Self creation and social critique: Kierkegaard, Arendt, and Castoriadis on thinking and discourse

Nicholas Taylor Rogerson

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Self Creation and Social Critique:
Kierkegaard, Arendt, and Castoriadis on Thinking and Discourse

by

Nicholas Taylor Rogerson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy

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In this essay, I respond critically to two social phenomena: the unreflective repetition of values and the problem of a democracy in name only. After revealing the stakes of the project through an introduction to the three main thinkers and some central contemporary issues that are particularly illustrative of the focal problems, I devote the three middle chapters to an examination of the public space and indirect communication as found in the work of, respectively, Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendt, and Søren Kierkegaard. I argue that when taken in concert, these three figures present a cogent account of how people ought to cultivate an *ethos* of critique or resistance, while nonetheless acknowledging that political participation is itself a mode of form-giving, or stabilization of social relations. The delicate balance between form-giving and critical resistance becomes central to the project, as does the relationship between the public space (Castoriadis and Arendt) and indirect communication (Kierkegaard). Political action is ultimately an educative process that fuels the productive questioning of values and the undermining of foundational principles, two essential aspects of genuine democracy and active, lucid self-creation.
“For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.”

—Franz Kafka, The Trees
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To my family and friends—I love you madly.
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List of Abbreviations

All .......................... Cornelius Castoriadis, “An Introductory Interview,” The Castoriadis Reader
BPF .......................... Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future
CUP .......................... Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript
CL .......................... Cornelius Castoriadis, Crossroads in the Labyrinth
DTBD .................. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Done and To Be Done,” The Castoriadis Reader
EU .......................... Hannah Arendt, Essays in Understanding
EJ .......................... Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil
FOT .......................... Cornelius Castoriadis, Figures of the Thinkable
HIKT .................. John Lippitt, Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought
HC .......................... Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition
IIS .......................... Cornelius Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society
JP .......................... Søren Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers
KW .......................... Søren Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard’s Writings (26 volumes)
LM1 .................. Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind, Volume 1
LMQA .................. Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy,” The Castoriadis Reader
NE .......................... Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
OT .......................... Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism
Pol .......................... Aristotle, Politics
PF .......................... Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments
PP .......................... Hannah Arendt, The Promise of Politics
PPA .......................... Cornelius Castoriadis, Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy
RJ .......................... Hannah Arendt, Responsibility and Judgment
WF .......................... Cornelius Castoriadis, World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis and the Imagination
WR .......................... Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” Altogether Elsewhere
Preface

In order to save space and time when following up on references, all citations of the three main figures in this essay—Castoriadis, Arendt, and Kierkegaard—in addition to Plato and Aristotle will be done parenthetically, in-line. A list of abbreviations is provided. Full bibliographic information can be found in the reference section. Unless otherwise noted, citations from Kierkegaard’s works (pseudonymous and signed) will be from the Princeton series, *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, edited by Howard and Edna Hong. They are cited by volume and page number. For example, a quote on page 600 from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* would appear: (KW XII.1 600). For the sake of convenience, however, when referring to a certain Kierkegaard work within the text, I will use an abbreviation which can be found in the List of Abbreviations, above. For example, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* would be: CUP. Journal entries (published by Indiana, Howard and Edna Hong ed.) will be cited using the volume and entry number: for example, entry number five from the first volume of the Journals and Papers would be cited: (JP I: 5). All references to Plato, unless otherwise noted, will be from Plato’s *Collected Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). All references to Aristotle, unless otherwise noted, will be from Barnes’ *Complete Works*, Volumes 1-2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). All emphasis in quotations is in the original unless otherwise noted. One more note: because the three focal thinkers traditionally used exclusively
masculine pronouns, I use feminine pronouns when doing so does not conflict with quotations or references. Any perceived inconsistency should be interpreted as an attempt to counter the overuse of masculine pronouns in philosophical writing.
Chapter One

Introduction

In this chapter, which serves as an introduction to the whole project, I contextualize my motivating philosophical question—*how does society create an active public space wherein people productively question values and institutions and adopt a critical resistance to inherited and totalizing forms of thought?*—by highlighting some contemporary issues that epitomize the central questions of this essay. By offering these concrete applications, I demonstrate the continuing relevance not only on theoretical grounds, but also in more concrete social-political terms. In fact, the unfortunate distinction—between theory and praxis—itself collapses. Following this groundwork, I point to the primary focus of the project, which is framed in terms of value formation and social criticism. By *inherited and totalizing forms of thought*, I understand a type of foundationalism that posits a top-down or unilateral authority. Each of the three central figures—Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendt, and Søren Kierkegaard—lodges a trenchant critique of totalizing or authoritarian structures of thought. Though the points of emphasis often differ, each thinker advocates a certain form of resistance or critical praxis. It will pay dividends to outline, presently, the current that ties the three thinkers together and to address the aim of the project, by way of a roadmap of the argumentative
structure. The theme of democracy is central to the project; specifically, the salient question is: *When is a democracy not a democracy in name only?*

## 1.1 Background and Motivation, Contemporary Issues

Today’s America establishes a useful angle from which to consider the nature of a genuine democracy in large part because of its increasingly polarized social-political climate. Though it often seems a lost sentiment in an increasingly impatient world,¹ Pericles’ funeral oration should still resonate. Thucydides recounts in *The Peloponnesian War*: “We [Athenians] do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into an action before the consequences have been properly debated.”² The false dichotomy between words and deeds or theory and praxis is propagated widely, so much so that it has become a culturally entrenched assumption.

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¹ Here, I refer to Theodor Adorno’s essay, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in which he claims: “The hostility to theory in the spirit of the times, the by no means coincidental withering away of theory, its banishment by an impatience that wants to change the world without having to interpret it…” [Theodor Adorno. “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis.” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 265. (Henceforth “Theory and Praxis”).] It is notable that Adorno’s concerns track those of Arendt quite closely in this respect. He argues, “critique and the prerequisite of democracy, political maturity, belong together. Politically mature is the person who speaks for himself, because he has thought for himself and is not merely repeating someone else; he stands free of any guardian. This is demonstrated in the ability to resist established opinions and, one in the same, to also resist existing institutions, everything that is merely posited, that justifies itself with its existence. Such resistance, as the ability to distinguish between what is known and what is accepted merely by convention and under the constraint of authority, is one with critique…” [Theodor Adorno, “Critique,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 281-282]. Though he equates the “intolerance to theory that is not immediately accompanied by instructions for action” [Theodor Adorno, “Resignation,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 290] with anxiety, the problem is also substantially deeper. The idea of education, for example, which figures prominently in the present essay (in addition to the work of all three central figures), is aimed at a sort of autonomy that ensures our safety from a repeat of Auschwitz: “The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating” [Theodor Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 195]. These passages crystallize a conception of critique, as resistance to inherited or totalizing norms and values, that echoes Castoriadis, Arendt, and Kierkegaard.

But words and deeds coexist in productive social deliberation; words occupy a distinct role in social action. Or as Adorno puts it, “thinking is a doing; theory a form of praxis.”

The Athenians—by affording policy decisions proper discussion—are obviously praiseworthy in one sense, but the particularities of this mode of discourse warrant further consideration. An especially instructive peculiarity of the Athenians is that “each individual is interested not only in his own affairs, but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics.” The public life is central to this essay, as is the characteristically Athenian sentiment—enunciated notably by Aristotle in the Politics—that a person who chooses to live outside society is “either a bad man or above humanity” (Pol. I, 1253a4).

For Aristotle, the human being is “by nature a political animal” (Pol. I, 1253a3-4) to the extent that an apolitical person could called human only homonymously. Thucydides corroborates, clarifying the stakes for social involvement: “we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics minds his own business: we say that he has no business here at all.”

Specific policy recommendations, however, should not be the sole focus of the public life. A culture’s foundational principles and values should be subjected to the public vision. A thoughtful posture alleviates—or at least begins to respond to—the uncritical repetition of values, by which I understand the systematic and permanent stabilization of values by and through social institutions, and the strict adherence to inherited forms of thought and social orders.

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4 Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, 2.39 (pages 118-119).
5 Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, 2.39-2.40 (page 119).
Institutions are often thought to be reflections of values. The second amendment of the U.S. Constitution, for example, was a historical response to a concrete social-political problem. As such, it illustrates, or at least represents, the value Americans place on the ability to form a civilian militia. As time passes, however, the institutions are apt to become outdated. If our response to this question is to justify the values we hold

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6 Consult: [Michael C. Dorf, “What Does the Second Amendment Mean Today?” Chicago-Kent Law Review, Vol. 76. (2000) 291-347. (Henceforth “Amendment”)] and [Eugene Volokh, “Necessary to the Security of a Free State.” Notre Dame Law Review, Vol. 83:1. (2007), 101-139. (Henceforth “Free State)]. These pieces of Second Amendment scholarship point out to the historical concern involved in the ratification (in 1791) of the Second Amendment, which reads: “A well regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.” Volokh suggests that depending on the interpretation of the phrase “free state,” the interpretation of the whole amendment likely shifts. If “free state” means, ‘a state that is free from unjust imposition on the part of the Federal Government,’ the most applicable interpretation would seem to favor what is called the states’ rights view (Volokh, “Amendment,” 101-102). If the idea were to protect States from the Federal Government, then the Second Amendment would presumably only cover actual militias, or at the least, National Guard-like organizations. It would also presumably not apply in non-states such as the District of Columbia (Volokh, “Amendment,” 102). On the other hand, if “free state” means, ‘a country free of despotism,’ as some have suggested, then the individuals’ right to own guns would seem to find support. Vokohl argues, based on textual support and historical-linguistic analysis, that “free state” takes the latter meaning, and would thus support the individuals’ right to bear arms. Michael C. Dorf, on the other hand, argues persuasively that the originalist method of constitutional interpretation is lacking: “Many individual right scholars appear to believe that original meaning is the sole criterion of constitutional interpretation. But if that is their premise, they cannot contend that nonoriginalist interpretation of the Second Amendment is anything like a unique mistake. Many of the foundational doctrines of our current constitutional regime do not comport with the original understanding of the Constitution or its amendments. The requirement of equal population apportionment for state legislative districts, the invalidity of de jure racial segregation, and the breadth of federal power under the Commerce Clause” (Dorf, “Amendment,” 292) are just a few examples he cites. The valuable point to remember is that adopting too much of an intentionalist approach with regard to the constitution would be a dangerous exercise in fundamentalist interpretation, and, moreover, would seem to be pitted in opposition to thinkers like Thomas Jefferson in the first place, thinkers who assumed that the need for laws to change and adapt themselves to prevailing values was a fixture in any democratic society. It seems reasonable to assume that the Second Amendment responded to the question of a free state, and was meant to counter a potential dangerous scenario in which the weaponry needed for successful defense of freedom was solely in the hands of the Federal Government. Of course, even Volokh acknowledges that the concern with an actual government take-over had largely subsided in the mid 19th century. In any case, whether or not the Second Amendment should apply to individuals and not just militias, there does not seem to be a clear, lucid, or explicit reference to hunting or the right to protect from home invasions. This does not imply that the Second Amendment should not apply; rather, it suggests that a reinterpretation of the passage that accounts for the rapidly shifting cultural context in which Americans find themselves, one that does not simply find justification within the passage itself, is of the utmost importance. This dialogue, further, should not happen behind closed doors and among members of various interest groups and lobbies. It needs to be a public discussion, in the public space. After all, a Gallup Poll (2012) found that 92% claimed to support background checks for gun purchases at gun shows, 58% think there should be stricter gun control laws, and 62% claim that there should be a ban on clips that hold more than ten bullets. At the very least, these issues are entitled to a fair discussion (http://www.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx) that is not entirely controlled by a few voices.
collectively with the institutions themselves, we risk inverting the relationship between values and institutions. In other words, the response to a question regarding the legitimacy of the private ownership of semi-automatic assault rifles or handguns should not be: the second amendment dictates the right to own this weapon. It may or may not, depending on which constitutional scholar is asked, but more to the point: We need not take a stance on gun ownership itself to consider the following case of circular reasoning. The second amendment justifies our right to own guns (Why should we have guns? The Second Amendment). Our (perceived) right to own guns justifies the second amendment (Why do we have the Second Amendment? We were given this right by the founding fathers, and this right is essential to the maintenance of freedom). Within this cycle, progress seems inconceivable.

Marriage equality and socialized health care are two additional examples of this sort of repetition of values. The debate on marriage often seems to reflect two radically different approaches: one camp seems to emphasize renewing the question of marriage as an institution, and the other seems to mainly focus on applying the already existing institution to contemporary and novel social situations. The idea that marriage has been defined as the union of a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation might not have the kind of existential import it had in the past. Through scientific progress, the ability to procreate is no longer limited to heterosexual unions. Further, for most members of our culture (broadly construed) at least, marriage no longer reflects the transfer of property from an older male to a (sometimes) younger male that ought include a dowry to sweeten the proverbial deal.
The debate on health care reform and anti-socialist mentality seems a similarly puzzling cultural phenomenon. Though a thoroughly socialist agenda is already found in education and retirement savings, large portions of Americans are reluctant to cede the task of health care to the federal level, and this reluctance often seems to stem from mostly ideological grounds. Perhaps, though, the anti-socialist stance represents our desire to cling to our institutions, which serve to justify our values. If, though, the point of health care is to provide security and stability through the assurance of certain basic rights, then institutional reform should be more akin to a fixture of social life than a drastic measure. Constant reform could represent the commitment to meet the complexity of shifting conditions with a sophistication to match. At the least, the debate would need to be renewed constantly. Unfortunately institutions, or collective responses to social problems, lag behind—and creep ahead of—the material conditions within which they operate. They do not always cohere smoothly.

Consequently, both the institution itself and the impetus for its enactment should be crucial considerations in the ongoing process of critique and reconstruction. The functions marriage serves or the roles it plays, the motivations for gun possession, the goals of a health care system in a broad sense, should figure prominently into the ongoing collective vision of society. Often, though, the focal point is just the institution itself, utilized as a justification for the ongoing uncritical repetition of values and behavior.

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7 I take “collective responses” in the broadest sense, which could include general societal trends and written laws alike. I intend “institutions” in this broad way. I am essentially following Castoriadis’ definition of the word institution, which he enunciates in his essay, “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain.” He calls the institution of society as a whole “the whole complex of its particular institutions,” particular institution being taken to mean: “language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things, and, of course, the individual itself both in general and in the particular type and form (and their differentiations: e.g. man/woman) given to it by the society considered” (WF 6).
Themes like health care, the second amendment, and marriage equality will not be treated directly by this essay (for the most part). But social issues like these serve as its backdrop in one crucial manner: social environments, by and through which members of a culture are conditioned, exert a powerful influence over collective vision and the potential scope of action. Social structures thus often appear invariant. Though a complete and unlimited ability to change these structures seems out of the question, this essay emphasizes an ethos through which a culture might point beyond what is currently the case. I explore the profound implications of the partial—albeit limited—transcendence of inherited structures, with regard to issues like those enumerated above, especially in relation to shifting values and new social forms.8

Recall Hannah Arendt’s sentiment in The Origins of Totalitarianism: “we can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our own heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion” (OT ix). For my part, I share Arendt’s particular concern with the “irritating incompatibility between the actual power of modern man (greater than ever before, great to the point where he might challenge the very existence of his own universe) and the impotence of modern men to live in, and understand the sense of, a world which their own strength has established” (OT viii).

The argument in this essay moves beyond questioning whether we (at least partially) create our world—this, I take as obvious—and toward a notion of value formation characterized by activity and substantive social critique. Marx’s clarification of

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8 Though this chapter has focused on contentious debates within American culture, I imagine a much broader application for the ideas of Castoriadis, Arendt, and Kierkegaard. These contemporary examples should be taken as just that: examples chosen among many, but that (in my view) illustrate the trend of the unreflective repetition of values.
the “new trend” in philosophy encapsulates the attitude nicely: “we do not attempt to
dogmatically prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through criticism
of the old…I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing.”9 This notion of
creation is not naïve or overly simplistic; society is also thoroughly infused with inherited
conditions. It is a point of emphasis: people have a hand in creating their world, and the
responsibility that accompanies such control should become more visible, a trend which
would lead to a more active, lucid approach to self-creation.

In order to respond to the unreflective repetition of values, I ask: Assuming that humans are responsible for the world in which they live, or in other words, that the world lacks a prefigured moral and social-political order, how can social and political institutions best reflect values, while nonetheless fostering substantive social critique and the productive questioning of foundational principles? In other words, the question is: how ought a democracy avoid being a democracy in name only; how does it become one in which people are able to engage in active, lucid, critical praxis in the public realm?

1.2 Central Figures

I incorporate three thinkers for a cogent response to the question of social critique
and the relationship between values and institutions: Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah
Arendt, and Søren Kierkegaard (often, but not always, with reference to his philosophical pseudonym, Johannes Climacus). Below, I justify the use of these three figures
individually and as a trio, offering an account of how each adds an essential element to the overall picture. I argue that Castoriadis’ conception of self-institution is necessarily a

public process, and examine how he and Arendt foster the development of a critical public space. Kierkegaardian “indirect communication” facilitates this public space. I highlight the social-political dimension of Kierkegaardian thought by discussing the relation between “indirect communication” and self-reflection.

1.2.1 Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997)

Cornelius Castoriadis, a profoundly erudite and original thinker, was Greek but lived the majority of his life in Paris, where he wrote expansively on subjects as diverse as politics, philosophy, classics, economics, psychoanalysis, and culture. He was roughly contemporary to Hannah Arendt, though slightly younger, and was quite familiar with her work, especially and most notably her political writings. Castoriadis developed a highly original philosophy of autonomy and political creation. Though his work is broad, I primarily focus on the political writings, working through the implications of the Castoriadian notion of political creation. Among these implications, I am especially interested in the necessarily social nature of autonomous, democratic self-institution.

In this essay, I demonstrate the implications of the concomitant institution of a public space and a public time. These aspects of social institution are reliant upon one another and, further, enable the forum in which deliberation and social action happens. Chapter Two develops Castoriadis’ concept of the public space (no doubt partially influenced by Arendt) by way of an analysis of his intellectual background, in addition to

10 Castoriadis demonstrates a high level of familiarity, particularly in the essay “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy,” of which I make frequent use below. Ingerid Straume notes, however, that it seems unlikely that Arendt was familiar with Castoriadis. This is likely owing to the slight difference in generation, because they share many questions and interests. See: Ingerid S. Straume. “A Common World? Arendt, Castoriadis and Political Creation.” European Journal of Social Theory. Vol. 15(3) (2012), 368. (Henceforth “A Common World”)

9
his unusual conceptions of time, history, creation, and autonomy or democracy. I also
devote much time to Castoriadis’ veneration of the Athenians. The use of an ancient
Greek paradigm, as I show below, is common to the three thinkers featured in this
project; Castoriadis is particularly enamored of the Greek polis as found in fifth century
Athens because it represents the first culture to openly and actively undermine its
foundations in an effort to create a new social form and point beyond the boundaries of
its present material conditions.

1.2.2 Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)

Hannah Arendt, a German Jew who lived and wrote in exile for much of her life,
conceived of thinking as an essential component of the human life. In Chapter Three, I
trace her philosophical background and attempt to show how several aspects of her
biography can facilitate a better understanding of her work. I examine her account of the
public space as a response to her exiled condition, to the totalitarian movements of 20th
century Europe, and to political and moral foundationalism. Arendt emphasizes a
thoughtful, considerate approach to life. Not only are social-political agents to reveal who
they are through words and deeds, but also and more importantly, the common world is
fueled by a critical posture—an anti-foundational morality and social comportment—that
engenders progress through thinking and judging.

I argue for a common world that is formed through the actions and words of
active agents, who think and judge. I then point to another Greek paradigm—Socrates—
who, for Arendt, represents the quintessential thinker. He is an illustrative example of the
paralyzing aspect of thought; through thought, previously secure values and judgments—
perhaps one could call them prejudices—are set into a state of unsure paralysis. At the
same time, however, Socrates also unfreezes thoughts and ideas from a static existence (RJ 169-176), justifying the claim that Socrates both paralyzes and releases preconceptions.

1.2.3 Sorens Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

Søren Kierkegaard is not traditionally considered a political thinker. There has been a recent influx of Kierkegaardians emphasizing his social importance, but despite this, his political thought is generally quite underdeveloped and underappreciated. In this vein, Chapter Four on Kierkegaard pursues the following two aims: firstly, I offer a different angle from which to approach Kierkegaard. I encounter him in the social-political context and the language more commonly associated with critical social theory. In this way, I position Kierkegaard as an important precursor to contemporary social theory and hope to help expand the scope of present mainstream Kierkegaard scholarship. Secondly, I demonstrate the effectiveness of what Kierkegaard calls indirect communication.

As with Castoriadis and Arendt, an admiration for the Greeks, notably Socrates, colors Kierkegaard’s work. Kierkegaard considers Socrates a paradigmatic figure: his discourse is emblematic of the kind of indirect communication that, at its best, is a pedagogical and social tool aimed at the greater good. Thus, after sketching out some of the background to Kierkegaard’s thought—relevant aspects of his formative years in Denmark, his religiosity, the state church of Denmark, the culture of the ‘Right’ Hegelians that dominated the academic and philosophical climate at the time—I point to some structural similarities between his theoretical motivation and that of Castoriadis and Arendt. I then give a detailed account of indirect communication, drawing on Socrates as
a paradigmatic case, one last time. Specifically, I analyze how the Kierkegaardian comic is an emblematic social-political mechanism.

1.3 Aims and Argumentative Structure of the Project

This essay attempts to generate a cogent response to the uncritical repetition of values; to that end, I examine the conditions of a genuine democracy, or a democracy that is not a democracy in name only. My vision of democracy primarily assumes three premises: (a) there is an important difference between a genuine democracy and an oligarchy, wherein the public realm is privatized by interest groups appropriating political action solely with an eye toward advancing specific agendas; (b) inherited forms of thought are inevitable, but when a culture’s conceptual inheritance precludes an outward push on the boundaries of thought and action, and when the conditions of thinking and political action become totalizing, disallowing substantial deviation from a determined hierarchical structure, the uncritical repetition of the same that results is not a feature of genuine democracy; finally, (c) oppression, exploitation, and inequality are not features of genuine democracy. Totalizing structures often reinforce oppression and inequality systematically. Inherited forms of thought, if seen as invariant and inert, can perform the same function. None of this is to say that inherited forms of thought can or should be completely avoided, for even language is an inherited form of thought. On the contrary, our institutions and political structures, and our values, are passed from one generation to the next. Inherited forms of thought only become problematic when reinforced automatically and uncritically. In other words, choosing to repeat actions or justify values is by no means illegitimate just as long as values are not seen as permanent and the
choice is active and thoughtful. To attempt a positive definition of democracy: the
democratic public space is free and open to everyone. This vision of democracy is
founded upon the condition of plurality, and as such is characterized by lucid, active
creation. But this activity does not happen automatically. An effort to create a public
space and endow it with certain important traits, as well as to communicate effectively
and engage in collective action, must be a part of a genuine democracy.

Each of the three thinkers introduced above offers a useful but ultimately lacking
approach; taken together with aspects borrowed from each, the response is stronger and
more coherent. I devote a single chapter to each thinker and attempt to trace a couple of
threads. The first of these is an undertone to the project, which should serve only as a
helpful backdrop. By comparing the material circumstances of the three figures, I show
that in some ways, each thinker is working in response to an oppressive, totalizing
worldview. Castoriadis perceived the Marxist orthodoxy and its emphasis on
superstructures as limiting and dogmatic; Hannah Arendt wrote largely in response to the
rise of totalitarianism in 20th century Europe; Kierkegaard’s opposition to the Danish
state church stemmed from his belief that there was no single way to be an ethical (or
Christian) agent, contrary to the church teaching that tried to synthesize the Hegelian
philosophy of Hans Lassen Martensen and J.L. Heiberg with Christian life and ethical
practice. They each—consequently—argue for a kind of anti-foundationalist social-
political order (especially Arendt and Castoriadis), and an anti-foundationalist morality
(especially Arendt and Kierkegaard). They are each characterized by an anti-essentialist
view of human nature, and in all three cases, this conception of human nature influences
the idea of social, autonomous action. Likewise, each thinker relies on a paradigm from
ancient Greece to illustrate—rather than laying forth in the form of a doctrine—how a kind of resistance takes place within an actual culture. Though these similarities are evident in both the content and the structure of each chapter, the project, primarily, does more than point to areas of overlap among the three main thinkers.

The argumentative structure is more important: I use Castoriadis’ concern with inherited forms of thought to develop an account of autonomy, or as he might call it, lucid, self-institution or creation. This particular alignment—found most notably in certain aspects of Athenian democracy—materializes through the creation of a public space and, concurrently, public time. Time, which is Castoriadis’ way of talking about creation, flux, novelty, and the unordered world in which humans find themselves, mandates an unusual way of thinking about history: as essentially creation. But history does not represent the development of spirit or a natural progression toward some broader telos. As pure novelty and creation, the essence of time and history is to lack a permanent essence; hence the requirement that societies erect institutions characterized by at least some stability and create meanings to isolate aspects or moments of the ongoing flux of experience in an effort to create a common world. In other words, the lack of a distinct and permanent order necessitates the creation of a public space. The same negative claim, however, that no fundamental or essentialist order exists, amplifies the risk of collective folly.\(^{11}\) It entails the need for resistance: of laws, norms, and essences; to the uncritical repetition of values; to the inherited forms of thought, broadly. In this sense, I use Castoriadis’ work to set up the problems and then explore a response that Castoriadis, Arendt, and Kierkegaard can give, when taken in concert.

