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The Burning Cup: Or, Im Anfang war die Tat

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The little cup in which the evil one has embedded a fragment of his soul is guarded by goblins and a dragon, stored in a treasure vault deep underground. If you manage to enter the vault, you'll find that the cup is protected by the Gemino and Flagrante curses. If you touch it, it's burning hot; and as you drop it, it generates worthless duplicates of itself, so that the crucial object is hidden in plain sight (J. K. Rowling follows G. K. Chesterton). The only solution is the simple, but painful and risky one that Harry Potter pursues: grab the cup and don't let go, even as your flesh is seared.¹

Heidegger, 1933: the moment when the thinker drinks from the poison cup—not a cup of hemlock that releases soul from body, but a cup of decision that links soul to body, word to deed, philosophy to politics. Having waited for years for a moment of truth, an event of disclosive resoluteness that would connect him to the *Volk* through *Mitteilung und Kampf*, communication and struggle (*Being and Time*, §74), Heidegger acts. It is not long before he doubts his acts, leaves office, quietly wrestles with Nazi ideology, and finally settles down to await a god. The moment of engagement—the one chapter of direct political action in his life—is engulfed by the horrors of the war and the

Holocaust, stained with the retrospective premonitions of hindsight, glazed over with excuses, obfuscations, and silence.

The defenses surrounding the poison cup make it only more alluring for the treasure seekers who want to grasp the Heidegger riddle. Is this the moment when he sold his soul? Is it the key to the meaning of his life and thought? But it burns with the hellfire of the crematoria of the annihilation camps—we can only be repelled, we cannot forget the subsequent events that make the murderous heart of Nazism unmistakable. And the cup multiplies: every word from the rectoral year that gets published—and there are many now—is instantly subjected to competing interpretations, the same words doubling and quadrupling their senses as left and right try to outdo each other in separating good from evil. But hardly anyone speaks of the possibility that there is some element of the act itself—some aspect of Heidegger’s engagement in the revolution—that was *right*.² The hellfire burns too hot.

Slavoj Žižek has bravely seized the cup. He has done so without in any way drawing nearer to the specifically Nazi goals of the revolution of 1933. The fire still sears, still hurts—and let us hope that we never grow insensible to that pain. But by holding on to the moment of decision and action, the moment of revolution as such, Žižek has managed to touch the heart of the matter. If we still have faith in action, then we have to consider that there may have been something in Heidegger’s action as *action* that was true. And it is precisely during the few years when Heidegger himself has faith in action that his concepts are potentially most illuminating for our own attempts to think and act today. Potentially—but with the constant danger that we will be seduced by the phantoms that tempted Heidegger into evil.

In several ways, I think Žižek has made the right step, although some points in his reading of Heidegger are debatable. Ultimately, however, Žižek turns in the wrong direction. As I see it, he has seized the crucial phenomenon—*action*—but both he and Heidegger have misinterpreted this phenomenon. It is Arendt who can show us just where the error lies.

Žižek’s scalpel

Let me first reconstruct the thread of Žižek’s argument. The Chesterton story serves as a healthy warning against sweeping diagnoses of the “Heidegger problem.” Such diagnoses can take Heideggerian or anti-Heideggerian forms. The first approach is the one taken by Heidegger himself: his mistake lay in hoping for too much from the

National Socialist movement, which turned out to be just another modern metaphysical worldview, essentially no different from liberalism or communism—and modern metaphysics as a whole is a destiny “sent” by a mysterious event that determines Western history as a whole. The cowardice of this position is all too apparent: Heidegger desperately flees responsibility for his own acts by insisting that his “error” of 1933 was only one, vanishingly small effect of a pseudotheistic revelation/concealment that determines us all. Alternatively, we can reject all of Heidegger’s thought as proto- or crypto-fascist; but this smug position prevents us from learning anything from him that we might be able to use in our liberal-democratic-capitalist world today. More importantly, this global dismissal insulates us from the troubling thought that our world itself is in need of questioning—it may even be rotten to the core, and even if we reject Heidegger’s solution, his insights into the rot may be profound.

Against both of these sloppy and self-serving interpretations, Žižek wants to find the *particular* point where Heidegger went wrong, while “repeating” or retrieving the latent truths in his thought. (This concept of retrieval is itself retrieved: Žižek emulates Heidegger’s phenomenological-deconstructive readings of Plato, Kant, and others, where Heidegger is on the hunt for “unthought” truth.) Even in the terrible decision of 1933—when we hold it fast and look at it with surgical precision—we may be able to separate out the diseased from the healthy elements. Žižek’s scalpel here—his theoretical orientation—is, of course, generally Lacanian, and aims to recover a dimension of the subject that cannot be reduced to Heidegger’s criticisms of modern, “technological” forms of subjectivity. As for the political edge of the scalpel, Žižek is bold enough to refuse to play the role of the crypto-democratic critic of democracy, the Socratic (Lacanian, Nietzschean) “gadfly” who sinks his mandibles into the drowsy Athenian (Western) stallion so that it will leap into action and display its true strength (Plato, *Apology* 30e). Instead, Žižek is dead serious about antidemocratic arguments: he proposes that we dare to exit the liberal parameters and move “elsewhere” (9)—that is, to the radical left.

Foucault’s temporary enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution gives Žižek an opportunity to transpose the Heidegger problem to a fresh field, and focus on the revolutionary moment as such. Both Heidegger and Foucault were right in “form”—they were rightly attracted to revolutionary action—but attached themselves to revolutions that were wrong in their “content” or direction (10). *L’homme revolté*, qua *revolté*, is authentic, even if his rebellion ends up lending support to an illusion. The essence of revolution (its form) is an Event, the emergence of possibilities, and an Event is not to

be reduced to its actual predecessors or successors. (The concept of Event here emphasizes uniqueness, unpredictability, and transformative revelation. This concept has gained currency in French thought, notably through Deleuze and Badiou. As we will see, it is partially affiliated with Heidegger's *Ereignis*.) But can this abstract concept of revolution allow us to distinguish genuine from false revolutions? Žižek proposes that we can, and here the political edge of his scalpel sets to work: a genuine revolution is "egalitarian," "utopian," and "emancipatory." The Bolshevik and Iranian revolutions were open to these dimensions (they are not to be judged by the post-revolutionary acts of Stalin and Khomeini); but the Nazi revolution and the series of anticommunist revolutions that began in 1989 were never open in such a way—they were nothing but pseudo-Events.

Why does Žižek not conclude simply that Foucault was right and Heidegger was wrong? Because we must continue to wield a scalpel, continue to distinguish form and content on various levels. Žižek, trying to see the Iranian revolution more clearly than Foucault did either before or after his intense attraction to it, concludes that the event had the proper form of revolt as well as some genuine content—a content that was later betrayed or overwhelmed by the repressive elements. The Nazi revolution, in contrast, never had any genuine content. Heidegger failed to recognize this. Nevertheless, the general form of revolutionary action was still there in Heidegger's engagement: thus, "this engagement is a key constituent of his 'greatness'" (18).

