



# Negative Politics: Nietzsche

Sarwar Ahmed Abdullah

## 1: Prologue

Here, precisely the political aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy is at stake. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche aimed to "philosophize with a hammer."<sup>1</sup> What he was trying to destroy was nothing but houses of *idols*, Nietzsche's word for 'ideals,' or "*houses of cards*," as Wittgenstein would say.<sup>2</sup> However, the first question for us is whether the Nietzschean hammer can also be observed and interpreted as a political tool, the annihilator of the modern state as *the New Idol*—"Only where the state ends, there begins the human being."<sup>3</sup> I am inclined to answer this question in the affirmative;

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, "Preface 4," *Echo Homo*, 221.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., §2 and Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §118.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, "On the New Idol," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 51.

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S. A. Abdullah (✉)

York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

e-mail: [sarwarabdullah73@gmail.com](mailto:sarwarabdullah73@gmail.com)

Nietzsche can also be understood as a political philosopher. Although this is a controversial statement, as we shall see shortly, it should be taken as a basic presupposition of this article. That is to say, the primary task of this article is to clarify a sense in which Nietzsche could be understood and drafted as a political philosopher. We must not forget that the concept of politics must be understood in Arendt's sense. I intend to propose an Arendtian reading of Nietzsche; that is, drawing from the works of Hannah Arendt, precisely *the Human Condition* (1958), I wish to draw a somewhat political portrait of Nietzsche, a new, or perhaps slightly different from how Nietzsche has been received. More specifically, my presentation of Nietzsche as a political thinker is based on Arendt's radical distinction between *philosophy* and *politics*.

Apart from the prologue, this article is divided into three major sections. In the first section of this article, which also explains why my initial key question is serious and significant, I shall briefly present how Nietzsche has been received and interpreted. In other words, this section can be read as a testimony. The primary aim of this testimony is to prove a point—the fact that to call Nietzsche a political philosopher or thinker is undoubtedly a problem. Beyond this point, apart from some brief remarks, I will not maintain any conversation with those readings. The second aims to introduce Arendt's conception of politics through her interpretation of the Greek understanding of the *polis* in general and Plato in particular. This should lead us to the final section, where I reconsider the status of Nietzsche as a political philosopher. I argue that Arendt's understanding of philosophy versus politics helps us to regard Nietzsche as a political philosopher in a distinctive way. But it must be clear that I am not attempting to arrive at a single, fixed account of Nietzsche as a likely political philosopher. Nor is the purpose of this article to suggest and construct a Nietzschean political vision. In this regard, there is nothing revelatory that I am proclaiming. Yet, as I suggest, reading Nietzsche should make us realize that the change that Nietzsche demands of us amount to a reversal of the Platonic/Christian worldviews. More precisely, I suggest that Nietzsche could be better understood in the right light by contrast with and against the standpoint of the Platonic worldviews.

## The Anti-Political Nietzsche

Opinions on Nietzsche as a political thinker are unsurprisingly different; I say “unsurprisingly,” for the political dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophy has remained the most controversial issue among Nietzschean scholars. Nietzsche, an unsystematic philosopher, is claimed to be either a political thinker or not a political thinker or an anti-political philosopher or perhaps a supra-political philosopher. So, who is Nietzsche?

It is beyond doubt that Nietzsche became, Walter Kaufmann thinks, a “myth even before he died in 1900.”<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche’s relation to politics has also become a problem; his political attitude has been mired in controversy. Hence, to imagine Nietzsche as a political philosopher *per se* is not free of challenges. In other words, Nietzsche’s relation to politics—or his political vision, if there is any—continues to trouble his commentators, admirers, and critics. Daniel Conway rightly observed that “Nietzsche’s contributions to politics, and to political philosophy, are notoriously difficult to reckon.”<sup>5</sup> But, to be sure, Conway thinks, Nietzsche has not widely been received as “a political philosopher of the first rank,”<sup>6</sup> not even, Kaufmann reminds us, as a great coherent philosopher in the English-speaking world.<sup>7</sup> However, what seems to be unquestionable is that “[f]or most of this century Nietzsche’s political thought has been a source of confusion and embarrassment...and continues to embarrass some and confuse many.”<sup>8</sup> Allan Bloom once stated, “Nietzsche’s thought seems to have some discomfiting relation with fascism.”<sup>9</sup> Implicitly, Leo Strauss seems to be making a similar remark. Strauss relates *the third wave of modernity* to Nietzsche’s philosophical thought and claims that “the political implication of the third wave of modernity [the Nietzschean wave] proved to be fascism.”<sup>10</sup> Crane Brinton also makes an

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<sup>4</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Conway, *Nietzsche and The Political*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 1 and 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 149.

