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TOTALITARIANISM AND PHILOSOPHY

Alan Haworth

ROUTLEDGE Focus

Totalitarianism and Philosophy

When Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin first came to power in the 1930s, their regimes were considered by many to represent a new and perplexing phenomenon. They were labelled ‘totalitarian’. But is ‘totalitarianism’ genuinely new, or is the word just another name for something old and familiar, namely tyranny?

This is the first question to be addressed by Alan Haworth in this book, which explores the relevance of philosophy to the understanding of totalitarianism. In the course of the discussion, definitions are tested. Is it coherent to think of totalitarianism as the imposition of a ‘total state’, or of ‘total control’? Could it even be that the idea of totalitarianism is a ‘non-concept’?

Examining the work of the totalitarian philosophers Giovanni Gentile and Carl Schmitt, the idea of ‘totalitarianism by other means’ as represented in dystopian fiction, and the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism and Philosophy* is essential reading for all students and scholars of political philosophy.

Alan Haworth is a specialist in political philosophy. He has taught the subject at all levels, from undergraduate to doctoral. He is the author of numerous articles and the books *Understanding the Political Philosophers* (Second Edition 2012), *Free Speech* (1998) and *Anti-Libertarianism* (1994), all published by Routledge.

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Totalitarianism and Philosophy

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FOR ROWAN

para siempre

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The man who tastes a single piece of human flesh, mixed in with the rest of the sacrifice, is fated to become a wolf.

Plato

If you are afraid of wolves, keep out of the woods.

Stalin

1 Introduction

As the title states, this book's twin subjects are totalitarianism and philosophy. Its guiding theme is the ability of the latter to illuminate our understanding of the former.

I will begin with the word itself. It is a relative newcomer to the vocabulary. The earliest recorded references to the 'ethical' or 'total' state occurred in the 1920s in the work of apologists for Italian fascism such as Giovanni Gentile, and the dictator Mussolini. The term 'totalitarianism' soon acquired a wider currency, however, and especially in the work of critics whose attitude towards the ideas, the ambitions and, ultimately, the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler was far less enthusiastic. The rise of those regimes had been startling. Hitler, especially, was guilty of extreme brutality, as was Stalin – also routinely categorised as a 'totalitarian' dictator. It is hardly surprising that a new term should have been coined in order to accommodate these apparently unprecedented manifestations of oppression and cruelty.

Even so, it is important to recognise that the existence of a new word does not necessarily signify the presence of a new entity, something for which the word stands. There is, at least, a possibility that 'totalitarianism' is just a new word for something old and familiar – dictatorship or tyranny. Accordingly, one question to which arguments contained in the following pages are addressed is that of whether totalitarianism – or 'so-called' totalitarianism – is genuinely distinct from the latter phenomena. With that in mind, the subject of the next chapter – Chapter 2 – is the suitability of totalitarianism as a subject for what I shall call 'political taxonomy'; the latter being a way of categorising political formations that has its roots in the work of Plato and Aristotle, but that is still assumed in the structure of many an introductory textbook to political theory. Chapter 3 is devoted to totalitarian philosophy, mainly as it appears in the work of fascist philosophers such as Gentile and Carl Schmitt. In Chapter 4 we consider whether the definition of totalitarianism as total control of the individual by the state is sufficient to distinguish it from 'mere' dictatorship or tyranny, and in Chapter 5 whether

there is anything to be learnt about totalitarianism from science-fiction dystopias such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. (It is an instructive comparison though not, I think, a choice that will surprise many readers.) Chapter 6 is a brief summary of conclusions to be drawn from the arguments of the chapters preceding it. Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to Hannah Arendt's analysis of the phenomenon in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in *The Human Condition*.

The point of an exercise such as this should be evident. In 1945, the year that saw the end of World War Two, totalitarianism was one of the main contenders for the title 'spectre haunting Europe'. There were others. One was the prospect of a return to the severe economic recession that had preceded the war, and another was the threat of nuclear destruction. But then, you do not need a philosopher to tell you that slow starvation is an unattractive prospect, or that the complete annihilation of the human species is not such a great idea – at least, not when considered from the point of view of the human species itself. However, the concept of totalitarianism does require attention – philosophical attention. It is true enough that, since 1945, totalitarianism has been absent from certain parts of the world – notably 'the West'. Far from having been driven into permanent exile, however, the malign spectre could be lurking in the darkness, ready to return when the time is right for it. When it does, we will need the ability to recognise it.