A moderate, commonsense, liberal interpretation of this engagement (here Žižek refers to Arendt) might argue that Heidegger's error lay in trying to find a political solution to ontological questions: he subscribed to an extreme ideology that failed to respect the imperfection of the concrete world in which politics takes place. But Žižek takes the opposite tack: Nazism was *not extreme enough*. Nazi "violence was an impotent acting out which, ultimately, remained in the service of the very [bourgeois] order it despised" (20).

Why, then, did Heidegger fail to see the impotence of the movement with which he aligned himself? Why, exactly, did he go wrong, and why did he never correctly understand his own error? Here Žižek deploys his most subtle and philosophically provocative line of argument. The "commonsense" position we sketched above relies on a distinction between ontic and ontological levels, where this difference is understood Platonically: being is universal, beings are individual. Philosophy ascends to the universal, but philosopher-*rulers* must learn to descend again to the cave, and acquire the art of implementing universals as well as possible amidst the particulars (*Republic*

520c). But as Žižek rightly points out, the *Heideggerian* ontological difference cannot be conceived in these terms. Heidegger constantly insists that being is not an abstract universal. Being is our *opening* onto beings; by virtue of being, *what is* becomes accessible, available, understandable for us in contrast to *what is not*. Heidegger's enduring question is how this opening opens: what makes the difference between something and nothing? Thinking with Heidegger, then, requires us to distinguish three themes: beings or entities (*das Seiende*: that which is, rather than is not); being (*das Sein*: the open region or horizon within which we can recognize beings as such); and the ground of being itself (the horizon, event, or destiny by virtue of which being itself is given—thought by Heidegger under labels such as *Temporalität*, *Ereignis*, and *Seynsgeschichte*).

With opening comes closure; with revelation comes concealment. Žižek says there are two aspects of this concealment, but I actually find three aspects in his analysis of Heidegger, corresponding to the three themes we just listed. (1) *Entities* are concealed: they can resist the illumination that being provides. We can sense their opacity and suspect that they are not exhausted by our access to them. (2) *Being* is usually concealed, because we are continually prone to “fall” (in the language of *Being and Time*): immersed in beings, we are oblivious to being. Being then functions as a transcendental horizon that goes unnoticed as we naively focus on the entities that it makes available to us. (3) *The ground of being* remains, and must remain, obscure. Thanks to being, entities are given; but the event that gives us *being* cannot itself be given — that would reduce this event of giving to a given entity. Being must be grounded in a giving that withdraws from every attempt to fit this giving into a given order. In many texts, Heidegger struggles to do justice to these three aspects of concealment—and perhaps more. His project is supremely difficult: how to reveal concealment as such, without negating it in the very attempt?

Žižek argues that Heidegger fails to think his way through this difficulty. As I read Žižek, the finitude of revelation (concealment in my sense 1) is inevitable because human beings are limited, and it is precisely our finitude that generates the difference between entities and being—with (2) our concomitant tendency to let entities obscure being as such and (3) our inability to find any ontic explanation of the origin of being. The three aspects of concealment go hand in hand. To expand on Žižek's rather condensed remarks: we need not hypothesize some supraontic force that sends us being from an inaccessible Beyond. Instead, we have being—an opening onto beings—precisely because we ourselves are limited beings.³ We have access to beings, but only

to an extent, and only from certain horizons: hence the opening (being), but also the concealment (in sense 1). The entire situation is ontic—there *is* nothing other than entities—but there is a “rift in the ontic order” (23); that is, we are marked out as the entities who have some, but not total, access to other entities. Again, everything is ontic—and yet we must not explain being or the ground of being in terms of entities. Why not? Because an *explanation* relies precisely on what is *already* illuminated, on the entities that we appear to grasp clearly. Such an explanation would forget our finitude and miss the question of being altogether. For example, the attempt to explain consciousness in terms of the known facts about the brain is fatally naive—not because we have to hypothesize an immaterial soul, but because this approach fails to take cognizance of the finitude of its own consciousness, its own presuppositions.

The gist of Žižek’s critique of Heidegger is that Heidegger failed to acknowledge ontic finitude as the home of all the aspects of concealment. Instead, he fell into the trap of postulating a big Other, and ended up making being untouchably superior to all entities. This is idealism, in a sense; would thinking in terms of a “rift in the ontic order” make it possible to revive a certain dialectical materialism? Žižek does not make that claim here, but he points out a crucial ethical and political implication of Heidegger’s error: indifference to the destruction of beings. For the late Heidegger, “the annihilation of the essence of humanity” seems to be of greater import than the mass murder of actual human beings.⁴ Heidegger has thus blocked off the possibility of *trauma* (23, 36): a traumatic event is an encounter with beings (or a loss of beings) that shakes being itself. In trauma, the way we are open is altered by something that we encounter within our opening—something that shakes the very heart of our understanding because it cannot be accommodated to it. This sounds much like Heideggerian “earth” struggling against the “world,” but on Žižek’s reading, Heidegger failed to be true to the earth, despite his acknowledgment of it in principle.

Žižek turns to two seminars dating from Heidegger’s political engagement and elucidates the specifically fascist elements of his thought—elements that may have been nourished by Heidegger’s failure to be true to the earth, his indifference to beings. It is not difficult to see that Heidegger grossly misrepresents Hegel in these seminars: Hegel wanted to preserve the limited truth in the modern concept of the autonomous subject, but Heidegger simply dissolves individual autonomy in a vision of the total *Führer*-state. To train your eye on Heidegger’s Nazism in its full ugliness, combine his denunciation of the Judeo-Christian roots of liberalism and Communism (cited by Žižek,

28) with his 1934 pronouncement that genuine *polemos* demands relentless persecution of the internal enemies of the *Volk*—to the point of complete *Vernichtung*.⁵

In the face of such statements, no one can deny that, at the time when he made them, Heidegger was an ardent Nazi. But Žižek is still determined to approach this Nazism surgically: we must not assume that everything that came before 1933 (for instance, “the notions of de-cision, repetition, assuming one’s destiny,” 29) was pre-cancerous, or that the cancer of 1933 metastasized and poisoned all of Heidegger’s thought. We can identify the malignant tumor and save the rest of the corpus. Of course, “saving” here does not mean pious reproduction, but properly Heideggerian retrieval or “repetition.” What Žižek wishes to retrieve above all, as we have seen, is the moment of revolutionary action, and this means embracing the formal structure of the option for Nazism, minus the Nazi content. He is even willing to say that “what makes Nazism repulsive is not the rhetoric of final solution *as such*, but the concrete twist it gives to it” (30).

Continuing his retrieval of the Heidegger of the 1930s, Žižek resists the late-Heideggerian attempt to turn away from the entire subject-object paradigm of modernity. Bret Davis convincingly shows that we cannot understand all evil by ascribing it to the objectifying illusions of a technological worldview: the most terrible evil lies in the lucid *will* to treat a subject as an object, a will that glories in the other’s horror at this objectification. The postwar Heidegger does not have the philosophical resources—or, perhaps, the honesty—to think through this will. (We could add that his attempt to transcend subjectivity may also make it impossible to understand eros, with its own—often mutual and consensual—objectifications of subjects and subjectifications of objects.) We must retain the subject, retain the will—but the psychoanalytic interpretation of this radical, irreducible will would take it as *drive*. It is our primal drive, Žižek suggests, that twists us apart from blind nature and opens a space where things can have meaning for us—a finite space, to be sure, with its own distortions and blind spots. Drive is the ground of being.

