic government” (Arendt 1994a, 311, emphasis in the original). Arendt further argues that “this specific nature” of totalitarianism, its newness and uniqueness, can be detected only by “the preliminary understanding on which the sciences base themselves” (311). It is only preliminary understanding that can orient the attention of the scholar towards the emergence of something new: “Totalitarianism...has become a current topic of study only since preliminary understanding recognized it as the central issue and the most significant danger of the time” (313). Thus the quest for knowledge cannot take off without an insight of a preliminary understanding, and by preliminary understanding Arendt means “popular” and “uncritical” (Arendt 1994a, 311), that is, a pre-reflective understanding of a phenomenon. But this is not in a derogatory sense. By calling this understanding “preliminary,” Arendt shows that such understanding facilitates an initial contact with a new phenomenon and generates an original and raw intuition about it.

This intuition, Arendt suggests, finds its expression in “popular language,” which “recognizes a new event by accepting a new word” (312). It is at that moment that the first recognition of the “new” happens: “The choice of the new word indicates that everybody knows that something new and decisive has happened” (Arendt 1994a, 312). What Arendt means here is that with the rise of the word “totalitarianism” as a popular “catchword,” everyone intuitively knew that a new phenomenon had emerged and that it was different from the imperialism that preceded it. It was not a complex statistical apparatus and data sets that first registered the advent of totalitarianism. It was a
popular and unscientific intuition that detected that the world had been changed by the presence of something horribly original that required a new word.

As I have noted above, this initial intuition of preliminary understanding as reflected in popular language provides a raw insight into the nature of a phenomenon. Therefore, the task of a scholar, if she wants to articulate the nature of a phenomenon, requires that she open herself to the insights of preliminary understanding and pay attention to the sources that reflect them. Arendt calls them “the sources that talk” – “documents, speeches, reports, and the like” (Arendt 1994a, 324, FN 5). By claiming that scholars should take their cue for the exploration of political phenomena from insights of popular understanding, Arendt does not want to say that the quest for knowledge makes no independent contribution to an understanding of these phenomena. Quite the contrary, she suggests that preliminary understanding needs the assistance of the quest for knowledge. Arendt mentions that preliminary understanding, having discovered a new phenomenon, takes its nature or essence “for granted”; it does not provide “a critical insight” into it (Arendt 1994a, 311). The coining of a new word through popular language merely points to the fact that something new came into the world, but its meaning remains implicit and needs further exploration. Moreover, Arendt notices that many people, after having recognised the newness of a phenomenon in their first encounter with it, tend to cover up their original insights with “familiar” descriptions – for example, explaining totalitarianism through notions such as “lust for power” or “terror” (312).

The role of a scholar who engages in the quest for knowledge thus consists in realising the insights of preliminary understanding in an informed analysis, in protecting these insights from being dissolved in commonplace explanations and familiar interpretations. As Arendt puts it, scientists have a capacity to “illuminate…
uncritical preliminary understanding from which they start” (Arendt 1994a, 311). In other words, a scholar in her quest for knowledge can uphold the insights of preliminary understanding by providing a more detailed examination of the elements, details and structures of a phenomenon at stake. Yet, Arendt is quick to clarify that this analysis on its own can “neither prove nor disprove” the insights of preliminary understanding (311). A scholar should always remember that her search for knowledge is oriented by the insights of uncritical understanding and should not attempt to emancipate herself from them if she wants to remain truthful to the nature of a phenomenon under investigation.

In realising the insights gained in preliminary understanding in an informed scholarly analysis, a researcher does not bring the quest for understanding to an end. As Arendt sees it, the role of a scholar is not to produce final answers about an issue at hand but to prepare for taking understanding to a new level. Arendt argues that after a body of knowledge is assembled, there is an essential need to further engage in the quest for meaning of these data. She suggests that understanding, that is, the quest for meaning, not only “precedes” knowledge but also “succeeds” it (Arendt 1994a, 311). Arendt calls this new level of understanding “true understanding.” This “true understanding” is both similar to and different from preliminary understanding. They are different since “true understanding” approaches a phenomenon not from a naïve position but from an informed standpoint that draws on a body of accumulated knowledge. But the two are similar as they both allow a scholar to enquire into what this knowledge means, for herself and for others. As Arendt puts it, “Preliminary understanding, which is at the basis of all knowledge, and true understanding, which transcends it, have this in common: They make knowledge meaningful” (1994a, 311).
It appears then that Arendt, in her emphasis on the connection between knowledge and meaning, draws on the Weberian approach to scientific knowledge, according to which to have knowledge is to give meaning and significance to the world by interpreting it. Arendt too argues in the essay that the task of a scholar, the task of “true understanding,” is not merely to provide a purely scientific analysis of an event, its strict exegesis and explication, but to give meaning and significance to human reality. I will return to this proposition in the second part of the chapter when reflecting on Arendt’s analysis of “the task of a historian.” Let me now connect these reflections to the question of truth by asking, what kind of truth is involved here? “True understanding” does not provide us with truth in the sense of final, definitive and “objective” answers about a phenomenon – something which cannot exist when we talk about phenomena in the realm of human affairs. But “true understanding” can elaborate on the meaning conferred to a phenomenon by people when they first encounter it and experience the shock of the new. To be sure, there could be not one but a plurality of meanings since, as we saw previously, the quest for understanding takes different paths depending on an individual’s position in the world, a lens of understanding that changes throughout her lifetime and her particular historical situatedness. All these meanings can be called “true” if in the process of understanding an individual does not ignore the intuition of preliminary understanding and at the same time takes into account the achievements of the quest for knowledge.

The quest for “true understanding” imposes certain demands on an individual. Firstly, when confronted with the shock of an encounter with a new phenomenon, an individual should not shy away from this newness, but instead find the courage to acknowledge this unfamiliar and unprecedented phenomenon which appeared into the world. Secondly, she should be willing to realise her preliminary insights into the
newness of the phenomenon in an informed analysis by drawing on a wide range of sources – documents, reports, speeches, facts, observations, and others – and gathering a body of knowledge. Finally, she should be willing to continue inquiring into a meaning of the phenomenon and to return to the uncritical and prescientific insights of understanding, and to ask what this body of knowledge means for her.

As I have argued, Arendt does not take for granted that the quest for “true understanding” necessarily takes place, and it is of a particular concern to her that she observes a growing inability of people to generate meaning in response to past and present events and, in particular, to engage in the quest for the meaning of totalitarianism. In the next section, I will consider how Arendt explains these contemporary difficulties of understanding and how she relates them to a long-term process of the degradation of common sense.

3. The modern story of the degradation of common sense

The question of whether humans are able and willing to engage in the quest for “true understanding” is by no means trivial, for Arendt. This quest, she argues, can respond to “the need for orientation in a world changed through a new event” (Arendt 1994a, 325, FN 8). I have considered the theme of a loss of orientation in the world in the previous chapter on Lessing. In the Lessing essay, Arendt talks about the “weird irreality” that accompanies the withdrawal from the world when humans seek to escape into their interior life or into relationships of brotherhood. In the “Understanding and Politics” essay we can see that Arendt is likewise concerned with the ability of humans to orient themselves in a world profoundly transformed by totalitarianism. This is why “true understanding,” one which does not shy away from the shock of the new, becomes so important for her. She suggests that with the help of understanding “we can potentially
orient ourselves toward new and specific conditions” brought about by totalitarianism (Arendt 1994a, 312, emphasis in the original).

Ashley Biser (2014) points out the significance of the language of orientation, navigation and stabilisation in Arendt’s writings. Biser persuasively shows that Arendt is aware of the challenge of “finding our bearings” (2014, 528), that is, positioning ourselves in relation to the world in which we live. Biser highlights that, for Arendt, there is always some measure of change happening in the world as the world is constantly transformed through human action and speech, by means of which individuals insert themselves into this world. Therefore, Biser argues that the world, as Arendt sees it, can never be “fixed” (522). As Biser puts it, from Arendt’s perspective, “as political actors we are continually acting into (and thus located within) a swiftly changing world that makes it difficult to find our sense of direction” (522). Biser further suggests that Arendt’s writings feature different ways of “stabilising” the world so that it becomes accessible to humans. One of them, Biser shows, is common sense, which can act as a steering mechanism or “inner compass” (519, 538) that assists humans in adapting to a constantly chancing world.

The idea of “common sense,” which Biser refers to in her article, occupies an important place in “Understanding and Politics.” In the essay, Arendt calls common sense “the political sense par excellence” (Arendt 1994a, 318). This is because common sense ensures that “we all fit” into the world (318) so that this world becomes accessible to us and appears to us as a common world that we share with others. In order to understand how common sense can “fit” humans into a common world, I suggest turning to The Life of the Mind, which provides us with further insights into how Arendt thinks about the faculty of common sense. Arendt defines common sense as the “sixth sense” that makes our five private senses work together (Arendt 1978, 50). In
other words, common sense ensures that the data generated by our sensations – hearing, sensing, seeing, smelling and tasting – can refer to the same phenomenon. Furthermore, as Arendt puts it, common sense ensures that humans have “the context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning,” and that “through perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, [they] agree on its identity” (50). Common sense thus gives us an instrument for defining whether what appears to me also appears to others, and whether it is the same object that we all experience. We can see here how Arendt explicitly connects common sense and the generation of meaning. As she points out, it is common sense that allows us to “endow” phenomena with “meaning.” In other words, without common sense to ensure a common frame of reference, humans cannot generate any meaning at all – they cannot engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning.

Moreover, Arendt proposes that there is an important connection between common sense and reality. She argues that common sense, by holding our private senses together, by providing a common context for our sensual experiences and allowing us to agree on the “identity” of an object, ensures the “sensation of reality” (Arendt 1978, 50, emphasis in the original). I referred to Arendt’s conception of reality in the Lessing chapter and argued that, for Arendt, the reality of the world relies on the presence of the plurality of human beings that see the same world from different perspectives and are willing to communicate these perspectives to one another. The notion of “common sense” is another way in which Arendt seeks to explain how the sense of the real arises: it emerges from the “commonness” of the five private senses, the common “context” that common sense guarantees, and the fact that individuals, seeing the world from different perspectives, are able to agree that it is the same world that appears to them.
From the vantage point of *The Life of the Mind*, we can see why Arendt devotes the central part of “Understanding and Politics” (Arendt 1994a, 313–317) to the discussion of the faculty of common sense. As I have argued above, for Arendt, the generation of meaning and common sense are interrelated: understanding cannot proceed without the faculty of common sense having ensured a common “context” that humans share and that allows them to endow appearances with meaning. In other words, humans cannot respond to the world and appearances by way of generating meaning unless their sense of reality is activated and sustained by common sense. That Arendt sees the connection between common sense and the quest for meaning can be seen from her observation that the difficulties of understanding in the twentieth century are not limited to the difficulties of understanding totalitarianism but are also closely associated with the degradation of common sense. Arendt explains it as follows:

The paradox of the modern situation seems to be that our need to transcend both preliminary understanding and the strictly scientific approach springs from the fact that we have lost our tools of understanding. Our quest for meaning is at the same time prompted and frustrated by our inability to originate meaning… Since the beginning of this century, the growth of meaninglessness has been accompanied by loss of common sense. (Arendt 1994a, 313–314)

Arendt proposes here that the degradation of common sense started well before the advent of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism only took advantage of the long-term process of the withering away of common sense, which Arendt traces back to the eighteenth century (Arendt 1994a, 317).

It needs to be clarified that by the “loss of common sense” (Arendt 1994a, 314) which Arendt views as characteristic of the modern age, Arendt does not mean that humans definitively lost the faculty of common sense and with it the ability to fit into
the world. Arendt’s argument is more complex. Firstly, she reflects on what held societies together in the early modern age, and her answer is that it was merely mores and customs – a kind of customary common sense that attended a common acceptance of traditional norms and values that were anchored in nothing other than such customary acceptance. Secondly, she shows how this common sense collapsed together with the irreparable breakdown of the authority of the Western tradition of thought. What follows is that, for Arendt, the fact that totalitarianism made it apparent that humans had lost “common sense” does not mean that common sense as the “sixth sense,” the sense of the common world, has evaporated. As will become apparent, she seeks to show that humans can and should be able to renew their sense of the common world. Let me unpack these key elements of Arendt’s argument in regard to the modern story of the degradation of common sense.

Arendt approaches the modern phenomenon of the degradation of common sense by turning to Montesquieu, who, according to her, was first to detect the signs of this degradation in Western societies. To explain why she refers to Montesquieu in this context, Arendt introduces his distinction between laws and customs:

The life of peoples, according to Montesquieu, is ruled by laws and customs; the two are distinguished in that “laws govern the actions of the citizen and customs govern the actions of man” (L’Esprit des Lois, Book XIX, ch. 16). Laws establish the realm of public political life, and customs establish the realm of society.

(Arendt 1994a, 315)

Montesquieu discovered, Arendt continues, that the sense of lawfulness in the European nations had been undermined, which had had a profound impact on the human ability and willingness to act politically. Arendt is thus interested in Montesquieu’s insight that “together with its ‘belief’ in its own laws, [a nation] loses its capacity for responsible
political action; the people cease to be citizens in the full sense of the word” (Arendt 1994a, 315). To be “a citizen” means to be politically involved in the realm of human affairs, that is, to act in concert with others and share a common public world with them. In the situation where humans cease being “citizens” in this sense, the degradation of the political realm is inevitable. For the faculty of common sense needs to be constantly rejuvenated by human beings through their active engagement with the world and with others by means of action and speech. The relationship between common sense and the common world, as I see it, can thus be likened to a downward spiral. The more people become disengaged from the common world, the weaker their common sense grows, and the weaker it grows, the less able they are able to engage with the world.

Under these conditions of the withering away of common sense, society is held together only by the glue of tradition – people rely in their conduct merely on old wisdom, customs and mores. As Arendt points out, “Montesquieu was convinced that only customs – which, being mores, quite literally constitute the morality of every civilization – prevented a spectacular moral and spiritual breakdown of occidental culture” (Arendt 1994a, 314–315, emphasis added). But these customs become empty forms as they lose their touch with reality and real political experiences. Such “common sense” anchored merely in traditional norms of morality and traditional patterns of judgment can sustain a common world only for a while, and it cannot withstand profound political, social and economic changes. As Arendt puts it, “tradition can be trusted to prevent the worst only for a limited time” (Arendt 1994a, 315).

It was the Industrial Revolution, Arendt suggests, that became the fatal event in the modern story of the degradation of the faculty of common sense that had survived until then only due to its matter-of-course reliance on traditional standards. She argues
that the Industrial Revolution, having spurred radical changes in European societies, exposed the fallibility of such “common sense.” As she puts it, the Industrial Revolution “took place within a political framework whose foundations were no longer secure and therefore overtook a society which, although it was still able to understand and to judge, could no longer give an account of its categories of understanding and standards of judgment when they were seriously challenged” (Arendt 1994a, 316). What Arendt says here is that people, when exposed to the unprecedented changes brought by the Industrial Revolution, continued referring mechanically to their “common sense” based on traditional standards and categories of thinking and judging, without being able to reflect on and rethink them. Therefore, they were incapable of re-orienting themselves in a world that had been profoundly altered by swift technological, economic, social and cultural developments. What then became apparent is that “our great tradition” (316), that is, the Western tradition of thought, proved unable to meaningfully account for a changing modern world and failed to help people respond to its moral and political perplexities. It soon became apparent that “common sense,” if it is based merely on traditional dogmas rather than sustained through the perpetual engagement of humans with the world, cannot respond to the challenges of a changing world. As Arendt puts it, “the very sources from which such answers should have sprung had dried up. The very framework within which understanding and judging could arise is gone” (Arendt 1994a, 316).

Yet, I believe that Arendt does not lament the end of the tradition of Western thought. She is clear that a reinvigoration of this tradition cannot provide an adequate response to the contemporary difficulties of understanding. By implication, it would seem that the only way out of these difficulties would be to revive common sense and the sense of the real without reliance on the framework of the Western tradition, or, in
fact, any tradition at all. But before Arendt reflects on how this may be possible, she provides an account of how totalitarianism took advantage of the degradation of common sense that had started in the eighteenth century, and how totalitarian regimes attempted to replace this faculty with logicality. I explore this account in the next section and show how by analysing it we can both better understand the nature of the contemporary crisis of understanding and illuminate the demands of truthfulness that the quest for understanding imposes upon us. In particular, commenting on Arendt’s discussion of logicality, I am able to show that the openness to the new which is necessary for the quest for understanding requires at the same time the recognition and appreciation of the “given.” As well, I reflect upon the consequences that the substitution of logicality for common sense has for the notion of truth.

4. The substitution of logicality for common sense: “a lying world order”

Arendt starts her reflections on the impact that totalitarianism had on the human faculty of common sense by examining one of Montesquieu’s passages, which almost proved to be a prophecy, as she sees it, in the twentieth century because of the advent of totalitarianism. Arendt uses this passage to demonstrate the consequences of a complete destruction of common sense and the human ability to generate meaning. She quotes from Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of Laws* as follows: “Man, this flexible being, who bends himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of others, is equally capable of knowing his own nature when it is shown to him and of losing the very sense of it (d’en perdre jusqu’au sentiment) when he is being robbed of it” (Arendt 1994a, 316). This statement, Arendt says, predicts “the very realistic totalitarian attempt to rob man of his
nature under the pretext of changing it” (316). Arendt here reinforces her argument that being human is inseparable from the ability of humans to “make sense” of themselves and the world. For Arendt, therefore, if humans were deprived of the quest for meaning, it would very likely change who they are and whether they can remain human at all. Therefore, the loss of the quest for meaning, if it ever occurred, would be equal to the loss of the humanity itself. People under totalitarian domination, she argues, have been brought very close to “this condition of meaninglessness” which was made possible “by means of terror combined with training in ideological thinking, although they no longer experience it as such” (317).

With this statement Arendt suggests that it is the combination of terror and ideological thinking that gave totalitarian governments the capacity to endanger the human ability to generate meaning. This reference to terror and ideology is by no means casual. Arendt came to consider terror and ideology as the key elements that define the “nature” of totalitarianism as a unique system of rule. In her essays “On the Nature of Totalitarianism” (Arendt 1994b) and “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government” (Arendt 2004), Arendt argues that it is this combined use of terror and ideology that makes totalitarianism not a temporal aberration in human history but indeed a new political phenomenon, distinct from all other forms of government.

Before I proceed with discussing Arendt’s account of how totalitarianism substituted common sense with “logicality,” I find it necessary to discuss the role that Arendt assigns to terror and ideology in constituting totalitarian governments. It is only by understanding this role that we can understand why the survival of totalitarian regimes, for Arendt, requires the substitution of “logicality” for common sense. For this
discussion, I will leave “Understanding and Politics” for a while and turn to “On the Nature of Totalitarianism” and “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government.”

In the essay “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” in order to justify her argument that totalitarianism is a unique political phenomenon, Arendt draws on Montesquieu’s discovery of the “principle of action” that “inspires” the actions of governments and their subjects: in a republic, it is “virtue”; in monarchy, “honor”; and in a tyranny, “fear” (Arendt 1994b, 330). Arendt then argues that totalitarianism is distinct from all other existing forms of government as it is not based on any “guiding principle of action taken from the realm of human action” (348). Totalitarianism cannot be said to be founded on Montesquieu’s “principle of action” as it seeks to eliminate entirely the human “desire and will to action,” that is, the desire and will to launch a new initiative and see it through together with others (Arendt 1994b, 344). Even under traditional tyrannies, Arendt suggests, individuals still preserve some limited “contact with other men”; they still can attempt to “act,” although they can act only out of fear (344). Under totalitarianism, the human will to action is fully substituted by a single imperative – to be compliant with the laws of movement of “Nature or History” (349).

What distinguishes, then, totalitarian regimes from other forms of government is that its “essence” consists in forcing the human world and people into an interminable movement according to supposed superhuman laws (Arendt 1994b, 348; Arendt 2004, 601). Totalitarian regimes employ terror in order to make the past, present and future “consistent” with the logic of these superhuman laws and sustain the world in a perpetual motion according to this logic. In “Ideology and Terror,” Arendt describes terror as “the realization of the law of movement” since totalitarian regimes use it in order to eliminate any “spontaneous human action” and exterminate those who impede
the relentless progression of “Nature or History” – be it “inferior races” or “dying classes and decadent peoples” (Arendt 2004, 599).

What is particularly relevant to the present investigation is that, from Arendt’s point of view, the use of terror under totalitarianism acquires a new character as compared to how terror operates in traditional tyrannies. In order to clear the path for the boundless movement of the laws of “Nature or History,” totalitarian terror proceeds by massing people together to the extent that it eliminates all worldly spaces that lie between them – spaces that can constitute the common world that both unite and separate them. As Arendt puts it, “by pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them” (Arendt 2004, 600). In turn, the destruction of these “in-between” spaces endangers the very fact of human plurality – the fact that the world is populated by singular, distinct individuals who can assert their unique identities through action and speech. This is how Arendt describes it:

In the iron band of terror, which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of many the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature, a device has been found not only to liberate the historical and natural forces, but to accelerate them to a speed they never would reach left to themselves. (Arendt 2004, 601)

Arendt further proposes that terror alone cannot ensure the unhindered progression of the laws of “Nature or History” that totalitarian regimes require for their survival. What is additionally necessary is that people in totalitarian regimes be transformed into “victims” and “executioners” who are ready to carry out the death verdict for selected groups of people pronounced by these laws (Arendt 1994b, 348–

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Arendt emphasises that totalitarian regimes need their subjects to be ready to play the script of both “executioner” and “victim” as today’s “executioners” can be easily turned into the regime’s “victims” tomorrow. As Arendt puts it, “what totalitarian rule needs to guide the behavior of its subjects is a preparation to fit each of them equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim” (Arendt 2004, 603).

This transformation of people into “executioners” and “victims” of the laws of “Nature or History” is achieved by the use of ideologies. Totalitarian regimes, Arendt argues, employ ideologies to train people to think about the world in line with “stringent logicality” (Arendt 1994b, 355; Arendt 2004, 602) – to accept a picture of the world in which everything is strictly deduced from the logic of the superhuman laws according to which terror functions, in which their own lives fully depend on this logic and in which they have no other way to exist than to succumb to this logic. This is why Arendt argues that along with terror, totalitarian ideologies are the second element that defines the “nature” of totalitarianism as a unique system of rule (Arendt 1994b, 349; Arendt 2004, 603). This brings us back to the essay “Understanding and Politics,” in which Arendt discusses the attempt of totalitarian regimes to replace common sense with the logicality of ideological thinking. In “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt suggests that logicality is the principle according to which totalitarian ideologies operate (Arendt 1994a, 317). Totalitarian ideologies pose as total and absolute explanations of reality and offer their adherents a coherent and flawless picture of the world. The picture of the world is derived from one and only one ideological postulate – the “idea,” such as, for example, survival of the fittest – by means of logical deduction (317). The construction and maintenance of such a picture of the world does not require
any contact with the world through sense perceptions, or any contact with others – the conditions which, as we saw above, are necessary for the upkeep of the faculty of common sense. The picture of the world provided by totalitarian ideologies appears as fully consistent internally since everything in it fits together by means of “stringent logic” (317).

“Ideology and Terror” offers further clarification as to the kind of picture of the world totalitarian ideologies impose upon adherents of totalitarian regimes. Here Arendt argues that the key feature of ideological reasoning is that it can proceed “independently of all experience” (Arendt 2004, 606). In other words, the human mind trained in ideological reasoning can create and sustain a picture of the world that is fully shut off from the intersubjective reality and human experiences of it. As Arendt puts it, “ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a ‘truer’ reality concealed behind all perceptible things” (606). Since, for Arendt, common sense is the “sixth sense” that holds the five private senses together and ensures our sense of the real, in this passage Arendt refers to the fact that ideological indoctrination trains people in a kind of “thinking” that does not require common sense. Now we are in a better position to understand why in “Understanding and Politics” Arendt links the proliferation of logicality under totalitarianism to the degradation of common sense, which, as we saw above, she traces back to the eighteenth century.

In “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt argues that the human mind can be satisfied with logicality only if in lacking common sense they lack its capacity to connect them with reality and the world of human affairs. As she puts it, “wherever common sense…fails us in our need for understanding, we are all too likely to accept
logicality as its substitute” (Arendt 1994a, 318). In other words, the reason totalitarian ideologies were so successful in enforcing an internally coherent and consistent picture of the world on people was because common sense could no longer meet their need to orient themselves in the world, their need for a reliable world in which they can feel at home. Totalitarianism thus takes advantage of the deterioration of the faculty of common sense in order to impose logicality on people’s minds and make them fit to function according to the logic of the laws of movement of Nature or History. In turn, totalitarian terror does everything to ensure that humans cannot maintain their common sense – by destroying “the common realm between men” (Arendt 1994a, 318, emphasis in the original).

As Arendt clarifies it in “Ideology and Terror” (1953b, 312), terror “presses people against each other.” There are at least two ways of understanding this proposition. Firstly, under the totalitarian regimes, an ever-increasing number of people, who allegedly stand in the way of movement of Nature or History, are persecuted, forced to flee for their lives or put in concentration camps and made to disappear there. Their whole existence is subordinated to the imperative of survival – people are turned into refugees who are forced into anonymity or reduced to the status of disposable bodies in the concentration camps. In the hope to survive the horrors of persecution, the persecuted cling tenaciously to those who similar to them live under the constant threat of annihilation. As a result, by coercing the persecuted to move so close to one another, terror destroys the spaces of “in between” that individuals need in order to be able to move freely in the world and appear in public so as to be seen by others and relate to them through action and speech. Terror under the totalitarian regimes thus can lead to destruction of all political ties among people.
Secondly, the totalitarian terror is devised by the totalitarian regimes to accelerate the movement of Nature or History that supposedly follows the inescapable laws. The totalitarian regimes with the aid of ideology organise the masses in a way that the majority of people embrace the logic of these allegedly existing laws and keep pace with the terror implemented in the name of Nature or History. There is thus another sense in which totalitarian terror can be said to “press people against each other” (1953b, 312) – by making human lives merely instrumental to the progression of the suprahuman forces, it ensures that people stop living, speaking and acting as distinct individuals, whose speech and action matter. Instead, the terror turns people into “One Man of gigantic dimensions” (Arendt 1953b, 312), that is, a single entity within which all distinctions are erased and which progresses towards the supposedly final destination of the humankind, such as the establishment of a classless society or the total domination of one pure race.

Arendt argues that even though totalitarian terror “masses” people together, they have never been as lonely and isolated as when they live under totalitarianism (Arendt 1953b, 322). To form political relationships and be able to relate to others, humans need the spaces of “in between” so that they are able to see themselves and each other as separate individuals who are capable of constituting their own opinions and speaking in their own voices – the very possibility that, as we saw above, the totalitarian terror attempts to take away from them, making any political relationships impossible. Moreover, Arendt demonstrates that under totalitarianism, most people are forced to experience loneliness of a kind whereby they are deserted not only by others but also by their inner companions that can be acquired through thinking, if thinking is understood as a conversation with oneself (Arendt 1953b, 324, Arendt 1994b, 358). To examine the
implications of Arendt’s account of loneliness under totalitarianism we need to remind ourselves of the distinction that she draws between solitude and loneliness.

The difference between solitude and loneliness is that solitude is something that humans need in order to be able to think, that is, to carry out the inner dialogue of the “two-in-one.” Solitude of thinking preserves intrinsic relationships with others and with the world. As Arendt puts it, “solitude in which one has the company of oneself need not give up contact with others, and is not outside human company altogether” (Arendt 1994b, 359). On the other hand, loneliness, Arendt proposes, is an experience of complete isolation which arises when an individual is both fully “deserted or separated from others” (359) and unable to relate to herself through starting the dialogue of the “two-in-one.”

Let me now connect these reflections to Arendt’s discussion of how totalitarianism attempted to replace common sense with logicality. Under the impact of totalitarian terror, common sense, the sense of the common world, is fully incapacitated and humans are brought very close to this experience of acute loneliness. On the other hand, this loneliness deprives humans of their ability and need to think. Hence it appears that Arendt sees a close link between common sense and thinking. Once common sense has atrophied, thinking is easily replaced with a simplified logical reasoning. Having lost an immediate connection with others and with the world, humans become inclined to take refuge in logicality and apply it to explain everything that has occurred and occurs. This is because, as Arendt proposes it in “Understanding and Politics,” the “logical reasoning” (“2+2=4”) that totalitarian regimes require of their adherents needs no external verification for its functioning: “logical reasoning” can “claim a reliability altogether independent of the world and the existence of other
people” (Arendt 1994a, 317). Like common sense, logical reasoning is a faculty common to all humans, Arendt says. However, while common sense relies on the world and the presence of others, logicality “functions even under conditions of complete separation from world and experience and…is strictly ‘within’ us, without any bond to something ‘given’” (318). Arendt further concludes that this negation of the “given” means that logical reasoning “is unable to understand anything and, left to itself, utterly sterile” (318). Here Arendt introduces a notion of the “given” which appears to be crucial to her conception of understanding. As I see it, Arendt argues that without recognition of the “given,” understanding cannot occur. What Arendt means by negation of the “given” is that logicality is solipsistic by its nature – it implies that an individual cuts off all contact with the world and trusts only to the process of cold stone reasoning.

The importance of the concept of the “given” in Arendt’s writings is highlighted by Peg Birmingham in her book The Predicament of Common Responsibility (2006). Birmingham suggests that there are two senses of the word “given” in Arendt’s works which “at times [are] competing” (Birmingham 2006, 75). The sense which is most often emphasised in the literature is Arendt’s definition of the “given” as the unavoidable bodily necessities that are part of the human condition, “the mere life,” “the natural” – something which should be taken care of within the boundaries of the private domain and which has no place in the public realm (75). However, Birmingham is more interested in another sense of the “given,” rarely acknowledged, she argues, in the literature. This sense of the given, as we shall see, has a particular relevance for the present enquiry into truthfulness in regard to the quest for understanding.
This other sense of the “given,” as shown by Birmingham, can be gauged from Arendt’s expression “the disturbing miracle of givenness” (Birmingham 2006, 73). This miracle is associated with “the archaic event of natality” (46, 73, 102) – with the event of the creation of man which repeats itself in the birth of every new human being. Birmingham thus talks about the “birth of the given” whereby the “singular, unique, unchangeable” appears into the world with every individual human birth (Birmingham 2006, 73). Seen from this perspective, “givenness” is “unqualified mere existence” which is not made or fabricated but appears on its own accord in the world. This “existence” or presence is “unqualified” as it can never be explained or definitively characterised – it can be only accepted with gratefulness (Birmingham 2006, 93). Birmingham’s point is that Arendt’s attitude to the “given” thus understood is more complex than simply an attempt to seclude it in the private realm. She argues that Arendt’s writings can be read in a way that shows Arendt’s deep appreciation of the “given.”