The foregoing point, that this is a work of philosophy, needs stressing, for it is important not to confuse political philosophy with 'political science' as it is sometimes called; the latter being a primarily descriptive activity involving the empirical study of actual regimes and their manner of operation. It is also important to keep in mind a clear distinction between political philosophy itself and another descriptive activity; that of surveying the various theoretical approaches that have been taken by others to questions in politics. (There are, of course, descriptive aspects to the discussions contained in the following pages, but they are present, primarily to illustrate various philosophical points.) By contrast, political philosophy, the activity, is primarily critical. It is a matter of the *attitude* with which you approach the questions you have chosen to address. In the present case, then, the chosen questions relate to the idea of totalitarianism, and my hope is that, through taking a critical approach towards them, it might be possible to learn something, not just about totalitarianism, but about philosophy itself.

Two further points: First, it is, of course, true that, in approaching questions with a critical attitude, one comes armed with presuppositions and analytical techniques one has acquired through a certain training. There is no such thing as a presupposition-free or value-free perspective – no 'God's eye view'. Equally, there may be a number of perspectives available. Fair enough; but these (somewhat banal) considerations do nothing to support

the conclusion that the philosophical landscape consists entirely of hermetically sealed 'traditions' from within each of which no-one is really capable of communicating with the inhabitants of the others. I am suspicious of the idea that traditions must be hermetically sealed, just as I am sceptical of catch-all references to 'linguistic philosophy', 'analytic philosophy', 'continental philosophy', and the like. (Thus, if I am right in suggesting – as I do later – that totalitarianism has been relatively neglected by 'anglophone' political philosophers, largely thanks to the influence of John Rawls's 'contractualist' approach, that is not because he was an 'analytic' philosopher, but because he was such an imaginative writer.)[1] Finally – and obviously – totalitarianism raises questions for disciplines other than philosophy. For example, it takes historians to explain just why dictatorships should have risen to such prominence in the earlier years of the twentieth century, and it may take psychology or psychoanalysis to explain how phenomena as repellent as those dictatorships could, at the same time, have been so attractive to so many individuals. But those points raise questions that lie beyond the scope of the present text.

Note

1 Rawls was neither a 'linguistic philosopher' nor an 'analytic philosopher'. For his views on the relationship of language to philosophy see Rawls (1972) p. 47ff.

2 'Totalitarianism' or plain tyranny?

As a start, consider the following passage.

> In the general studies concerned with man and society, totalitarianism is the most perplexing problem of our time. It has burst upon mankind more or less unexpected and unannounced. There are antecedents to be sure, both in thought and action, but they do not add up to the reality with which the mid-twentieth century finds itself confronted and by which it finds itself persistently challenged.
>
> (Friedrich 1954A: 1)

The quotation is drawn from the introduction to a collection of papers that were first presented at a conference on totalitarianism, held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1953. The author was C.J. Friedrich, one of the period's leading political scientists. The passage reflects the seriousness of the concern over 'totalitarianism' felt by many during that period. So does the fact of the conference itself, of course.

Note that Friedrich's claim rests upon two assumptions, each of which is open to question. The first is that totalitarianism – or, at any rate, the phenomenon he calls 'totalitarianism' – is something new; something that only came into existence during the twentieth century, and that was unknown prior to that. This assumption is potentially open to the objection that the 'unexpected and unannounced' phenomenon by which Friedrich and his scholarly contemporaries were so anxiously preoccupied was, on the contrary, an example of something familiar and ancient, namely tyranny – a form of control that has existed since the beginning of recorded time, and that most probably existed well before that. (After all, whatever else they may have been, Hitler and Stalin were certainly tyrants.) It is, of course, true that *the word* 'totalitarianism' only entered the vocabulary at some point during the 1920s – or so the objection runs – but the existence of a new

word does not necessarily signify the existence of a new entity, something for which the new word stands. It could just be a new word for something for which we already have an old word.

Totalitarianism as a subject for political taxonomy

Friedrich's assumption could turn out to be right, of course. My point is that we cannot take it for granted unless we first examine it more closely. The same goes for his second assumption; the assumption that, while 'totalitarianism' itself may be a new and unfamiliar phenomenon, it nevertheless resembles other, more familiar phenomena, if only in certain respects. This is a clear implication of his remark that, 'There are antecedents to be sure', for how would it be possible to recognise that some phenomenon (event or entity) is an antecedent of some other phenomenon unless the two shared common properties and were, by that token, classifiable together? (To borrow an example from zoology, it would be impossible to determine that some dinosaurs were ancestors of modern birds unless there was fossil evidence to show that the two forms of life shared common features – feathers, hollow bones, bipedality, and so on – so much so that they had more in common with each other than either did with other forms of life.)