Let us beware, then—Žižek concludes—of abandoning the violent, polemical Heidegger of the 1930s. It is in violence that liberation may lie, and even in the figure of the violent statesman-creator. The problem with Hitler was that he was *not violent enough*: he lashed out, he flailed against phantom enemies, but he failed to remake the world, because he lacked the courage to look in the eye of the true enemy—capitalism.

Traumatic ontology

As an initial response I want to take up Žižek’s suggestions about trauma and ontological difference, and show that Heidegger’s own texts have more resources for developing these suggestions than Žižek’s present article might suggest. My points here are in the nature of friendly amendments, as I agree that the “middle” Heidegger may well be the most fertile source for our own thought. Heidegger’s early work, culminating in *Being and Time*, insists on authentic resoluteness and teaches that we must find possibilities to retrieve in our heritage; but at the same time, the question of *which* possibilities we should retrieve seems unanswerable in the face of the nothingness revealed by anxiety, which faces us with the insignificance of all things and roles, throwing us back onto our own sheer existence in the face of death. Thus “I am resolved, only towards what I don’t know,” as Heidegger’s students quipped.⁶ His late work turns away from action altogether, abandoning politics for the sake of a pastoral “dwelling” that claims to be the true “ethics” but is essentially contemplative.⁷ In his middle period, Heidegger acts—and in the ensuing turmoil, develops a wealth of promising ideas.

Žižek denies that Heidegger understands the phenomenon of trauma, but there is at least an *effort* to develop what we could call a traumatic ontology running through the decade of the thirties. One might speculate that Heidegger himself was traumatized by his rectorate, but the theme goes back to his earlier thought: throughout the twenties, Heidegger insists that in order to be myself, I have to let my own being come into question; asking “who am I?” is a precondition for being more than just “anyone.” This question comes to life at moments when I feel anxiety, confront my death, or come to grips with my existential guilt. In 1929-30, Heidegger risks extending this approach to the being of a community: he diagnoses his times as suffering from “profound boredom.”⁸ Consequently he starts asking, in the first person plural, “Who are *we*?”⁹ When the identity of a community is shaken, it may begin to find its way to its true history. What we need is *Not*—urgency, distress, emergency. But we live in a time of the *Not der Notlosigkeit*, an absence of emergency that itself constitutes an emergency—for those who can manage to see it.¹⁰

It would be a mistake to read these statements on a psychological or political level without recognizing their ontological import. Dasein understands being only because its own being is an issue for it (*Being and Time*, §4). Entities as such make a difference to us only because we are faced with the question of who we are. Being

emerges, then, only in an emergency—that is, in a moment of crisis that calls our own being into question, that makes our identity problematic in the first place.

I have argued that Heidegger's thoughts on *Ereignis* as developed in the *Contributions to Philosophy* need to be understood in these terms: *das Ereignis* is (or would be) the event in which our own being, and the being of all beings, emerges as emergency: being is "given" to us by becoming an urgent issue.¹¹ Such an event is an "appropriation" because it brings a people into its "own." It finds a site where the people's destiny can unfold—a site where "we" belong. Like French conceptions of the "Event," Heideggerian *Ereignis* is singular, irreducibly new, and revelatory. The emphasis on belonging gives *Ereignis* a slant to the right—but this belonging is never grounded on a fixed identity as invoked by the usual nationalist and racist myths. Selfhood cannot be fixed, because it is based on emergency—it is, so to speak, traumatic.

But is the emergency of being a trauma in Žižek's sense, where *entities* call being into question? Or does it operate solely on a mystical and mystified level? Heidegger's intent, at least, was to find an interchange between being and beings. As early as 1928, Heidegger had envisioned a project called "metontology" that would inquire into beings as the whole within which Dasein (the entity who understands being itself) emerges.¹² A decade later, the *Contributions* extend the conflict between earth and world—and thus between beings and being—beyond artworks, to all the domains in which truth is to be "sheltered." Being is not supposed to take place independently of what is, but instead requires a certain *Gleichzeitigkeit* or syn-chronicity with beings.¹³ Heidegger is certainly interested, then, in understanding how entities play a role in being itself. However, it must be admitted that for the most part, his calls for a return to entities remain abstract. *Ereignis* remains a distant possibility that would operate on the scale of an entire world and age. But what about the multiple, specific emergencies that generate being for each and every one of us?¹⁴ Because of his indifference to concrete traumas, Heidegger lays himself open to commonsense objections after all: despite his non-Platonic philosophy, he spends too much time in a Platonic realm "outside the cave" where he meditates on "being itself," without managing to do what Plato himself demanded: go back down and readjust his vision so he can see entities again. It is telling that Heidegger's readings of the allegory of the cave completely ignore the point that extended philosophical thought temporarily blinds us to the concrete (*Republic* 516e, 518a). Far from recognizing that "those who reach ontological truth have to err in

the ontic" (Žižek, 21), Heidegger simply asserts that "with his view of essence [the philosopher] can now see what happens in the cave for what it is."¹⁵

Did Heidegger compensate for this hubris with his notion of errancy? The postwar pronouncement that "he who thinks greatly must err greatly"¹⁶ is the worst apology imaginable—a third-person excuse that concedes that, as we put it today, "mistakes were made," but simultaneously indulges in self-congratulation. However, the general idea of errancy goes back to the 1920s, and the errancy runs deep. It is not, as Žižek suggests (3, 17), simply an *ontic* error that accompanies ontological truth. "That which has been uncovered and disclosed stands in a mode in which it has been disguised and closed off by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity."¹⁷ This untruth is "ontological," in the sense that the meaning or horizon of beings gets distorted and impoverished by our own "falling" way of being. Even when we get our facts straight, we tend to interpret them in superficial ways. And errancy is not just an everyday temptation; it is insurmountable, because truth itself is finite and thus requires untruth: "Complete opening—*would be no opening any more (pure openness—nothing)*."¹⁸ The errancy is ontological, not just ontic. But perhaps Heidegger should have paid more attention to ontic error; then he would have been wary of presuming to understand the situation in the cave in 1933.

