Arendt and modern American conservatism

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A Thesis

entitled

Arendt and Modern American Conservatism

by

Oliver J. Wolcott

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Political Science

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May 2010
An Abstract of

Arendt and Modern American Conservatism

By

Oliver J. Wolcott

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Political Science

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In this thesis, I present modern American Conservative arguments supporting the role of tradition, freedom, and religion as necessary components of a modern conception of politics articulated by conservative thinkers Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott and Russell Kirk respectively. I present these ideas, and then critique specific defenses of conservatism using Hannah Arendt as an interlocutor in this process. Central to this effort is developing a notion of human freedom that offers an understanding of human freedom which incorporates liberal and conservative principles, but one that ultimately embraces the changing realities of the modern world as cause for re-thinking "politics” generally and "human freedom” specifically. Assuming the shared interests of individuals as the starting point, and identifying the physical spaces in our society where these interests can help build stronger communities, will, I argue, move us toward this rethinking.
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Introduction

The meaning of human freedom is deeply contested, particularly among those who identify as democratic theorists. While most political theorists readily acknowledge the value of individual liberty as minimal impediments to the realization of desires and goals, there is wide disagreement among them as to what constitutes freedom for the individual within the context of the social. States, nations and societies differ greatly on the amount and type of constraints placed on the freedom of individuals.

At the heart of the "idea" of democratic society is the notion of citizen engagement and political participation. In essence, for a government "by the people and for the people" to succeed, its citizens must take an active role in the political process. This is usually effected through the act of voting, whether to appoint a political "representative" to speak on the behalf of citizens or to affect the outcome of a particular issue by direct vote. The reality of a democratic society presents a significant challenge: accommodating the often competing "values" of individual liberty and political participation. As far back as Plato, political theorists have pointed out some of these challenges to Democratic citizenship, in particular: the notion that a certain portion of society is thought to be "better fit" intellectually to rule (see Plato’s Republic), which subsequently leads to the inequality of political power creating an environment where those individuals not in charge often feel detached and without a sense of responsibility for political outcomes. Discussions of this sort are a continued source of contentious
debate to this day, in part because limiting the amount and kind of freedom an individual enjoys in order to preserve some basic rights for all is complicated to say the least. Moreover – and vital to this discussion moving forward – any discussion of human freedom necessarily cuts to the heart of our understanding of *politics per se* in democratic societies. The two I want to suggest, are inextricably bound to each other so that any attempt to define human freedom inevitably shapes the way we conceptualize politics. This interplay between politics and freedom will be a common thread throughout the paper.

In today’s political landscape we often find the conversations and debates appear to be limited to differences between Democrats and Republicans or Conservatives and Liberals respectively. This is nothing new of course. For centuries liberals and libertarians have principally argued for the protection of individual rights, including but not limited to the right to ‘privacy’. Naturally then, they have argued against a universal value system that, as the term implies, should apply to all. Conservatives, along with communitarians, on the other hand, have long argued that it is a community that provides meaning to its individual members. Though an individual’s rights are not unimportant to the conservative and communitarian, she believes on principle that it is imperative an individual first and foremost recognizes the value in a “common” civic duty that ultimately pursues a better future for a given community; sometimes at the expense of an individual’s liberty.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, what we see – from the mainstream media in particular – is debate presented as an either or proposition; either Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative. This is unfortunate because genuine inquiry into a
matter like human freedom rarely if ever results in pitting a solely individualistic notion against a solely communitarian conception of human freedom: the lines of argumentation are often crossed and at various points indistinguishable for an important reason. Most of us are, whether we choose to be or not, members of a given community, and regardless of the size or makeup of that community we, as individuals, feel a certain belonging and responsibility to the community at large. Generally speaking the sense of responsibility comes from a simple recognition of the talents, goals, and way of life of other individuals that are similar to our own. At the same time we understand the need to respect the rights of each individual member of the community. Therefore when we speak of human freedom most of us do so with this combination in mind: I contest the way the debate is framed does not recognize that we each live “both sides” of the same coin at once in a sense.

Where many liberals and individualists go wrong, I believe, is in limiting the notion of human freedom to simply the constitutionally protected, negative rights and liberties we guarantee each individual in our democratic society. Although an important and necessary part of our understanding of human freedom, this approach is restrictive and lacks the element of public participation I see as essential – not only to recognize diversity that is already there in a different way – but particularly as our society continues to become more diverse, vibrant and dynamic. In other words modern liberals do not readily admit to the value of public appearance and association as a manifestation of human freedom, which I find unfortunate. Their apprehensiveness towards embracing a “communitarian” concept of human freedom is not without merit. Communitarians often do not see the differences or heterogeneity in a given society because their romance
with the “community” obscures. As a result, protecting ones individual rights requires an acute awareness of them on the part of the individual herself. Moreover, protecting individual rights is paramount for any healthy democratic society, and a society that is not sensitive to this reality may find itself at the behest of the consensus of the majority – however unreasonable, irrational, and pernicious the majority decision may be. To be clear though, a “majority rule” concept of human freedom is significantly different from the ‘communitarianism’ (entirety of the public at hand) I detailed above.

Conservatives and communitarians are similarly myopic in their approach to human freedom, though for different reasons than liberals. While the modern American conservative is sensitive to the health and goals of a given community, this general approach can come at the expense of safeguarding the rights and liberties of those individuals most vulnerable in our society. Again, to avoid being misunderstood, it is not the same as saying conservatives share no concern for the less fortunate this of course is not the case.\footnote{This is different still from concerning oneself with the “oppressed” and “exploited”. One will find that it matters what language she uses to describe those lacking social, political, and or economic power. As I mentioned above, of course conservatives and communitarians care for the “weak” but it is an altogether different question as to whether they would “care for” those who claim exploitation or oppression.} The alternative view of human freedom that I will carve out in the next three chapters offers an understanding of human freedom which incorporates liberal and conservative principles but one that ultimately 	extit{embraces} the changing realities of the modern world as cause for re-thinking “politics” generally and “human freedom” specifically. Assuming the shared interests of individuals as the starting point, and identifying the physical spaces in our society where these interests can help build stronger communities, will, I argue, move us toward this rethinking.
In this paper I set out to accomplish several things. First, I present modern American Conservative arguments supporting the role of tradition, freedom, and religion as necessary components of a modern conception of politics articulated by conservative thinkers Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott and Russell Kirk respectively. Second, as I present these ideas, I critique specific defenses of conservatism using Hannah Arendt as an interlocutor in this process. Third, I aim to show through these Arendtian critiques how the modern American conservative moment’s case for a politics in modernity built upon ‘conservative principles” is flawed when it comes to respecting the goals of human freedom. Lastly and most importantly, I address some of the issues I see at the heart of the modern American conservative movement by re-thinking and redefining what politics in the 21st century ought to look like.

Human freedom, above all else, will be the central theme of this essay. As I will show, modern conceptions of politics and freedom go hand in hand. Conceiving of what a politics in the 21st Century should look like thus requires in part, ironically enough, a return to our intellectual and cultural past. We find one example in particular, ancient Greece, offering a different conception of human freedom, which I argue is more amenable to the modern world than are conservative notions of freedom. Although I will use Arendt primarily in contradistinction to Burke, Oakeshott and Kirk it is not because her thinking stands in consistent contrast to them. In fact many political theorists over the years, liberal and conservative alike have attempted to claim Arendt as their own. I believe there are compelling cases to be made on both sides, which in my mind speaks to her general appeal as a political thinker.
Arendt, Oakeshott, and Kirk all readily recognized the indeterminate nature of modernity in the 20th Century. Burke similarly viewed the rapidly changing England of late 18th early 19th Century as problematic. Arendt broke with her contemporaries, Oakeshott and Kirk, in how to go about dealing with the challenges of the modern world however; in doing so she moved even further from Burke. Arendt saw action as the political virtue par excellence. Action in Arendt‘s mind was public oriented, with concern for the political community. Furthermore, Arendtian “action” is about change that is unpredicted and unpredictable, which is anathema to the vision conservatives promote as to how to do politics or create change. Though on the surface her concern for the community falls in line with Burke, Oakeshott and Kirk, upon closer examination her action oriented approach is noticeably different.

This thesis consists of three main chapters and a concluding chapter; the three main chapters follow the same general format. The first chapter discusses the particular influence of Edmund Burke on the modern American Conservative movement. I focus on Burke‘s formal defense of tradition in his work Reflections on the Revolution in France. In addition I use scholarly articles and texts of modern conservatives lauding Burke’s arguments to show the relevance of Burke’s thought among modern American conservatives. In doing so I make the case that Burke’s defense of the role of tradition in a society is as relevant today in conservative circles as it was when he wrote Reflections at the end of the 18th Century. Throughout my presentation of Burke’s influence on the modern American conservative movement I inject Arendtian criticisms of Burke’s formal arguments, arguing against the infusion of Burkean principles into a framework of
politics in the 21st Century, and thus against the modern American conservative movement’s embrace of Burke’s notion of politics.

In Chapter Two I focus on British theorists Michael Oakeshott’s notion of political freedom. I compare and contrast it with Arendt, whose version of the political helps us better understand and critique Oakeshott’s conservative influence in thinking about freedom. My primary concern is with the way Oakeshott’s development of “civil association” has influenced the modern Conservative movement. I argue that while Oakeshott’s detailed account of the private and public spheres of society and the corresponding relationship he draws between law, tradition and freedom are an invaluable addition to the field of political theory, it lacks the richness of thought found in Arendt’s sense of individuality and plurality; a richness, which I argue ultimately helps make the case for a more “progressive republican” politics of modernity.

In Chapter Three my focus turns to the writings of Russell Kirk, in particular his seminal work *The Conservative Mind*. Here I will present Kirk’s defense of a politics informed by a “moral order”, and the dangers Arendt sees in such an approach. I will highlight the differences in Kirk and Arendt’s conception of human freedom. First, I will present Kirk’s defense of the close relationship between morality and politics. Then by offering Arendt’s counter argument in a way that brings to light certain aspects of Kirk’s defense of a politics built upon “traditional Judeo-Christian principles” I show how she offers a different recommendation for dealing with the problems posed by the loss of authority, religion and tradition in modern times.

The concluding chapter accomplishes two things. First, I connect the themes and arguments of the three chapters into a larger narrative that is characteristic of a view
prominent among today's modern American conservatives. Thus revealing the weaknesses of the arguments supporting the larger conservative narrative (which I argue renders the modern American conservative movement's view of politics incapable – in its current form – of dealing with the challenges of politics in the 21st Century). Second, I construct a different, more progressive republican politics of the 21st Century, which will in theory promote a more engaging, active, thoughtful, responsible, and transparent citizenry and government. Ultimately, my hope is to encourage the modern American conservative movement to think about politics in the 21st Century differently.

The modern world has changed the way we must think about politics. The challenges we face are in many ways unprecedented. The question remaining for the conservative is: what is to be done in light of these unprecedented circumstances? As conservative columnist David Brooks of the New York Times noted in a recent OpEd, "Burkean gradualism is fine if you've got a cold. But if you've got cancer, you want surgery, not nasal spray."\(^2\) Arendt informs us of how to go about performing the surgery when needed, but how much surgery and what kind of surgery are questions we must continually ask ourselves in order to adapt to the ever-changing realities of our modern world.

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Chapter 1

Arendt and Burke

To understand Burke’s critique of the French Revolution, it is necessary to be familiar with the ‘traditional’ history of English political life underscored throughout Reflections on the Revolution in France. According to Burke, it was when the French dismissed out of hand the traditions and religious underpinnings of government and society that the dangers of a politics of ‘romantic abstraction’ arose. In the 20th Century, political theorist Hannah Arendt was similarly concerned with a nation losing grasp of its traditions and religious underpinnings. This, in part, is why she devoted an entire book to explore just how the French and American Revolution came to be understood first as events, and secondly as the beginning of something new – politically speaking. Burke and Arendt’s concerns, though similar on the surface, are notably divergent in several ways. Before going any further two basic yet central points of departure between these thinkers will be developed. First, Burke and Arendt came to understand the intent and effect of the ‘foundational documents’ birthed from the American and French revolutions respectively, in significantly different ways. Secondly, Burke and Arendt reached demonstrably different conclusions on the particular influence

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3 Federici, Michael P. ‘Burkean Foundations’. pp 1
of ‘tradition’ and ‘religion’ during the course of the aforementioned Revolutions, and they further offered notably different prescriptions for what should constitute a proper authoritative underpinning of society. Taken together, these two points of departure between Burke and Arendt are critical for understanding not just the differences between –Burkean conservatism” and –Arendtian republicanism,” but more importantly a new vision for politics in modernity.

At the core of Burke’s thought resides an unwavering commitment to those social mores, customs, laws and traditions of a given nation, which are time-tested and said to be –proven” effective. Burke forcefully opposed radical change, particularly motivated by what he understood to be utopian conceptions or abstract formulations of social equality and good governance. If it were as simple as dismissing his arguments out of hand because he championed certain customs and traditions that we now may consider anachronistic then he most certainly would not have attracted the attention of academics and theorists over the years as he did.