\(^{11}\) As will become clear below, there is no “guarantee” against collective folly. This danger is inherent to autonomous and democratic societies. The condition of plurality, however, at least responds to the danger.
Castoriadis’ response is useful, especially insofar as he acknowledges the need for institutions (which represent stability). His version of the public space, though, in emphasizing self-institution on a broadly social level, leaves the individual actors conspicuously out of the picture. Though Arendt needs Castoriadis’ institutions (as they provide protection), she adds to Castoriadis’ account in a key way. I agree with Ingerid Straume, who claims that Arendt contributes an important element to the Castoriadian idea of self-creation: plurality. Through a robust analysis of the common world, Arendt corroborates Castoriadis’ claim that critical praxis happens in the public arena, but gives a more inclusive account of what it means to engage in social action and how people—not abstracted collectives—engage socially. In a way, Arendt brings Castoriadis’ analysis down one level from the broadly social toward a clearer understanding of the agents themselves, a narrowing which sees one more step in Kierkegaard, toward the interpersonal, or as he puts it, toward communication between an I and an I.

Kierkegaardian indirect communication engenders critical resistance and substantiates the public space. But at the same time, it needs the public space in order to take place. It is thus both reliant on, and productive of, the public realm or common world. The Kierkegaardian comic, envisioned primarily through the paradigmatic humorist, the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Johannes Climacus, and the paradigmatic ironist, Socrates, is inherently social-political. I show how this form of perplexity fosters substantive action by pointing to the way in which Kierkegaardian indirect communication specifically underscores how the seemingly destructive side of Socratic discourse is also deeply productive and educative.

12 Straume, “A Common World,” 378. Plurality, in Straume’s estimation, asserts that the human condition is to be connected by a common stake in the world, but to be at the same time fundamentally distinct.
To respond to disenfranchisement, oppression, and the uncritical repetition of values or a blind adherence to inherited forms of thought, a society requires participation in the public space, the paradigmatic example of which is indirect communication. Indirect communication is an educative process that responds to these issues and engenders collective autonomy and genuine democracy.
Chapter Two

Cornelius Castoriadis and Self-Institution

Self-institution is an active process in which autonomous agents shape public action and discourse. This chapter develops a view of collective autonomy fueled by the creation of a public realm, which is at the center of democracy. Through it, societies self-institute: they create new social-political forms, meanings, and laws; though societies are indubitably conditioned in some sense, the Castoriadian notion of creation shifts away from thinking about history in terms of superstructures and toward the idea that cultures are characterized by the ability to self-create in radically novel ways. Toward this point, I begin by contextualizing Castoriadis’ work. His thought was, in large part, a response to the post-Marxist climate; his opposition to totalizing and inherited forms of thought parallels Arendt and Kierkegaard, both of whom also operated in philosophically or socio-politically oppressive environments. Analyzing democracy and autonomy leads into a discussion of Castoriadis’ creation of a public space and time. The final section highlights Castoriadis’ veneration and invocation of Athenian political theory, demonstrating its continuing relevance with regard to value formation and substantive social action. I show that Castoriadis’ notion of autonomous, democratic, self-institution is an educative process that relies on a certain conception of time and history, and in
which social action and community figure prominently. The creation of a genuine public space, moreover, is an absolute requirement for collective autonomy and a genuine democracy, as opposed to a merely nominal one.

2.1 Background to Castoriadis’ Work

A historical analysis of Castoriadis’ intellectual development reveals a totalizing structure, to which Castoriadis responded, and which stifles creativity. Specifically, it takes the form of the *Marxist orthodoxy* and an emphasis on invariant and dominant *superstructures*. Notable parallels between Castoriadis, Arendt, and Kierkegaard will emerge, but equally important is the difference between the respective theories of *history* for orthodox Marxists and for Castoriadis. When compounded with Castoriadis’ unusual view of time, these deviations foster a clearer picture of how his break from Marxism fits with his thought on democracy and autonomy.

Castoriadis’ early adherence to—and subsequent break from—Marxism was a formative period in his development, and it warrants attention. One focal problem for Castoriadis relates to institutions:

> Once an institution is established it seems to become autonomous, the fact that it possesses its own inertia and its own logic, that, in its continuance and in its effects, it outstrips its function, its ‘ends’ and its ‘reasons for existing.’ The apparent plain truths are turned upside-down: what could have been seen ‘at the start’ as an ensemble of institutions in the service of society becomes a society in the service of institutions (IIS 110).

This reference to *unreflective repetition of values* illustrates the particular contemporary issues mentioned above. As in the case of marriage equality and the right to bear arms, people begin to serve the institution itself, which is thought to have its own ineffable
justification, instead of allowing it to serve them. Perhaps the roles of institution and social action have been inverted.

According to Castoriadis, his break with Marxism had two main causes: firstly, the theoretical aspect of Marxism, which consists of a metaphysical, an economic, and a historical theory, all of which are closely related, is untenable. Secondly, the historical fate of Marxism—the way in which the theory has actually manifested itself in the world—does not encourage a favorable interpretation.

2.1.1 Castoriadis and the Marxist Orthodoxy

Castoriadis rightly alludes to the problem of ‘orthodoxy.’ He argues that due to the variety of historical forms of Marxism, each excluding the others as deficiently authentic, it would seem inaccurate to label any one point of content ‘truly Marxist.’ Likewise, he finds Lukács’ attempt to isolate Marxist orthodoxy solely in a method flawed because it operates as if one could separate method from content when addressing social and political theories (IIS 12).13

The isolation of a ‘truly Marxist’ philosophy would prove quite difficult. Would it reflect the younger Marx, often called the humanistic Marx? Or would the ‘truly Marxist’ approach mirror his later writings on the economy and labor issues? Castoriadis rightly suggests that the true words of Marx—what he really meant—are somewhat mysterious and, further, Castoriadis’ approach seems to hinge upon the intentionalist conviction that “there is a full and plain truth and that it is physically deposited in Marx’s writings” (AI 25). Were this the case, the key would simply be to ‘unlock’ it.

Moreover, an idea cannot be judged neatly, apart from the aspects of historical creation it fuels. “To want to find the sense of Marxism,” Castoriadis claims, “exclusively in what Marx wrote, ignoring what this doctrine has become in history, is to claim, in direct contradiction to the central ideas of this doctrine, that real history does not count” (IIS 10). Ignoring Marxist-inspired regimes is problematic for this reason. Castoriadis argues, “the full sense of a theory is, according to the theory itself, that which appears in the practice it inspires” (IIS 10).\footnote{I understand this comment to be primarily centered in the discussion of theory and praxis in the post-Marxist climate. Theories, he wants to say, are bound up with the sorts of social action they inspire, and to separate the action and thought is narrow and ultimately impossible. Moreover, because of the particular emphasis Marx places on concrete historical analysis, it would be even less fair to take the ideas of a Marxist social theorist out of the material conditions in which they exist. Castoriadis suggests that the social environment in the past, present, and future alike are all important points of reference when thinking about the value of a theory, or the \textit{full sense of a theory}.}

Thus, one must reconcile with the unfortunate fact: “The \textit{reality} of Marxism is first of all, to an overwhelming degree which takes precedence over all the rest, that it is the avowed ideology of totalitarian regimes of exploitation and oppression which exercise their power over a billion men and women” (All 25). No longer, in other words, can the Marxist afford to eschew questions surrounding particular social-political regimes or events; after all,

would I be able to discuss Christianity while saying, ‘I couldn’t care less about the inquisition; the Pope is an accident; the Catholic Church’s participation in the Spanish civil war was on the side of Franco, well that’s just a matter of empirical priests. All that is secondary in relation to the essence of Christianity, which manifests itself in such-and-such verses from the Gospels?’ Christianity is a social-historical reality that has been instituted for going on two thousand years (All 25).

This passage attacks the intuition that it would be possible to move beyond the material circumstances of a theory, into some more authentic realm wherein the sole important matter was: \textit{what is the true content of Marxism}? I take this to be a point about how Castoriadis understands the relationship between theory and praxis; they are not distinctly
separate and theories can only be fully understood with regard to the actions they have a
hand in creating. After all, Marx’s criticism of Idealism in *The German Ideology* cautions
against such a separation (between material conditions and theoretical considerations):
“...The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life process of
definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they appear in their own or other people’s
imagination, but as they really are; i.e., as they operate, produce materially, and hence as
they work under definite material limits.”

Throughout the *German Ideology*, in fact, Marx speaks of “real, active men” and of the “real life-process” in an attempt to separate
his own method from that of his Idealist predecessors, finding no reason to posit clearly
separate spheres for theoretical and practical conditions.

The broader point Castoriadis seems intent to make is that Marx was “the first to
show that the meaning of a theory cannot be understood in isolation from the historical
and social practice to which it corresponds” (IIS 10). He elaborates further on the term
*meaning*—the social-historical context of which he demonstrates—in a passage from *IIS*:

> That history is the domain in which meanings are ‘embodied’ and in which things
become meaningful is certain beyond the shadow of a doubt. However, none of these
meanings is ever complete and closed in on itself; each always refers to something else,
and no thing, no particular historical fact can deliver a meaning that in and of itself would
be inscribed in it. No technical fact has an assignable meaning if it is isolated from the
society in which it is produced and none imposes a univocal and ineluctable sense to the
human activities that it underlies (IIS 22-23).

By analogy, he illustrates the flaw in interpreting a law only in terms of its “explicit,
manifest meaning” by arguing that “law, like politics, religion, etc. can acquire its full

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Norton, 1978), 154. (Henceforth “German Ideology”)
and true sense only when it is bound up with a reference to all the other social phenomena of an epoch” (IIS 22).\textsuperscript{16}

With regard to a methodological approach to Marxist orthodoxy, Castoriadis is equally unimpressed. Using economics as an example, he claims: “there are connections, repetitions, ‘local’ and partial regularities, general tendencies; there is an intelligibility of phenomena, provided, of course, one never forgets that, in order to understand anything about it, economics must be plunged back into the social-historical” (AII 23).\textsuperscript{17} Drawing a comparison to theoretical physics, he shows how the Marxist orthodoxy has been led astray; indeed, there are \textit{universal constants} in the form of stable relations and \textit{invariant conservations} in the field of physics. He challenges the Marxist, however, to find such invariant conservations in social-political or economic structures. In economics, Castoriadis posits, the forms of such relations change: “The economy is full of ‘locally regular’ linkages that are not unintelligible, but there can be no question of integrating them into an exhaustive and permanent system of invariant relations, still less of formalizing them” (AII 24). This approach would be tantamount to “eliminating history and society, to deciding in advance that the sole reality is that of ‘forces of production’” (AII 24).

In Castoriadis’ view, neither an outlook that would attempt to remain faithful to the writings of Marx, nor an approach that emphasizes strict adherence to his \textit{method}, is ultimately adequate to engage in meaningful social action. Content and method are not

\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps saying “all other social phenomena” is a bit strong. If this is what Castoriadis means, it seems problematic. If, on the other hand, Castoriadis intends the more reasonable point that laws are deeply embedded within their material conditions and that an attempt to understand laws should account for as much of the complexity reflected in the society as possible, then the point is well taken.

\textsuperscript{17} Despite the apparent difficulty associated with understanding other cultures without abstracting to the level of universals and generalities, Castoriadis seems to think that cultures are not mutually closed-off for understanding, and that, in reality, the only way a culture can understand the norms, essences, meanings, and laws of another is through an inspection of “all the other social phenomena of an epoch” (IIS 22).
separable, and more to the point with regard to Marx’s own work, the idea of Marxist scientific orthodoxy seems implausible in on its own terms. It seeks to fix relations rather than acknowledge that relations are in fact social-historical products themselves, and contingent upon society, thus warranting revision.

2.1.2 Castoriadis and the Marxist Theory of History

Castoriadis claims that the Marxist theory of history is indisputably scientific (IIS 41). But as a scientific theory, Castoriadis suggests, it must be subjected to empirical verification and observational rigor. In other words, it should be treated as any other scientific theory. He astutely suggests that “there is no longer any need to say that we are Marxists,” just as the Newtonian intellectual lineage of Europe is uncontested, because “everyone is Newtonian in the sense that there is no question of returning to pre-Newtonian categories or ways of posing problems. Yet no one is really ‘Newtonian’ anymore, for no one can continue to be a proponent of a theory that is purely and simply false” (IIS 41). According to Castoriadis, it would be equally inconceivable to return to a pre-Marxist conception of historical progress—since the intellectual climate in which western thinkers operate has been inundated with Marxist ideas since the mid-eighteenth century—as it would be to return to a pre-Copernican vision of the universe. The problem with remaining dogmatically linked to the Marxist theory of history (aside from the contradiction of Marx’s own approach, which is to not dogmatically prefigure the future), however, is that strict adherence “provides itself beforehand with the solution to all the problems it poses” (IIS 41).

Castoriadis opines that the Marxist philosophy of history does not move beyond that of Hegel in any particularly important manner. “The rationality it seems to elicit
from the facts, it imposes on them. The ‘historical necessity’ it speaks of (in the sense this expression has commonly had, precisely that of a series of events that leads history towards progress) differs in no way, philosophically speaking, from Hegelian reason” (IIS 53). Because he thinks this conception relies on a permanent understanding of fixed relations, Castoriadis finds it fundamentally flawed. This impression stems from his deeply rooted conviction that “there are not in history, even less than there are in nature or life, separate and fixed substances that act on one another from the outside” (IIS 24). To make sweeping universal claims about the influence of ideology on economy, or the inverse relation, would be to miss the point that economy and ideology “are themselves the products of a given stage (in fact, a very recent one) of historical development” (IIS 25). Castoriadis offers an elaborate and trenchant critique of the Marxist theory of history in the following passage:

In the same way, the Marxist theory of history, and every general and simple theory of the same type, is necessarily led to postulate that the basic motivations of individuals are, and have always been, the same in all societies. Productive or other kinds of ‘forces’ can act in history only through the actions of individuals and to say that the same forces play the same determining role everywhere signifies that they correspond to motives that are constant and that are found everywhere. Thus the theory that makes the ‘development of productive forces’ the motor of history implicitly presupposes an invariable type of basic motivation for all individuals, broadly speaking, an economic motivation: from all time, human societies are held to have aimed (whether consciously or unconsciously, little matter) first and foremost to increase their production and their consumption (IIS 25).

“This idea,” according to Castoriadis, “is not simply false in a material sense; it overlooks the fact that the types of motivation (and the corresponding values that polarize and direct human lives) are social creations, that each culture establishes its own values and rears individuals in relation to these” (IIS 25). Castoriadis does not oppose the basic claim that historical development and, for that matter, social life are bound up with labor and

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18 This claim stems basically from Castoriadis’ conviction that history is creation. In the following section, his account of history—and the implications it holds with regard to isolating fixed patterns of relations—becomes clearer, but for now, the point is: to isolate fixed and separate substances in unchanging relations would be to forget that social patterns are reflective of a certain stage of material production.
production. Forces of production are an essential component of human activity; he opposes, rather, the positing of *productive forces* in contradistinction to individual and social creation of our world. Castoriadis draws the conclusion—from the fact that forces of production vary widely historically—that neither the forces themselves, nor the relations between them, are inert. Theories of history are thus theories of *human activity*; each culture wields its own forces of production uniquely, and talking about them should reflect their embedment. It is deeply important to Castoriadis that the domain of social creation reflect openness rather than universalized or inherited forms of thought and action, closed and final norms and essences, or prefigured theories; the following section explains this conviction of his.

### 2.1.3 Castoriadis’ Conception of Oppressive Structures

*Superstructures* are theoretically central to the Marxist sense of history. By the term *superstructure*, I understand the cultural and political institutions of a society, which are thought to be—depending on how much control one estimates *forces of production* to exert—either conditioned or determined by the *base*, or the labor-production (forces of production) itself. Castoriadis accepts a relation of conditioning between the base and the institution; the problem, in his view, is that “there is not, nor has there ever been, an inertia of the rest of social life, nor a privileged passivity of the ‘superstructures’” (IIS 20).

Castoriadis’ break with Marxism, in fact, related heavily to the question of *superstructures*. Herein lies the meaning of his claim that *economics must be plunged back into the social-political domain*:
The superstructures are no more than a fabric of social relations, neither more nor less ‘real,’ neither more nor less ‘inert’ than the others, and just as conditioned by the infrastructures as the infrastructures are by them, if the word ‘conditioned’ can be used to designate the mode of coexistence of the various moments or aspects of social activities (IIS 20).

The influence, in other words, is bidirectional and certainly not one of determination, but only a “soft” conception of conditioning. To expand on this sentiment, he claims:

“History is just as much a conscious creation as it is an unconscious repetition. What Marx called the superstructure was itself no more a passive and belated reflection of a social ‘materialness’ (moreover, undefinable) than human perception and knowledge are imprecise and cloudy ‘reflections’ of an external world, which would be perfectly formed, colored, and scented in itself” (IIS 21).

To reiterate, if the forces of production are thought to set cultural and ideological structures in motion, and this process is assumed to become determined and stable, the relations fixed, the structures themselves appear to have an invariant quality that stands alone with regard to the real material conditions of each culture. Moreover, if the sum total of relations is thought to be invariant, social production—in contradistinction to Marx’s stated intention—is abstracted from the domain of real humans and actions into the realm of essences and spirit.

The foregoing account of Castoriadis’ objection to Marxist philosophy has sketched a picture of his protest against an oppressively totalizing world-view. For Castoriadis, this particular notion of sweeping historical movements—determined and beyond the control of individuals—leaves no room for self-creation and institution in an active and lucid manner, which are essential to the productive social life. Part of my task is to show that the structures are not external to people; they are active, ongoing processes that reflect their constitutive agents, namely, political actors. Central to the task
of demonstrating this is the public space, without which there is no collective autonomy or genuine democracy.

2.2 Self-Institution and Autonomous Creation

Autonomy is the precondition for self-institution, or as Castoriadis often calls it, active, lucid, self-creation. A closer look at the precise meaning of the two interrelated ideas of democracy and autonomy not only elucidates a profound alignment with regard to political creation; it also requires an unusual and fascinating deviation from the conceptual status quo of history and time. This section explores the manner in which autonomy and democracy are both preconditions for the creation of a public space—which is the space in which political action, and active, lucid, self-creation takes place—and also reliant upon the public space. I also explore the implications of Castoriadis’ conception of creation with regard to time and history. It is also important, additionally, to flag a concern that both Castoriadis and Arendt share (and to which I return throughout the project): namely, the inherent danger of self-determination (the risk of collective folly) and anti-foundational morality and politics, and the need for stabilization or form-giving of sorts.

2.2.1 Democracy and Autonomy

Because a wealth of baggage accompanies the word ‘autonomy,’ it is important in the first place to be clear regarding Castoriadis’ use of it. He goes out of his way, in fact, to show that autonomy “does not signify doing ‘what one likes’ or whatever one pleases
at the moment, but rather giving oneself one’s own laws” (WF 332). Self-determination, however, does not imply closure; rather the opposite:

Autonomy is not closure, but, rather, opening: ontological opening, the possibility of going beyond the informational, cognitive, and organizational closure characteristic of self-constituting, but heteronomous beings. It is ontological opening, since to go beyond this closure signifies altering the already existing cognitive and organizational ‘system,’ therefore constituting one’s world and one’s self according to other laws, therefore creating a new ontological eidos, another self in another world. This possibility appears, as far as I know, only with the human. It appears as the possibility of challenging—not by chance or blindly, but knowing that one is doing so—one’s own laws, one’s own institution when society is involved (LMQA 310).

Most importantly, autonomy is “explicit and lucid self-institution—the fact that it gives itself its own law, knowing that it is doing so” (LMQA 314). If at first glance, positing one’s own laws and characterizing one’s own social meanings seems ideal, further consideration reveals that democracy is not without danger. Castoriadis, for example, points out that a society in charge of creating its own meanings, institutions, and structures, has—by the assertion of its creative power—also forfeited its right to claim external sources of signification-giving; in other words, it has given away its extrasocial guarantee. “Democracy thrusts aside the sacred” (LMQA 316) in precisely this manner. Rather than outsourcing power of signification and valuation, a democracy affords the right to the people, but not without complication.

Hence Castoriadis’ repeated invocation of Ivan Karamozov: as did Ivan, Castoriadis occupies himself with the lack of a foundation for morality when a culture relinquishes “meaning given as a gift or any guarantee of meaning” (LMQA 316). By

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19 This particular formulation is indebted to Immanuel Kant, who writes in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, “the will is not merely subject to the law but subject to it in such a way that it must be viewed as also giving the law to itself...a rational being is a member of the kingdom of ends when he gives universal laws in it but is also himself subject to these laws. He belongs to it as sovereign when, as lawgiving, he is not the subject of the will of any other” [Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. and Ed. Mary Gregor. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39-41].

20 I take Castoriadis’ careful insistence on “possibility” to mean that autonomy is choice—but not the requirement—to move beyond the “already existing cognitive and organizational system.” It would be fully within the scope of autonomous self-determination to actively and lucidly endorse the status quo.
accepting that “there is no meaning other than that created in and through history,” and accepting that humans are finite creatures living without a God to substantiate social norms, democratic societies renounce all limitations except self-limitation. Herein lies a danger: self-limitation is imperfect and relies on continual effort and renewal, and both theoretically and historically, it is not always successful.

This amounts to saying that democracy is the only tragic political regime—it is the sole regime that takes risks, that faces openly the possibility of its own destruction…democracy always lives within the problem of its own self-limitation, and nothing can ‘resolve’ this problem in advance. One cannot draw up a constitution that would prevent, for example, 67 percent of the individuals from one day making the ‘democratic’ decision to deprive the other 33 percent of their rights. Imprescribable rights of individuals can be written into the constitution; one cannot inscribe within it a clause that absolutely forbids any revision of the constitution—and were one to do so, this provision would sooner or later prove impotent. The sole essential limitation democracy can know is self-limitation. And this form of limitation, in its turn, can only be the task of individuals educated in, through, and for democracy (LMQA 316).

Castoriadis maintains—in a similar vein—that there can be neither “any intrinsic criterion of and for the law,” nor a guarantee that the criterion will not be transgressed (GPCD 282). His response to this problem is consistent with the quoted passage above: “There is no norm of norms which would not itself be a historical creation. And there is no way of eliminating the risks of collective hubris. Nobody can protect humanity from folly or suicide” (GPCD 282). Hubris is taken here as a result of the unordered world. It stems from “the essential vagueness of the ultimate bearings of our actions” (GPCD 282). The problem is that in a democracy “people can do anything—and must know that they ought not do just anything” (GPCD 282).

Rather than looking solely toward constitutions—the stabilization of norms and laws through ratification—Castoriadis emphasizes the democratic process itself, through general and active participation. As noted above, in the quoted passage, this process relies on education. This is not to denigrate the importance of stabilization, or what I call the
form-giving aspect of social creation: on the contrary, rationalization or form-giving is quite central to the Castoriadian account. Participation, however, responds to the risk of collective folly in an adaptive manner. To underscore the degree to which stable laws cannot save societies from collective mistakes, he points to a concrete example: “If we can be reasonably certain that the reestablishment of slavery tomorrow in the United States or in a European country is extremely improbable, the ‘reasonable’ character of our forecast is based not on the existing laws or constitutions (for then we would be simply idiotic) but on a judgment concerning the active response of a huge majority of the people to such an attempt” (GPCD 283). That self-limitation remains dangerous is true; it is also true that basic autoimmune features of democracy seem like fixtures, or at least seem to be constant possibilities.

I develop more thoroughly, below, the idea that the democratic process involves an essential educative aspect; while it does not ‘solve’ problems, strictly speaking, it at least begins to respond to the dangers enunciated above, and mitigates the problem of autoimmunity and the risk of collective folly. Before proceeding, one point is noteworthy: self-institution works in and through the creation of a public space, which for Castoriadis is bound up with peculiar notions of history and time.

### 2.2.2 Time and Novelty

Castoriadis’ quite controversial notion of *creation ex nihilo* becomes clearer as a result of a discussion of time and novelty, which at the core have an identity relationship. He insists on the claim that social structures condition, but do not determine, self-institution; without his notion of time, the emphasis on creation would seem either
rhetorical or nonsensical.\textsuperscript{21} For Castoriadis, \textit{being} is groundless abyss, or unordered chaos. Human beings are creators of significations. “Being,” additionally, “is not only ‘in’ but is through (by means of, by virtue of) time. In essence, being is time” (WF 3). He suggests, “time either is nothing or it is creation. Time, properly speaking, is unthinkable without creation” (WF 3). The kind of creation he imagines is what he calls \textit{genuine ontological creation}. “Time is essentially linked,” according to Castoriadis, “to the emergence of alterity. Time is this emergence as such—whereas space is ‘only’ its necessary concomitant. Time is creation and destruction—that means, time is being in its substantive determinations” (WF 399). It is the emergence of difference, thus, emergence of new forms. Put another way, the flux of creation and destruction by default makes each moment new; yet at the same time it calls forth the past and anticipates the future, for experience tends to build—to use Virginia Woolf’s image, as recalled by John Hawley Roberts—as a stream does, not strictly passing, but adding to itself layer by layer.\textsuperscript{22} Henri Bergson argues that experience, or states of consciousness, for example, permeate one another and become virtually impossible to distinguish. The whole of a person’s character can thus be expressed through each moment and in this state, past, present, and future commingle in a productive tension.\textsuperscript{23} Novelty thus appears in and

\textsuperscript{21} Time, as shall be made clear below, is Castoriadis’ way of talking about change, flux, and novelty. In other words: creation or difference. Suzi Adams succinctly alludes to the bifold significance of time: “Castoriadis pursues a two-fold aim in his discussion of time. First, he wants to show that traditional philosophy has instituted a tradition of time as identitary…second, he argues that time \textit{qua} time needs to be interpreted as the emergence of ontological novelty as \textit{creation of otherness}” [Suzi Adams. \textit{Castoriadis’ Ontology: Being and Creation}. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 40. (Henceforth \textit{Castoriadis’ Ontology})].