One way that Birmingham sets out to demonstrate this is by quoting from Arendt’s letter to Gershom Scholem, Jewish philosopher and historian, in which Arendt characterises her own Jewishness in terms of that which is “given” to her: “There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been given and was not, could not be, made; for things that are physei and not nomoi (The Jew as Pariah, 296)” (Birmingham 2006, 73). Birmingham provides the following commentary on this passage:

For Arendt, embodiment, including differences in gender as well as differences in ethnicity, like being Jewish, are included in the “birth of the given.” These are physei, not nomoi. To deny givenness would be a form of madness. Arendt further
suggests that givenness is at the very heart of human plurality and is the condition for human action. Givenness carries the ethical demand of unconditional affirmation and gratitude – *Amo: Volo ut sis.* (Birmingham 2006, 73)

The phrase *Amo: Volo ut sis,* to which Birmingham refers in the passage, translates from Latin as “I love you, I want you to be.” This phrase manifests the influence of the Augustinian idea of love on Arendt’s writings – she devoted her dissertation to an exploration of Augustine’s concept of neighbourly love. This phrase *Amo: Volo ut sis* recurs in many of Arendt’s writings and, in particular, *The Life of the Mind* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* In her book, Birmingham proposes that, for Arendt, this phrase inspired by Augustine manifests the deepest appreciation of “the birth of the given” and gratitude for a miraculous appearance into the world of a new, unique and singular life.

Furthermore, Birmingham proposes that this affirmation and gratitude for “the birth of the given” is “unconditional” since to say *Amo: Volo ut sis* means to accept the presence of someone or something without seeking to transform or overpower it. Birmingham further illustrates this point by emphasising the affinity between Arendt’s and Agamben’s thought:

This is also Agamben’s thought: “In every thing affirm simply the *thus, sic,* beyond good and evil. But *thus* does not simply mean in this or that mode, with those certain properties. ‘So be it’ means ‘let the thus be.’ In other words, it means, ‘yes.’” (Birmingham 2006, 86)

Birmingham’s approach to the notion of the “given” opens up a new dimension of Arendt’s notion of natality or “new beginning.” Usually the literature on Arendt’s
thought emphasises a connection between the event of natality and the human ability to act, that is, to begin something new and unprecedented which interrupts a chain of previous happenings and introduces changes into the world. Indeed, Arendt herself argues that the human ability to act is rooted in the event of natality (Arendt 1998, 9). However, Birmingham argues that Arendt’s writings point out that the event of natality, for her, carries with it not only the principle of new beginning or *initium* – the principle whereby humans who are newcomers to the world have the ability to start a new beginning themselves – but also “the principle of givenness” (Birmingham 2006, 70, 87, 91) – the principle whereby every new birth brings to the world an appearance of “unqualified existence,” of a singular, distinct, unchangeable life, an appearance which always remains an explicable “miracle.”

In so far as the event of natality has a twofold character and carries both the principle of beginning and the principle of givenness (Birmingham 2006, 9, 33, 87), Birmingham argues that these two principles are interconnected: the principle of givenness in Arendt’s works is inseparable from the principle of new beginning or *initium*. As she puts it, “Arendt suggests that givenness understood as mere unqualified existence is precisely what allows for the radical unpredictability of the new” (83). In other words, without an unconditional affirmation and gratitude for the given, humans cannot exercise their capacity for action in Arendt’s sense of initiating the new and unprecedented.

Throughout the book Birmingham discusses different contexts in which Arendt refers to the principle of givenness, and the *givenness* of life as *physis* is only one of them. Birmingham also discusses the *givenness* of the web of human relationships, the *givenness* of a historical world, the *givenness* of a people, the *givenness* of the earth,
and so on. What unites all these contexts is the demand for “gratitude” for the given that the principle of givenness poses on humans. And this “gratitude” in turn gives rise to the pleasure of sharing the world with others: “Gratitude for what is given (for the singularity of being, for the otherness of living things, for the webs of appearance, for the unfolding of time, for the earth itself) is accompanied by the joy of inhabiting together with a plurality of others a world where the unpredictability of the new remains an ever-present possibility” (Birmingham 2006, 103).

If we look at the “Understanding and Politics” essay from the perspective of Birmingham’s argument about the connection of the principle of beginning and the principle of givenness, then we can better appreciate why Arendt insists on the fact that because logicality is “not bound to the ‘given,’” it does not allow humans to generate meaning (Arendt 1994a, 317). As I have been arguing so far, the generation of meaning is related to the ability and willingness to recognise and comprehend the “new” which appears in the human world with every event. If, for Arendt, the principle of beginning and the principle of the given are interrelated, then logicality, by ignoring and disparaging the given, becomes indeed “sterile,” that is, unable to recognise phenomena in their newness and uniqueness and hence unable to instil the quest for meaning. I argue thus that the appreciation of the “given,” in Arendt’s work, is essential not only for the human capacity to start a new beginning through action but also for the human ability to understand, that is, to generate meaning. Gratitude for the “given,” the willingness to unconditionally accept it and appreciate it, thus can be seen as another demand of truthfulness that the quest for meaning imposes upon us.

I would like to further build on this insight and show how the substitution of common sense with “stringent logicality” influences the question of “truth.” Arendt
shows that totalitarian ideologies equate “truth” with “consistency” and, as she argues, “this equation actually implies the negation of the existence of truth in so far as truth is always supposed to reveal something, whereas consistency is only a mode of fitting statements together, and as such lacks the power of revelation” (Arendt 1994a, 317). Arendt here conceives of truth as that which discloses something to us. Totalitarianism, by having relinquished contact with the real, factual and intersubjective world, eliminates all the conditions of possibility for such truth: truth is reduced to the criterion of consistency and does not reveal anything to us, rather coercing our mind into accepting everything that follows from logical premises. Such “truth,” Arendt implies, is a perversion of truth. The moment humans accept this concept of truth they stop learning from experience and lose the ability to recognise the new and unprecedented that our experience may lead us to discover.

In “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” Arendt further elaborates on the dangerous implications of the perversion of truth attempted by totalitarian regimes:

If Western philosophy has maintained that reality is truth – for this is of course the ontological basis of the aequatio rei et intellectus – then totalitarianism has concluded from this that we can fabricate truth in so far as we can fabricate reality; that we do not have to wait until reality unveils itself and shows us its true face, but can bring into being a reality whose structures will be known to us from the beginning because the whole thing is our product. In other words, it is the underlying conviction of any totalitarian transformation of ideology into reality that it will become true whether it is true or not. (Arendt 1994b, 354)
In this passage Arendt shows how totalitarianism takes advantage of the model of truth postulated by the Western tradition of thought, by which she means the correspondence model of truth. Totalitarianism reverses this model to its advantage: it forcefully interferes with reality in order to ensure that whatever the ideologies profess becomes real and thus true. For example, in order to confirm the “truth” that some races are unfit to live as the Nazi ideologues declare, all the Nazi regime has to do is to undertake their extermination, to make up the reality in a way that becomes “consistent” with the desired outcome. Such an attitude to truth, as I see it, represents a profound violation of the “principle of givenness.”

In “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” Arendt reinforces the dangerous consequences of the attempt of totalitarianism to manufacture “truth” by forcefully interfering with reality. The danger of this situation is that the notion of truth becomes meaningless altogether (Arendt 1994b, 354) since any flagrant lie pronounced by totalitarian leaders can be turned into “truth” by making reality consistent with this lie. This in turn opens way for totalitarianism to establish “a lying world order” (354) – a world in which flagrant lies are systematically turned into “truths” by manufacturing reality.

In “Understanding and Politics,” reflecting on the attempt of totalitarianism to substitute common sense with logicality, Arendt turns to the analysis of history and “the task of the historian” (Arendt 1994a, 320) in order to find a way of reinvigorating the human ability to generate meaning without reliance on the “traditional tools” inherited from the Western tradition of thought and on common sense trained in traditional thinking. In the next section, I consider how Arendt understands the task of the historian. I start with exploring Arendt’s critique of historicism that, as she sees it, is not
an adequate approach to dealing with historical events – including totalitarianism – since historicism subsumes all the events under the yoke of causality. I then proceed with considering how Arendt, in opposition to this approach, formulates her own approach to an understanding of historical events that can allow us to recognise and grasp that about them which is new and unprecedented.

5. The task of a historian: the dangers of causality and the notion of an “event”

Arendt starts her discussion of the task of a historian by referring to a distinction between the natural sciences and history (Arendt 1994a, 318). As I see it, here Arendt refers to the distinction between the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) and the humanities (Geisteswissenschaften), an established distinction in German academia that goes back to Heinrich Rickert and Max Weber. Similarly to Weber, Arendt suggests that the historical sciences are interested in unique and new events – events “which always occur only once” – while the natural sciences are concerned with the knowledge of recurring causal sequences (Arendt 1994a, 318). The danger, as Arendt sees it, arises when the historian seeks to apply knowledge of the laws of causation specific to the natural sciences to the realm of human affairs: “This newness [of historical events] can be manipulated if the historian insists on causality and pretends to be able to explain events by a chain of causes which eventually led up to them” (318). Arendt further specifies that by causality she means “the application of general categories to the whole course of happenings, such as challenge and response, or in the search for general trends which supposedly are the ‘deeper’ strata from which events spring and whose accessory symptoms they are” (319).
Arendt gives the following objections to the application of causality in the historical sciences. First of all, she suggests that “the actual meaning of every event always transcend[s] any number of past ‘causes’ which we may assign to it” (Arendt 1994a, 319). Thus an event is somehow more significant, more meaningful than anything that preceded it. As such, an event can never be forecasted, anticipated or causally explained. Rather than trying to present a historical phenomenon as a manifestation of some “objective” laws, a historian, for Arendt, should be concerned with the meaning of an event as a phenomenon which is unprecedented and radically new. Here Arendt shows herself as an ardent critic of historicism – a conception that historical events are a realisation of historical laws. Rather than considering individual events, actions and human lives as meaningful in and of themselves, historicism evaluates them in terms of their relation to the general laws of history that allegedly determine the nature of everything that is in the human realm. Arendt is extremely critical of such an approach to history, which she believes does not allow for the development of an understanding of events as meaningful and significant. What then interests Arendt is how it is possible to challenge this approach and to find an alternative way of thinking about history that does not conceptualise it in terms of movement driven by eternal laws.

In “Understanding and Politics,” in order to counter the idea of history based on causation, Arendt turns to the notion of the event. For Arendt, an event is not a passing point on an ordered time continuum. Seyla Benhabib (1990, 181–182) and Taran Kang (2013, 142) insightfully suggest that the best term to use to characterize Arendt’s understanding of the event is “rupture.” Conversely, the past cannot be known before
the event happens – the event breaks the time continuum and creates a unique reference point from which the past can be observed and understood.

In a footnote to her “Understanding and Politics” essay, Arendt gives an example of how it is possible to think about totalitarianism as a unique event without reference to the laws of causality. To this end, she uses the metaphor of crystallisation:

The elements of totalitarianism comprise its origins, if by origins we do not understand “causes.” Elements by themselves never cause anything. They become origins of events if and when they suddenly crystallize into fixed and definite forms. It is the light of the event itself which permits us to distinguish its own concrete elements from an infinite number of abstract possibilities, and it is still this same light that must guide us backward into the always dim and equivocal past of these elements themselves. In this sense, it is legitimate to talk of the origins of totalitarianism, or of any other event in history. (Arendt 1994a, FN 12, 325)

Here Arendt attempts to dissociate the notion of “origins” from “causes” and thus defines “origins” through the notion of “elements.” Elements, unlike causes, do not exist independently of an event, nor do they directly cause it. The elements – and by elements Arendt means here, as I see it, deeds, currents of thought, ideas, doings, incidents, etc. – become apparent to an observer only at the moment when an event occurs and thus cannot be calculated in advance, before the event takes place. Arendt uses the metaphor of crystallisation to describe how the elements come to shape the event’s origins. It is as though the elements have frozen together as crystals so that every new event brings to life a new and unexpected political constellation, which it is the historian’s task to untangle.
Furthermore the metaphor of crystallisation allows us to avoid a reference to causality when exploring historical events. It helps us to recognise the novel character of every event that appears in the world and points out the impossibility of deducing it from the previous incidents. Richard Bernstein puts particularly strong emphasis on the fact that, for Arendt, the final constellation of elements in an event is never known in advance and could have always been otherwise. This is how he describes Arendt’s methodological approach to totalitarianism:

Retrospectively, from the vantage point of the “unprecedented event” of totalitarianism, we can tell the story of those subterranean historical elements that crystallized into totalitarianism. But we must be vigilant against the fallacy of sliding from such a retrospective account (the type of account of totalitarianism that Arendt seeks to provide) into the fictitious belief of the historical inevitability of totalitarianism. The reason why Arendt is so insistent on this point is that although she did believe that there were subterranean trends in modernity that came together and crystallized into the horrible event of totalitarianism, she did not believe and strongly opposed the thesis that totalitarianism was the historically inevitable outcome of forces and trends set in motion in the modern age. (Bernstein 1996, 51–52, emphasis in the original)

Kang (2013) offers another important clarification of Arendt’s notion of “origins” when he points out the connection between Arendt’s notion of origins and the quest for meaning. He argues that Arendt’s understanding of the notion of origins does not mean that she presupposes that all events have some kind of ontological “essence.” Even though Arendt sometimes uses a notion of “essence” as synonymous to “origins,” Kang argues that by “essence” she means something very different from what the Western
philosophical tradition commonly understands by it. “Her brand of ‘essentialism,’” he argues, “with its suspicion of both efficient and final causes, is existential and anti-teleological in its orientation” (Kang 2013, 157). Kang shows that in so far as “essence” is an existential category, for Arendt, it has an important connection with meaning. Kang remarks that “she frequently employs the term in explicating the deeper meaning or the animating principle of regimes, movements, and ideologies” (156, emphasis added). Therefore, he concludes that, for Arendt, an essence of political events or a phenomenon such as totalitarianism can never be revealed through the application of causal laws but only through understanding: “according to Arendt, the appearance of the new calls for an understanding of its essence, not an explication through causes” (160).

The metaphor of crystallisation further informs Arendt’s view of “the task of the historian,” which, as she sees it, consists, first of all, in recognising the newness of an event and, secondly, in engaging with the quest for meaning:

...each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins. It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected new with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance. (Arendt 1994a, 320, emphasis in the original)

To understand what Arendt means in this paragraph I suggest referring to The Human Condition, specifically the section “The Frailty of Human Affairs” (Arendt 1998, 188–192). In this section, Arendt emphasises that action is never an isolated activity since
“action and speech need the surrounding presence of others” (Arendt 1998, 188). For not only does an actor start a new beginning, she needs the support of others to carry out this initiative – “to see it through” (189). Action thus never happens in a vacuum but rather in the midst of other actors who are also capable of starting a new beginning in response to the original action. Therefore, Arendt proposes that by acting, every actor unleashes an open-ended stream of other actions and initiatives: “Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others” (190). Every actor is thus not only a new beginner but also a “sufferer” (190) who is influenced by the chain of actions that her deed may instigate. Arendt thus argues that every action is “boundless” in the sense that its repercussions can become the incentive for an unlimited number of new actions. The impulse of the original action can thus spread through the “web” of human relationships and transform this network by creating new relationships.

Every action thus gives rise to a new terrain of relationships, deeds and sufferings that are not reducible to the original motives, desires and aims of actors. This is why in “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt demands from the historian that she open herself to “an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities” – possibilities for ever new actions – which is disclosed to her if she is willing to engage in understanding in the sense of a quest for meaning (Arendt 1994a, 320). This “landscape” which opens to the eye of the historian is “unexpected” and “new” as it was not known to any of the actors involved in the event and cannot be deduced directly from actors’ intentions or circumstances or from previous happenings. Again here we can turn to The Human Condition for further clarification. In The Human Condition
Arendt emphasises the “inherent unpredictability” of action (Arendt 1998, 191). What Arendt means by unpredictability, as she explains it, is not that an actor cannot predict all the repercussions of her own initiative. Rather, action is “unpredictable” in a sense that an actor cannot know what kind of meaning and significance her initiative may acquire. In *The Human Condition* Arendt proposes that it is only after the performance of action has taken place that its meaning can be disclosed – not to the actor herself but to “the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants” (192). The role of the historian thus consists in illuminating a unique meaning of an event and the human actions involved in it – meaning which is not accessible to actors who while performing their deeds are not aware of the meaning their actions will reveal to others.

In “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt emphasises that the historian can shed light on the meaning of an event as she is able to “see” the chain of deeds, sufferings, intentions and incidents as a story and tell this story to others (Arendt 1994a, 319). As Arendt puts it, “whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past, history comes into being. Only then does the chaotic maze of past happenings emerge as a story which can be told, because it has a beginning and an end” (319). In the Lessing essay, we saw that Arendt considers storytelling as a practice which enables individuals to face up to the reality of the past and endow the past with meaning. In the Lessing essay, Arendt highlights the roles of the poet and historian as those who initiate storytelling, thus involving others in this process. In “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt similarly argues that an event becomes a reference point for a historian that allows her to tell a story. This story left behind by the actors does not speak for itself: it
demands that the historian recognise it and engage in understanding in the sense of a quest for meaning.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt proposes that storytelling plays an important political role in the realm of human affairs. Action, unlike the activity of fabrication, does not leave behind any tangible traces (Arendt 1998, 95). Action, as well as speech and thought, last only “a fleeting moment” (95) and the only way to preserve their greatness is through “remembrance.” Arendt refers to the ancient Greek polis as providing a remedy for “the futility of action and speech” (197) by allowing for “the fleeting greatness” of deeds and words to be preserved and to acquire “reality” (197). This is why Arendt calls the polis the space of “organized remembrance” (198). But if deeds are to be preserved for posterity, then they first should be transformed into stories – they “needed Homer and ‘others of his craft’ in order to be presented to those who were not there” (198). In this passage Arendt refers to the role of poets who can convert the deeds and words of others into poetry, thus preserving their significance and saving them from oblivion. In “Understanding and Politics,” it is the historian to whom Arendt assigns the primary task of recognising and telling a story left behind by political actors. The task of the historian thus has a political significance as it contributes to the remembrance of political deeds and words, as well as of the actors themselves, and ensures a permanent place for memories about them in the world of human affairs.

Yet, Arendt warns us that the belief in a causality that derives particular human phenomena from general laws – a common approach in historiography – prevents the historian from performing her task for storytelling since this belief prevents her from seeing human deeds, events, words, sufferings and experiences as a meaningful story. As Arendt puts it, “such generalizations and categorizations extinguish the ‘natural’
light history itself offers and, by the same token, destroys the actual story, with its unique distinction and its eternal meaning, that each historical period has to tell us” (Arendt 1994a, 319–320). What Arendt reinforces here is that the task of a historian is to transform the past and past events into stories, thereby endowing them with meaning – a task that cannot be performed if someone attempts to subsume unique meanings of events under general overarching causal laws of movement.

As quoted above, the meaning that a historian seeks to reveal, Arendt says, is “eternal” (Arendt 1994a, 319). However, this is not in the sense, I submit, that this meaning is unchangeable or permanent. Arendt rejects the possibility of one monolithic and general narrative of human history which will settle its meaning once and for all. Quite the contrary, Arendt allows for the possibility of multiple stories to be told about the past and for a multitude of meanings to be generated about it. As I have mentioned before, thinking, for Arendt, is like Penelope’s web as it unravels every day what it wove the night before. Therefore, the task of understanding the past, the task of the historian to generate meaning of past events, will never have an end. Given the perspectivist nature of understanding, discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the quest of understanding takes different paths depending on the unique situatedness of an individual. Therefore, every historian will tell her story in a different way, and there can be not one but many stories about the same historical period. In other words, historical truth about this period will have not one but many “faces,” to use the metaphor from Kafka’s phrase about truth that Arendt chose as an epigraph for the essay.

It is essential to note that by opening the past to multiple stories, Arendt does not mean to suggest that a historian is allowed to change history at will as this would amount to an attempt to manufacture reality, as totalitarianism aspired to do by
establishing “a lying order of consistency.” As I see it, the principle of givenness articulated by Birmingham – in this context, the acceptance of given facts about historical events – is integral to the role of a historian as storyteller. As we will see in the next chapter, the recognition and preservation of the factuality of the past becomes the key theme of Arendt’s essay “Truth and Politics.”

What Arendt may mean then by the “eternal meaning” (Arendt 1994a, 319) that every historical period can reveal to us is that an event remains potentially meaningful to us regardless of how long ago it took place. Understanding is capable of bridging the distance between us and events, and actors involved in these events, even if they are too far away from us in temporal or spatial terms. It is by no means accidental that Arendt finishes the essay by discussing the faculty of imagination, which she regards as an important aspect of understanding, and emphasising its capacity to adjust distances between us and others, between us and that which happened or is happening. As Arendt puts it,

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding. (Arendt 1994a, 323)

Arendt suggests here that understanding with the assistance of imagination not only is capable of bringing events, actions and individuals close to us but also can help us to
establish a space between us and others, allowing us to come into a “dialogue” with them. These distances that the faculty of understanding helps us to establish can be conceived in terms of “in-between” spaces that both separate and unite humans or in terms of the world that comes “in-between” humans when humans make the world an object of their common interests, in the literal sense of the Greek word *inter-esse*. In turn, as I have indicated, the preservation of these spaces is essential for the actualisation of the condition of human plurality. These “in-between” spaces can become public spaces which bring together a plurality of actors and speakers and allow humans to distinguish themselves as unique individuals. In the chapter on Lessing we also saw that Arendt is concerned about individuals forsaking their commitment and interest in the world so that “in-between” places disappear and leave humans “worldless.” In this situation, humans risk coming too close and losing their distinct voices – something which bothered Lessing, who was fearful that human beings can put their trust in an absolute truth and thus meld together into relationships of brotherhood with the result that no human dialogue, the dialogue of friendship, can be possible. On the other hand, in this chapter I also highlighted that Arendt is aware of another danger that put at risk these “in-between” spaces. She demonstrates that under the pressure of terror and ideology, humans become atomised and isolated from one another and combined in an amorphous mass – something that totalitarian regimes attempted to achieve by trying to destroy the remnants of common sense and substitute it with logicality.

In “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt thus proposes that the dialogue of understanding has the ability to constitute the world if we conceive the world in terms of “in-between” spaces that bring humans together and separate them at the same time.
This can be seen, I suggest, as her response to the degradation of common sense which, as we saw above, first had degenerated into conformity to a traditional, customary common sense and then was further weakened with the advent of totalitarian regimes that attempted to replace it with logicality. Thus Arendt proposes that understanding of the kind she describes in the essay could allow humans to regain their sense of the real, their ability to “see” the world as that which lies “in-between” them” and their capacity to orient themselves in the world that has been changed by the event of totalitarianism. As Arendt puts it in “Understanding and Politics,” without understanding, “we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have. We are contemporaries only so far as our understanding reaches” (Arendt 1994a, 323). If we interpret the term “contemporaries” in this passage in terms of “friends” in Lessing’s sense – friends who preserve their commitment to the world and do not shy away from recognising and affirming their differences – then understanding, indeed, acquires a crucial political significance in helping use share he world with the plurality of other human beings. Arendt entrusts understanding with the power to transform one’s fellow beings into one’s friends, in Lessing’s sense of “political” friendship, and inspire them to share the world in common.

However, given the historical degradation of common sense and the fact that totalitarianism attempted to fully deprive humans of the quest for meaning, how can Arendt be confident that individuals are still capable of an understanding that could allow them to access the world and experience this world as common to them? Arendt finishes the essay by providing a justification for her conviction that humans can develop common sense again and thus be able to renew their quest for meaning without relying on pre-existing structures, models, and standards of judging and thinking.
Arendt bases her justification by referring to the event of natality, which I discussed above along with the principle of initium and givenness in Arendt’s writings, as Birmingham interprets them.

In the final part of “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt articulates her conception of natality by referring to a passage from the Biblical myth of creation, as interpreted by the theologian and philosopher Augustine. Augustine, Arendt says, wrote during the period of the demise of the Roman Empire, which was experienced by Augustine and his contemporaries as the irrevocable political catastrophe, comparable to the catastrophe of totalitarianism in the twentieth century (Arendt 1994a, 321). What Arendt finds fascinating in Augustine’s writings is his belief in new beginnings:

Augustine, in his Civitas Dei (Book XII, ch. 20), said: “Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit” (“That there might be a beginning, man was created before whom nobody was”). According to Augustine, who might rightly be called the father of all Western philosophy of history, man not only has the capacity of beginning, but is this beginning himself. (Arendt 1994a, 321)

For Arendt, the primordial event of creation or natality emphasised by Augustine has more than a symbolic significance. This event is reproduced or recovered in every individual birth so that every human being somehow carries with herself an indication of this original event of natality. This is why every human being has the capacity to start a new beginning herself – to initiate something new and unprecedented by virtue of political action. In “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt shows that the fact that every human life through the event of birth preserves a link to this arche, to the primordial event of natality, not only manifests itself in the human ability to initiate the
new through action but also ensures the human ability to detect and understand the new when it comes to the world:

In light of these reflections, our endeavoring to understand something which has ruined our categories of thought and our standards of judgment appears less frightening. Even though we have lost yardsticks by which to measure, and rules under which to subsume the particular, a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality. (Arendt 1994a, 321)

The ability to understand the new and the ability to initiate the new are thus two sides of the same coin and spring from the same source – the primordial event of natality, the *arche* that repeats itself in every new birth. In other words, Arendt believes that in so far as a human being is endowed with the ability to start a new beginning through action, she is also endowed with an instrument that allows her to reconcile herself to the outcomes of these actions – outcomes that she herself cannot foresee or control, that she can only recognise as “given” and come to terms with. As she puts it,

If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action, namely, that form of cognition, distinct from many others, by which acting men…eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists. (Arendt 1994a, 321–322)

In this chapter I have discussed the key role that Arendt ascribes to the quest for meaning in the need of humans to orient themselves in the world and “reconcile
themselves” to reality. The quest for meaning, as I read it in the “Understanding and Politics” essay, allows humans to establish those “in-between” spaces that both unite and separate them – something which is essential for enabling humans to access the world and to “see” this world as common to them. I also argued that the quest for understanding can play this important political role only if this quest preserves its integrity, that is, if it becomes “true understanding.” By reading Arendt, I attempted to elicit the demands that she makes of historians and actors so that they are able to practise “true understanding” as opposed to indoctrination, purely scientific analysis or logicality. Among these demands, I highlighted Arendt’s emphasis on the importance of being open to the shock of the new, of being willing to recognise the “given” and of resisting the temptation to subsume phenomena under mechanistic causal explanations.

As I have shown, for Arendt, the willingness to practise the quest for “true understanding” is required more urgently now than ever before since the world in which we live has been profoundly changed by the event of totalitarianism. Arendt is deeply aware of the far-reaching consequences of the totalitarian attempt to destroy common sense and deprive humans of their quest for meaning. She suggests that totalitarianism brought to light an entirely new and dangerous phenomenon – it established a “lying world order,” an attempt to manipulate reality and forcefully change it in order to make it consistent with ideological doctrines. Arendt is concerned that if this attempt is successfully accomplished, then the notion of truth can become completely meaningless as now every flagrant lie can be turned into “truth” by those who have power to unilaterally transform reality according to their convictions. This became possible because totalitarianism, aided by terror and ideological indoctrination, is able to impose on people an absolutely consistent image of the world and cut them off from the factual
and intersubjective world that they share with others. Trained in reasoning according to “stringent logicality,” adherents of totalitarian regimes are forced to see the world and their own lives as subordinate to the logic of the superhuman laws of Nature or History. Under these conditions, the only criterion of “truth” and “truthfulness” is consistency with the logic inherent in these supposedly existing laws of perpetual movement. However, for Arendt, this amounts to the blatant perversion of the notion of truth.

The theme of “a lying world order” finds its continuation in Arendt’s late writings and in a new context. In the essay “Truth and Politics,” written in 1967 more than ten years after “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt discusses the phenomenon of “organized lying” which is characteristic of non-totalitarian societies. Birmingham (2007) persuasively demonstrates that Arendt sees the “lying world order” that totalitarian regimes seek to establish and “organized lying” in non-totalitarian societies as related. I find this reading very productive as it points out that there is continuity between Arendt’s early reflections on truth, and her attempt to discern the sense of truth which is related to thinking *qua* reason or understanding, and her later works written in the 1960s.

What an analysis of “Truth and Politics” will add to the present enquiry is that, firstly, it will allow me to show that Arendt’s conception of truth in relation to meaning has a broad relevance that stretches beyond the specific problem of understanding totalitarianism, and that Arendt continues reflecting on truth in relation to meaning in the context of her experiences in the United States in the 1960s. Secondly, analysing the essay “Truth and Politics” will also allow me to position this conception of truth, in the sense of that which is meaningfully disclosed to us, in relation to a particular notion of “the truths of facts” or “factual truths” that Arendt explores in that essay. In the next
chapter, I will argue, then, that it is important not to reduce Arendt’s understanding of “factual truths” to a positivist/empiricist version of reality. I will attempt to show that facts are not “self-evident” and their preservation in the political realm also requires the commitment to the quest for meaning.
Chapter Five. Factual truths as “the ground on which we stand”

I. The controversy around Arendt’s report on the trial of Eichmann

I begin this chapter by addressing why Arendt decided to focus on the question of lying and factual truths in 1967 when she wrote the “Truth and Politics” essay. In a footnote to the essay, Arendt explicitly states that this work is written in response to the controversies caused by her report on the trial of the Nazi functionary Eichmann, held in 1961 in Jerusalem. The publication of this report – first as a series of articles in the *New Yorker* and then as a book – provoked profound and passionate debates in the US and abroad. Some commentators even characterised the debates as “violent” (Ezra 2007). Some points in Arendt’s book that caused controversy were as follows: her remarks about the conducting of a trial, which she claimed should not be carried out by one nation state but by an international organisation; her depiction of Eichmann as someone who is not a moral monster or a diabolic evildoer but rather a person who did not “think”; and her discussion of the role of the Jewish Council in the Final Solution, which might have led, she suggested, to a greater number of victims among the Jews (Ezra 2007). Arendt was accused of misinterpreting and taking liberties with the facts, of lacking a solemn tone when talking about the tragedy of the Final Solution and of misrepresenting her own people. Many critics suggested that Arendt should have avoided bringing up the issue of the Jewish leadership (even if there was some truth to it), at the very least out of empathy and compassion for the Jewish people. For example, Ignatieff argues: “The accusation [against Arendt] here is fundamental: that in making
ethical judgment the central function of intellectual life, and its chief claim of authority, Arendt had lacked the one essential feature of judgment: compassion” (Ignatieff, cited in Berkowitz 2011).