Too much of Heidegger's thought after his disillusionment with Nazism is vague and abstract; he refers to contemporary events solely in order to refer them to the "essential" realm of the history of being.¹⁹ But an exception is the Zollikon seminars, conducted with a group of Swiss psychiatrists between 1959 and 1969. Here Heidegger returns to the phenomenological mode and examines specific lived, embodied experiences. Would he be open to a psychoanalytic conception of drive, then, as an approach to the question of being? Perhaps, but we should note Heidegger's complaint that Freud was unphenomenological and failed to ask about the distinctive character of human being.²⁰ Psychoanalysis is reductive, according to Heidegger; it explains human beings in terms of a particular ontic domain (the psyche, as conceived by Freud), while failing to ask how it is that we understand being in the first place. The criticism goes back to *Being and Time*: "any attempts to trace [care] back to special acts or drives like willing and wishing or urge and addiction, or to construct it out of these, will be unsuccessful."²¹ And it is on very similar grounds that Heidegger, even at his most Nazistic, strenuously rejects the racist, biological interpretation of the revolution: "One thereby *perverts* decision—engagement—freedom—the courage for sacrifice into a process that is encumbered *from the outside* and fit into the biological actuality that has

been presupposed as the only definitive actuality *In principle* this way of thinking is no different from the psychoanalysis of Freud and his ilk. And in principle it is also no different from Marxism, which takes the spiritual as a function of the economic production process.”²² The challenge for Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-Soviet Marxism is to avoid reducing the human way of being to a set of ontic facts, while at the same time showing that our understanding of being emerges from the ontic domain.

One point on which Heidegger would insist is that an adequate understanding of human being, or care, must be temporal and historical. A general reference to an ontic “rift” would not capture the historicity of our finitude; we are both finite and open because we are thrown from a past, we fall into a present, and we project into a future. Any account of us that thinks ahistorically is doomed to fail.

Action and power

Let’s turn to the heart of the matter, the phenomenon that we have to understand in order to judge Heidegger’s engagement: *action*. Arendt can help us here, I propose, but only if we understand how she distinguishes action from labor and work. Žižek is right to call Arendt the first liberal Heideggerian: that is, she preserves the early Heidegger’s insights into the truth in practical engagement, but by drawing on the Aristotelian texts that Heidegger had urged his students to scrutinize, she develops a concept of action that both subtly and overtly undermines the “totalitarian” politics to which Heidegger initially lent his support. Potentially, then, she can illuminate what was right and wrong in Heidegger’s action in 1933. Žižek reads Arendt as endorsing revolutionary moments that “cannot be reconciled with the liberal-democratic political order to which she remains faithful,” and thus enlists her as a forerunner to his own position: that is, “the true problem of Nazism is not that it ‘went too far’ in its subjectivist-nihilist hubris of exerting total power, but that it did *not* go far enough” in destroying liberal capitalism (20). This statement would appall Arendt, and for good reason. To see why, we need to focus on the phenomena she describes.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt rehabilitates the classical and medieval distinction between the life of the mind and the *vita activa*. She further divides the active life (in a broad sense) into labor, work, and action (in a specific sense).²³ *Labor* consists of our cyclical efforts to sustain and promote our biological existence. The prototypical labor is farming, a necessary bodily effort that must constantly be renewed in order to keep us fed. Arendt associates this sphere with the household, which is also centered

on biological life—procreation and family. For Aristotle, we might add, the household is also the scene of slavery (his model slave is primarily a house slave who assists the master with the daily details of life: *Politics* 1.4). Although Aristotle believes that some are slaves by nature and thus slavery is sometimes just, he is at pains throughout the *Politics* to distinguish rule over slaves from other sorts of rule. Governing free citizens is a noble pursuit that calls for virtue; ruling a city despotically (as a master rules slaves) is nothing but vicious tyranny. Rule over slaves may be necessary within the household, but it is nothing to be admired (*Politics* 1.1, 1.7, 7.2, 7.3). This Aristotelian thought lies in the background of Arendt's arguments that the modern world has become a field of labor and nothing else; labor is a sphere of necessity where despotism can easily take hold.

Work transcends the daily cycle of labor; it is the production of lasting things amidst which we dwell. In work we escape the realm of necessity and family, and generate a shared human "world." The prototypical work is architecture, which aims to produce an enduring structure that houses human activities. Work can also be less tangible: legislation or poetry can also produce an enduring context for our lives. But as a rule, work is physical fabrication, and fabrication trans-forms: it does violence to the existing form of things and uses them as raw material to produce new things. The original material becomes means to a new end. The risk here is that the mentality of fabrication, the worldview of *homo faber*, may end up degrading the universe, viewing it as a collection of resources and judging everything in terms of utility. (This is the essence of what Heidegger calls *Technik*, which is supposedly the contemporary sense of being.) What this mentality overlooks is that utility is not meaning, and that the "in order to" (utility) is not the same as the "for the sake of" (meaning and possibility: compare *Being and Time*, §18). The entire realm of work is for the sake of *action*: "the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech," otherwise it "lacks its ultimate *raison d'être*."²⁴

Even though it generates a shared world, work itself is not necessarily shared with others; sometimes the worker can best concentrate on fabrication in solitude. In contrast, *action*, the subtlest and most elusive domain of the *vita activa*, requires plurality as its very condition: action happens between people. The prototypical act is the response of a newcomer who is asked, "Who are you?"²⁵ It is almost impossible to reply appropriately without using words, and these words are themselves an action. They partially display the stranger's identity, and by the same token do something to connect him to the others: "I'm a friend of so-and-so," "I bring a warning from so-and-so," "I've

come to help.” These words are neither labor nor work: they produce nothing directly, their efficiency is zero—but their revelatory and initiatory power may be immense. Arendt takes the newcomer’s response as a paradigmatic act because human beings as such are newcomers: “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”²⁶ *What* we are is generic: organisms with a human genome. But *who* we are is revealed and comes to be only if we distinguish ourselves from and in front of the others by freely initiating some event. Heidegger makes much the same point during his rectorate:

Now, if we ask about man, we see that this question was up to now always posed in the form: *What* is man? In this *form of the question* there already lies a quite definite *advance decision*. For here it has already been decided that man is *something* constituted in such and such a way, which has these and those components that belong to it. One takes man as an entity that is put together out of body, soul, spirit. Each of these components can then be considered individually in definite forms of questioning. Biology asks about the body of man, plants, and animals; psychology asks about the soul; ethics asks about the spirit. Everything can be summed up in an anthropology.

All these disciplines have accumulated a tremendous amount of information about man. Nevertheless, they are not in a position to answer the question of man, because they *do not even ask this question anymore*.

The real revolution in the question must be that the question as a *question* must already be posed in a different way. We do not ask, “*What* is man?” but “*Who* is man?”

With this question, we establish a *direction of questioning* that is different in principle. With this, it is posited that man is a *self*, an entity whose kind and way and possibility of being is not something indifferent to it, but instead, its *being* is that which *is an issue* for this entity *in its being*.²⁷

When Arendt says that no human being is “the same” as any other, she does not mean the triviality that there will always be discernible points of difference between two different individuals; this point remains external and could even be applied (with Leibniz) to all beings as such. Arendt’s point is really the Heideggerian thought that we have each been given our own being as a task and burden that only each one of us, as an individual, can bear (or fail to bear). Because we live in a world that we share with other such beings, we must deal with the burden of our own being by pursuing some possibility within that world. In short, we must act, and thereby emerge as who we are. Thus to act, for Arendt, is essentially to come into appearance—to disclose oneself and become oneself in a public space, “to make articulate [one’s own being] and call [it] into full existence.”²⁸

The meaning of action, then, has more to do with the character and biography of the actor than with the desired result. Of course one acts in hope of achieving something, but to judge an action solely as a means to an end would be to revert to the utilitarian mentality of work. It would also be naive to hope for too much from any act, because several “disabilities” inhere in action as an interpersonal event within the world (*The Human Condition*, §32). Every agent’s action invites the participation of other agents, who will probably take it in unexpected directions. Because of this dependence on others, and also because of our own limited understanding of our situation and ourselves, we can never be sure where our actions will lead, or what their meaning will be in retrospect. Finally, since we can never undo what we have done, we inevitably get entangled in the unintended consequences of our initiatives. These difficulties can be ameliorated, but never eliminated, by acts of forgiveness and promise (§§33-34).