\textsuperscript{22} John Hawley Roberts. “‘Vision and Design’ in Virginia Woolf,” \textit{PMLA} 61, no. 3 (1946): 841. “Unity-emotion” is meant to demonstrate the convergence of seemingly discreet, but actually connected, life elements.

\textsuperscript{23} It should be noted that Woolf and Bergson address primarily inner experience. This could be seen as an irrelevant disanalogy to Castoriadis’ emphasis on the societal action, or public time. While I do not think it fits perfectly, there is one solid point of affinity: time and creation require that conscious experiences be added, so to speak, to the collective \textit{ethos}; each event imposes a something new on the deliberative process,
through time, for both Bergson and Castoriadis. Suzi Adams suggests a useful gloss on Castoriadis’ view of time: “His interpretation also foregrounds the image of being as creative *phusis* and as *á-être*, a radically heterogeneous *always-becoming* being.”

There are, for Castoriadis, two separate but interdependent and equally necessary types of time. Firstly, there is *social imaginary time*, which—strictly speaking—is social institution itself. Castoriadis clarifies:

> We are not saying: each society has its own way of living time, but: each society *is* also a way of making time and of bringing it into existence, which means: a way of making itself be, of bringing itself into existence as a society…it would not even be enough to say that the description or analysis of a society *is* inseparable from the description of its temporality; the description and analysis of a society *is* obviously the description and analysis of its institutions. And among these, the first one is that which institutes it as being, as being-society and as *this particular* society, namely the institution of its own temporality (IIS 206).

Social-historical creation is temporal creation. With “institution of its own temporality,” Castoriadis touches upon not just the differences in benchmark time found in varied cultures, but also “the time of this particular society, with its particular tempo, significant articulations, anchorages, prospects, and promises” (PPA 34). Cultures with the same external methods for telling time (calendars, seasons, for example) can often have drastically different felt experiences of time. *Social imaginary time* thus relates more to how a society lives in and through time, how it self-institutes through time.

Living in and through social time primarily means two things: firstly, as time *is* change for Castoriadis, social imaginary time is bound up with how a society changes. It is the creative process by which a society institutes its own rhythm and develops its collective *ethos*, or the “different modalities according to which different societies

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24 Adams, *Castoriadis’ Ontology*, 196.
represent and make their incessant self-alteration” (IIS 185). Secondly, social imaginary
time also relates to the manner in which a society appropriates and assigns meaning to the
various aspects of shared benchmark time: for example, “the local irreversibility of time
will be instituted in a singular fashion by each society and invested each time with a
different meaning.”

A (relatively) concrete example of what Castoriadis means by
social imaginary time is found in Book I of Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*: Castoriadis
suggests that Thucydides’ account of the Corinthian speech to the Spartans regarding the
differences between the latter and the Athenians is really a claim about the difference in
the social imaginary temporality of each culture. By asserting, “an Athenian is always an
innovator,” and likewise claiming that the Spartans “are good at keeping things as they
are,” the Corinthians refer to a comportment on the part of the Athenians, one which at its
core is bound up with *doing* or the *á-être* (*always-becoming* being), in contradistinction
to being as static preservation of the same. Castoriadis interprets this as a radical
difference in the relative temporality of the cultures, “viewed in its mode of doing, and
that this is perceived in its deep relation to the signification of the past and of what is to
come” (IIS 208). The Corinthian sentiment seems to reflect an admiration for the culture
of activity: the Athenians’ “view of a holiday is to do what needs doing; they prefer
hardship and activity to peace and quiet. In a word, they are by nature incapable of either
living a quiet life themselves or of allowing anyone else to do so.”

Castoriadis, further, rightly connects the priority of activity with values generally, claiming that the priority of
activity offers a glimpse into the relative importance of different modalities of being.

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26 Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.70 (page 51).
On the other hand, *identitary time*, which is exemplified by calendar time and other imposed, universal mechanisms of collective measurement, relies on the natural substratum (seasons, natural cycles), but is nonetheless an arbitrary imposition on internal rhythm. *Identitary time* “is that related to the measurement of time or to imposing a measure on time and as such entails its segmentation into ‘identical’ or ideally (and impossibly) ‘congruent’ parts” (IIS 209). A paradox appears: calendar time and other identitary forms of time rely, in a sense, on natural phenomena (for example, our years, months, weeks and days are based on natural cycles), yet are thoroughly unnatural in a way. They impose boundaries on *temporal felt experience*.27

For Castoriadis, neither aspect of time can exist without the other: “Time must be

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27 Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* is an excellent account of inner experience or rhythm. The story takes place over a period of only a few hours, but Clarissa’s rich experience of time and meaning forms the core of the novel. Though time in the novel is demarcated by Big Ben, the time that matters takes the form of experience, or felt duration. Likewise, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s portrayal of the inner experiences—and thus radically different internal durations, that swell and contract according to activities and outlook—of the Ramsey family and the “time passes” section in the middle of the book show that past, present, and future mingle and blend through the melding of perception and memory (or history and creation, to use Castoriadis’ preferred focal language). It is important to note, however, that this essentially Bergsonian conception of time as duration is not exactly compatible with Castoriadis. In the first place, Castoriadis’ analysis stays on the level of the social; arguments for precisely the same kind of consciousness are implausible. Secondly, while Castoriadis heavily emphasizes “signification,” the failed attempt to translate experiences into language was a primary catalyst for Woolf and Bergson in the first place, who both thought that language could not translate the richness of consciousness into socially meaningful articulations. This was the partial function of the “stream-of-consciousness” novel on its own terms. These differences notwithstanding, it does seem clear that cultures have quite varied experiences of time; it seems uncontrovertial to claim that (for example) Italy and America today—while utilizing essentially the same system of benchmark time—experience, feel, and institute themselves through time differently. Not only do the differences manifest in daily trivialities like dining; the way in which Americans comport themselves with regard to work, rest, vacation, and activity in general seems strikingly different. These cultural differences could be considered more akin to the differences between the Spartans and Athenians—as given by the Corinthians via Thucydides—than the trivial differences mentioned above. Moreover, though the exact same analysis of experience does not hold, it seems nonetheless possible (this is perhaps Castoriadis’ intention) to speak in broader strokes about cultural attitudes and the collective past and future goals that fuel them. I take this to be the crux of his discussion of public time. The above interpretation of Woolf and Bergson is indebted to Shiv Kumar [Consult: Shiv K. Kumar. Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel. (New York: NYU Press, 1963); Shiv Kumar. Virginia Woolf and Bergson’s Durée. (Hoshiarpur, India: Vishveshvaranand Book Agency, 1957.) and Mary Ann Gillies [Consult: Mary Ann Gillies. Henri Bergson and British Modernism. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).] For Bergson and Woolf, consult: Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Trans. F.L. Pogson. (New York: Cosimo, 2008); Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway*. (Orlando: Harvest, 1981); Virginia Woolf. *To the Lighthouse*. (Orlando: Harvest, 1984).
instituted (both as identitary and as imaginary) for social representing to be possible, the
time in and through which this representing exists and which this representing makes
exist. This time, however, is inseparable from the *time of social doing*” (IIS 211). For an
illustration of this relationship, Castoriadis turns to “the essential datum, at once naïve
and scientific, the core of our experience of time and an ingredient in every social
institution, that finds its counterpart and its support in the ‘natural’ fact of the
irreversibility of the succession of events or phenomena” (IIS 202). He underscores that
while this is necessarily true to our experience, in all possible realms of our experience, it
does not characterize a society as distinguished from other societies: “What characterizes
society is not the obligatory recognition of the local irreversibility of time, which is trivial
and the same everywhere, but the manner in which this local irreversibility is instituted
and taken into consideration in the representation and the activity of society” (IIS 203).
Social-historical creation thus necessarily coexists with a *natural* irreversibility, or the
basic fact of durational flux, but the temporal cannot involve *only* that one aspect of this
coupling; “an instituted time that would be purely identitary is impossible because an
instituted world that would be purely identitary is impossible, because the separation of
the ensemblist organization of the world from imaginary social meanings is impossible”
(IIS 211).

Meaning exists in and through the social-historical.28 This form of creation,
according to Castoriadis, requires a public space (on which, more later) and is bound up
with his notion of time:

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28 “Meaning” and the “social-historical” are quite similar, and certainly interconnected, but are not the
same. The social-historical is creation; creation of new social-political forms, essences, and the web of
meanings for a culture. Suzi Adams suggests: “Only when thought of as the social-historical,” as opposed
Equally important, hand in hand with the creation of a public space goes the creation of a public time. By this I do not mean just ‘social,’ ‘calendar’ time, a system of sociotemporal benchmarks which, of course, already exists everywhere. I mean the emergence of a dimension in which the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as domain for its activities (GPCD 281).

Inspecting the past and allowing for a contingent future to open itself is another way in which—as suggested above—the past, present, and future tend to merge. The natural substratum already exists as an underlying (partial) determination but imaginary creation is reliant upon the time of doing. “The time of doing must thus be instituted so as to contain singularities that are not determinable in advance, as the possibility of the appearing of what is irregular, of accidents, of events, of the rupture of repetition. It must, in its institution, preserve or make room for the emergence of otherness as intrinsically possible (not as the possibility of miracles or of acts of magic)” (IIS 212). Castoriadis’ insistence on the use of strong, normative language reflects his commitment to the emergence of otherness, or absolute ontological creation, which is intimately connected to Castoriadis’ notion of history.

2.2.3 History and Creation

“History is creation: the creation of total forms of human life” (GPCD 269). Creation implies novelty, which together with history is couched in the expression of time. It is useful to begin with a close look at the above passage. The second part of this sentence—creation of total forms of human life—seems almost inconceivable at first glance. In other places, Castoriadis will connect this to creation ex nihilo, by which he...

to the social or the historical, “as both doing and signification, can time as radical otherness be grasped in its perpetual self-alteration and creation of other forms” (Adams, Castoriadis’ Ontology, 57).
means the creation of new forms “not producible or deducible from what ‘was there’” (WF 392). He clarifies, however:

This does not mean that it is created in nihilo or cum nihilo. So, for instance, humans create the world of meaning and signification, or institution, upon certain conditions, namely that they are already living beings, that there is no constantly and bodily present God to tell them what is the meaning of the world and of their life, and so forth. But there is no way we can derive either this level of being—the social historical—or its particular contents in each case from these conditions. The Greek polis is created under certain conditions and “with” certain means, in a definite environment, with given human beings, a tremendous past embodied inter alia in Greek mythology and language, and so on, endlessly. But it is not caused or determined by these. The existing, or part of it, conditions the new form; it does not cause or determine it (WF 393).

This passage guards against the common misinterpretation, which attributes to Castoriadis the (obviously absurd) view that humans create structures, meanings, essences, from literally nothing. It is a legitimate point that social structures exert a powerful influence on behavior and thought. The objection highlights, correctly, that creation seems to consist, at least in part, of utilizing already present materials or structures in new ways or to new ends. Castoriadis’ terminological insistence creates issues because at least at first glance, using already present conditions or materials does not sound like creation ex nihilo or the creation of the total forms of life. He probably should have chosen a different, less distracting, formulation; I think the central (significantly less controversial) claim is actually that “creation entails only that the determinations over what there is are never closed in a manner forbidding the emergence of other determinations” (WF 393). In other words, actuality does not exhaust potentiality.

In reality, Castoriadis’ notion of creation is not attenuated by the claim that an environment conditions the horizon of its inhabitants. He regards the general institution of society as “various particular institutions” (WF 7). The unity that appears as a web of meanings, which he also calls social imaginary significations, is the unity of a new social
The web of significations is “irreducible to the traditional types of being” (WF 8), which means nothing particularly mystical: it is just the insistence that new social and theoretical forms cannot be reduced neatly to inherited forms or structures of thought. “Society is self-creation deployed as history” (WF 13); in other words, it consists of shifting self-creation into the social-historical realm as the emergence of otherness and moving from the self-creation of individuals to self-institution of society. But, “this is not to say that historical creation takes place on a tabula rasa” (WF 14); for Castoriadis, history is conditioned (but not determined).

A central conceptual snag that prevents the consideration of history as creation is that history “presents itself immediately as succession” (IIS 183). Castoriadis wonders “what is available to inherited thought to think of a succession,” and posits: logical consequence, or causality, the search for which aims at the isolation of fixed relations. A historical view that relies on logical implication attempts to show that differences and historical contingencies are actually components of a static, determined framework, in Castoriadis’ eyes. He does not argue against the occasional efficacy of this method; in fact, a wholesale abandonment of the idea of productive generalizations would have—to say the least—undesirable effects on the natural sciences. Rather, the focal issue for Castoriadis is a specific mode of historical analysis. He argues:

> History cannot be thought of within any of the traditional frameworks of succession. For what is given in and through history is not the determined sequence of the determined, but the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, non-trivial novelty. This is manifested by the existence of history in toto as well as by the appearance of new societies (of new types of society) and the incessant transformation of each society. And it is only on the basis of this radical otherness or creation that we can truly think of temporality and time, the excellent and eminent effective actuality of which we find in history. For, either time is nothing, a strange psychological illusion masking the essential intemporalty of a relation of order; or else time is the very manifestation of the fact that

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29 When Castoriadis highlights creation, deployed as history, he means this kind of creation: of new forms, essences, and meanings. These comprise the collective ethos of a culture, for Castoriadis.
something other than what exists is bringing itself into being, and bringing itself into being as new or as other and not simply as a consequence or as a different exemplar of the same (IIS 185).

Though historians tend at times to speak as though historicity were only present in periods characterized by monumental shifts, the truth—according to Castoriadis—is that history simply features different modes. The difference between these modes accounts for periods of seemingly broad change, not the complete presence or absence of history (IIS 185). Essentially, the claim regards different social-historical institutions of time and returns to the idea that accompanying the creation of a public space must be the creation of a public time. Recall that the public time operates such that “the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as domain for its activities” (GPCD 281). Time, in other words, is the emergence of being in its substantive form: creation.

Rather than thinking and assigning meaning based on pre-determined relations (as in orthodox Marxist theories of history and society), Castoriadis believes cultures should think outside of traditional frameworks (inherited forms of thought): “What is given in and through history is not the determined sequence of the determined but the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, non-trivial novelty” (IIS 184). Traditional categories of understanding—of assigning meaning and essences to the world—are useful insofar as they take the pulse of the time and place in which they are embedded. Otherwise, and especially if thought to be invariant, they reduce to misleading constructions. Castoriadis suggests another emphasis: “if we decide to consider the social-historical for itself; if we understand that it is to be questioned and reflected upon on the basis of itself alone…then we observe that it shatters our inherited logic and ontology…it makes us recognize the narrow limits of [our traditional categories’]
validity, permits us to glimpse a new and different logic and, above all, radically to alter the meaning of: being” (IIS 169). Ingerid Straume encapsulates the Castoriadian conception of the social-historical in the following quote: “History is the creation of social forms: complex, irreducible forms that do not accord to laws or principles.”

2.3 Athenian Democracy and the Public Space

This section explores two ongoing threads: firstly, I work through the creation of a public space (which ties Arendt and Castoriadis together) and the continuing development of the idea of autonomous creation in more detail. Secondly, I offer an explanation as to why the Athenians—as opposed to any other culture—might be of particular use for current political theory and why Castoriadis’ veneration is not simply nostalgia.

2.3.1 A Public Space for Autonomous Creation

The Athenians were a particularly important moment of rupture in history, according to Castoriadis. He felt deeply connected to the Greeks and found in Athenian democracy the “becoming truly public of the public/public sphere” (DTBD 405), which

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31 Though a detailed discussion would exhaust too much space, the following should suffice for my purpose: this is a reference to the three spheres that—according to Castoriadis—form in Greek society. They are (a) the private sphere (oikos), (b) the public/private sphere (agora) and (c) the public/public (ekklēsia) sphere. It is, however, noteworthy that he acknowledges a compression of the latter two spheres into one, especially after—and due to—the work of Hannah Arendt. For the sake of brevity and focus, I will treat mainly the public/public sphere and not focus much on the distinctions between the three. Though, it should be noted that the importance of the public/public sphere stems in large part from Castoriadis’ hesitation with regard to representative democracy. He suggests a fully participatory model (public/public) instead of the exclusivity that arises from the private/public realm. For my part, I focus less on the merits and drawbacks of representative democracy and more on participation in public discourse and
is the core of democracy. In Castoriadis’ estimation, until the end of the fifth Century, B.C.E., “no opposition existed in principle between the ‘private’ and the public ‘spheres’” (WF 117). He is careful to point out that “the emergence of a public space means that a political domain is created which ‘belongs to all’ (ta koina). The ‘public’ ceases to be a ‘private’ affair—of the king, the priests, the bureaucracy, the politicians, and the experts. Decisions on common affairs have to be made by the community” (GPCD 280). This line is reminiscent of the passage from Pericles’ funeral oration on the citizen.\(^{32}\) Castoriadis’ notion of deliberation operates within the community at large, includes all, and to an extent ends\(^{33}\) at the institution of social imaginary significations. Limiting the process to the few is essentially to privatize the public realm:

“Totalitarianism is characterized by the attempt to unify by force these three spheres and by the full becoming-private of the public/public sphere” (DTBD 406).

Similarly, “the first condition for the existence of an autonomous society—of a democratic society—is that the public/public sphere has become effectively public, become an ekklēsia and not an object of private appropriation by particular groups” (DTBD 407).\(^{34}\) Moreover, Castoriadis goes to great lengths to demonstrate the extent to which ‘democratic’ societies are simply not yet there:

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\(^{32}\) Pericles says: “We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics minds his own business: we say that he has no business here at all” (Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, 119 [2.39-2.40]).

\(^{33}\) “End” should not be taken to imply that once a society has instituted itself, its work is finished. Far from it, on the contrary: self-creation is an ongoing process. For this reason, it would seem that “pause” might be a better word choice. But this too fails to encapsulate the flux, novelty, and temporality of change. Unfortunately the use of a spatial metaphor seems necessary to the explanation at hand, but it must be accompanied by the notion that if—as maintained earlier—creation and time are bound up with one another, it must remain metaphorical only, or else be found lacking.

\(^{34}\) This is an appropriate time to take note of a couple of important problems. In a way, the entire distinction could collapse with this line about “particular groups” because a political system with an obviously unjust system of representation (in ancient Greece, the public sphere was open to all, other than—of course—women and slaves) could hardly be said to be free of control from private particular groups. Though this
The contemporary liberal oligarchies share with totalitarian regimes, Asiatic despotism, and absolute monarchies the following decisive trait: the public/public sphere is in fact, in its greatest part, private. It is certainly not so legally speaking; the country is not the domain of the monarch, nor the state the entirety of the servants of its ‘house.’ But on the factual level the essential features of public affairs are still the private affair of various groups and clans that share effective power, decisions are made behind closed doors, the little that is brought onto the public stage is masked, prefabricated, and belated to the point of irrelevancy (DTBD 406-407).

Thus, without the creation of a genuine public space there is no collective autonomy, and democracy is democracy in name only.

### 2.3.2 Why Athenian Democracy? Greeks as a Germ?

Castoriadis conceives of Athenian politics as a germ. It is important to note immediately that this is not the claim that the Greeks are a model. In fact, he argues explicitly against this misconception of his work. The issue, for Castoriadis, essentially proceeds from a historical analysis: the ancient Greek culture was the first society to shift away from a principle of closure, and toward the active undermining of its own foundational principles. This interpretive claim foreshadows our discussion of Arendt, who suggests that “impartiality, and with it all true historiography, came into the world when Homer decided to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans” (BPF 51). Castoriadis agrees, pointing out that enemies are not denigrated in Homer; moreover, the focal character in the Iliad, for example, is Hector. Castoriadis assumes, as an impetus for this choice of emphasis in Homeric poetry, “the keen interest in the other,” objection would certainly be sustained, for my part, it is less fruitful to focus on the obviously and uncontroversially negative aspects of the Athenian political system because they can, at this point, be taken for granted as arcane. But on the other hand, the principle behind the application is still of use to us. For a modern corollary, section two of the first article of the U.S. Constitution regards the census, and though we no longer find it appropriate to count all free men and three fifths of everyone else, excluding untaxed Indians, we nonetheless successfully utilize the idea of a census being important for the maintenance of the democratic process.

35 He claims, in DTBD, “I have not ceased reiterating that Athenian democracy cannot be for us anything but a germ, and in no way a model” (DTBD 407). I take this to indicate that it is the beginning of a response, something upon which to build, but no more.
which “starts with the Greeks. This interest is but another side of the critical examination and interrogation of their own institutions. That is to say, it is a component of the democratic and philosophical movement created by the Greeks” (GPCD 268). Reflecting on the Greeks is, for this reason, not a model but a germ; it is akin to “reflecting on the social and historical conditions of thought itself—at least, thought as we know and practice it” (GPCD 268) because “Greece is the social-historical locus where democracy and philosophy are created” (GPCD 269).  

Though Castoriadis’ assertion that judging and choosing is a solely western phenomenon, in origin at least, seems obviously false, there is nonetheless something important to be garnered in its backdrop. I will not defend the claim; instead, I would like to highlight the conviction that perhaps motivates it. Chaos, or as he sometimes calls it, the abyss, is characteristic of a world without a firmly codified order. Focusing on the social-political order (though the concept also applies to discussions of moral order), a world that is not fully pre-figured allows—and mandates—self-conscious reorganization, active self-creation. Castoriadis has this in mind when he equates chaos with void or nothingness, saying, it is “out of the total void that the world emerges” (GPCD 273). According to Castoriadis, God did not provide the world to the Greeks, fully ordered. Castoriadis is primarily concerned with a culture “explicitly deliberating about its laws

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36 Before moving on, I should note that Castoriadis’ claim here is potentially imbued with—to say the least—dangerous implications. The idea of thought “as we practice it” is unclear, but could certainly be used for the continual justification of a conception of ‘rationality’ that isolates and marginalizes large groups of people within a culture, not to mention the effect on other cultures. It also seems likely to be patently false that philosophy actually originates in ancient Greece, because the emergence of a robust philosophical tradition in China seems at least to correspond to that in Greece. I take a more generous interpretation of the line, however: I think Castoriadis intends to underscore that in this particular dialogue (social-political philosophy and political theory in a the United States or Europe), there is a distinct heritage. He also claims that we need to move toward the middle, in between two equally incorrect assumptions: (a) that Greece is an “inaccessible model” and that (b) “history is essentially flat” and “there are no significant differences between cultures other than descriptive ones” (GPCD 268-269).

37 See GPCD 271-274.
and changing those laws. Elsewhere laws are inherited from the ancestors or given by
gods or the One True God; but they are not posited as created by men after a collective
confrontation and discussion about right and wrong law” (GPCD 272). It is essentially a
matter of questioning the laws themselves, but also and perhaps more importantly,
attempting to adopt a cultural ethos to gain a better collective understanding of the world
and the good life.\textsuperscript{38}

Castoriadis seems right in asserting that this vision—of a world without a definite
order—motivates the emergence of philosophical inquiry. “Philosophy, as the Greeks
created and practiced it, is possible because the world is not fully ordered. If it were,
there would not be any philosophy, but only one, final system of knowledge” (GPCD
274). He makes the same connection with regard to the human world of politics, the
public space: “If the human world were fully ordered, were given by God or by nature or
by the ‘nature of society’ or by the ‘laws of history,’ then there would be no room for
political thinking and no field for political action and no sense in asking what the proper
law is or justice is” (GPCD 274).

2.3.3 Participation and the Public Space

One area in need of further discussion is the paramount question of politics and
power: \textit{Who gets a seat at the table}? As mentioned earlier, it would hardly be fair to be
dismissive of Athenian politics solely on the unfortunate grounds that women and slaves,

\textsuperscript{38} I choose to essentially ignore the question of the accuracy of Castoriadis’ historical claim that “judging
and choosing…were created in Greece” (GPCD 272). As a claim, it seems likely that it would need more
argumentation and evidence, but I eschew the issue because it is not of primary importance to me. More
important for my purpose is the idea of chaos and the necessary self-institution that arises from a world that
is not completely given. In this sense, I think it is fair to focus on the Greeks as a germ because, if for no
other reason, ancient Greece is the most substantial origin of western philosophical lineage and Athenian
democracy is the most notable foundation upon which the western political-theoretical worldview is based.
among others, were severely marginalized. On the other hand, the question of participation must be considered. This section (and the remainder of the project) aims at addressing some of the loose threads from the foregoing chapter: how do politics account for and remain fair to all people, advocating broad general participation; how does the cultivation of a public space work for everyone, and not just private interests; what is the aim of the public sphere conceived as such?