In the chapter on the Lessing essay, I have already considered why, for Arendt, it is impossible to initiate genuine action out of compassion – compassion is natural, almost instinctual, reaction, self-absorbed and unconcerned with worldly differences. A compassionate person can feel compassion for villains or turn compassion onto oneself. Therefore, it can be assumed that, for Arendt, compassion, indeed, could not be a defining factor for judging political phenomena. Her decision to write what she deemed true about the past was indeed not based on compassion, as Ignatieff highlights. But this is, perhaps, not because she lacked compassion as such but because she would deliberately set it aside as an unreliable guide in decisions as to how to act and how to judge.

That Arendt perceives her task in writing the report about the trial in terms of truth-telling can be seen from her correspondence with the journalist Samuel Grafton, which was published only recently. In her reply to Grafton’s question whether “would, in the light of that reaction [to her book], want to change anything if [she] were starting to write the book now,” and whether she would change her mind given “the sensitivity of some Jews” that the controversy brought to light (Arendt 2007b, 472), she firmly says “no”: “I believe,” she writes, “it is against the honor of our profession – ‘a writer…seeking the truth’ – to take such things into account” (Arendt 2007b, 477). If compassion cannot and should not prevent us from telling what we think is the truth, the question is, should there be any limits to truth-telling? Arendt sets out this question explicitly in a footnote to the first sentence of “Truth and Politics” as orienting her
enquiry in the essay. She formulates her question as follows: “whether it is always legitimate to tell the truth – did I believe without qualification in ‘Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus’? [‘Let truth be done, though the world perish’]” (Arendt 2006, 223). As we shall see, exploring this question leads her to ask not only whether it is “legitimate to tell the truth” but also what “telling” and recognising the truth involves.

Another question that Arendt sets for herself in this essay is concerned, she tells us, with “lies” that emerged during the controversy about her book on Eichmann’s trial. To understand the full significance of this problem of lying, as Arendt sees it, it is important to provide further background into the controversy around the trial of Eichmann. At first, Arendt was reluctant to react publicly to the controversy, preferring to let her work speak for itself. Moreover, she was persuaded that many of the book’s critics did not make a careful effort to follow her argument, or indeed that they misinterpreted and misrepresented what she wrote. At first she responded to the controversy with reference to an Austrian witticism: “There is nothing so entertaining as the discussion of a book nobody has read” (Arendt 2003a, 17). However, with time Arendt’s attitude changed and she became extremely concerned about one aspect of the debates around the book – namely, “the amazing amount of lies used in the ‘controversy’ – lies about what [she] had written, on one hand, and about the facts [she] had reported, on the other” (Arendt 2006, 223). Moreover, as we learn from her correspondence with Grafton, Arendt became persuaded that the lies about what she wrote in the book did not stem from a genuine misunderstanding of the book, yet were not random. As Arendt wrote to Grafton, “what then happened, in my opinion, was a concerted and organized effort at creating an ‘image’ and at substituting this image for
the book I had written” (Arendt 2007b, 476). She then clarifies, “such willful distortions and outright falsifications can be effective if they are organized and massive” (477).

Now we can see why Arendt says at the beginning of “Truth and Politics” that the second question that will concern her in the essay arose from her thinking about the “lies” produced during the controversy. As I understand it, Arendt came to see these lies as a symptom of a larger contemporary phenomenon of “organized lying” (Arendt 2006, 248), which she makes the subject of “Truth and Politics.” In the next section, I proceed by considering how Arendt answers the question of whether it is “legitimate” to always tell the truth about political events regardless of the “sensitivity” of others and the damage to human relationships that can be done.

2. *Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus*

Arendt starts “Truth and Politics” by suggesting that in the essay she will work with “commonplace” issues (Arendt 2006, 223). As she puts it,

No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade. (Arendt 2006, 223)

As I discussed in Chapter One, these remarks of Arendt about truth not being seen as one of the political virtues are often taken as evidence of her own anti-truth position. However, we need to be careful not to attribute this position to Arendt. In this passage quoted above Arendt does not articulate her own position on the issue but merely refers
to a popular assumption about the relationship between politics and truth that sees truth as something that is not of value in politics and can be sacrificed for the expedient achievement of goals and the implementation of efficient political action. As Arendt puts it, by way of explaining this popular belief, “lies, since they are often used as substitutes for more violent means, are apt to be considered relatively harmless tools in the arsenal of political action” (Arendt 2006, 224). Note that Arendt uses “political action” here not in her usual sense of that which starts a new beginning and whose greatness consists in performance itself and in its ability to disclose the unique identity of an actor. Instead, Arendt works here with the popular understanding of political action as a means-to-an-end, utilitarian activity, the success of which is measured by the results that it produces.

My point here is that although she states that truth and politics are seen to be “on rather bad terms with each other” and that “no one...has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues” (Arendt 2006, 223), Arendt is far from condoning these propositions, rather implying that it is time to start explicitly questioning these taken-for-granted beliefs. Arendt continues by suggesting that this view that truth and politics are antagonists seems “plausible” only at first sight. Her argument is that there is nothing more implausible and absurd than to speak about sacrificing truth for the sake of the survival of a society or reaching utilitarian goals. Arendt transforms the Latin truism “Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus” (“Let justice be done, though the world perish”) into “Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus” (“Let truth to be told, though the world perish”) (Arendt 2006, 224). Arendt suggests that the second statement is even more imperative than the first – that is, truth must be told regardless of its impact on the world. If we take this phrase out of context, it could seem at first that Arendt is ready to sacrifice the
world to truth-telling and that she values truth over the preservation of the world. In fact, what she means is that we cannot compromise on truth-telling since the very preservation of the world depends on it. As I understand Arendt’s argument here, when people think that they sacrifice truth for the sake of world – and often they do so for the sake of “politics” in the ordinary sense of the word – they are sawing off the branch on which we are sitting, so to speak. For it is impossible, as Arendt sees it, even to imagine that the world will continue without truth-telling: “the sacrifice of truth [for the sake of the world] is…futile” (Arendt 1968a, 225). In other words, Arendt points out the fallacy of thinking that a compromise in truth-telling is necessary for the survival of the world for the reason that without truth there will be no human world to sacrifice in the first place. This is how she herself formulates it:

What is at stake [in truth-telling] is survival, the perseverance in existence (in suo esse perseverare), and no human world destined to outlast the short life span of mortals within it will ever be able to survive without men willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously – namely, λέγειν τα ἑόντα, to say what is. No permanence, no perseverance in existence, can even be conceived of without men willing to testify to what is and appears to them because it is. (Arendt 2006, 225)

This is a complex statement that brings together the ideas of truth, politics and the permanence of the human world. Let me examine this in more detail. First, in this passage, Arendt refers to Herodotus – a Greek historian who was the first, as Arendt sees it, to recognise the importance of creating a record of historical events, that testifies about that which has happened and, thus, hands down historical truth to posterity. Secondly, Arendt proposes that the preservation of historical truths is essential for the
“perseverance of existence” of the world. To understand what Arendt is getting at here, I propose that we divert from “Truth and Politics” and look at the concept of the public realm in its relation to “earthly immortality,” as she refers to in *The Human Condition*. The permanence of the world becomes an issue for a human being in so far as she has a need to leave the private realm (a site of family life, labour and the fulfilment of bodily necessities) and step in the light of the public realm. It is only in the public sphere, amidst the presence of others, that humans can distinguish themselves through performing deeds and words and disclosing to others “who” they are. When these public spaces open up between individuals, the world ceases to be a mere sum of things and appears as the “common world” that has the power of “gathering [us] together and yet prevents our falling over each other” (Arendt 1998, 52). Here we can see again how Arendt engages with the idea of the common world that we observed in the chapter on Lessing – by making the world the subject of their interests, actions and speech, humans allow the world to appear as common to them, and what were merely distances between them become “in-between” spaces that both connect and separate them. What is particularly relevant to the present enquiry in the relationship between truth and politics is that in *The Human Condition* Arendt emphasises that the continuity of public spaces and hence the common world should not be taken for granted. As she puts it:

…the existence of a public realm and the world’s subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men. (Arendt 1998, 55)
Arendt suggests here that in order to become a public space, the human world needs permanence and endurance over time. What is at stake here is whether humans can preserve memories about actors and speakers, their deeds and words, beyond their individual lifetimes and whether they can make the world a shared space – a space that they share “not only with those who live with [them], but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after [them]” (Arendt 1998, 55). By virtue of this continuity of the world, humans can thus hope to achieve “earthly immortality” – which is different from an eternal life. Arendt reinforces that “without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible” (55).

If we connect these insights to “Truth and Politics,” then, I submit, it can be argued that Arendt conceives truth-telling as one of the conditions of the possibility for permanence and “earthly immortality” that are essential for the maintenance of the public realm and for the appearance of the world as “common” to humans. For, as she puts it in “Truth and Politics,” for Arendt, “no permanence, no perseverance in existence, can even be conceived of without men willing to testify to what is and appears to them because it is” (Arendt 2006, 225). Given the discussion above, it is thus difficult to accept Ronald Beiner’s (2008, 124) contention that, in “Truth and Politics,” Arendt represents truth and political action as being “existentially in conflict with each other” since, as he reads it, they offer “two conflicting ways to shelter ourselves in some measure from the flux of existence.” In opposition to what Beiner claims, I argue that, for Arendt, truth-telling and political action are not two opposing paths humans may follow in their hope to achieve earthly immortality in the midst of the natural life cycle but rather two sides of the same coin, as it were. The continuity of the public
realm as the common world shared by humans in speech and action requires the preservation of truths and thus the commitment of individuals to “testifying to what is,” that is, to truth-telling.

Now let us recall the first question that Arendt set herself for the essay – whether when she was writing her report on Eichmann’s trial and, specifically, the collaboration of the Jewish leadership with the Nazis, she believed in “Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus,” that is, in truth-telling regardless of the damage and distress that this truth may incur to interest groups or individuals. As has already become apparent throughout this investigation, Arendt’s answer is yes, and not because she has a moralistic belief in the wrongness of lying but because, above all, she believes that testifying to the truth about political phenomena – something which involves the quest for meaning – is the only way to ensure the endurance of the world as a shared space for human action and speech.

The question that Arendt sets out to explore in “Truth and Politics” is not only whether we should tell the truth but how we tell the truth, how we recognise truth as such and how we preserve truths. What concerns Arendt, as we shall see below, is that truths are in constant danger of being erased, wilfully or unintentionally, from the political realm, and when efforts to eliminate or fabricate truths are organised, we are confronted with the dangerous phenomenon of “organized lying” (Arendt 2006, 248). But before I proceed with considering Arendt’s conception of “organized lying,” it is important to consider two distinctions that Arendt draws in the essay – between rational truths and truths of facts, and between facts and opinions.
3. **Two distinctions: the truth of facts as distinct from rational truths and opinions**

For the purpose of her investigation in “Truth and Politics,” Arendt distinguishes two types of truths. The first type is rational truth, which include philosophical, mathematical, or logical truths. As Arendt notices, these are truths “produced by the mind” (Arendt 2006, 226). Their existence depends on the sheer power of the mind: for example, the human mind can independently reproduce the logical truth “2+2=4.” By referring to “rational truths,” Arendt speaks of such products of the human mind as doctrines, theorems, arguments, equations and scientific models which can be shown to be correct by reasoning alone and proved valid in relation to a theoretical method or criterion.

The second type of truth that Arendt considers is factual truth. Arendt does not provide a definition of “fact,” but she gives two examples: “the role during the Russian Revolution of a man by the name of Trotsky” (Arendt 2006, 226) and “that on the night of August 4, 1914, German troops crossed the frontier of Belgium” (235). These two examples, to which she continuously refers in the essay, indicate that Arendt is interested not in facts of a physical nature but in facts concerning human affairs – current political events, historical incidents, episodes in the life of individuals, human actions and words. As Arendt puts it, facts are “the inevitable outcome of men living and acting together” (227). Facts are thus enacted by human beings in the course of their existence as political beings – that is, their living in the company of others, speaking and acting in concert.
As compared to rational truths, Arendt says, facts are more vulnerable to destruction if someone decides to falsify them. Facts are “contingent.” As Arendt puts it, facts about human affairs “could have also been otherwise” (Arendt 2006, 238). And it is this contingency of facts, Arendt believes, that makes them more susceptible to oblivion or distortion by political powers than rational truths. For the human mind is unlikely to restore a fact by sheer intellectual force if a historical record of this fact disappears or if no one is willing or able to testify to what happened. “Once they [facts] are lost,” Arendt says, “no rational effort can bring them back” (Arendt 2006, 227).

What further differentiates factual truths from rational truths is that “the opposite of a rationally true statement is either error or ignorance, as in the sciences, or illusion and opinion, as in philosophy,” whereas the opposition of factual truths is “deliberate falsehood, the plain lie” (228). What Arendt means here is that a deliberate lie does not make much sense in relation to, say, a statement like “2+2=4.” However, facts can and are deliberately lied about. In the contemporary world, as we shall see below, this lie can take the form of “organized lying,” which consists in fabricating “images” (248) of reality with an opportunistic goal, presenting them as “true” and leading others to believe that they are “true.”

Before proceeding further in exploring the notion of “organized lying,” let me articulate another distinction that Arendt introduces in the essay – that between factual truths and opinions. Arendt does not seek to oppose the two; she sees them as distinct. As she puts it, “facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm” (Arendt 2006, 234). Facts and opinions are similar in that they are both concerned with human affairs, historical events,
incidents in human life and outcomes of human actions – with things related to people and their activities in the political realm.

However, the difference between facts and opinions lies in the fact that they have different “mode[s] of asserting validity” (Arendt 2006, 235). Opinions claim their validity through persuasion and debates. In case of facts, however, “persuasion or dissuasion is useless, for the content of the [factual] statement is not of a persuasive nature but of a coercive one” (235). I begin unpacking this claim by first looking into what Arendt means by the validity of opinions. In “Truth and Politics,” Arendt refers to opinions in the sense of the Socratic doxai which are debated, discussed and tested in discourse. As in her Socrates essay, in “Truth and Politics” Arendt ascribes to thinking a crucial role in articulating opinions and discerning truth in them. She uses, however, a new term – “representative thinking” (Arendt 2006, 237). Also she does not talk about the “truth of one’s opinion” (Arendt 2005, 19), the notion that she uses in the Socrates essay, but the “validity” of opinions (237):

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think
if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (Arendt 2006, 237)

The process of thinking described in this passage is “representative” in a twofold sense: firstly, this thinking proceeds by “representing” or reconstructing diverse perspectives of others in my imagination and relating my perspective to theirs. Secondly, during this process, my doxa, my perspective on the world, becomes “representative” of the positions of those whom I took into account while articulating my own opinion. The description of “representative thinking” that Arendt provides in the passage above has features of the kind of thinking that is involved in the Socratic dialogues and Lessing’s selbstdenken. On the one hand, representative thinking with the assistance of the faculty of imagination does what Socrates attempted to do by engaging his fellow citizens in his dialogues – to bring into relation various doxai so that humans become more aware of distinctions in their perspectives on the world and thereby can recognise the commonness of the world that they share. On the other hand, Arendt emphasises that “representative thinking” does not unquestioningly assent to the opinions of others. It also requires thinking for oneself (selbstdenken), which consists in being willing to distinguish my position from the positions of others, to disagree, debate and assert the differences.

It is only when perspectivist thinking and thinking for oneself come together that opinions can acquire their “validity” (Arendt 2006, 237). By “validity” of doxa Arendt means its representative “quality” defined by how many diverse doxai an individual engages with while formulating her opinion. The more perspectives an individual considers while formulating her doxa, the more “representative” and thus “valid” her doxa will be (237). Arendt emphasises that many people fail to engage in the process of
“representative thinking” and assure the validity of their doxai. Her point is that the willingness and ability to think representatively does not depend on the formal education or “sophistication” of an individual. What prevents humans from exercising “representative thinking” and from making their doxai valid is that often individuals are not willing to take into account perspectives beyond “[their] own interests, or the interests of the group to which [they] belong” (237). For Arendt, everyone can learn and practise “representative thinking” and the only precondition for it is the readiness to be “disinterested” (237) – that is, to be prepared to suspend one’s own partial “interests” and prejudices.

In “Truth and Politics,” Arendt thus remains consistent in her emphasis on the political role of thinking as a relational activity which actively participates in mediating between the plurality of human doxai, assists individuals with articulating their doxai in their truthfulness or “validity” and establishes the common world between them. What Arendt’s account in “Truth and Politics” adds to our understanding of thinking is that Arendt sees it as connected to, albeit distinct from, the faculty of judgment. Arendt says that she draws here on the Kantian notion of “enlarged mentality” (Arendt 2006, 237) which, as we saw in Chapter Two, she also uses in Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy. In “Truth and Politics,” Arendt remarks that “representative thinking” and the practice of “enlarged mentality” “enable” the human faculty of judgment, as distinct from thinking (237). Conversely, she says that the unwillingness to engage in “representative thinking” leads to “lack of imagination and failure to judge” (237). This reference to judgment is important because, as we know from The Life of the Mind, Arendt sees judgment as an independent human faculty, but one that is, however, closely related to thinking. One way that Arendt defines judgment in The Life of the
Mind is as “the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (Arendt 1978, 193). In the essay “Truth and Politics” we see that Arendt also connects judgment to thinking – “representative thinking” and the practice of “enlarged mentality.” As I show later in the chapter, in this essay Arendt also articulates an important way in which judgment is connected to truth-telling.

I now return to the distinction between facts and opinions. In “Truth and Politics” Arendt suggests that while doxai acquire their validity in the process of representative thinking and through the dialogue of different perspectives that it initiates, this criterion of validity cannot be applied to factual truths. No discussion, no dialogues can add anything new to a fact. As Arendt puts it, facts are “beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent” (Arendt 2006, 235). Arendt even calls facts “stubborn” (236) to emphasise that no amount of debate and polemics is able to modify them once they are established. Arendt’s unique approach to facts thus consists in that, paradoxically, she attributes to them both “stubbornness” and “contingency.” On the one hand, as we saw above, facts are contingent: they “could have also been otherwise” (238). Therefore, facts avoid any definitive explanation, any conclusive reason as to why they are as they are: “they withstand further elucidation” (238). The contingency of facts also means that they become vulnerable to perversion by political powers as they are not like a mathematical theorem that can be proven again even if its proof has been lost. On the other hand, facts are “stubborn” as they stand like islands of firmness in the political realm in which everything is constantly moving and changing. Facts – and Arendt is concerned with facts of the past, historical facts – are something that “men cannot change at will” (259) once they occur and that they must accept as given. This “stubbornness” of facts, as Arendt puts it, is “infuriating” (236) to those who are in
power as they realise that facts exist independently of their desires and interests. Those in power can try to cover up facts or substitute them with lies, but they can never change a fact once it has been established – hence the degree of hostility to facts on the part of those who seek to establish dominance over the political realm.

One weapon which is often used against facts nowadays, Arendt suggests, is an attempt to transform facts into opinions, that is, reduce them to “merely your opinion,” to the matter of your subjective interpretation: it happens when “the liar, lacking the power to make his falsehood stick, does not insist on the gospel truth of his statement but pretends that this is his ‘opinion,’ to which he claims his constitutional right” (Arendt 2006, 245). And yet Arendt claims that the right to the freedom of opinions becomes a “farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute” (234). Melding opinions and facts becomes one of the key methods of “organized lying.”

Having discussed the distinction between factual truths and rational truths, and between factual truths and opinions, I turn to the notion of “organized lying” and to how Arendt articulates the newness of this phenomenon, as compared to what she calls “traditional lies.”

4. “Organized lying” as distinct from traditional lies

Arendt defines “organized lying” as “the relatively recent phenomenon of mass manipulation of fact and opinion as it has become evident in the rewriting of history, in image-making, and in actual government policy” (Arendt 2006, 247). One sense in which the adjective “organized” can be explained is that this lying stems not from individual liars but from governmental institutions and “gigantic interest organizations”
(Arendt 2006, 250) – an umbrella under which Arendt can classify business corporations, non-governmental organisations, lobby groups, associations, and so on. Moreover, Arendt points out that the line between governmental and non-governmental institutions has been blurred: politicians and their image-makers actively use marketing strategies to promote themselves and their politics – they learnt “more than a few tricks from business practices and Madison Avenue methods” (250).

A widely known example of “organized lying” that Arendt provides in another essay, “Lying and Politics,” is her discussion of decision-making during the Vietnam War years, based on her reading of the Pentagon Papers. In the literature, there are likewise various attempts at interpreting contemporary events (e.g. the rationale for the Iraq War provided by the Bush administration, Edward Snowden’s actions) through the prism of Arendt’s idea of “organized lying” (Birmingham 2007, 2012; Zerilli 2012; MacLean 2015)

When Arendt writes “Truth and Politics” in 1967, the theme of “organized lying” is not new to her. The phenomenon of “organized lying,” as she discusses it in “Truth and Politics,” has a close affinity with the phenomenon of “a lying world order of consistency” that, according to Arendt, is characteristic of totalitarian systems of rule. Birmingham (2007) provides a reading of Arendt that links Arendt’s concerns about totalitarianism’s attitude to truth to her discussion of modern lying in “Truth and Politics.” Birmingham’s article shows that both phenomena can be seen as manifestations of the same novel form of lying that Arendt is extremely concerned with. Birmingham characterises this new form of lying using Arendt’s expression “lying the truth” (2007, 33). I find this reading of Arendt that shows the affinity between “organized lying” and “a lying world order” of totalitarianism suggestive. If these two
phenomena are driven by similar concerns, as Birmingham proposes, then the phenomenon of “organized lying” must also be implicated in the problem of “meaninglessness” – concerns that humans are losing their ability and willingness to generate meaning, and which, as we saw in the chapter on “Understanding and Politics,” preoccupied Arendt in regard to totalitarianism. As I show below, in “Truth and Politics,” the quest for meaning, for Arendt, becomes important for countering “organized lying” and for the recognition and acceptance of factual truths.

In “Truth and Politics,” Arendt highlights the meaning of “organized lying” by contrasting it with a traditional political lie. Arendt draws a few key distinctions between these two types of lying. First, the traditional political lie is concerned with “secrets” such as classified information or state secrets. “Organized lying,” on the other hand, changes facts that are publicly known – it “rewit[es] contemporary history under the eyes of those who witnessed it” (Arendt 2006, 248). By way of illustrating her notion of “organized lying,” Arendt refers to Adenauer’s public campaigns, in which he asserted as a matter of fact something that people knew was a blatant untruth, namely “that the barbarism of National Socialism had affected only a relatively small percentage of the country [Germany]” (Arendt 2006, 248). In this situation, Adenauer, from Arendt’s perspective, substitutes the factual truth about the extent of support of Hitler in Nazi Germany with a fictitious image he wished to be true. For Arendt, this strategy cannot be justified by the ends it achieves as it deliberately interferes with the texture of factual reality of the past. And what is particularly important, for Arendt, is that in this example of lying, Adenauer seeks to falsify factual information about the past which everyone in Germany witnessed with their own eyes.
Secondly, Arendt shows that traditional lies concern particulars only – individual events, separate incidents, single characteristics – and do not “attempt to change the whole context” (Arendt 2006, 248). Even though a traditional lie destroys a locus of reality, the “fabric of factuality” remains intact and the perversion of facts can be easily noticed. This is not the case with modern lies. The modern “organized” lies, Arendt suggests, “require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture – the making of another reality, as it were, into which they will fit without seam, crack, or fissure, exactly as the facts fitted into their own original context” (249). Drawing on this passage, we can elicit the second sense in which Arendt may call this modern form of lying “organized” – such lying attempts to re-organise factual and intersubjective reality by coordinating particular lies so that they emerge as a consistent and coherent picture, a full-fledged substitute for the worldly reality.

Thirdly, Arendt suggests that modern “organized lying,” as compared to a traditional lie, does not simply cover up for reality but seeks to violently annihilate it – it is “the difference between hiding and destroying” (Arendt 2006, 248). This is particularly evident in totalitarian regimes that use lying as a step towards the annihilation of that which lie is about. Arendt gives the example of the murder of Trotsky. The murder had been preceded by the Soviet regime eliminating all references to Trotsky’s participation in the Russian Revolution: “When Trotsky learned that he had never played a role in the Russian Revolution, he must have known that his death warrant had been signed” (Arendt 2006, 248). This example can help to further illuminate the previous discussion about the role of truth-telling in guaranteeing political actors “earthly immortality” through ensuring remembrance of their deeds and words and bringing about the common world that they can share with their
contemporaries, ancestors and descendants. “Organized lying” does not only undermine the possibility for such remembrance through the destruction of facts, hence taking away the promise of the earthly immortality of individuals and of humanity as a whole. In its extreme forms, “organized lying” also opens up a way for the physical annihilation of whatever or whoever does not fit in with the picture of consistency. It is not only earthly immortality but human life itself that is in danger here.

Finally, Arendt argues that the difference between traditional and modern “organized lying” is the difference between deception and “self-deception” (Arendt 2006, 249). According to Arendt, traditional political liars – “statesmen and diplomats” (248) – are well aware of their lies and, while trying to deceive their enemies, do not lie to themselves. This offers a slim hope that factual truths can be still saved from complete destruction. In the case of “organized lying,” however, politicians, or whoever becomes a liar, deceive not only the public but also themselves: they come to believe in the reality of what they themselves manufactured. What then happens, it is that a liar herself has ceased to be aware that she lies.

Arendt emphasises that this kind of self-deception that accompanies lying may be the primary factor in the success of “organized lying.” For “the self-deceived joker who proves to be in the same boat as his victims will appear vastly superior in trustworthiness to the cold-blooded liar who permits himself to enjoy his prank from without” (Arendt 2006, 249–250). Arendt thus considers lying accompanied with self-deception as more dangerous than the lies of a self-conscious liar. The danger is that the liar herself can lose her grasp of reality and, in so doing, her lies can potentially become definitive – there will be no one able to testify to truth anymore. Arendt points out that it is only “those inside the group itself” (251) who help engineer the lies in the first
place – spin doctors, public relations managers, marketing specialists, etc. – who remain aware of the factual truths. But being the only ones who can expose the web of lies, these insiders are targeted most vehemently by the organisations for which they work in their drive to preserve the fictitious images they created. Moreover, Arendt suggests that these insiders, if they wish to expose lies, are targeted both by “the deceived group and the deceivers themselves” (251), which means that the people who were lied to and came to believe these lies are also likely to turn against this small group of truth-tellers or whistle-blowers.

What further concerns Arendt is that as a result of self-deception, modern lies perpetuate themselves “almost automatically” (Arendt 2006, 251). Her point is that the further lies spread, the more believable they become and hence the more people they can attract. Finally, if a deceiver himself starts fully believing in what was a flagrant lie, then lying, Arendt says, reaches “completeness and potential finality” (250), in the sense that the moment the liar herself starts believing her own lies, there is no way in which factual truth can be restored, provided that all the records and other witnesses of a particular fact have been destroyed and eliminated. Arendt remarks that a complete elimination of a fact from the world would require “considerably more than the whims of historians,” namely “a power monopoly over the entire civilized world” (235). However, she adds that “such a power monopoly is far from being inconceivable” (235).

Moreover, Arendt seeks to refute the common conviction that self-deception can be an “excuse” for lying (2006, 253) and that those who lied because of self-deception are not to be held responsible for their lies; on the contrary, she seems to suggest that self-deception aggravates the responsibility of the liar. Arendt represents liars who
deceive themselves while deceiving others as more dangerous and disagreeable than “cold-blooded liars” who do not fall prey to their own falsifications (Arendt 2006, 248–249). In the next section, I consider a critique of Arendt’s notion of self-deception provided by F. Mechner Barnard which will allow me to connect Arendt’s concept of the self-deception that accompanies “organized lying” to thinking in the sense of an internal dialogue of the “two-in-one.” Moreover, this investigation enables me to raise the question of whether Arendt holds individuals responsible for succumbing to self-deception, that is, for gullibly accepting lies as truths, and whether her notion of self-deception presupposes personal responsibility for seeking and establishing facts.

5. Responsibility for self-deception

Here I refer to an important objection raised by Barnard (1977) in regard to Arendt’s treatment of self-deception in “Truth and Politics.” He emphasises that Arendt gives a non-traditional account of self-deception as it is viewed not as a mitigating circumstance but as an aggravating factor. He then says that he cannot agree with this view of self-deception. He explains his disagreement by means of two propositions, which I cite below in full:

First of all, although self-deception may indeed be recognized as a potentially serious source of political misjudgement, “lying to oneself,” the phrase Arendt uses for self-deception, is a rather problematic way of speaking, since it inevitably raises the question of who is relating to whom when I am lying to myself. Admittedly, we often use such figures of speech as “debating with myself,” or being “angry with myself,” or “pulling myself up.” Yet what we thus express are circumlocutions for states of indecision, conflict, unhappiness, resolution, and so
on, within ourselves. We feel torn, or uncertain, or under some illusion, but none
of these states or feelings involve wilful deceit tantamount to the deliberate
fabrication of untruths which we present to ourselves as truths. Lying, no less than
veracity, is a moral category; being the victim of an illusion, whatever else it is, is
not, and hence being deluded about oneself or about others is not a variant of
lying.

Secondly, there may be occasions when I am not fully informed, or actually ill-
formed, or plainly mistaken and, realizing this *ex post facto*, I conclude that, in
this unintended sense I have been deceiving myself…Although I may feel
profoundly contrite realizing that I upheld beliefs which I now find to have been
false, I can hardly accuse myself, or be accused by others, of having lied to
myself, or having destroyed truth, in the problematic moral sense Arendt talks
about. (Barnard 1977, 47–48)

I would like to address these two charges Barnard makes against Arendt’s concept of
self-deception. In response to the first charge and Barnard’s question about “who is
relating to whom” when Arendt speaks about “self-deception,” it is important to return
to Arendt’s conception of the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” that is, the dialogue of
thinking. Could it be the case that the phrase “lying to oneself” is connected to Arendt’s
understanding of people as potentially “two-in-one,” as potentially able to “speak to
themselves”? In an article on Arendt’s and Derrida’s treatment of the conception of
lying, Marguerite La Caze (2013, 13) answers this question positively. “I argue that
self-deception for Arendt must be something like shutting down part of the interior dia-
logue I have with myself.” La Caze continues as follows: “In self-deception, instead of
a dialogue where a view is questioned or challenged, a monologue continues to reiterate
the convenient or desired belief” (14). She then concludes that “self-deception takes some effort on our part, at least to initiate, and can be maintained only through blocking the dialogue of thought” (14).