Arendt’s distinctions among labor, work, and action enable her to develop a critique of the modern age: modernity first destroys the notion of a superior and independent *vita contemplativa*; the *vita activa* is then conceived in terms of work; finally, the entire human enterprise devolves to the level of labor. Modern culture, according to Arendt, has tended to obliterate action as the highest realm of the *vita activa*; instead, the strongest force in our culture is the consumerist mentality of the *animal laborans*.²⁹

This is a provocative, sweeping, and surely problematic diagnosis, but all we need consider at the moment is a narrower point: action is not work, and political philosophers have all too often tried to substitute work for action (§31). The notion of “making” a good society is unpolitical at its heart, because it leaps over the interpersonal words and deeds from which political life is woven; instead, political philosophy tends to adopt the solitary perspective of the craftsman in his workshop, “where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end.”³⁰ This notion of “sovereignty”—which is “contradictory to the very condition of plurality”³¹—brings violence in its train. Violence, as we saw, is inevitable when work transforms raw material into a finished product—so when we view politics in terms of production, we inevitably condone and even glorify violence.³² We can think here of the paradigmatic reduction of politics to making in the *Republic*, where Socrates uses a metaphor that may initially seem innocuous (if we think the fine arts are harmless entertainment): philosopher-rulers would be like painters who look toward the forms of the just and good, and paint the most beautiful possible constitution and citizens using the forms as their models. Then Socrates adds the chilling remark that in order to paint, one needs a

clean, white surface. When human beings are your canvas, what does it mean to wipe the canvas clean?³³

The “beautiful city” of the *Republic* is a regime founded by philosophers, who tend to interpret founding as work. Questions of constitutions, laws, institutions and structures, including the arrangement of the means of production, are easily viewed as architectonic issues, questions of how best to build a world. These issues can obviously make an immense difference in the conditions of our lives: do we live in a situation that allows freedom and flourishing, or are we oppressed and exploited? But the construction of the *conditions* of our lives is not living itself. Distinctively human living, Arendt argues with Aristotle, takes place in action and thought. We could say that world-building is a means to an end, if this language were not already the language of work and production. It is better to put it this way: world-building gains its sense, its *raison d'être*, from the action and thought that it enables.

However, *no* institution or constitution can *guarantee* the frequent flowering of action. It is not that, as Žižek claims, Arendtian action “cannot be reconciled with the liberal-democratic political order”; action can and does occur in liberal democracies, although it is inevitably swallowed up, sooner or later, by the concerns of labor and work. What will always tend to drag action down is the weight of its everyday requirements and antecedents: the ensuring of physical survival and comfort, the construction and maintenance of the world. Most of us, most of the time, are left with little initiative for action. This initiative is further dampened if a culture or regime focuses its attention on work and labor, forgetting that these exist for the sake of the action that they enable. But no matter where action occurs, and precisely because moments of action are unique and extraordinary, they tend to be reabsorbed into the ordinary and generic. Action is born from its everyday antecedents, dies back into them, and is reborn. No political system can *make* this rebirth come about—not Athenian democracy, not liberal democracy, not socialism.³⁴ In short, *action cannot be made—it can only be taken*.

Similar phenomenological distinctions are operative in Arendt’s concepts of strength, force, violence, and power, where she reserves the last term for a phenomenon specific to action (*The Human Condition*, §28). By “strength” Arendt means an individual’s natural physical and mental ability; it is possessed by one person, can in principle be measured, and is needed for both labor and work. “Force” can be controlled either by an individual or by a group, and may rely on manmade objects (the most obvious example would be firearms). Force is a means of “violence,” which can be

“stored up and kept in reserve.”³⁵ Force and violence, like strength, can be used in labor and work.

This is all straightforward enough, but when we come to Arendt’s notion of “power” we encounter a cryptic, apparently mystical concept that has nothing to do with our usual notions. Physics conceives of power (energy) as the capacity to do “work,” that is, change the velocity of a mass; in the human sphere, power (as we usually think of it) is the capacity to make something or someone bend to our will. Power, as Nietzsche might put it, is always an event of *overpowering*. But for Arendt, “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”³⁶ Power, in her sense, is essentially interpersonal and political; unlike strength and force, it cannot belong to one person alone. It cannot be measured or stored up, and it differs essentially from violence because it cannot be understood in the utilitarian terms of work: “if nothing more were at stake here than to use action as a means to an end, it is obvious that the same end could be much more easily attained in mute violence, so that action seems a not very efficient substitute for violence.”³⁷ Violence can overcome power (the Burmese junta can arrest, beat, and kill the protesting monks), but it cannot substitute for power. Arendt thus describes tyranny as a combination of force and powerlessness.³⁸

Here again, Arendt follows Aristotle’s lead. For Aristotle, the concept of power as overpowering is a despotic notion, based on a master’s relation to slaves. He repeatedly argues against those who would use mastery as a model for all types of rule: the relation of master and slave differs qualitatively from that of husband and wife, parent and child, or political leader and fellow citizens (*Politics* 1.13). The differences lie in the purposes of the relationships and the capacities of the people involved. For Aristotle, there is no single phenomenon of ruling common to all human relationships; ruling takes on different characteristics in accordance with the function that it performs.³⁹ On the despotic extreme, the master uses the natural slave as a living tool who has brawn, but not brains—or has reason enough to understand commands, but not to make prudent decisions for himself. The natural slave essentially belongs to another, because his highest fulfillment lies only in making the good life possible for someone else. Although the natural slave benefits from slavery, according to Aristotle, this benefit is incidental; the inherent purpose of the relationship is to assist the master. On the other extreme we find specifically “political” rule, rule over fellow citizens for the sake of the common good.

Here the ruler should be first among equals, one who has learned how to rule by being ruled and is now taking his turn as leader (*Politics* 3.4). Only the ruling that occurs in this political sphere is inherently noble and great, whereas the art of ruling slaves has nothing admirable about it. Political rule is free activity in relation to free human beings, and its essential element is *logos*, which is necessary to reveal the just and unjust (*Politics* 1.2).