Castoriadis anticipates the need for a robust notion of participation. “Equality of the citizens,” he says, “is of course equality in respect of the law (isonomia), but it is essentially much more than that. It is not the granting of equal passive ‘rights,’ but active general participation in public affairs” (GPCD 275). This should be public, be concerned with the collective, and—as underscored earlier—must belong to all. The public space, which Castoriadis calls the ekklēsia, is characterized by equal participation. It involves freeing politics from the lobbying of special interests, a trend that often precludes the public space from being a zone of indetermination and discourse.  

The problem, however, is unfortunately not resolved through measures of political structuring alone; the resultant ethos of the citizen seems as much a product of the active cultivation of an outlook on the part of an individual or social group as it is the product of

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39 The question of paternalism, or benevolent dictatorship, erects a conceptual road-block: it is certainly conceivable that the actions of a benevolent authoritarian leader would be more socially beneficial, or even more progressive and thoughtful, than actions of the larger population. Moreover, the democratic process could result in a genuinely open discussion, in the public realm, that materialized in the preservation of the ‘sanctity of marriage.’ No matter how undesireable this result seems, and no matter how benevolent the dictator, the risks of collective folly seem like more tolerable risks than totalizing governments and a lack of collective autonomy, not only because they are less likely to produce severe marginalization and oppression, but also because education and participation more easily respond to these risks. No doubt this alignment requires a redoubled commitment to education and escalating participation; but historically, social progress has been the result of education and participation, of taking a stake in the collective welfare. The possibilities of good-hearted authoritarians and collective folly aside, the democratic promise seems to represent the best chance at long-term growth.
political opportunity. Recalling Thucydides’ description of the Athenian citizen, people must concern themselves with the collective in the first place.

Pericles’ funeral oration will remain in at least partial focus throughout this project, but Castoriadis offers a particularly insightful analysis of one line in particular:

Φιλοκαλοῦμεν τε γὰρ μετ’ έυτελείας καὶ φιλοσοφοῦμεν ἀνευ μαλακείας (philokaloumen te gar met’ euteleias kai philosophoumen aneu malakeias).

It is useful to quote Castoriadis’ analysis at length:

Pericles’ sentence is impossible to translate into modern language. The two verbs of the phrase can be rendered literally by ‘we love beauty…and we love wisdom…’, but the essential would be lost (as Hannah Arendt correctly saw). The verbs do not allow this separation of the ‘we’ and the ‘object’—beauty or wisdom—external to this ‘we.’ The verbs are not ‘transitive,’ and they are not even simply ‘active’: they are at the same time ‘verbs of state.’ Like the verb to live, they point to an ‘activity’ which is at the same time a way of being or, rather, the way by means of which the subject of the verb is. Pericles does not say that we love beautiful things (and put them in museums), we love wisdom (and pay professors or buy books). He says we are in and by the love of beauty and wisdom and the activity this love brings forth, we live by and through them—but far from extravagance, and far from flabbiness…The object of the institution of the polis is for him the creation of a human being, the Athenian citizen, who exists and lives in and through the unity of these three: the love and ‘practice’ of beauty, the love and ‘practice’ of wisdom, the care and responsibility for the common good, the collectivity, the polis (GPCD 288).

The Athenians are a germ in large part because “the Athenian citizen is not a ‘private philosopher,’ or a ‘private artist,’ he is a citizen for whom philosophy and art have become ways of life” (GPCD 288). The public space incorporates, but at the same time pushes beyond, the simple right to free speech or demonstration. It also includes, but mandates more than, the right to make what Castoriadis calls final decisions. There is—in

40 To illustrate Castoriadis’ suggestion of the untranslatability of this passage: Rex Warner translates, “Our love for what is beautiful does not lead us to extravagance; our love of things of the mind does not make us soft” (Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, 118 [2.40]). Thomas Hobbes translates “For we also give ourselves to bravery, and yet with thrift, and to philosophy, and yet without mollification of the mind” (Thomas Hobbes. The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. Ed. Sir William Molesworth. Vol. VIII. (London: John Bohn, 1843), 194). Benjamin Jowett translates: “For we are lovers of the beautiful, yet simple in our tastes, and we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness” (Thucydides Translated into English. Volume 1. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 129). The Hobbes translation seems obviously incorrect, as the original does not appear to mention “bravery.” The Warner translation risks omitting the important detail that philokaloumen and philosophoumen are verbs; translating them as nouns and as the subjects of their respective clauses might be misleading.
the public realm—an equal emphasis on the dialogue surrounding such decisions.

Autonomous citizens have the right to negotiate final judgments, but more importantly, they have the right to help shape the discourse and legitimize its terms. This is a mechanism of value-formation. Not just the final say, as it were, but the process that precedes it, should be public, open, and active. The legal implications, important as they are, are but the preconditions.

The important question is: What are the people actually doing with these rights?...Only the education (paideia) of the citizens as citizens can give valuable, substantive content to the ‘public space.’ This paideia is not primarily a matter of books and academic credits. First and foremost, it involves becoming conscious that the polis is also oneself and that its fate also depends upon one’s mind, behavior, and decisions; in other words, it is participation in political life (GPCD 281).

Hence Castoriadis’ claim that “whatever is of importance has to appear publicly” (GPCD 280). He alludes—astutely—to a bipartite condition: the public space must be characterized by the right of people to speak freely on the one hand, but equally, the willingness of those people to engage in political, value-shifting discourse. Moreover, it is an educative process, which peers ahead toward the future while nonetheless inspecting its past and lodging a critical analysis of present institutions. Genuine democracy happens in and through the public space.

2.4 Conclusion

Castoriadis’ analysis is largely on the social level. Though his psychoanalytic work is influential in pockets, his social-political and philosophical writings have garnered more attention. His notion of autonomous self-creation is deeply empowering; the public space, upon which the self-institution of society relies, is an educative and collective process. He is right to insist that self-institution must be active and cognizant,
because in this way citizens have a stake in their cultural mechanisms (essences, norms, meanings, for example); they inspect the past and form lucid goals about the future, which opens up as possibility and indetermination.

Through education and broad participation, societies self-institute in and through the public space, a process which engenders value formation and the creation of meanings and norms. Castoriadis does not, however, focus much on the actual agents of political action. Who are the actors? The transition from Castoriadis to Arendt is in one way a move from the broadly social toward the interpersonal. She finds the public realm equally important, but integrates the notion of plurality, which contributes to a much clearer sense of political action, critical thinking, and discourse. Castoriadis leaves these questions relatively unanswered. Arendt’s plurality also helps respond to the risk of collective folly.

Concurrently, Castoriadis offers an approach to institution-building, or as he calls it, self-institution, that Arendt needs and does not quite establish. Working closely with Ingerid Straume’s analysis, I suggest that each of these two thinkers augments and fills holes in the other’s position. The other highly significant strength of Castoriadis’ position is his insistence on critical praxis: his steadfast opposition to inherited forms of thought and the unreflective repetition of values manifests itself in an ethos of collective inquiry and social criticism, which engages in active, lucid self-creation in and through the public space, the locus of collective autonomy and genuine—as opposed to nominal—democracy.
Chapter Three

Hannah Arendt: Thinking and the Public Space

Hannah Arendt was witness to “homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth” (OT vii). The growing trend of world alienation fascinated Arendt, and in her view she wrote “against a backdrop of both reckless optimism and reckless despair” (OT vii). For my part, I am most concerned with the ramifications of the following disparity: “the irritating incompatibility between the actual power of modern man (greater than ever before, great to the point where he might challenge the very existence of his own universe) and the impotence of modern men to live in, and understand the sense of, a world which their own strength has established” (OT viii). Whether we created our world through an essentially human strength should no longer be the question; for Arendt, and likewise for Castoriadis, the claim to be worked through is that “we can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion” (OT ix). In other words, we are already largely responsible for the world we inhabit; as members of the collective, we actively shape our values. The complacency exemplified in the idea that we would let the bad simply fade away is highly problematic. Value formation is and must be an active process fueled by
substantive social critique: specifically, an unrestricted and ruthless critique of everything existing.\textsuperscript{41}

With this goal in mind, this chapter pursues—for the most part—two main threads: on the one hand, I continue to demonstrate areas of overlap in the background of the three main thinkers. Like Castoriadis and Kierkegaard, Arendt wrote in response to a particularly oppressive worldview. In her case, the oppression took on a more visceral feel due to its extremity (totalitarian movements of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century). It is nonetheless the case that instructive parallels can be underscored between the ideological climates of the three thinkers. Another realm of affinity is a deep admiration for the Greeks, most notably her paradigmatic thinker, Socrates. The second thread is less an overlap and more a continuation and partial improvement: I trace the ways in which Arendt’s account of the public space and the activity of judging and thinking improve upon Castoriadis’ notion of the necessarily social process of self-institution and autonomous creation, and the ways in which Arendt in turn could utilize Castoriadis’ self-institution and creation in a more effective manner, that is, to bolster her work. At stake, ultimately, is the public realm and how cultures ought to cultivate an ethos of resistance that opposes the unreflective repetition of the same and a merely nominal democratic public space. Plurality and political action respond to the needs that form as a result of Castoriadis’ unordered, chaotic world (temporary stabilization of norms and essences, addressing the risk of collective folly, resisting totalizing structures and inherited forms of thought).

3.1 Background to Arendt’s Work

\textsuperscript{41} Marx, “Ruthless Criticism,” 13. I return to Marx’s letter to Ruge in order to highlight the importance of activity and process without an end.
Hannah Arendt’s interest in politics formed as a result of quite distinct conditions.

Elizabeth Young-Bruehl alludes to her three (relatively) politically apathetic formative teachers—Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Karl Jaspers—and her doctoral dissertation (a relatively non-political work entitled *Augustine’s Concept of Love*) to show that her political theory responded directly to her immediate surrounding environment, most notably Nazi and Stalinist forms of totalitarianism. This claim finds corroboration in Arendt’s “Understanding in Politics,” with the following passage, in which she refers to the theme of trying to be at home in, or understanding the sense of, the world:

> Many people say that one cannot fight totalitarianism without understanding it. Fortunately this is not true; if it were, our case would be hopeless. Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is 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 (EU 307-308).

The passage alludes to a noteworthy biographical consideration: Arendt was an outcast of sorts. Born in Germany, she left in 1933, spending the rest of her life in exile. In this respect, she is quite similar to Castoriadis; they both departed from their native lands and adopted new lives and languages. The concern with trying to be at home in the world thus takes on a personal and highly relevant role in her thought.

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43 The idea of being outside of a culture, existing as a pariah, is arguably very important for Castoriadis as well. He certainly valued openness in a culture, and praised the Greeks for their lack of closure; I do not think Castoriadis assumes an outsider status to be anything like a necessary condition (nor does Arendt), but perhaps he would claim that a benefit of an exiled existence is the ability to retain a critical distance from social institutions and avoid the deep entrenchment that can result from a fortified connection to home, or at the least an awareness of this distinction.
In this section, I attempt to understand Arendt by contextualizing her philosophy:
I explore (a) how her status as an outcast might have contributed to her ideas, (b) the influence of totalitarianism, and (c) the legacy of foundationalism in ethics.

3.1.1 Arendt as Pariah

Arendt’s self-identification as a pariah, according to Young-Bruehl, became an important aspect of judgment itself as Arendt conceives of it. The judgment of actions should not rely on subsuming particularities under generalities; rather, Young-Bruehl shows that Arendt fiercely opposes such a mode of moral deliberation. Actions should be judged as distinct cases. Her pariah-status enabled a certain level of detachment from the system of traditional moralities and institutions. Though Castoriadis’ exile had a different impetus, he nonetheless shared a conception of the importance of external influence: the deliberate undermining and questioning of foundational values materializes in a delicate balance between participation in and critical distance from institutions and processes.

It seems that being an outcast at the least facilitates the move away from holding fast to cherished values. Being initially and always at home in the world has a formative effect on the horizon of actions and morals; hence Arendt’s claim that “members of respectable society, who had not been touched by the intellectual and moral upheaval in the early stages of the Nazi period, [were] the first to yield. They simply exchanged one system of values for another” (RJ 44). Her (better) version of moral deliberation is pitted in opposition to an automatic process, which functions “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” (RJ 44). Young-Bruehl maintains that within this critique is contained an implicit indictment of the social parvenu and
praise for the *social pariah*. The *parvenu*—who establishes a world of belonging and attachment, and has in this sense *arrived*—is contrasted with the *pariah*, who remains unafraid of independence and solitude, or the two-in-one of thinking and judging.\(^4^4\)

Arendt characterizes the pariah with an ability to resist the sweeping nature of political identity and belonging: “Man is a social animal and life is not easy for him when social ties are cut off. Moral standards are much easier kept in the texture of a society. Very few individuals have the strength to conserve their own integrity if their social, political and legal status is completely confused” (WR 116). In many cases, according to Arendt, the instinct is to change an identity for the purpose of assimilation. The important aspect of this for my part is that the *social parvenu* is in need of belonging to such an extent that she unthinkingly obeys or conforms in the field of politics.

Arendt speculates with regard to the reason for this: “Most of us depend entirely on social standards; we lose confidence in ourselves if society does not approve of us; we are—and always were—ready to pay any price in order to be accepted by society” (WR 119). Young-Bruehl points to Adolf Eichmann as a prime example of the parvenu, who “did what he was told to do by those whose approval he wanted, and obeyed the law of the land in doing so. He behaved; he did not act.”\(^4^5\)

Thinking and judging figure prominently in the subsequent sections of this chapter, but before proceeding, it seems important to note one point of overlap between the three thinkers.

If the pariah-status is interpreted as detachment in the best, most positive sense of the word (acknowledging, of course, that there is a negative connotation as well), then it

\(^4^4\) On the “two-in-one,” a more detailed discussion ensues below. The phrase represents the Arendt’s conviction that thinking is an act during which the thinker is not alone, but is rather engaged in a “silent dialogue between me and myself” (RJ 45).

\(^4^5\) Young-Bruehl, “Reflections on Hannah Arendt,” 17.
is a sentiment shared by Castoriadis and Kierkegaard. In Arendt’s vocabulary, the parvenu is so deeply entrenched in the systematic thought and ideology of a culture that she is unable to maintain a critical posture toward it. She desires approval and belonging more than she desires living together with her self. On my reading, Arendt does not claim that an outsider is the only person capable of this posture (in fact, she goes to great lengths to show that every person is capable of thinking and judging); rather, she underscores the bifold existence perhaps facilitated by an uncertain social-political identity: the pariah is both a part of, yet discerning with regard to, the social-political climate in which she is embedded. This is far from dissimilar to the kind of critical engagement Castoriadis advocates when it comes to pointing beyond what is currently the case. Kierkegaard thought a similar kind of outsider status could be used to understand how the Danish Lutheran church had fabricated a worldview of unity and neatness, a complete synthesis of Christianity and speculative philosophy that claimed to provide the answers to how one exists as an ethical agent and citizen. Her identification with the pariah suggests the utility of noting how citizens engage in thoughtful judgment even when that choice materializes in unpopularity or exile of a literal or figurative type.

3.1.2 Arendt and Totalitarianism

Arendt links totalitarianism with the satisfaction of certain basic human desires: “Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted

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46 On this important formulation, there is more to come. Living together with one’s self is a significant part of the activity of thinking.
masses can feel at home” (OT 353). Clearly, for Arendt, the power of totalitarianism is at least in part that it can offer a feeling of rootedness or certainty. This relief from anxiety is the feeling of the parvenu, previously mentioned. It can perhaps be characterized by a perceived connection, or unity, within the worldview and alignment of a culture. This alignment echoes Castoriadis’ criticism of orthodox Marxism. Likewise, it recalls Kierkegaard’s critique of the Danish Lutheran church. The opposing emotive reaction, which totalitarianism utilizes well, is fear: “Fear is the despair over the individual impotence of those who, for whatever reason, have refused to ‘act in concert’” (EU 337).

This base-level fear reflects our need to belong; Arendt positions it in opposition to virtue, which “is happy to pay the price of limited power for the blessing of being together with other men” (EU 337). Fear, conversely, is “the inspiring principle of tyranny,” and is “fundamentally connected to that anxiety which we experience in situations of complete loneliness” (EU 336). The joy or virtue on the other side of the coin is linked to being able to share power with equals—a condition of the Athenian polis. Note, however, that tyranny is distinguished from totalitarianism: they are not precisely the same form of government, but the fear of isolation nonetheless epitomizes both. After all, Arendt states, “if law, therefore, is the essence of constitutional or republican government, then terror is the essence of totalitarian government” (EU 341).

Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, “does not curtail all liberties or abolish certain essential freedoms, nor does it, at least to our limited knowledge, succeed in eradicating the love of freedom from the hearts of men; it simply and mercilessly presses men, such as they are, against each other so that the very space of free action—and this is the reality of freedom—disappears” (EU 342-343). The laws and channels of
communication that form between political agents, and which establish the public space of interaction and self-determination, are at stake: “Terror substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men an iron band which presses them all so tightly together that it is as though they were melded into each other, as though they were only one man” (EU 342).

The concomitant destruction of the shared world of political action and the compression of all people into one tight, artificially unified set preys upon a perennial fear of humans. To address this fear, Arendt carefully distinguishes between loneliness and solitude. Loneliness is the condition, par excellence, of totalitarian regimes; it is the danger inherent in solitude, and represents an inability to connect with others through separation or desertion. Solitude itself, however, is not purely negative. Quite the opposite, in fact: solitude is the two-in-one of thinking and judging (the silent dialogue between me and myself) and requires the presence of other people, if for no other reason than, thinking is something that happens not in isolation but in an environment. It is a form of plurality. Arendt’s notion of individuality depends, actually, “entirely on other people” (EU 358). Solitude is linked to Kierkegaard’s notion of inwardness, a connection which is explored in detail below.

The way in which people are pressed together indicates the core issue; it often takes place in and through dominant ideologies, or to use language more familiar to this project, inherited forms of thought.47 A contrastive point seems necessary: just as tyranny is not strictly the same as totalitarianism, not all opinions are ideologies, and not all ideologies are totalitarian. Totalitarian regimes rely on ideology for continued power:

47 I am not equating “inherited forms of thought” with “ideology.” I would simply like to point out that inherited forms of thought can often become dangerous ideologies; this can, further, happen quite quickly.
Only in the hands of the new type of totalitarian governments do ideologies become the driving motor of political action, and this in the double sense that ideologies determine the political actions of the ruler and make these actions tolerable to the ruled population. I call all ideologies in this context isms that pretend to have found the key explanations for all the mysteries of life and the world. Thus racism or anti-Semitism is not an ideology, but merely an irresponsible opinion, as long as it restricts itself to praising Aryans and hating Jews; it becomes an ideology only when it pretends to explain the whole course of history as being secretly maneuvered by the Jews, or covertly subject to an eternal race struggle, race mixture, or whatnot. Socialism, similarly, is not an ideology properly speaking as long as it describes class struggles, preaches justice for the underprivileged, and fights for an improvement or revolutionary change of society. Socialism—or communism—becomes an ideology only when it pretends that all history is the struggle of classes, that the proletariat is bound by eternal laws to win the struggle, that a classless society will then come about, and that the state, finally, will wither away. In other words, ideologies are systems of explanation of life and world that claim to explain everything, past and future, without further concurrence with actual experience (EU 349-350).

This notion of ideology, and the caution thereof, is not unique to Arendt. Castoriadis lodges virtually the same complaint with regard to the Marxists, and Kierkegaard in reference to Hegelian Lutheranism. The strand running between the three thinkers emphasizes thinking and a critical posture in response to worldviews that do not foster autonomy, self-institution, thinking and judging, or inwardness.

### 3.1.3 Arendt and Foundationalism

The crux of Arendt’s anti-foundationalism is to effectively replace external authority for politics or morality with political plurality: Arendt objects to “the quest for an absolute in which to ground and legitimate the reconstitution of the political realm.” Such a quest is misguided, according to Bonnie Honig: “The positing of an absolute undermines the contingency that is the quintessential feature of the public realm, the feature in virtue of which political freedom and human innovation are possible.” Not only this, but additionally, “it deprivileges the very human achievement of reconstitution and founding, making it dependent on something external to the human world.”

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move toward political plurality, according to Canovan, is “directed at this kind of foundationalism.” Honig posits that “resistibility is the sine qua non of Arendt’s politics,” also suggesting that this motivates Arendt’s anti-foundationalism. If God, or natural law, does not legitimate the social institution, then citizens are free to actively engage in the process of reformation. If, however, the approach to political foundation ends in the placement of the law above or beyond the people, it becomes irresistible and immobile.

It is in this context that I place Arendt’s admiration for Thomas Jefferson, with whom she concurs regarding the basic need to continue to renew and augment—and to resist the totality of—our political structures. Political plurality and the performative sphere are thus a response to a distinct historical development:

Within the western tradition, therefore, what was handed down was an understanding of authority as something bestowed upon political bodies from outside the realm of politics itself. Arendt notes in On Revolution that the American Founding Fathers were very much concerned to anchor their new republican institutions to external authorities of this kind, whether to the quasi-Platonic ‘self-evident truths’ of the Declaration of Independence or to the religious belief in a Divine Legislator with his supernatural sanctions of heaven and hell. In either case, it seemed obvious to them that their positive laws needed the backing of some higher law in order to be legitimate.

Canovan’s reading emphasizes Arendt’s thought that in ancient Roman and Greek politics, there was no reason to seek an external foundation for politics. Canovan also points out that totalitarianism satisfies the desire for foundation. Humans perceive the need for a new community and wonder what could bestow authority on that new community. Ideology—at first glance—tempts people through its perceived all-encompassing explanatory power. The answer Arendt ultimately provides is that political

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49 Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 220. (Henceforth Hannah Arendt)
51 Canovan, Hannah Arendt, 220. This passage—though Canovan’s—remains quite close to the views of Arendt’s On Revolution.
plurality, and general participation in and through the public space, offers no guarantee but can guard against the danger of totalitarianism (or, equally, a totalizing and oppressive worldview) by recognizing that people “share the earth with people that are both like and unlike [them].”52 This sentiment is highly similar to Castoriadis’ claim that there is no guarantee that protects humanity from folly or suicide; moreover, Castoriadis locates a similar kind of anti-foundational freedom in the notion that theories are not given before—but arise as a result of—critical praxis (IIS 76).

This section has aimed at establishing Arendt’s intellectual environment, mainly with an eye looking toward the eventual responses she offers and highlighting the structural similarities between her intellectual climate and that of Castoriadis and Kierkegaard. The following section continues the discussion by way of an analysis of political actions in the public space and the common world they help to create. After highlighting the significance of the common world, I give an account of Arendt’s paradigmatic thinker, Socrates, and the laudable achievement of the Greek polis, specifically giving its significance in terms of a response to the initially posed problem: *the uncritical repetition of values*.

### 3.2 Political Action: Thinking a Common World

Having explored the motivation for meaningful political action through Castoriadis and Arendt’s background concerns, I would like to turn to a more detailed account of how this action appears. The most important note is that it takes place in the public. Plurality and openness provide assurance that people are given the right to appear before their equals, as peers. A multiplicity of opinions in the public view safeguards

against—to use Castoriadis’ language—the privatization of this public realm. For my part, I am concerned primarily with thinking as Arendt conceives of it. This section focuses on thinking and judging and the manner in which these actions are essentially political. These observations coalesce in a demonstration of the significance of the common world, and how the actions of thinking and judging are concrete examples of—or at the least prerequisites for—self-institution of the sort that Castoriadis champions, along with genuine democracy and collective autonomy.

3.2.1 Plurality

Plurality is an essential component—in fact, it replaces the external foundation that has often been thought necessary for institutions—of the public space for politics. Plurality poses the best response to the dangers of inherited forms of thought, even though traditional authority at times feels necessary. Canovan stresses this point in her Introduction to The Human Condition: “In principle, if we can all agree to work together we can exercise great power; but agreement between plural persons is hard to achieve, and never safe from the disruptive initiatives of further actors” (HC xix). Arendt notes, plurality is essentially “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition—not only the conditio sine qua non, but the conditio per quam—of all political life” (HC 7). Political action and the creation of a public world relies on the belief that humans are both the same as, and distinct from, one another: “Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (HC 8).
She clarifies this statement further in a passage that focuses on the person’s disclosure of who she is through words and deeds:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has a twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood…otherness, it is true, is an important aspect of plurality, the reason why all our definitions are distinctions, why we are unable to say what anything is without distinguishing it from something else…in man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings (HC 175-176)

Arendt takes the idea that humans disclose this unique character through words and deeds very seriously. She takes it so seriously, in fact, that “a life without speech and without action…is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (HC 176).