<sup>10</sup> Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, 94 and 98. It is worthwhile to mention that for Strauss, the crisis of modernity is primarily the crisis of modern political

unpersuasive association between Nietzsche's thought and Naziism and argues that "the facts of Nietzsche's vogue in Nazi Germany are much clearer than the facts of his vogue in the Germany of 1914."<sup>11</sup> In short, Brinton claims that "Nietzsche has become one of the Early Fathers of the revolutionary Nazi faith."<sup>12</sup>

What must be acknowledged is that Nietzsche was received into a culture—the political culture of Nazism and fascism, that he did not make. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche himself was aware of being misunderstood. In a short response to certain charges or misrepresentations of his thought, Nietzsche writes: "Whoever thought he had understood something of me, had made up something out of me after his own image...and whoever had understood nothing of me, denied that I need to be considered at all."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the National Socialist German Worker's Party, i.e., the Nazis, made up something out of Nietzsche's thought after its own image.<sup>14</sup> Who is Nietzsche, then?

In *Ecce Homo*, specifically in section 3, "why I am so wise," Nietzsche has proclaimed himself "the last *anti-political* German"; that is, he saw himself thinking "beyond all merely local, merely nationally conditioned perspectives." He believed he had been granted a "good European" eye or perspective. In other words, he could transcend merely local, limited views. Here, we can notice that an obvious contrast is drawn between a local, national, or German perspective and a more "universal," pan-national, or European perspective. Nietzsche distanced and disassociated himself from the local, national, and German thinking and saw himself as the last anti-nationalistic thinker. He fought against the nationalistic state.

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philosophy. By the crisis of modernity, and more specifically, modern political philosophy, Strauss means that we no longer know and believe anything. So, modern political philosophy is essentially skeptical, Strauss (also Bloom) himself uses *relativism* rather than skepticism. In a word, Strauss speaks of three radical breaks (three waves) with the traditional, premodern political philosophy. The first wave, Strauss believes, begins with Machiavelli. The second wave is related to Rousseau, while the third is related to Nietzsche (*ibid.*, 81–98).

<sup>11</sup> Brinton, Nietzsche, 205.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, "Why I Write Such Good Books 1," *Ecce Homo*, 261. *My Italic*.

<sup>14</sup> As Kaufmann has reported, Nietzsche's sister is partly responsible for this. See Kaufmann's *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 8.

In most cases, as Golomb has reminded us, the main target of his criticism was “the German Reich founded by Bismarck.”<sup>15</sup> But it does not seem to follow from that that we should understand him as an anti-political or unpolitical thinker *per se*. Should we not appreciate Nietzsche as a good European or supra-German political thinker? Was Nietzsche trying to rescue or liberate the German political thinking from its merely local, merely nationally conditioned perspectives? The Nietzschean self-proclaimed “anti-political” attitude discloses more problems than a decisive promise to resolve his attitudes toward politics if we pay close attention to a short passage from *The Twilight of the Idols*. In (Germans 4), Nietzsche seems to be using the term “anti-political” in a radically different sense—we can also say in a more precise sense that Nietzsche asserts that “[a]ll great ages of culture are ages of political decline: what is great culturally has always been unpolitical, even *anti-political*.”

For Nietzsche, culture and politics seem to be antagonistic. More precisely, according to Nietzsche, as Lester H. Hunt has pointed out, culture and the state (a political picture) by nature, are antagonistic.<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche saw the modern State as a new, modern idol, a form of replacement of the old idol, say, of a god or church. He, placed in the mouth of *Zarathustra*, rejected the idea of the modern state, which Nietzsche himself describes as a centralized State—“I, the state, am the people.”<sup>17</sup> For Nietzsche, the modern, centralized state, “the name of the coldest of all cold monsters,” means “the death of peoples.” Thus, Nietzsche asserts that “[o]nly where the state ends, there begins the human being”; only where the state ends, the rainbow and the bridges of the overman” appears.<sup>18</sup> It is only under this condition that the over-human can arise. Let us end this section by acknowledging, as Hunt reminds us, that Nietzsche’s view of the state could be best unearthed by contrast with and

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<sup>15</sup> Golomb, “Will to Power,” 547.

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, “Politics and Anti Politics: Nietzsche’s View of the State,” 456.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, “On the New Idol,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 48 and 51.

against the standpoint of Jacob Burckhardt.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Nietzsche rejected the idea of the state partly due to Burckhardt's influence. Burckhardt, to whom Nietzsche dedicated his *Human, All Too Human*, once stated that "there came into being the modern centralized State, dominating and determining culture, worshiped as a god and ruling like a sultan."<sup>20</sup> However, the Nietzschean anti-political and anti-state remarks are perhaps more in favor of those who have read him as an anti-political or unpolitical philosopher. Let us push this concern further by providing a synopsis of various readings of Nietzsche.

## Various Political Sketches of Nietzsche

Here, I will sketch various readings of Nietzsche, whether as a political thinker, an anti-political thinker, a super-political thinker, or an archi-political thinker. As I mentioned in the introduction, this short survey aims to prove a point; the point is to call Nietzsche a political philosopher or thinker is undoubtedly a problem. Beyond this assertion and apart from some brief remarks, I will not maintain any conversation with those readings.