Aristotle's politics are aristocratic, but his insights into political power are not limited to a highly hierarchical situation. Whenever and wherever individuals motivate and inspire others, setting in motion changes that can affect a community, political power—what Arendt calls “power” simply—is at work. This dynamic cannot be captured by despotic models of politics, by the physics of forces, or by the metaphysics of overpowering. Political power is unpredictable and may well seem miraculous. (Even Weber, the most sober of sociologists, has to use an originally religious concept, “charisma,” to describe it.) It can spring up in situations that seem hopeless and from agents who seem insignificant, given the right conditions for political *logos* to stir and transform us.

How often do these mysterious conditions come about? Aristotle seems to look back to the dying age of independent Greek *poleis* and to dream of a city led by a fellowship of virtuous leaders—the city, as he puts it, that one would pray for (*Politics* 2.1). As for Arendt, she looks back with heavy nostalgia to Periclean Athens, whose culture was supposedly devoted to the glory and remembrance of individuals' great words and deeds, in all their extraordinary uniqueness.⁴⁰ *The Human Condition* is so short on references to “power” in the present day that it is easy to get the impression that for Arendt, the present is hopeless. I think this is a misreading, but in any case this view would do the present an injustice. Spontaneous actions still take place every day in countless meetings and forums. (Some are cyberforums, which makes them ambiguous and problematic, but probably better than nothing.) Still, there must have been something extraordinary about fifth-century Athens, a small town (by our standards) where so many memorable individuals came on the stage. The character of a regime and its worldview certainly affects the likelihood that political power and action will arise. Even though action can manifest itself anywhere, and even though no system can make action occur, some systems leave room for it or even encourage it, while others try to minimize its possibility, seeing it as a threat to the social machine.

On revolution

If there are crucial differences among political systems, we might look for action in moments of transition from one system to another—moments of revolution. In fact, revolutions cannot take place without action. What may seem like brute force—a military coup or the triumph of one side in a civil war—could not come to pass without the exercise of authority and persuasion, speech as action. Sometimes revolutionary action has the effect, intended or not, of establishing a repressive regime that sets up obstacles to action—but that is no reason to deny that action took place. All revolutions—liberal, communist, fascist, and Islamist—have their moments of genuine Arendtian “power.” Yes, even the Nazi revolution required and inspired *acts*—such as Heidegger’s own. Furthermore, since all action is undertaken in uncertainty, the retrospective judgment that a revolution was essentially and inexorably closed to action is always somewhat unfair. Heidegger risked the possibility that National Socialism had some “inner greatness,” that its leaders were open to a deeper historical understanding of what it meant to be a *Volk*; he was disappointed rather quickly, but that cannot prove that the “emancipatory potential,” as Žižek calls it (15, 33), never glimmered at all.

Can we make no distinctions, then, between revolutions that turn in the right and the wrong direction? We can. As we noted, some revolutions end up creating obstacles to action—and sometimes these obstacles are an explicit part of the program of the revolutionary leaders. In these situations, if we prize the freedom that is exemplified in all action, we should be loath to lend our support to a figure—such as Hitler, Mao, or Khomeini—who expresses contempt for individual liberty and thinks of politics in despotic terms. This point could be made from a Kantian moral perspective, but it can also be made from a more Heideggerian-Arendtian point of view. To use one’s own freedom to support an attack on freedom is not a logical contradiction, but it disregards the value of one’s own act as such by subordinating action to a “higher end” that may end up denying the essence of the human condition: if our being is an issue for us, and we can appropriate our being only by acting, then a system that leaves no room for action smothers human existence itself. One might risk supporting an illiberal movement, as Heidegger did, in hopes that it will lead to a deeper freedom; but this choice is supremely dangerous.

If these considerations are right, any judgments about revolutions are delicate and debatable, requiring us to think cautiously even in the midst of mass enthusiasm; and in making these judgments we must always ask whether the leadership and

ideology of the revolution value free action as such, or subordinate action to an architectonic program that aims to “remake” a community in accordance with a single vision.

Žižek’s comments on the Iranian and Bolshevik revolutions might suggest similar criteria, as he emphasizes the “open” quality of the immediate aftermath of these events and claims that the Nazi revolution was never open (despite Heidegger’s perceptions in 1933). Žižek states that a genuine revolution must be “emancipatory,” “egalitarian,” and “utopian.” But in the present article, these words are not fleshed out enough to be helpful. Emancipation from what, for what? Equality for whom, in what regard? Žižek’s hope for “something New” (14) perhaps makes him reluctant to spell all this out—for who could articulate and defend equality and freedom without drawing on “the existing order” (15), the tradition of modern political philosophy? The glorification of revolution is itself quintessentially modern—this is presumably one reason why Heidegger eventually turns against both the conservative *and* the revolutionary.⁴¹ I would not want to follow Heidegger’s flight from all politics; my point is that to hope for a revolution that is postmodern, postliberal, yet (in some indeterminate sense) egalitarian and emancipatory is perhaps incoherent, and certainly irresponsible. Ill-defined utopian dreams are easily perverted and exploited.⁴²

My doubts about Žižek’s criteria are exacerbated by his dogmatic claim that the revolutions of 1989 were inauthentic “pseudo-Events.” By Arendtian standards, at least, they would seem to be prime examples of genuine action. The ground was prepared by individuals such as Gorbachev and Walesa, but the revolutions themselves seemed to spring up through an interpersonal dynamic that could not be localized or attributed to a few ringleaders. They swept through the communist bloc unpredictably yet irresistibly, showing how “force” can sometimes melt away in the face of “power.” And the predominant view among those who participated in and witnessed these revolutions was that their goal was not a particular arrangement of society, but liberty itself—the freedom to act freely.

The meaning of a revolution remains permanently debatable, because phenomena such as collective revolutionary power cannot be photographed or measured. They can be felt, but the feelings are always subject to reinterpretation. Still, I can’t resist testifying to my own feelings and observations during a visit to Prague in the spring of 1990, shortly after Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Revolution.” The new president, former dissident playwright Vacláv Havel, was said to be rolling through the halls of the presidential palace on a scooter. Colorful electoral material from a variety of

parties and candidates was everywhere; even the Communists joined in the festive mood with a poster featuring a young woman in a wet t-shirt. My friend and I walked into the headquarters of Civic Forum, Havel's party, and met his brother Iván, a philosopher who was happy to chat with us about artificial intelligence. Nearby, a memorial to the victims of the overthrown regime had been formed from hundreds of candles, wreaths, and other mementos. In the streets of Czech cities, parades of young people in motley costumes, banging pans, urged the citizens to vote. The mood I perceived was a shared joy in new possibilities—a celebration of freedom and of action itself, beyond all concrete political objectives.

Žižek obviously views such happenings with a jaundiced eye, given his hostility to liberal economics and his impulse to move “beyond democracy.” This phrase recalls a remark by Arendt: “This attempt to replace acting with making is manifest in the whole body of argument against ‘democracy,’ which, the more consistently and better reasoned it is will turn into an argument against the essentials of politics.”⁴³ The ancient antidemocratic argument is summed up efficiently in *Republic* 557e-558c: democratic freedom amounts to anarchy, democratic majority rule elects popular but not virtuous leaders, and democratic equality is sheer injustice—because unequals should not be treated equally. But this line of thought undermines political action itself. If we are unwilling to hand our destinies over to a group that claims to possess knowledge of “the good,” then the authority of the “superiors” has to give way to debate, pluralism, and broad access to political power. Freedom, majority rule, and equality before the law enable the widespread action and discussion that are the alternative to submitting to “wise” political architects.