To be clear, the space of appearances results “wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action” (HC 199). This space—or condition of plurality—is not strictly identical to the public realm, but rather fuels the emergence of the “formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized” (HC 199). John McGowan reads “space of appearances,” and much of Arendt’s thinking on the public realm in general, as a response to totalizing thought, which aims at uniformity and solidarity, or in other words, crushing plurality.53 Arendt counts on two characteristics of plurality, according to McGowan: plurality is, on the one hand, “hardly a constant; it appears dependent on human efforts to foster it (if not quite to create it) and vulnerable to human efforts to wipe

it out.”54 It is thus something in need of cultivation. On the other hand, it is the conditio sine qua non of politics and it is fundamentally related to the idea that men, and not Man, inhabit the earth, so seems to rely on an intuition about natural plurality. I think the problem is eschewed by an insistence that although there is no ‘natural’ condition of politics or the human being in an essentialist sense, there does seem to be a way of expressing one’s self publicly that “sustains and embodies (continually recreates) plurality,” and thus conditions successful political action.55 Moreover, this mode of expression is at least partially bound up with what it means to be human, even if ‘what it means to be human’ is taken solely in a historical sense.56

The subtlety of this distinction manifests itself clearly in the following passage:

“Human essence—not human nature in general (which does not exist) nor the sum total of qualities and shortcomings in the individual, but the essence of who somebody is—can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story” (HC 193). The idea is that the polis is a way for people to “make their appearance explicitly” (HC 199) and live a distinctly human life, by revealing who they are. The polis is inspired partially by the desire to erect a legacy that outlasts the individual people, or as Herodotus puts it, to “prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements”57 of citizens. This sentiment should recall Castoriadis’ emphasis on the activity of self-creation; the creation, or display, of who I am happens in and through the common world of political

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56 Note: I do not think that this gloss on what it means to be human need imply a hard claim on ‘nature’ or the like; she, in fact, distinguishes human nature from the human condition on a number of occasions. See: HC 7-11, 22-28, 175-199.
57 Herodotus, Histories, 3.
action. Before providing a more detailed account of what it means to act politically for Arendt, it is important to establish the common world, or the public realm, paying especially close attention to the ways in which Arendt’s public space lends a hand to Castoriadis’ account of self-institution and creation.

One more note, however, will help to contextualize plurality within the larger scope of the project. Arendt’s notion of plurality seems heavily reliant on her reading of Kierkegaard. She interprets his work in the following way: “Against Hegel’s system, which presumed to comprehend and explain the ‘whole,’ Kierkegaard set the ‘individual,’ the single human being, for whom there is neither place nor meaning in a totality controlled by the world spirit. In other words, Kierkegaard’s point of departure is the individual’s sense of being lost in a world otherwise totally explained” (EU 173). The especially important consideration is that the individual not be collapsed into the social as it is in Hegelian and Marxist philosophy (according to Kierkegaard and Arendt). Put another way, plurality relies on a robust individuality as much as it relies on the sameness that enables mutual understanding.

3.2.2 A Common World: the Public Realm

Public primarily designates two things for Arendt. It indicates that “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity” (HC 50). Or at the least, it is capable of being seen and heard by everybody. Secondly, “the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, insofar as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place within it” (HC 52). This particular

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58 This should not be interpreted as a nod to self-reliance, but interpreted in the anti-essentialist mode: there is not only one way to be a human, a citizen, or an ethical agent.
world is better conceived as an “artifact, the fabrication of human hands,” than as the literal physical world in which humans perform their human actions. “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” (HC 52). Of primary concern for Arendt—and for this project—is the difficulty of the present age: “What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them” (HC 52-53). The motivation to participate, or the feeling of a shared stake in the world, is not always immediately perceptible. And the power to relate people can either seem permanent and outside the control of people, or ephemeral and fleeting.

A significant component of the function of politics, according to Arendt, is that citizens themselves create the (relative) permanence of the common world through actions and words:

God’s creation of the plurality of men is embodied in the absolute difference of all men from one another, which is greater than the relative difference among peoples, nations, or races. But in that case, there is in fact no role for politics. From the very start, politics organizes those who are absolutely different with a view toward their relative equality and in contradistinction to their relative differences (PP 96).

This definition subtly and effectively avoids an essentialist claim about the nature of humans. Arendt frames her critique in terms of the mistakes of past political philosophies:

There are two good reasons why philosophy has never found a place where politics can take shape. The first is the assumption that there is something political in man that belongs to his essence. This is simply not so; man is apolitical. Politics arises between men, and so quite outside of man. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships…the second is the monotheistic conception of God, in whose likeness man is said to have been created. On
that basis, there can, of course, be only man, while men become a more or less successful repetition of the same (PP 95).

Below, it will become clear how this relates to Kierkegaard’s claim that there is not just one way to be an ethical agent, a Christian, or a human being, but for now the implications it holds for political organization are particularly instructive. After all, Arendt is clear: “Politics deals with the coexistence and association of different men. Men organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities found within or abstracted from an absolute chaos of differences” (PP 93). The problem, however, is that with nothing necessarily holding the common world together (like God or an essence) the protection against the futility of life that the polis offers needs to be actively sought and cultivated.

This brings us to the promise of politics: Arendt is committed to the idea that isolation is the primary way in which totalizing structures can become pervasive. She opines: “It has been frequently said, and it is perfectly true, that the most horrible aspect of terror is that it has the power to bind together completely isolated individuals and that by so doing it isolates these individuals even further. Hitler and Stalin may have learned from all the historical examples of tyranny that any group of people joined together by some common interest is the supreme threat to total domination. Only isolated individuals can be dominated totally” (EU 356). She uses the terms “isolated individuals” and “atomized society” to indicate a “state of affairs where people live together without having anything in common, without sharing some visible tangible realm of the world” (EU 356-357). Isolation, as will become clearer below, is related to loneliness rather than solitude. Solitude is a form of thoughtful engagement in a way (for Arendt), a critical
praxis, caring about and having a share in the world; isolation is being disconnected from
others and alone with regard to a shared vision.\(^{59}\)

If, on the other hand, members of a culture come together to form a public space,
centered upon political plurality and the activities of thinking and judging, critical praxis
toward the common good and the ability to resist a totalizing worldview is at least
engendered. To be clear, a notable difference between Arendt and Castoriadis arises in
the idea that politics is essentially *institution building*. Castoriadis, with his focus on the
*imaginary institution of society*, relates political action to creation, similar to an artistic
creation. Arendt, on the other hand, values general participation, and places equality
before not only the law, but also and more importantly, the public space for deliberation.
Expressing oneself through words and deeds, put another way, is the general right of
participation in politics.\(^{60}\) Their respective points of emphasis are just that; neither would
oppose the basic premise that politics requires institutions (Arendt talks about the *polis* as
institution building in places), and neither would oppose the idea that highlighting
specific and concrete forms of political action and actors is a useful endeavor (Castoriadis
focuses some highly specific remarks on Soviet Russia, on the Hungarian revolution, just
to name a couple of examples). But, in general, both are concerned primarily with the

\(^{59}\) It is possible that the pariah could be an isolated individual. The experience of exile can manifest itself in
a separation from, or bitterness toward, the culture from which the exiled is excluded. I think, however, that
the difference between the exiled person who cultivates a critical posture and engages in a productive
resistance and the isolated exile has much to do with education and social comportment.

\(^{60}\) A detailed analysis of Arendt’s stance toward representative democracy, which is highly critical, would
prove too extensive for the scope of this paper. It is important to note, though, that her hesitation toward
representative democracy is in large part born of a concern with the right to speak, and more importantly, a
right to have some control over the dialogue and value formation itself. The emphasis—for both
Castoriadis and Arendt—when discussing political participation, is on making sure that everyone is invited
to the table and that politics reflects vibrant and self-aware formation of values and norms. The distinction
between law-giving and deliberation, or political action, is so important to Arendt that she alludes to the
Greeks, who claimed that legislation was external to politics to the extent that it could be outsourced to
non-citizens, while the truly political actions (words and deeds within the *polis*) could only take place
between free, equal citizens (PP 179).
process of democratic political action, and much less with specific policy recommendations.

Arendt alludes to a complication: if the *polis* is lost or if a person is removed from the physical location in which discourse happens, the ability to speak freely is gone too. It requires the space, the common world, and the willing community of equals formed around a common goal. Banishment from a homeland or from the public discourse is thus an extreme form of alienation from the freedom of—an albeit limited—self-determination.

For the Greeks, the *polis* was aimed not just at freedom; it provided “a concrete place that itself survived both those memorable deeds and the names of the memorable men who performed them” (PP 123). In other words, it would outlast the people who formed it: “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” (HC 55). The commonality exists between current citizens and future generations alike, a commonality, moreover, that relies on plurality for mutual balancing. Arendt takes the metaphor of space (to breathe, think, space to act politically) extremely seriously: “For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (HC 57). Note that the guarantee of this commonality is not a common nature. It is a shared interest or stake in the world.
The precondition (plurality) and the forum (the common world or the public realm) of politics lead into a discussion of the ways in which thinking and judging are essentially political actions.

3.2.3 Thinking and Judging: Political Action

Arendt’s *Vita Activa*, which could be defined as “human life insofar as it is actively engaged in doing something” (HC 22), is predicated upon the world humans create. It is “always rooted in a world of men and of man-made things which it never leaves or altogether transcends” (HC 22). Yet at the same time that humans never transcend the world of man-made things, the idea that historical analysis holds the key to understanding (explaining completely) a person seems patently false. In a passage that echoes the Castoriadian claim that people are conditioned but not determined by their environment, Arendt claims: “The conditions of human existence—life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth can never ‘explain’ what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely”

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61 A brief sketch of the three components of the *Vita Activa* will have to replace a full treatment: for this purpose, I quote a passage from the beginning of *The Human Condition* at length: “With the term *Vita Activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each one corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man. Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness. Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, and not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life” (HC 7). This distinction is quite controversial; without addressing the specific criticisms and implications, for my purpose I mainly focus on Arendt’s notion of political action and how it can—through the public realm—contribute to a robust account of public discourse, which in turn responds positively to the uncritical repetition of values.
(HC 11). Though, strictly speaking, Arendt does not make specific reference to thinking within her notion of the *vita activa*, this need not imply a lack of importance:

> Thought, finally—which we, following the premodern as well as the modern tradition, omitted from our reconsideration of the *vita activa*—is still possible, and no doubt actual, wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom. Unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory-tower independence of thinkers, no other human capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think. As a living experience, thought has always assumed, perhaps wrongly, to be known only to the few. It may not be presumptuous to believe that these few have not become fewer in our time. This may be irrelevant, or of restricted relevance, for the future of the world; it is not irrelevant for the future of man. For if no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all (HC 324-325).

According to Richard Bernstein, *The Human Condition* is an entire book in the form of a thought exercise. “*Thinking* is essential for politics,” claims Bernstein, who considers *thinking without banisters* “one of the deepest themes” in Arendt’s work. Bernstein highlights the practical considerations that condition Arendt’s thematic approach, saying: “She was convinced that with the outbreak of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, there had been a radical break with tradition. We can no longer rely on tradition, accepted categories and guideposts. We have to learn to think in new ways.” This reference to *thinking without banisters* should recall Castoriadis’ insistence that inherited forms of *thought* are inadequate to the task of solving current problems. The political importance of this sort of thinking is that it directs itself toward “making doxa more truthful” through a critical examination of the presuppositions and foundational principles that fuel opinions, and in turn it never rests:

> The business of thinking is like Penelope’s web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before. For the need to think can never be stilled by allegedly definite insights of “wise men;” it can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I want and am able to think them anew (LM1 88).

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Arendt remarks, “to think and to be fully alive are the same, and this implies that thinking must always begin afresh; it is an activity that accompanies living and is concerned with such concepts as justice, happiness, virtue, offered us by language itself as expressing the meaning of whatever happens in life and occurs to us while we are alive” (LM1 178). Thinking, in this way, is an intimate manifestation of the life process; as complex and changing organisms within multifarious environments, humans’ search for meaning should not end in universalizable propositions, just as the relations between organism and environment are not fixed permanently. Rather, thinking culminates in the process itself, namely, in more thought.

If the connection between thought and politics still appears tenuous, it seems likely that a preconceived notion about the nature of political action—or action in general—is to blame. Arendt begins The Life of the Mind, a large portion of which is an extended discussion of thought and judgment, with two interrelated questions about the nature of thought: firstly, she wonders, “might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought” (LM1 5)? Secondly, and not less importantly, she asks: “Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil doing, or even actually ‘condition’ them against it” (LM1 5)? Obviously Arendt is concerned with a specific historical problem—the nature of totalitarianism—and her thought should not be taken entirely out of this context. But it is not removing Arendt’s thought from its conditions to suggest some ways in which her concern with totalitarianism mimic Castoriadis’ concerns with Marxism and my concerns with the
social-political climate in America today. To an extent, the issue is not so much the specific content—Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany were only manifestations of a trend—as it is the unreflective repetition of values and approach to morality and politics that subsumes particularities under the scope of pre-figured universals or generalities.

Moreover, thinking is not—in Arendt’s vocabulary—the activity in which ‘professional thinkers’ engage; it is rather an *ethos* or comportment, the adoption of a critical posture toward institutions and ideology, among other things that “[happen] to come to pass” (LM1 5).\(^{64}\) The question—*what results from the activity of thinking?*—presents itself. Arendt gives the best answer she can: “an answer, if at all, can come only from the thinking activity, the performance itself, which means that we have to trace experiences and not doctrines” (RJ 167). The idea of looking toward experiences, or processes, resisting the temptation to isolate the meaning of an experience in fixed doctrines, is central to Arendt’s project as a whole—and can be encapsulated by imagining a *permanent critique*.

Arendt’s notion of thinking is peculiar in a couple of ways, actually. There is the aspect of thinking that in a sense codifies opinions and ideas. For example, the task of

\(^{64}\) It should be noted that there are less than desirable implications of talking about thinking in this way. Firstly, even when thinking implies general participation, resistance to the inherited forms of thought (as opposed to the activities of professional philosophers), it is clear that not all people can do this. This truth predates Arendt, however, and already is addressed in—for example—the American policy of voting rights. The severely handicapped, for example, could be dismissed as “unthinking” by Arendtian standards if an extreme reading were adopted; this unfortunate implication is—I think—far from her desire. I think it misses the point. Unfortunately, however, Americans already live in a culture in which the right of participation in politics is limited (in, for example, the case of a person who has a guardianship imposed) to some, rather than being extended to all. The other—no less important—implication regards a conception of the ability to reason and judge: if taken the wrong way, *thinking* suggests a ‘correct’ and an ‘incorrect’ mode. This mode can obviously be used to support policies of elitism and subjugation of ‘lesser’ and ‘irrational’ groups, on the grounds that these groups are unable to think properly. This, I believe, is not a problem for Arendt’s account, if taken seriously and on her own terms. She explicitly advocates *plurality*, which contributes to a harmonious and multifarious public realm. Plurality should serve as the best response available to the problem of power struggle or subjugation; though it does not offer any kind of guarantee, it seems a better approach than any other immediately obvious alternative.
making people’s *doxa* more truthful seems to solidify those opinions. Conversely, however, “thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics” (RJ 175-176). These seemingly contrastive approaches can be reconciled as long as the firmed up, more truthful *doxa* resultant from critical discourse and thinking are not seen as invariant solutions, but on the contrary, resting places along an interminable path. Arendt uses the imagery of paralysis to illuminate the activity of thinking, claiming that the paralysis is twofold:

> It is inherent in the *stop* and think, the interruption of all other activities, and it may have a paralyzing effect when you come out of it, no longer sure of what had seemed to you beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing. If your action consisted in applying general rules of conduct to particular cases as they arise in ordinary life, then you will find yourself paralyzed because no such rules can withstand the wind of thought (RJ 176).

The point is that “thinking is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed” (RJ 178). Arendt eschews potential charges of elitism via clarity on the point that anyone can be guilty of not thinking; the unreflective repetition of values is always a danger, and not just for people who seem ‘incapable’ of thought.

> In opposition to the unreflective repetition of values, Arendt posits not only thinking, but judgment. Judgment is closely related to, and dependent upon, thinking. Without thought, judgment would be simply prejudice or subsuming of particulars under the umbrella of a universal. Good judgment, though, which is a cornerstone for political action, is something else:

> The faculty of judging particulars (as Kant discovered it), the ability to say, “this is wrong,” “this is beautiful,” etc., is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things that are close at hand. But the two are interrelated in a way similar to the way consciousness and conscience are interconnected. If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the
world of appearances, where I am never alone and always much too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down (RJ 189).

The challenges to social and personal freedom in Arendt’s life (anti-Semitism, imperialism, totalitarianism) “one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited” (OT ix). Instead of framing this solely in terms of a principle, I will appropriate this idea and apply it to the creation, and subsequent adoption, of an *ethos* of critical thinking and social engagement, which all could adopt, and which would facilitate sound political action. This is far from a stretch for Arendt, who maintains, after all, “if the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be” (RJ 164). She explicitly notes that thinking and judging for oneself transcends the boundaries of class and education; in other words, thinking and judging is an activity for all, contingent upon political plurality and not necessarily productive of anything tangible or permanent.

This mode of social engagement is best treated by way of an example. Because of the difficulties associated with isolating precisely what thinking is, Arendt underscores her emphasis on experience and process, and opts for an elucidation of thinking in a different form: she chooses an exemplar to demonstrate how an active, engaged, critical thinker might manifest in culture. That we look to a thinker *in culture* is no accident; this move takes very seriously the notion that an abstracted approach to ‘thinking’ or ‘spirit’
is a mistake. It asserts that thinking is not abstracted from the world; in fact, we cannot think without the world and the relations between people that form it.

3.3 The Greek Polis and the Socratic Paradigm

Arendt’s notion of politics is inseparable from her historical analysis of the fall of the Greek polis: “The gulf between thought and action opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which in the history of political thought plays the same role of a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion” (PP 6). Calling the Athens of Plato and Aristotle a “politically decaying society,” Arendt alludes to the seriousness of “the abyss which immediately opened between thought and action, and which never since has been closed” (PP 6). This gulf, or abyss, produces the misconception that thought—or judgment—is directly opposed to plurality, or the condition of political action. Not so, according to Arendt: “The precondition for this kind of judging is not 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” (RJ 44-45). This two-in-one existence (thought) is a form of plurality; further, it spurs action on the political stage.

To counter the potential objection that thought is an isolating experience (from whence the assumption that thinking is an anti-political activity seems to come), a couple of points are noteworthy. Firstly, she suggests a more salient link between speech and thought than is often assumed:
The identity of speech and thought, which together are *logos*, is perhaps one of the outstanding characteristics of Greek culture. What Socrates added to this identity was the dialogue of myself with myself as the primary condition of thought. The political relevance of Socrates’ discovery is that it asserts that solitude, which before and after Socrates was thought to be the prerogative and professional *habitus* of the philosopher only, and which was naturally suspected by the polis of being antipolitical is, on the contrary, the necessary condition for the good functioning of the polis, a better guarantee than rules of behavior enforced by laws or fear of punishment (PP 23-24).

The *two-in-one* of thinking indicates more than conscience, or the desire to engage one’s own ideas in order to better *live together with oneself*; it also signifies that critical thinking is a form of discourse, or a give and take. Moreover, it implies that thinking does not engender loneliness, but rather, solitude, which is entirely different for Arendt. As mentioned above, solitude requires the presence of others and is a precondition for successful action in the public realm, whereas loneliness increases isolation and marginalization. In addition to the identity of speech and thought, Arendt also demonstrates the link between actions and words, again with an example from Athens:

> For it is one of the most remarkable and fascinating facts of Greek thought that from the very beginning, which means as early as Homer, such a separation on principle between speech and action does not occur, since the doer must at the same time also be a speaker of great words—and not only because great words were needed to accompany and explain great deeds that would otherwise fall into mute oblivion, but also because speech itself was from the start considered a form of action (PP 125).

The *polis*, or the locus of public appearance, provides freedom of expression and participation in politics. As noted above, politics should be interpreted broadly, to mean both (in the case of Castoriadis) institution-building and (for Arendt) public discourse. To be clear, “politics is not so much about human beings as it is about the world that comes into being between them and endures beyond them” (PP 175). This vision of discourse obviously relies on plurality: “the more peoples there are in the world who stand in some particular relationship with one another, the more world there is to form between them, and the larger and richer that world will be” (PP 176). This hefty normative claim is founded upon the conviction that “human beings in the true sense of the term can exist
only where there is a world, and there can be a world in the true sense of the term only where the plurality of the human race is more than a simple multiplication of a single species” (PP 176). A large part of her veneration for the Greeks is due to Homeric poetry and relates to the notion of plurality or the multiplicity of perspectives: “Homer sings the glory of the defeated and in a celebratory poem shows how one and the same event can have two sides, and how the poet has no right to use the victory of one side to strike down and slay, so to speak, the other side yet a second time” (PP 174). Impartiality, Arendt notably claims, enters the world with Homer. Similarly, Herodotus’ Histories opens with these words: “The purpose is to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks.”

In addition to her affection for the Greek polis, which preserves the deeds and words of great people and engenders freedom and political action, her utilization of the Socratic paradigm of thinking does major work for her. The common world relies on the realization of a collective goal or task, and the establishment of this shared public realm hinges upon its constitutive members engaging in thinking and judging. For an illustration, she turns to Socrates: “Socrates seems to have believed that the political function of the philosopher was to help establish this kind of common world, built on the understanding of friendship, in which no rulership is needed” (PP 18).

66 Obviously, Arendt might want this claim to be a bit stronger than I do. I think “no rulership” is not to be literally interpreted, but rather should allude to her criticism of the representative form of democracy. I should note, instead, the emphasis on the process of deliberation. Without claiming that it completely ‘resolves’ current aporetic cultural issues, it could be a good start.
Arendt finds three similes quite helpful: Socrates resembles (a) a gadfly, (b) a midwife, and (c) an electric ray. Briefly stated, gadflies arouse others around them, awakening people with an eye toward thoughtful consideration of their surrounding world. Midwives assist in determining which children—or to remain close to the figurative device, which ideas—are fit to live. Thus, a midwife “purge[s] people of their ‘opinions,’ that is, of those unexamined prejudgments which prevent thinking by suggesting that we know where we not only don’t know, but cannot know, helping them, as Plato remarks, to get rid of what was bad in them, their opinions, without however making them good, giving them truth” (RJ 174). Lastly, the image of the electric ray implies that Socrates is perplexed and paralyzes those with whom he comes into contact. That Socrates is himself perplexed is important because it reemphasizes the point that answers are less important than the process of engagement, critique, and thinking-judging. In other words, the goal is the process itself: “To Socrates, maieutic was a political activity, a give-and-take, fundamentally on a basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth” (PP 15). Invariant and permanent general truths are not helpful because thinking is primarily destructive of those truths. This is the essential political characteristic:

At these moments, thinking ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters. When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. The purging element in thinking, Socrates’ midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined options and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions—is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man’s abilities. It is the faculty to judge particulars without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules (RJ 188).
Socrates was an exemplar of thinking and judging for these reasons. And contrary to a common conception of thinking as quite separate from politics and action,

the political relevance of Socrates’ discovery is that it asserts that solitude, which before and after Socrates was thought to be the prerogative and professional *habitus* of the philosopher only, and which was naturally suspected by the polis of being antipolitical is, on the contrary, the necessary condition for the good functioning of the *polis*, a better guarantee than rules of behavior enforced by laws and fear of punishment (PP 24).

Note well, however: Arendt’s claim is not that thinking is a foolproof solution, or an absolute guarantee. As in her notion of plurality, this seems a better response than is currently available or conceived, but should not be taken to represent anything more; she appears to agree with Castoriadis that *nothing can save humanity from collective folly or suicide*. As Arendt claims, “this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down” (RJ 189).

Refocusing on Socrates, it should be noted that the feasibility of thinking as a precursor to political action lies within the notion of thinking as an activity for all: Socrates “thought about all subjects and talked with everybody” (LM1 180). The political value of thinking is located within the activity itself, and not within a particular object. This thread is more fully developed below, when I focus on Kierkegaard’s notion of indirect communication, conceived as a potential mode of social engagement that epitomizes thought and action of this sort.

Socrates is paradigmatic—additionally—in the sense that he was in harmony. He successfully engaged in thinking, or “the soundless dialogue” between “me and myself” (LM1 185). During the process of thinking, Socrates is solitary but not lonely. He relates himself to himself and is never alone and never inactive. He is in harmony with himself; this is in fact the basis of morality and personal responsibility, in one sense. Arendt suggests that those who were able to resist the pull of totalizing structures during the rise
of Fascism did so by wondering “to what extent they would be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds” (RJ 44). It is, once again, the ability or 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” (RJ 44-45). Strictly speaking, Arendt seems to think that thinking conceived as such does not necessarily have political value. It becomes political when one “transcend[s] the limits of [her] own life span and begin[s] to reflect on the past, judging it, and this future, forming projects of the will” (LM1 192). Castoriadis’ public space—and institution of social-imaginary time, or a society’s own unique temporality—explores the same idea: a comportment that encourages a critical examination of the collective past, the present, and future goals, along with social imaginary significations as mechanisms and products of prevailing values, substantiates the productive undermining of cultural essences, values, and norms. In response to the unreflective repetition of values, with which people are swept away, Socrates’ “purging component of thinking is political by implication” (LM1 192). Arendt is careful to note that the maieutic project of thinking does not result in values, strictly speaking. The goal, in other words, is not to find the ‘good’ or the ‘right’ in any permanent sense, but rather to continue to reexamine values and adapt.

3.4 Conclusion

Arendt is optimistic that thinking—the two-in-one, or a critical discourse and posture with one’s self—engenders political action, or genuine democracy. While the above sections paint a picture of what this action looks like, and who the agents
themselves are, there are some incongruences between Arendt and Castoriadis that it would pay to reconcile at this point. I agree with Ingerid Straume’s analysis: Arendt augments the work of Castoriadis through a focus on a different aspect of social action and the common world.