In a short article, "Is Nietzsche a Political Thinker?" Martha Nussbaum wonders whether we should take Nietzsche as a political thinker in *Ecce Homo* and elsewhere. In other words, Nussbaum asks what Nietzsche, commonly believed to be a romantic and anti-rationalist, has to offer as a critic of liberal political philosophy, more specifically as a critic of the liberal Enlightenment thinkers—namely, Rousseau, Kant, and J. S. Mill. She concludes her article by inviting us to neglect Nietzsche as a political thinker altogether. According to Nussbaum, a political thinker must contribute to what she considers the most critical seven areas in political theory.<sup>21</sup> She argues that Nietzsche has failed to

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<sup>19</sup> Hunt claims that "[s]everal ideas which seem to lie beneath a good deal of what Nietzsche says about politics and the state can be found in a series of lectures which Jacob Burckhardt delivered at Basel the year after Nietzsche arrived there as a young professor" (ibid., 554).

<sup>20</sup> Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: An Interpretation of History*, 199.

<sup>21</sup> The seven areas are: "Material need"; "Procedural justification"; "Liberty and its worth Racial"; "ethnic, and religious difference"; "Gender and the family"; "Justice between nations"; and finally, "Moral psychology."

make any contribution in those areas. Hence, as she asserts, apart from arguing against Nietzsche's baneful influence, serious political theory must neglect Nietzsche and turn back to the liberal Enlightenment thinkers Nietzsche found so boring. In a word, Nussbaum refuses to consider Nietzsche as a profound political thinker. It is crucial to point out that by a political thinker, Nussbaum means a political theorist. If I understand her rightly, we can argue that Nussbaum is correct in her refusal to consider Nietzsche a political thinker if and only if she means a political theorist by this. Indeed, Nietzsche is not a theorist of any kind. Overall, what Nussbaum seems to be dismissing is the idea that, as Badiou has accurately observed, "for Nietzsche, what he calls "philosophy" is not an interpretation, is not an analysis, is not a theory."<sup>22</sup> In short, while Nietzsche can be ruled out as a political theorist, we must keep Nussbaum's question of whether Nietzsche is a political thinker as an open question.

Walter Kaufmann, who loved Nietzsche and yet refused to be called a Nietzschean, firmly believes that Nietzsche opposed both "the idolatry of the State and political liberalism because he was basically 'antipolitical'."<sup>23</sup> According to Kaufmann, the leitmotif of the anti-political Nietzsche is to seek and find "self-perfection far from the modern world."<sup>24</sup> For Kaufmann, to be sure, Nietzsche's philosophy is wholly concerned with the individual, the human subject and its self-revelation and self-perfection. In other words, as Golobm has rightly stated, "[a]gainst the generalizing accusations of Crane Brinton...and others [Bloom and Strauss], that Nietzsche was the godfather of Nazism [ and fascism], Kaufmann presented the leitmotif of Nietzsche's life and thought as that of 'the anti-political individual'."<sup>25</sup> According to Lester H. Hunt, the word which describes the status of Nietzsche's political philosophy most accurately is "one that Kaufmann— and Nietzsche himself (EH I 3)— used: he was anti-political."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Badiou, "Who Is Nietzsche?" 1.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 412.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>25</sup> Golobm, "Will to Power," 546.

<sup>26</sup> Hunt, "Politics and Anti Politics," 454.

Yet, for Golomb, Kaufmann's attempt to present Nietzsche as fundamentally anti-political—the aim to break down any constructed link between Nietzsche's thought and the Nazis, is misleading and invites us to go beyond this common defense of Nietzsche in postwar scholarship. However, Golomb claims that "Nietzsche is no less political than he is an "immoralist"—in a very moral and political sense."<sup>27</sup> In a way like Golomb, Julian Young argues that what Nietzsche meant by anti-political in the *Ecce Homo* is that he was against "the politics of European nationalism that had plagued the continent for at least a millennium... especially... the aggressive, jingoistic, *Reichsdeutsch* politics of Bismarck's Germany— and, in particular, of Richard Wagner."<sup>28</sup> Young continues by arguing that "[f]ar, however, from representing apoliticality as his preferred alternative (being a 'good European' is itself, of course, a political stance)."<sup>29</sup> Hence, unlike Kaufmann, Young believes that Nietzsche's self-proclaimed anti-political stance *per se* is a political stance.

Perhaps, Kaufmann is right in ascribing a perfectionist thesis to Nietzsche's philosophy. However, denying Nietzsche any interest in politics—his attempt to depoliticize and historicize Nietzsche's philosophy has remained questionable. Against attempting to depoliticize Nietzsche, Daniel Conway, among many others, understands Nietzsche as a political thinker. Conway argues that Nietzsche has tried to "retrieve the founding question of politics: what ought humankind to become?"<sup>30</sup> Thus, Conway thinks that central to Nietzsche's political thinking is "his commitment to the position known as perfectionism."<sup>31</sup> But unlike Kaufmann's unpolitical perfectionism, Conway ascribes a political form of perfectionism to Nietzsche; he believes that Nietzsche is not exclusively concerned with the individual but rather "with existence in the continued perfectibility of the species as a whole."<sup>32</sup> In other words, as Ansell-Pearson has also stated, Nietzsche presents the problem of nihilism as the decisive problem of the modern age in a new way in

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 547.