Burke anticipated many of his opponents criticisms in his Reflections and in the process was very clear that he did not oppose change at all cost, in fact he embraced it when necessary; Russell Kirk gave voice to Burke’s position on this matter in saying –change is inevitable…and is designed providentially for the larger conservation of society…change is a process of renewal.”4 Or, as Robert Nisbet quotes Burke saying, –A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.”5 As the above two quotes indicate, Burke readily admitted that incremental change was a necessary component of a functioning society. However, there is a precarious element of

4 Kirk, Russell. The Conservative Mind. pp 45
5 Nisbet, Robert. Conservatism. pp 26
both Burke and Kirk’s philosophy – the challenge of knowing when to uphold and defend existing institutions (religious and governmental in particular) just because they have survived over a period of time, versus recognizing when an institution or practice is outdated and requires change. This is a vexing problem for conservative philosophy. Nonetheless, Burke remained a resolute defender, on principle, of tradition, specifically the common law tradition of England; Burkean change was therefore possible and encouraged only under the exclusive auspices of this commonly held, generationally passed down body of socio-politico-religious understanding.

In contradistinction to Burke’s focus on the importance of ‘tradition’ is Arendt’s development of ‘political action’. A prime example of her attention to political action can be found in her second major work, *The Human Condition*. In it Arendt attempts to reestablish a ‘space’ for politics that – after thoroughly examining both the ancient Greek and ‘modern’ understanding of the public and private spheres of human existence – she argues has been marginalized and devalued if not eliminated all together. Over and over again, ‘political action’ – an exclusively public human capacity and a necessary condition of ‘freedom’ – finds its way at the heart of the discussion in her writings. It is not surprising then that we find Arendt saying the following: ‘because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent altogether with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public

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6 My use of the word ‘modern’ relies on Arendt’s notion of the ‘modern world’ in contradistinction with the ‘modern age’ – which began in the seventeenth century”; when I use ‘modern’ henceforth I am referring to the historical period where politically, the modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions’ (Arendt, The Human Condition, pp 6) – in essence WWII, 1945.
realm” (emphasis added). The connection between tradition and religion and freedom as action will come into sharper focus in what follows.

To be clear, the themes of tradition, religion, and social change recur throughout both Burke and Arendt’s writings. Both make a case for the need to understand our past while at the same time warning against the abrupt detachment from the past epitomized in the loss of authority found in religion and tradition. On this account, authority is lost by virtue of losing the authoritative structures offered by religion and tradition (as opposed to a loss of authority simply because x is religious or traditional).

Burke’s formal defenses of tradition were predominantly a reaction to the events of the French Revolution as he saw them unfold. As Jerry Z. Muller in Conservatism: An Anthology has rightly observed, Reflections on the Revolution in France is a critique of the revolutionary mentality which attempts to create entirely new structures on the basis of rational, abstract principles, a mentality which Burke contrasted unfavorably to his own conception of legitimate reform as building upon existing, historical institutions.”

Even if we accept as valid all of Burke’s denouncements of the abstract principles he attributed as causes of France’s revolutionary turmoil’s, there remains a significant inadequacy in a modern Burkean appeal to solving modern socio-political problems. While in general it may be useful to approach sweeping change with Burkean caution, failing to recognize that great social and institutional change is at times warranted and beneficial – even, and perhaps especially when enacted precipitously – has proven as deleterious to a great many groups of people as upholding existing institutions for

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7 Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. pp 180
8 Muller, Jerry Z. Conservatism. pp 80
purposes of social cohesion.\textsuperscript{9} It is against this context that I submit the following: Only when an account of positive human freedom is offered, i.e. Arendtian action, can politics preserve something essential and unique to the human condition moving forward; where politics is understood to mean a global dominion in which people appear primarily as active agents \textit{who lend human affairs a permanence they otherwise do not have}\textsuperscript{10} (emphasis added). This paper explains and supports the above claim.

\section*{1.1 Foundational Documents}

At the beginning of this chapter two essential points of departure in Burke and Arendt’s philosophy were developed. The first: \textit{how Burke and Arendt came to understand the intent and effect of the foundational documents’ birthed from the American and French revolutions respectively}, I will take up in detail presently. Simply put, drafting a written constitution was a pivotal and essential foundation for America’s new republic. Obviously the actual challenge of forging an authoritative document was, even for our greatest statesmen of the time, wrought with tension, bitter disagreement, and real uncertainty. In a broader sense, Edmund Burke was concerned less (if not altogether entirely) with the physical act of ‘founding’ as a notable moment in history to be remembered as such, rather he was concerned much more with the principles upon which a nation’s foundation is built. So too was Arendt, who like Burke, was concerned with the principles which inform foundational documents, and like Burke devoted an

\textsuperscript{9} See Civil Rights, Women’s Suffrage, LGBT Equality, and Child Labor to name just a few of the countless Human Rights, and Social Justice struggles made exponentially more difficult to correct because of the institutional impediments inherent in our socio-political structure that thwart change.

\textsuperscript{10} Arendt, Hannah. \textit{The Promise of Politics}. pp 97
entire book to “Revolutions and the principles that guide them.”11 That said, Burke’s contempt of the underlying causes and impetus behind the French Revolution needed a proper historical contrast against which his arguments could find a foothold. To fully articulate criticisms of the French Revolution then, Burke set out to show how the British Revolution of 1688 – a historical occurrence familiar to his audience in England – was different from it in very fundamental ways. And this lead Burke to make the case that the consequences of toppling the monarchy in France came at a grave price; the French with one fell swoop simultaneously destroyed their government along with the customs, traditions and morality that maintained their nation’s social fabric. Contrary to what one may presume, the British after the Revolution of 1688 did not come to believe that “a popular election is the sole lawful source of authority,”12 rather, as is commonly known, they sustained the extant monarchical rule and the core of its laws and governance. This is how to read Burke (through this lens) when he distinguishes the British from the French Revolutions. Or, alternatively as Robert A. Heineman notes in his “Revolutions and the Principles that Guide them”13: “The British Revolution of 1688 had preserved the foundations of the nation; the French Revolution was in the process of destroying them.”

Arendt makes note of Burke’s correct recognition of this essential difference,14 but goes further by contextualizing the fluid historical understanding of ‘revolution’. According to Arendt, the fact that we in modern times use the term ‘revolution’ in an entirely different way than how it was understood by 18th century revolutionaries is due

11 Gottsegen, Michael G. *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. pp 119
13 Heineman, Robert A. “Edmund Burke and the American Nation”. pp 96
in large part to a historical misunderstanding of its original usage. The term ‘revolution’ originated out of the natural sciences — through Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*”, which referred to the ‘regular, lawfully revolving motion of the stars.”\(^{15}\) Arendt adds: ‘Nothing could be farther removed from the original meaning of the word ‘revolution’ than the idea…that [revolutionaries] are agents in a process which spells the definite end of an old order and brings about the birth of a new world.”\(^{16}\) Most importantly, ‘the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which to us appear to show all evidence of a new spirit, the spirit of the modern age, were intended to be restorations.’\(^{17}\) Our modern understanding of the term revolution does in fact connote something intrinsically ‘new’ and ‘radical’ about those events, which of course is drastically at odds with their pre-modern understanding. Having said that, what concerns me here is not a Marxian\(^ {18}\) understanding of the historical happenings of revolutions per se but rather ‘the foundation of freedom’\(^ {19}\) the American Revolution produced.

Connecting back to Burke, in his view then, to preserve the foundation(s) of a nation it was particularly important for a nation’s constitution to serve as the glue not only for the practices and customs of society (moral and religious traditions), but for the institutions the people formed and served as well. Put another way, Burke understood the British constitution to contain the indisputable laws, morals, customs and traditions forged by many generations; he understood liberty was not a metaphysical creation but rather a ‘prescriptive right’ *because* it was an ancient liberty. This begs the question,  

\(^{15}\) Ibid, pp 32  
\(^{16}\) Ibid  
\(^{17}\) Ibid, pp 33  
\(^{18}\) In Arendt’s final analysis of Marx, she came to find the notion of a proletarian revolution that would replace the ruling/ruled structure of the ‘state’ with the ‘administration of things’ – Marx’s politics-less, socialist ideal of a ‘stateless…final condition for humanity’ – ‘simply appalling’ (*Promise of Politics*, pp. 153)  
\(^{19}\) Ibid, pp 51
who then did Burke think was influencing or creating ideas about liberty as a metaphysical creation? The long and short answer is of course the French intellectuals like Rousseau. Yet as has been pointed out, Burke was unabashedly critical of the French intellectual movement, whose grand champion according to Burke was Rousseau. Why? Because this movement – which inspired the eventual collapse of the French monarchical government – destroyed what was known and tested, and because the metaphysical reasoning used to justify the insurrectionist behavior was, for Burke, disassociated from precisely those norms, laws and customs that held a nation together. Heineman is thus absolutely correct when he says: ―Burke‘s singular contributions to Americans…are his statements of the dangers of radical change and of the importance of protecting the traditions and institutions that constitute the vital core of nationhood.”

To be clear, and avoid overstating my point, Burke forcefully argues against scrapping traditional modes of governance in favor of the pursuit of untried and abstract conceptions of government. My interest in Burke, and undoubtedly of political theorists and the contemporary conservative movement’s interest in Burke, stems from this central theme in his work.

As basic as the concern for continuity found in traditional modes of being was for Burke, the outcome of the American Revolution which, according to Arendt ―[Burke] so enthusiastically greeted…” perhaps prevented him from recognizing the unprecedented opportunity – as a matter of course for any nation – to establish a lasting ‘authority‘ that found its authoritative source apart from what had become plain to an increasing number

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20 Heineman, Robert A. ‘Edmund Burke and the American Nation”. pp 95

21 On the other side of that same coin for Burke was an equally troubling consequence of a politics unconcerned with the past as precedence in the form of Baconian scientific naturalism. An interesting and important corollary, though it lies outside the scope of our discussion. I therefore recommend this strain of thought be undertaken for future research and discussion on this topic.

of people everywhere throughout the eighteenth century” as the —.breakdown of the old Roman trinity of religion, tradition, and authority…”23 Burke clearly understood that Nothing less than a convulsion that will shake the globe to its centre can ever restore the European nations to that liberty by which they were once so much distinguished.”24 However, he could not, as the quote clearly attests, see the way forward but through the lens of ‘restoration‘ – a return to traditional liberties embodied in the English ‘common law’. And if we consider the historical reality that —the three elements which together, in mutual accord, had ruled the secular and spiritual affairs of men since the beginnings of Roman history, political authority…depended upon tradition…and it was unable to survive the lost sanction of religion,”25 then Burke’s concerns were not without justification. What the American Revolutionaries ensured however was the legitimate foundation of political freedom specifically and intentionally on its own foundational authority. What I mean by that is, despite the dismissal of the notion of public happiness, the founding fathers were brilliantly on the mark in their understanding of their responsibility to the new nation – to create a foundation from which freedom can spring forth. Consequently, Arendt draws from the founding fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, to illustrate just how concerned they were with founding a lasting republic. Put simply, as they saw it the —ultimate aim of revolution… [was] the constitution of freedom, and…the foundation of a republic.”26 What was needed to ensure a lasting foundation was nothing less than a public agreement about the terms on which all citizens could actively participate in government. Thus the Constitution was

23 Ibid
24 Ibid
25 Ibid, pp 109
26 Ibid, pp 132
born. The Constitution of 1791 remained a piece of paper...its authority was shattered.” And to add another fatal blow, “The deputies of the French Assembly who had declared themselves a permanent body, and then, instead of taking their resolutions and deliberations back to the people, cut themselves adrift from their constituent powers...It was in this process that the act of constitution-making lost its significance.” The bottom line is, the French Revolution failed — namely in the task of foundation.

Despite the failure in establishing an authoritative foundation of government, the great tragedy of the French Revolution as Arendt saw it lay not in the initial understanding and intent of the revolution itself. In fact the American and French revolutions were similar and unremarkable in their beginnings. It was, as I laid out, the French’s failure to create a Constitution for their new republic that ultimately led to internal turmoil lasting well into the 20th Century. Robespierre, like the founding fathers, understood the —aim of constitutional government as the preservation of the republic which revolutionary government had founded for the purpose of establishing public freedom” (emphasis mine). For Arendt, one needs look no further than Robespierre’s qualification, rather his correction of that notion, in which he posits the role of constitutional government as a protector of individuals from the abuses of public power. This for Arendt clearly captures why the French (influenced greatly by Robespierre) were apprehensive about creating a constitution. —The aim of revolution was, and always has

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27 Ibid, pp 145
28 Ibid, pp 116
29 Ibid, pp 117
30 Ibid, pp 126
31 Ibid, pp 128
32 Ibid
been, [public] freedom.”

Robespierre conversely came to see a constitution as necessarily concerned with the protection of private liberty thereby diminishing the spirit of public freedom. The contrast offers insight into why the American Revolution led to a relatively stable form of governance, while the French Revolution led to the rise of an imperial and authoritarian regime.

1.1.1 The Problem of the ‘Absolute’

—. however great the good fortune of the American Revolution, it was not spared the most troublesome of all problems in revolutionary government, the problem of an absolute.”

As I have established, Burke’s principle critique of the French Revolution was that, in an attempt to quench the thirst for “public freedom”, France’s revolutionaries were dissolving “the whole fabric” of French society. In the case of the English Restoration and Revolution Burke notes that “they regenerated the deficient part of the old constitution through the parts which were not impaired. They kept these old parts exactly as they were, that the part recovered might be suited to them.”

Burke found this approach to sufficiently account for the “relative” stability and social cohesion in England up to the time he wrote. Across the Atlantic, the American Founding Fathers were engrossed in dealing with the new realities and challenges of post-revolutionary government. The ultimate challenge, in Arendt’s words: “on the actual business of revolutionary government, the foundation of a republic.”