Here, the significance of the point lies in the way it illustrates Friedrich's tendency to conceive 'the question of totalitarianism' – of coming to terms with 'the most perplexing problem of our time' as he calls it in the passage quoted – as a problem for what I shall call *political taxonomy*. By that expression, I mean that, rather as zoologists seek to categorise organisms by species, genus, family, and so on, thereby locating their position within the evolutionary family tree, so philosophers have, quite often, sought to classify political formations of one sort or another – political 'systems', political 'regimes', constitutions, and the like – by assigning them to some general category. (It is a pattern of thought that can be traced right back to Aristotle, who was both a zoologist and what would nowadays be called a 'political scientist' and who believed that the same method could be used in both disciplines.)[1] This chapter's subject, then, is the suitability of political taxonomy as an approach to the understanding of totalitarianism.

A working specification: list L

Before going any further it will be helpful to have at our disposal a specification of the phenomenon at issue – if only a rough 'working specification'. To that end, consider the following list – *List L*, as I might as well call it. According to List L, a totalitarian system's most salient features are as follows.

1 the presence of a charismatic leader – one who (supposedly) stands at the apex of the power structure. This leader is supposedly inspirational, and is held up to be someone to whom all are required to show respect. (Obvious examples are Hitler, Stalin, and – more recently – North Korea's first 'Dear Leader', Kim Jong-Il.)
2 an ideology to which all are expected to subscribe and that is 'exclusionist' in the sense that it divides 'us' from 'them' – 'Aryans' from 'Jews', for example. 'the proletariat' from 'the bourgeois capitalists' or, simply, 'our' nationals from 'the others'.
3 the existence of a single mass party. (Examples are – obviously – the Nazi Party and the Soviet Communist Party.)
4 a secret police prepared to use all methods – including mass surveillance and terror – to eradicate domestic opposition. (For example, the Gestapo; Stalin's NKVD.)
5 a monopoly of the media, direct control of the education system, and a determination to change basic social, artistic and literary values (propaganda, in other words).
6 an insistence that the interests and the welfare of individuals must always be subordinate to the interests of the state.

There is nothing especially original about List L. The scholarly literature on totalitarianism contains many a similar list, and with List L I am simply contributing my own variant.[2] It was not too difficult to compile, given that – as one historian, Bruce F. Pauley puts it: 'Surprisingly, there has been a greater agreement among historians about how to define "totalitarianism" than there has been about whether the definition actually fits any of the states usually described as totalitarian' (Pauley 2015: 1). In short, there is a consensus – at least when it comes to the definition of the term. However, and here is the point, it is, as Pauley says, a consensus among *historians*; history being – as we may reasonably assume – an activity that is primarily descriptive (hence his reference to the failure of definitions to 'actually fit any of the states usually described as totalitarian'). The assumption may be reasonable enough, but there are difficulties in taking a purely empirical approach and the shortcomings of List L, construed as a working specification, should help to illustrate some of these.

The 'balding man' problem

Let us now turn to the question of how closely a political regime must match List L if it is to qualify as totalitarian. Since the list is meant to be a working specification, there must be some degree of correspondence. On the other hand, it would be absurd to insist that a political system can only qualify as

totalitarian if, and only if, it exhibits the full set of features listed, for that would mean that a system lacking *just one* feature would fail to qualify. Suppose, for example, that, in a particular instance, the one missing feature was the first item on the list, the presence of a charismatic leader. If this were a necessary condition for a system's being totalitarian, it would follow that General Franco could not be described as having imposed totalitarianism upon Spain, even though there is an obvious case for stating that he did just that. At least, it would follow, given that Franco was, by all accounts, a decidedly *un*charismatic figure. (Franco was a physically unappealing pedantic bureaucrat, described by one historian as being 'short' and as having 'a pot belly' and a high-pitched voice, which provoked jokes among his fellow officers. They called him by the diminutives *comandantin* and *Franquito*.) (Beevor 2006: 50) A similarly absurd conclusion would have to be drawn in the case of North Korea, whose first 'Dear Leader', Kim Il Sung, was once described by an observer as resembling, 'a fat delivery boy from a neighbourhood Chinese food stall' (Lankov 2013: 4).