This comment helps me to respond to Barnard’s first point in his criticism of Arendt’s conception of self-deception. The notion of self-deception becomes meaningful if we consider it within the context of Arendt’s notion of the dialogue of the “two-in-one” or the dialogue of thought. Self-deception thus may be linked to a lack of willingness or an inability to engage in this dialogue of thought which, from Arendt’s point of view, everyone is capable of and should strive to practise. Then it appears that every deception involves some self-deception and that we are always to a certain extent complicit in the fact that we have been deceived since we failed to take responsibility for subjecting that which was presented to us as truth to the dialogue of thinking.

This brings us to the Barnard’s second point. Barnard proposes that people are merely victims of self-deception – according to him, “they can hardly accuse [themselves], or be accused by others, of having lied to [themselves]” (1977, 48). Here Barnard sees himself as disagreeing with Arendt who, in his opinion, wrongly assumes that people are complicit in their own self-deception and, since they failed to resist to it, can be held accountable for it.

There is no easy answer to this criticism as it opens up an issue which preoccupies Arendt – the question of personal responsibility. In her essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” which I consider in the next chapter, Arendt’s question is whether wrongdoers can be held responsible if they committed their evil deeds while being deceived by ideological propaganda or terror, or by the sheer number of people who did
the same thing as they did. Should people be held accountable if they failed to distinguish the good from the evil – that is, in the historical context of Nazi totalitarianism, if they failed to see that the virtues of loyalty and obedience to a criminal political order and its laws made them support mass murder on a scale unprecedented in human history? In the context of this discussion of “Truth and Politics,” the question can be formulated in a slightly different way – is there a sense in which Arendt holds individuals responsible for succumbing to self-deception both in totalitarian and non-totalitarian countries, that is, for gullibly accepting lies as truths?

One way to start exploring this question is to consider Arendt’s insight that despite attempts at “organized lying” to destroy the factual reality and to deceive, people, if they are attentive enough, can still pinpoint what is going on. This is how she explains it: “the fabric of reality” has a fluid character – it constantly changes and its configuration at any particular moment cannot be fully predicted. This is due to the very fact of human freedom as manifested in the human ability to start new beginnings. Here we can again remind ourselves of Arendt’s concept of the “web of human relationships” (Arendt 1998, 184) which she develops in The Human Condition: a political actor does not act in a vacuum but in the midst of the “web of human relationships” into which she inserts herself by launching her new initiatives. Every action thus gives rise to a chain of new actions and a new and unpredictable set of relationships. This is why in “Truth and Politics,” Arendt argues that those who coordinate “organized lying” need to constantly keep up with this speed of changes in “the web of human relationships,” that is, in the human world. If “gigantic interest organizations” (Arendt 2006, 250) or governments want to maintain “organized lying,” they must constantly substitute their
false “images” of reality with new ones – a race which the deceivers are most likely to lose:

Their trouble is that they must constantly change the falsehoods they offer as a substitute for the real story; changing circumstances require the substitution of one history book for another, the replacement of pages in the encyclopedias and reference books, the disappearance of certain names in favor of others unknown or little known before. (Arendt 2006, 252)

As I read Arendt here, she hopes that the need for constant change in lies – a constant substitution of lies with new lies, images with new images, deceiving stories with new stories – and the perpetual movement that arises from it could at least alert people that they are subject to “organized lying”: “this continuing instability…is itself an indication, and powerful one, of the lying character of all public utterances concerning the factual world” (Arendt 2006, 252). Whether this indication is recognised or not depends on whether political actors are willing to be attentive to inconsistencies, contradictions and omissions that appear in what is claimed to be factual reality and if they are committed to double-checking, searching for and establishing the facts for themselves.

La Caze (2013) arrives at a similar conclusion in her comparison of Arendt’s and Derrida’s approaches to lying. She explores Derrida’s conception of “counter-truth,” that is, a kind of lying that “does not try to find the truth and aims at an effect of truth to justify an opinion or prejudice” (26). Drawing on Derrida and the examples he provides, La Caze clarifies that “counter-truth” is an outcome of “a negligent or motivated failure to search for the truth” (La Caze 2013, 9). La Caze notices that
“Arendt does not explore this idea of counter-truth in detail, perhaps because she would believe it is obvious that we must carefully seek out the truth before expressing ourselves, an aspect of all thinking for her” (9). What La Caze proposes here is that Arendt expects, even though she never states it explicitly, that humans are committed to actively searching for truths, validating their actuality and remaining alert to lies. For Arendt, as La Caze emphasises, this commitment to the search for truths is integral to human engagement in “all thinking.”

I now return to Barnard’s (1977, 47) charge against Arendt’s conception of “self-deception” – that is, that people who sincerely believe in the fabricated images provided to them or manufactured by themselves are victims of self-deception and, therefore, should not be held accountable for having been deceived or for any actions that may have followed from it. Based on the preliminary analysis above, it appears that, for Arendt, someone who lived in self-delusion cannot refer to it as a mitigating excuse as, to certain extent, she is responsible for a failure to engage in the quest to actively search for “counter-truth” and remain alert to lies by engaging in the dialogue of the two-in-one.

However, Arendt recognises that due to the impact of “organized lying,” the willingness to search for facts and to distinguish facts from lies is increasingly missing from the contemporary political realm. She calls this phenomenon “cynicism” and sees it as one of the most serious implications of “organized lying” – something which cannot be easily redeemed: “It has frequently been noticed that the surest long-term result of brainwashing is a peculiar kind of cynicism – an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established” (Arendt 2006, 252). Arendt explains that by making people cynical about truth, “organized lying”
destroys “the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end” (252–253). The “sense” that Arendt refers to here is, as I read it, “common sense” – the sense which “fits” humans into the common world. This sense is impaired by “organized lying”: having got used to lies masquerading as facts and vice versa, individuals become less and less willing to trust their sense of reality and less capable of distinguishing reality from fiction. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the context of Arendt’s discussion of the “lying order of consistency,” once common sense is impaired, humans become increasingly disoriented in the world, unable to share the world with others and incapable of generating meaning. Cynicism, as it arises from “organized lying,” is also potentially conducive to conditions of meaninglessness and a loss of the desire and capacity to share the world with others.

If we take into account Arendt’s remarks on cynicism, it appears that if a community wants to resist “organized lying,” an individual commitment to search for facts and to validate and establish them is not sufficient. For factual truths cannot be rescued from the assault of “organized lying” unless people cease seeking refuge in cynicism, that is, thinking and conducting themselves as though there can be no truth at all and unless they trust in the possibility of truth in principle.

James Phillips (2013), when reflecting on Arendt’s understanding of “organized lying” and cynicism, proposes that facts are safe from systematic distortion only in a community in which there is an agreement about the status of facts: “Where there is no agreement that the facts are irreducible to agreement, the self-evidence of the facts begins to totter” (108). This agreement, he clarifies, is “an agreement not to substitute conventions, covenants, and the like for the individual facts themselves” (108). What
Phillips is getting at here is that rescuing facts from the dangers of “organized lying” and cynicism demands more than the efforts of an individual in isolation – what is required to resist “organized lying” is that people are involved in developing a shared understanding of where to draw a line between that which is immutable (the basic content of facts) and that which can be subjected to interpretation. To rescue facts from “organized lying” needs the involvement of a plurality of actors and speakers and their willingness to agree that once facts are recognised and validated, their basic content – for example, that it was Germany that invaded Belgium on the night of August 3, 1914, not the other way around – should be regarded as undeniable. Once the content of a fact is respected, individuals can and will provide different evaluations of this fact – of its significance, meaning, reasons and impacts. But as Arendt puts it, these diverse interpretations of the past do not have “the right to touch the factual matter itself” (Arendt 2006, 234).

For Arendt, lying accompanied by self-deception is potentially more dangerous than traditional lying because it has more profound political consequences. The traditional liar preserves an awareness that she is lying: while she tries to deceive others, she still herself knows the distinction between what is truth and what is falsehood. This means that truth has not been completely erased from the world and thus can be potentially restored. The self-deceiving liar, on the other hand, is no longer conscious of her lying. The fact that she believes so ardently the falsehoods that she presents makes her appear ever more trustworthy and persuasive to others, which in turn persuades the liar to believe even more strongly in her self-deception and lends her lies even more credibility. Lying coupled with self-deception thus perpetuates itself – the more people believe a lie, the more persuasive it becomes, tempting ever more
people to start believing it and in turn deceiving themselves. As a result, lying can reach a massive scale in terms of both the numbers of people who fall prey to lying and self-deception and the mass of facts that are distorted in the process. Lying accompanied by self-deception thus creates a danger that the whole fabric of reality will be supplanted by a make-believe world that has no firm foundations and is not contained by any boundaries which can only be provided by factual truths. As I will show below, under these conditions, no genuine political action in the sense of launching a new beginning is possible, and there is a threat that action will turn into destruction, violence or a meaningless shifting around of the pieces of lies to maintain a fictional world that had been created.

Self-deception thus allows for a false “image” created by lying to assume its “completeness” so that there will be no one in the world who could potentially testify to this truth. This in turn gives rise to a set of questions: if everyone, including the liar, comes to genuinely believe in what was said as true, why could not this, indeed, become true in an ontological sense, that is, become real? Given that I have been arguing so far that Arendt rebuts the notion of a single possible interpretation of reality, why could not people be capable of creating their own fully fledged pictures or versions of reality and claiming them to be real? Does not she argue herself that human beings constantly interpret the world from different perspectives in order to endow it with their own meaning, and that reality itself depends on the presence of a plurality of perspectives?

To explore these questions I suggest turning again to the distinction between opinions and facts and enquire into what kind of relationships Arendt perceives between
them. This in turn allows me to further elaborate on the relationships between the ideas of truth, doxa and meaning.

6. Relationships between truths of doxai and truths of facts

As I argued earlier, for Arendt, opinions and facts are not antagonistic but related. Now I would like to explore what kinds of relationships exist between them. I would like to argue that they have a two-way mutual relationship. Arendt makes it clear that “facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth…factual truth informs political thought” (Arendt 2006, 234). In other words, facts, for Arendt, are essential in the process of formulating opinions, in the sense of doxai. Factual truths ground this process and establish its limits. For the basic content of facts is not subject to the perspectivist approach that representative thinking takes and should remain unchanged regardless of diverse standpoints that an individual’s imagination “visits” when practising “enlarged mentality.” What is at stake in the “respecting” of facts is the preservation of the stability of the common world, without which no interpretative activity would make sense at all. As Arendt famously says of factual truths – “they are the ground on which we stand” (Arendt 2006, 259).

The recognition and acceptance of facts as given is, therefore, essential for the formation of a truthful doxa, for generating the meaning of how the world “appears” to me. The plurality of meanings would not appear unless they all share a common framework of reference – the world. Incidentally, it also shows that an advancement of “organized lying” poses a danger not only for the integrity of facts but also the integrity of meaning in so far as the quest for meaning involves, and necessarily so, the
recognition and acceptance of factual truths. Arendt clearly states that “organized lying” consists of “mass manipulation of fact and opinion” (Arendt 2006, 247, emphasis added).

It is my understanding that the recognition of the “stubbornness” and “indestructibility” (Arendt 2006, 234) of the basic content of facts does not contradict the plurality of meanings that individuals may attribute to these facts and to the plurality of doxai that can be articulated in regard to these facts. This can be further demonstrated by an anecdote that Arendt uses in the essay. She tells the story of Clemenceau, who was once asked what he thinks future historians will think in terms of who bears the “guilt” for the outbreak of World War I. Clemenceau answers as follows: “This I don’t know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany” (Arendt 2006, 234). Arendt is interested in this story because it helps her to demonstrate that neither time nor a variation in perspective or historical context will change the content of the fact of Germany’s invasion of Belgium. Arendt adds that “we are concerned here with brutally elementary data” (234), that is, data which will and should remain the same – which army invaded which country – regardless of the perspective from which the event of World War I is regarded. Yet, according to the anecdote, Clemenceau suggests that he does not know what kind of interpretation these data will acquire in the future and what kind of meanings future historians will attribute to this event.

On the other hand, I would like to show that the recognition and preservation of facts, for Arendt, also stands in need of individuals practising thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning. Arendt’s reference to “brutally elementary facts” does not mean that, for her, as some authors argue, facts are ontologically pre-given as though we can
simply apprehend and recount them in a matter-of-course way. This is the position of Nelson (1978, 282), for example, who states that in “Truth and Politics,” Arendt’s account of factual truths borders on “a brutal empiricism.” Nelson writes that, for Arendt, “the facts are just ‘there,’ comprising the raw historical record in their brute existence, unleavened in any fundamental way by perspective or theory” (282). He also assumes that Arendt uses the term “factual reality” in the sense of an “objective reality” that exists independently of humans and their engagement in the process of interpretation of reality.

I am indebted to Birmingham for the insight that Arendt’s conception of facts and factuality cannot be reduced to a kind of empiricist or positivist view. Birmingham (2012, 73) starts by suggesting that it is important to “ask…how Arendt understands ‘the givenness of factual truth’” (2012, 73). She remarks that “[o]n the face of it, she seems here to be very close to a positivist conception of factual truth, as if it were nothing more than something to be grasped in a kind of presence-of-hand by the witness who testifies to it” (73). Yet, Birmingham proposes that “Arendt is far from positing some sort of notion of objective reality upon which she grounds her understanding of factual truth” (74). Birmingham proceeds to unpack this claim with a reference to Arendt’s understanding of history and her debt to Walter Benjamin’s essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

As will be shown later in the chapter, in order to illuminate how Arendt sees the task of the truth-teller, Birmingham refers to the figure of “the historian as the chronicler” described by Benjamin (Birmingham 2012, 78). For Benjamin, as Birmingham highlights, facts are not “self-evident” – they need to be “wrested from history” and “a wrestling…is always incomplete and ongoing” (77). The task of the
chronicler, like Arendt’s truth-teller, is to rescue as many facts as possible from oblivion by recognising and testifying to them. The task of establishing factual truths thus involves ongoing recitation of different fragments of history – collecting and telling stories that meaningfully reveal all perspectives and sides of historical events.

Birmingham’s interpretation of Arendt’s understanding of facts is very useful for the analysis of the essay “Truth and Politics.” In this essay, we can also see that Arendt’s attitude to reality and facts is different from a positivist or empiricist one. Arendt thus reinforces that “factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion” (Arendt 2006, 239). What Arendt is getting at here is that even though the basic content of facts should not be affected by our interpretation of facts, facts do not speak for themselves – they require a process of recognition which involves the generation of their meaning. Indeed, “organized lying” proves to us that people can avoid seeing the publicly known facts. So how do we tell and recognise factual truths?

First, I would like to show that even though Arendt is adamant that the basic content of facts cannot be established through persuasion, as happens with doxai, she still recognises the importance of keeping facts in a space of public dialogue, without, however, subjecting facts to validation through debates. As she puts it, a fact is “established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about” (Arendt 2006, 235, emphasis added). Arendt further indicates that facts acquire “political implications only by being put in an interpretative context” (245). The interpretation of reality, in turn, as I discuss throughout this thesis, happens through the generation of meaning and this process is linked to the process of articulating my opinion, my perspective on the world as it appears to me in relation to the perspectives of others.
Zerilli (2012) persuasively argues that there is a difference between knowing factual truth and acknowledging it, and that the latter depends on whether this factual truth became contextualised through debates in which a plurality of perspectives or interpretations of this truth is being articulated. She points out “the hollowness of truth in the absence of a context of plural opinions and their exchange, for it is only in such a context that truth, when it is revealed, can reveal something to us citizens, and further that we as citizens can reveal other aspects of the common world with the knowledge or, better, acknowledgement of that truth” (Zerilli 2012, 74). I further build on Zerilli’s insight. In so far as opinions require representative thinking and the generation of meaning, it can be shown that factual truths, and the common world that relies on them, stand and fall depending on whether individuals are truthful in their quest for meaning: whether they are willing to practise thinking in the sense of formulating their doxai, thinking for oneself (selbstdenken), and thinking as the “enlarged mentality” that opens up a way for the faculty of judgment. Thinking as the quest for meaning thus can be seen as a vehicle of relationships between the “truths of facts” and the “truths of doxai”: doxai cannot be articulated in their truthfulness unless thinking recognises the givenness of facts, while facts themselves cannot be preserved without being endowed with meaning and contextualised through debates – something which also requires a commitment to thinking.

As follows from the reading of “Truth and Politics” that I presented so far, the worldly reality “appears” to humans only if individuals can keep in play both factual truths and truths of doxai, both a commitment to upholding and recognising facts and a willingness to exercise free representative thinking, without losing sight of the differences between them. Once the relationship of distinction between facts and doxai
is lost, and once one of the elements takes primacy, humans lose their ability to access an appearing worldly reality and to see and understand the world as “common.”

Now we are in a better position to understand why Arendt argues that a construction of an “image” of reality through “organized lying” can never substitute for reality itself even if everyone believes in its reality and why creative lies about the past can never become truth even if everyone accepts it as truth. For Arendt, reality is a more complex phenomenon than something which is entirely constructed through interactions between humans. Reality depends on a twofold commitment on the part of humans to recognise that which is “given” to them and cannot be changed at will, and to interpret its significance.

Moreover, as I argued at the beginning of the chapter, Arendt believes that, for humans, the world and their own existence can acquire reality only when the world becomes a shared public space for them – a space that they share “not only with those who live with [them], but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after [them]” (Arendt 1998, 55). What this means, I submit, is that the ability to accept and face up to reality depends not only on whether humans come together in a public space with their immediate contemporaries to discuss their doxai in relation to one another but also on whether they can see the world as common with their ancestors and previous generations. This requires of humans the ability to recognise, accept and respect facts in their discourse.

As Arendt points out, “all factual truth, of course, concerns the past” (Arendt 2006, 254), that is, all facts are historical facts. By this she means that in so far as the realm of human affairs is concerned, the future is always open to multiple possibilities
and contingencies and it is only the past that is closed to transformations, and thus it is the past that represents the realm of accomplished facts. The notion of fact is therefore only valid when used with reference to a completed human act in the past. Facts about human affairs can be contemporary in the sense that they can refer to events that have happened recently. However, for Arendt, facts cannot refer to the future since there is always a possibility for a radical new beginning that individuals can initiate and see through together, thus interrupting the chain of happenings and changing the course of events. For Arendt, no matter how certain we may be that something will happen in the political realm, we cannot discard the element of unpredictability which corresponds to the fact that the reason politics can exist is that it provides humans with a freedom that they can experience only when they act politically, that is, initiate new beginnings.

To return to “Truth and Politics,” my point here is that the continuity of the public space as a common world, which in turn allows for the worldly reality to appear to humans, stands in need of human respect for historical truths. And, yet, as I mentioned earlier on, these truths cannot be taken as matter-of-course; they require the process of recognition and understanding. Hence again the reality of the world relies on individuals being able to maintain the relationships of distinction between historical truths and their interpretations.

We can see now why Arendt is so concerned about the danger of the line between opinions (doxaï) and facts being blurred, as happens when “organized lying” seeks to destabilise factual truths by pretending that they are mere opinions. Yet, Arendt understands that there is no easy solution by which we can simply separate facts and opinions and keep them away from each other: the two are closely interrelated and stand in need of each other, and yet, we need to constantly remind ourselves about their
differences – something which I described above in terms of relationships of distinction. Birmingham (2007) suggests we think about the line between opinions and facts in terms of the difference between “interpretation” and “manipulation.” Her point is that facts can and should be open to “interpretations” but not become subjected to “manipulation.” As she puts it:

…for Arendt each generation has the right to its interpretation of facts; each generation must engage in the hermeneutical task of establishing the meaning of the facts and in this way factual truth will for each generation take on a new hue and tone. “Manipulation,” on the other hand, is literally a “handling” of the matter itself. In other words, manipulation is not concerned with the meaning of factual truth (hermeneutics), but actively transforms the matter into something else entirely. (Birmingham 2007, 34, emphasis in the original)

The question that arises, then, is how we can distinguish what can be subjected to “interpretation” and when does “interpretation” become “manipulation.” The difference lies, as I see it, in whether we deal with the reality of the past or with the future.

To show this, I suggest we start with Arendt’s claim that a liar, unlike a truth-teller, is an actor by her nature. This gives rise to a curious and provocative perspective on lying: Arendt seems to declare that lying, including manipulation of facts, can be seen as a mode of action, and action, as we know, is praised by Arendt as one of the three essential parts of the *vita activa*, together with work and labour. Does this mean that Arendt condones lying in politics?

Arendt clarifies that the affinity between lying and acting arises from the fact that they both have their roots in the human faculty of imagination. As Arendt puts it, a liar
“takes advantage of the undeniable affinity of our capacity for action, for changing reality, with this mysterious faculty of ours that enables us to say, ‘The sun is shining,’ when it is raining cats and dogs” (Arendt 2006, 246, emphasis in the original). The advantage of a liar as compared to a truth-teller is thus that a liar naturally blends into the political realm in which political actors constantly launch new initiatives, thus bringing to the world that which never existed before: “he [the liar] always is, so to speak, already in the midst of it” (Arendt 2006, 246). On the contrary, Arendt remarks that “the mere telling of facts…leads to no action whatever; it even tends, under normal circumstances, toward the acceptance of things as they are” (246). What Arendt is getting at here is that the act of truth-telling does not seek to change the world and create something new but instead recognises and asserts that which is given and cannot be changed. A truth-teller, unlike an actor, is concerned about “what is” or “what was” rather than with what could be and how the world could be changed (246). A truth-teller thus finds herself in a position of tension with the political realm, which is in constant flux and transformation.

Yet, Arendt clarifies that it is only “under normal circumstances” that a truth-teller cannot be considered as an actor. Under extraordinary circumstances, when “a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle, and not only with respect to particulars” (Arendt 2006, 247), the truth-teller becomes an actor. As Arendt puts it, “where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act” (247). The truth-teller can be said to act in this situation because she now too becomes an agent of change and her acting consists in bringing down the systematic lying that came to substitute for the reality of the world.
Arendt’s reflections on the affinity between lying and politics have been widely discussed in the literature. Some scholars take these reflections as evidence that Arendt is permissive of lying in politics (Beiner 2008; Nelson 1978). However, I believe that Arendt points out the affinity between action and lying not in order to glorify lying but to show the limits of action that acquires dangerous implications the moment it starts acting on the past.

For Arendt, the limits of action are established by factual truths – truths of the past, historical truths – something which action should not attempt to “change at will” (Arendt 2006, 259). When action encroaches upon the domain of the past, it turns into manipulation: “not the past – and all factual truth, of course, concerns the past – or the present, in so far as it is the outcome of the past, but the future is open to action” (254). A political liar who takes advantage of the human ability to act commits a profound mistake – she acts with relation to the past as though it is the future, which is always open to new beginnings and potentialities. When lying assumes the form of “organized lying,” as it does in the contemporary political realm, we are faced with an organised attempt to act into the past and re-write history. Hence we are faced with the realistic possibility that the whole fabric of the past and present will lose its stability and firmness:

If the past and present are treated as parts of the future – that is, changed back into their former state of potentiality – the political realm is deprived not only of its main stabilizing force but of the starting point from which to change, to begin something new. What then begins is the constant shifting and shuffling in utter sterility which are characteristic of many new nations that had the bad luck to be born in an age of propaganda. (Arendt 2006, 254)
As seen in the passage quoted above, political action when it stops respecting the limits of factual reality destroys its own conditions of possibility. It becomes sterile, unable to produce any new beginning – it wastes its energy on keeping the fictitious picture of the past intact and cannot find solid ground from which to launch something new. What then follows from the above passage is that any action in order to start a new beginning needs a stable foothold in that which is given, that is, in the acceptance of facts of the past and present as they are.

This can help us to further clarify the meaning of Arendt’s metaphor of factual truths as “the ground on which we stand” (Arendt 2006, 259). Without this anchor in the acceptance of the past, humans cannot actualise their capacities for a new beginning. This is just another illustration of Birmingham’s (2006) insight that, for Arendt, the principle of the new beginning (initium) and the principle of givenness go hand in hand. In the context of the “Truth and Politics” essay, it is the “givenness” of factual truths that Arendt is concerned with – the givenness of the world itself, which has been shaped by the actions of our ancestors and our contemporaries and given to humans as such. Only by unconditionally accepting this given factuality of the world can a political actor in turn start a new beginning and bring about changes in the world without undermining its (relative) stability and damaging the fabric of reality. Moreover, in a world in which humans are incapable of starting a new beginning and are concerned only with preserving the consistency of their own web of lies about the past and the present, the quest for meaning is not likely to proceed. As we saw in the previous chapter, the quest for meaning responds to the need to reconcile oneself to the reality of the past and present as it arises out of the outcomes of human action in concert. This reality is often painful and requires facing up to it and endowing it with
meaning. In a world in which the spirit of “organized lying” dominates, the need to reconcile oneself to reality is blocked as the reality of the past is freely shaped at will, according to one’s interests, or reduced to “mere opinion,” which again can vary as one wishes. In such a world, there can be no place for truth that humans can constitute by engaging in thinking as the quest for meaning.

Usually Arendt scholars who discuss “Truth and Politics” focus on how the essay considers the relationship between factual truths and the political realm. However, as I attempted to show above, despite this prevalent approach in the literature, there is a way of reading “Truth and Politics” that still allows room for another sense of truth – truth of doxai, truth of that which is disclosed to me in the course of “representative thinking” and the practice of “enlarged mentality.” Moreover, as I tried to demonstrate in this section, truths of doxai and factual truths are not antagonistic or separate from each other. I suggested that if there were a way of describing the relationships between truths of doxai and truths of facts, it be called the relationship of distinction – a relationship that keeps in play both truths of doxai and factual truths, without losing sight of their differences. The preservation of this relationship, as I showed, is essential for the worldly reality to become apparent to humans and the continuity of the common world to be preserved.

Yet, I have not yet considered the role of those who pronounce the truths of facts in the first place – “witnesses.” In the next section, I consider the role of “witnesses” as well as other agents whom Arendt assigns a role in preserving factual truths in the human world. I also discuss how thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning is involved in the task of upholding and preserving facts.
7. Who is the truth-teller?

Arendt emphasises that, apart from other factors, the preservation of facts depends first and foremost on the testimony of witnesses (Arendt 2006, 239), on their desire to say what they deem to be true and to be truthful in their accounts. Arendt is certain that even under the conditions of “organized lying” there are people left who still do know factual truths even though their numbers grow ever fewer and they find themselves in more and more precarious positions. Organisations and governments that embark on “organized lying” feel more threatened, and rightly so, not by their explicit enemies but by those who can expose their lies. This is why Arendt talks about the importance of a free press and of its “protect[ion] against government power and social pressure” (Arendt 2006, 257). The role of the journalist, as Arendt sees it, is to collect and supply “the daily information” (257). By journalist, Arendt seems to mean a news reporter who gathers and transmits information on current events rather than an investigative journalist. Arendt calls the role of journalists “political” since, as she sees it, a flow of reliable “information” (257) delivered by journalists is essential for our ability to recognise factual truths and hence respect the limits of that which political action can and cannot change. Without a supply of facts ensured by a free press, Arendt says, “no action and no decision are, or should be, involved” (257).

However, in her discussion of the role of journalists in the preservation of facts, Arendt suggests that “the telling of factual truth involves much more than the daily information supplied by journalists” (Arendt 2006, 257). To explain her point Arendt refers to the figure of the historian. Arendt suggests that the input of a historian into truth-telling is more than merely recording facts as journalists do. The role of the historian consists in endowing facts with meaning. For reality is more than a mere sum
Who says what is – λέγει τὰ ἑόντα – always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning” (257). In this passage we can find further confirmation of the fact that Arendt does not base her understanding of facts in a kind of empiricist/positivist conception of reality. Facts, even if they exist in the form of raw historical records, can gain any significance for humans and appear as real only if they become meaningful. Therefore, a truth-teller who gives an account of that which is does not merely register and recount her observations, experiences and sensory data. The registration of this information is surely important as the first step towards recognising facts, and, as we saw above, Arendt attributes to the journalist the role of recorder of facts.

However, for Arendt, truth-telling involves more than dutifully recording facts. As I mentioned above, truth-tellers not only record facts but also endow them with meaning, and this becomes possible through telling a story. Here is a familiar refrain that we already saw in the Lessing essay: storytelling helps one’s readers and listeners to achieve “a catharsis, a cleansing or purging of all emotions that could prevent men from acting” (Arendt 2006, 257). Storytelling presents facts in a way that allows humans to relate to facts, put them in perspective and face up to that which happened. This leads towards accepting that which is given and cannot be changed, and opens a way for a new beginning, that is, for political action.

In the previous chapter about “Understanding and Politics,” we saw how Arendt reflects on “the task of the historian,” which she associates with illuminating the newness of events and enabling the past to appear to humans as meaningful and significant. In “Understanding and Politics” Arendt views storytelling as a practice that
allows the historian to endow the past with meaning and thereby ensure the remembrance of human acts and words. In “Truth and Politics” Arendt also associates the political role of the historian with the generation of meaning, but contextualises it in different terms, as follows: “The political function of the storyteller – historian or novelist – is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment” (Arendt 2006, 258). Here we can see that Arendt connects the experience of telling a story to the faculty of judging. Kateb (2010) suggests that there are many senses of “judging” in Arendt’s writings, with the term “judging” often indistinguishable from “thinking.” In “Truth and Politics,” the most relevant idea of “judgment” among those identified by Kateb is “judging as impartiality, whether in the form of appreciating the skills of one’s adversaries and the pathos of their struggle, or in the form of one’s ascent above the fray in order to look at both sides fairly” (Kateb 2010, 36). As I see it, for Arendt, being “impartial” does not necessarily mean to be able to judge. Rather, “impartiality” in Arendt’s sense, which in turn arises from truth-telling, creates the condition of possibility for judgment, that is, for distinguishing “right from wrong, beautiful from ugly,” as Arendt puts it in The Life of the Mind (Arendt 1978, 193).

In “Truth and Politics,” Arendt refers to Herodotus as an example of the kind of “impartiality” she has in mind. She suggests that Herodotus was influenced by “Homeric impartiality”: “Homeric impartiality echoes throughout Greek history, and it inspired the first great teller of factual truth, who became the father of history: Herodotus tells us in the very first sentences of his stories that he set out to prevent ‘the great and wondrous deeds of the Greeks and the barbarians from losing their due meed of glory’” (Arendt 2006, 258, emphasis in the original). “Homeric impartiality” here
corresponds to the ability to tell a story in a way that illuminates equally well all perspectives and sides of an event, renders facts about that what happened, accords a role to all participants and presents all experiences as significant.