But once the physical foundational documents were produced questions regarding its authority as a document

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33 Ibid, pp 1
34 Ibid, pp 149
35 Muller, Jerry Z. Conservatism. pp 87
36 Ibid
37 Arendt, Hannah. On Revolution. pp 132
capable of establishing freedom arose. The founders were acutely aware of this problem, and Arendt brings this problem to the forefront of her account of foundation; she examines just how a secular Constitution, wrought by *men*, can garner the requisite authority as opposed to that of divine fiat – or in the case of the French replacing the absolute monarch of the king with – Rousseau’s notion of a General Will…putting the people into the seat of the king [seeing] not only, the source and the locus of all power, but the origin of all laws as well.”38 The founders grounded the authority of the foundational documents in an „absolute“ of a different sort and in doing so lent to them the legitimacy they required. This unfortunately, while it did achieve its foremost intention – that of legitimizing the document as authoritative – evoked the concerns of those like Arendt who saw in the „self-evidential“ language („we hold these truths to be *self-evident*“) a despotic character the new republic sought to distance itself from; a problem we continue to face even today.

Bonnie Honig summarizes Arendt’s rejection of a politics of modernity that is grounded in an absolute when she states: „an absolute is illicit in politics because it is irresistible. God, self-evident truths, natural law, are all despotic in character because they are irresistible…they do not persuade to agreement….in virtue of their irresistibility that they are, for Arendt, anti-political.”39 Arendt’s fundamental point as I understand it is well justified. Having the ability to change our notions of certain ideas/ideals found in the constitution is paramount in a healthy and vibrant republic. An absolute by its very definition is unchangeable, non-negotiable, and utterly irresistible to persuasion. Even when the essence of a given absolute loses its applicability it nevertheless commands

38 Ibid, pp 147-48  
39 Honig, Bonnie. „Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic“. pp 108
blind obedience, and correspondingly it deters all notions of improving upon let alone re-inventing concepts that perhaps are built upon harmful prejudices. Honig provokes one to think, as Arendt did, of an alternative source for authority in which a republic can legitimately and continually re-constitute itself. Honig’s alternative source for authority thus centers on the “we hold” as the act that constitutes, with the implication that the truths must be "actively held" self-evident otherwise they dissolve their non-despotic quality.

The founders maintained a problematic guiding principle, namely that the essence of secular law was a command. Arendt postulates that the authority of the Constitution lies not in any appeal to a deity or “natural law”, but rather in the purely human and unique ability to exercise freedom as an end in itself, as well as understanding the political as a space where public happiness is of supreme value. Honig juxtaposes Arendtian thought on this matter with Jacque Derrida’s and in doing so brings to light Derrida’s own “amendment” of Arendt's position.

Why is this important for Arendt? Furthermore why should we as political beings concern ourselves with the ability to augment (actively engage with) the constitution? In Arendt’s view, the Constitution had given all power to the citizens, without giving them the opportunity of being republican and of acting as citizens.” What I take Arendt to be saying is that citizens have the right to revolution (given certain abuses of the government), as well as the right to certain liberties guaranteed by the

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40 Ibid
41 To elaborate on Derrida’s formulation of “intervention” is outside the scope of this paper, however I will point out that it embraces the ambivalent nature of the Declaration of Independence: recognizing the constative (statements depicting states of affairs which purport to be either true or false) character of all things foundational while at the same time, like Arendt, allowing – even encouraging – the amendment, or in Derridian terms, “intervention” of the constitution.
42 Arendt, Hannah. On Revolution. pp 253
Constitution itself. However, when there is no space for citizens to actually participate in politics (in any capacity) it deprives them of the potential to realize freedom, *positive freedom*. Without the possibility of realizing this positive freedom, the meaning of politics – as Arendt warned – would more or less be distilled down to questions on economics and the social; a perversion of politics indeed. What was necessary from the beginning and in fact remains possible today, are local governments (cities, counties and regions) taking up republican governments of their own (within the same confines of the larger Constitution) thus giving every citizen the opportunity to be an active participant in politics. This was understood by Jefferson as a “ward system” and merited worldly enactment by Arendt. More will be said on this in the next chapter.

The founding fathers of the American Revolution and the founders of the French Revolution (particularly Robespierre) clearly came to understand the reasons for revolution and the manifold meanings and results it produced in very different ways. As I detailed earlier, the French’s was a departure from the virtual agreement in terms of the aims of each revolution in the beginning. What eventually came of the American Revolution – the foundational document of the Constitution, as opposed to the Declaration of Independence – gave Arendt hope for politics in modernity, namely through amending and augmenting the U.S. Constitution. I believe her hope is well placed. All successful revolutions (a distinction unique to the American Revolution according to Arendt) must confront the traditions of the past in a way that ensures the new foundations of freedom can take hold without at once undermining the institutional and societal constructs people are familiar with.
1.2 On Religion

1.2.1 Burke on Religion

―We know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and of all comfort.‖

The profound sureness elucidated by Burke regarding all things religious leaves little to question about the integral role Burke believed religion ought to play in maintaining the social and moral order of a society. Burke's appeal to religion derives not from an apologetic defense of Christianity per se; as Clark notes in his Introduction to Reflections, Burke rarely cites Scripture but instead the Latin and Greek classics. What is clear in reading Burke however is removing religion from its traditional moorings would deleteriously affect the social and moral structure of society. In Burke's own words: ―when ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer." Burke not only believed it was irresponsible, even morally reprehensible, for citizens to willfully abdicate the practice of their religious upbringing; he took it a step further than most religious conservatives of today's order by invoking the melding of church and state as a necessary reality of a healthy society. Burke states unequivocally:

Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and

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41 Burke, Edmund. Reflections on the Revolution in France. pp 254
44 Ibid, pp 93
45 Ibid, pp 241
were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion.\textsuperscript{46}

Burke's defense of religion as an integral part of society stems from a twofold understanding of the nature of religious institutions, i.e. the Church, relative to the state (government). First, the period and place in which he wrote speaks to the relative ease with which Burke presented his defense. Burke rightly points out as much in \textit{Reflections}: "I give you opinions which have been accepted amongst us…and which are so worked into my mind, that I am unable to distinguish what I have learned from others from the results of my own meditation."\textsuperscript{47} The English didn't consider their church establishment as convenient, but as essential to their state…they consider[ed] it as the foundation of their whole constitution, with which, and with every part of which, it holds an indissoluble union."\textsuperscript{48}

Secondly, many modern conservatives, like Burke, presume the existence of the divine, arguing its active hand in not only the creation of our universe but also as sole proprietor of our civil contract embodied in the customs and laws of generations past. All are to account for their conduct in that trust to the one great master, author and founder of society,"\textsuperscript{49} furthermore a nation’s contract with its people (constitution) serves a specifically transcendent role: "each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society…sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and moral natures, each in their appointed place."\textsuperscript{50} Burke clearly had the weight of history on his side: religion has existed and flourished in most areas of the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, pp 263
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, pp 264
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, pp 257
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, pp 261
world since the dawn of civilization. As such, the laws and customs of every nation drew in large part – if not all together - from their religious beginnings, which was particularly the case in the dominantly Christian Europe.

The essentiality of religio-political existence predates the beginnings of European civil society, drawing heavily from the Roman origins of the concept; what Arendt calls the "Roman Foundation" as "religion, authority, and tradition." Here the connection between Burke and Arendt becomes more evident.

Burke saw the bedrock of civil society in religion. Thus he believed God had enacted his plan in the creation of that civil society; each member of society was according to Burke, in his "appointed place." The troubling corollary to this assertion is that only when members of a given society embrace their "place" in the social hierarchy will God bestow peace upon a nation. More specifically, to maintain any sort of congruence in the moral and social order those members of society must reverently respect the divine plan. Many religious conservatives of today’s order share these particular positions with Burke and I will show support of this in the chapter on Kirk and Arendt. Burke’s views informed Kirk who, as I will clearly demonstrate, by a large degree continues to inform the religious conservative movement in America.

1.2.1.1 Arendt on Religion

Arendt, like Burke, articulated a deep awareness and keen interest in the problems inherent in the loss of religious authority. She however offers insights that I believe are more useful and politically relevant today than did Burke in part because she recognized

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51 Arendt, Hannah. *The Promise of Politics*. pp 51
what Burke did not – namely with the arrival of the modern revolution came the necessity of making new laws and of founding a new body politic… [in which] former ‘solutions‘ (i.e. traditions) stood now revealed as facile expedients and subterfuges” (parenthetical addition mine). The American revolutionaries faced an enormous challenge, one brought to bear by the newly lost ‘sanction’ of religion – upon the secular realm”; a challenge that could not easily be solved by supplanting the traditional religious authority with a non-traditional ‘absolute sovereignty’:

Secularization, the emancipation of the secular real from the tutelage of the Church, inevitably posed the problem of how to found and constitute a new authority without which the secular realm, far from acquiring a new dignity of its own, would have lost even the derivative importance it had held under the auspices of the Church.  

At that point when the revolutions became something more than a ‘return‘ to ancient liberties, when it became the task of the revolutions to establish a new authority, unaided by custom and precedent,” there was no turning back to the old groundings. Burke abhorred this about the French Revolution, seeing in it a veritable ‘end game‘ for societies who proceed down this alien path. Yet Arendt again saw hope for this new creation that was charged with grounding itself in a legitimate authority of this world. What many like Burke – commonly neglected in the discussion of modern secularization” was the fact that separation of church and state – of an emancipation of the secular from the religious” – should have been seen not so much as a detriment to the Church, but rather generally as an emancipation of religion from the demands and burdens of the

54 Ibid, pp 151
55 Ibid, emphasis mine
Herein lies the important difference between Arendt’s and Burke’s defense of authority found in religion. As I have demonstrated, central to Burke’s views on politics resides an unwavering and reverential proclivity to tradition which serves as the ultimate guide for proper future political activity. When it came to understanding the newness of the American Revolution however, such a hard stance demonstrated an inability to deal with changing realities. In Arendt’s words:

conservatives who clung to tradition and the past as to fetishes with which to ward off the future, without understanding that the very emergence of revolution on the political scene as event or as threat had demonstrated in actual fact that this tradition had lost its anchorage, its beginning and principle, and was cut adrift.\ citation{57}

In its early manifestations the political did indeed need the church – not just religion, but also the tangible, spatial existence of religious institutions – in order to prove its higher justification and legitimation.\ citation{58} The Church also needed politics in order to assert itself on earth as the visible Church, in contrast to the invisible, whose existence, being solely a matter of faith, was entirely untouched by politics.\ citation{59} The influences of religion on the traditions of English society were so abundant and commonplace that it assumed a quasi “self-evidential quality of necessity” for those who, like Burke, sought to maintain its traditional foothold. I maintain, in the end, the Church specifically, and religion in general, profited from its separation from politics through a return to the church’s original philosophical and institutional beginnings. By that same token, I find a renewed hope for politics through a true understanding of this separation in that we can

\^56 Arendt, Hannah. \textit{On Revolution}. pp 152
\^57 Ibid, pps 153-54
\^58 Arendt, Hannah. \textit{The Promise of Politics}. pp 141
\^59 Ibid
once again think of politics as an end in itself; in an odd way “freeing” the political from
the need to appeal to a higher authority.

Burke misses what is unique about the American Revolution, part of which is its
detachment of church from state, and a grounding of the Republic in political authority as
an end in itself.

1.3 Prudence and Action: The Inherent Tension

1.3.1 Burkean Prudence

To fully appreciate Burke’s political theory generally along with the principled reason
he found such favor with Kirk in the early modern American Conservative movement
specifically, I will turn to Christopher J. Insole’s “Two Conceptions of Liberalism:
Theology, Creation, and Politics in the Thought of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke”. His
work will serve as a guide to develop Burke’s notions of prudence in politics. First,
Insole brings to light the necessary distinction one must make between the pre-modern”
natural law theology of Thomas Aquinas, which leaves room for transcendence, and
modern” conceptions of prudence, which deny transcendence.60 This is a necessary
approach according to Insole because only when we understand this distinction can we
fully understand which conception Burke aligns himself with.

60 Insole, Christopher J. “Two Conceptions of Liberalism: Theology, Creation, and Politics in the Thought
of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke”, pp 469
For Aquinas the object of practical intellect...is right action\textsuperscript{61} with the further distinction between producing and doing, where producing is an action passing into external matter, thus to build, to saw, and the like; whereas doing is an activity abiding in an agent, thus to see and the like.\textsuperscript{62} Insole continues: Art concerns producing – right judgment about things to be made\textsuperscript{63} – whereas prudence concerns correct judgment about what is to be done.\textsuperscript{63} Plainly put, prudence is oriented toward a final end; it is concerned with appetite and dispositions; it is measured to something beyond itself; and as it is concerned with contingency, it must suffer from a lack of certainty.\textsuperscript{64} Insole goes on to add: Art constructs the truth it knows, prudence reaches out to a transcendent source of truth.\textsuperscript{65} It is this crucial difference, in which Kant thinks in terms of art, and Burke thinks in terms of prudence.\textsuperscript{65} Insole once again draws upon the foundational premise of Burke's formulation when he states: Burke conceives of God as the artist...and so the final end toward which we are always stretching; we are subject to the moral law, without being its creator.\textsuperscript{66} Kant's metaphysics allows for, and in fact is predicated upon, our (collective and individual) creation of moral laws and the physical universe itself. As Insole notes: Kant can think in terms of art, because we are indeed the artists of the moral law and the physical universe, at once its creators and subjects.\textsuperscript{67}

Burke's conception of the divine's hand in the creation and sustenance of moral law has guided modern conservative thought since WWII. For the Burkean conservative this much is clear: God created the physical universe and as such human inventions,
customs, history and traditions have God's imprint etched into it all. Politics is thus an extension of God's plan.