<sup>28</sup> Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, 193.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>30</sup> Conway, *Nietzsche and The Political*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



which “a political mode of thinking given not just to individuals but to *humanity*” as a whole.<sup>33</sup> So, for Nietzsche, as far as Conway is concerned, the task of “great politics” is to bring humankind to completion and perfection. Moreover, Conway argues that the political perfectionism of Nietzsche reaches its apotheosis in his conception of the overman. According to this reading, Nietzsche understands and presents the *Übermensch* or overman as expressing and embodying not the transcendence but rather the perfection of humankind.<sup>34</sup> These political readings, specifically Conway’s reading, should lead us to another interpretation of Nietzsche.

Paul Van Tongeren questions the position of those who wish to present Nietzsche as a political philosopher, specifically Daniel Conway. But he does not want to go as far as, e.g., Kaufmann, to call him an anti-political thinker. According to Van Tongeren, Nietzsche should rather be understood as an “über-politischer (or supra-political) thinker... even a super-political philosopher.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, Nietzsche’s philosophy, he argues, ultimately leaves the political behind.

Van Tongeren lays out his first argument in the following way. “[T]hings appear to be political on the surface are not always political.”<sup>36</sup> This, Van Tongeren claims, is essentially true of Nietzsche’s thoughts on political issues, topics, developments, and circumstances. In short, Tongeren claims that Nietzsche more often voices his opinion on political issues from a perspective, which is *not* primarily political. For example, Van Tongeren argues that Nietzsche uses the word ‘democracy’ in a non-political sense. Instead, he uses it in multiple ways. In the writings after *Human All Too Human*, he uses the concept of “democracy” culturally—“as a symptom of a far broader cultural movement.” As far as Van Tongeren concerns, Nietzsche understands democracy as a symptom of powerlessness to acknowledge *suffering* as a necessary element of life.<sup>37</sup>

Van Tongeren rejects Conway’s political perfectionist thesis and claims that perfectionism can only be political if the indented perfection is

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<sup>33</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 157.

<sup>34</sup> Conway, *Nietzsche and The Political*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Van Tongeren, “Nietzsche as Über-Politischer Denker,” 70.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

*still* a human being. But since Nietzsche's intended perfectionism is not human, it cannot be taken politically. To put the point in a slightly different way. Nietzsche's reference to a beyond human, precisely as his concept of "Übermensch" suggests, points "beyond the subject of perfection [in a political sense] and leaves humankind behind."<sup>38</sup> Hence, Nietzsche, he argues, is a "super-political philosopher"—or, instead, an "'Über-politischer Denker' in the sense of going 'beyond' politics"<sup>39</sup> Essentially, Van Tongeren rests his interpretation of Nietzsche on a significant, decisive short remark on what he calls "great politics" appearing in *Ecce Homo*, Destiny 1, "where Nietzsche writes that with him, 'the concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits'."<sup>40</sup> In Nietzsche's sense, Van Tongeren thinks, "politics is no longer the organisation of human coexistence, but it is in principle antagonistic, agonistic, full of tension, and warlike."<sup>41</sup> But to be sure, Nietzsche states that "all power structures of the old society...are based on lies...the morality of decadence or, more concretely, *Christian* morality," including the modern state.<sup>42</sup>

The relationship between Nietzsche and politics brings another and deeper surprise; the word politics, Badiou thinks, is sometimes reclaimed. First, as mentioned earlier, Van Tongeren argues that Nietzsche's reference to a beyond human points beyond the subject of perfection and leaves humankind behind. I think this Van Tongerenean line of argument is somewhat misleading. Nietzsche's aim to overcome humans and his reference to a beyond human does not necessarily mean leaving "humankind behind." Nietzsche aims to overcome denialism, or negative nihilism, as a historical event. In Heidegger's view, "[t]he name 'overman' designates the essence of humanity...whose essence is that essence which is willing."<sup>43</sup> For Heidegger, as Badiou has put it, "Nietzsche, in reversing the old values, in proposing the noon of affirmation over against the

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, "Density 4," *Echo Homo*, 328; "On the New Idol," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," 96.

will to nothingness, actually intends to overcome nihilism.”<sup>44</sup> In short, Nietzsche’s reference to a beyond human is an attempt to go beyond nihilism and discover free and fearless spirits whose essence is willing and who must be annihilators before saying: *Yes* to earthly life—“*negating* and *destroying* are conditions of saying *Yes*.”<sup>45</sup> This is undoubtedly a radical call for a transition from negation and destruction to the noon of affirmation and creation of the earthly world.