Though Castoriadis and Arendt cannot agree with regard to the core activity of politics—Castoriadis citing *self-institution* and Arendt claiming that public expression through words and deeds in the common world is really *politics proper*—they are not as far from one another as they might initially seem. Arendt in fact needs the robust account of political creation, or *self-institution*, that Castoriadis provides. Straume speculates about Arendt in the following passage:

> The common world consists of ‘words and deeds’, but, of course, also institutions in a wide sense of the term. In fact, ‘instituted society’ (to use the Castoriadian term) is of the utmost importance to Arendt: it needs protection for the sake of protecting our humanity. And even though she does not see institutions as the product of ‘politics proper’, it is hard to see why the creation of institutions, especially constitutions, should not be a political matter.\(^{67}\)

Castoriadis also suggests that the creation of a public space, and subsequent creation of public time, in encouraging the critical inspection of the past, affords a reasonable defense against the aforementioned collective folly, with which both Castoriadis and Arendt are concerned. Autonomy, for Castoriadis, is resistance toward inherited forms of thought. But Arendt also improves upon Castoriadis’ approach in a significant way. Castoriadis rarely shifts away from the category of the social (though I agree with Straume when she claims that nothing would necessarily preclude Castoriadis’ utilization of the Arendtian notion of *plurality*).\(^{68}\) Even though he is clearly opposed to the level of analysis that talks about political agents in terms of semi-determined, sweeping

\(^{67}\) Straume, “Common World,” 375.
\(^{68}\) Straume, “Common World,” 379.
movements, he seems to be hesitant to depart from that very realm in his own work.

Straume claims, rightly:

Plurality asserts that while the subjects occupy different places in the world, they are connected. In comparison, the concepts Castoriadis uses to denote collective agency in his later works—the anonymous collective, the social-historical, the instituting social imaginary and the instituting society—are, in my opinion, too abstract for many practical purposes such as analyses of social phenomena. Thus, Arendt’s concept of plurality represents an important dimension of the politically active, collective subject (like the demos of antiquity); a dimension that is lacking in (the later) Castoriadis.69

Starting with Castoriadis’ analysis of creation and self-institution, an analysis that moves primarily on the social level, I add to the account Arendt’s more specific answers to the question: of ‘what’ and ‘whom’ does political action consist? The next chapter—in one way—moves one level inward, toward the interpersonal level. The focus is still on the common world, or public realm, that Castoriadis and Arendt establish. The central questions also still relate to the unreflective repetition of values and avoiding a merely nominal democracy. But neither Castoriadis nor Arendt analyze (explicitly) the type of communication that best engenders critical praxis. Kierkegaard’s indirect communication adds this key element.

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Chapter Four

Søren Kierkegaard: Indirect Communication

Søren Kierkegaard shares the Arendtian and Castoriadian concern with inherited forms of thought; 19th century Denmark was deeply problematic with regard to thinking outside of the structure of Hegelian Lutheranism. Like Arendt and Castoriadis, Kierkegaard imagined no fundamental social-political order. He also opposed an essentialist view of humans, which claimed to have isolated what it is to be a human being, a social actor, or an ethical agent. On the one hand, I intend to demonstrate that Kierkegaard, through his own pen and under his philosophical pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, is underappreciated as a social-political thinker. On the other hand, this


71 Due to restrictions of space, I cannot offer more than a couple of words about how I will address Kierkegaard and Climacus. I respect Kierkegaard’s wish from the end of the CUP: “If it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author’s name, not mine” (KW XII.1 627). This seems the obviously right choice, given the amount of secondary literature exposing the mistakes of readers who have ignored this request, in addition to Kierkegaard’s own explanation two pages prior to the previous quote: the basis of his pseudonymity is not “accidental” but is rather “essential in the production itself…for the sake of the lines and of the psychologically varied differences of the individualities” (KW XII.1, 625). For a more detailed discussion, Roger Poole’s book is quite helpful [Roger Poole. Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1993)]. Also, consult C. Steven Evans’ helpful remark [C. Stephen Evans. Kierkegaard’s ‘Fragments’ and ‘Postscript’: The
chapter demonstrates that Kierkegaard’s account of communication strengthens Castoriadis’ public space and the Arendtian notion of political action by explicitly addressing the type of communication that takes place between political agents and spurs critical praxis.

Traditionally, much interpretive emphasis has been placed on the exploration of Kierkegaard as a religious believer, as an individualist, and as a critic of speculative and rational philosophy; this is not without good reason. But I would also like to take seriously the following claim, which Kierkegaard made in 1836: “It is dangerous to isolate oneself too much, to withdraw from social relationships” (JP II: 1964).

Kierkegaard aligned his work—particularly his treatment of the central concept of indirect communication—in a manner similar to Arendt: rather than opting for a systematic treatise on indirect communication, the irony of which would certainly not be lost on Kierkegaard, he demonstrates this focal mode of communication through an exemplar. Also like Arendt, his paradigmatic communicator is Socrates. Though Kierkegaard’s notion of the comic (humor and irony) is only one aspect of indirect communication, it is fair to say that it is a paradigm; this is not to say that humor and irony are always politically useful devices, or strictly necessary for the well-being of the public realm. The Kierkegaardian comic is, however, when employed by thinking agents,


“Biographers and intellectual historians have a right to examine the pseudonymous literature and use it as best they can to fulfill their goals of understanding Kierkegaard’s life and thought…but if our purposes are essentially personal and philosophical—if we are interested in the truth of the views presented, in understanding more profoundly some basic existential concepts, and thereby understanding ourselves and our existence more deeply—then it really does not matter very much whether Kierkegaard personally held these views (9).” Another helpful comment, which gets the crux of it, comes from Matuštík and Westphal: “We recommend in reading them, and as a general practice except where biography is at issue, that ‘Kierkegaard’ be taken to stand for a body of texts brought into the world by Søren Kierkegaard because he wanted readers to engage seriously with the points of view expressed in them, paying more attention (subjectively) to their own relation to those points of view than (objectively) to his” [Martin J. Matuštík and Merold Westphal, eds. Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xii].
a tool for critical praxis. A close examination of this particular conception of the comic as indirect communication will reveal the potential for substantive social critique through interpersonal discourse: “Ethical-religious truth is related essentially to personality and can only be communicated by an I to an I” (JP I: 656). Centrally, I claim that humorous and ironic indirect communication exists between individuals and engenders the questioning of values and social norms through interpersonal discourse. To avoid a misunderstanding, it is important to note that the comic is not a witty remark, nor does it necessarily have anything to do with laughter. Kierkegaard has a notably different aspect of the comic in mind: the comic is a way of life that is constantly present in some individuals (who choose to cultivate this mode of existence), and it has to do with grasping the paradoxical relationship between the experience of a chaotic world and the desire for complete understanding. It leads to an active engagement with social, political, and ethical structures. With maieutic, engaged, ethical discourse as its center, this critical praxis aims at responding to questions about what it means to be an ethical agent, and more broadly, what it means to be a human and to have inwardness; note well, however, that it would be a mistake to assume that these responses represented final destinations. ‘Answers’ are unimportant when compared with inwardness, or essential knowing; in other words, living an ethical (and for Kierkegaard, religious) life.

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72 This need not imply a fully autonomous self; it should rather suggest that interpersonal communication is the locus of effective ethical and social-political action.

73 I will focus much less on the task of becoming a Christian and much more on the critical praxis aimed at ethical and social life. Although Kierkegaard’s estimation of the importance of becoming a Christian could hardly be overstated, I will choose to downplay it solely for the purpose of this paper. This decision should not be taken as a tacit objection to mainstream Kierkegaard scholarship, but rather as an active choice in emphasis geared toward further opening Kierkegaard’s thought to social theorists (bringing his work together with that of Arendt and Castoriadis) and further developing a growing corner of Kierkegaard scholarship (for references, see fn. 4, below) that interprets much of his work as a precursor or predictor of movements in recent critical social theory, and social and political philosophy broadly construed.
Kierkegaard remarks: “There are observations and feelings which are expressed in such a medium that they are perceived only upon being kindled by the warmth of sympathy and the flame of inspiration, just as the writing on a certain kind of paper becomes visible only when it is held up to the light” (JP I: 658). This seems a relatively straightforward conceit; a range of thinkers that spans the literal entirety of western philosophy willingly acknowledges a realm in which direct communication, in the form of treatises or systematic philosophical texts, is at the very least problematic. The nature of this particular realm—though not treated in depth presently—will serve as a backdrop for Kierkegaard’s inclination toward indirection.

Lurking in the background is the implicit claim that if offered as definitive answers, foundational universals regarding social-ethical life force a thinker to lose sight of the reality of ethical existence as Kierkegaard conceives of it: there is not just one formula for the ethical life; ethical engagement is personal and subjective.

My argument relies on a conception of language as fundamentally social and human nature as multifarious; I must not only show that language exists in and for the social setting, but also that for all of his emphasis on the individual, Kierkegaard actually has a robust conception of the form of interpersonal communication out of which social praxis arises. Kierkegaard also must be demonstrably against a conception of human nature and ethical regulation that relies on a totalizing top-down structure. Further, I will need to show that irony is not a temporary condition, but a mode of comportment; the ironic person is always ironic, or at least always potentially ironic.

To substantiate my claim that the comic is a tool for critical praxis, I point to one particularly important formulation: standing alone—by another’s help. This vision of
social discourse hints at the relation between individuals and the groups they form, namely suggesting that constituent members can stand alone in a sense, but only insofar as they help and are helped by others.

4.1 Background to Kierkegaard’s Work

Kierkegaard’s work and life reflect each other mutually: Denmark during the early and mid 19th century was characterized at once by shifting popular values and yet steadfastly professed faith. This section aims at situating Kierkegaard’s thought with regard to the conditions he felt his philosophy addressed: namely, the totalizing structure of Hegelian Lutheranism, and the fact that modernity had forgotten what it means to exist, and what inwardness is ( KW XII.1 242).

Kierkegaard is considered significant in a number of different areas of philosophy: existentialism, philosophy of emotion, and the philosophy of religion, to name a just a few. Not included in this list of fields, however, is political philosophy. His name is not traditionally associated with social-political thought, in large part due to his own continued insistence on the importance of individuals and subjectivity. I move beyond Kierkegaard’s ostensive comfort zone and into the social-political sphere for a few reasons: (a) a primary conceptual focus of this treatment is indirect communication, and it is hardly a stretch to maintain that the goal of any kind of communication is by nature social, (b) as long as I acknowledge that while this is not Kierkegaardian/Climacean language, nor was this necessarily an anticipated application of the idea of a subjective, existing, individual, it should nonetheless be fair to say that even if it were unintended, indirect communication augments current conceptions of
social engagement and discourse in and through the public space, and (c) I hope to show that reading Kierkegaard as a social-political thinker further develops new channels of Kierkegaard scholarship and opens his thought to more questions and different thinkers.74

4.1.1 Kierkegaard and Danish Hegelian Lutheranism

It will be useful to briefly examine one short passage, from an 1843 journal entry:

“Faith hopes for this life also, but, note well, by virtue of the absurd, not by virtue of human understanding; otherwise, it is only common sense, not faith” (JP I: 5). Faith by virtue of the absurd epitomizes a certain criticism Kierkegaard lodges against his Danish contemporaries by underscoring the flaws in an attempt to rationalize faith. It also clearly underscores the dichotomy between faith and knowledge, the former of which, for

74 This chapter slides into, and perhaps between, two burgeoning corners of Kierkegaard scholarship. There exists much interpretive work on the Kierkegaardian comic, and indirect communication, already. Until not long ago, a large portion of the analysis of the comic focused on Kierkegaard’s dissertation, The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates. But in recent years, especially after John Lippitt’s influential monograph, the CUP has garnered much more attention as an excellent resource in the study of humor and irony. There is also a growing presence of Kierkegaard’s thought in the social-political sphere. Though at one point Kierkegaard was considered “as at least apolitical, if not antipolitical” he is increasingly thought of in the political sphere. [Quote from Robert L. Perkins. “Climcean Politics: Person and Polis in Kierkegaard’s Postscript.” International Kierkegaard Commentary 12: Concluding Unscientific Postscript. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 33] Some important general treatments on Kierkegaard’s social-political thought are: George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare, eds. Kierkegaard: The Self in Society: (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1998); George Connell and C. Steven Evans, eds. Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992); Mark Dooley. The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard’s Ethics of Responsibility. (New York: Fordham, 2001); Jon Stewart, ed. Kierkegaard’s Influence on Social-Political Thought: Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources, Volume 14. (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011); Merold Westphal. Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987). Much of the political work addresses itself to Kierkegaard’s criticism of (a) the deification and idolatry of state religion and (b) the totalization and universalization of 19th Century Denmark. By focusing on the comic in its role as a particular form of indirect communication, I add to the conversation in the following three ways: (a) I look at the comic not only as a “border territory,” but also as a social and pedagogical tool aimed at a certain kind of socially active discourse; and (b) I use language not normally associated with Kierkegaardian thought; namely, I attempt to encounter Kierkegaard in the language of 19th and 20th century critical social theory; additionally, (c) I focus much less on the critique of Christianity and specific religious and social structures, and more on the process of substantive critique itself, envisioning the comic as an mode of existence that cultivates a productive distance and refuses to submit entirely to the inherited forms of thought. In a way, I attempt to position this section in between the treatments primarily focusing on politics and those more interested in the comic; in this sense, I hope to demonstrate that Kierkegaard’s comic is essentially social-political.
Kierkegaard, cannot be predicated upon the latter. For my part, I am less concerned with how faith relates to the absurd and more interested in how this colors inquiries into ethical existence within a world that lacks a fully objective moral order.

Kierkegaard is committed to the idea that “existence is the essential and truth is inwardness” (JP I: 633). In fact, the basic misunderstanding of these relations plagues society; “because of much knowledge people have entirely forgotten what it means to exist and what inwardness is.” This notion is predicated upon the idea that the highest task of humanity is to be a subjective, existing, individual. Some unpacking is warranted.

Clare Carlisle suggests that a key to understanding Climacus’ process of becoming an existing, inward individual lies within the concept of movement. Her formulation of the problem is particularly helpful, as she points out carefully that Climacus’ task of becoming involves an assertion of the difference between the assumption that Lutheran Christianity is inherent to a 19th century Danish life, and the Climacean claim that Christianity is not given and finite, but rather infinite and bound up with what it means to be an individual. Existing and thinking subjectively thus takes the form of a kind of essential knowing that “presents the subjectivity of the existing individual as not an obfuscation but a condition of attaining knowledge. Rather than a negligible entity, the knowing subject is now understood as a concrete person who is interested, situated, and living in a world.”

Rick Furtak alludes to an extremely helpful

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75 KW XII.1 242; 249; 259; 263. This is an idea to which Climacus constantly returns.

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vantage point: Climacus should be taken as an advocate for a certain kind of unfinished project, hinting at philosophy as it might be.78

So what, then, is the subjective, existing individual? There is a kind of truth that cannot be objective. This is not an anti-scientific claim, nor would Kierkegaard take issue with mathematical truths, or the like; “the problem with the statement ‘two plus two equals four’ is not that it is untrue, but that it asserts an impersonal proposition—and is, therefore, existentially irrelevant.” And again, this is not a polemic against mathematics or scientific knowledge; it rather attacks the assumption that objective knowledge can serve as an ethical compass.79

Louis Mackey suggests that “Kierkegaard’s writing was coerced from him by two urgent questions: What is it to be a man? And what is it to be a Christian?” Mackey is aware, however, that “there was in his day [no] shortage of answers to these questions; on the contrary, [Kierkegaard] felt there were too many and too facile answers, but not enough understanding of the questions.”80 Further, and more germane to the present discussion, the first question hinges upon the second, as Climacus makes clear in the CUP: “If people had forgotten what it means to exist religiously, they had probably also forgotten what it means to exist humanly; therefore this would have to be brought out” (KW XII.1 249). The mode for bringing about this kind of self-awareness (which is, in turn, deeply connected to the ethical and social-political life) is presently at stake. Before

78 Furtak, “Essential Knowing,” 109-110. This theme is developed much further in section 4.3 but it should suffice for the moment to say that Furtak’s suggestion that Kierkegaard’s hostility toward modern philosophy had much to do with his admiration for the “spirit of ancient [Greek] philosophy,” wherein “philosophy was primarily a mode of life guided by the love of wisdom, a reflective discipline oriented toward the end of illuminating human existence,” (87-88) is quite instructive. It seems right that Climacus seeks philosophy primarily insofar as it helps people live better lives.
79 Furtak, “Essential Knowing,” 101-102. The quotation and paraphrased text are from this section.
an attempt to illustrate this proper mode, it will be helpful to clarify its opposition, which he often labels *speculative philosophy* or *direct communication*.

Kierkegaard (at times through his own pen, and often through that of Climacus) uses a variety of terms to designate his conception of Hegelian philosophy.\(^{81}\) According to Jon Stewart, “the speculative philosopher’s interpretation cannot in principle be the truth of Christianity for the individual believer. Thus, the truth upon which one bases one’s faith cannot be that of a speculative interpretation of Christianity.”\(^{82}\) Because the objective speculative vantage point offers only an approximation of what it means to be human or religious, it fails to encapsulate particularities and individuals. This would not be as problematic if it were assumed to be an approximation by those who appropriate its message; on the contrary, however, Kierkegaard points out that these guidelines are considered codified, permanent essences.

The approximation leads people away from the task of becoming existing thinkers who strive for *truth qua subjectivity* or inwardness, and toward *truth qua objectivity*. It should be noted well, once again, that this is not a wholesale attack on the speculative point of view, which “conceives of Christianity as a historical phenomenon” (KW XII.1 50). There are undoubtedly important contributions made by these forms of historical and

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\(^{81}\) Regarding the precise target of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous polemic against ‘Hegelian’ philosophy, Jon Stewart’s groundbreaking account of the relation between Kierkegaard and Hegelianism is invaluable. [Jon Stewart. *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)] In it, he demonstrates convincingly that more than Hegel himself, the likely targets are Hans Lassen Martensen (1808-1884), a theologian, and Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860), a philosopher, poet, and literary figure. Unfortunately, space does not permit a detailed discussion for the purposes of this paper. However, a fastidious treatment of Hegelianism in Denmark (45-89) and the sections that deal primarily with the *PF* and *CUP* (336-377 and 448-523, respectively) are indispensable.

\(^{82}\) Jon Stewart. *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 477. Cf. “A hawk’s-eye view of world history does not replace a sober insight into oneself; the most matchless discoveries, even the discovery of gunpowder, do not compensate as a substitute for a lack of self-knowledge and of maieutic skill in relation to others (JP I: 626).”
academic scholarship; they just do not admit of ethical or religious instruction. In fact, Stewart points out that Climacus seems to have no problem conceiving of a speculative philosopher who is also a believer, as long as her faith is not grounded in the speculative viewpoint. Faith must be by virtue of the absurd.

Kierkegaard seems convinced of one characteristic feature of the modern age:

“That which should be communicated as art is communicated as science and scholarship, [and] this is the confusion of the modern age, the ethical is communicated as scholarship and science” (JP I: 649). Louis Mackey formulates the problem very clearly:

The stages on life’s way are the larger categories into which the answers fall, but each man by living his own life works out his own unique solution to the problem of the meaning of human existence. This fact supplied a motif for Kierkegaard’s critique of speculative philosophy. If life has an indefinite plurality of meanings in the concrete, then it has no one definitive meaning in the abstract, and it is perverse of the theorist to discover such a meaning and package it for retail distribution.

In other words, it is both inaccurate and disingenuous to pre-figure meaning and ethical rules to disseminate deceptively to the masses. Human deliberations “can on principle never be final. There can be no absolute beginning for philosophy.” Nor is there an absolute end.

83 It seems important to note that Kierkegaard might well find pieces of academic scholarship like this essay problematic, if not damaging and obnoxious. The best answer I can give in defense of this project and the work of Arendt and Castoriadis—the best reason to assume that Kierkegaard would find it tolerable—is that avoiding treatises and attempting to elucidate thinking and communication indirectly, through the use of exemplars, would be after Kierkegaard’s own heart. Insofar as I highlight these aspects of Arendt and Castoriadis, and attempt to do this with my own line of thought, Kierkegaard might give this essay a break.

84 Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations, 469. This is a reference to the CUP (KW XII.1 55), wherein Climacus hints at a potential speculative philosopher and believer.

85 The tension between absurdity and rational knowledge, and how this feeds into the overall discussion of values and institutions should be addressed: the paradox arises when the human’s encounter with the finite social realm is pitted in opposition to the infinite, through which an invariant explanation is often thought to exist. Absurdity is not entirely different from Castoriadis’ chaos; it ultimately signifies that all people live in world that does not admit of invariant order.

86 Mackey, Kierkegaard, 134.

87 Mackey, Kierkegaard, 141.

88 The critique of Hegelian systematic thought courses throughout Climacus’ work and can even be found in the word fragment, which forms part of the title of his first book: according to Mackey, “to say ‘philosophy’ was, thanks to Hegel, to say ‘system;’ to be ‘fragmentary’ was possible in belle lettres, but a scandal in philosophy” (Mackey, Kierkegaard, 151). Likewise the word unscientific in the title Concluding
Climacus explains the incompatibility of the “objective” approach and the ethical-religious life in the CUP:

When an individual infinitely, impassionedly interested in his own eternal happiness is placed in relation to the Church theory in such a way that he intends to base his eternal happiness on it, he becomes comic. He becomes comic not because he is infinitely, impassionedly interested—this is indeed the good thing about him—but he becomes comic because the objectivity is incongruous to his interest (KW XII.1 43).

In fact, such an individual would be tragic, due to the passion and suffering, and comic, due to staking happiness on an “approximation.” By approximation, Climacus roughly means to point out, “where one should be objective, in strict scholarship, objectivity is rare, because a savant equipped with expert autopsy is a great rarity.” Universals as generalities may succeed in providing a gloss, but Christianity (or ethics) is, for Climacus (and Kierkegaard), “precisely a matter of spirit and of subjectivity and of inwardness” (KW XII.1 43). This is precisely why faith must be in relation to the absurd, not to calculation:

With regard to historical issues it is of course impossible to reach an objective decision of such a nature that no doubt would be able to insinuate itself. This also indicates that the issue is to be formulated subjectively and that it is indeed a misunderstanding to want to assure oneself objectively and thereby avoid the risk in which passion chooses and in which passion continues upholding its choice. It would also be a gross injustice if any later generation would safely, that is, objectively, be able to insinuate itself into Christianity and thus partake of what an earlier generation had purchased in the utmost danger of subjectivity and had spent a lifetime acquiring in this very danger (KW XII.1 42).

Climacus’ position becomes clearer with his proclaimed task: to make difficulties everywhere (KW XII.1 187). He regards 19th century Denmark as emblematic of the problem with speculation. Not only have surveys and publications (of the speculative philosophers) purported to make everything worthy of knowledge readily available to the general public, but the task of spiritual (and ethical) existence is increasingly facile—yet

Unscientific Postscript is generally considered an ironic reference to Hegelian systematic thought (Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations, 451).
considered more meaningful (KW XII.1 186). Thus, in a world wherein the ethical-religious life is increasingly but speciously easy, Climacus intends to make life more difficult. This difficulty might manifest itself in the pathos of inwardness, which for Climacus is subjectivity and truth and must be appropriated by the individual through self-action.

4.1.2 Inherited Forms of Thought: A Kierkegaardian Response

Kierkegaard’s philosophy—like that of Arendt and Castoriadis—arises from a distinct set of historical questions. His opposition to the state church, though complicated, should prove useful in demonstrating the manner in which Kierkegaard’s focus on the inherited forms of thought is motivated by a similar set of convictions when compared with Arendt and Castoriadis. Though Kierkegaard claims that the state church aims at creating unthinking replications of the same mold, he retains a broader point of criticism with regard to the public realm. Activity geared toward creating neat replications of the
same mold, either in a religious, social, or ethical context, bitterly misses the point of the endeavor in the first place:

So the state established a kind of eternal principle that every child is born more or less a Christian. Just as the state undertook to take care of eternal salvation for the Christians (si placet), it also undertook to do the whole job, also to produce Christians. Just as production by machine is on a much larger scale and more accurate than by hand, so also generation after generation the state delivered an assortment of Christians, all with the factory stamp of the state, each Christian an accurate copy of the others, so accurate that the heart of every manager of a factory must leap to see what matchless heights of accuracy the art has attained. The main point in Christianity is that the man is spirit and spirit is diversity, per se; Christianity’s infinitely sublime thought is that each Christian becomes a Christian by different ways and means—always diversity, which is precisely what God wants, he (a detester of all mimicry, which indicates the absence of spirit) who is inexhaustible in creating diversity. So the state took over Christianity, and the main point in being Christian came to be the greatest possible factory-made uniformity (JP IV: 4502).