1.3.1.1 Arendtian Freedom

Arendt's thought would reject as nothing short of being ―anti-political‖ the Burkean notion that politics is ―an extension of God's plan‖. Once again, to put her reason into its proper context I turn to a detailed account of her notion of human freedom; though never directly referencing Burke, one that is inherently critical of his view of the ―political‖.

The ancient Greeks came to reject nature on two grounds. First, the natural was equated with necessity and as a result with slavery. Secondly, as Arendt points out to think of oneself as a member of ‗humanity‘ or a certain species – — the multiplicity of men is melted into one human individual, which is then also called humanity 第 68 – is to lose an essential quality of individual identity, namely plurality. The reasons for these rejections stems primarily from the nature of democratic life in ancient Athens, and the way in which Athenians viewed the nature of freedom in general.

The private realm (associated with the household in ancient Greece) was defined by its administrative and often violent realities. In distinct contrast, only in the public realm of Athenian life could citizens (heads of households) go to exercise their political freedom. In the public realm the citizen was an equal; free from the necessity‘s that consumed private life. He could share his opinions and participate in a collective dialogue with his peers. To be an active participant in the agora was the Athenian honor

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68 Arendt, Hannah. *The Promise of Politics*. pp 95
par excellence. In addition, Athenians depended on the active engagement of its citizens.

Central to Arendt’s development of action is the ancient Athenian divide between the public and private. In public, men could make themselves known through speech by constructively adding to the moral, ethical and social debates of the day. The household existed insofar as it managed the necessities of life by allowing for citizens to practice politics – the space of human interaction that takes places solely between men⁶⁹ – uninhibited.

What we today experience as the political is drastically different from the earlier depiction. Most discussions of freedom in modernity centralize around the notion of negative freedom; the idea we are guaranteed not to have our rights and liberties infringed upon, with the corollary being we are ‘free’ to not participate in politics at all if we so choose. This notion of freedom is not true freedom according to Arendt; true freedom is positive freedom. As I just pointed out, positive freedom is not freedom from something which stifles individual action but rather it is, at its core, something which is manifest only within the confines of certain social constructs, e.g. the agora. Personal freedom is made possible only when an individual is willing to forfeit their negative liberties by going out into the realm of appearance, in public. In today’s world we often concern ourselves with individual pursuits, and while this is necessary it often comes at the expense of civic, public participation. It is vital for this discussion to appreciate the significance of this modern reality and it is imperative to understand Arendt’s appeal to return to civic engagement whereby the interests of individual pursuits are in keeping with those interests of the political community in general.

⁶⁹ Ibid
For civic engagement to have any possibility in reality it is necessary for the *demos* to contain persons possessing differing viewpoints. Put another way, democratic politics must at its core be comprised of a plurality of individuals. Differing opinions are shared through dialogue in the full transparency of the public domain. This does not preclude general consensus nor does it mean open dialogue will lead to an ideal compromise or pacification of opposing views. Of course, this assumes that politics as action is a predictable process, one where clearly defined outcomes are the natural result of the debate process. Arendt rejects this notion of politics in part because the goal of political action is not and should not be seen as a means to an end. Politics understood as nothing more than a means to some other end, even if that end is freedom, gravely confuses the proper aim of *revolution* (the establishment of political freedom) with what politics should mean if it were to have any meaning at all, namely the active participation in government (government here understood in a broad way). Understood in this way, political action entails conflict and as a result must necessarily be given a space to civilly and respectfully produce the unpredictable consequences of its undertaking. And just as politics should not be seen as a means to an end, in no way is politics, for Arendt, merely an extension of a Burkean divine plan.

In sum, there exists a tension between Arendtian action and Burkean prudence even though both Arendt and Burke see a grave loss in the detachment from traditional moorings. Tradition assumes a collective knowledge regarding institutions and individuals as “actors” using this cumulative knowledge as a guide for future progress, which is at odds with the spontaneous and indeterminable nature of action per se. Burke’s defense of English tradition and formal religion does not formally address the
development of 'positive freedom' that we find in Arendt. Action as understood by Arendt, can, and in fact may just be the only way possible to produce the changes in society Burke sees as necessary and healthy. Furthermore, preserving those spaces where freedom can be realized may well be the only reliable hope for a given society to bring to bear an account of those things in need of expedited change; a reality faced with much more regularity in the modern technological age. Whether we can find hope in the modern technical age or not will be explored in the next chapter on Arendt and Oakeshott.
Chapter 2

Arendt and Oakeshott

In this chapter I explore in greater depth Arendt’s notion of political freedom as action in comparison and contradistinction with Michael Oakeshott’s theory of freedom as civil association. Michael Oakeshott’s relevance to the modern American Conservative movement lies in his unwavering defense of individuality and community found in his earlier works, particularly when civil association is defined by the acknowledgment on the part of its members (or cives) of the moral conditions to be subscribed to in their conduct,”70 or ”properly speaking”, as Boyd adds in Oakeshott’s own words: [civil association] is not concerned with the satisfaction of wants and with substantive outcomes but with the terms upon which the satisfaction of wants may be sought.”71 In brief, Oakeshott repeatedly stressed the importance of creating those conditions which fostered organic association, and recognizing that, to use Boyd once again: Making room for individuals to form voluntary groups is one of the primary motivations behind Oakeshott’s insistence that we come to such a strict understanding of

71 Ibid
the nature of civil association.”

Oakeshott, like most conservative thinkers, focused primarily on the institutions rather than individuals...because conservatives assume that it is the functioning of institutions upon which the well-being of individuals ultimately depends.” This should not be confused with Lockean ‗individualism‘ or government imposed ‗collectivism‘ for Oakeshott vehemently opposed such notions. Not only are these misguided ideologies according to Oakeshott, but he also believes they inevitably damage the social makeup of a given community, because as he says: "the office of government is not to impose other beliefs and activities upon its subjects...the office of government is merely to rule." Arendt is similarly pro-communitarian, albeit her understanding of political freedom and the meaning of politics is different – though not un-related with respect to the belief that politics per se should not be understood as a means to some specific end – than Oakeshott’s development of the two (political freedom and the meaning of politics). Their connection to each other and to the American conservative movement will be developed in what follows.

Of the many political topics Michael Oakeshott concerned himself with during his lifetime few took center stage as often and forcefully as did his attention to authority, the rule of law and human freedom. Therefore, I will spend some time addressing their respective notions of political freedom; in particular how Oakeshott understands the relationship between authority, law and freedom and the ways in which it resembles (and differs from) the Burkean conservatism I laid out in Chapter One. In the end, Oakeshott’s influence – albeit an often overlooked one – on the modern American

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72 Ibid, pp 606
73 Muller, Jerry Z. Conservatism, pp 17
74 This is an allusion to the classically understood notion of individualism where the interest and advocacy of individual rights, liberties and goals are touted over the interests of the community at large.
75 Oakeshott, Michael. Rationalism in Politics. On Being Conservative”. pp 186-87
Conservative Movement will become more evident. I will draw primarily from several scholarly articles on Oakeshott along with Oakeshott’s work *On Human Conduct*. Arendt’s *The Human Condition* will once again be used as a primary reference for her positions and ideas concerning “freedom” and civil association. In my examination of Oakeshott’s influence on the American conservative movement it will also become clearer how Arendt’s version of the political is helpful in critiquing this movement.

### 2.1 Arendtian Freedom: A Closer Examination

It is tempting to approach Arendt’s development of human “freedom as action” and derive from it a general “theory” of action where we might then turn to “understand the present and future simply through extrapolation from the past”, though doing so – in a book review of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s *Why Arendt Matters*, Philip Walsh rightly adds – “involves a fundamental misunderstanding of the character of [Arendtian] action.”76 And this caution is similar to the one given by Oakeshott in his essay “On Being Conservative” where at the onset he advises his reader against transposing the design of his arguments “into the idiom of general principles.”77 I bring this to light at the beginning of a closer look at “Arendtian freedom” for this reason: before moving forward one must recognize that both thinkers (Arendt and Oakeshott) as republican thinkers shared a deep concern with respect to the “meaning” of our history and traditions (see Arendt’s *The Promise of Politics* and Oakeshott’s *On History* in particular).

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Juxtaposing, then, Arendt and Oakeshott’s development of human freedom (as ‘action’ and ‘civil association’ respectively) will better serve my effort to flesh out those similarities and differences between the two thinkers as it relates to conceptualizing a more progressive republican notion of human freedom. I begin with a close examination of the arguments presented in Arendt’s seminal work on human freedom – *The Human Condition*.

In the first chapter of this essay I discussed Arendtian freedom and established that her notion of human freedom was a ‘positive‘ freedom, I noted: ‘personal freedom is made possible only when an individual is willing to forfeit their negative liberties by going out into the realm of appearance, in public.’ A quick refresher in how I arrived here is in order. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt is primarily concerned with recapturing a space for politics in which human beings are indisputably distinct from animals; a space that, for Arendt, constitutes the most meaningful realm of human existence. In this space (most closely related to the *polis* in ancient Greek philosophic understanding), *men* (only those men who were land owning persons born in Athens and therefore citizens) actualize freedom. It is necessary – for our discussion of the meaning of politics in modernity general speaking, and in particular what constitutes ‘politics’ per se for Arendt – to be very clear about Arendt’s notion of freedom, for the two (politics and freedom) are interrelated. Arendtian ‘freedom’ can most adequately be understood as action, though not action as it is understood in ‘the modern age’.

On her account, action can only take place in the public sphere where men are unburdened by the necessities of life. Ultimately it will be clear in this chapter that true Arendtian ‘freedom as action’ is shared *between* people in public, in her own words: ‘Action, the only

78 See my first chapter, specifically the section titled ‘Arendtian Freedom’
activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality…this plurality is specifically the condition…of all political life.”79 This understanding of human freedom — intrinsically tied to the existence of a public sphere where freedom can manifest itself – is at the heart of her work.

A modern definition of what it means to be human includes the base, animalistic character traits – or ‘forces’ more appropriately termed – which include among others hunger, sexual drive, and the fight for survival. If ‘life” is understood in its most basic form as just described to mean doing what it takes to simply maintain existence, i.e. survive, then anything done by human beings that simply maintains life is not unique and hence does not distinguish us from animals. Put simply, human beings living according to their basic needs (in this manner) are no different than the rest of the animal kingdom and, more importantly, no different from one another. Hunger and thirst are not different for two different individuals. In other words, the general sensation one feels when deprived of food or water for extended periods of time is for all intents and purposes the same in every human being. The biological response my body undergoes is effectively the same as it would be for every other person experiencing a similar withdrawal; such is the case of procreation and ‘fight for survival’ as well. For it is only with this understanding in mind that Arendt is able to speak of our essential –sameness” (to each other as humans and the rest of the animal kingdom) before establishing how we distinguish ourselves first from the rest of the animal kingdom, and more importantly, from other human beings.

Generally speaking, one does not say that animals are "free", either free to act or free from forces preventing action. Animals simply do what is necessary to maintain life. Their existence is predicated on satiating the innate pangs of hunger, thirst, and procreation in a similar manner to human beings. In fulfilling those very same base needs human beings are not distinct from animals. Thus, for Arendt, to say one is acting "freely" in attaining those same needs is a contradiction in terms. She says:

“The distinction between man and animal runs right through the human species itself: only the best (aristot), who constantly prove themselves to be the best (aristueuin, a verb for which there is no equivalent in any other language) and who 'prefer immortal fame to mortal things,' are really human; the others, content with whatever pleasures nature will yield them, live and die like animals”.

Similarly, and perhaps more germane to our discussion, the fact a lion in the wild has the ability to move about without restriction across the plains of Africa in search for food highlights the need to understand "freedom" in a different manner than just "having the ability to move about without restriction”.

What does separate us from animals is our plurality. Inherent in Arendt’s notion of plurality is the realization that we as human beings are related in our distinctness. For if we were genuinely content with whatever pleasure nature presented us we would have no need to appear in public. Since this is not the case, the fact that we can and do appear in public as distinct, unique individuals stems from the twofold character of human plurality, namely equality and distinction. Without this twofold character, Arendtian
politics would be incoherent: for the world of appearances is predicated on the ability for individuals to enter into the public realm as equals, and interact as such.

―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.‖

Arendt begins by using the term *vita activa* to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action.\(^8^2\) When humans labor we are simply meeting the basest needs of our existence. As I mentioned above, this does not distinguish us from other animals so labor is relegated to the lowest level of activities. The ancient Greeks understood labor in this manner and as a consequence labor was performed primarily by slaves in order for heads of households in ancient Greece to participate in political life. ―Work‖ is something entirely human because it fabricates nature, transforming nature to fit the needs of human activity in the world. In this way only *homo faber* conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth.\(^8^4\) This is a step above mere labor, though it is not a fully free enterprise. Work is still tied to necessity (which by definition is *not* free) because it is a means to an end (a determined end whether in a piece of art or a house), or as Arendt says: ―the process of making is itself entirely determined by the categories of means and end. The fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it…and that it is only a means to produce this end.‖\(^8^5\) An important differentiation between the two is unlike labor, work is at the very least ―unpolitical‖ (as opposed to labor which is ―anti-political‖) because the products of work are ―connected with [the] space of

\(^{8^2}\) Ibid, pp 176  
\(^{8^3}\) Ibid, pp 7  
\(^{8^4}\) Ibid, pp 139  
\(^{8^5}\) Ibid, pp 143
appearances…it remains related to the tangible world of things it produced."\textsuperscript{86} I emphasis ‘world’ here because, as Arendt goes on to explain, labor is ‘anti-political’ precisely because in the case of laboring man is neither together with the world nor with other people, but alone with his body, facing the naked necessity to keep himself alive.”\textsuperscript{87} Action, the third distinction of the \textit{vita activa} — though it may have a definite beginning, never…has a predictable end.”\textsuperscript{88} Through action, and only action, human beings are fully free – the subject of the next section.