In the draft of a letter to Brandes from December 1888, Nietzsche describes his philosophical battle as “great politics.”<sup>46</sup> According to Badiou, the Nietzschean great politics, essentially an anti-philosophical act, intends to “revolutionise the whole of humanity [rather than leave humankind behind] at a more radical level than that of the calculations of politics.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, Badiou bases his understanding of Nietzsche’s aim to overcome nihilism on a crucial distinction between the archi-political or great politics and the calculations of politics. However, Badiou likes to call the Nietzschean great politics or anti-philosophical act, which aims at “breaking the history of the world in two [the world of negation or denialism and the world of affirmation],” a “Nietzschean archi-political,” which, Badiou thinks is “the discovery of a non-Christian explosive.”<sup>48</sup> In a nutshell, Badiou argues that the logic of Nietzsche’s archi-politics is not to find or lay out a “foundation for politics.” Rather, the logic is a “logic of rivalry.” That is, “the historical explosion of the Nietzschean archi-politics is to show that “the political revolution proper has not been genuine.” What follows from this, as Badiou argues, is that in Nietzschean archi-politics, “the word politics is sometimes reclaimed and validated, and sometimes depreciated.”<sup>49</sup> Generally, I am more sympathetic to this reading. However, this brings us closer to the final section, putting this Badiouian–Nietzschean anti-philosophical act or archi-politics in an Arendtian context.

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<sup>44</sup> Badiou, “Who Is Nietzsche?” 3.

<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, “Density 4,” *Echo Homo*, 328.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted from Badiou’s “Who Is Nietzsche?” 4.

<sup>47</sup> Badiou, “Who Is Nietzsche?” 4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 and 6.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

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## Hannah Arendt: The Political

To draw an Arendtian political sketch of Nietzsche, perhaps a different portrait (slightly different from other readings), we need to construct and introduce Arendt's conception of politics. We must try to get closer to understanding a sense in which the concept of politics can be reclaimed, and for this, we turn to Arendt's account of politics, or the political. Since Arendt understands the political in opposition to the philosophical, we must clearly understand both concepts.

Indeed, Plato, one of the main rivals of Nietzsche, is pivotal to Arendt's understanding of politics. Before spelling out Arendt's conception of politics, we must begin our inquiry with a brief return to Plato for two primary reasons: one is related to Arendt and the other to Nietzsche. The first reason is that Arendt introduces and establishes her concept of politics mainly by returning to the Greeks and partly by returning to Plato. Therefore, a brief report of specific key ideas of Plato, through an elaboration of his allegory of the cave, is vital here. The second reason is that Nietzsche believed Platonism was not faithful to the earthly home. He has explicitly declared and directed his polemical and prophetic thoughts against Plato. Against Plato and Platonism (also Christianity), we are called to seek ourselves, **remain faithful to the earth, and regard other-worldly hopes as illusions.** In a word, Nietzsche understood his own philosophy, Arendt thinks, as "inverted Platonism."<sup>50</sup>

## The Genesis of the Conflict Between Philosophy and Politics

First, it must be said that the Greek word *hypotonia*, as Johnathan Lear has reported, is correctly translated as "allegory," which means the "under-thought." It means the more profound or the hidden meaning

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<sup>50</sup> Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," 29.

that lies at the bottom, say, “of a thing.”<sup>51</sup> Then, the question needs to be asked: what is the hidden meaning that lies at the bottom of Plato’s allegory of the cave? What is left unsaid in what Plato says is undoubtedly open to numerous interpretations. However, for our purposes, we are focusing *more* on Arendt’s political understanding of it—“Plato’s elevation of the idea of the good to the highest place in the realm of ideas, the idea of ideas, occurs in the cave allegory and must be understood in this political context.”<sup>52</sup> Second, according to Arendt, the cave allegory essentially embodies Plato’s escape from politics. Third, the cave allegory in Plato’s *Republic* has unquestionably dominated Western metaphysics.<sup>53</sup> Thus, interpreting it should lead us to the root of Western metaphysics. Fourth, we must also not neglect that Plato, as both Arendt and Heidegger have pointed out, locates the “ordinary life on earth” or “the situation of the human being in *everydayness*” in a cave.<sup>54</sup> In a word, Plato’s cave, as Simone Weil also affirms, is “the world,” the everyday world, a world of mere shadowy appearances.<sup>55</sup>

Philosophically speaking, this shadowy world, Plato thought, is a world that constantly vanishes with the effort to make it present genuinely. Plato believed that the sensory disclosure of the actual reality of the world must be illusions. The point is that our senses in themselves and common sense were regarded as a constant source of error and delusion. To be sure, the epistemological stance of Plato came under the compulsion of wonder (*thaumatin*), and he had to renounce mere opinion (*doxa*), sense perception, common sense, and social and political conventions to disclose an independent, actual reality lying beyond or above the cave.

In other words, unlike the Leibnizian simple *monad*, the Platonic cave world is not *windowless*; there is a stairway, which is supposed to lead the cave-dwellers, who are chained before a screen to a clear sky lying beyond and above the cave. The stairway or the passage links two worlds; that is, Plato places the cave-dwellers, notably the philosopher, in-between two

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<sup>51</sup> Lear, *Wisdom Won from Illness*, 208.