Birmingham argues that Arendt’s description of the figure of the historian in “Truth and Politics” and her reference to Herodotus are inspired by Walter Benjamin and his representation of the historian as a “chronicler” (2012, 77). Birmingham explains that, for Benjamin, “the chronicler is the truth-teller” and that he finds it important to “make[e] a distinction between the one who explains history (the historian proper) and the one who narrates it (the chronicler)” (77–78). The role of the “chronicler” is to “simply narrate what happened and what did not happen” (78).

What is required from “chroniclers,” however, is to narrate their stories in a particular way so that they “testify to the events of history – its failures as well as its possibilities, its victors and its vanquished” (Birmingham 2012, 78). What this insight of Birmingham adds to our investigation is that a historian as Arendt represents her in “Truth and Politics” does not do the interpretative work of the past herself but offers to others a story so that a plurality of interpretations and meanings of this story becomes possible.

It is important, therefore, not to mistake the “impartiality” of a historian who pays equal tribute to all participants in an event for a detached objectivity that views the realm of human affairs from a standpoint somewhere above the political realm. To clarify Arendt’s understanding of “impartiality,” I find helpful the term suggested by Disch (1993) – “situated impartiality,” by which she means that a storyteller occupies a “critical vantage point, not from outside but from within a plurality of contesting standpoints” (666). She specifies that “situated impartiality” is “neither objective and
disinterested nor explicitly identified with a single particularistic interest” (666). By choosing this standpoint, a storyteller can show her listeners or readers how the same event looks from different sides without, however, imposing on the audience any equivocal interpretation of it (666). As Disch explains it, a good storyteller, for Arendt, is one who creates for her readers and listeners “the ‘intoxicating’ experience of seeing from multiple perspectives” and yet who “leaves them with the responsibility to undertake the critical task of interpretation for themselves” (Disch 1993, 687).

I now apply Disch’s notion of “situated impartiality” to Arendt’s reflections on truth-telling in “Truth and Politics.” A historian’s truth-telling allows us to see the world from the point of “situated impartiality.” It encourages the listeners and readers of a story to constitute their own meanings of phenomena at stake and to engage in the process of forming their own doxai in regard to phenomena. Truth-telling thus understood opens a way for judging in the sense of the ability of individuals “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly,” as Arendt formulates it in The Life of the Mind (Arendt 1978, 193). The political task of the historian as truth-teller, storyteller and, possibly, judge is to fill in the world with stories told from an “impartial standpoint.” Through these stories, the world can be seen from multiple perspectives and, as we know, for Arendt, it is only in the presence of a diversity of outlooks that the worldly reality becomes apparent to humans and the world itself emerges as a public space – a space in which political actors can in turn engage in “representative thinking,” the formulation of doxai, judging, and speech and action in concert.

Arendt finishes “Truth and Politics” by reinforcing that truth has primary political significance. Truth sets “limits” for the political realm and it is only in this realm that humans can experience “the joy and the gratification that arise out of being in company
with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal identity and beginning something entirely new” (Arendt 2006, 259). Without truth neither of these political experiences is possible since truths are the “borders” of the political realm. And as Arendt puts it, “it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises” (259). In other words, we can again see here Birmingham’s insight about the twofold character of the event of natality at work: the principle of givenness goes hand in hand with the principle of *initium*. It is only by accepting and being grateful for that which is given, historical factual truths, that humans can start a new beginning in the world.

This brings us back to the questions with which Arendt begins the essay – whether it is legitimate to always tell the truth about political phenomena and why “image” construction and “organized lying” pose a danger to the human world. In light of the investigation in this chapter, it appears that, for Arendt, truth-telling is one of the essential conditions of the possibility for the world to appear to humans as real, meaningful and common, and it is this appearance of the world that is put at risk under the conditions of “organized lying.” The final phrase of the essay exposes the utmost political significance of truth and provides a metaphorical answer to the question of the relationship between politics and truth: “Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us” (Arendt 2006, 259).
Chapter Six. Personal responsibility for judging for oneself

The essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” was first delivered as a lecture in 1964 at a number of American universities and as a radio address broadcast by both BBC Radio in England and Pacifica Radio in America (Young-Bruehl, 1982, 395). That same year it was published in the BBC magazine *The Listener*. In the essay Arendt reflects on the reasons and implications of the controversy around her book on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published in 1963. Arendt uses this controversy and its most controversial point – her thesis of the “banality of evil” – as an entry point into exploring the relationship between thinking, judgment and personal responsibility in such boundary situations as totalitarian dictatorship, a system that places systemic pressure on individuals to do evil. This essay can be conceived as part of Arendt’s sustained enquiry into how to approach the events of the Nazi past and the people who, to different extents, were involved in it.

Yet, given the political situation in the early 1960s – which included the rising tensions of the Cold War and an escalation of the involvement of the United States in Vietnam – some parts of the essay sounds as if Arendt not only addresses the issues of the Nazi past but also has in mind the vital political issues of the 1960s.

I begin this chapter’s analysis by examining Arendt’s idea of the “banality of evil,” the most controversial aspect of Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial. I argue that the way Arendt connects Eichmann’s evil to his unwillingness to think reinforces for us that, for her, the engagement of an individual with thinking in the sense of a quest
for meaning is not something to be taken for granted. This raises the question of what distinguishes those who are willing to think and those who avoid doing so. I then consider how in her essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt argues that if we want to apprehend the nature of crimes and wrongdoings committed under the Nazi regime and the nature of responsibility for these crimes we have to be willing to engage in judgment. On the other hand, Arendt proposes that in order to hold people personally accountable for their support of the regime we need to presuppose that they have the willingness to judge for themselves without reliance on public opinion or customary rules. Such judgment proved rare in the wake of the advent of totalitarianism. In the essay, Arendt reflects on how we can explain the “breakdown” of “personal judgment” (Arendt 2003a, 24) of public figures and intellectuals that she observed in Germany in 1933, the year when Hitler came to power and many of these people started to go along with the regime. In the essay, Arendt introduces the idea of personal responsibility on two planes: that of the actor living under totalitarian dictatorship – the system that encourages and even requires people to carry out evil deeds – and that of those who are positioned as “spectators,” who come afterwards and who, in relation to her report on the Eichmann trial and its associated controversy, either evade responsibility for judgment or assume this responsibility.

One of Arendt’s key questions in the essay is, how was it possible in the situation of totalitarian dictatorship to judge for oneself and not succumb to the pressure to collaborate with the Nazis when everyone else was collaborating? Arendt answers this question by considering the experiences of those few who did not collaborate and were able to take personal responsibility for judging for themselves and without reliance on customary moral rules. Arendt entertains the possibility that what distinguished those
who were able to judge for themselves under totalitarian dictatorship was their commitment to “liv[ing] together explicitly with themselves” (Arendt 2003a, 45), which in turn arises from the practice of the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” that is, the dialogue of thought. Engagement in the dialogue of thought becomes, for Arendt, a ground for assuming personal responsibility and exercising judgment for oneself in a boundary situation such as that of totalitarian dictatorship.

Before I proceed with the analysis of the essay, it is worth referring to the Kantian distinction between reflective and determinant judgments that Arendt invokes in her lecture “Imagination,” included in Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (Arendt 1992). Arendt emphasises that in The Critique of Judgment, Kant makes a distinction between reflective and determinant judgments: “Determinant judgments subsume the particular under a general rule; reflective judgments, on the contrary, ‘derive’ the rule from the particular” (Arendt 1992, 83). She further explains, using Kant’s words, that a determinant judgment “subsumes” particular phenomena under a general concept while a reflective judgment gives primacy to the particular and seeks “to bring [the particular] to a concept” (83), that is, recognise in the particular that which can have universal validity. In terms of this distinction, it is the possibility of reflective judgments under the conditions of totalitarian domination that preoccupies her in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship.” As we will see in this chapter, for Arendt, it is essential to demonstrate that humans are capable of reflective judgments, for if this is the case, then we can expect that individuals maintain the ability to judge for themselves even under the catastrophic and unprecedented conditions imposed by totalitarianism whereby individuals morally compromise themselves if they judge by
I. Reflecting on the Eichmann controversy: judgment and responsibility

Arendt starts the “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” essay by commenting on the controversy over her report on the Eichmann trial, which, she says, inspired her to write this essay. While in “Truth and Politics” Arendt focuses on the questions of truth and truth-telling that emerged from that controversy, in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” she emphasises how this controversy “raised all kinds of strictly moral issues, many of which had never occurred to [her], whereas others had been mentioned by [her] only in passing” (Arendt 2003a, 17). What she means by “moral issues” can be seen from the following clarification: “I had pointed to a fact which I felt was shocking because it contradicts our theories concerning evil” (18). Here Arendt refers to her famous idea of the “banality of evil” – the idea that Eichmann’s evil acts arose out of his unwillingness to think.

In Arendt’s characterisation of Eichmann in her report Eichmann in Jerusalem, she uses the expression “an inability to think” (Arendt 1963, 49) rather than “an unwillingness to think.” The distinction between the two expressions is crucial. If we take the expression “an inability to think” literally, then it can be interpreted in a way that presumes Eichmann did not possess the cognitive capacity to think, which in turn could mean that he was not able to distinguish right from wrong and therefore recognise the implications of his actions when he arranged for the transportation of Jews to
concentration camps. This is not what Arendt means, though. Formosa (2006, 54) shows that Arendt “uses the term ‘inability’ in a very strange sense to mean something like ‘failing to’ or ‘choosing not to.’” As Formosa puts it, for Arendt, “if Eichmann did not think he nevertheless might have” (504).

In other words, Arendt does not want to say that Eichmann was unable to think in an ontological sense. When Arendt relates the absence of thinking to evil, she means thinking in the sense of reason that allows humans to constitute meaning rather than in the sense of intellect that seeks to produce and apply knowledge. In the Introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt explicitly states that her thesis of the “banality of evil” is inseparable from the assumption that every “sane” individual is capable of thinking in the sense of generating meaning. As she puts it, “If, as I suggested before, the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be” (Arendt 1978, 13). By implication, when arguing that Eichmann’s crimes follow from his “inability to think,” Arendt does not seek to diminish his responsibility for crimes, as the most adamant critics of her report on the Eichmann trial represented it. On the contrary, given that Arendt believes that every human being, including Eichmann, is capable of thinking in the sense of exercising reason, what she means by Eichmann’s “inability” to think is that he was unwilling to exercise his faculty of reason. Therefore, for Arendt, Eichmann can and should be held responsible for his failure to think and judge, and therefore for his evil deeds which stemmed from this failure. As the analysis in this chapter shall demonstrate, Arendt’s question is, how can we explain Eichmann’s unwillingness to think, what accounts for it and how could it have been rectified?
As in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt does not elaborate in detail on her concept “banality of evil,” I refer briefly to Arendt’s correspondence to further illustrate what she means by it. We find one of the most succinct elaborations on her notion of the “banality of evil” in her letter to the journalist Grafton. In the letter, Arendt explains that by calling evil “banal,” she opposes the Kantian idea of “radical evil” as well as “the widely held opinion that there is something demonic, grandiose, in great evil” (Arendt 2007b, 479). Arendt suggests that these traditional ideas about evil cannot explain the Nazi crimes. These crimes demonstrated to her that “evil is not radical, going to the roots (radix), that is has no depth” (Arendt 2007b, 479). Arendt further explains it as follows:

Evil is a surface phenomenon, and instead of being radical, it is merely extreme. We resist evil by not being swept away by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think – that is, by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life. In other words, the more superficial someone is, the more likely he will be to yield to evil. An indication of such superficiality is the use of clichés, and Eichmann, God knows, was a perfect example. Each time he was tempted to think for himself, he said: Who am I to judge if all around me – that is, the atmosphere in which we unthinkingly live – think it is right to murder innocent people? (Arendt 2006, 479–480)

In this passage, Arendt relates evildoing to a failure to think. Specifically she suggests that Eichmann evaded thinking for himself because he fled from the challenge of judging the situation in which he found himself, one where both the regime and its followers found it right, even natural to “murder innocent people.” This adds a new component to the idea of thinking as Arendt understands it: it is a relationship between
thinking as the quest for meaning and as a willingness to judge, that is, the willingness and courage to extricate oneself from public opinion and to affirm oneself as an individual who has the ability and the right to think for oneself. Hence the Eichmann’s self-deprecating rhetorical exclamation at the trial: “Who am I to judge?”

For Arendt, the evidence that Eichmann lacked the ability and willingness to judge for himself is his tendency to speak in clichés. Birmingham emphasises that, for Arendt, “Eichmann’s use of clichés is dependent upon a kind of psychological ‘elation’ that literally permits him not only to not confront reality, but at the same time never to confront himself” (2007, 34). “Elation,” manifested in clichés, shields Eichmann from reality, that is, from the demands that reality puts on humans – the demands to think about what is happening and to generate meaning. Hiding behind clichés, Eichmann avoids taking responsibility for judging for himself, and thereby cannot proceed with inquiring into meaning in every particular situation that he encounters.

As we saw above, for Arendt, the faculties of thinking and judging are interrelated. An encounter with Eichmann demonstrated to her that the willingness and courage to judge is necessary for an individual to be able to initiate and sustain the activity of thinking for herself, that is, the activity of constituting her own meaning for every phenomenon and every particular situation. Now we are in a better position to understand why in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt focuses on judgment and personal responsibility for judgment, which, as she sees it, is at the root of the “moral issues” that the controversy around the report on the Eichmann trial brought to her attention. As we saw above, Arendt relates Eichmann’s evildoing to a lack of thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, which reinforces that thinking thus conceived is not something that all people necessarily are willing to practise. This opens
up the question of why some individuals choose to engage in the quest for meaning, which in turn can keep them immune to the involvement in evildoing, while others avoid thinking, that is, using their reason rather than mere intellect. As the investigation in this chapter demonstrates, in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt seeks an answer to this question in exploring the potentialities of the faculty of judgment as well as the idea of personal responsibility and its connection to thinking.

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt remarks that the controversy around the report on Eichmann gave rise to two questions concerned with judgment. Firstly, “how can I tell right from wrong, if the majority or my whole environment has prejudged the issue? Who am I to judge?” (Arendt 2003a, 18, emphasis in the original). Secondly, “to what extent, if at all, can we judge past events or occurrences at which we were not present?” (Arendt 2003a, 18–19). I now consider these questions in more detail and establish some context for them.

The first question is the question of whether the individual can extricate herself from the pressure of public opinion and judge a situation for herself. This question is essential for understanding how we can evaluate the conduct of those who lived under the conditions of Nazi totalitarianism and were involved in various capacities in the Nazi regime— as public figures, civil servants and ordinary citizens. The controversy that arose from Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial demonstrated to her that there is no common ground as to how to approach these issues. Arendt remarks:

I had somehow taken it for granted that we all still believe with Socrates that it is better to suffer than to do wrong. There was a widespread conviction that it is impossible to withstand temptation of any kind, that none of us could be trusted or
even be expected to be trustworthy when the chips are down, that to be tempted
and to be forced are almost the same, whereas in the words of Mary McCarthy
[Arendt’s friend and intellectual companion], who first spotted the fallacy: “If
somebody points a gun at you and says, ‘Kill your friend or I will kill you,’ he is
tempting you, that is all.” (Arendt 2003a, 18, emphasis in the original)

In this passage Arendt makes it clear that, for her, the Socratic proposition does
not lose its relevance in the situation of Nazi rule and terror. As she puts it, “while a
temptation where one’s life is at stake may be a legal excuse for a crime, it certainly is
not a moral justification” (Arendt 2003a, 18). Here I understand Arendt as responding
to the comments of those who, like Gershom Scholem, criticised Arendt for invoking in
the report on the Eichmann trial the collaboration of Jewish leaders with the Nazi
during the Final Solution (Arendt 2007a, 465). Arendt was accused of not taking into
account the difficulty of the situation in which the Jewish functionaries found
themselves and the terror to which they themselves may have been subjected.

I suggest this reading because “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” was
written in 1964, and it was in July 1963 that Arendt engaged in the correspondence with
Scholem, who was one of the most vocal critics of her report. Scholem wrote to Arendt
that she did not have the right to judge the Jewish leaders as “she was not present” at
these events and that she was not fair in her judgment (Arendt 2007a, 465). In her
response to him, she emphasises that “decisions [of the Jewish functionaries] were
made in an atmosphere of terror but not under the immediate pressure and impact of
terror” (469). Arendt remarks that these conditions, even though they were “terrible and
desperate enough,” were different from the conditions of concentration camps since,
unlike the victims of the camps, “these people [the Jewish functionaries] had still a
certain, limited freedom of decision and of action” (469). Arendt emphasises here that the Jewish as well as the Nazi functionaries still had an alternative not to do what they were pressured to do by the Nazi system and could have refused fulfilling their duties and “do[ne] nothing” instead (468, emphasis in the original). In her response to Scholem, she argues that when studying totalitarianism and its crimes, it is important that “we begin to judge, not the system, but the individual, his choices, and his arguments” (469). The importance of judging individuals rather than the system can be explained in a number of ways. Firstly, for Arendt, if we refuse to ask about the role of individuals in the rise of Nazism and in its crimes, we will not be able to understand what distinguished those individuals who did not cooperate with the regime from those who did, and therefore learn about what it is that can help us withstand systemic pressures toward evildoing in the future. Secondly, if we refuse to consider the issue of the personal responsibility of people involved in the Nazi regime, we accept that under a totalitarian system, individuals are indeed reduced to “cogs” in the totalitarian machine of mass murder and terror. Thinking in that way, we downgrade the dignity of being human.

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt is concerned precisely with the fact that people evade the challenge of judging the role of individuals in the events of the Nazi past. As the reaction of the public to her report on the Eichmann trial demonstrated to her, “there exists in our society a widespread fear of judging” (Arendt 2003a, 19). Those who do dare to judge are ostracised and accused of arrogance (Arendt 2003a, 19), as though in judging others, they seek to prove their moral superiority. This is why in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt formulates her second question about judgment as follows: “to what extent, if at all, can
we judge past events or occurrences at which we were not present?” (Arendt 2003a, 18–19). Arendt responds to this question by referring to the long-standing institutions of legal trials and historiography, which presuppose the human ability to judge retrospectively. Her point is that since we do not contest the ability of a trial judge or jury to judge events “by hindsight” (19) and do not accuse them of arrogance, then any individual can and should judge retrospectively events at which they were not present that pose serious moral issues for us all.

Arendt attempts to clarify the nature of this fear by providing the two most common excuses to avoid judgment: a reference to superhuman forces and the fallacy of “collective guilt.” Arendt illustrates the first point by referring to “the huge outcry the moment anyone fixes specific blame on some particular person instead of blaming all deeds or events on historical trends and dialectical movements, in short on some mysterious necessity that works behind the backs of men and bestows upon everything they do some kind of deeper meaning” (Arendt 2003a, 19–20). Here Arendt shows how people avoid judging a particular individual and her conduct by explaining individual actions in terms of an historical law or historical necessity. Here we see the same critique of historicism that Arendt provides in the essay “Understanding and Politics” in which she rebuts any historical explanation of totalitarianism according to general laws of historical movement. As we previously saw, she is particularly concerned with the fact that a belief in causality precludes us from recognising and understanding the uniqueness of historical phenomena.

Another common way to avoid judging a particular individual and her role in wrongdoing is to designate as guilty a collective subject – to accuse all representatives of a specific religion or nationality. To illustrate what she means, Arendt gives an
example of an attack by critics on Hochhuth’s play *The Deputy*. A reference to this play is not random as Arendt believed that there were some similarities between the controversy caused by the play and the one stirred up by her own report on the Eichmann trial. Young-Bruehl (1982, 393), in her biography of Arendt, emphasises that Arendt even took part in a television appearance together with Hochhuth, even though she did not like and even consciously avoided publicity, in order to support him in the midst of the controversy over his play.

The play portrays Pope Pius XII as responsible for not speaking out about the mass killings of Jews during the war. A common response of critics to this play, Arendt remarks, was that “it is superficial to accuse the pope, all of Christianity stands accused” (Arendt 2003a, 20). The logic of this criticism resembles “the concept of collective guilt as first applied to the German people and its collective past – all of Germany stands accused and the whole of German history from Luther to Hitler” (21). Arendt is critical of the concept of “collective guilt” as it does not allow us to fix guilt on those who were factually guilty – the idea of “collective guilt,” she remarks, “in practice turned into a highly effective whitewash of all those who had actually done something” (21).

In the essay “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” Arendt shows that in the later stages of the Third Reich, the Nazis deliberately sought to make complicit in the Final Solution the whole of the German people so that in case of defeat, they would be able to point to the “collective guilt” of the nation rather than the guilt of particular individuals. The Nazi leaders deliberately increased the number of German people who knew about or were drawn to participate in the program of systematic mass murder. This is to ensure that in the eyes of the external world, “there is no difference between
Nazis and Germans, that the people stand united behind the government” (Arendt 1994c, 121). Such a strategy, as Arendt sees it, proved to be successful in blurring the distinction between those who were factually guilty in commissioning and exercising the crimes of the Final Solution and those who may have been responsible in terms of supporting the regime but did not commit any crimes per se. After the war, the Allies, Arendt remarks, fell into the trap of this Nazi strategy to create an “organized guilt” of Germans, as the Allies themselves “abandoned the distinction between Germans and Nazis” (Arendt 1994c, 121) with the result that, as she foresees it in 1945 – when writing “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” – it will be very difficult to identify and punish the actual Nazi criminals who participated in or commissioned the mass murder of Jews and other Nazi crimes. This is how she puts it: “Allied provisions for punishment of war criminals will turn out to be empty threats because they will find no one to whom the title of war criminal could not be applied” (121). In the essay, Arendt’s point is that to ensure that justice be done, it is essential to debunk the fallacy of “collective guilt.” For this purpose, she draws a distinction between guilt that corresponds to a factual involvement in the Nazi crimes by commissioning or executing them, and responsibility – a term that she uses to designate a liability for supporting Hitler and the system without committing actual crimes.

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt suggests that the critics of Hochhuth’s play go even further than this fallacy of “collective guilt” as it was applied to Germans after the war. For some of them declare guilty for not speaking out against the Final Solution not only the whole Christian faith but the whole of humanity. Robert Weltsch, Arendt emphasises, suggested that “no doubt, there is ground for serious accusation, but the defendant is the whole human race” (Arendt 2003a, 20). In
response to this statement, Arendt proposes that “the absurdity of the concept [of collective guilt is that] for now not even the Germans are guilty any longer: no one at all is for whom we have so much as a name instead of the concept of collective guilt” (Arendt 2003a, 21). What concerns Arendt here is that if everyone is guilty, then no one can be judged as an individual and thus no one can be found personally guilty or responsible for one’s deeds and words.

In the two examples considered above Arendt shows how a fear of people in post-war societies to face up to the challenge of judging the Nazi past and the role of individuals in it clouded the issue of personal responsibility and guilt for Nazi crimes. Arendt then proposes that it is useful to look at Nazi crimes and wrongdoing from the perspective of a courtroom. Arendt calls the legal system the only “institution in society in which it is well-nigh impossible to evade issues of personal responsibility” (Arendt 2003a, 21). As she puts it, a courtroom provides a space where all justifications of a nonspecific, abstract nature – from the Zeitgeist down to the Oedipus complex – break down, where not systems or trends or original sin are judged, but men of flesh and blood like you and me, whose deeds are of course still human deeds but who appear before a tribunal because they have broken some law whose maintenance we regard as essential for the integrity of our common humanity. (Arendt 2003a, 21)

Here Arendt suggests that she finds legal settings advantageous for discussing issues of the responsibility of those involved in wrongdoings because a legal trial focuses on an offender as a person and on her individual motivations, decisions, deeds and arguments. Legal settings remind us that an offender, whether we want it or not,
still remains a human ("a man of flesh and blood like you and me") – not a monster or an embodiment of a devilish superhuman force or a puppet in the hands of historical necessity. This proposition of Arendt’s proved to be highly controversial when it came to judging the Nazi criminals and their atrocities. Beiner remarks that for many people who considered the Nazi criminals the incarnation of evil, it was impossible to recognize their humanness:

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt had sought to do justice to the Holocaust experience not by representing the war criminals as subhuman creatures, who are beneath judgment, or the victims as innocents without responsibility, who surpass judgment, but by making clear that human judgment can function only where those judged are neither beasts nor angels but men. However, many of Arendt’s readers objected (quite vociferously) that if this is how human judgment must operate, it would be better to abstain from judgment altogether. (Beiner 1992, 98)

What Beiner is getting at here is that Arendt insisted on judging the Nazi criminals as individual human beings, despite the horror of the evil that they committed. For her, it is only when we recognise the accused as human that we can judge her as an individual and hold her personally responsible for what she did. Beiner does not elaborate on why this is the case, but I propose that it is because, for Arendt, recognising that a Nazi criminal is human means assuming that he has an ability to judge for herself. As she puts it: “Legal and moral issues are by no means the same, but they have a certain affinity with each other because they both presuppose the power of judgment” (Arendt 2003a, 22). In other words, to be able to speak about moral as well as legal issues, we have to assume that both those who judge and those who are to be
judged are human beings who possess the ability to judge independently and who are capable of taking responsibility for their judgment.

By looking at Nazi crimes from the perspective offered by the courtroom, Arendt reinforces the importance of taking into account the human faculty of judgment if we are to understand the nature of responsibility for these crimes. Arendt then formulates her next question, which courtroom reporters – here Arendt is thinking about those people, including herself, who reported on the trials of Eichmann and other Nazi criminals – cannot avoid asking when observing court proceedings: “How can we tell right from wrong, independent of knowledge of the law?” (Arendt 2003a, 22). What Arendt means here is that the judges in the trials of the Nazi functionaries assumed that the defendants at the moment of committing their evil deeds had the ability to recognise that their deeds were criminal and morally wrong. As we will see later in the chapter, Arendt seeks to unpack the complexity of this assumption. Arendt shows that in order to be certain that individuals were able to distinguish right from wrong in the situation of Nazi rule, we need to be able to justify the notion that people are capable of a kind of judgment which is not bound to given rules and norms. In order to avoid becoming complicit in evil deeds, people who lived under the Nazi totalitarian system should have been able to judge their actions independently of the spirit of the law of the land that was conducive to, and even imperative for, the mass murder of a select group of people, and independently of superior orders that commissioned evil deeds and were deemed to be “legal” under the political and legal order in Germany at that time.

The question that interests Arendt is whether and how people can judge for themselves and distinguish good from evil under conditions where the law and legal provisions lose their rightfulness and the political system itself encourages and even
demands that evil be committed. With this question in mind, Arendt introduces a new line of enquiry – an exploration of the ability of humans to judge every situation for themselves, independent of pre-given rules, laws and customary norms. She starts this line of enquiry with reflections on her childhood milieu as well as her observations of “a failure of personal judgment” in 1933.

2. Judgment that is not bound to rules

Arendt emphasises that as a child, she was raised with a conviction that moral conduct is a “matter of course” and that morality needs no explicit defining: “Das Moralische versteht sich von selbst” (Arendt 2003a, 22), which can be translated from German as “The moral is obvious.” Arendt refers to a particular atmosphere of her childhood – an atmosphere of innocence in which moral conduct was taken for granted and in which the preaching of “moral rectitude” did not occur and was unnecessary.

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt remarks that in her childhood on a few occasions she was faced with examples of moral failure happening outside her “milieu,” and these failures were largely manifested in people’s unwillingness to judge for themselves – they succumbed to the “pressure” of public opinion. As she puts it, “every once in a while we were confronted with moral weakness, with lack of steadfastness or loyalty, with this curious, almost automatic yielding under pressure, especially of public opinion, which is so symptomatic of the educated strata of certain societies, but we had no idea how serious such things were and least of all where they could lead” (Arendt 2003a, 22). For Arendt, as for her childhood peers, these cases of moral failure were not a matter of particular importance.
“we did not know much about the nature of these phenomena, and I am afraid we cared even less” (22).

However, Arendt continues by emphasising that her awareness of moral issues was awakened when the Nazi party came to power: “For my generation and people of my origin, the lesson began in 1933 and it ended not when just German Jews but the whole world had been given notice of monstrosities no one believed possible at the beginning” (Arendt 2003a, 23). She clarifies that a new moral lesson that the year 1933 had to teach her was not about the conduct of “true culprits” (24), that is, the overt criminals of the SS storm troopers. No one expected these people to behave otherwise – “all this was terrible and dangerous, but it posed no moral problems” (24). The “moral problem” arose, according to her, from the phenomenon of “coordination” that started in 1933: when “public figures” began readily collaborating with the Nazi regime, vouched their support for it and radically altered their set of morals. Arendt makes it clear that this collaboration did not happen out of “fear-inspired hypocrisy” (24). It was not “fear” that drove those who embraced the Nazi ideology in 1933. Rather Arendt says that she was faced

…with this very early eagerness not to miss the train of History, with this, as it were, honest overnight change of opinion that befell a great majority of public figures in all walks of life and all ramifications of culture, accompanied, as it was, by an incredible ease with which lifelong friendships were broken and discarded. In brief, what disturbed us was the behavior not of our enemies but of our friends, who had done nothing to bring this situation about. (Arendt 2003a, 24)
Let me note Arendt’s reference to friendship in the passage above: Arendt is profoundly concerned with the fact that people were eager to manifest their support for the Nazi ideology and goals to the extent that they were ready to sacrifice friendships and human relationships. An example that Arendt may have in mind here when she refers to broken friendships in 1933 is the conduct of her friend and teacher Martin Heidegger. As shown by Margaret Betz Hull (2002, 35), Heidegger “exemplified this type of German intellectual [who came to collaborate with the regime]: Heidegger was appointed rector of Freiburg University in the spring in 1933, at which time he delivered a pro-Nazi rectorial address.”

Arendt’s concerns about broken friendship in 1933 remind us of her reflections on Lessing where she refers to friendship as a principle of conduct in boundary situations such as that of the advent of Nazism. As we saw in the chapter on the Lessing address, Arendt believes that the principle of preservation of friendship can allow friends to withstand external pressures to accept the ideological “truth” offered by Nazism and thus avoid becoming complicit in crimes and wrongdoings. Friendship becomes a litmus test for the humanness of truth: a truth must be rejected if this truth threatens to destroy the relationship of friendship – be it existing relationships or those to come. However, as I argued in the chapter on the Lessing essay, Arendt, following Lessing, talks about a particular kind of friendship –“political” friendship. To preserve such friendship in its integrity, friends should be committed to the practice of selbstdenken – thinking for themselves – and to a world that friends share in common. As appears from Arendt’s reflections in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt was painfully aware that many people did not uphold their commitments to friendship and were ready to sacrifice it for what they saw in 1933 as “truth” offered by the Nazi
ideology. Could it be then the case that it was their inability and unwillingness to think for themselves that prevented people from choosing friendship over ideological “truth”?