2.1.1 Freedom as Action

Arendt’s formulation of freedom as action elevates the public over the private and the potentiality of a great deed over the possible negative consequences of said action. Crudely articulated, I as a human being come out of the comfort of my private realm of existence and enter the world of men; what Aristotle defined as the \textit{polis}.\textsuperscript{89} I offer myself to others, to be challenged, critiqued, embraced, or glorified. In this exposing of the self one is ‘free”. The self is no longer bound to the necessities of human existence. Something unbounded, utterly unique and unpredictable can actualize between men; hence we can conclude from Arendt’s formulation of action that freedom is interchangeable with action. Michael G. Gottsegen notes Arendt’s observation: in her own words, ‘the actor…acts into a web of other actors who act and react as well. The actor is not sovereign because those with whom he interacts are equally capable of

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, pp 212  
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid  
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, pp 144  
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, pps 194-95
action."\textsuperscript{90} Gottsegen goes on to add: \textit{man is free, but he is not sovereign…it is man’s lack of sovereignty and the consequent fact that he is an actor among actors that renders action heroic.}\textsuperscript{91} Through actions, men’s interaction with one another, Arendt attempts to seize upon the courageous nature of action, though it bears repeating only when the necessities of life are taken care of can men \textit{act‘}. Action can only take place between people in public, through speech, and as such, action is unique to human beings.

2.1.1.1 A Bit More On Speech

\textit{...the raison d’être of public words and deeds is self-disclosure, the disclosure of one’s unique humanitas to others in a plural, political context.}\textsuperscript{92} This characterization by Mark Button in \textit{Arendt, Rawls, and Public Reason”} largely captures the essence of what Arendt means when she says that \textit{speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals}\textsuperscript{93} (emphasis mine). And so, given that Arendt’s conception of human freedom is intrinsically bound to \textit{action‘}, (for all intents and purposes interchangeable conceptions \textit{politically speaking”}) \textit{speech‘} thus becomes the vehicle through which \textit{action‘} (in an Arendtian sense) finds its political meaning. The implications for action become clear: \textit{speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words.”}\textsuperscript{94} In the short analysis, the ability of

\textsuperscript{90} Gottsegen, Michael G. \textit{The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt}. pp 28  
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid, pp 29  
\textsuperscript{92} Button, Mark. \textit{Arendt, Rawls, and Public Reason”}. pp 268  
\textsuperscript{93} Arendt, Hannah. \textit{The Human Condition}. pp 178  
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, pp 178-79
human beings to engage one another in public through ‘speech’, in Arendt’s own words, single(s) out speech as the decisive distinction between human and animal life.”

Moreover, and perhaps more germane to the present discussion it’s only through ‘speech’ and ‘action’ that men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua man.” And yet despite ‘speech’ being the only activity in which, according to Arendt, we are truly human, the act of full disclosure – to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own” – as we shall see below, requires an indefinable amount of ‘original courage’ on the part of the ‘actor’ (without which the ‘human world’ would cease to exist).

Inherent in action is the indefinable and immeasurable amount of risk assumed by the actor. What I mean by that is, when one presents himself to others it takes an indefinable amount of courage, as I alluded to above, because according to Arendt, men never have been and never will be able to undo or even to control reliably any of the processes they start through action.” Furthermore:

“Whoever entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life, and too great a love for life obstructed freedom, was a sure sign of slavishness. Courage [emphasis added] therefore became the political virtue par excellence, and only those men who possessed it could be admitted to a fellowship that was political in content and purpose and thereby transcended the mere togetherness imposed on all…through the urgencies of life.”

95 Ibid, pp 205
96 Ibid, pp 176
97 Ibid
98 Ibid, pp 186
99 Section 26 of the Chapter on _Action_ in The Human Condition is appropriately titled “The Frailty of Human Affairs”.
100 Ibid, pp 222-23
101 Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. pp 36
This, on the face of it, is a seemingly impossible responsibility to bear and hence necessitates a courageous actor. If action is as unpredictable, because of its miraculous quality, as Arendt proposes, what is to be done if action produces a negative or unfavorable outcome?

Arendt does in fact propose a way to deal with the potential negative consequences of action in the uniquely human capacity to promise and forgive. At first glance this seems wholly inadequate to deal with the consequential magnitude of action, which Arendt recognizes: “forgiveness attempts the seemingly impossible, to undo what has been done, and that it succeeds in making a new beginning where beginnings seemed to have become no longer possible.” But is Arendt over-reaching in holding to, in Gottsegen’s words, an “over-extreme sense of life’s radical contingency”? In response to the challenge regarding the unfavorable outcome of action Arendt offers these words:

“The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises.”

This is an important qualification, for it ensures that actions create relationships unhindered by an end in mind, or as Arendt says: Motives and aims, no matter how pure or how grandiose, are never unique…greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its

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102 Ibid, pp 178
103 Arendt, Hannah. The Promise of Politics. pp 58. (Emphasis mine)
104 Gottsegen, Michael G. The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt. pp 29
105 Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. pp 237
achievement.” To forgive is an absolutely essential element of Arendt’s formulation and I believe sufficiently deals with the unpredictability of action. It does so precisely because Arendt effectively demonstrates the political value – forgiveness – as properly tending to the constitution of a political community that is maximally conducive to the continuous effusion of political action presupposed in *The Human Condition* specifically.

Does forgiveness adequately deal with action’s negative outcomes? Moreover, does an inability to definitively predict the outcomes of an action alleviate the actor from bearing responsibility? Max Weber described the dilemma of political action within a larger framework of an –ethics of ultimate ends” and an –ethics of responsibility”. The two, according to Weber, are –irreconcilably opposed maxims.” The former defers ultimate responsibility of an actor, who despite the noblest of intentions, can forever find justification for a negative outcome in the –stupidity of men” or by claiming the outcome was a result of –God’s will.” Weber is quick to note however, that an –ethics of ultimate ends” is not an ethics of irresponsibility per se, though there exists an –abyssmal contrast between conduct” of the former and that of an –ethics of responsibility”. The simple reason being, an –ethics of responsibility” must –give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s action” and as such accepts the consequences of a negative outcome. I believe Weber’s –ethics of responsibility” closely aligns with the faculty of promising and forgiving in Arendt’s philosophy. Forgiveness attempts to undo something in the past by acting –new and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked

106 Ibid, pp 206
107 Gottsegen, Michael G. *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. pp 59
108 Weber, Max. –Politics as a Vocation”. pp 23
109 Ibid
110 Ibid
it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who
is forgiven.” 111 The only way then that forgiveness becomes a beneficial alternative to
the more natural human desire to seek vengeance when harmed is in the faculty to
promise. Promising recognizes the unpredictable nature of action, but despite this
recognition attempts to give a Weberian _account of the foreseeable results of one’s
action’; placing the burden of potential negative outcomes on the one performing the act.
Both forgiveness and promising assume the fallibility of man, yet do not as a result
abdicate responsibility for the negative consequences of action. An _ethics of ultimate
ends” on the other hand does just that; this ethic is anathema to Arendt’s notion of
political freedom as action.

A complete understanding of Arendt’s development of political action ultimately
must reside within the context of her private/public distinction. What is done in the
privacy of one’s home can hardly be seen as _acting” because it lacks others to provide
meaning to our action. One’s spouse and children, by virtue of their contributions to the
life of labor and work, cannot then be considered candidates for mutual _free’ public
discourse. This, as has been demonstrated by Arendt, can only happen between people
outside of the home in a _space’ where each actor has the ability to speak and act in such
a way their actions can be remembered, glorified, emulated, dismissed, or forgotten, and
given the ability to then forgive and be forgiven after said act. _The art of politics
teaches men how to bring forth what is great and radiant…as long as the polis is there to
inspire men to dare the extraordinary, all things are safe; if it perishes, everything is
lost.” 112

111 Arendt, Hannah. _The Human Condition_. pp 241
112 Arendt, Hannah. _The Human Condition_. pp 206
Freedom as action ought to be the apex of the human condition because it lends permanence to human existence that cannot be attained through labor or work. Actions—despite their material futility, possess an enduring quality of their own because they create their own remembrance.” Labor and work produce inevitably fleeting products. Action, as long as men exercise this freedom, can become immortalized through story, or even immortalized by the enduring legacy of one said action whose repercussions are felt in the world for generations to come. Arendt’s understanding of human freedom stemmed from the ancient Greek practice, where only in the public realm could Athenians escape from or be separated from the necessities of the household (private). Athens depended upon this distinction; the city counted on a lively and active participation from its citizenry (be they at that time only ‘free‘ men). To act in public amongst one’s peers is freedom and this was the honor of the Athenian citizen par excellence.

Michael Oakeshott does not see political action in these terms. His understanding of action, or ‘human conduct’ as he terms it, comes from a Roman understanding of civil association. In what follows I draw on certain aspects of Oakeshott’s development of human conduct and civil association to establish whether they align with or challenge the account of Arendtian action and public nature of freedom detailed earlier, and to show that Oakeshott’s notion of ‘civil association‘ as human freedom has played a bigger role in influencing modern American conservative conceptions of freedom than is readily acknowledged by conservative scholars.

113 Ibid, pp 208
2.2 Liberty and Civil Association

As David Boucher notes, Michael Oakeshott was averse to attaching labels to himself, implicitly on the grounds that the current vocabulary of politics had become debased, and that categories such as left and right, liberal and conservative, totalitarianism and equality had degenerated into an "artless muddle." Boucher goes on to add: "If we wish to attach any label to Oakeshott at all...he is best characterized as a republican." I believe he should be seen as a conservative republican: a republican in the Roman sense, for the reasons justly articulated by Boucher and a conservative for his views on 'tradition' and 'community'. In fact, and it is worth noting here, all of the thinkers I have discussed thus far are 'republicans' in the sense that the community is the key to politics rather than individual desiring, willing, or having capability. Yet because Arendt's sense of individuality and plurality is richer, in my view, than any 'modern' liberal notions, she is in a better position to offer something constructive to our modern understanding of politics, chiefly through her notion of political freedom, action and speech as 'self-disclosure'. That being said, I will compare and contrast Oakeshott with Arendt to build a case for a more progressive republican politics that can thrive in modernity.

Michael Oakeshott's often overlooked, though important influence on the Modern American Conservative movement stems primarily from his understanding of human

114 Boucher, David. "Oakeshott, Freedom and Republicanism". pp 81
115 Ibid
116 Ibid
117 Mark Button on pp 269 of his essay "Arendt, Rawls, and Public Reason" makes the point that it is difficult, if not altogether impossible to reconcile certain central elements of Arendt's notion of action with modern liberal theories of public discourse. Or in Button's own words: "The revelatory, nonsovereign, and tragic dimensions of the self and political action may simply be taken as an instance of Arendt's irreducible difference from liberalism. And that, of course, would be right, as numerous scholars have shown."
freedom through civil association. In brief, Oakeshott believed there was an intrinsic freedom in the human condition, rather in human agency specifically. What he meant by this was simply that whenever a human being chooses between a set of contingencies she is doing so —freely”. The choices we make are not arbitrary; on the contrary they display our intelligence, for the decision making process which informs action requires a certain level of understanding of the world. For Oakeshott, like Burke, this ‘understanding’ is not an a priori knowledge of human conduct, rather it is the result of (or accumulation of) a wealth of moral principles passed down through the generations.

Oakeshott specifies what he means by ‘the freedom inherent in agency,’ when he writes: ‘The starting-place of doing is a state of reflective consciousness, namely, the agent’s own understanding of his situation, what it means to him…and in this respect…the agent in conduct may be said to be free.’¹¹⁸ This too, as J.R. Archer notes, is directly associated and affected by tradition, i.e. what is already known to the given individual: ‘Individuals react intelligently to the world as they (subjectively) understand it, but are limited by established practices (especially moral practices).’¹¹⁹

As simple as this may seem to grasp on the surface, Oakeshottian ‘freedom’ as non-domination is particularly dense and difficult to come to terms with. Several commentators on Oakeshott’s On Human Conduct criticized his development of ‘freedom’ as unconvincing and even confused.¹²⁰ I think Efraim Podoksik in ‘Oakeshott’s Theory of Freedom as Recognized Contingency” however, does a good job

¹¹⁸ Oakeshott, Michael. On Human Conduct. pp 37
¹¹⁹ Archer, J.R. ‘Oakeshott on Politics”. pps 159-60: for more on the importance of ‘tradition’ in the conservative framework see my first chapter on Burke and Arendt.
¹²⁰ See for example John Liddington’s ‘Oakeshott: Freedom in a Modern European State” (1984). Others like Richard Boyd note that ‘Oakeshott’s unwillingness (for better or worse) to entertain a more substantive understanding of freedom is that he apparently overlooks the fact that the right to exit (and the correlative freedom of association) are necessary but insufficient conditions for getting individuals out of groups of which they disapprove” (Boyd, pp 609).
answering such claims. As Podoksik argues, a coherent account of Oakeshottian freedom must stem from an interpretation of his work for he made no attempt to qualify it in response to criticism. Podoksik recognizes that what Oakeshott means concerning non-domination is when an individual lacks the ability to choose a particular action from a set of possible actions because of another person’s arbitrary force of will, she is de-humanized. In addition, depriving someone the ability to act imposes a strong form of psychological terror on that person so deprived. Boucher makes a similar argument: “Oakeshott recognized in his own terms that the Romans were not taking freedom to be the absence of constraints; it was certainly the absence of dominium which is an arbitrary constraint.” This is the portion of his development with regards to ‘non-domination’ and freedom which is rather uncontroversial. However, the distinction between constraints (to be addressed presently) and dominium (as was just defined) is critical to understanding the fundamental difference not only between Oakeshott and Arendt, but more importantly it is necessary for Conservatism to maintain an understanding of this distinction if is to remain intelligible as a movement going forward.