<sup>52</sup> Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 77.

<sup>53</sup> Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Reminder of Life*, 155.

<sup>54</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 292 and Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, 105–6.

<sup>55</sup> Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 219.

worlds, in Kant's terminology, between the "two standpoints" or worlds, the sensible versus the intelligible world.<sup>56</sup> Arendt calls this: a tragedy—"Being still a mortal man, [the liberated or unchained philosopher] does not belong and cannot remain here [outside the world of the cave, i.e., in the clear sky, a landscape without things and human beings] but must return to the cave [to the realm of appearances] as his earthly home, and yet in the cave, he can no longer feel at home."<sup>57</sup> However, the return of the liberated philosopher to the cave with the hope of liberating, awakening, or unfreezing its shackled, confused, and frozen inhabitants, as far as the story of the cave goes, results in a failure of the return of the philosopher and the possibility of his death.

For Arendt, philosophy stands counterposed to politics. Plato's despair at the failure of the philosopher's return, and more specifically the death of Socrates, which is his despair at politics, as Arendt underscores, forced a philosophical turn, a turn to the eternal or what she calls; *vita contemplativa* or contemplative life. More precisely, for Arendt, in the history of political thought, the gulf or conflict between philosophy and politics opened with the trial of Socrates. That is, the political thought began when the trial, condemnation, and death of Socrates made his pupil, Plato, despair of the political life, and the just order of an ideal city. The fundamental tension between the philosophical and the political came to an end with a defeat for philosophy.<sup>58</sup> Plato's despair is given in terms of the philosopher's attitude toward the *polis*, and a clear description of it, Arendt asserts, is the core point of the cave allegory.<sup>59</sup>

To put the point differently. As we know from the cave allegory, Arendt reminds us, that the philosopher "leaves the cave in perfect singularity" and his "experience of the eternal, which to Plato was *arrhēton* ('unspeakable') or ineffable, can take place only outside the *polis*, i.e., "outside of the realm of human affairs and outside of the plurality of [human beings]." The word given to the experience of the eternal is

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<sup>56</sup> Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics*, 53–4.

<sup>57</sup> Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 95.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 73 and 91. In Arendt's reading, the Platonic metaphor of a conflict between body [politics] and soul [philosophy] is essentially meant to express the conflict between philosophy and politics.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. Familiarity with the allegory of the cave is assumed.

“contemplation” or the unspeakable. The contemplative life is considered “the only truly free way of life.”<sup>60</sup> In the final analysis, Hannah Arendt argues that Plato makes a leap from politics (*vita activa*, an active life) to philosophy (*vita contemptativa* or a contemplative life), an escape from speech (*lexis*) and action (*praxis*) to silence or the unspeakable. In short, according to Arendt, Plato set the foundation for an “escape from politics altogether,” from “the reality of human affairs into the solidity of quiet,” silence.<sup>61</sup> It should be clear that while philosophy is bound up with *vita contemptativa*, politics is bound up with *vita activa*, the realm of human affairs.

## Politics as a Miracle

What then is politics? Arendt understands politics only in terms of the original Greek understanding of politics. Due to space limits, a fair, complete account of Arendt’s conception of politics is virtually impossible; we will be focusing on some critical aspects of it. The very concept of politics will be formulated as a miracle.

Arendt’s conception of politics is inseparable from that of *vita activa*. *Labor*, *work*, and *action* are the three activities that form Hanna Arendt’s concept of *vita activa* presented to us in *The Human Condition* (1958). The *vita activa*, or rather, these three activities, are identified as “fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man [human beings].”<sup>62</sup> *Action*, “the highest rank in the hierarchy of the *vita active*,” is the last activity and corresponds to both the public and the political realms.<sup>63</sup> Unlike labor, “action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others”<sup>64</sup>; Arendt continues by claiming that “[w]ith word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth”; Arendt calls this the fact or the human condition of *natality*,

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<sup>60</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 20 and 14.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

a new beginning of somebody, the sheer *capacity of being oneself*.<sup>65</sup> Unlike labor, this insertion is “not forced upon us by necessity,” and it is “not promoted by utility,” like work.<sup>66</sup> In other words, this insertion is an expression of freedom—“The *raison d’être* [essence] of politics is freedom,” in the sense that it is unforeseeable.<sup>67</sup> In other words, this insertion means that “the unexpected can be expected.”<sup>68</sup> In light of Arendt’s terminology, I call this insertion *political*.