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt does not use the term _selbstdenken_ (thinking for oneself) but rather refers to “personal judgment” – she talks about a widespread “breakdown” of “personal judgment” (emphasis in the original) in 1933 (Arendt 2003a, 24). As she puts it, “they [those who “coordinated” with the Nazi regime] were not responsible for the Nazis, they were only impressed by the Nazi success and unable to pit their own judgment against the verdict of History, as they read it” (24). Arendt’s point here is that the “public figures” who were eager to “coordinate” with the Nazis lacked the willingness to take personal responsibility for judging for themselves and for their decisions and choices. The failure to decide to take such responsibility meant that they were not able to face up to the reality and to inquire into the meaning of the new situation that the advent of Nazism created. Instead, these people followed the opinion of the majority and allowed themselves to be carried away by the Nazi ideology.

It is important to emphasise that Arendt does not argue that public figures and representatives of intellectual circles who collaborated with the Nazi regime are guilty of the Nazi crimes. What she wants is to open the possibility of holding them responsible for their refusal or unwillingness to judge the situation for themselves when Hitler came to power, for their support of the Nazi ideology in the early stages of the Nazi regime and for their inability to recognise its dangerous and lethal implications. Here I turn again to Arendt’s essay “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” where this point is clarified particularly well. In that essay, Arendt distinguishes between guilt and responsibility and suggests that “there are many who share
responsibility [for the Nazi crimes] without any visible proof of guilt” (Arendt 1994c, 125). What Arendt is getting at here is that many people who were not “guilty” in terms of ordering and carrying out the Nazi crimes were nonetheless responsible for making these crimes possible through their support of the regime. Among these people were “ladies and gentlemen of high society” “who continued being sympathetic to Hitler as long as it was possible, who aided his rise to power, and who applauded him in Germany and in other European countries” (125). Ultimately, their responsibility lies in their failure “to judge modern political organizations,” that is, to recognise the unprecedented nature of totalitarianism and the implications of the ideology that it offered (125). Arendt argues that this failure to take responsibility for judging for themselves makes those who gullibly vouched their support for the Nazi regime “co-responsible for Hitler’s crimes in a broader sense,” even though they did not “incur any guilt in a stricter sense” (126).

Both in “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” and “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt emphasises that the inability to assume responsibility for judging for oneself does not depend on a lack of formal education and training in morality. On the contrary, Arendt remarks that many highly educated people appeared to be less prepared to understand the dangers of the Nazi regime in 1933:

We had to learn everything from scratch, in the raw, as it were – that is, without the help of categories and general rules under which to subsume our experiences. There stand, however, on the other side of the fence, all those who were fully qualified in matters of morality and held them in the highest esteem. These people proved not only to be incapable of learning anything; but worse, yielding easily to temptation, they most convincingly demonstrated through their application of
traditional concepts and yardsticks during and after the fact, how inadequate these had become, how little...they had been framed or intended to be applied to conditions as they actually arose. (Arendt 2003a, 25)

Arendt shows here that a lack of education in morality and a lack of strict attachment to a prescribed code of moral rules proved to be beneficial for developing an insight into the nature of moral situation in 1933. On the contrary, those who were holding on to traditional moral categories lost their moral orientation in the world. Here we can remind ourselves how in “Understanding and Politics” Arendt suggests that totalitarianism exposed the “ruins” of our traditional categories of thought and standards of judgment. What Arendt reinforces in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” is that the majority of people failed to reflect on whether the traditional moral norms remained relevant to the new moral situation in which they found themselves in 1933. Moreover, as we saw above, Arendt is also concerned that basing one’s judgment on any norms that had become customary is dangerous. For these norms can change quite suddenly, as happened for many people in 1933 who experienced “an honest overnight change of opinion” (Arendt 2003a, 24) so that the new morality accommodating the Nazi regime easily substituted for the traditional moral norms.

This brings us back to Arendt’s question of whether humans are capable of a kind of judgment that is not bound to customary rules, and if they are, what is involved in developing and practising such judgment. In the following passage Arendt makes explicit her assumptions about this kind of judgement as she envisages it:

…only if we assume that there exists a human faculty which enables us to judge rationally without being carried away by either emotion or self-interest, and
which at the same time functions spontaneously, that is to say, is not bound by standards and rules under which particular cases are simply subsumed, but on the contrary, produces its own principles by virtue of the judging activity itself; only under this assumption can we risk ourselves on this very slippery moral ground with some hope of finding a firm footing. (Arendt 2003a, 27)

This passage, although in a condensed form, contains three key characteristics that, according to Arendt, human judgment should exhibit if it is to operate independently without reliance on rules and standards. This judgment should be rational, not driven by self-interest, and spontaneous. Let me look into these characteristics in more detail.

Firstly, Arendt emphasises that the judgment she envisages is rational, that is, it is not an emotional and whimsical response to events and happenings in the world of human affairs. Judgment does not leave aside a claim to logical reasoning and factual knowledge. This rational component of judging is highly important for Arendt, as without relying on the faculty of intellect, a judging person will not be able to develop factual knowledge of specific situations she experiences and which call her to an exercise of independent judgment for herself. As Birmingham (2007, 33) argues, “comprehension testifies to factual truth and therefore is the first order of political judgment, providing the ground for all political judgments that are made on its basis.”

Secondly, judgment, as Arendt sees it, requires the capacity to go beyond self-interest. To understand what Arendt means here I propose we need to refer to Arendt’s notion of “representative thinking” which I explored in the previous chapter on “Truth and Politics” and by which Arendt means the capacity to engage with the perspectives, doxai, of others by “visiting” their diverse standpoints, and yet remain committed to thinking for oneself without trying to exchange one’s standpoint for the standpoints of
others. By a standpoint, Arendt literally means a place that an individual occupies in the world and the concomitant individual conditions of her existence attached to this place. By practising “representative thinking,” individuals are able to overcome the limitations of their own doxai and, by moving from one standpoint to another, “enlarge” their thinking – hence Arendt’s use of Kant’s term “enlarged mentality.” As Arendt puts it in Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (Arendt 1992, 43), “the greater the reach – the larger the realm in which the enlightened individual is able to move from standpoint to standpoint – the more ‘general’ will be his thinking.” It is the lack of an “enlarged mentality” and capacity for “representative thinking” – thinking that is capable of taking into account and “representing” the perspectives of others – that Arendt constantly emphasises in Eichmann. For example, in Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt remarks that “the longer one listened to him [Eichmann], the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected to an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (Arendt 1963, 49, emphasis in the original). What Arendt is getting at here is that Eichmann was not able to imagine any other perspective but his own and failed to think beyond his own self-interest. As Arendt puts it in the letter to the journalist Grafton to which I referred above, “each time Eichmann tried to think, he thought immediately of his career, which up to the end was the thing uppermost in his mind” (Arendt 2007b, 480).

If we relate these reflections back to Arendt’s concerns about the faculty of judgment in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” then we can better articulate what kind of relationships between thinking, judging and personal responsibility emerge from Arendt’s writings. I argue that even though Arendt does not explicitly articulate it in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” it can be shown that she
envisages a two-way relationship between thinking and judging. On the one hand, as we saw above, Arendt envisages a faculty of judgment of a kind that is not “carried away by… self-interest” (Arendt 2003a, 27). In turn, Arendt came to associate the willingness to overcome one’s self-interest with the practice of “representative thinking.” “Representative thinking” opens a way for an “enlarged mentality” whereby an individual liberates one’s perspective from biases and prejudices and can make her doxa “impartial.” In this way, “representative thinking” prepares the human mind for judging – judging without reliance on preconceived rules and customary norms, judging in a way that takes her beyond her own interests or those of her close circle. On the other hand, thinking can proceed only if and when an individual decides to accept responsibility for facing up to the challenge of personal judgment instead of blindly following public opinion. To be able to think in the sense of constituting meaning in phenomena for herself, an individual should first refuse to succumb to the self-deprecating stance “Who am I to judge?”, which was so characteristic of Eichmann’s conduct at the trial, and have the courage to judge for herself. In other words, for Arendt, the two human faculties of thinking and judging are closely interrelated such that judging both precedes and succeeds thinking.

The third characteristic of judgment that Arendt emphasizes in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” is that it be “spontaneous” – which means that this faculty can function without following pre-established customary rules and is capable of evaluating every new situation on its own ground. Arendt seeks to explain the “spontaneity” of the faculty of judgment by a reference to the idea of “principle” which recurs in her writing. She proposes that human judgment does not need to rely on pre-existing standards as it is capable of generating “its own principles by virtue of the
judging activity itself” (Arendt 2003a, 27). What I find important about this passage is that it shows that Arendt does not intend to discard entirely a reference to morality. However, neither does she intend to introduce a new code of moral norms or a new ontological foundation of morality. I submit that any attempts to ascribe such a foundation to Arendt’s political thought, as attempted, for example, by Benhabib (1988) or Diprose (2008) go against the grain of Arendt’s writings. As I see it, Arendt’s approach to morality is best apprehended precisely through the notion of “principle,” which has recently drawn the attention of Arendt scholars (see, for example, Birmingham 2006; Cane 2015; Williams 1998). While Birmingham (2006) focuses on the significance of a twofold principle of natality which is constituted at once by the principles of givenness and *initium*, Cane (2015, 62) refers to a wide range of principles in Arendt’s writings, such as solidarity, public or political freedom, public or political happiness, consent and the right to dissent, rage, charity, distrust and others.

Earlier in the thesis, I showed that Arendt takes her inspiration for her use of the notion “principle” from Montesquieu and his observation that there are “innate principles” that inspire each type of government (Arendt 1994b, 331). In the context of her political theory, Arendt refers to principles as a source and animating force of political action. Birmingham characterises Arendt’s idea of the principle by saying that “principles are ‘moving principles’; they orient action and ‘map out certain directions’” (Birmingham 2006, 13, internal citation from Arendt, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism”).

In the essay “What Is Freedom?” from the collection of the essays *Between Past and Future* (Arendt 1961), Arendt elaborates on the relationship between principles, action and freedom. Political action, for Arendt, is the only mode of being in which
humans can realise their freedom (Arendt 1961, 152). By freedom Arendt does not mean freedom of choice, that is, freedom to choose between two or more alternative courses of action, but the freedom to start something new and unprecedented. The notion of principle allows Arendt to propose a non-deterministic conception of free action. A principle only “inspires” humans to act (152); it never predetermines how a specific action will unfold nor how a particular actor will actualise this or that principle in a given situation through action. Hence the notion of principle leaves room for individual agency in how an individual understands and interprets every specific situation and in how she responds to it. This affinity between the notions of principle and freedom, as described by Arendt, suggests that principles can contribute to developing an ethical stance when judgment that automatically follows moral rules cannot be trusted anymore, and an individual faces the challenge of judging for herself.

As we observed above, Arendt sees potential in applying the notion of “principle” not only to political action but also to judgment – she wants to assign to the faculty of judgment the ability to generate “its own principles by virtue of the judging activity itself” (Arendt 2003a, 27). Cane (2015, 63) briefly mentions that Arendt entertains the possibility that principles can “serve as standards for making political judgments.” Cane means that judgment can play an auxiliary role to action – to assist with evaluating a principle that has been manifested in the performance of an actor and assess to which extent the action has been able to fulfil the principle intended by the actor.

I believe that there is more potential for applying the idea of “principle” to unpacking Arendt’s understanding of the faculty of judgment and morality. I find suggestive Assy’s (2008) approach. She argues that the key to understanding how judgment can generate its own principles lies in the idea of “exemplarity” that Arendt
borrows from Kant. Drawing on *The Life of the Mind*, Assy (2008, 127) argues that for Arendt, “an example can…work as a guiding principle” and that, by engaging with an example of “great” actions and figures, judging gives “a law from and to itself.” Judgment thus can produce “its own principles” in the sense that every time that an individual judges, she takes a decision as to whether an example is worth perpetuating in the world.

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt remarks that the philosophy of judgment is beyond the scope of her present investigation and insists that, as the title of the essay suggests, she is interested in considering the issue of judgment through the lens of personal responsibility and its functioning under the conditions of totalitarian dictatorship.xii Therefore, Arendt says that she now wants to focus her enquiry on considering the two notions that compose the title of the essay – “personal responsibility” and “dictatorship.” I turn to these considerations in the next section of the chapter.

3. **Personal responsibility and the cog theory**

Arendt clarifies what she means by “personal responsibility” by contrasting it with political responsibility. As she sees it, political responsibility is a responsibility that can be assumed by a collective of people – a government, a nation or humanity as a whole – with respect to their “predecessors” or their “past.” This type of responsibility corresponds to the fact that we are not born into a vacuum but into a world that we can share with others, a world that is inherited from our ancestors and that we will hand over to our successors. As Arendt puts it, “every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with
the deeds of the ancestors” (Arendt 2003a, 27). Therefore, each one of us – as a “newcomer” to the world that existed before us – becomes responsible for the common world, its preservation and its constant revival through action and speech.

However, Arendt argues that political responsibility does not apply to the issues of morality as political responsibility “is not personal, strictly speaking” (Arendt 2003a, 28). Arendt clarifies this as follows: “Morally speaking, it is as wrong to feel guilty without having done anything specific as it is to feel free of all guilt if one actually is guilty of something” (28). She concludes that the question of responsibility for moral judgment and moral conduct opens up only when a human is named and singled out as an individual: “There is no such thing as collective guilt or collective innocence; guilt and innocence make sense only if applied to individuals” (Arendt 2003a, 29).

Arendt further clarifies the idea of “personal responsibility” by reflecting on the limitations of using cog theory, which is often invoked to explain the nature of the totalitarian system and the mechanism of its operation. Arendt explains that cog theory represents a totalitarian regime as a gigantic “bureaucratic machine” with a complex mechanism of interrelated parts and functions. Cog theory thus presents human beings as merely “cogs and wheels that keep the administration running” and makes them look as though they are “expendable” and lacking any agency of their own (Arendt 2003a, 29). If the logic of the concept of collective guilt leads us to assume that everyone should feel guilty for the crimes of the Nazis, then the logic of cog theory takes us to the other extreme and proposes that only those who had real decision-making power in the Third Reich should be held responsible. Arendt remarks that if we follow this line of reasoning than we are bound to conclude that it was only Hitler himself who should be accused of the Final Solution and other Nazi atrocities (30).
Arendt finds that cog theory does not provide us with an adequate theoretical tool for understanding the issues of wrongdoing and liability under the totalitarian regime. She emphasises that in the trials of war criminals any reference to the theory used by the defence was immediately discarded by judges. The reason for this was that “in a courtroom there is no system on trial, no History or historical trend, no ism, anti-Semitism for instance, but a person, and if the defendant happens to be a functionary, he stands accused precisely because even a functionary is still a human being, and it is in this capacity that he stands trial” (Arendt 2003a, 30, emphasis added). Here Arendt reiterates her earlier claim that the nature of the responsibility for the Nazi crimes cannot be understood unless we judge individuals, not systems, ideological doctrines or historical laws. A new element that Arendt brings into consideration here is that we need to distinguish an individual from an official persona that the system assigns to a human being. In other words, personal responsibility, for Arendt, is a responsibility that is ascribed not to the persona of the official but to an individual as such. Unless we make this transition, we will not be able to dissociate an individual from a function assigned to her by the system and to define the measure of her own responsibility. Arendt turns again to the courtroom for an illustration:

The question addressed by the court to the defendant is, Did you, such and such, an individual with a name, a date, and place of birth, identifiable and by that token not expandable, commit the crime you stand accused of, and Why did you do it? If the defendant answers: “It was not I as a person who did it, I had neither the will nor the power to do anything out of my own initiative; I was a mere cog, expendable, everybody in my place would have done it; that I stand before this
tribunal is an accident” – this answer will be ruled out as immaterial. (Arendt 2003a, 31)

Moreover, Arendt remarks that in the courtroom, the defendant is not allowed to shift responsibility to a system: “For to the answer: ‘Not I but the system did it in which I was a cog,’ the court immediately raises the next question: ‘And why, if you please, did you become a cog or continue to be a cog under such circumstances?’” (Arendt 2003a, 31). What Arendt argues here is that the possibility of ascribing personal responsibility even to the lowest bureaucratic functionary stems from the fact that at some point in time this functionary was faced with the choice to either consent or refuse to become part of a system and that, in most cases where one is not under immediate physical threat, one can still decide whether to continue or discontinue being a “cog.”

In these passages, Arendt connects the notion of personal responsibility to the capacity of an individual to act “out of his own initiative,” to the ability to express a voice in the matters of her destiny and life, and to the readiness to preserve some agency even in critical situations. At first it seems that Arendt reinstates here a legal conception of responsibility, which, as astutely noticed by Diprose (2008, 619), presupposes “a self with the capacity for responsibility: the capacity to act autonomously according to conscience, to ‘own’ that act, and to know its significance and value in terms of some juridico-moral code” (emphasis in the original). Yet, I believe that this legal understanding of responsibility based solely on the autonomy and rationality of a person does not reflect fully what Arendt means by personal responsibility. While the legal conception of personal responsibility is useful for Arendt, she wants to go beyond the legal domain of personal responsibility, which occurs after the fact of wrongdoing as it were. She wants to confront the question of
personal responsibility in relation to what it is that the individual does or fails to do in a situation that requires the capacity for judgment. What follows from Arendt’s reflections I have considered so far is that firstly an individual can fail to recognise a situation in which she needs to summon her capacity to judge independently. Secondly, an individual may fail to judge independently, that is, to take responsibility for judging without succumbing to the pressures of public opinion and without unthinkingly relying on customary rules.

Here I would like to refer to a criticism provided by Formosa (2006), who points out a contradiction between Arendt’s concept of a human person, on the one hand, and her conception of personal responsibility as applied to Eichmann and other functionaries, on the other. He accentuates worldliness and publicness as the main feature of Arendt’s account of a human person: “personhood is for Arendt a public property that requires a plural human togetherness in order to manifest itself through appearance. That is, in order to appear as who you are, a public political space is required” (Formosa 2006, 509, emphasis in the original). Formosa connects Arendt’s idea of a person to “natality,” which “as a person-constituting activity seems to coincide approximately with action arising out of spontaneous autonomy” (509). Formosa further adds that in later Arendt’s works she envisages another “source of natality” – “it is thoughtfulness (and thus seemingly not action) that constitutes personhood” (509, emphasis in the original). He concludes that “the correct reading of this seems to [him] to be that either action or thoughtfulness, or perhaps some combination, is sufficient as sources of natality to constitute personhood” (509).

Formosa demonstrates that Arendt argues that Eichmann can and should be held responsible for Nazi crimes as a person, that is, as somebody who appears in public and
constitutes his unique identity by speaking and acting together with others, and who engages in thought. Yet, Arendt’s account of Eichmann, as Formosa reads it, portrays him as a “nobody” who lacks personhood, as a “non-person” who does not appear in the public domain to others, who does not speak or act in Arendt’s sense, and who does not think either. He concludes that “Arendt…seems to specifically deny Eichmann’s personhood, but if Eichmann is genuinely a ‘nobody’ then there is no one left behind who we can hold morally responsible” (Formosa 2006, 502). Therefore, he argues, Arendt’s conception of “banal evil” involves two “criteria” – “thoughtlessness and lack of personhood” (512, emphasis added) – and this is where an inherent contradiction of this conception lies.

Formosa proposes the following way of resolving the contradiction between Arendt’s ideas of person and personal responsibility. He suggests that rather than referring to Eichmann and other Nazi functionaries as “nobodies,” “we can instead see them as persons, even if only shallow ones, and so we can maintain that they are worthy of basic moral respect and are potentially able to be held individually responsible for their actions” (2006, 512). In fact, as we previously saw, Arendt attempts to offer a similar argument in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” where she remarks that if we are to be able to judge Nazi criminals, we need to see them not as monsters, an embodiment of a devilish superhuman force or a puppet in the hands of historical necessity, but as individual humans. Therefore, I believe that Arendt seeks to reinstate the Nazi functionaries in their status of human beings and represent them as individuals who had the ability to constitute themselves as persons but failed to do so. What concerns Arendt is that the functionaries themselves chose to hide behind the mask of
“nobody,” behind their official functions in the system. As Arendt puts it in the essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,”

[T]he greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies [emphasis added], that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons. Within the conceptual framework of these considerations we could say that wrongdoers who refuse to think by themselves what they are doing and who also refuse in retrospect to think about it, that is, go back and remember what they did (which is teshuvah or repentance), have actually failed to constitute themselves into somebodies.

(Arendt 2003b, 111–112)

In this passage Arendt does not reduce the Nazi functionaries to non-persons per se; she emphasises that they themselves “refuse” to take up the possibility of “constituting” themselves as persons, of constituting their unique who as compared to what. This is because they could have, but failed to, think in a two-fold sense of generating meaning in every situation for themselves and, secondly, thinking about what it is that they committed in the past and what its implications are. For Arendt, however, they are still singular human individuals who can potentially at any moment face up to the challenge of constituting themselves as persons and revive their ability to think for themselves.

This unwillingness to see themselves as persons made the Nazi functionaries unwilling to judge for themselves and to recognise themselves in their actions as actors and to take responsibility for what they have done. This predisposed the Nazi functionaries to evildoing. This inability of the Nazi functionaries to see oneself in one’s own actions is rendered very well by a dialogue that Arendt quotes in her essay
“Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility.” The dialogue took place between a Nazi functionary who worked in a concentration camp and a journalist after the liberation of this death camp at Majdanek:

Q. Did you kill people in the camp? A. Yes.
Q. Did you poison them with gas? A. Yes.
Q. Did you bury them alive? A. It sometimes happened.
Q. Were the victims picked from all over Europe? A. I suppose so.
Q. Did you personally help kill people? A. Absolutely not. I was only paymaster in the camp.
Q. What did you think of what was going on? A. It was bad at first but we got used to it.
Q. Do you know the Russians will hang you? A. (Bursting into tears) Why should they? What have I done? [Italics Arendt’s. PM, Sunday, Nov. 12, 1944.] (Arendt 1993c, 127)

In this passage we can see how the Nazi functionary fully identifies himself with the function of “paymaster.” He fails to take responsibility for his actions as he fails to think through them and recognise that they come from his own choices and decisions. Yet, for Arendt, we can still hold him responsible for what he has done as it was within the range of his capacities to start thinking for himself, to see himself as a person who “owns” and “authors,” as it were, his actions and to recognise the criminal character in what it is that he was doing.

So far I have argued that Arendt proposes that the personal responsibility of the adherents of totalitarianism cannot be identified unless we stop judging the system of totalitarianism and focus on individuals instead – their choices, motivations, attitudes
and, most importantly, the way they judged or failed to judge. However, she particularly reinforces that she finds it essential that we take into account the systemic nature of totalitarianism. Therefore, for Arendt, in spite of the fact that a reference to system cannot be used as an excuse for the Nazi crimes, “the system cannot be left out of account altogether” (Arendt 2003a, 32). The system provides “circumstances” or a context that must be considered to understand how people judged or failed to judge during the Nazi Reich. In the next section, I turn to Arendt’s reflections on what makes totalitarian dictatorship an unprecedented form of political system that is different even from traditional dictatorships. I further consider how Arendt explores what an understanding of this system contributes to our understanding of how humans can judge for themselves and assume responsibility for such judgment.

4. Personal responsibility and the nature of totalitarian dictatorship

Arendt devotes the second part of the essay to a reflection on the nature of totalitarian dictatorship in relation to the idea of personal responsibility. She starts this part of the essay by introducing “a few distinctions” that are meant to show the originality of totalitarianism as compared to all the preceding systems of rule, including non-totalitarian dictatorship. I would like to focus on two distinct features of totalitarianism: its claim to total control over all spheres of life and its relationship to law.

The first feature of totalitarianism that, according to Arendt, distinguishes it from a dictatorship is that it aims at establishing total control over a society. As Arendt puts it,
Totalitarian society, as distinguished from totalitarian government, is indeed monolithic; all public manifestations, cultural, artistic, or learned, and all organizations, welfare and social services, even sports and entertainment, are “coordinated.” There is no office and indeed no job of any public significance, from advertising agencies to the judiciary, from play-acting to sports journalism, from primary and secondary schooling to the universities and learned societies, in which an unequivocal acceptance of the ruling principles is not demanded. (Arendt 2003a, 33)

This feature of totalitarianism has a direct implication for our understanding of the idea of personal responsibility. Since not only political activities but also social, economic and cultural ones (such as education, social welfare and entertainment) were permeated with the ideology of the Third Reich, it becomes impossible to avoid becoming complicit in the activities of the regime if you continue appearing in public. As long as you participate in any public activities, you become “implicated...in the deeds of the regime” and its crimes (Arendt 2003a, 33). The essay “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” explains this very well: “The totalitarian policy, which has completely destroyed the neutral zone in which the daily life of human beings is ordinarily lived, has achieved the result of making the existence of each individual in Germany depend either upon committing crimes or on complicity in crimes” (1994c, 124). In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” Arendt argues that there was still a way to avoid becoming complicit in or committing the crimes: by withdrawing from any public activities altogether and refusing to appear in public. The complexity of the situation that Arendt describes is such that the two forms of responsibility – political and personal – are mutually exclusive: “only those who withdrew from public life
altogether, who refused political responsibility of any sort, could avoid becoming implicated in crimes, that is, could avoid legal and moral responsibility” (2003a, 34).

This imperative to withdraw from the public realm at first sounds un-Arendtian as it goes against her deep appreciation of a public space and a love for the world, as we observed throughout this thesis. As we saw in the chapter about the Lessing essay, Arendt argues that a withdrawal from the world is often an individual’s only possible response to the rise of a totalitarian system. However, Arendt emphasises that this withdrawal should be of a kind such that an individual does not lose sight of the world and keeps reminding herself that it is the inhumaness of the world that should be escaped. In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” we see how Arendt rehearses the same idea: that it was only by refusing to participate in world of human affairs that one could avoid contributing to the wrongdoings and crimes of the Nazi totalitarian system. Under the unprecedented conditions of totalitarianism, when the public realm is destroyed, the private realm becomes the only place that allows for not becoming complicit with evils. But we can also now better understand why in the Lessing essay Arendt remarks that even when withdrawing from the world an individual should never overlook the presence of the world. Turning a blind eye on the world is fraught with serious consequences as it is too easy to forget that everything around is constitutive of the totalitarian system and any interaction with the world of human affairs amounts to cooperation with the system itself.

As Arendt emphasises in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” the majority of people in the Third Reich continued to participate in public life and to live their lives as though nothing had changed when the Nazis came to power and were unable to perceive and understand the consequences of this participation. Arendt
remarks that many of these people post factum justified their conduct by pointing to their best intentions. Arendt renders their argument as follows:

We who appear guilty today are in fact those who stayed on the job in order to prevent worse things from happening; only those who remained inside had a chance to mitigate things and to help at least some people; we gave the devil his due without selling our soul to him, whereas those who did nothing shirked all responsibilities and thought only of themselves, of the salvation of their precious souls. (Arendt 2003a, 34)

Arendt rejects the legitimacy of this argument. Firstly, she highlights that if fighting the regime from within was the real goal of those who collaborated, then it is reasonable to expect that these people were taking part in an underground resistance, revolt or conspiracy against Hitler. However, most of people who continued performing their duties did not rise up in revolt, even if they became aware of the crimes of the regime and even if they disagreed with them. Secondly, for Arendt, the line of reasoning of those who collaborated with the regime as outlined in the paragraph quoted above is based on a profound misunderstanding of the moral demands that the situation in Nazi Germany put on people. People were eager to take responsibility without being aware that in the particular circumstances of the Third Reich this zeal for taking responsibility played into the hands of the Nazi regime and strengthened its system. Arendt draws our attention to the fact that many people used to believe, and continued to believe after the war, that “it was more ‘responsible’ to stay on the job no matter under what conditions or with what consequences” than to withdraw into the private realm (Arendt 2003a, 35).
In the passage cited above Arendt puts the word “responsibility” in quotation marks to show that a commitment to responsibility in this case was profoundly misplaced. In this situation the persona of the official overwhelmed the possibility of individuality and thus the capacity for individual judgment. Without such judgment – one that treats every situation on its own merits and which does not rely on public opinion and customary rules – a determination to take responsibility can do more bad than good. People who stayed on the job out of “responsibility” in fact committed themselves to perpetuating evil. What this adds to our understanding of Arendt’s notion of personal responsibility is that taking responsibility for one’s actions should be always preceded by taking responsibility for judging for oneself and an attempt to understand how this particular situation may be different from others.

Another distinctive feature of totalitarianism that Arendt discusses in the essay is its relationship to law. On the one hand, Arendt emphasises the overt criminality of the Nazi regime. On the other, she argues that the Nazi regime was by no means lawless. Let me consider this argument and its implication for the issue of responsibility. Firstly, Arendt is adamant that totalitarian dictatorships are overtly criminal as they persecute and kill people “who [are] ‘innocent’ even from the viewpoint of the party in power” (Arendt 2003a, 33). Therefore, Arendt suggests that the traditional legal defence of reason of the state is not applicable when we talk about crimes committed by totalitarian regimes (37). The reason-of-the-state defence holds only when acts of violence committed by the state are occasional and aimed at protecting an otherwise legal state of affairs so that, despite these occasional crimes, the general aim of the state remains ensuring the wellbeing and safety of all its residents. According to Arendt, this was not the case in the Third Reich where crimes committed by the system against
innocent people became habitual and regular and the whole state was turned into a killing factory: “the whole state machinery enforced what normally are considered criminal activities” (Arendt 2003a, 39).

Arendt recognises that this inherent criminality in the Nazi system makes it harder to distinguish evil from good, criminality from lawfulness. To explain what I mean here, let me refer to how Arendt considers a justification of the judges in one of the trials of a Nazi criminal. Arendt writes that the judges stated in their ruling that the Nazi criminal should have been able to recognise the unlawfulness of “superior orders” and refuse to follow these orders because, as Arendt quotes from this court ruling, “unlawfulness ‘should fly like a black flag as a warning reading Prohibited’” (Arendt 2003a, 40). The judges further stated that the Nazi functionary should have followed “a feeling for such [immoral] things [that] has been inbred in us for so many centuries that it could not suddenly have been lost” (Arendt 2003a, 41). Arendt finds this justification of the court rather naïve. She does not refute the judges’ claim that the Nazi functionaries could and should have been able to recognise the evil character of the “superior orders” given to them. However, she disagrees that this recognition was as straightforward and matter-of-course a task as the judges presumed, and that “inbred” “feeling” was the right way of describing what could enable individuals to distinguish evil from good under totalitarianism.