Socrates adds that democracy breeds demagogues, who then become tyrants (565d-566d). Modern *liberal* democracy is meant to protect individuals and constitutions against tyranny; liberal policies usually receive their theoretical justification from concepts such as human rights, which are based on typically modern notions of individual autonomy. The autonomous subject theorized here is abstract, purified of all particular desires and commitments (as a Rawlsian once put it to me, “All you have to do is pretend that you’re no one in particular”). When Žižek critiques “democracy,” it is this liberal democracy that he means; he affirms the subject, but denies the empty, self-transparent, self-mastering subject that is hypothesized by liberal theory.

I cannot pretend to give an adequate defense of liberal democracy here, so I simply ask a few questions that seem pertinent. If modern theories of autonomous self-consciousness are indefensible, does it necessarily follow that all the liberal institutions

that have appealed to those theories are harmful? Could liberal institutions benefit even the dependent, self-deluding, fixated subjects that we are, given that such subjects can perceive the difference between liberty and tyranny? Could the “empty” formalism of abstract rights protect the “content” of our lives from being erased in the name of the “sublime ... creation” (15) of philosopher-artists who claim to be less deluded than we are? Could it be that the aspiration to found a nonliberal state mistakes work for action?

In the beginning

Heidegger’s act of 1933 was, of course, a hope for a new ground, for a *founding*. For the rest of the decade he shifts this hope to a different domain, but it becomes, if anything, still more urgent. The new domain is being itself: being is said to emerge in *das Ereignis*, and Heidegger tells us that this term is an abbreviation for *Ereignis der Dagründung*, the event of the grounding of the there.⁴⁴ The there rips open at a critical juncture, the *Augenblicksstätte* or “site of the moment.”⁴⁵ Being itself, then, happens as inception (*Anfang*). Heidegger invests the *Anfang* with so much pathos that in 1941 he composes an entire volume that orbits around the word and its variations.⁴⁶ Arendt—had she had the opportunity to see this text—would surely have pointed out that beginning (“natality”) occurs in specific actions of individuals, actions that generate life stories. But Heidegger’s postpolitical ruminations on inceptivity tell no stories about anyone’s life—only a broad metanarrative about Western thought.

If we turn back to Heidegger’s political phase, we find a similar insensitivity to the reality of inception. The “Hegel” seminar that Žižek quotes reveals a stunningly crude fantasy about the unity of the leader’s will with the will of the people. Here Heidegger insists on the absolute power and authority of the *Führer* without recognizing that in *action*, the initiator necessarily depends on others to interpret his message, take up his initiative, and develop a new chapter in the story. In *work*, however, a lone creator can maintain control of the process from beginning to end. Heidegger’s celebration of violence in texts such as *Introduction to Metaphysics* is another sign of his fascination with the figure of the founder as creative worker, the architect of the *polis* who is *apolis* precisely because he founds it. This misunderstanding is an understandable pathology of philosophers, whose semidivine solitude makes their life alien to the city, *xenikos* (Aristotle, *Politics* 7.2). But it is a misunderstanding nevertheless, one with terrible consequences.

Of course, Heidegger turned away from the Nazis and toward the more abstract, metaphysical politics of the *Contributions*. But his continuing fascination with “makers”—now as poets—betrays his continuing difficulty in conceiving of action. What are we to *do* in the “there” once it has been founded? Answer: we should “shelter” the truth of being in beings, where the prime example of sheltering is the work of art. But as for how we are to get along with each other or speak to each other, Heidegger has nothing to say. In my own view, his thoughts on inception and appropriation could become very fruitful—but only if we find ways to apply them to concrete human acts.

In the *Contributions*, “violence” and “power” are subordinated to “mastery,” which Heidegger attributes to the few “future ones.”⁴⁷ In subsequent texts Heidegger tries to wash his hands of “power” altogether, claiming that being lies beyond both power and powerlessness.⁴⁸ In effect, this is an admission of defeat: Heidegger is unable to think of the initiating power of will and action apart from the metaphysics of the will to power, exemplified in the Nazi ideology that at this point he cannot stomach.

Does Žižek do better? At least he does not give up on action, will, and politics; he sticks with these phenomena and tries to think through them. But, like Heidegger, Žižek cannot distinguish action from work, political power from force. Nazism “did *not* go far enough ... its violence was an impotent acting out” (20). “What can be more sublime than the creation of a new ‘liberated territory’ ...?” (22). “What makes Nazism repulsive is not the rhetoric of final solution *as such*, but the concrete twist it gives to it” (30). The “problem with Hitler was that *he was not violent enough*,” that he “did *not* ‘have the balls’ to really change things” (39). And finally: “Hitler’s violence, even at its most terrifying (murdering millions of Jews), was all too ‘ontic,’ i.e., an impotent *passage a l’acte* that betrayed the inability of the Nazi movement to be really ‘apolis,’ to question-confront-shatter the basic coordinates of the bourgeois communal Being” (40).

These statements make sense only if we assume that the function of a leader or a party is to *create*, to *make*—a kind of *work* that, like all work, requires violence. The supreme political actor is then a founder who, as such, stands apart from the existing community in order to destroy and rebuild it. Hence the language of demolition and construction. But as Arendt shows us, genuine action is interpersonal initiation, a deployment of “power” on a level essentially different from violence, a level that requires speech. It is telling and troubling that Žižek criticizes Hitler for destroying the wrong things (and people), and Stalin for having incorrect motivations and taking ineffective measures, without ever objecting to tyranny as such. Would an enlightened tyrant with good motives be acceptable? Žižek breathes not a word of criticism against the model of

the lone, despotic architect that has entranced both fascists and communists (and capitalists, of course: *vide* Howard Rourke in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*).

As Heidegger in his post-Nazi period pointed out, this model of action and human greatness is a subjectivist illusion—whether the subject is an individual out for profit, a defender of the race, or an agent of the workers of the world. In all these cases, the subject is in the grip of his own world-picture and enslaved to the will to power. Heidegger's response to subjectivism is to wait and listen for the call of being. This is a solitary thinker's response, perhaps even a response that is necessary in order to recover the *vita contemplativa*. But in the *vita activa*, subjectivity can be transcended only through *intersubjectivity*. Only by acting with and against each other—primarily by speaking and listening to each other—can we elude the tyrannical temptation in our condition.

The *founding* of a good system, whether such founding happens through violence or through Arendtian “power,” is not the supreme act, but is for the sake of what it enables: it is for the sake of citizens' action, which cannot be understood in terms of work (founding, building, breaking, making). The deepest inception, the true natality, the fountainhead lies in citizens' intersubjective action—not in the ground-laying and world-building that makes the action possible.