According to Greek thought, freedom stands in direct opposition to necessity. The Greeks introduced politics, a distinct mode of existence, to escape, especially, from the force imposed on them by the pitiless, natural condition of their biological or natural needs and wants. The Greek term *polis*, which arises out of acting and speaking together, was understood to enable qualified people (the masters of the necessities of life) to make a transition from the sphere of necessity (a pre-political realm) to that of freedom. In other words, according to Arendt, the Greek understanding of the political is based on a necessary distinction between two radically different spheres, private versus public, “between what is his own (*idiom*) and what is communal (*koinon*).”<sup>69</sup> For Arendt, “the rise of the city-state and the public realm occurred at the expense of the private realm of family and household.”<sup>70</sup> The central body of a private sphere, Arendt elucidates, was the household. The private sphere, the sphere of natural, biological necessity, was driven by “wants and needs.”<sup>71</sup> It was primarily characterized by the principle of “rule and being ruled,” i.e., “inequality” and violence, which was understood to be a pre-political phenomenon. The central body of the public sphere, on the other hand, is the *polis*, the activities of “action (*praxis*)” and “speech (*lexis*),” speech as a means of persuasion.<sup>72</sup> It is the only space where human beings could “show who

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 176–7.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” 146.

<sup>68</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 and 30.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



they really and inexchangeably were.”<sup>73</sup> In a nutshell, what Arendt means by politics is that everything needs to be decided through persuasion, not force or violence.

I must reaffirm that the public world of appearances, for Arendt, is the human world of insertion, disclosure, and meaningful engagement; it is what humans can share and have in common. Arendt introduces the term “public” to accentuate the distinctiveness of the human world in two different ways. First, she claims that the term “public” signifies the human-made world itself to the extent that it is a shared world or space. This leads us to the second meaning of the term, the idea that the world is materially shared but only phenomenologically can be understood. That is, its proper space, not its physical location, but its phenomenological location lies between individuals. Phenomenologically, *trust* in the world as a place fit for human appearance is necessary. Analogically, Arendt helps us understand what she means by this common, phenomenological world or space by asking us to imagine the world *like* a “table” located between those who sit around it. So, like a table, or “every in-between,” this world “relates and separates us at the same time.”<sup>74</sup> So, the unnatural, artificial, or human world is a world that “gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other,” separating us from each other. Deed and word are central to this shared, worldly “in-between” of human beings.

Unlike Plato, Arendt’s understanding of politics is characterized by a consistent meditation on an affirmation of the world of appearances and the fact of natality. Thus, for Arendt, there exists an inextricable bond between the world of appearances, the fact of natality, and politics. What ultimately saves the shared human-made space from its “normal, ‘natural’ ruin” is finally “the fact of natality,” in which, she thinks, the faculty of *vita activa* (speech and action) is ontologically rooted.<sup>75</sup> The vocal and face-to-face relations bring the open space or the world of appearance into being. In other words, this shared space is a place of disclosure of “who” in opposition to “what” somebody is. For Arendt, to

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 52 and 134.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 247.

be alive, of course not in biological terms, means to be in this human world and possess an urge toward self-disclosure—“The disclosure of the ‘who’ through action, and the setting of a new beginning through action.”<sup>76</sup>

For Arendt, the question “Who are you?” is essentially political. Yet, a close reading of Arendt shows that the root of this question is both phenomenological and ontological. Indeed, Arendt’s concept of politics is constituted by both speech and action, out of which rise the realm of human affairs. Speech and action reveal the unique distinctness of the human subject.<sup>77</sup> To be sure, sheer human togetherness—being “*with* others and neither for nor against them” is a necessary condition for “the revelatory quality of speech and action to come to the fore” or for “the space of appearance comes into being.” So, this implies that the space of appearance or the revelatory quality of speech and action does not always exist. In other words, the reality of *the political* is “guaranteed by the presence of others.”<sup>78</sup> In essence, politics is understood to be a “miracle,” and “the miracle that can save the world, the realm of human affairs...is ultimately the fact of natality.”<sup>79</sup>

## Epilogue: Nietzsche’s Negative Politics

We are still reflecting on Nietzsche to understand in what sense he could be read as a political, not theorist, but a philosopher. In the second section, we tried to uncover how problematic and contentious it is to call Nietzsche a political or anti-political thinker. My aim here is not to seek to resolve this issue once and for all. Instead, my objective here is to present Nietzsche as a political philosopher in the light of my understanding of Arendt’s conception of politics presented in the preceding section. In this regard, my concern is not to find out how Arendtian Nietzsche might be.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 180, and 199.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 178 and 247.

It is a fact that it is by no means easy to classify Nietzsche, who possesses a dramatic view of human existence. As a radically exceptional thinker, Nietzsche should be seen as one of the great outsiders; his philosophical thought does not fit into any existing traditions. Alain Badiou describes him as an “anti-philosopher.” By this, Badiou means that Nietzsche’s thought stands in direct opposition to “the speculative nihilism of philosophy,” and his role as anti-philosopher is to announce an “act that will in fact destroy philosophy.”<sup>80</sup> Or, in Nietzsche’s own terms, the nightmare of “dogmatic philosophy”—namely, “Platonism in Europe.”<sup>81</sup> More precisely, Nietzsche traces dogmatic philosophy back to Plato’s ideas of “pure spirit and the Good in itself.”— “[I]t must...be said that the worst, most prolonged, and most dangerous of all errors to this day was a dogmatist’s error, namely Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the Good in itself.”<sup>82</sup> Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the Good in itself, as occurs in the cave allegory, as we learnt from Arendt, must be understood in a political context. However, in the parable of “The madman,” Nietzsche implicitly discloses his violent polemics against Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the Good in itself (also the Christian God); he aims to invert Plato’s parable of the cave. In other words, Nietzsche sees the same dogmatist’s error in Christianity— Christianity suffers from the same dogmatist’s error since, as he claims, “Christianity is Platonism for the people.”<sup>83</sup> Hence, Nietzsche’s violent polemics against Platonism is his struggle against Christianity and *vice versa*. His overall aim is to confront and find ourselves after the departure or death of God.<sup>84</sup>