Arendt emphasises that people under totalitarianism “acted under conditions in which every moral act was illegal and every legal act was a crime” (Arendt 2003a, 41). As a result of this reversal of what is legal and criminal, habitual ways of thinking and judging would hardly register a slip from legality into criminality. It would be much easier for people to recognise unlawful orders if they are “clearly marked off as an
exception” (40). However, the majority of the orders that the Nazi functionaries received were criminal in their character. Therefore, not only did the criminal orders bear no mark of exceptionalism, the sheer number of them and the consistency of their content made noncriminal orders stand out and appear to the functionaries as different and, therefore, illegal: “the trouble is that in totalitarian regimes, and especially in the last years of the Hitler regime, this mark [of exceptionalism] clearly belonged to noncriminal orders” (40). Therefore, Arendt is aware that under Nazi rule, evil did not appear to the majority of people as that which “flies like a black flag” above actions and words. Evil lost its distinguishing mark which allowed humans to easily recognise it as evil.

Part of the reason why it was hard to recognise the immorality of the “superior orders,” Arendt proposes, is because these commands appeared to be in accord with “the spirit of the law of the country” and to disobey them would require people “to contradict the law of the land and their knowledge of it” (Arendt 2003a, 40). What Arendt argues here is that there was more to the totalitarian dictatorship than “a gang of criminals who in conspiracy will commit just any crimes” (41). To support her argument Arendt notices that crimes committed by the Nazi, as well as their methods, were selective – for example, brutality, bribery and theft were explicitly banned, and it was only the murder of targeted groups of people that was decriminalised and habituated.

For Arendt, the Nazi regime thus was not lawless. Rather, it represented an attempt to create a “new order” which is lawful in the eyes of people: “this ‘new order’ was exactly what it said it was – not only gruesomely novel, but also and above all, an order” (Arendt 2003a, 41, emphasis in the original). The “gruesome novelty” of the
order, as Arendt argues, was partly due to the perversion of a foundational principle of both religious and secular law – “Thou shalt not kill.” Within this order, as Arendt shows, the law, therefore, was used as an instrument for the destruction of arbitrarily selected groups of people. Arendt further proposes that if we want to understand the nature of totalitarian crimes, we should keep in mind that these crimes against innocent people were authorised by the new “order” that pronounced these crimes legal:

The moral point of this matter is never reached by calling what happened by the name of “genocide” or by counting the many millions of victims: extermination of whole peoples had happened before in antiquity, as well as in modern colonization. It is reached only when we realize that this happened within the frame of a legal order and that the cornerstone of this “new law” consisted of the command “Thou shalt kill,” not thy enemy but innocent people who were not even potentially dangerous, and not for any reason of necessity but, on the contrary, even against all military and other utilitarian considerations. (Arendt 2003a, 42)

The very moral problem posed by the Nazi regime was that most people proved to be incapable of registering this perversion of the law or to foresee its implications. They assumed the responsibility of obeying the new law regardless of the consequences. As Arendt suggests, many “believed in the ‘new order’ for no other reason than that that was the way things were” (Arendt 2003a, 43). As a result, enormous crimes were committed not by “outlaws, monsters, or raving sadists, but by the most respected members of respectable society” (42), that is, by law-abiding citizens who were summoned to support the new order under the narratives of responsibility, obedience and historical necessity.
Arendt reinforces her earlier claim that in this situation of the reversal of criminality and legality, moral norms, if they are understood as customary rules of conduct, cannot supply guidelines for judgment, for distinguishing right from wrong, good from evil. Morality, when it relies only on customary rules, can be flipped on its head overnight and adopted as the new moral code accommodating the new Nazi “order.” As Arendt puts it:

It was as though morality, at the very moment of its total collapse within an old and highly civilized nation, stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of *mores*, of customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with no more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of a whole people. (Arendt 2003a, 43, emphasis in the original)

In the passage above Arendt invokes one of the recurrent metaphors in her writings – a comparison of rule-based morality with “table manners.” This metaphor emphasises the ease with which many people under the Nazi totalitarian regime were eager to commit themselves to a new moral code – a code based on the command “Thou shalt kill” instead of “Thou shalt not kill.” How was it then possible that millions of respectable people so easily accepted the new “order,” its law, and new moral norms accommodating this order and law? What could have prevented them from doing so?

As I mentioned, Arendt dismisses as rather naïve and optimistic the position of the judges at the post-war trials of the Nazi functionaries in their claim that an “inbred” “feeling” of lawfulness should have been enough for people to recognise the criminality of the Nazi regime and refuse to participate. Arendt rejects such an ontological account of conscience. That this account is inadequate was demonstrated to her by the very fact
that most people failed to recognise and resist the systematic and criminal order established by the Nazi – an order that purposively habituated people to selective evildoing, claimed to be lawful and referred to the powerful narratives of sacrifice, historical and natural necessity, and obedience to legitimise its criminal actions. The advent of totalitarianism showed Arendt that humans are not ontologically endowed with an ability to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil. But it also proved to her that some people were able to not succumb to the systematic pressures of evildoing, and hence there is something about these people’s attitudes to the world and themselves that allowed them to remain alert to evil deeds, to recognise the reversal of criminality and legality, and to judge for themselves. Arendt thus formulates her questions as follows:

First, in what way were those few different who in all walks of life did not collaborate and refused to participate in public life, though they could not and did not rise in rebellion? And second, if we agree that those who did serve on whatever level and in whatever capacity were not simply monsters, what was it that made them behave as they did? On what moral, as distinguished from legal, grounds did they justify their conduct after the defeat of the regime and the breakdown of the “new order” with its new set of values? (Arendt 2003a, 43–44)

Arendt devotes to these questions the last part of the essay and in the next section I proceed with considering how Arendt unpacks them. This analysis allows me to answer the fundamental question that concerns Arendt in this essay – why are some people able to take responsibility for independent judgment in situations that require such judgment while others avoid it?
5. Personal responsibility and the dialogue of the “two-in-one”

In response to the first question – “in what way were those few different who in all walks of life did not collaborate and refused to participate in public life?” (Arendt 2003a, 43) – Arendt answers that “the nonparticipants, called irresponsible by the majority, were the only ones who dared judge by themselves” (44). The use of the verb “dare” shows that judging in that situation required courage and a readiness to go against the opinion of the majority. Arendt further speculates about what allowed people who refused to participate in public and social activities to have that courage to face up to reality and judge for themselves. It was not their knowledge of old moral values. Neither did they create a new set of moral norms. Arendt notices that unlike those who adapted to the regime, the nonparticipants who proved to be immune to the change in the moral code did not judge by preconceived standards, that is, in an “automatic way – as though we dispose of a set of learned or innate rules which we then apply to the particular case as it arises, so that every new experience or situation is already prejudged and we need only act out whatever we learned or possessed beforehand” (44). What allowed people to judge for themselves every new situation was a particular quality of the relationship that they had with themselves:

Their criterion, I think, was a different one: they asked themselves to what extent they would still be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds; and they decided that it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves at all. Hence, they also chose to
die when they were forced to participate. To put it crudely, they refused to murder, not so much because they still held fast to the command “Thou shalt not kill,” but because they were unwilling to live together with a murderer – themselves. (Arendt 2003a, 44)

Here we can see how Arendt returns to the Socratic proposition with which she started the essay, that “it is better to suffer than to do wrong” (Arendt 2003a, 18). At the beginning of the essay Arendt remarks that she was surprised by how many people argued that this Socratic wisdom was not relevant to the situation of the Nazi Reich, thereby attempting to exculpate people who complied with the regime, for example, the Jewish leaders. In the passage quoted above, Arendt seeks to prove otherwise. She states that it was precisely a commitment to this Socratic proposition that enabled people to abstain from complying with the regime. They preferred to die rather than harm someone else because they knew that the price they would have to pay for committing this immoral deed would be to spend the rest of their lives in the company of a murderer, that is, themselves. In their moral choices, they thus relied on their inner criterion rather than on external incentives, imperatives, commands or rules. This criterion can be formulated in terms of the question “Will I be able to live with myself if I commit or commission this or that deed, if I say this or that word?”

Arendt further explains that in order to be able to “judge” according to the Socratic proposition, people do not need “a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking” (Arendt 2003a, 44–45, emphasis added). In this passage Arendt connects the faculty of
independent judgment to the phenomenon of the “two-in-one” that I discussed in the chapter on the Socrates essay. For further insights into this phenomenon we can turn to *The Life of the Mind*, where Arendt gives one of her most succinct explanations of it. She refers to the “two-in-one” as “the original duality or the split between me and myself which is inherent in all consciousness” and which can be “actualised” into “the soundless dialogue of the I with itself” (Arendt 1978, 74–75). Like in the Socrates essay, Arendt calls this inner dialogue thinking. This split of the “two-in-one” opens up when an individual is left by herself, and it closes down again when she speaks to others and acts together with them in the world of human affairs. This makes solitude a necessary precondition for this type of thinking.

Arendt remarks in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” that as a process of conversing with oneself in solitude, thinking assumes a different quality (Arendt 2003a, 44–45): it is not “technical” (concerned with logical calculus and reasoning) or “theoretical” (concerned with knowledge construction for its own sake); rather, it is concerned with the meaning of lived experiences in the world of human affairs. The dialogue with herself, her engagement in thought about her life experiences opens up an inner relationship of an individual to herself. This makes it possible for her to ask the question of what this or that action or speech can mean for her ability to live with herself, and whether she will be able to live with herself if she commits or commissions this or that deed.

The quest for meaning thus arises due to the fact that thinking happens in the form of a silent conversation with one’s inner dialogical partner – this conversation allows an individual to inquire into what every particular phenomenon means for her. This brings us back to Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil”: thinking understood as the silent
dialogue of the “two-in-one” assumes an ethical dimension as it allows humans to constitute meaning in what it is that they are doing or are about to do. When an individual is committed to thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, her judgment stops being automatic and ceases to follow preconceived norms and standards. Judgment becomes that which generates its “own principles” in every concrete situation, thus protecting an individual from becoming complicit in evildoing.

Let me further unpack the relationship between thinking as the dialogue of the “two-in-one” and the ability of an individual to judge for herself her deeds and words and to assume responsibility for them. By practising the dialogue of the “two-in-one” an individual become able to learn what it means to live together with herself. It is noteworthy that Arendt talks about the dialogue of the “two-in-one” not as an ad hoc experience but as a sustained practice, one which requires of an individual a conscious commitment and willingness to maintain this inner conversation and the solitude it requires. This can be gauged from Arendt’s expression “to live together explicitly with oneself.” The qualifier “explicitly” presupposes a certain level of awareness that “I am the two-in-one” and that I have to live not only with others but also with myself. Furthermore, this ability of an individual to live together with herself, in the sense that Arendt intends it, requires her to judge for herself every situation and her conduct in it so as to avoid any deed that will cause her to fall out with herself. Through constantly conversing with herself, an individual learns how to “own” her action, as it were – that is, to recognise herself in it and assume responsibility for it. This is because her actions – actual and potential – have been constantly thought about and endowed with meaning through this inner conversation with herself. This is why thinking as the dialogue of the
“two-in-one” becomes for Arendt a basis for assuming personal responsibility for both one’s judgment and one’s action.

Young-Bruehl (1982, 377), Arendt’s biographer, insightfully describes the relationship between judgment and thinking in the following passage: “Arendt realized that the internal harmony of thinking – ‘the dialogue between me and myself,’ as she called it – precedes judging and supplies it with its objects. Such thinking presupposes a capacity to stand back from the world of human affairs...[and] to search for meaning, to tell a meaningful story.” Here Young-Bruehl brings together two concepts of thinking – as the dialogue of the “two-in-one” and as the quest for meaning – and shows how thinking in this twofold sense enables humans to judge. However, not all scholars refer approvingly to the way Arendt sees the dialogue of the “two-in-one” as the ground for exercising judgment. For example, Benhabib (1988, 45) poses the following critical questions aimed at exposing the solipsistic character of Arendt’s conception of the dialogue of the “two-in-one” and its incompatibility with the ethos of political judgment: “[If the basis of the validity of our moral judgments is that they allow us ‘to be at home with ourselves,’ are we not in fact making validity a matter of the idiosyncrasies of the individual psyche?”

Contrary to what Benhabib argues in this passage, I suggest that the dialogue of the “two-in-one” is not solipsistic and self-absorbed: indeed, if it had been, it could not have been made the basis for the assumption of personal responsibility and for exercising independent judgment in situations that involve a plurality of individuals. Arendt’s reflections on the dialogue of the “two-in-one” as an ethical practice presuppose a connection between the inner duality, on the one hand, and the fact of human plurality, on the other. As Arendt sees it herself, the dialogue of the “two-in-
one,” even though it pertains to an individual’s inner life, still preserves a connection to the world: it carries out an imprint of the individual’s relationships with others and it points to the plurality of human beings with whom an individual can potentially share the world. This is why the withdrawal from the world that the activity of thinking entails need not be complete or final – when an individual finds herself in solitude, she is still related to others through her practice of the dialogue of the “two-in-one.” As Arendt puts it in “Ideology and Terror” – a chapter added to the second edition of The Origins of Totalitarianism – “all thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are presented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought” (Arendt 2004, 613).

Since the inner plurality and the plurality of human beings are related in the way I described above, every time, when in the context of her dialogue with herself, an individual judges what committing or commissioning a specific action can mean for her ability to live with herself, she at the same time validates whether this action can be harmful to a plurality of human beings. This is why the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” for Arendt, can become the ground for assuming personal responsibility and exercising independent judgment.

I want to emphasise that it is not plausible, as I see it, to claim that, for Arendt, judgment linearly succeeds thinking as though one first thinks and then one judges. As I have argued earlier in the chapter, judgment is in a two-way relationship with thinking. Thinking in the sense of an exercise of reason actualised in the dialogue of the “two-in-one” prepares the human mind for independent judgment – judgment that proceeds without reliance on any externally imposed code of conduct or customary rules of
morality. At the same time, thinking thus conceived takes off only if an individual first takes on the responsibility of judging a situation for herself, of showing courage to be someone, to be a person rather than “nobody.” As we saw above, Eichmann refused to take responsibility for his judgment by hiding behind the self-deprecating rhetorical question, “Who am I to judge?” Therefore, he was not able to proceed with thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning.

As well, the failure of the Nazi criminals to take responsibility for their own judgments was pointed out by the judges during the post-war trials in their response to a defendant’s appeal to cog theory: “And why, if you please, did you become a cog or continue to be a cog under such circumstances?” (Arendt 2003a, 34). In other words, why did you fail to take responsibility for your judgment when you were enticed to become or continue being part of the system? The moment when one decides to judge for oneself is thus the moment when one assumes personal responsibility for one’s thinking, and hence for one’s actions, one’s words – for ensuring that one’s actions and words will not undermine the possibility of the dialogue with oneself.

Arendt finds it important to address an accusation often mounted against those who did not collaborate with the regime. This accusation suggests that by withdrawing from the world and trying to preserve the harmony of the relationship to oneself, the non-collaborators behaved “irresponsibly” as they abdicated responsibility for the world. At the same time, it is assumed that those who did comply with the regime chose to sacrifice their conscience in order to slightly improve things and ease the lot of victims of the regime as much as they could. For Arendt, however, it is a fallacy that an individual can assume responsibility for the world in a situation when every aspect of this world is dominated by totalitarianism. In such situations, she says,
Responsibility for the world, which is primarily political, cannot be assumed because political responsibility always presupposes at least a minimum of political power. Impotence or complete powerlessness is, I think, a valid excuse. Its validity is all the stronger as it seems to require a certain moral quality even to recognize powerlessness, the good will and good faith to face realities and not to live in illusions. Moreover, it is precisely in this admission of one’s own impotence that a last remnant of strength and even power can still be preserved even under desperate conditions. (Arendt 2003a, 45)

In this passage Arendt refers to the concept of power. We know from The Human Condition (Arendt 1998, 200) that Arendt maintains a distinction between power and strength. While strength is an individual capacity, power is a function of human relationships that stems from the capacity to persuade others to follow one’s initiative and act in concert. Under totalitarian dictatorships, in most cases there is no possibility of sustaining power through relationships with others and acting politically, since all the worldly spaces that allow the plurality of individuals to relate to each other have been destroyed.

To understand what Arendt means here, let me consider her critique of the argument of “lesser evil” that was often used by those who complied with the regime in Nazi Germany and then later justified their conduct. In the essay, Arendt articulates this argument as follows: “If you are confronted with two evils…it is your duty to opt for the lesser one, whereas it is irresponsible to refuse to choose altogether” (Arendt 2003a, 35–36). The fallacy of this argument consists in an assumption that one must assume responsibility for making a choice in favour of the “lesser evil” when, in fact, the only responsible conduct in this case would be “to refuse to choose altogether” (36). Arendt
remarks that those who yield to the fallacy of the “lesser evil” were only playing into the hands of the Nazi regime. Moreover, Arendt shows that the Nazi leaders deliberately deployed this fallacy to habituate people to ever increasing degrees of evil (Arendt 2003a, 35–36). “The lesser evil,” Arendt argues, was “one of the mechanisms built into the machinery of terror and criminality” (36). As we know from Arendt’s correspondence, she believes that a similar argument was used by the Jewish functionaries who collaborated with the Nazis. In her letter to Grafton, she suggests that among the Jewish leaders,

[i]t was common enough to think: (a) If some of us have to die, it is better that we decide than the Nazis. I disagree. It would have been infinitely better to let the Nazis do their own murderous business. (b) With a hundred victims we shall save a thousand. This sounds to me like the last version of human sacrifice: pick seven virgins, sacrifice them to placate the wrath of the gods. Well, this is not my religious belief, and most certainly it is not the faith of Judaism. Finally, the theory of the lesser evil: Let us serve in order to prevent worse men from taking these positions; let us do bad things in order to prevent the worst. (Arendt 2007b, 481)

What Arendt is getting at in this passage is that it would have been much more responsible to refuse to take responsibility altogether and not give in to a desire to prevent the worst from happening. What one needed to avoid complicity with the crimes of the Nazis is to face up to the reality of one’s powerlessness to improve things. In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt notices that in order to come to an understanding and acceptance of one’s powerlessness, a certain “moral quality” is required (Arendt 2003a, 45). This “moral quality,” as I understand it, has two aspects: it
involves firstly the willingness to learn about the reality and facts of the Nazi regime, to think about these facts and face up to the reality, rather than seeking an escape in the illusion of one’s omnipotence, and secondly, the willingness and humility to recognise the limits of one’s ability to change on one’s own a world dominated by totalitarian ideologies and terrors.

The majority of people under totalitarianism proved to be lacking in this ability to face up to reality and to make a judgment as to when one should refuse to assume responsibility for the world. This gives rise to Arendt’s second question – “if we agree that those who did serve [the regime] on whatever level and in whatever capacity were not simply monsters, what was it that made them behave as they did?” (Arendt 2003a, 43–44). Arendt emphasises that many of the collaborators argued at the post-war trials that they acted according to the moral virtue of obedience and thus should be exculpated of any guilt. They were convinced that it was their moral responsibility to keep performing their tasks and duties as they had to stay loyal to their government and the law of the land. Arendt renders their arguments as follows:

[Every organization demands obedience to superiors as well as obedience to the laws of the land. Obedience is a political virtue of the first order, and without it no body politic could survive. Unrestricted freedom of conscience exists nowhere, for it would spell the doom of every organized community. (Arendt 2003a, 46)

Arendt takes this argument seriously, as she believes that it reflects an honest conviction held by the Nazi collaborators rather than a defence tactic in the course of their trial as war criminals. Arendt herself disagrees that this is a plausible justification for the crimes committed by Nazi functionaries and fellow travellers. Arendt argues that
the use of the term “obedience” in this context is totally misplaced since we are talking about the relationship between an adult individual – who is neither a child nor a slave – and the state (Arendt 2003a, 45). For Arendt, this relationship should be conceived in terms of a free consent. She quotes from Madison that “‘all governments’… even the most autocratic ones, even tyrannies, ‘rest on consent,’ and the fallacy lies in the equation of consent with obedience. An adult consents where a child obeys; if an adult is said to obey, he actually supports the organization or the authority or the law that claims ‘obedience’” (46, emphasis in the original). Here Arendt is claiming that even under totalitarian terror and oppression, an individual was not coerced into obedience unless she allowed it to happen. Neither was an individual forced to continue supporting the regime: in most cases there was always the option of opting out of duties.

It is important to note here that Arendt does not suggest that all people under totalitarian rule had the ability to consent. The inmates in the concentration and extermination camps existed under the total domination of terror and were put in a situation in which the notion of “consent” lost its meaning. They were even deprived of the possibility of dying meaningfully. Yet, for Arendt, the same was not true for those who managed and operated the camps or in any other way collaborated with the Nazis outside the camps. Arendt seeks to show that in most cases collaborators with the regime were able to opt out of their duties without immediate physical punishment or risk to their lives. This is how, for example, she explains it in her letter to Scholem when she refers to the Jewish leaders who collaborated with the Nazis: “These people had still a certain, limited freedom of decision and of action. Just as the SS murderers also possessed, as we now know, a limited choice of alternatives. They could say: ‘I wish to be relieved of my murderous duties,’ and nothing would happen to them”
What Arendt wants to assert, then, in “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” is that, with exception of those who are exposed to the immediate and total physical and psychological terror, as were the inmates in the concentration camps, an adult human being retains the freedom to withdraw her consent to a political system, even if this system is as monstrous and dangerous as totalitarianism.

Arendt is aware that here she is challenging the whole tradition of Western thought, that is, the Platonic tradition of philosophy, which claims “that every body politic is constituted of rulers and ruled, and that the former give commands and the latter obey orders” (Arendt 2003a, 46). To provide an alternative imaginary of politics, Arendt refers to the pre-Platonic notion of politics, understood as “the relations between men in the sphere of concerted action” (47). She argues that according to this original understanding of politics, the political realm is based not on the hierarchy of the rulers and the ruled but on the relations between equal “plural men” who accomplish all initiatives together in a joint effort. A political leader is, therefore, not the one who commands and makes others obey but the one who is “the first among peers,” who stands in need of their support of, and consent to, his actions (47).

By projecting this pre-Platonic notion of politics onto the contemporary political conditions, Arendt is able to pinpoint the collective potential of “civil disobedience” – a situation when people simultaneously withdraw their support from a political regime or a leader and refuse to participate:

The nonparticipators in public life under a dictatorship are those who have refused their support by shunning those places of “responsibility” where such support, under the name of obedience, is required. And we have only for a
moment to imagine what would happen to any of these forms of government if enough people would act “irresponsibly” and refuse support, even without active resistance and rebellion, to see how effective a weapon this could be. (Arendt 2003a, 47)

Arendt seeks to emphasise that not everyone might be prepared for overt opposition and heroic rebellion against the regime – “it is obviously not everybody’s business to be a saint or a hero” (Arendt 2003a, 35). However, she adds that “personal or moral responsibility is everybody’s business” (35). By referring to the idea of “civil disobedience,” she wants to assert that anyone who was not under the direct coercion of the Nazi regime, as happened in concentration camps, could still contribute to the overthrowing of the regime by accepting their impotence and by withdrawing their consent from the regime. That way, in fact, they would have been able to preserve some limited amount of power for they would have now ceased being obedient “cogs” in a gigantic machine.

Arendt believes that by exposing the fallacy that presents humans as subjects who must obey a political order rather than individuals who voluntarily give their consent to be part of it, that is, by distinguishing obedience from consent, she is able to assert human dignity in defiance of such a monstrous and inhumane phenomenon as totalitarianism: “If we think these matters through, we might regain some measure of self-confidence and even pride, that is, regain what former times called the dignity or the honor of man: not perhaps of mankind but of the status of being human” (Arendt 2003a, 48). For Arendt, totalitarianism represents a direct danger to human plurality and to the status of a human being – a being who is capable of initiating a new beginning, asserting her unique individuality, and thinking and judging for herself. As we observed
throughout this investigation, totalitarianism subsumes action under the necessity of the laws of nature and history, it substitutes all mental processes with a stone-cold logicality, it destroys the worldly spaces of the “in between,” and thus the possibility of human beings to relate to one another, and it endangers human diversity by committing the “crimes against humanity” which target people solely because of their differences.

By arguing that the consent of the individual matters for the maintenance of all political systems, including that of totalitarianism, and that the withdrawal of this consent is a possibility for everyone, Arendt is able to show that human beings are still able to preserve some agency and power in the face of the horrific crimes of totalitarianism.

In this chapter I discussed the relationships Arendt sees between judgment, personal responsibility and thinking in the context of her reflections on the crimes of the Nazi, the conduct of those who complied with and adapted to the regime of the Third Reich, and the experiences of those who had courage and willingness to judge for themselves. I showed that there is a two-way relationship between judgment and thinking. On the one hand, Arendt argues that the commitment to “live explicitly with oneself” that is made possible by the maintenance of the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” the engagement in the dialogue of thought, forms the basis for exercising independent judgment and assuming personal responsibility for such judgment, and concomitantly for one’s actions and words. On the other hand, I also showed that the commitment to “live explicitly with oneself” and to not avoid the inner dialogue of thought requires that the individual be willing in the first place to decide to judge without reliance on public opinion or customary rules of morality. Thinking in the sense of an exercise of reason cannot be initiated or sustained unless an individual sees herself as someone
capable of independent judgment. Eichmann did not and could not think as he could not imagine himself as a person who can pit his own judgment against the pressures of the system and the public opinion of others. He hid behind the self-deprecating rhetorical question “Who am I to judge?” and hence blocked his ability to think in response to events and situations in his life, and hence engage in the quest for meaning. As a result, he also deprived himself of the truth that he may have been able to constitute if he had assumed personal responsibility for the quest for meaning – the truth of how the world is disclosed to him in a way that is distinct from others and yet reveals the commonness of the world that he could share with them. Therein consists the relationship between thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, truth in the sense of that which an individual can constitute by engaging in this quest, and personal responsibility for judgment.

A lack of personal responsibility for judgment and an absence of the practice of thinking made Eichmann’s life “banal” in the sense that his life did not acquire the depth that only an engagement with the quest for meaning can ensure. This made Eichmann so susceptible to yielding to the systematic lies of the Nazis and to the systematic pressure carried out by the regime to support evildoing – hence the “banality” of his evil. Without being able to engage in thinking that poses the question of meaning, Eichmann allowed himself to be swept away by the demands of the Nazi system even though he himself was an ordinary individual – neither a monster nor an incarnation of a demonic force. The moral importance of the readiness to take personal responsibility for judging for oneself and the willingness to engage in thinking as the quest for meaning and constitute truth in relation to this quest consists in the fact that
these can allow humans to abstain from evildoing in such boundary situations as living under totalitarianism.
Conclusion

The present enquiry was prompted by a desire to argue against a common assumption in the scholarship on Hannah Arendt’s thought that Arendt seeks to oppose truth to politics and to regard the two as mutually exclusive. By offering an analysis of five of Arendt’s essays, I intended to demonstrate that this argument does not reveal her thought in its full complexity. I also proposed that even though the topic of the relationship between truth and politics has received extensive treatment in previous Arendt scholarship, most scholars focus either on Arendt’s criticism of the idea of Platonic truth or on the role Arendt assigns to a particular type of truth – factual truth – in the political realm. In the present enquiry I sought to emphasise that there is a sense of truth in Arendt’s writings that is neither the Platonic truth nor “a truth of fact.” It is truth that Arendt associates with the kind of thinking which corresponds to the faculty of reason and involves the quest for meaning.

The potential contribution of this thesis to the existing scholarship on Arendt is twofold. Firstly, the thesis explores the proposition that Arendt uses thinking in the sense of exercising the faculty of reason in order to bring truth and politics into relation. I argue that in Arendt’s writings there is a sustained enquiry into the sense of truth that individuals can constitute if and when they engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning. I argue that truth in relation to the quest for meaning is not only compatible with politics in Arendt’s particular sense but is essential for it.

Secondly, this thesis brings together five essays that in this combination have not been considered before – “Socrates,” “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” “Understanding and Politics,” “Truth and Politics” and “Personal
Responsibility under Dictatorship.” The thesis offers a close textual analysis of these essays in a way that permits an intertextual commentary on them and sheds light on different aspects of the relationship between politics and truth where truth is conceived as the truth, or rather a plurality of truths that humans can constitute through engaging in the quest for meaning. By analysing how these essays are interrelated and shed light on one another, I was able to identify key themes that can contribute to our understanding of this complex relationship between truth and politics as Arendt conceives it. I address these themes in the next section.

1. Key themes of the thesis: different aspects of truth in relation to the quest for meaning

Firstly, it became apparent that there is a consistent line of enquiry that Arendt sustains throughout her work – namely an enquiry into a kind of thinking that is not deployed for the purpose of producing knowledge but in order to engage in the quest for meaning. In *The Life of the Mind* Arendt illuminates this kind of thinking by borrowing Kant’s distinction between the faculty of “reason” and the faculty of “intellect.” Thinking as an exercise of the faculty of “reason” does not serve the purpose of establishing “irrefutable” truth which the “intellect” seeks to achieve in its quest for knowledge. However, as I argue, thinking that corresponds to “reason” is not deprived of truth either. Thinking thus understood is oriented by another kind of truth – truth in relation to meaning. As my analysis in this thesis demonstrated, this idea of thinking finds different manifestations in the five essays I explored: as the activity of formulating *doxai* (opinions) in the sense of how the world “appears to me”; as the idea of thinking for oneself (*selbstdenken*), which Arendt associates with the figure of Lessing; as the
dialogue of the “two-in-one,” that is, the dialogue of thought that an individual can carry out by conversing with herself; as storytelling, where individuals reflect on the events of the past and try to “reconcile themselves” to them; as “true understanding,” whereby individuals bring together knowledge and uncritical preliminary understanding to develop an insight into the uniqueness of political phenomena; and as searching for and establishing facts and endowing them with meaning. I attempted to argue that these are all manifestations of thinking understood as the quest for meaning. They are all oriented not by a desire to achieve unequivocal final results and to produce and accumulate knowledge but by the need of humans to constitute meaning – to endow with significance the world as it “appears” to them, words and actions of their own and those of others, knowledge that they produce, events of the past, political phenomena, facts about humans affairs, etc.