But then, if a political system can count as totalitarian if it lacks just one of the features listed, what if a system lacks two? Would it not *still* count as totalitarian? Here again, it could be that Franco's Spain provides an example. It is, thus, true enough that Franco relied upon the Catholic Church for support. However, I am not sure that it would be accurate to describe Catholicism as 'an ideology to which all were expected to subscribe' (List L, item 2), or to think of membership of the church as resembling membership of a party such as the Nazi Party or the Soviet Communist Party (item 3). Then again, if a regime lacking two of the features included in List L would still count as totalitarian, why not a regime lacking three? It is beginning to appear that a purely descriptive account of totalitarianism – one that treated List L as paradigmatic would be an example – is threatened by that familiar philosophers' bogey-person, the 'balding man problem'. This is the problem of stating precisely how many hairs a man has to lose before he can be described as bald. It arises because, if a man who loses just one hair clearly is not bald, and if a man who loses two is not bald either – whereas a man with absolutely no hairs clearly is bald – then there is a question as to exactly where the hairy/bald dividing line lies. That is the problem, and the suggestion is that, similarly, if a regime lacking just one of the features included in List L counts as totalitarian, and if a regime lacking two also counts as totalitarian – but if a regime which lacks every single feature is not totalitarian – which must be the case if we treat List L as paradigmatic – then there must be a problem in deciding how many features must be missing before it is no longer appropriate to describe a regime as totalitarian.

The conclusion to draw here is pretty clear. It is that no account of totalitarianism can succeed without introducing a conceptual element into its

analysis – some organising conception in terms of which it becomes possible to distinguish totalitarianism's essential elements from those accidental properties that just happen to be features of this or that totalitarian regime. (Note the contrast with zoology here. It is that, normally, the scientist is perfectly capable of discerning the organism before proceeding to analyse it. First, you see the creature that has been washed up on the shore. You then proceed with anatomy, noting its component parts and the relationship between them. By contrast, in politics, it seems that you need a definition before you can know what it is that you are supposed to be analysing. The thing lying on the shore may be there, as it were, but you need the definition before you can even see it.)

I can think of no available response to this point that actually succeeds in establishing that a purely empirical approach is possible here – and I mean, of course, a *purely* empirical approach. Thus, one possibility is to deny, flatly, that the conclusion I have just drawn is correct – and I can well imagine that there will be empirically minded 'political scientists', suspicious of philosophy, who will want to do just that, insisting that there is *no need* to introduce abstraction into an account of totalitarianism. But such an approach would be a non-starter for even the most banal descriptive activity – collecting the numbers of railway locomotives, for example – must involve some principle of selection. (You choose to pick out the locomotives, and not to write down the numbers of the wagons they are hauling.) Likewise, a categorisation of political formations must involve a principle for distinguishing the essential from the accidental. (It was apparently the case that one of Stalin's arms was noticeably longer than the other. You could, therefore, say – I suppose – that it was a feature of the Soviet system that it was run by a man with arms of unequal length. I doubt that anything of much interest can be gleaned from the fact, however.)

A similar response might be to stipulate, quite simply, that a specific group of regimes are the ones you are prepared to count. This was the approach taken by Leonard Schapiro in a 1972 study of the subject. In response to the argument that 'without proper denotation of the concept, we do not know what systems to study and observe' (i.e. that we need a concept of totalitarianism before we can know where to direct our attention empirically), Schapiro insisted that, 'we *do* know what systems to study and observe, namely the three countries to which the term was in fact applied in the 1930s', and that, '*it is from the study of these three alone* that proper limits to the use of, and meanings of, the term "totalitarian" can be discovered' (Schapiro 1972: 17 my emphasis). Schapiro is, of course, referring to the regimes of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. One can appreciate the attraction of this approach. At first glance, it appears 'realistic' and 'hard-headed'. Moreover, the idea that both Nazism and communism fall into the same category – the category

labelled 'totalitarianism' – can hold a particular appeal to those on the right who would like to tar fascism and communism with the same brush. That is why it is, perhaps, especially worth noting that a stipulative approach, such as Schapiro's, has its problems.

To appreciate their nature, note – firstly – that Schapiro's stipulation is, in fact, ambiguous between the following claims.