Neither Platonism nor Christianity, Nietzsche thinks, has been faithful to this earthly world or what the traditional metaphysicians have called the apparent/sensible world. Nietzsche, or, more specifically, the hermit Zarathustra **asks us to “remain faithful to the earth,”<sup>85</sup> to this worldly life, or the sensual life, rather than to the other-worldly hopes, the non-sensuous metaphysical world, or the Platonic**

<sup>80</sup> Badiou, “Who Is Nietzsche?” 1.

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. I may say that I do not necessarily agree with Nietzsche’s reading of Plato.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, “Preface,” *Beyond Good and Evil; The Gay Science*, §125.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue § 3,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

world that lies above the cave. Plato, Nietzsche believed, was a coward in the face of reality, the earth. According to Nietzsche, the will to nothingness, i.e., nihilism, is inherent in Platonism. In a nutshell, Nietzsche claimed to be ending the era of both Christianity and Platonism. More precisely, Nietzsche understood his philosophy, Arendt thinks, as “inverted Platonism,” turning the Platonic world upside down.<sup>86</sup> As mentioned in the preceding section, to claim that Plato was unfaithful to the earth is to say that Plato was unfaithful to politics, the realm of human affairs.

In other words, Platonism is understood as a form of escapism from the political—i.e., a leap from speech and action into the sphere of ineffable and inner freedom. In the light of my interpretation of Arendt, Nietzsche’s affirmation and creation of the earthly world could therefore be read in a political context—of course, in Arendt’s sense of politics. Thus, we can argue that only with word and deed one can remain faithful to the earth. That is, only through speech and action can one insert oneself into this earthly world, a physical and phenomenological public space where one can show who one really and irreplaceably is—the sheer *capacity of being oneself*. This must be understood as a mode of the revelation of self. Recall Zarathustra in “On the Despisers of the Body,” “Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage—whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body.”<sup>87</sup>

Whether in its Platonic or Christian form, the earth or the human world, Nietzsche asserts, must be unchained from its sun. But it is a fact of *natality* that gives “us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon,” to liberate “this earth from its sun.” Nietzsche, or the madman, describes the death of metaphysics, God, the transcendent Good, or the sun as a great deed or rupture.<sup>88</sup> In a word, Nietzsche invites us to return to home, to the earthly world. “There is one thing alone we really care about from the heart—‘bringing something home,’” becoming an inhabitant of this earthly life or world. Here Nietzsche expresses a sense

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<sup>86</sup> Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age,” 29.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 34.

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 125.

that in history, we have been away from home, the earth—“we are unknown to ourselves...how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves?”<sup>89</sup> As mentioned earlier, Arendt would say, through the possibility of natality, speech, and action, which I identified as a political insertion, a miracle. We must understand this insertion as a possibility; it is not something that can be done once and for all.

To be sure, Nietzsche was the first to try to overcome not just the speculative nihilism of dogmatic philosophy, say, of Platonism and Christianity, but also, as Arendt has observed, the nihilism inherent “in the reality of modern life.”<sup>90</sup> More specifically, the nihilism inherent in the reality of the modern state. Kaufmann is right when he writes, “[w]e have destroyed our own faith in God. There remains only the void.”<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche understands the modern state as *a new idol* aiming to fill the void left by the death of God—The State wishes for “the same idolatry” from humanity as they formerly showed to the Church.<sup>92</sup> Against this modern attempt, Nietzsche, not so much unlike Arendt, wishes to keep the void left by the departure of God as open space. Nietzsche himself asks us to “break the windows and leap to freedom,” which, Arendt thinks, is the essence of politics.<sup>93</sup> In a nutshell, I call the Nietzschean anti-political, or, in Badiou’s terms, the Nietzschean anti-philosophical approach to the understanding of politics *negative*. I use the term *negative* in Adriana Benzaquén’s sense. Benzaquén states, “[n]egative thinking criticizes the existent as that which can and should change, and in so doing, it marks the space of an absence. That absence, however, is not to be filled with images or given a positive content; it is to remain as absence as a possibility.”<sup>94</sup> But, this is not a logical possibility; it is a possibility in a sense, as Arendt would say, that the unexpected can be expected.

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<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, “Preface 1,” *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age,” 30.

<sup>91</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 97.

<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as an Educator,” 150.

<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 50.

<sup>94</sup> Benzaquén, “Thought and Utopia,” 151.

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