“To recognize a rule as a rule is not to recognize it in terms of approval or disapproval; a rule does not cease to be obligatory simply because we do not approve of it...to recognize a rule as a rule is to recognize it in terms of its authority, and to recognize subscription to it as an obligation.” Franco’s concise clarification of ‘authority’ in Oakeshottian terms highlights a similar qualification that must be made regarding ‘constraint’ and ‘domination’, for the following related reason. Laws are inherently constraining, and as was just pointed out the Romans understood and accepted

121 Podoksik, Efraim. “Oakeshott’s Theory of Freedom as Recognized Contingency”. pp 58
122 Boucher, David. “Oakeshott, Freedom and Republicanism”. pp 89
123 Franco, pp 157
this truth. The rule of law at its basest level exists simply to prohibit and limit certain actions in observance of the general welfare of specific individuals and society at large: it protects us from ourselves as much as it protects us from others. We have laws though, and agree to live in a particular community, because we subscribe (at least implicitly and tacitly by virtue of our taking residence) to the notion that the law applies to all members of a community. Again, as Oakeshott makes abundantly clear this is not the same as saying a law is just or unjust. To take up the question of justice is an altogether different task and outside the scope of this paper. There is a very important connection – the most obvious connection perhaps – between Arendt and Oakeshott on the role of laws in the context of politics that must be made here. When Arendt speaks of laws and ‘political space’ her references (in my view) are notably similar to Oakeshott’s. The creation of laws is not an attempt to define a specific purpose or direction for society at large, but rather only the necessary ‘boundaries…which protect and make possible” the ‘political existence” of the polis. And in this respect Oakeshott would agree.

However, when Oakeshott speaks of ‘liberty’ he is doing so within the context of a Roman understanding of the term, as opposed to the ancient Greek notion – contra Arendt. As a result, Boucher qualifies Oakeshott’s formulation as a ‘Roman form of republicanism exemplified by Cicero, in which freedom is equated with the rule of law.’ For Oakeshott however, laws qua the underpinnings of freedom in civil society are comprised of much more than simply the written constitution of a given nation. If this sounds familiar, that is because the Burkean conservatism I described in Chapter One

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124 See Arendt’s The Human Condition, pp 191. It was, according to Arendt, the polis’ attempt to deal with the boundlessness and unpredictability of action.
125 Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. pp 191
126 Boucher, David. ‘Oakeshott, Freedom and Republicanism”. pp 81
runs right through this particular thread of Oakeshott’s philosophy. Common law and moral law are for Oakeshott more important to the health of a nation than a formal, written constitution. Put another way, the customary moral and common laws practiced over a period of time – handed down generation to generation – are the glue holding the citizenry together. These are the time tested mores, and customs which a people of a given land consent to by way of being a citizen. Consequently, any changes to the law should be incremental, over a period of time to avoid running the risk of disrupting the quality of life individuals in said community are accustomed to.

If we look to the recent past, here in the United States we find examples where the pace of social change that is driven by and responded to by laws has taken a significant amount of time. Changing traffic laws, though they may require some time for people to adjust to them, do not fundamentally challenge a particular social mores or deeply help personal/group philosophy. On the other hand, more inchoate habit and tradition challenged by, for example, the Civil Rights Movements required more time than those movements were ultimately willing to tolerate. The laws imposed upon those habituated to racist ways of life in many instances undermined those people's willingness to obey – their obligations to obey authority – and therefore perhaps did more damage than good immediately after the laws were initially imposed.127

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127 The timing of political change, according to Oakeshott and Burke, is clearly subjective. And in the case of the civil rights movement specifically the fact that “full equality” was gained by African-Americans after some 30 to 40 years of legal victories (culminating with the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964) does not change the fact that the Civil Rights Movement was socially disruptive. Furthermore, simply because the CRM took shape after African-Americans suffered a few hundred years of abject inequality does not, according to Oakeshott and Burke, then necessarily justify rapid overhaul or change of the status quo; the result of rapid change, so the conservative argues, inevitably results in significant adverse and unpredictable social consequences. What this line of argumentation fails to recognize, however, is nothing of significance was changing (social mores, customs, or laws) until it was “forced” by those activist taking to the streets saying in effect – enough is enough.
Still, contrast Oakeshott’s view of individual freedom with that of Arendt’s and on the surface one is confronted with what looks like an impasse between the Roman, authority based understanding of freedom in Oakeshott and the Greek, public notion of freedom in Arendt. This impasse can be overcome however as evidenced by this quote from Boucher: —. it is a mistake, Viroli argues, to consider republicanism as a form of anti-individualism. Republicanism’s emphasis upon common liberty as the highest good is the most effective way to safeguard individual liberty”128 (emphasis mine). Boucher here is drawing from Maurizio Viroli’s suggestion that republicanism is not a purely self-indulgent enterprise, and in fact is not wholly understood nor functional (practically speaking) without recognizing the importance of a common, rather a communal liberty.129 For my purposes then, Viroli articulates quite nicely the notion of liberty both Arendt and Oakeshott espouse – that of a liberty sustained between citizens in public via a communal effort to preserve a particular form of individual freedom. For Oakeshott the community (comprised of individual actors seeking their own interests) acts as the guarantor of individual liberty, while for Arendt the public space in a community is a necessary place which guarantees (through active participation/performance) an individual’s freedom. In both instances, the public interest plays a vital role in guaranteeing – even making possible – an individual’s liberty. This particular commonality is, as I mentioned, a necessary reality Conservatism must once again subscribe to if it is to remain intelligible as a movement going forward.

128 Boucher, David. “Oakeshott, Freedom and Republicanism”. pp 84
129 See Maurizio Viroli’s Republicanism. (2002)
The conservative ‘mood’ places a high premium on things as they are and yet with an Oakeshottian understanding of freedom the grounds for an Arendtian notion of freedom is laid. The civil condition…is not a relationship in terms of any common purpose. Similarly, the politician and the conservative are identified by Oakeshott as men who reject the pursuit of premeditated goals. The Oakeshottian and Arendtian actor recognizes that a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act is the critical factor in a proper understanding of political freedom.

In the next chapter I will explore whether Russell Kirk shares this understanding of political freedom, in addition I will look at the particular part of Kirk’s philosophy that has profoundly influenced the modern Conservative movement over the past several decades, namely Judeo-Christian morality.

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130 Archer, J.R. ‘Oakeshott on Politics’. pp 155
132 Archer, J.R. ‘Oakeshott on Politics’. pp 155
133 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. pp 244
134 ‘Christian morality’ used henceforth refers to the type of morality espoused by Kirk in his *Conservative Mind*; I will elaborate on some of the general and specific elements of Kirkian Christian morality in the next chapter. Presently though, by using the term ‘Christian morality’ I am not ignoring nor glossing over the many nuances and disagreements on social, moral and political issues between the various denominations within Christianity itself. Moreover, reducing the moral precepts into a clear, well-defined, and incontestable set of principles is (understandably) problematic. Attempts of this sort are made however – most prominently by contemporary Evangelical Christians, who in effect claim to define their notion of Christian morality as the Christian morality – despite the very real inter and intra-denominational disagreements I just alluded to. A Kirkian understanding of Christian morality” has at its core edicts and laws – moral codes of conduct, e.g. “The Ten Commandments” – that are indisputable, and beyond argument because they were dictated to humans from a supernatural lawgiver (God). Even still, within the Christian moral tradition there are varying points of emphasis: Catholics emphasize good works; Lutherans, good faith; and Calvinist, good grace. Not to mention the differing emphases amongst Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicans, Protestants, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Seventh Day Adventists. Furthermore, Christians are divided on other contemporary fundamental moral and political issues such as homosexuality and gay marriage. That said, my understanding of the Christian moral tradition (what I refer to specifically as Christian morality”) derives from a Kirkian understanding; a particular type of morality I enunciated above, which despite specific inter-denominational disagreements, draws as its source from the writings of The Bible and the works of prominent classical Christian apologists, e.g. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine among others – to argue for a fixed and immutable moral code that orders and guides our institutions and societal interactions.
Chapter Three

Arendt and Kirk

To understand Russell Kirk’s defense of conservatism, it is first necessary to be familiar with the historical period in which he wrote his seminal work, *The Conservative Mind*. In large part, the modern American conservative movement was a repudiation of the legislative and social programs established under Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration. In the post WWII decade of the 1950’s, Kirk’s *Conservative Mind* provided the unifying voice for those who claimed America was a morally and socially decaying republic as a result of the programs adopted under FDR’s presidency. Kirk provided the intellectual arguments for conservatism and did so in two important ways: appealing to an American intellectual tradition through the likes of John Adams and Alex de Tocqueville\(^ {135} \) (among others), while simultaneously rooting its ideals in Judeo-Christian morality. This dual effort gave the movement intellectual heft and a politico-religious attractiveness that many who shared his worldview found appealing.

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\(^ {135} \) By that I mean Adams, as an American Revolutionary hero to be sure, was an important reference because he exemplified the “conservative” disposition that – despite what many may now consider looking back to be a rebellious, anti-establishment attitude by the “founding fathers” – “declared”, as Kirk notes, “that freedom can be achieved and retained only by sober men who take humanity as it is, not as humanity should be” (Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, pp 71). Kirk drew upon this Adamsonian disposition to reinforce the narrative that “conservatism” is not a new movement per se, but in fact draws from a very deep well of prominent historical thinkers, e.g. Tocqueville; Further, American Revolutionary figures even, like Adams whose writings (though largely unread and written about until Kirk “re-introduced” him to his readers) resonated with a significant portion of the American public in the 1950’s.
Kirk’s appeal to the anti-liberal sentiments shared by those opposed to FDR’s programs and his connection to Arendt’s critique of modernity warrants attention. The philosophical similarities between Hannah Arendt and Russell Kirk begin with their criticism of the modern world relative to politics. Hannah Arendt, like Kirk, presented a rather negative conception of modernity, particularly in *The Human Condition*. As I laid out in the first two chapters, Arendt is concerned throughout her writings with the diminution of political space sustained as a result of a loss of authority found in religion and traditional institutions in modern times and to that point Kirk shared Arendt’s general assessment of modernity. Where Kirk stresses the importance of a politics informed by a “moral order,” however, Arendt repudiates such a notion. She instead articulates a vision for politics in modernity, which recaptures those particular elements of our past that can still provide meaning and value for our current situation, but a politics sustained through action in public. Therefore I shall spend some time in this chapter going over Kirk’s defense of a politics informed by a “moral order,” and the dangers Arendt cautions against in adopting such an approach; the goal being to highlight the differences in Kirk and Arendt’s conception of human freedom.

I will first present Kirk’s defense of the close relationship between morality and politics. I will then offer Arendt’s counter argument in a way which illuminates certain aspects of Kirk’s defense of the role morality plays in our understanding of politics, but one that ultimately offers an altogether different recommendation for dealing with the problems posed by the loss of authority, religion and tradition in modern times.
3.1 The Fundamental Question of Conservatism: Revisited

What can the past teach us about the future? In the first two chapters I have presented the “conservative” answer to this question primarily through the writings of Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott. Their answer, of course, would definitively be – *all that is necessary and useful concerning our current situation*. Individually, concerning oneself with the above question has an immense impact on one’s ability to navigate through the world making informed judgments about one’s actions and their potential consequences. In this sense, we all as individuals concern ourselves with the past in effect by conditioning ourselves through experience to avoid making the same mistake twice (so to speak).

And while this is (justifiably) a “self-preserving” way to approach one’s daily activities in the world, “human action” challenges us to re-think the commonly accepted relationship between the past and future in a profound way. The future’s *unpredictable* quality, Arendt maintains, largely results from the “complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed or even to have reliable knowledge of its motives.”\(^{136}\) Moreover, “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until man-kind itself has come to an end.”\(^{137}\) With this understanding in mind, Arendt compels us to confront the “two-fold darkness of human affairs” – i.e., “the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act

\(^{137}\) Ibid, pp 233
within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act”\textsuperscript{138} – differently than “[looking] upon freedom with the eyes of the tradition, identifying freedom with sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{139} Arendt is most conspicuously different from conservative thinkers in her recognition and development of the concomitant faculties of human action: forgiveness and promising. To avoid belaboring what was said last chapter, it is simply notable as a point of distinction that “the remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty, but is one of the potentialities of action itself”\textsuperscript{140} (emphasis mine).