1 The claim that the regimes of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin were totalitarian, and that those, *and only those* regimes can be counted as examples of totalitarianism.
2 The claim that the regimes of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin were totalitarian, and that those, *and regimes very like them* can be counted as examples of totalitarianism.

The former claim carries with it an absurd implication, namely that, were a new regime to come into existence – one that was exactly like one of the three listed in every respect – it would still not be a genuinely totalitarian regime. Suppose for example, sometime next year, and in Italy, a new fascist regime were to spring to power, exactly like Mussolini's, even down to the fact that the new dictator's name was Benito Mussolini. If it were the case, as the former claim states, that the regimes of (the first) Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin, and only those, were genuinely totalitarian, then it would have to follow – absurdly – that the new regime would not count.

The latter claim is the more plausible of the two, but note – and here is my point – it raises the question of what the features which render regimes 'very like' the three listed might be, and therefore the need to define a concept of totalitarianism in terms of which the structure and practice of actual regimes can be assessed. (Having a dictator with one arm longer than the other is, presumably, not a defining feature, and nor is having a leader whose name is Benito.) Moreover, it is begging the question to suppose – as Schapiro appears to – that a specification of the concept can be derived from the study of the regimes of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin alone. In fact, there might even be a mismatch between theory, as exemplified by a concept, and practice as exemplified by the manner in which a system operates in reality. For example, it may be reasonable to argue that, although Mussolini himself insisted that his regime was totalitarian, it did not, in fact, count as such.[3]

A further difficulty with the stipulative approach is that the differences between the three regimes might turn out to be so great that it is difficult to determine any common element that might be relevant to one's classification. Certainly, it is easy to empathise with Barbara Goodwin's judgement that, 'the term "totalitarian" has been hopelessly debased by its regular use as a term of abuse' (Goodwin 1987: 186). As she explains (ibid: 186–7):

> When the USSR (before 1991), China, Cuba, Haiti, and the Philippines (before 1986), El Salvador, Argentina and (until the mid-1970s) Greece, Spain, and Portugal are all described by the same epithet, there is no possibility of analysing the differences between their political systems, or passing discriminating judgements on their varying ideologies and goals.

It is equally easy to appreciate Slavoj Žižek's argument (2005) that,

> the difference between the Nazi and Stalinist universes is clear, just as it is when we recall that in the Stalinist show trials, the accused had publicly to confess his crimes and give an account of how he came to commit them, whereas the Nazis would never have required a Jew to confess that he was involved in a Jewish plot against the German nation

and, therefore, that Nazism and Stalinism cannot be assimilated to the same model.

Finally, it would be of no help to invoke Wittgenstein's famous doctrine of 'family resemblances' here. As readers well-acquainted with philosophy will know, the reference to family resemblances occurs in a section of the *Philosophical Investigations* in which Wittgenstein is conducting a critique of the idea that words acquire meaning thanks to the existence of some common quality – some 'essence' – for which they 'stand' in the manner of names. Against this, Wittgenstein invites his readers to 'Consider, for example, the proceedings that we call "games"' and points out that there is no feature common to every activity we count as a game; that, as with the relationships between members of a family, 'if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that' (Wittgenstein 1953: §66).

Wittgenstein's was one of the twentieth century's most influential contributions to philosophy. (It is a fact which makes Schapiro's essentialist approach to definition all the more surprising. In 1972, almost 20 years after the publication of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, it should already have seemed old-fashioned.) Influential though it may have been, however, Wittgenstein's doctrine cannot be applied in the case of 'totalitarianism', and it is worth noting the reason why. It is that 'totalitarian' and 'totalitarianism' are not words in 'ordinary language', at least not in the sense required by Wittgenstein's argument. Wittgenstein held that philosophical problems arise when the way words are used in everyday contexts is misconstrued. 'Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday', he said. (1953: §38). His is, thus, an argument that rests upon the juxtaposition of two situations; one defined by the range of contexts within

which a given word, and the expressions related to it, are normally used (to inform, to request, to describe, to warn, and so on); the other that of the philosopher seeking to make sense of those usages and, if failing to interpret those contexts correctly, coming up with misleading and bizarre metaphysical interpretations. In the case of 'totalitarianism', however, the two situations cannot be easily distinguished, for the word comes already laden with the particular values or theoretical preconceptions held by whoever is using it. A political journalist may describe policies he or she dislikes as 'totalitarian', a political theorist may contrast a regime he or she regards as totalitarian from others that are supposedly not, but there is no further concept of totalitarianism – out there in the world of 'ordinary usage', and independent of such judgements – against which such claims can be tested.