Secondly, in so far as all five essays involve Arendt’s reflections on thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning, I argued that in all of them there is a space for talking about truth in relation to thinking thus conceived. It is truth, or rather a plurality of truths, that individuals can constitute if and when they are willing to unendingly pursue the quest for meaning. Depending on the context of the essay, truth in relation to the kind of thinking that seeks meaning lends itself to various conceptualisations. In the essay on Socrates, Arendt talks about truths that inhere in *doxa* – truths of how the world “appears” to individuals from their unique standpoints. In the essay on Lessing, these are truths that friends constitute in the discourse of friendship when they discuss among themselves what each of them “deems truth” and articulate and strengthen their accounts of truth by distinguishing them from one another. In the essay “Understanding and Politics,” the idea of truth in relation to the quest for meaning emerges in the
context of Arendt’s reflections on how it can be possible to understand and “reconcile ourselves to the world,” one which has been profoundly changed by an unprecedented event – that of totalitarianism. The essay “Truth and Politics,” too, opens up the possibility of talking about truth in relation to thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning. For, as I argued drawing on the insight of Peg Birmingham (2012), factual truths, which are the main subject of the essay, are not positivist or empiricist “facts” that speak for themselves and merely await acknowledgment by humans; rather, the human ability to recognise, preserve and hand down facts to future generations depends on the presence of those who are willing to recognise and interpret facts by telling stories about them and endowing them with meaning – without, however, modifying the content of factual statements.

In “Truth and Politics” Arendt sees self-deception as the greatest danger in relation to truth and truthfulness in the political realm. A self-deceiving individual loses her bearings and fails to distinguish between honesty and mendacity – she deceives herself about her honesty and starts “honestly” believing falsehoods and defending them. An individual finds herself in a situation where she seemingly cannot rely on her own sense of honesty to ensure that she is truthful; neither can she fully rely on others, who may also have fallen prey to self-deception. This brings to the fore the urgent question of what it takes to be truthful under the conditions of “organised lying” and mass self-deception. I suggested that part of the answer to this question lies precisely in the commitment of an individual to the activity of thinking *qua* reason since it takes the form of a dialogue of the two-in-one that can potentially enable an individual to stop the monologue of self-deception and start questioning, doubting and verifying what she believes to be truth.
Finally, the essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” can be also read from the perspective of what it contributes to our understanding of the sense of truth in relation to the quest for meaning. Arendt starts the essay by invoking her thesis of the “banality of evil” which proposes that evil of the kind that the “desk murderer” Eichmann committed stems from the failure to think for oneself. Thinking here corresponds not to the faculty of cognition (intellect) but to that of reason, which enables humans to endow their lives, their actions and words with meaning. In the essay, Arendt compares the attitudes and motivations of those many who collaborated with the Nazi regime and became complicit with its evils, and of those few who avoided doing so. Her reflections allowed us to enquire into why those many failed to deploy their faculty of reason and what enabled those few individuals to do so. Arendt’s answer involves an exploration of the faculty of judgement, which, she argues, can work spontaneously, that is, without being bound to public opinion, rules and fixed moral codes, since a blind adherence to these in the unprecedented situation of totalitarian rule can easily lead to bad judgment and draw an individual into complicity with evil, as happened in Nazi Germany with many intellectuals and renowned public figures. Drawing on her analysis, I argued that if an individual fails to see herself as someone who has the ability, the right and the courage to judge for herself and take responsibility for such judgment, she blocks the possibility of exercising her faculty of “reason” and engaging in the quest for meaning. This makes an individual vulnerable to the systematic pressures toward evildoing imposed by the system. Moreover, an individual deprives herself of the truth in relation to meaning that she could have constituted had she assumed the responsibility for judging for herself.
The third theme that emerged out of my analysis of the five essays is the importance of Arendt’s “perspectivism,” as it is referred to in the literature, for our understanding of thinking that responds to the inexhaustible need to seek meaning that humans possess by virtue of having the faculty of “reason,” and the kind of truth that an individual can constitute if she chooses to recognise this need and engage in such thinking. For Arendt, the world is not a thing that exists out there and speaks for itself. Rather, for her, the world “appears” to humans from a plurality of distinct perspectives since every individual occupies a particular standpoint in the world. To each individual, therefore, the world “appears” from an angle which is unique.

Given that individuals can only see the world from their own perspectives and never from an “objective,” overarching point of view, the quest for meaning never follows a predetermined path: it assumes the plurality of different and contingent paths. This is because the quest for meaning, as Arendt continuously emphasises in the essays I analysed, is driven by the need of individuals to “reconcile themselves” to the world of human affairs that had existed before individuals came to the world upon birth and will continue to exist after they leave it upon death. This world swiftly changes under the impact of the appearance of newcomers – individuals who insert themselves into this world by starting new beginnings through action and speech. The need of individuals to “reconcile themselves” to the world, provided that they are willing to respond to this need, lasts as long as they are alive. For this need arises anew every time an individual finds herself in new situations and in new contexts, when she is confronted with new facts and political phenomena, when she encounters appearances of other people and takes up the challenge of recognising and affirming them, when she is confronted with outcomes of her own actions and actions of others, and when she
decides to face up to the reality of the past. This need to “reconcile herself” to the world, therefore, can never be satisfied by accepting ready-made results and answers that are “objectively” valid for all. It can be satisfied only by an individual’s active efforts to sustain thinking in the sense of an unending quest for meaning. A recurrent metaphor that Arendt uses to characterise this kind of thinking is that of Penelope’s web: like Penelope’s web, thinking as the quest for meaning constantly undoes that which it wove before. All the modalities of thinking that I considered throughout my analysis of the essays – thinking as formulating of doxai, as “thinking for oneself,” as the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” as “true understanding,” as storytelling – have an unending character and require continuous effort on the part of an individual to sustain them.

What follows from this is that there can be no one single “objective” truth when we talk about truth in relation to the quest for meaning which is driven by the need of humans to “reconcile themselves to reality.” There is always a plurality of individuals positioned differently in relation to the world whose quests for meaning follow different paths and thus can give rise to a plurality of truths that individuals can constitute through engaging in these quests. The theme of the plurality of truths came up a number of times in the course of the present investigation. In the essay “Socrates” Arendt emphasises Socrates’ insight that truth in relation to the status of the citizen who lives in the company of others in the realm of human affairs is always truth in the plural and that, for the citizen, it is important to see truth in the doxa of each of his fellows. Importantly, for Arendt, it is not just that there is a plurality of truths of doxai in an ontological sense. The very coming into appearance of this plurality happens through the bringing of opinion in relation to all other opinions. Through his midwifery,
Arendt’s Socrates intends to initiate the process whereby each opinion giver is invited to consider her opinion in its relation to opinions of others and be inspired to reflect on her opinion further so as to proceed to the practice of “enlarged mentality” and include all possible opinions in her thinking. If a multitude of citizens engage in this process of thinking together about their doxai in this relational manner, then they can succeed in articulating doxai in their truthfulness and constituting a plurality of doxai.

In the essay on Lessing, Arendt represents Lessing as the second Socrates as he is concerned with the “relative rightness of opinions” and attempts to bring to life and keep in play a plurality of conflicting opinions and ensure a place for each of them in the world. For this, Lessing, like Socrates, seeks to bring opinions into relation – he provokes opinion holders to think for themselves (selbstdenken) and engage in polemics with others in order to articulate, defend and strengthen the truths of their opinions. The importance of the relationality of opinions, for Arendt, can also be illustrated by how Arendt’s Lessing sees relationships between friendship and truth. By demanding of friends that they abandon the notion of one single truth as an arbiter for settling their differences and disagreements, Lessing demands that in the discourse of friendship each of the friends not merely tells the others what he “deems truth” but also asserts what he “deems truth” in relation to the truths of his friends and seeks to actively distinguish his truth from theirs.

The essay “Understanding and Politics” illuminates the idea of the plurality of truths from yet another perspective. In the context of her exploration of how we can understand the key political event of the twentieth century, totalitarianism, Arendt emphasises that the quest for meaning is never stable because the kind of thinking involved in it means that the individual will keep on considering the matter for as long
as she is alive. Therefore, understanding totalitarianism should not be treated as a means of developing a conclusive picture of this political phenomenon or as a source of final answers about it. The quest for understanding totalitarianism undertaken by historians and actors will produce not one but a plurality of pictures, stories and meanings depending on the particular standpoint in the world of each individual who engages in this quest, depending on the specific context and situation in which this quest takes place, her historical situatedness and life-stage.

The essay “Truth and Politics” allows us to consider the plurality of truths in relation to the quest for meaning in the context of Arendt’s discussion of factual truths. Arendt emphasises that the validity of facts cannot depend on persuasion and debates or on a number of people that agree to support this or that “fact.” Facts – and Arendt means here facts of the past, historical facts – should be acknowledged and accepted unconditionally as given, that is, as something which humans cannot change at will and amend to their liking. Yet, as I argue, it can be shown that to be preserved, facts need to be contextualised in the discourse among individuals as well as endowed with meaning through stories being told about them. This opens the way for a plurality of possible interpretations of the same facts, provided that the content of factual statements remains intact.

Looking back at the investigation, it can thus be argued that, for Arendt, truth in relation to the quest for meaning loses its affinity with final, conclusive, “objective” results – it assumes the form of plurality and becomes adequate to the fact of the plurality of unique human beings and the plurality of the perspectives on the world that they have. Moreover, this plurality of truths in relation to the quest for meaning is relational in its character. This plurality is not guaranteed. It comes into being only
when individuals can bring in relation to one another their diverse doxai, various accounts of what they “deem truth,” individual perspectives on the events of the past, different interpretations of facts and multiple stories and their meanings.

The proposition that the process of articulating truth that corresponds to thinking as “reason” is relational in its character is also connected to Arendt’s enquiry into the figures who can play the role of helping individuals engage with one another, articulate what it is that “appears” to them in relation to one another and endow appearances with meaning and significance. As emerged from the analysis of the essays, among these figures who provoke, facilitate and help individuals initiate their quests for meaning, Arendt identifies Socrates, who perceived his role in the polis as a “midwife” who helps others constitute the truths of their doxai, as well as Lessing, who provokes debates among thinkers and brings opposing opinions into polemics.

In addition Arendt constantly returns to the figures of the poet and the historian. She assigns to them an important role – that of initiating the process of storytelling. In “Understanding and Politics” Arendt emphasises how in telling a story the historian has the ability to highlight the “newness” of historical events and endow with meaning the deeds and words of actors and speakers involved in these events. This in turn enables actors who attend to the stories to face up to the reality of the past – here Arendt talks about the painful Nazi past which is very hard to come to terms with. Through engaging in storytelling, individuals become able to establish some space between themselves and the past and, therefore, try to “reconcile themselves” to what irrevocably happened.

We encounter a similar proposition in the essay on Lessing, in which Arendt, in the context of her discussion of the uneasy Nazi past, suggests that it is impossible to
“master” the past, but that it is possible for humans to “reconcile themselves” to it. She again emphasises that for this to happen, we need a help of a poet or a historian who can tell a story about an event. However, the role of the historian and the poet consists not in providing us with ready-made answers about the past but in provoking us to engage in storytelling ourselves, to retell the stories, to reflect on what these stories mean for us and interpret the past for ourselves.

In the essay “Truth and Politics,” Arendt assigns to the historian the important role of preserving factual truths. For this, the historian needs to not only record facts but also put them together in a story. For facts will not survive unless they are preserved within a story that makes the facts meaningful. This story is to be told in a way that pays tribute to all participants and recognises the significance of all their experiences. The story which is told in this way invites its listeners or readers to reflect on the diverse experiences and meanings of the participants in the story and figure out what the story and the facts involved in it can mean for them. The practice of story-telling prepares the listeners and readers for the exercise of judgment, that is, “telling right from wrong, beautiful from ugly.”

The last major theme that stood out in the analysis of the essays is the question of the “truthfulness” of individuals in relation to the kind of thinking that is concerned with the quest for meaning. As emerged from the analysis of the five essays, humans are not passive receivers of such truth. For truth in relation to meaning is not an “objective” truth that exists independently of humans and that can be simply grasped by humans once and for all. Truth in relation to the quest for meaning is a phenomenological achievement that demands of humans that they put an effort into
constantly searching, articulating, and constituting truth. It is this active orientation and commitment to truth-seeking that I call “truthfulness.”

As follows from the investigation undertaken in the thesis, what “truthfulness” means changes depending on the context of the enquiry that Arendt carries out in each particular essay. In the essay “Socrates,” as I argued, truthfulness can be conceived in three senses: firstly, the willingness of an individual to find a voice for one’s doxa and engage in the quest for meaning in how the world “appears” to her; secondly, the willingness to “see” truths in doxai of all others, which requires of an individual that they develop an insight into the world as it “appears” to others and think about the world from other people’s perspectives; and thirdly, the willingness to proceed to a state of “enlarged mentality” and to relate one’s doxa to the infinite variety of doxai of others, which can liberate doxa from prejudices and self-interests and make it “impartial.” As I remarked, in her essay on Socrates Arendt also emphasises the importance of practising and sustaining the dialogue of the “two-in-one” – the silent dialogue of thought – as this dialogue allows an individual to become truthful in the three senses articulated above.

In the essay on Lessing, I suggested, truthfulness is associated with a similar set of demands, but they appear in a different context – that of Arendt’s reflections on Lessing’s conception of friendship and his idea of selbstdenken (thinking for oneself). As emerged from these reflections, truthfulness involves a willingness on the part of friends to articulate what each of them “deems truth” in the course of the dialogue of friendship. For this, friends should be ready to actively challenge, question, defend and strengthen their respective truths, as well as assert them in distinction from those of
others. Moreover, the truthfulness of friends requires a commitment to the world, an interest in the world and its wellbeing, and a willingness to share this world with others.

In “Understanding and Politics,” in which Arendt explores the possibilities of understanding the event of totalitarianism, she perceives as one of the main threats to thinking as an exercise of the faculty of “reason” the tendency of individuals to take shortcuts in their pursuit of the quest for meaning. She highlights that humans expect of this quest final results. Thus they arbitrarily interrupt the quest for meaning by ascribing the status of absolute and final truth to tentative insights into the meaning of a phenomenon. The result of this attitude is indoctrination, which curtails the desire in humans to explore a phenomenon any further and figure out what it means for themselves. Therefore, what is required of humans if they want to be “truthful” in their quest for meaning is that they be willing to refuse to use the quest to produce conclusive answers and impose these answers on others. Another common way that the quest for meaning can be shut down or perverted is the tendency of scholars to resort to causality and deduce phenomena from general laws or explain their uniqueness away by subsuming them under traditional standards of thinking and judging. “Truthfulness” in relation to the quest for meaning, therefore, requires of a thinker that they be open to the “newness” of an event. This can be achieved by an individual orienting her enquiry in terms of insights delivered by preliminary, uncritical understanding, and then being willing to realise these insights in a critical, informed analysis by accumulating knowledge and afterwards reflecting again on the meaning of the knowledge she produced. Arendt calls this understanding “true.”

In “Truth and Politics” truthfulness in relation to thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning acquires a slightly different connotation: as I showed, in the context of
Arendt’s discussion the significance of facts for the political realm – to provide “the ground on which we stand” – and the dangers of “organized lying,” truthfulness means the willingness of an individual to search for and establish facts and recognise and respect the givenness of facts. Truthfulness in this context also implies a refusal to succumb to cynicism, which is one of the direct consequences of constantly experiencing “organized lying,” and to behave in such a way that no truths can exist at all. Truthfulness in this context also demands of individuals the willingness to resist gullibly accepting everything that is presented as truth and the readiness to take personal responsibility for validating and verifying facts.

In “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” as I read it, we saw the most comprehensive account of what it means to be able and willing to engage in thinking in the sense of a quest for meaning and to constitute truth in relation to this quest. As in her Socrates essay, Arendt assigns a particular significance to the practice of the dialogue of the “two-in-one.” For the practice of the dialogue of the “two-in-one” allows humans to develop a particular relationship with themselves – to “live explicitly with themselves.” In order to be able to live together with oneself, it is essential that an individual take responsibility for judging every particular situation without relying on public opinion or the mechanical application of a fixed moral code. By taking responsibility for judging for oneself, which happens in the context of her engagement in the dialogue of the two-in-one, an individual also takes responsibility for her actions and speech. People who know that they live not only together with others but also together with themselves cannot but have to think about every deed or word that they are about to commit or commission. This thinking involves asking themselves the question of meaning – what would it mean for me to live together with myself if I allow
myself to act or speak in that way? What follows from these reflections is that there are two interrelated reasons for why an individual can fail to initiate and sustain the quest for meaning and constitute truth in relation to this quest: a failure to engage in the practice of the dialogue of the “two-in-one” whereby an individual can relate to herself and come to an awareness that she lives not only with others but herself; and a fear of seeing oneself as someone who can judge for oneself and of extricating oneself from mainstream public opinion and a prescribed and fixed code of conduct. As I understand it, the reasons for this fear of seeing oneself as someone who can think and judge for oneself are complex and manifold: it can be a fear of standing out and being subjected to formal and informal sanctions from mainstream society for diverging from what is seen as acceptable, or a fear of abandoning the rules and norms internalised through education and upbringing and of proceeding in the absence of any reliable guidelines and standards, or a fear of taking full responsibility for one’s actions, judgments and words and their consequences, since thinking and judging for oneself come together with an awareness that, if something goes wrong, there will be no one else to hold responsible but the individual herself.

Having considered the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the five essays in regard to the idea of the truth that an individual can constitute by engaging in the quest for meaning, I proceed with outlining how this sense of truth can be related to politics in Arendt’s sense and what this investigation can add to how we understand Arendt’s conception of the political.
2. The relationship between truth and politics

In the literature on Arendt’s political thought we can find a comprehensive account of her concept of politics as the “web of relationships” that arises between human beings who “appear” to one another in public spaces, who act by starting new beginnings and accomplishing them together with others, who speak with others in the public realm, and who take joy in sharing the world with others. The present enquiry seeks to emphasise that truth in relation to the kind of thinking that corresponds to the faculty of reason has an important place in this rich concept of the political that Arendt offers. And in so far as truth in this sense cannot be passively learnt, truthfulness of individuals too has a high political importance if by truthfulness we understand the willingness of individuals to actively engage in an unending process of constituting truth through undertaking the quest for meaning. Below I summarise a set of propositions that emerged from the analysis of the five essays and that can contribute to our understanding of the political significance of truth and truthfulness thus conceived.

It is well known that Arendt puts at the centre of her conception of politics the phenomenon of human plurality, which she regarded as the political principle and condition par excellence. Politics in Arendt’s sense arises when and if there exists a plurality of others to whom an individual can “appear” in the public realm. For Arendt, plurality is relational and dynamic in its character. It is true that in some sense human beings are already together. But Arendt does not stop here. Plurality, for her, can emerge only by way of political actors relating to one another and to the world and constituting themselves as unique individuals who are both distinct and equal at the same time.
It is often suggested in the literature that, for Arendt, a way that individuals can relate to others is through action in Arendt’s sense of starting a new beginning and seeing it through together with others. The exploration of the five essays in this thesis made more emphatic a proposition that there is another important aspect of the human plurality in Arendt’s writings – the plurality of doxai (opinions). The plurality of doxai is not something that is already given: it is constituted by individuals voicing their doxai in public, developing mutual insights in the doxai of one another and bringing their doxai into relation. In this process individuals reveal truths of their doxa – that which is unique about each of their doxa and that which they have in common – the “same” world that “appears” differently to all humans but is still held by them in common. Therein lies the political significance of truth in relation to the quest for meaning: in the process of constituting this truth, humans develop their awareness of the commonness of the world they share with others and become capable of “seeing” one another as equal partners in this world – as “citizens” in Socrates’ terms, as “friends” in Lessing’s sense of “political” friendship, or as “contemporaries” who can come into the dialogue of “true understanding,” as Arendt represents it in “Understanding and Politics.” This political significance of thinking as the quest for meaning and truth in relation to this quest is highlighted by Arendt’s emphasis on the threats to the world of human affairs that she associates with the advent of totalitarianism as well as with tendencies characteristic of non-totalitarian societies – “organized lying,” a withering away of common sense, a widespread fear of judgment as well as a withdrawal of individuals from the world into the privacy of their concerns and a loss of their common interests in the world.
Another important element of Arendt’s conception of the political is the notion of “in-between” by which she means the spaces that lie between individuals and that both connect and separate them. Sometimes Arendt calls these “in-between” spaces “a world,” by which she means that the world of human affairs can be seen as the sum of these “in-between” spaces, reminding us of the surface of a table that brings humans together and at the same time sets them apart so that they do not fall onto one another. The possibility of constituting human plurality depends on whether these “in-between” spaces come into appearance or not, since in their absence humans are not able to “see” one another as distinct individuals and are in danger of being massed together – as happens in times of totalitarian terror, a terror that attempts to bind humans into one single amorphous mass.

Throughout the analysis of the essays, we saw how Arendt explores the possibility that by engaging in the quest for meaning and seeking to truth in relation to this quest, humans become able to create these “in-between” spaces, illuminate them and preserve their breadth. Moreover, by thinking about the world and endowing it with significance, individuals come to “see” the world that “appears” in these spaces as an object of their common interest and as a common framework of reference for their deeds and words. This means that by endowing the world with meaning and through “seeing” it as the common world, humans create the conditions of possibility for “in-between” spaces to become public places which gather humans together and in which the world is illuminated from the plurality of different perspectives and, therefore, “appear” to the spectators as “real.”

This brings us to yet another way of demonstrating the political significance of humans being “truthful,” that is, being willing to engage in the quest for meaning and
constitute truth in relation to this quest. This willingness is an important element of a complex process whereby humans develop their sense of reality. In the essays I explored, Arendt time and again returns to the proposition that what really is, for humans – the reality of the world, of all phenomena in the world, of actions and words, of past events as well as of human beings themselves – is that which “appears” to the plurality of spectators who are willing to perceive this appearance from diverse perspectives and to recognise and acknowledge it, thereby confirming its reality. In other words, an individual relies on others and on their willingness to share their perspectives on the world for being able to perceive the appearance of the world and her own appearance as real. Yet, in order to illuminate the world from a plurality of different perspectives, humans need to constitute a plurality of doxai, which is not something that is already given. For this, as we saw in the previous section, humans need to be “truthful,” that is, willing to engage in the quest for meaning and actively seek truth in relation to this quest.

Thinking as the quest for meaning allows humans to constitute the common world not only among their contemporaries but also with those who came before them and will come after them. As emerged throughout the thesis, the activity of storytelling, which can also be conceived as a form of thinking that pursues the quest for meaning, allows individuals to ensure the “remembrance” of “great” deeds and words so that they can be preserved for posterity and the continuity of the world of human affairs can be secured over time. As I have highlighted earlier in this conclusion, storytelling also plays a key role in the preservation of factual truths. In turn, facts when they are established set the boundaries for the political realm and ensure its relative stability by delineating a sphere – a sphere of historical facts – that actors cannot change at will.
Without this stability and continuity of the world over time, which is sustained through historical understanding and storytelling, no politics in Arendt’s sense is possible. For what inspires an individual to “appear” to others is a promise of earthly immortality that the world of human affairs can potentially guarantee to her.

The last sense in which constituting truth in relation to the quest for meaning can play an important political role is through allowing humans to acquire a thoughtful orientation to their past – an orientation whereby humans do not seek to “master” the past but rather take on the challenge of facing up to it and trying to “reconcile themselves” to what happened. As the analysis of the essays showed, Arendt proposes that thinking as storytelling enables humans to develop such an orientation to the reality of the past. Moreover, Arendt’s point is that without enduring the knowledge of the past, endowing it with significance and accepting it, which is made possible through storytelling, actors are not capable of initiating new beginnings. This is why thinking in the sense of the quest for understanding is considered by Arendt as another side of political action.

So, politics in Arendt’s sense is associated with a particular orientation of humans to reality – an orientation that recognises the fact of a plurality of humans existing in the same world and sees them as unique individuals, one that is based in the commitment to “appear” to others in public and respond to their appearing by acknowledging and confirming it, one that does not avoid the challenge of facing up to reality and that is animated by a desire and pleasure to share this world with others through acting in concert and engaging in the discourse of friendship with them. This orientation to reality is not something which humans possess in an ontological sense, and Arendt is aware of all the difficulties associated with developing, practising and remaining
committed to this political orientation in the contemporary world. What I tried to achieve in this thesis is to emphasise that if we want to develop and sustain this political orientation to reality, we need to be willing to use thinking for more than merely producing and accumulating knowledge: we must use it for generating meaning – formulating our doxai, thinking for ourselves (selbstdenken), pursuing “true understanding,” conducting the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” telling stories, and establishing and accepting factual truths. And when we do engage in thinking in these diverse modalities, we need to be “truthful,” that is, willing to actively seek and constitute truth in relation to the quest for meaning.
References

Works by Hannah Arendt


**Literature on Hannah Arendt’s political thought and other sources**


Endnotes

i See also Canovan’s (1983) insightful reply to Habermas in her article “A Case of Distorted Communication: A Note on Habermas and Arendt.”

ii Yeatman (2011) provides an insightful account of the phenomenological character of Arendt’s political thought in her exploration of Arendt’s notion of individuality. This account has profoundly informed the current investigation and its spirit.

iii It must be noted that even though Arendt seeks to preserve a distinction between reason and intellect, she also emphasises the role that the quest for meaning has to play in allowing humans to recognise and establish knowledge, including knowledge of factual truths. I will investigate the complexity of Arendt’s understanding of “facts” and the quest for knowledge in the fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis.

iv Another edition of Gorgias that Arendt had in her collection, the 1937 translation by Jowett, completely omits any reference to “the single self” or “being one.”

v Eigen in her article “Hannah Arendt’s ‘Lessing Rede’ and the ‘Truths’ of History” (2000) argues that Arendt must have been aware that the fact of this award was a part of a new historical narrative that the post-war German authorities wanted to create – the narrative which attempted to restore the continuity of German intellectual culture and tradition by forsaking the years of Nazism. Thus, as Eigen demonstrates, Arendt, as a recipient of the Lessing Prize, was to represent the German thinker who preserved the kernel of the German humanist tradition, to which Lessing arguably belonged as well, and who can now help to symbolically reconnect post-war Germany to its “true” past. As Eigen puts it, “the award” “was intended to posit a genealogy of cultural transmission and establish thereby a particular kind of history” (2000, 309). What Eigen means by “a particular kind of history” is the history that only superficially acknowledges the realities of the Nazi past and treats the years of the Third Reich as a mere detour from the otherwise “true” humanistic orientation of the German people.

vi According to Kohn, there are some differences between the original manuscript and the essay “Understanding and Politics” as it appeared in Partisan Review in 1954: the order of sections and sentences was changed, and also, certain fragments were taken out and excluded from the published version. As Kohn explains it, some of these fragments were obscure while others could have been controversial. With respect to the latter, I believe that Kohn may have referred, for example, to Arendt’s rather direct comments about the role of European nations in being permissive and conducive to the advent of totalitarianism (Arendt 1994a, FN 4, 324). Kohn set himself the task of reconstructing the essay in its entirety, and in his edition – the one I work with – the excluded fragments are attached at the end of the essay as endnotes.
As mentioned by Arendt’s biographer, Young-Bruehl (1984, 199–211), Arendt was engaged in revising the book and further enunciating and clarifying her perspective on totalitarianism long after the first edition was published. This can be seen from the multiple prefaces that Arendt produced for her later editions of the book as well as from the new sections that she added to its original version.

Hansen (2004) is one of the few Arendt scholars who set out to demonstrate that Arendt seeks to reconnect meaning and knowledge.

The word “totalitarianism” was coined in May 1923 by journalist Giovanni Amendola. It was used to criticise the rising power of the Fascist movement in Italy. The word came into common usage in the 1930s. It came to encompass National Socialism, especially after the Nazi “seizure of power” in 1933. By the mid-1930s, the German, Italian and Soviet systems were commonly viewed as totalitarian, and the comparison became even more frequent after the Nazi–Soviet pact was signed in 1939 (Baehr 2005).

“Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government” first appeared as an essay in the journal The Review of Politics in July of 1953 (Arendt 1953b). Later on Arendt incorporated this essay into The Origins of Totalitarianism as an epilogue added to the second enlarged edition of the manuscript in 1958. This is how Arendt comments on the significance of this addition in the Preface to the second edition: “As sometimes happens in such matters, there were certain insights of a more general and theoretical nature which now appear to me to grow directly out of the analysis of the elements of total domination in the third part of the book, but which I did not possess when I finished the original manuscript in 1949. These are now incorporated in Chapter XIII, ‘Ideology and Terror,’ of the present edition and they replace the rather inconclusive ‘Concluding Remarks’ that closed the original edition, some of which, however, have been shifted to other chapters” (Arendt 1958, xi). The lecture notes “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” written in the period 1953–1954, rehearse many themes that Arendt considers in “Ideology and Terror.” This is why I suggest analysing “Ideology and Terror” and “On the Nature of Totalitarianism” together.

As I see it, the fact that Arendt’s classification into factual truths and rational truths does not include the notion of truth which corresponds to a disclosure of meaning – meaning of the world as it appears to me, my doxa – should not mislead us. Arendt explicitly says that for the purpose of this essay she merely adopts the distinction between factual and rational truths as introduced by “the modern age” (Arendt 2006, 226). And the modern age, Arendt argues, “believes that truth is neither given to nor disclosed to but produced by the human mind” (226). This means that the distinction between facts and rational truths does not exclude the possibility that, as I have been arguing in this thesis, Arendt’s writings also keep in play the sense of truth which is related to meaning – truth which humans constitute during thinking as the quest for
meaning. In fact, as I will argue later in the chapter, there is a way of showing that “Truth and Politics” leaves room for this sense of truth, as can be seen from the relationship between truths of doxa and truths of facts that Arendt, as I see it, presupposes in the essay.

Further considerations of how the activity of judging can produce “its own principles” warrants a separate investigation. The difficulty of exploring this topic consists in the fact that due to her sudden death Arendt was unable to finish the last part of The Life of the Mind on judging, with which she intended to complete the trilogy “Thinking,” “Willing” and “Judging.”

In Eichmann in Jerusalem Arendt remarks that in 1944 Eichmann received an order from Himmler to halt extermination and destroy the “death factories.” However, Eichmann did everything to “sabotage” this order (Arendt 1963, 60) as it contradicted that which Eichmann had come to consider as lawful – the “law of the land” as manifested in Hitler’s order to carry out the Final Solution. Arendt emphasises that Eichmann even took an initiative to continue the transportation and extermination of his human “cargo” against Himmler’s order to put them on hold – an order that stood out for him as unlawful against the background of previous orders and in relation to the spirit of the law in the Nazi Germany.

Arendt went on to fully develop the theme of civil disobedience in “Civil Disobedience,” an essay she wrote in 1969 and published in her collection of essays Crises of the Republic (Arendt 1972).