“To be conservative,” Michael Oakeshott writes, “is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant…the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to Utopian bliss.”\textsuperscript{141} How though is the question I posed at the beginning of this section pertinent to our discussion of the modern American Conservative movement? The relevance exists as a result of the conservative belief that we as individuals and more importantly as a collective society should look to our traditions for guidance when dealing with the political and social problems of the day. The lessons of the past will invariably, so the conservative argues, act as a guiding light for societies and individuals to navigate through the future’s unpredictable seas. With that in mind, the modern American conservative movement appeals to the social and moral traditions of past

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid, pp 244
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, pp 235; See also pps 234-36 where Arendt rejects (successfully in my opinion) “identifying freedom with sovereignty” (235).
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid, 236-37
\textsuperscript{141} Oakeshott, Michael. \textit{Rationalism in Politics}. “On Being Conservative”. pp 169; Oakeshott, like John Adams, is expressing this “conservative” disposition: Oakeshott’s wording, which I selected in the quote, Burke would surely consent to.
generations with the purposive intent of maintaining social order and continuity in present time, or in Kirk’s words: “It is old custom that enables people to live together peaceably,” and “Continuity is the means of linking generation to generation.” In channeling the thinking of Burke, Kirk posited that the conservative should not only go as far as to say our existence rests upon the past’s failures and successes, but he maintains that the veneration for those time tested customs and traditions are in large part what prevents the current generation from taking unnecessary steps backwards. This is the essence of Kirkian conservatism; if this sounds remarkably similar to Burkean conservatism, then that’s because it is. Kirk, however, goes further than Burke by elaborating on those assumptions guiding the argument about the importance of tradition more fully thus supporting this conservative view. Kirk emphasizes the moral element of conservative thought where most traditional conservatives like Burke, did not.

3.2 On Morality in Politics

3.2.1 The Foundations of Kirkian Morality

At its core, Kirkian morality is a descriptive morality in that it is not age specific: crudely put, what was “good” for our ancestors is still “good” for us in our time. Kirkian morality is also revelatory in character and thus by its own definition not open to considerable debate. Kirk found legitimization of this particular view of morality

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143 This is particularly true as it relates to the protection of individual liberties that resulted from difficult and often violent social, legal and political struggles, e.g. civil rights movement, women’s suffrage, and the still ongoing struggle for fair and equal treatment of the LGBT community. Oddly enough, these particular struggles saw and continue to see the strongest opposition from conservatives (Christian conservatives specifically).
144 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition/
through our American religious tradition, which was ostensibly and inextricably wound in our nation’s social fabric. The thrust of Kirk’s argument in favor of a particular form of descriptive morality – Christian morality – was as I mentioned earlier, one of the eminent contributing narratives that precipitated the general resurgence of religious influence in politics in America post WWII. What concerns me in this chapter however is not the theological or rational validity of Kirk’s particular descriptive morality per se, but rather how his conservatism, grounded in the moral tradition of previous generations informed his notion of human freedom, and furthered his notion of politics in modernity.

3.2.1.1 The “Permanent Things”: Kirk’s Conservative Lens

One finds in *The Conservative Mind* a current of thought in accord with Kirk’s belief that “Political problems are, at bottom, religious and moral problems.” A little explanation of what he means by this is needed. First, to be fair, in the text just cited Kirk cautioned his conservative brethren against condensing “profound and intricate intellectual systems to a few pretentious phrases,” and goes on to add: “conservatism is not a fixed and immutable body of dogmata,” rather like I noted of Oakeshott, it is a “disposition” – that disposition, for Kirk, being fundamentally anchored in the “permanent things.” To that point, a statistically substantial portion of the modern American conservative movement today identifies as religious conservatives, which is

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significant because there is at least a loose espousal of Kirk’s ‘permanent things’ among those self-identified religious conservatives. Kirk began with a belief in God, to which the ‘permanent things’ are anchored. In other words, according to Kirk, God’s existence implied the existence of eternal truths; hence concepts like justice, charity, goodness are more than abstract Jacobin\textsuperscript{149} creations but are, again, permanent truths.\textsuperscript{150} Even granting Kirk and religious conservatives this to be the case, addressing the challenges of our modern times is an increasingly difficult project. Kirk, as the loyal Burkean he was, insisted on rooting our future in traditional society, with its religious, and moral and political inheritance…”\textsuperscript{151} precisely because it was tried and tested. Is however the traditional, venerated moral and political conceptions of past generations appropriate models to account for the ever changing social and political dynamics of modernity? If Kirk is correct in calling for anchoring the future in those ‘permanent things’ then – to employ Arendt’s phrase – does politics still have any meaning at all?\textsuperscript{152}

The answer to that question lies at the heart of our modern understanding of action, and human freedom, and it is where Arendt irreconcilably departs from conservative thinkers (religious conservatives particularly). Conservatives view progress as Adams\textsuperscript{153} (and Kirk) did, as dependent upon conservative institutions and the will of

\textsuperscript{149} A reference to the political group of French intellectuals, as mentioned in the First Chapter, and who’s name (Jacobin) became synonymous with extreme egalitarian philosophies and violence that characterized the events of the French Revolution.
\textsuperscript{150} Kirk, Russell. The Politics of Prudence. p. 17
\textsuperscript{151} Kirk, Russell. The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Conservatism. pp 9
\textsuperscript{152} Arendt, Hannah. The Promise of Politics. pp 151
\textsuperscript{153} A reference to John Adams and what he believes constitutes progress in human affairs – he was a believer in the probable improvability and improvement, the ameliorability and amelioration in human affairs” (Kirk, The Conservative Mind, pp 91)
God. In contradistinction, Arendt maintained progress was a product of human action.

To Kirk, utilitarianism perverted the notion of the greatest good for the greatest number – a notion that Kirk points out, “Burke had said as much, yet Burke had meant something very different” – because Bentham utilitarianism removed the “Author of our being” from its framework; religion, to [Bentham], was simply a framework of morals. The greatest good, properly understood by Burke, “emanates from their conformity to the providential order of the universe: in piety, in duty, in enduring love.” As a result, utilitarianism, for Kirk, is fatally flawed at its core. He thus attempts to distance his thinking from the Benthamite utilitarian tradition, but ultimately falls short of this aim by stressing the ‘social cohesion’ – the utility – offered to society by religion. Reconciling a resolutely anti-utilitarian stance with the promulgation of religion as a social utility is fraught with difficulties, and may not in the end be possible. However, to remain intelligible as a movement, conservatism, as I laid out in the introduction, must subscribe to the principle of an enduring moral order, grounded in a strong, consistent set of principles that above all else sustain the permanency of moral truths.

154 Kirk, Russell. The Conservative Mind, pp 91
155 Ibid, pp 116
156 Ibid
157 See Russell Kirk’s The Conservative Mind: pp 40, 50, 80, 98, 115-118, and 235-236 for specific references to utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Interestingly enough, I agree with Dermot Quinn when he says: “Strongly anti-utilitarian, Kirk seems to share the utilitarianism he reprobates in others, reducing religion to sacred glue holding together the secular order...[The Conservative Mind] again and again the language is of utility, of social value, of good consequences.” (Quinn, Dermot. “Religion and The Conservative Mind”. The Political Science Reviewer, Vol XXXV, 2006. pp 205). Perhaps though Dermot’s critique of Kirk merely speaks to just how difficult it is – for someone even as well versed as Kirk – to separate ‘utility’ from ‘doctrinal law’ with respect to revealed religion, e.g. Christianity.
When Kirk references John Henry Cardinal Newman who says “Life is for action...to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith,”\textsuperscript{159} the modus operandi of Kirkian action becomes manifest. In direct contrast to Arendtian action, Kirkian action has an explicit end and it is tied to his notion of human freedom: a “true understanding of liberty, which is freedom to live within the compass of God’s ordinances...”\textsuperscript{160} Burke’s influence on Kirk in this particular instance is once again evident. He credits Burke’s ideas for having “an enduring elevation superior to the vicissitudes of politics” of which Kirk is referring specifically to Burke’s conception of the ‘natural order of things’: “Political reform...conducted upon these principles [the eternal natural order which holds all things in their places] embody the humility and prudence which men must cultivate if they are to conform to a transcendent moral order.”\textsuperscript{161}

Understanding politics to be a reflection of a “transcendent moral order” is precisely what Arendt sees as the problem with our understanding of politics since antiquity, but which has been degraded further in modern times from the growing condition of “worldlessness”\textsuperscript{162} I will take up what Arendt means by this in the next section so until then I will briefly return to the Kirkian conception of action by going back once again to Burke’s notion of prescription that I detail in Chapter One.

Kirk, like Burke, sees the past as a prescription for future action. To be clear though, not in the sense that if a specific action was performed in the past the same action will produce an identical result if performed in the here and now. Prescription tempers action, mitigating action’s unforeseeable consequences so as to avoid utterly

\textsuperscript{159} Kirk, Russell. \textit{The Conservative Mind}. pp 285
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, pp 288
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid, pp 64
\textsuperscript{162} Arendt, Hannah. \textit{The Promise of Politics}. pps 201-204
transforming the status quo. Conservatism, as articulated by Burke and then Kirk, was not opposed to change and progress. In fact, they saw these two happenings as essential elements to a thriving nation: “Conservatism is never more admirable than when it accepts changes that it disapproves, with good grace, for the sake of a general conciliation.” Burke summarizes this point:

“We must all obey the great law of change. It is the most powerful law of nature, and the means perhaps of its conservation. All we can do, and that human wisdom can do, is to provide that the change shall proceed by insensible degrees. This has all the benefits which may be in change, without any of the inconveniences of mutation…” (emphasis mine).

What this has to do with our traditions and their role in politics is for Kirk and Burke quite simple. Those “time tested” mores and customs have been passed down from generation to generation for many reasons. But most importantly for conservatives, they survive history because they provide a sense of connection to past generations while at the same time useful in holding society's institutions together. As a result, the traditional mores and customs of a society engender an authoritative quality. In these respects, the same can be said of our Christian moral traditions.

3.3 The Rejection of Politics

To this point I have, in effect, argued that morality is an encumbrance on politics. The conservative of course claims otherwise, arguing as I’ve shown that it is wrong (if not altogether impossible) to separate morality from politics – either on the grounds that

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164 Ibid
our moral traditions are inextricably tied to our political traditions, or that our moral
traditions are moral commandments from God and therefore unobjectionable. Arendt
rejects both conservative approaches. In the opening sentences of the chapter titled "The
Tradition of Political Thought" from *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt explains why at the
end of the day a conservative approach to politics ultimately fails to properly account for
the changing realities of modern times: "What matters is that ever since the nineteenth
century, the tradition has remained impenetrably silent whenever confronted with
specifically modern questions, and that political life, wherever it is modern and has
undergone the changes of industrialization and universal equality, has constantly
overruled its standards."165 Burke and Kirk would undoubtedly find this passage
objectionable; remember Burke’s acknowledgment of necessary societal change throughout *Reflections*, along with Kirk’s Tenth Conservative Principle that recognizes
that the tension between permanence and change must be reconciled in a vigorous
society."166 However, I believe this later passage however speaks to the fundamental
tension (to employ Kirk’s language) between morality, religion and politics as argued by
Kirk. In what follows I contend this tension cannot be resolved apart from the extrication
of morality and religion from politics, and vice versa.167

Though nowhere in her writing does she specifically mention Kirk by name,
Arendt’s *The Promise of Politics* addresses at length this tension between morality,

165 Arendt, Hannah. *The Promise of Politics*. pp 40
167 Although I agree with Arendt that the tension between morality, religion and politics was born out of
this particular phenomenon – reconciling the notion of permanence and change – one could argue that
the separation is in fact a resolution of the problem by removing the philosophical or religious self from the
public space of politics. Interestingly though Arendt, in accord with Oakeshott, does not summarily
dismiss the religious and philosophical element of the self as not having any place in politics per se. So
long as one’s public act of speech – whether philosophical or religious – is open to debate and argument
(by definition subject to the approval or disapproval of others and not prima facie true”) then for Arendt
the expression of one’s philosophical or religious self is as legitimate as any other form of argument.
religion and politics. In discussing her distinct approach to religious stories as differentiated from moral teaching, Arendt decisively rejects the Kirkian attempt to ground politics’ authority in morality (specifically the Christian religion) by effectively distinguishing the utility of religious stories from the pernicious consequences of a politics that is practiced as a means to some ultimate or higher end.  

Whereby religious stories do in fact serve a purpose, according to Arendt, politics should not be in service to religious stories or reflect their ends.

To take up the first part of this distinction, religious stories unlike strictly moral teachings are generally narrative. These stories, though religious, are intended to persuade the listener to think of certain circumstances within a particular ethical or moral framework. As such, the moral and ethical meanings of religious stories continue to be the source of considerable debate even within a general faith community like Christianity. In essence, religious stories contain an ostensibly “normative” moral quality. To avoid being misunderstood, this distinction between specifically moral teachings and religious stories stems from the fact that religion (revealed religion) has edicts and laws – moral codes of conduct – that are indisputable, and beyond argument because they were dictated to humans from a supernatural “lawgiver” (God); hence the need to differentiate between moral edicts and religious stories. Ultimately, conflating the two leads to a doctrinal, apothegmatical conception of human freedom, which is the antithesis of Arendtian politics. As I stated last chapter, central to Arendtian politics is an

168 See Arendt’s The Promise of Politics pp 114–153
169 As Arendt notes on pg. 66 of Responsibility and Judgment, outside of revealed religion one cannot but raise the question as Plato did: “do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?”. Originating from Plato’s Euthyphro this dilemma is often answered by the religious as Aquinas did, that “God commands the good because it is good”. Kant’s undertaking of the Euthyphro dilemma in his Lectures on Ethics challenges the “moral” element of obligatory religious dictums as precisely lacking any moral component, or as Arendt says: “hence where morality is a strictly human affair, can we speak of moral philosophy” (Responsibility and Judgment, pps 66-67).
understanding of politics as existing through the persuasive speech act in public, not in an obligatory adherence or relationship to a specific set of moral codes.