Plato's taxonomy of 'imperfect societies'

So, where should we go from here in the search for a criterion by means of which to distinguish totalitarianism from tyranny pure and simple? In philosophy, examples drawn from antiquity can sometimes provide a useful perspective upon contemporary issue so, with that in mind, I suggest that we turn for a moment to the taxonomy of 'imperfect societies' contained in a short section of Plato's *Republic* about three quarters of the way into the text (375BCE/1987: 295–358). This should provide a useful point of comparison and contrast, and for a number of reasons. One is, simply that the passage is well-known. Others are that it is brief and relatively clear. For our purposes, there could be lessons to be learnt from it

First a summary: The four 'types of society' Plato identifies are, respectively, 'timarchy', 'oligarchy', 'democracy' and 'tyranny'. He presents them in that order because he believes that each is destined to degenerate into the next – with tyranny being the worst type. The first on the list, 'timarchy' will be the least familiar to modern readers. To Greeks of the fourth century BCE, however, Plato's portrait of the timarchic system would have been recognisable as modelled upon the constitution of Sparta, where a disciplined caste of soldier-aristocrats held another caste, the 'helots', in absolute servitude. Plato's story of degeneration begins with a representation of timarchy as a corrupt form of the ideal (and 'perfect') state, which it is the purpose of the *Republic* to describe. According to Plato, timarchy is destined to degenerate into oligarchy, a 'society where it is wealth that counts . . . and in which political power is in the hands of the rich' (ibid: 305). He holds that oligarchy must be succeeded – inevitably – by democracy, in which power is exercised by the *demos*, or ordinary people, and, lastly, that democracy must be succeeded in turn by tyranny, the most degenerate item on the list.

Note, firstly, that Plato's is an argument from political *forms*. Take his account of the way that – as he thinks – democracy must inevitably degenerate into tyranny. All Plato needs for his argument to work is a definition of democracy as rule by the *demos* – i.e. the ordinary people – this being the principle that distinguishes democracy from other types of political system. It is a straightforward argument according to which democracy must lead to rule by the best orators, and not by the people best fitted to rule, and then to an inevitable deterioration into tyranny. As he puts it, 'A democratic society in its thirst for liberty may fall under the influence of bad leaders, who intoxicate it with excessive quantities of the neat spirit' (Plato ibid: 320). My point is that it relies upon a definition of a principle that distinguishes democracy from other forms – plus a few assumptions about human psychology, of course – and not upon a weight of empirical data. That is what gives the argument its *philosophical* character. There is, thus, an instructive contrast between Plato's and another Greek work on the subject of democracy, namely Aristotle's *The Athenian Constitution* (332–22BCE/1984). Aristotle's is a detailed descriptive account of the Athenian system. In it – or, rather in the surviving fragment we have – he relates the history of how the system came into being, and outlines in some detail the manner in which officials were appointed, for example, and the way in which meetings of the courts and the assembly were organised. By the same token, a present-day descriptive account might explore the differences and similarities between different democratic systems; pointing out that the British electoral system is, in many ways, different from the French, for example, and drawing attention to the fact that, whereas France and the USA have written constitutions, the UK does not – and so on. But an argument such as Plato's need contain no such detail.

'Totalitarianism' or tyranny

A second point to note is that, in the absence of a criterion for differentiating totalitarianism from tyranny pure and simple, we have, as yet, no reason for supposing that totalitarianism cannot be accommodated within Plato's *schema*. In other words, the regimes that have been described as totalitarian in our own time would have been counted as tyrannies by Plato. If this is right, it would follow that C.J. Friedrich is wrong in supposing that totalitarianism is a new phenomenon, one that first appeared in the twentieth century.

It is worth spelling this out a little. It has to be conceded, of course, that, for the Greeks, the word *tyrannos* did not carry quite the same connotations as the word 'tyrant' tends to carry in our own times. (Any competent classical scholar will tell you as much.[4]) For the Greeks, a tyrant was, quite

simply, an individual who had come to power through unorthodox, unconstitutional means; whereas, in modern times, a tyrant tends to be thought of as, necessarily, a ruler who is 'cruel and oppressive' or as a person exercising power or control in a 'cruel, unreasonable or arbitrary way'. (These are the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions of 'tyrant'.)