Christians—but also ethical agents and actors on the political stage—become what they are in a variety of ways and means. Though Kierkegaard addressed the church, the issue is also much larger. The Hegelian Lutheran state encourages conformity and uniformity. But if, as suggested earlier, a strictly essentialist view of human nature mistakes the contingent string of choices based on human values and propensities for something invariant, then uniformity is not a desirable trait after all. Uniformity would be either a product of, or possible contribution to, totalizing structures and inherited forms of thought. Kierkegaard was certainly preoccupied with the church; one of his central objections challenged the notion that Christians naturally and without effort beget more Christians. But the other side of the coin is—for the purpose of the present essay—the more important side. Inherited forms of thought—which in Kierkegaard’s time were the structures of religious faith, dogmatic ethical truths, and a political action founded upon the two—can confine the horizon of possibility for self-creation and institution to what already exists, but even more restrictedly, what exists presently in view. Pointing beyond what is presently the case is central to this essay because although difficult, the ability to
create new values, norms, and essences depends on the assumption that what is currently the case need not always be the case. For Castoriadis, the imagination is central in understanding how people avoid becoming a society in service of its institutions. In a way, to examine history is to examine the human imaginary and its works. Kierkegaardian indirect communication also fosters a sort of imaginative posture because—at its core—it pertains to pointing beyond what is presently the case through a critical examination of our most deeply held commitments.

4.2 Kierkegaard: Indirect Communication

“Indirect communication is sheer tension” (JP I: 679), according to Kierkegaard. This section attempts to clarify that tension. In line with Roger Poole, 92 I will be careful to give due attention to Kierkegaard’s method of communication as much as the content, assuming that in this case the method is the content; what is indirect communication, then?

Edward F. Mooney states that the teacher of inwardness “teaches by withdrawal and reservation” because direct communication “is too invasive and liable to overpower a student’s vulnerable ‘self-activities.’” 93 This coheres with a journal entry in which the difference between reflections and Christian discourses 94 becomes clearer:

92 Roger Poole. Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1993). (Henceforth KIC) In the introduction to this treatment of indirect communication, he points out readers’ propensity to give undue attention to ‘what’ Kierkegaard says, forgetting, more importantly, ‘how’ he says it. I think this also serves to justify my move away from Kierkegaard’s comfort zone, into the social-political realm, because the specific content (which often relates to becoming a Christian) is not at stake primarily in this section. At stake is, rather, a mode of communication that should engender positive results in a variety of inquiries, which includes but is not limited to faith and the ethical life.

93 Edward F. Mooney. “From the Garden of the Dead: Climacus on Interpersonal Inwardness.” Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide. Ed. Rick Anthony Furtak. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 80-81. (Henceforth “Garden of the Dead”) Cf. Climacus in the PF, regarding the genius of Socrates: “any point of departure in time is eo ipso something accidental, a vanishing point, an occasion. Nor is the teacher anything more, and if he gives of himself and his
Reflections do not presuppose the qualifying concepts as given and understood; therefore they must not so much move, mollify, reassure, persuade, as *awaken* and provoke men and sharpen thought. Reflections ought to be a ‘gadfly;’ therefore their tone ought to be quite different from upbuilding or edifying discourse, which rests in mood, but reflections ought in the good sense to be impatient, high-spirited in mood. One may very well even laugh once in a while, if only to make the thought clearer and more striking. An upbuilding discourse on love presupposes that men know essentially what love is and seeks to win them to it, to move them. But this is, in fact, not the case. Therefore the reflections must fetch them up out of the cellar, call to them, turn their comfortable way of thinking topsy-turvy with the dialectic of truth (JP I: 641).

Not only does this passage hint at a response to the overarching question about the role of the comic (on which more later), but also, the image of the ‘gadfly’ recalls maieutic discourse, aimed at the subject (of communication) *standing alone—by another’s help.*

The word reflection is also quite important: Kierkegaard connects, in a journal entry (JP I: 651) from 1847, *reflection* with the *communication of capability.* He highlights that all communication of (ethical) capability is indirect, and points to one scenario upon which my analysis rests: “the emphasis is predominantly upon the receiver…the communication of ethical capability (maieutic; the communicator in a sense disappears, steps aside)” (JP I: 651).

In other words, the receiver is spurred into activity, or *awakening.* In an entry from two years before, Kierkegaard writes, “but this right way [of communicating] is precisely the art which makes being such an author very difficult; therefore it pleases me that the pseudonymous authors have overcome the difficulties” which I had almost erudition in any other way, he does not give but takes away. Then he is not even the other’s friend, much less his teacher” (KW VII 11).

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94 Note that during the time periods in which Kierkegaard wrote pseudonymous works, he also published signed works that he called *Upbuilding or Christian Discourses.*

95 I will return to this ironic formulation; for now, though, note that it would involve the indirect communicator revealing ignorance, but doing so subtly so as not to “overpower.” Also note, again, that the discourse takes place between individuals. It will become clearer shortly how this grows into broader social discourse.

96 This in opposition to *communication of knowledge.*

97 Kierkegaard claims, “my service in using pseudonyms consists in having discovered, Christianly, the maieutic method (JP I: 649, section 13).” The “art” Kierkegaard mentions here is the maieutic art, which strikes a certain chord in the receiver and spurs self-activity and critical engagement. This is not intended as
despaired over. If it is communicated in a direct form, then the point is missed...[and] he keeps right on sitting in the status quo” (JP I: 633). Note: Kierkegaard is convinced that pseudonymity provides him with a kind of shield from authorship that essentially links his task to that of Socrates, who also avoided the codification of his ideas in the form of doctrines. Indirect communication, in other words, is the communication of capability (JP I: 649): it is an aporetic process in which people engage in productive social discourse. Productive, however, in the sense that it spurs more thought and critical praxis; in the strictest sense, though, there is no tangible ‘product.’ Though Kierkegaard often seems to emphasize only one side of the communication, this should not be taken as a substantive point; productive discourse is bidirectional and the communicator and receiver of communication alternate freely.

The point is to cultivate a dynamic engagement with the world, the salience of which is that it enables productive ethical discourse and thought. Ethical truths, unlike facts to be related directly, are not amenable to systematic expression, according to Kierkegaard. Edward Mooney states the distinction between ideas in need of direct communication and those in need of an indirect approach nicely when he says, “firstly, the idea that I have in mind to communicate is definite and for the purposes at hand, an implicit endorsement of the false dichotomy between “art” and “rationality.”” It is, however, meant to suggest that the interaction with the world in terms of the good life should be dynamic (actively contributing), not passive (receiving top-down rules).

Cf. “Up until now I have made myself useful by helping the pseudonyms become authors. What if I decided from now on to do the little writing I can excuse in the form of criticism. Then I would put down what I had to say in the form of reviews, developing my ideas from some book or other and in such a way that they would still be included in the work itself. In this way I would still avoid becoming an author” (JP V: 5877).

It appears at times inescapable that the primary point of emphasis—even though Kierkegaard does his best to avoid this implication—is a relation that feels like a one-sided ‘teacher-student’ relation. Despite his best efforts, as with his proclaimed model, Socrates, it is difficult to shake the feeling that something other than open discussion is going on. Perhaps the best response is that the communicator and receiver of communication can and should alternate freely in this process; at the same time, it seems unavoidable that something like natural hierarchies would develop within social settings.
sharply etched…[and] I have a direct lock on the idea to be conveyed.”

In such instances of direct communication, the need for interpretation is not as pronounced; though context sensitive, the differences between the two forms of communication mainly involve the type of issue at stake. The difference is essentially between rational knowledge and ethical-religious truth, which C. Stephen Evans clearly demarcates: “The basic idea is that a distinction can be drawn between objective knowledge, which can be communicated directly from one person to another as a ‘result,’ and a type of self-knowledge that can only be communicated ‘artfully.’”

The static ethical existence, which comes from learning by rote, encourages the opposite: inability to think creatively and reliance on adopting universals and objective principles, which are at best approximate, and at worst, dangerous.

Because I take Kierkegaard’s insistence on the need to avoid systematized treatises quite seriously, it seems best to avoid further explication and opt in favor of showing a mode of communication that epitomizes Kierkegaard’s brand of indirect communication: the comic. The comic is far from the only way to communicate indirectly, nor is the word comic used in a traditional manner; it is the case, however,

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102 Whether or not it is fair to apply this kind of “danger” to Kierkegaard’s targets, it seems safe to say that there is at least some danger to the kind of totalizing system that starts with universals and encourages or mandates conformity to those universals. Maieutic discourse, alternatively, aims at critical praxis.

103 “The category of the comic is essentially contradiction” (JP II: 1737), according to Kierkegaard. It relates to the paradoxical encounter of the desire to understand with the fact that “truth is hidden in the mystery” (JP II: 1682). It is, according to Kierkegaard, important that the truth is not “revealed in the mystery,” but is hidden there: “worldly wisdom” is here regarded humorously (JP II: 1682). It might be helpful to note: “for the ancients the divine was continually merged with the world; therefore no irony” (JP II: 1677). Partially at least, the basis of the claim that humor is omnipresent in Christianity is that Hegelian Lutheranism seeks to account for the world in an impossible manner. To be sure, the humorist is aware of this and utilizes it, pointing out that living competently is bound to incorporate humor.
that Socratic irony and maieutic discourse can be indispensible social tools and should be addressed as such. My use of the comic should not confuse the big picture: just as Arendt invokes Socrates to show how thinking can look in a particular context but does not mean to imply that Socrates is the only thinker, my reference to the Kierkegaardian comic should be taken as a relevant example of the kind of indirect communication that engenders critical praxis without the implication that social-political agents respond to the unreflective repetition of values only with the Kierkegaardian comic.

4.2.1 The Comic as Indirect Communication

To grasp the extent to which Kierkegaard’s work relies on indirect elucidation rather than explicit enumeration, a glance at the comic through my own somewhat indirect elucidation pays dividends. It should be noted that no shortage of scholarly attention has plagued the comic in Kierkegaard. This section briefly treats the comic, first attempting to discern between humor and irony, and then addressing the comic as a larger umbrella category.

According to a journal entry, Kierkegaard considered his entire existence “the deepest irony” (JP II: 1767):

To travel to South America, to descend into subterranean caves to excavate the remains of extinct animal types and antediluvian fossils—in this there is nothing ironic, for the animals extant there now do not pretend to be the same animals. But to excavate in the middle of “Christendom” the types of being a Christian, which in relation to present Christians are somewhat like the bones of extinct animals to animals living now—this is the most intensive irony—the irony of assuming that Christianity exists at the same time that there are one thousand preachers robed in velvet and silk and millions of Christians who beget Christians, and so on (JP II: 1767).

104 I will focus mainly on Climacus’ treatment of these “border territories” in the CUP and PF, along with Kierkegaard’s journals and papers. This section will also be heavily indebted to John Lippitt’s Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought [John Lippitt. Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought. (Great Britain: Macmillan Press, LTD, 2000) (Henceforth HIKT)].
Irony exists as the *confinium* (something like a border territory) between the *aesthetic* and the *ethical*, which, along with the *religious*, comprise the three spheres of existence. In this formulation, “irony emerges by continually joining the particulars of the finite with the ethical infinite requirement and allowing the contradiction to come into existence” (KW XII.1 502). An ironist would, in other words, be aware of the ethical requirement (this distinguishes him from the immediate, or aesthetic individual), but the pure ironist would not “appropriate existentially the requirement of the ethical: to really take on board what this demand means for him, when applied to his life.”

While it is true that irony is, strictly speaking, a ‘lower’ existence than the ethical stage, it can also serve as what Climacus and Kierkegaard often call an ‘incognito’ of the ethicist. For my purpose, it is noteworthy that ‘incognito,’ through emphasizing a deceptiveness stemming from the projection of an image contrary to reality, can also imply indirection and artful communication. Climacus cites Socrates as a historical example of this kind of ethical existence. The precise reason for the ethicist’s utilization of the ironic in this manner is his comprehension of the “contradiction between the mode in which he exists in his inner being and his not expressing it in his outer appearance” (KW XII.1 504). The salient point is:

Irony is the unity of ethical passion, which inwardness infinitely accentuates one’s own *I* in relation to the ethical requirement—and culture, which in externality infinitely abstracts from the personal *I* as a finitude included among all other finitudes and

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105 Unfortunately, I lack the space to give a detailed account of the “existence spheres.” These should be considered three potential stages of development for the individual. The religious existence is the highest, though it is important to note that neither Kierkegaard nor Climacus ever claims to be religious. In fact, in *Point of View*, Kierkegaard writes: “Never have I fought in such a way that I have said: I am the true Christian; the others are not Christians, or probably even hypocrites and the like. No, I have fought in this way: I know what Christianity is; I myself acknowledge my defects as a Christian—but I do know what Christianity is” (KW XXII 15). I will argue below that never claiming to be Christian is a purposeful move bound up with his method of “indirect communication.” Not claiming authority is an extremely important aspect of his (and Socrates’) thought.

106 Lippitt, *HIKT*, 91.
particulars. An effect of this abstraction is that no one notices the first, and this is precisely the art, and through it the true infinitizing of the first is conditioned. Most people live in the opposite way. They are busy with being something when someone is watching them. If possible, they are something in their own eyes as soon as others are watching them, but inwardly, where the absolute requirement is watching them, they have no taste for accentuating the personal I (KW XII.1 503).

The tension between what Lippitt calls “a kind of performance, being concerned with how they appear to others rather than how—inwardly—they really are,” and the other kind of “performance,” given by the ethicist, is worth a close look. The ethicist’s “cultivation of an outlook that appears to be that of a mere ironist protects a space in which the continual inner appropriation of the demands of the ethical can take place.”

This interpretation coheres nicely with a journal entry in which Kierkegaard hints at a more existential irony:

In what did Socrates’ irony really lie? In expressions and turns of speech, etc.? No, such trivialities, even his virtuosity in talking ironically, such things do not make a Socrates. No, his whole existence is and was irony; whereas the entire contemporary population of farm hands and business men and so on, all those thousands, were perfectly sure of being human and of knowing what it means to be a human being, Socrates was beneath them (ironically) and occupied himself with the problem—what does it mean to be a human being? … The irony with respect to Christianity has one element more than Socratic irony has, inasmuch as men in Christendom not only imagine themselves to be human beings (here, of course, Socrates also stops) but also imagine themselves to be something historically concrete, which being a Christian is. Socrates doubted that one is a human being by birth; to become human or to learn what it means to be human does not come that easily—what occupied Socrates, what he sought, was the ideality of being human. What would Socrates think now if he were told that men have long since become so perfectible that they have made great progress in nonsense to the extent that there now is sense in saying that a child is just about born a Christian, yes, “even of a particular denomination” (JP II: 1767).

It should be noted that for both Climacus and Kierkegaard, “irony is an existence-qualification,” not a “style of speaking or an author’s counting himself lucky to express himself ironically once in a while. The person who has essential irony has it all day long and is not bound to any style, because it is the infinite within him” (KW XII.1 504).

107 I take “the first” to mean “ethical passion.”
108 Lippitt, HIKT, 92.
Just as irony can serve as an ‘incognito’ for an ethical person, Climacus claims that humor can serve as an ‘incognito’ for the religious existence. According to Climacus, the humorist joins the infinity of God with the rest of his finite existence, but instead of relating himself to the infinite through religious passion, he “revokes the suffering in the form of jest” (KW XII.1 447). He realizes the profundity of passion, according to Climacus, but in the end, the effort that explaining it would involve is not worthwhile, or perhaps better put, he “has comprehended suffering in such a way that he finds all documentation superfluous and expresses this by mentioning the first thing at hand” (KW XII.1 448-449). But the disguised religious utilization of humor would “comprehend the suffering and remain in it in such a way that reflection is on the suffering and not away from the suffering” (KW XII.1 443). Humor and irony, though conceptually distinct in Kierkegaard’s work, can be collectively identified under the umbrella category of the comic presently because the primary focus is not the three existence spheres mentioned before. The focal point relates to the paradox of encountering the contradiction of our need for explanation and a world that does not admit of it.

Kierkegaard claims: “The purely comic arises when a man knows the right thing and yet shows that he does not know it. Here is the essential contradiction. A man knows that God exists—and he says: I know it, damn it all! He knows that everything is uncertain, and yet ‘experience has taught him’ to cling to the ‘certainty,’ namely to the certainty which is in fact uncertainty” (JP II: 1747). With this entry, among a series of others in his journals and papers, Kierkegaard establishes his view that “the category of the comic is essentially contradiction” (JP II: 1737). The comic—broadly construed—is at work wherever there is contradiction. And since contradiction is seemingly
omnipresent when eternal goals are merged with empty realities, it is not hard to understand why Kierkegaard (through Climacus) seems to think that finding the comic in life merely entails waking up and smelling the proverbial coffee (KW XII.1 462).

Though there is much to be said about how religious passion, or faith, relates to the comic, it is outside the scope of this paper. I am more concerned with how the comic—conceiving of it especially through the lens of one of its paradigmatic examples (Socrates)—engenders indirect communication, the latter being indispensable for social-political discourse. The following section serves to support this chapter’s main claim: humor and irony are essential tools for social and ethical discourse, and are indispensable for meaningful, substantive critique, questioning and formation of values, and personal and societal growth.

Strictly speaking, the role of the comic in indirect communication\textsuperscript{109} is simple: it is indirect communication. At least, it is a form of it. But “what makes it appropriate to laugh at the speculative philosopher, rather than soberly pointing out his error? Part of the answer, I think, lies in the idea that this is not merely an error.”\textsuperscript{110} Lippitt keenly alludes to a passage in the \textit{Point of View}, wherein Kierkegaard calls Danish Christendom (which is deeply connected with speculative philosophy) an ‘illusion:’

\textsuperscript{109} Though Kierkegaard, as demonstrated above, clearly distinguishes between humor and irony, I would like to acknowledge and be fair to those differences, while also speaking more broadly about the joint role they play in “indirect communication.” Lippitt suggests, rightly I think, that communicating religious truths (how one ought to be a Christian, which is the self-described task of Climacus and Kierkegaard) might involve humor because it is the confinium between the ethical and religious spheres. On the other hand, communication of ethical truths could involve irony (Socrates was, after all, an ethicist “bordering on the religious” (KW XII.1 503)), which stands between the aesthetic and ethical spheres (Lippitt, HIKT, 93-95). In a general sense I treat these two elements of the comic together since they exist in similar relations to indirect communication. I am more concerned with Socrates as an exemplar and with social and ethical discourse; I thus focus on a more detailed exploration of irony (as an incognito for the ethical agent), but could easily be addressing either aspect of the comic.

An illusion can never be removed directly, and basically only indirectly. If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, declares himself not to be Christian (KW XXII, 43).

As mentioned before, the point is that teaching should take the form of withdrawal, because direct communication would feel too much like an assault; it would fail to encourage self-activity. Below, I explore maieutics as a political mechanism and as what Paul Muench will call the art of taking away. For now, though, a detailed exploration of the paradigmatic, existing thinker works toward showing how the Kierkegaardian concept of indirect communication augments the Arendtian and Castoriadian public realm through a robust account of the kind of discourse that most directly fuels social critique and progress.

4.3 Socratic Irony and Maieutic Discourse

The existing thinker, for Climacus in CUP, is constantly reaching out: “He is striving infinitely, continually in the process of becoming, something that is safeguarded by his being just as negative as positive and by his having just as much of the essentially comic as of the essentially pathos-filled, and that has its basis in the circumstance that he is existing and renders this in his thinking” (KW XII.1 91). Negativity, continual striving, and never becoming a teacher\(^{111}\) but rather remaining a learner, roughly comprise what

\(^{111}\) I think Kierkegaard intends to oppose a certain kind of teacher: he often refers to “assistant professors,” for whom knowledge is meant for systematic dissemination and rote memorization. I don’t think that Kierkegaard wants to attack the entirety of pedagogy; he rather argues that a certain kind of teaching is damaging. In fact, the core of indirect communication is educative. The freewheeling give and take of discourse aims at a mutual education, or mutual awakening. Arendt’s plurality is also essentially educative; how else would plurality be an effective method for progress? Castoriadis also refers to self-institution itself as essentially a process of education and undermining of one’s preconceived notions, values, essences and norms. Kierkegaard is not remotely anti-education; he does, however, oppose a certain narrow view of what education is (namely, memorization or parroting of ideas; learning of invariant truths in the fields of politics and ethics). But in the productive, useful form of education envisioned by these three thinkers, it is
Climacus understands by *subjective, existing, thinker*. This is opposed to abstract thought, which Climacus deems “thinking where there is no thinker” (KW XII.1 332). Since this kind of existence is lost in the modern age, Climacus tasks himself to retrieve it.

I would like to suggest a reading of Kierkegaard’s authorship (focusing especially on his philosophical pseudonym, Johannes Climacus) in terms of its broader goals, emphasizing Kierkegaard’s self-identification as a Socratic character. Through focusing on the method of Kierkegaard’s authorship and reading his entire pseudonymous authorship as at least partly an instance of indirect communication, the social and pedagogical role of such a task clarifies itself.

In Kierkegaard’s late work, *The Moment*, he wrote openly, without the use of a pseudonym, about his task as an author and citizen. “My task is to audit the definition: Christian” (KW XXIII 343). Though—in a Socratic vein—he refuses to actually commit to self-identifying as a Christian, rather identifying with Socrates. “The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it is to be a Christian—I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that the others are that even less” (KW XXIII 341). It takes a figure detached

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from religion and speculative philosophy, a self-identified humorist, to reveal to people their own ignorance. The focal point for Kierkegaard is the criticism of an essentialist view of Christian faith and human nature. For my part, it is the method of bringing about self-awareness more than the particular content of the critique.\textsuperscript{113}

The overarching problem: there is not just one mode of genuinely human existence.\textsuperscript{114} Nor is there just one route to the ethical life. If there were, it would not only be easier, but imperative, that ethics were treated and enumerated in the form of doctrine or systematic treatises. But as the world actually stands, Kierkegaard estimates a realm of questions beyond the scope of direct communication, in need of more subtlety. So how does the comic figure in the narrower concept of indirect communication, and more broadly, in productive social discourse?

Socrates, the master ironist, is a specialist in the art of ‘taking away.’ Muench argues compellingly that this skill is an “exemplary instance of Kierkegaard’s notion of indirect communication.”\textsuperscript{115} The term ‘taking away’ is derived from an image found in a long footnote in the middle of the \textit{CUP}, wherein Climacus claims that his book sets its sights on the person who knows too much (as mentioned before, ‘knowing too much’ is a reference to speculative philosophy and the objectivization of Christianity):

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Kierkegaard (like Climacus) imagines it foolish to think that being born in Denmark in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century ensures one’s status as an existing individual or ethicist, much less a Christian. That the state church is Lutheran means ultimately nothing, and the answers provided by the religious authority only facilitate the superficial—and ultimately hollow—ethical and religious life. From here forward I will choose to focus less on the Christian aspect of this task, and more on the social/Socratic aspect. This move should not be taken to affirm or deny the importance of Kierkegaard’s conception of what it means to be Christian; I want to acknowledge its importance and choose knowingly to address an underdeveloped aspect of the issue.
\item ‘Genuinely human existence’ could be misleading: Kierkegaard seems to be simply opposing an essentialist view of human nature in the sense that humans are not bound to one particular and unchanging form of existence. There are multiple ways of being a subjective, existing (and ethical) individual.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Because everyone knows the Christian truth, it has only gradually become such a trivality that a primitive impression of it is acquired only with difficulty. When this is the case, the art of being able to communicate eventually becomes the art of being able to take away or to trick something away from someone. This seems strange and very ironic, and yet I believe I have succeeded in expressing exactly what I mean. When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat and it must end with his dying of hunger does giving food consist in stuffing his mouth even more or, instead, in taking a little away so that he can eat? Similarly, when a man is very knowledgeable but his knowledge is meaningless or virtually meaningless to him, does sensible communication consist in giving him more to know, even if he loudly proclaims that this is what he needs, or does it consist, instead, in taking something away from him? When a communicator takes a portion of the copious knowledge that the very knowledgeable man knows and communicates it to him in a form that makes it strange to him, the communicator is, as it were, taking away his knowledge, at least until the knower manages to assimilate the knowledge by overcoming the resistance of the form (KW XII.1 275).

A little unpacking is necessary, but luckily, in a surviving fragment of a draft to the CUP, Kierkegaard explains what he means by a ‘form strange to him.’ “One clothes [the knowledge taken away] in an altogether strange way so that he does not recognize it and at the same moment for a short time takes away from him what he knows, because now he does not know it” (KW XII.2 65). This might seem to beg the question, why this unusually serious conception of irony?

It is a fundamental commitment of Kierkegaard that “the presence of irony does not necessarily mean that earnestness is excluded” (KW XII.1 277). In numerous places, Kierkegaard connects earnestness with jest, or an aspect of the comic. Specifically, he claims that due to the ambiguity of the comic itself, the receiver of such communication (or, for example, the reader of his pseudonymous books) would be likely to mistake the message as nothing but jest (JP I: 656). The indirect mode of communication by nature requires care in interpretation. Hence Kierkegaard’s reference to Socrates, which alludes to the false perception that Socrates spoke of mundane matters (like food and drink), whereas in reality he exemplified inwardness. Kierkegaard positions this in contradistinction to the example of more ‘serious’ thinkers who superficially occupy
themselves with “the infinite” but are really only talking about “food and drink, money, profit” (JP IV: 4290).