As an intersubjective event, action will always involve the possibility of resistance, misunderstanding, and abuse. There is no “final solution” to these conditions; they are essential to the process. The very concept of a “solution” is appropriate to the domain of making, not the domain of acting. There can be an optimum solution to the problem of designing the most aerodynamically efficient aileron, but there can be no solution to the problem of friction in human action; to eliminate the possibility of friction would be to eliminate action itself. Inequality, injustice, and unfreedom cannot be eliminated from human relationships without eliminating those relationships themselves—which usually means eliminating human beings. We should fight these evils in case after case, but they exist and will always recur because of human freedom itself. I cannot help believing that Žižek would agree with me, given his view of the subject as primordially disturbed and disturbing (37). Maybe in flirting with the language of a “final solution,” he is simply playing the provocateur. In that case, well played: I, for one, am provoked.

What stands at the inception: the Word or the Act? Žižek suggests that when theory reaches an impasse, practice begins—as a *passage à l'acte*, as blind violence. The implication is that better thought might go hand in hand with better action. Our first

step toward both might be to abandon the notion that divine creation is “the act par excellence” (40). As Arendt puts it, “aspiration toward omnipotence always implies—apart from its utopian *hubris*—the destruction of plurality.”⁴⁹ If action requires plurality, would it not happen, first and foremost, as communication between human beings? Wouldn’t the human Act par excellence be precisely *the Word*?

Then—returning to our quest for the burning cup—we could agree with Žižek that it was not Heidegger’s acting as such that was wrong, but the insufficient courage of his action (40). However, the vice did not lie in any reluctance to destroy a structure and build a new one; it lay in a failure to speak *with* others, in a cowardly refusal of true communication, which is never simply a matter of deploying rhetoric but requires *listening*. In his passion to decide, his passion to act, Heidegger insisted that nothing less than a unanimous “yes” to the Führer’s will would be able to constitute the Germans as a community. But unanimity is not community. Even if there were no dissenters, the unanimous citizens would be deprived of the possibility of *acting*. A political community is not *una anima*, one soul, but a plurality; a city that is too unified, that becomes a single organism, is no longer a city at all (Aristotle, *Politics* 2.2). Heidegger was right in *Being and Time*: a people can find itself only through communication and struggle—but as he should have understood, the *Führerprinzip* destroys both. A community can thrive only when it has a healthy space for dialogue, interaction, and competition, a space that separates and unites us at once—a world. Yes, Heidegger was right to want to act—but not only did he confuse action and work, he even lent his hand to a kind of work that aimed at constricting the German world and asphyxiating genuine action.

- ¹ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Arthur A. Levine, 2007), 537-540.
- ² As Žižek points out, Ernst Nolte argues that the anti-communist element in Heidegger's choice was right. One has to suspect that this argument hides deeper Nazi sympathies that are politically unspeakable today. But even if we set aside this suspicion, and regardless of whether Nolte has his facts straight, the essential limitation of his approach is precisely that it calculates right and wrong in terms of facts—in terms of situations and consequences understood retrospectively. This approach ignores what Heidegger himself took to be essential: the *prospective* moment, the moment of risky commitment that seeks possibilities while facing an unknown "dark future": *Sein und Wahrheit*, GA 36/37, 3. ("GA" will refer to volumes of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, published in Frankfurt am Main by Vittorio Klostermann. Gregory Fried and I are working on a translation of this particular volume, which includes the two lecture courses Heidegger delivered during his rectorate in 1933-34.)
- ³ Thomas Sheehan has made much the same point in a series of articles. See, for instance, "A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," *Continental Philosophy Review* 32:2 (2001), 1-20.
- ⁴ *Feldweg-Gespräche*, GA 77, 207.
- ⁵ GA 36/37, 91.
- ⁶ Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933: A Report*, trans. E. King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 30.
- ⁷ Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 271-2.
- ⁸ *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 160-167.
- ⁹ For a paradigmatic exploration of the "Who are we?" question, see *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, GA 65, 48-54.
- ¹⁰ GA 65, 11, 107, 119, 125, 234-37.
- ¹¹ Richard Polt, *The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's "Contributions to Philosophy"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- ¹² *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 156-7.
- ¹³ Polt, *The Emergency of Being*, 193-203.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 244, 248-53.
- ¹⁵ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and "Theaetetus,"* trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002), 65. Cf. GA 36/37, 183-4.
- ¹⁶ Heidegger, "The Thinker as Poet" (1947), in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 9.
- ¹⁷ *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 264 (German p. 222). For the introduction of the term "errancy" see "On the Essence of Truth" (1930), in *Pathmarks*, 150-151.
- ¹⁸ Heidegger, "Das Wesen der Wahrheit: Zu 'Beiträge zur Philosophie,'" *Heidegger Studies* 18 (2002): 10.
- ¹⁹ For details see Richard Polt, "Beyond Struggle and Power: Heidegger's Secret Resistance," *Interpretation* 35:1 (Fall 2007): 11-40.
- ²⁰ *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols—Conversations—Letters*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 224.
- ²¹ *Being and Time*, 238 (German pp. 193-4).
- ²² GA 36/37, 210-211.
- ²³ For a concise explanation see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7-9. Labor, work, and action are explored in greater depth in Chapters III-V.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173, 204.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ²⁷ GA 36/37, 215.
- ²⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 208.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

³¹ Ibid., 234.

³² Ibid., 228.

³³ *Republic* 501a. As it turns out, cleaning the canvas would mean exiling everyone over the age of ten (540e-541a)—a proposal that may very well be meant to sound ridiculous. If so, Plato is the first, all-too-subtle critic of the reduction of politics to fabrication.

³⁴ Arendt is anti-bourgeois, as Žižek says—but she does not advocate overthrowing the capitalist economic system. Why not? Because the focus on economics, “household management,” is a symptom of the basic problem—the preeminence of labor over action. Bourgeois culture is infected by a laboring mentality, but that mentality cannot be overcome by changing the system of labor.

³⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

³⁶ Ibid., 200.

³⁷ Ibid., 179.

³⁸ Ibid., 202.

³⁹ The metaphysical counterpart to this position is the priority of *energeia* over *dynamis*. See Richard Polt, “Potentiality, Energy, and Sway: From Aristotelian to Modern to Postmodern Physics?” *Existentialia* 11 (2001): 27-41.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197-8, 205-6.

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Metaphysik und Nihilismus*, GA 67, 39; *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, GA 69, 23. The pathos of the violent eruption of the “New” is not itself new, but is a fascination that dates from the French Revolution and its aftermath: see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1965), Chapter 1.

⁴² For a critique of Žižek’s “abstract radicalism” from an Arendtian standpoint see Julia Hell, “Remnants of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt, Heiner Müller, Slavoj Žižek, and the Re-Invention of Politics,” *Telos* 136 (2006): 76-103.

⁴³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 220.

⁴⁴ GA 65, 183, 247.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 234, 323, 384.

⁴⁶ *Über den Anfang*, GA 70.

⁴⁷ GA 65, 281-2, 386.

⁴⁸ *Besinnung*, GA 66, 83, 187-188. Cf. Polt, “Beyond Struggle and Power,” 17-19, 24-27.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 202.