The second part of this distinction – politics as a means to an end – is the focus of the last section (appropriately titled “Does Politics Still Have Any Meaning At All?”) in the last chapter of *The Promise of Politics*. Suffice to say I cannot possibly give her account of the relationship between the categories of ends/means in politics its due, but an attempt to do so is nevertheless necessary for reasons that will become clear. Arendt puts her finger on the source of confusion regarding the meaning of politics in modern times: In politics, then, we have to differentiate between ends and goals and meaning.”

Arendt leads into this statement with an explanation of why this is necessary in the previous paragraph in the text:

If a political action that does not stand under the sign of brute force does not achieve its goals – which it never does in reality – that does not render the political action either pointless or meaningless. It cannot be pointless because it never pursued a point, that is, an end, but has only been directed at goals, more or less successfully; and it is not meaningless because in the back-and-forth of exchanged speech – between individuals and peoples, between states and nations – that space in which everything else that takes place is first created and then sustained.

Arendt, correctly in my view, associates our modern mistrust of politics with the idea that wars and revolution are the basic political experiences of our time… [prompting] us to equate political action with violence.” Thus the confusion of ends with goals and meaning in politics is similarly attributable to the problem with Kirk’s conception of action, where action is oriented in such a way that accords to God’s

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171 Ibid
172 Ibid, pp 192
ordinances (whatever those may be). Kirkian Conservatism sees action as a means to an end, so when Arendt says that “we are automatically prepared to question the meaning of politics the moment we become convinced that action has neither an end nor a goal,” Kirk himself couldn’t have said it better. Yet if one accepts that politics is a means to an end, as Kirk consistently argues, two significant problems arise. The first is the problem of means and ends itself. Though not at all simple to conceptualize, Arendt gets to the core of the issue when she says: “Within the category of means and end…there is no way to end the chain of means and ends and prevent all ends from eventually being used again as means, except to declare that one thing or another is ‘an end in itself’” (emphasis mine).174 Kant’s solution, of course, was to establish “man as the ‘supreme end’”, primarily to relegate the means-end category to its proper place and prevent its use in the field of political action”. Secondly, though not without its problems,175 Kant’s formulation attempts to avoid the “paradoxical formula” Plato submits in the Laws, whereby “not man – who because of his wants and talents wishes to use everything and therefore ends by depriving all things of their intrinsic worth – but the god is the measure [even] of mere use objects.”176 Christianity’s assimilation of Plato’s formulation, which we find so fervently espoused throughout Kirk’s work, is exposed to the very same criticism levied by Arendt with respect to the “otherworldliness” (the “worldlessness” in fact) of an appeal to deities or religious edicts as the “ultimate aim” of politics.

173 Ibid, pp 197
174 Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. pp 154
175 Ibid, pp 156
176 Ibid, pps 158-59
Correspondingly, Christianity’s rejection of politics is at its root the same as Philosophy’s rejection of politics in that both Christianity and Philosophy [depended] entirely on the separation of the many from the few”\textsuperscript{177} – the few being the Church in Christianity’s case, and the schools (our modern universities) in the case of Philosophy. The removal of individuals from the public sphere into “the church” and “universities”, according to Arendt, “went hand in hand with the founding of a new space set apart from the existent political space.”\textsuperscript{178} Clearly a “rejection of politics” does not equate to a formal decree of asceticism or solitude on behalf of believers; the Church was anything but removed from the affairs of government throughout European history.\textsuperscript{179}

The attempt by religious institutions to enter the public political discourse is wrought with problems however. What ultimately prevents the religious element (revealed religion specifically) from entering the public discourse legitimately is, as Arendt points out, the fact that “religious teachings” are comprised of “a real command which ultimately is beyond argument…”\textsuperscript{180} Moreover, when morality becomes

\textsuperscript{177} Arendt, Hannah. The Promise of Politics. pp 135
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid
\textsuperscript{179} To avoid overstating my point, this is simply to say a tension has existed between religion (the Church) and politics for a very long time, despite the fact (particularly on a surface view of history) the Church acted as the primary religious and political institution in Europe for centuries. Taking this “vision” a significant step further, the Revolutionaries in America and (in particular) France – by removing the religious element as a political underpinning of authority – created a difficult problem for each respective “new” nation in that a traditional mooring of society was removed. Essentially, it was the Revolutionaries, not Christianity per se, who separated religion from politics in an ostensible and real way. The formal relationship between religion and politics (regardless of how critical or supportive one is of it in practice or theory), which had existed until the foundational documents of the American Revolution were forged at the very least served as a societal glue – it was a familiar relationship to the citizens of a given nation.
\textsuperscript{180} Arendt, Hannah. Responsibility and Judgment. pp 65. See also Arendt’s The Human Condition pps 73-78. In this section, she try[s] to determine with some measure of assurance” the “political significance” of the vita activa, and in the process I believe rightly demonstrates that “goodness” – that central element of Christian moral teaching, synonymous with acting “morally” – as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it”. “Goodness”, according to the Gospel accounts we have of the teachings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, “can exist only when it is not perceived” (THC, 74), i.e. is only possible when done in private (see Matt. 6: 1-18 of the NIV Bible). The non-public character of “goodness”, coupled with the early Church’s imminent eschatological expectations,
synonymous with ″good works″ as it did in Christianity’s case, the reason Arendt makes a distinction between ″worldliness″, i.e. public freedom as ″action″, and ″worldlessness″, i.e. work, labor, and good works becomes abundantly clear. To do ″good″ in public then is a contradiction in terms. ″Doing good″ is, as Arendt points out, instead ″the active flight from the publicity of the world.″181 And hence within the framework of an Arendtian understanding of politics, morality is left out of consideration for ″which of the activities of the vita activa should be shown in public″ and instead relegated to those ″which [should] be hidden in privacy.″182 Kirk, who as has been shown, believes all political problems are, at their core, religious and moral problems183 does not address this fundamental tension between morality and politics, perhaps because he simply does not see one there. Lack of acknowledgment however does not mean it isn’t there as Arendt has clearly shown.

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181 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition.* pp 118
182 Ibid, pp 78
183 See the last section titled: ″Judeo-Christian morality: Kirk’s Conservative lens″
Conclusion

At the beginning of my project I set out to address some of the issues I see at the heart of the modern American conservative movement by re-thinking and redefining what politics in the 21st century ought to look like. In the process I first presented modern American Conservative arguments supporting the role of tradition, freedom, and religion as necessary components of a modern conception of politics articulated by conservative thinkers Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott and Russell Kirk respectively. I critiqued specific defenses of conservatism using Hannah Arendt as an interlocutor in this process. And, as a result I showed through these Arendtian critiques how the modern American conservative moment's case for a politics in modernity built upon "conservative principles" is flawed when it comes to respecting the goals of human freedom. Alternatively, I demonstrated why modern conceptions of politics and freedom go hand in hand, which when conceiving of what a politics in the 21st Century should look like requires, in part, a return to our intellectual and cultural past. The example I use specifically – ancient Greece – offers a different conception of human freedom; one which I argued is more amenable to the modern world than are conservative notions of freedom.

In Chapter One, I focused on the works of Edmund Burke and Hannah Arendt and their understanding of the authoritative underpinnings of society found in traditions and religion. The chapter centered on Arendt's critique of Burke's appeal to tradition and
religion as proper societal moorings as it applies to their usefulness for a given nation moving forward. First, I showed how Burke and Arendt came to understand the intent and effect of the foundational documents’ birthed from the American and French revolutions – specifically the lasting American Constitution in contradistinction with the lack of a lasting foundational document in post-Revolutionary France – respectively, in significantly different ways. Secondly, I demonstrated that Burke and Arendt reached demonstrably different conclusions on the particular influence of tradition and religion during the course of the aforementioned Revolutions, and that they further offered notably different prescriptions for what should constitute a proper authoritative underpinning of society. Taken together, these two points of departure between Burke and Arendt remain critical for understanding not just the differences between Burkean conservatism and Arendtian republicanism I developed this chapter, but more importantly a new vision for politics in modernity.

In Chapter Two I developed Arendt’s notion of political freedom as action in comparison and contradistinction with Michael Oakeshott’s theory of freedom as civil association. I argued Michael Oakeshott’s relevance to the modern American Conservative movement lies in his unwavering defense of individuality and community found in his earlier works. Oakeshott repeatedly stresses the importance of creating those conditions that foster organic association, which subsequently recognizes making available the possibility for individuals to gather voluntarily as critical to a proper understanding of Oakeshottian freedom as civil association. Oakeshott’s focus, like most conservative thinkers, targeted institutions rather than individuals…because conservatives assume that it is the functioning of institutions upon which the well-being
of individuals ultimately depends. In addition I juxtaposed Arendt and Oakeshott’s development of human freedom (as ‘action’ and ‘civil association’ respectively) to flesh out those similarities and differences between the two thinkers as it relates to conceptualizing a more progressive republican notion of human freedom in modernity.

In Chapter Three I compared the philosophical similarities between Hannah Arendt and Russell Kirk beginning with their criticism of the modern world relative to politics, specifically their rather negative conception of modernity. I explored the central point of departure between Arendt and conservatives – their respective understanding of action, and human freedom. Conservatives, I noted, view progress in a Kirkian manner; reliant on political and societal institutions, but most importantly on the will of ‘God’. Arendt on the other hand, maintained progress was a product of *human action*. I made light of the problems specifically religious institutions encounter when attempting to enter the public discourse legitimately. Furthermore, I explored the tension Arendt saw exists between morality and politics, and ultimately came to the conclusion the tension cannot be resolved apart from the extrication of morality and religion from politics, and vice versa.

Specifically or comprehensively addressing the challenges of American conservatism with respect to dealing with the political and social difficulties the modern world presents is not within the scope of this paper; I was under no illusion that such an accomplishment could be made when writing this paper. I did demonstrate however, that an appeal to the past for guidance into the future is a precarious task at best, particularly when the motivation behind one’s search for the ‘tried and tested’ is of a moral or religious makeup. The task is complicated further through the rise of a global economy,

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184 Muller, Jerry Z. *Conservatism*. pp 17
changing social structures, and the sharp rise in the reliance on technology in all areas of life. Philip Walsh in “Why Arendt Matters” alludes to the precarious nature of such a task:

> In politics especially, knowledge of the past is no guide to the present or the future, and some of the most disastrous mistakes in political thinking in the 20th century are the direct result of a failure to perceive the unprecedented character of its socio-political formations, and therefore to assume that events would tend to follow the same courses that they had in the past (Emphasis mine).

If in fact, as Kirk would have us believe, we should anchor the future of politics in the ‘permanent things’ then the following passage from Quinn Dermot’s “Religion and The Conservative Mind” appropriately captures this belief: “Religion formed societies and held them together, it gave shape to man’s deepest desires, it remained the one reality through time and space that seemed to express and explain the infinite variety of things. That was a powerful evidence of the truth of something” (emphasis mine).

If in the end we were forced to choose between Kirk and Arendt’s view of politics then doing so would be similar – to use an old adage – to a traveler approaching a fork in the road. In one direction – the Kirkian direction – the traveler will find a future whose prospects are predicated on the following: social and institutional change where a necessary occurrence is a slow, protracted and designedly difficult process, and an understanding of politics grounded in the traditions and social structures of past generations. Action here would be tempered by prudence and an appeal to the ‘permanent things’ of a higher order. The future, so the traveler will be lead to believe, is a relatively predictable reality because the socio-political structures as they exists are a

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185 Walsh, Philip. “Why Arendt Matters”. pp 140
186 Quinn, Dermot. “Religion and The Conservative Mind”. pp 205
product of a divine plan, coupled with the fact that we have access to God’s ―rulebook‖ or ―guidebook‖ found in The Bible to refer to at our discretion; in addition, institutions and social structures exist for reasons we as humans cannot possibly ―know‖ but nevertheless must adhere to.

In the other direction – the Arendtian direction – the prospects for the future rest on different though not dissimilar foundations. Political freedom is understood not as individual liberty, but through an Arendtian lens of 'freedom as action', which is shared between people in public. That being said, the challenge of dealing with an ever changing world in which technology and social injustice present altogether new and unseen obstacles remains; solutions to these changing realities know no history from which to appeal. Corrine Enaudeau presents the challenge of politics moving forward:

Because it aims at constructing the future of “human living-together” (Arendt, 1968: 141), politics concerns forthcoming events, "contingent futures" that are in principle undeterminable because they might either fail to take place or they might come to pass very differently from what was anticipated. The "calamit[y] of action" (Arendt, 1958: 220) lies in the fact that it sets off a chain of reactions that is in principle infinite and uncontrollable (Arendt, 1958: 191, 236-237). Consequently, the rule of truth according to which, out of two contradictory propositions, one is true and the other false, does not apply to statements regarding the future.187

One could take Enaudeau’s unsettling, almost ominous assessment of the challenge of politics moving forward as just that. I for one, like Arendt, see a great opportunity to re-shape, re-evaluate, and ultimately re-construct our collective understanding of what politics is so as to more adequately confront and deal with the problems our modern world presents.

187 Enaudeau, Corrine. –Hannah Arendt: Politics, Opinion, Truth‖. pp 1030
I would welcome further research into what models demonstrate a reconstruction of our collective understanding of what politics is, and how other researchers and writers think it best to confront and deal with the problems of our modern world.
References