The comic is an existential commitment to social awareness through the maieutic task: “standing alone—by another’s help.” “Standing alone” points to the importance of resistance; “by another’s help” refers to interdependence and the need to form a public space wherein people are seen and heard by their peers, and challenged to engage with values, principles, and institutions. The irony of this formulation is intentional: Kierkegaard wants to show that the communicator must serve as a gadfly,\textsuperscript{116} or a midwife,\textsuperscript{117} who arouses ethical (and religious) awareness and communicates the value of focusing on the important aspects of life. But to do this, the communicator must not try to stand above, as a teacher. She instead should help another stand alone.\textsuperscript{118}

4.4 Conclusion

Communication is profoundly social. In an insightful article, Ronald L. Hall demonstrates a connection between language, freedom, and ultimately faith. Even though I do not focus primarily on faith, it will be instructive to briefly consider Hall’s argument.

\textsuperscript{116} Cf. Plato, \textit{Apology}, 29d. Kierkegaard suggests that the reason Socrates compared himself to a gadfly is that “he did not want to be admired as a genius who stood apart from others and who therefore essentially made the lives of others easy, since they might say: It’s easy enough for him—he’s a genius (JP IV: 4265).”

\textsuperscript{117} Cf. Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 149a. The line (150b) in which Socrates claims that an important dimension of the midwife’s work would be, were women to give birth to phantoms, telling the real from the false children—seems to do a lot of work in describing Climacus’ role in isolating the authentic from the pseudo-Christian.

\textsuperscript{118} Kierkegaard insists that this should take place with a subtlety that doesn’t allow the other to be aware of the help. In other words, “if he is going to stand alone—by another’s help, then he must by no means have any conception of this other as advantageous, for this advantageous idea usually becomes a hindrance to his standing alone (JP I: 650).” Though at first glance this seems an odd picture of social discourse between equals, I take the motivation to be that individuals need to retain their critical distance from structures and institutions. Kierkegaard displays an almost fanatic concern about the individual being “swallowed.” Note a similarity between this formulation and Lippitt’s point that irony protects an inner space wherein renewal of the ethical demand can happen.
Language serves a social function; without other people with whom to communicate, there would be no need for language. For this reason, Kierkegaard’s allowance of language to take on a crucial role in freedom and faith at least suggests, but more likely necessitates, a presumed but tacit emphasis on community. Hall offers the concept of ‘muteness’ as an example of the opposing alignment: one exists in ‘muteness’ if one does not speak with authenticity, as oneself. Put another way, “there is no reflexive integrity between one’s inner will and one’s outward expression.”

Hall uses a helpful example: consider the actor, whose speech is not a product of his own thought, or inner feeling; “his expressions in the world are externally imposed by his social role.” Note that it is difficult to live the engaged social life exemplified by ‘inwardness’ and reflexive integrity in language. The alternative, namely, a life wherein one’s language does not reflect the ‘inwardness’ of one’s condition, rather reflecting a role or ethical comportment imposed upon the individual by society is an easy and tempting route. For this reason, the partial formation of one’s own role, through critical praxis, becomes all the more important.

To take an active role in shaping the manner in which the engaged social life takes place, maieutics and the awakening of self-activity are paramount. In 1846, Kierkegaard wrote the following in his journal:

The fact that many of Plato’s dialogues end without a result has a far deeper basis than I had thought earlier. They are a reproduction of Socrates’ maieutic skill which makes the reader or hearer himself active, and therefore they do not end in a result but in a sting. This is an excellent parody of the modern rote-method which says everything the sooner

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119 Ronald L. Hall. “Language and Freedom: Kierkegaard’s Analysis of the Demonic in The Concept of Anxiety.” International Kierkegaard Commentary 8: The Concept of Anxiety. Ed. Robert L. Perkins. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 161. (Henceforth “Language and Freedom”) This form of expression, also, is notably similar to Arendt’s idea that people have a chance to reveal who they are through words and deeds.

Kierkegaard sees modernity in terms of rote memorization of religious and ethical truth, but that method of talking about ethical and religious truth is linked to one side of the above-mentioned disjunction between the expression of ‘inwardness’ and the ‘acting’ form of linguistic expression. Authentic linguistic expression, on the other hand, and appropriation of inwardness through ironic indirect communication, may appear negative, but the ironist “is turned out toward others in such a way that he understands himself as having nothing to say to others directly to build them up. He is there not to tell them what to think or say or do, but to awaken, to strip, to turn from falsehood towards truth … he presents not a content so much as a way.”

Mark Dooley offers a lucid account of Kierkegaard’s social thought, drawing together Kierkegaard’s opposition to Hegelian philosophy and the conclusion that he found Hegelian ethics non-existent: they are predicated upon an individual being subsumed under the spirit of the state and adhering to the law, which has been deified. The truly self-conscious individual must cultivate passionate inwardness in order to establish “social cohesion and harmony through involved critical praxis.” In other words, Kierkegaard finds the Hegelian system closed off from critique; this is why his aim at engagement with the question of essential truths matters. Dooley chooses a particularly poignant image to convey the kind of relation that holds here:

To become an alien in one’s own land, to resign from the given actuality, is the very process of inwardness—not the total withdrawal from or abdication of one’s cultural matrix, but rather the adoption of a critical posture in relation to the prevailing

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sociopolitical structures. Kierkegaard’s antiheroes—and one thinks primarily of Socrates in this instance—are as much a part of the state as they are dissenters. Their objective is to undermine the power of the state to delude its citizens into believing that singularity must always be sacrificed on the altar of universality.¹²³

Firstly, the theme of “becoming alien in one’s own land” is strikingly similar to some thematic points in both Castoriadis and Arendt, and seems to be essential to the adoption of a critical posture for all three thinkers. Moreover, inwardness, for Dooley, is a kind of engaged, responsible, action; not pulling inward in direction, but something more akin to ‘heartfelnss,’ to use the language of Mooney and Hannay. Dooley aims to highlight that Kierkegaard’s idea of ironic indirect communication is aimed toward the state (taken as a set of inherited forms of thought, norms, essences, and institutions), toward promoting the self-action of individuals to fuel a substantive social critique that takes seriously the demands of an ethical and religious existence, and does not assume that those demands are equated to the adherence to the version of morality and faith offered by the totalizing whole.

The temptation to regard Kierkegaard as a rugged individualist and an aloof figure should be avoided; within his signed works and the pseudonymous works of Johannes Climacus, in particular, the impetus for a substantially productive social critique is evident. Through ironic and humorous indirect communication, which takes place between individuals, and engenders questioning of values and social norms, the active engagement with social, political, and ethical structures takes place. The communicator ought to take the role of the midwife, like Socrates, who opted for that role himself because he perceived that “this relation is the highest relation a human being can have to another” (KW VII 10). In other words, humans are not in the position to be laying forth

¹²³ Dooley, PE, 51.
religious and ethical doctrines; 124 humans can at most help one another stand alone, and be helped in standing alone.

The eventual cultivation of this critical ethos might be called inwardness, which does not imply a push away from others or a blinding focus on the individual as apart from the social context in which she exists: “if anything, for Kierkegaard, inwardness requires that the individual become more passionately engaged with others.”125 Productive social discourse, in fact, often starts on the micro or interpersonal level, but gradually shifts into a broader social awareness. In this way, indirect communication can propel individuals into critical praxis. Kierkegaard’s central claim is that the method of communication, as much as its content, fosters heightened social awareness and action. In this sense, the Socratic exemplar still holds as a model for social-political action, and indirect communication itself is a political concept. Perhaps this is precisely what critical praxis is: standing alone—by another’s help.

124 For Kierkegaard, this role would be reserved for God. For my part, this role is not reserved for anyone.
125 Dooley, PE, 49.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

On the one hand, the thematic development of this project points to Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis as two social-political thinkers, each of whose work relates to that of the other in a mutually beneficial manner. They each augment the other’s account of social-political action in the public realm. Søren Kierkegaard adds an explicit endorsement of a useful form of communication, which I argue can improve upon the work of Castoriadis and Arendt by establishing a clear account of how political discourse actually takes place. On the other hand, the project has witnessed a subtle shift from Castoriadis, whose analysis works primarily on the level of the broadly social, toward Arendt, whose central questions regard political plurality and agency, and finally to Kierkegaard, who in a sense completes the progression toward the interpersonal level. Chapter Four ends with an account of the comic as indirect communication that takes place between an I and an I, or in other words, interpersonally. This is the forum of political discourse because it is precisely where the most important praxis happens: a critical examination of values, norms, and essences. I address each of these thematic points presently.
Castoriadis’ “subject is the imaginary and the imagination, looked at from the standpoint of their present crisis in Western societies: the crisis of the instituting social imaginary, the crisis in the imagination of singular human beings” (FOT 71). Of course, when he claimed this subject, he was referring to an individual essay written late in his life. But the imagination, or the imaginary, is central throughout his work. He writes, “I talk about the imaginary because the history of humanity is the history of the human imaginary and its works” (FOT 71). For my part, I share Castoriadis’ conviction that “from the start of history, one sees the emergence of radical novelty, and if we do not wish to resort to transcendental factors to account for this, we definitely must postulate a power of creation, a *vis formandi*, immanent to human collectivities as well as to individual human beings” (FOT 72). Radical novelty, though, is not magical. It need not imply anything more than “bringing into being a form that was not there before” (FOT 73). Castoriadis speculates that a hesitation to accept humans’ ability to create radically novel forms could relate to the legacy of theological creation: the inherited forms of thought have “reserve[d] creation for God—creation took place once and for all, or it is continuous divine creation—or it is rationalist or determinist, and therefore obliged either to infer everything that is from first principles or else to produce it out of causes” (FOT 73). Producing causes is messy. Castoriadis wonders, for example, where “was the piano hidden during the Neolithic age” (IIS 198)? The piano itself is comprised of matter that preexisted the piano. The material substratum was already there, but the ivory, wood, and metal had to be produced and then combined in a novel fashion. Castoriadis compares the creation of artisans (say, of a piano) to political creation. He reveals the influence of Aristotle on his thought when he claims, the action with which the artist makes the piano
is “concerned with coming into being, i.e. with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being” (*NE* VI, 1140a11-12).

These are the stakes; political institutions, for both Arendt and Castoriadis, are contingent. So too history, and his way of talking about the novel and finite nature of experience: time or creation. For Kierkegaard also, the social realm, how to live life, how to become a human: these aspects of existence are quite undetermined. Contingency exists in and through a lack of permanently applicable solutions. In *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, Castoriadis suggests:

> There exist no problem or problems of man which have been defined once and for all, so that he can meet them, in the course of time, by ‘obligatory’ or progressively improved solutions; human ‘needs’ are defined by no fixed point. The gulf which separates the necessities of man as biological species from the needs of man as historical being is dug by the human imaginary, but the pick which digs it is technique (CL 241).

Returning to the question of novelty, the idea of form-giving is paramount in Castoriadis’ account. As noted earlier, autonomy and a non-essentialist order implies the need for stability and resistance to collective folly. Creation—for the artisan—manifests itself in appropriating a shapeless piece of matter, or perhaps more accurately, a piece of matter (wood, for example) that is only characterized by its shape *qua matter*, or *qua wood*. The artisan then gives it a new *eidos*, for example, the *eidos* of a piano. Castoriadis shares an Aristotelian view of the priority of form (actuality) in at least one sense: “It is the *eidos*, this form that makes of wood a table, of bronze a statue, and of earth a vase. Now bronze is bronze regardless of its form. But the statue is a statue only due to its form; its being a statue, its essence, is its *eidos*” (*IIS* 197). This sort of form-giving creation is not dissimilar to creation in the political realm, in at least one important way: it is to posit, in a manner conditioned but not determined, some new structure or institution that performs
certain functions or actions within the context in which it is embedded. Moreover, technique—or technical creation—figures prominently in the public space (as a necessary but not sufficient condition of societal institution):

The most important of all ‘techniques’ is social organization itself, and the mightiest engine ever created by man is the regulated network of social relations. It must indeed be recognized that this network is the institution, and the institution is far more than technique, something other than technique; but among its indissociable constituent parts, without which it would not be possible, we must include social ‘technique,’ the ‘rationalization’ of the relations between men as this is constituted by the society in question (CL 242).

Two particular aspects of this passage are instrumental for my purpose. Firstly, the institution is more than just technique, but the technique of social organization is of unparalleled importance. Secondly, in equating ‘technique’ and ‘rationalization’ of relations between people, Castoriadis seems to suggest that the form-giving aspect of technique affords societies a structural regularity, perhaps a universal form (though not an invariant one; this regularity would admit of constant change). The notable implication, here, is that if a standardization of such a network of relations is possible, then it seems feasible to link Castoriadis’ account of the technē of institutions to novelty, on the one hand, and on the other, structure and institution.126

The structure of which Castoriadian technē admits is immensely useful in the Arendtian account: institution, according to Castoriadis, represents the ability of the collective to form a public space and time, within which it is able to inspect its past and build collaborative future goals. The regulated network of social relations (which includes and hinges upon social imaginary significations, meanings, essences, and

126 Similarly, Linda Zerilli alludes to an interesting complication to Castoriadis’ account: “What Castoriadis sees – and this is crucial – is that the institution of the social-historical and the creation of imaginary significations always involve both the creation of radical otherness (the new) and the workings of ensemblistic-identitary logic (the inscription of the new in terms of the old)” [Linda M.G. Zerilli. “Castoriadis, Arendt, and the Problem of the New.” Constellations. 9:4. (2002), 541] (Henceforth “Problem New”).
norms), as a exemplar of的技术, does more than simply change the state of nature: “To create a technical object is not to alter the present state of nature, something accomplished as well by moving one’s hand; it is to constitute a universal type, to posit an eidos which henceforth ‘is’ independently of empirical exemplars” (CL 239). Note well, though: to endorse a universal, standardized, form-giving aspect of political creation need not imply invariance. But the emphasis on self-institution (institution taken, once again, to mean collective responses in the broadest sense of the term) helps Arendt by providing a more robust account of the structure involved in these complex social mechanisms.

As Straume points out, Arendt’s neglect of the institution does not imply that she does not want or need it; instead, it should be taken solely as a point of emphasis. She has much use for institutions, and as Straume suggests, institutions protect the public space, through which thinking and deliberation is possible. Like the Kierkegaardian comic, which protects an inner space, wherein the demands of the ethical can be continually appropriated, societal institution adopts an important protective function with regard to the faculty of thinking in the public realm.

This stabilization or rationalization of the relations (institution), however, is not sufficient to lay claim to a genuine democracy. The Arendtian and Kierkegaardian

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127 Suzi Adams suggests [“Interpreting Creation: Castoriadis and the Birth of Autonomy.” Thesis Eleven, No. 83. (Nov. 2011) (Henceforth “Creation”)]: the term “contextual creation” because it would more adequately reflect the fact that (a) there is much interpretive activity going on in creation and that “interpretation itself includes a constitutive creative moment,” (b) “as undetermined horizons of meaning, social imaginary significations, once created, themselves always already require further interpretation and elaboration, that is, the world still requires ongoing interpretation,” and (c) “the creation of the social-historical world occurs in the context of interpretation and transformation of already existing historical constellations of meaning” (35). Even though I am not as concerned with the problematic terminology, Adams is correct to point to “contextual” as perhaps a formulation of social-political creation. The more interesting issue, however, is that Adams’ reading allows for a better account of degree to which creation in Castoriadis is conditioned (though not determined) by inherited forms of thought, which mandate constant undermining and questioning, but which nonetheless can never be completely avoided.
approaches facilitate the progression toward genuine democracy, though. In fact, Arendt and Castoriadis have a quite mutually beneficial relationship. Political agents, in the work of Castoriadis, are replaced by movements and collectives; Arendt, as Straume notes, has more to say about the actors themselves. She stresses “the emergence of the actor who appears to others and reveals who he is. Thus, Arendt frames the discussion in an expressivist, phenomenological and agent-oriented notion of political action, where the point of the activity is not to create something, but rather to stand out as unique individuals for each other.”128 Straume also points out that Castoriadis’ emphasis on the “collective,” and the “society” is a bit too abstract for the purpose of thinking through political creation.129 Moreover, she notes that Arendt’s plurality more closely resembles the Greek idea of the demos. Jeff Klooger, interestingly without mentioning Arendt at all, argues130 along essentially the same lines for a shift away from Castoriadis’ rather restricted, overly homogeneous account of the social sphere. In his view, the concept of political plurality—along with the idea of heterogeneity—responds to Castoriadis’ abstracted and simplistic conception of how political actors collaborate on the social level. Even without a reference to Arendt, the argument tracks her focal concern: the actual political agents need to be accounted for when taking seriously the idea of institution-building because without the agents, society is characterized by closure rather than critical praxis and active discourse.

Kierkegaard understands critical discourse as primarily taking place on the interpersonal level. I share this understanding. Arendt has room for communication of

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this sort, additionally, and would undoubtedly support the claim that productive deliberation happens on a small scale, between individuals, or even in the two-in-one silent dialogue of thinking. Even if I speak to a group of, say, four people, the line of communication seems to be drawn between myself and a particular subject. This subject can communicate reciprocally with me, but each signification, essence, or norm that I communicate is unique to a moment. Social groups can unite in an effort to stabilize these significations; they in fact do. But, it remains true that when I utter a distinct set of words, that which I have communicated to one individual could be drastically different from that received by another. Though an obvious point in some ways, it’s important to note that Kierkegaard’s intuition—that the important forms of discourse take place between an I and an I—seems vindicated in at least this sense.

The locus of this deliberation is the public realm. Yet it also fosters the development of a more robust space for social-political action. The comic as indirect communication is thus productive of, and reliant upon, the public realm. Within this free space of critical praxis, citizens engage each other in maieutic discourse. In the Theaetetus, Socrates informs Theaetetus that he resembles the midwife who takes care of the bodies of people in most respects, save for one: “I watch over the labor of their souls, not of their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or fertile truth” (Theaetetus, 150b-150c). Shortly following this passage, Socrates claims to be barren of wisdom, using as a metaphor his apparently being forbidden by God to procreate. Kierkegaard sees this as his own task, indeed. But he also thinks that maieutic discourse is the task of all social-political actors, in a way.
Political actors engage one another in this kind of aporetic discourse and push one another to encounter the paradox, or perplexity, that stems from the contradiction inherent to looking for meaning in a world devoid of it.

It might seem natural to assume that the experience of contradiction should lead to anger and confusion, rather than something productive. Socrates embraced irony and contradiction at the cost of banishment and death; tolerance for this kind of experience, and the ability to transform it into something positive, is far from a fixture of western culture. Arendt highlights numerous ways in which the Socratic art isolates and destroys opinions, leaving nothing in their place. Kierkegaard tasks himself to audit the definition: Christian. After this audit, we are to realize that there are no Christians present. But, underneath these apparently negative effects of the experience of irony and contradiction, there also lies a positive aspect, which takes two forms primarily. Firstly, the process of discourse and critical praxis is focal and, thus, people are encouraged to cultivate a thoughtful posture toward social-political structures and ideas. Secondly, the Castoriadian concept of (societal) self-institution incorporates stabilization and a rationalization of sorts, of patterns of meaning, of essences, and of norms. This stabilization arises in response to the same world (to which Arendt and Kierkegaard respond): a world that lacks an essential social-political order, unordered and characterized by chaos. Without both a stabilization and the ability to undermine the stabilized institutions and forms of thought, the balance tips in one direction or another.

Ultimately, though, it comes down to a comportment. The difference between Socrates or Climacus and a citizen unwilling to embrace the paradox relates to the cultivation of an ethos. The ethos has to do with acknowledgment of the inherent
contradiction, but also and more importantly, a posture of resistance. That all three thinkers conceived of self-institution (Castoriadis), thinking (Arendt), and indirect communication (Kierkegaard) as a form of resistance is not a coincidence. The mentality of an exiled person, of a person unable to feel completely at home in the world, is strikingly different from a person entrenched in her material circumstances. Mark Dooley’s point regarding Socrates is especially important to recall: Socrates at the same time a part of his culture and yet—in a way—removed from it through his critical resistance. This balance is particularly difficult to achieve, not only because people absolutely need the aspects of society that pertain to their material well-being. But also, a person can be convinced to opt for conformity because much rides on playing by the rules, as it were. It seems worth noting, though, that embracing discomfort can often lead to growth and long-term rewards.

Though the shift from Castoriadis to Arendt, and then to Kierkegaard, witnesses a shift from institution building toward critical resistance, the resistance is not a departure from the work of Castoriadis by any means. It is there, but perhaps not foregrounded. Imagination itself is a form of resistance when conceived in relation to inherited forms of thought and structures or institutions. It is the ability to resist seeing the world as simply what meets the eye. Moreover, critical resistance is an essential component of Kierkegaardian ironic communication, most notably underscoring the extent to which political agents push one another into awakened activity. But it must be self-activity; helping another to stand alone.

I do not attempt, presently, to resolve the tension between “self-institution,” taken to indicate societal action, and the kind of “self-activity” upon which Kierkegaard
focuses. Kierkegaard was not particularly concerned with social movements, and, moreover, he found an analysis of culture undertaken on the social level primarily, to be limited and limiting. I only stress: an adequate account needs both of their respective emphases. Arendt and Kierkegaard are right to insist—especially through the lens of communication—that critical praxis happens on a small scale. Castoriadis might well acknowledge this; more to the point, though, his notion of institution creates an important protectorate (the instituted society) toward the goal of social-institution and societal “self-creation.”

Through the rejection of a top-down authority, the public space of Castoriadis and Arendt, and ironic indirect communication, which substantiates and requires that space, achieve a balance with one another. The implication is indeed a strong one. If it appears that I am advocating a genuine democracy that features nearly universal participation, fueled by a public space and indirect communication, it is because I am. I still want to avoid addressing whether representative democracy is up to this task; I suggest, however, a couple of considerations.

In the first case, participation can take a variety of forms. The public space, as a locus for shifting values and critical action, offers people two basic abilities (according to Arendt): (a) it increases a person’s chance to “win immortal fame,” or in other words, “to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word” (HC 197) his unique character; and (b) the public space (the polis) counters the “futility of action and speech,” for the chances that a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten” are poor without the public space. This sentiment tracks Castoriadis’ self-institution in a way. The aim of both thinkers is the imperishability of words and deeds. It ensures being seen and heard in the public,
before fellow citizens, “together in the manner of speech and action” (HC 199). Acting together in the space of appearance is really the core of political participation, and, strictly speaking, it precedes formal constitutions, “the various forms in which the public realm can be organized” (HC 199).

Castoriadis and Arendt still share one important thought: “the laws, like the wall around the city, were not results of action but products of making,” according to Arendt (HC 194). Political action actually follows the creation of walls and laws; the laws are needed to protect a space in which political action should take place, and serve essentially the same function as do the walls. The Castoriadian position, which claims that the institution of a public space creates the opportunity for meaningful deliberation, might tend more toward emphasizing laws, but neither he nor Arendt ultimately shares the intuition that “legislating and the execution of decisions by vote are the most legitimate political activities;” rather, according to Arendt, this is not yet action, but is making (poiēsis), which Arendt claims is preferable to some on account of its ostensible (but perhaps specious) response to the “futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome” associated with action (HC 195).

They unite around one idea of the public space, which, though quoted above, should be helpful to recall:

This is equivalent to the creation of the possibility—and actuality—of free speech, free thinking, free examination and questioning without restraint. It establishes logos as circulation of speech and thought within the community. It accomplishes the two basic traits of the citizen already mentioned: isēgoria, the right for all equally to speak their minds, and parrhēsia, the commitment for all really to speak their minds concerning public affairs (GPCD 280).

Here, Castoriadis quite agrees with Arendt, claiming, “it is important to stress the distinction between the ‘formal’ and the ‘real.’ The existence of the public space is not
just a matter of legal provisions guaranteeing rights of free speech, etc. Such provisions are but conditions for a public space to exist. The important question is: What are people actually doing with this right” (GPCD 280)? Without critical action on the part of the people actually in the public space, “legal provisions are of no avail or produce evils worse than the ones they pretend to cure” (GPCD 281). Thus participation, and a sense of collective ownership or stakes, is central: “Only the education (paideia) of the citizens as citizens can give valuable, substantive content to the ‘public space.’ This paideia is not primarily a matter of books and academic credits. First and foremost, it involves becoming conscious that the polis is also oneself and that its fate also depends upon one’s mind, behavior, and decisions; in other words, it is participation in public life” (GPCD 281). Not only does it require education, though; education is also the result of participation.

The central concerns of the introduction have remained only in the background until now. Kierkegaard’s task—to audit the definition of Christianity—recalls the Arendtian sentiment that the existence of humans is in a way characterized by a desperate attempt to “live in, and understand the sense of, a world which their own strength has established” (OT viii). The stabilizing effect of thinking and institution has manifested itself in deeply entrenched commitments, the sense of which all three thinkers task themselves to understand. Kierkegaard’s audit discloses his intuition that our deepest commitments are often merely produced and replicated by inherited forms of thought. He does not replace the anti-Christian citizens with newly minted Christians in his own image; his insistence that he not be referred to as a Christian (both with regard to Climacus, and Kierkegaard himself) rather communicates the feeling that the central
concern for a democracy is to keep values and institutions adaptive. In a way, I advocate a similar kind of audit: of the word, democracy, and the commitment to a genuine instantiation of it. The response to the problems enunciated above (the Second Amendment, marriage equality, and health care) is not to replace the currently held values with others that seem better and then call the work done. Responding to these questions rather mandates a commitment to plurality in the public realm, and a resolution that the education and participation of all people, the active, lucid self-creation (without permanence with regard to solutions) of society, is—to recall Marx—the new trend of social-political action.
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