> 'Well – maybe. Even so, Plato's description of the course any tyrant's career must take is chilling. First of all, the tyrant is pictured as rising to power on a wave of popular support. Plato writes: '[T]he mob will do anything he [the tyrant] tells them, and the temptation to shed a brother's blood is too strong. . . . Exiles, executions, hints of cancellation of debts and redistribution of land follow, till their instigator is inevitably and fatally bound either to be destroyed by his enemies or to change from man to wolf and make himself tyrant'. Then, [W]hen he has disposed of his foreign enemies by treaty or destruction, and has no more to fear from them, he will in the first place continue to stir up war in order that the people may continue to need a leader, and '[H]e must keep a sharp eye out for men of courage or intelligence or wealth; for, whether he likes it or not, it is his happy fate to be their constant enemy and to intrigue until he has purged them from the state'. Eventually, '[H]e is compelled to make the happy choice between a life with companions most of whom are worthless and all of whom hate him, and an inevitable death' (ibid: 326–7) It's a description which might easily have been taken from a biography of Stalin. So might the following proverb; the one Plato's sketch is designed to illustrate.
>
> 'The man who tastes a single piece of human flesh, mixed in with the rest of the sacrifice, is fated to become a wolf'.
>
> (ibid: 325)

The Greek **polis** *as a model for modern totalitarianism*

Should we conclude, then, that modern totalitarianism is really nothing more than totalitarianism 'so-called'; that the word 'totalitarianism' is just another word for tyranny, a system that would have been familiar to the Greeks? That would be jumping to a conclusion too soon, for the imperfect societies categorised by Plato lacked features that are present in the political forms of our own time.

The point is that totalitarianism might be a very different *sort of thing* from those imperfect societies. It is, thus, noticeable that Plato distinguishes only four types of political system, or 'constitution', and that these are, in fact, the four that would have existed in the world with which he was most familiar, the world of the Greek *polis*. Those are the one's with which he

would have been especially concerned, given his interest in forestalling what he saw as the degeneration of the *polis* into anarchy. (One wonders whether Egypt's pharaonic system, a traditional way of doing things passed down to his own time through many past generations, would count as a distinct 'type of society' for Plato; and, if it would, where it would fit into his classification. Then again, how would Plato categorise the practices of the nomadic Scythians who roamed Siberia in his time? Both Egyptian society and Scythian society would have been known to Plato, if only because they had been well documented by the historian Herodotus a generation or two before his own. But then, unlike Herodotus, Plato is interested in rather more than documentation (see Herodotus 450–20BCE/2003).)

To return to the analogy – or, rather disanalogy – between taxonomy in zoology and taxonomy in politics for a moment note that, in both cases, the procedure rests upon the supposition that there is a specific category to which all the entities classified belong. In the case of zoological taxonomy this is fair enough, for the entities studied by the zoologist do fall into the same general category, the category of animals. (The category is so broad, and the fact so evidently contained in the notion of zoology itself, that it is – normally – hardly worth remarking upon.) In the case of Friedrich's treatment of totalitarianism, one way in which the tendency to think taxonomically shows up is in his argument that, 'fascist and Communist totalitarian society are basically alike. that is to say are more nearly alike to each other than to any other systems of government and society' (1954B: 47). (Friedrich might have added – but did not – that, in just the same way, dinosaurs and birds are alike, 'in fact more nearly alike to each other than to other organisms'.) He also holds that, 'totalitarian society is historically unique and *sui generis*' (ibid). This talk of 'types of society' carries with it the suggestion that a 'society' is a distinct, easily recognisable entity with relatively well-defined boundaries – akin to, if not identical with, the boundaries of a nation state. It may be a conception that fits many societies reasonably well and, in 1953, when the international order was dominated by the institution of the nation-state even more than it is now, the picture upon which it rests would have appeared all the more apt. But it is not a picture to be taken for granted.

There are, however, differences between the political structures of ancient Greece and those of our own time that suggest that the supposition should be treated with caution. For example, it is a feature of Plato's classification that it relies upon a simple bipolar distinction between those who exert power – the upper caste, the oligarchs the *demos*, or the tyrant – and those over whom power is exercised. In the case of tyranny we are, thus, led to picture an individual or group exerting direct control over the others, with

the vector of power moving in a single direction from the former to the latter. I shall call this *the control model*. It may paint a reasonably accurate picture of the way things worked within the Greek *polis*, but, as a representation of the power relationships that can hold in the modern world, it must surely be too simple. In the latter world, political systems can rely upon relationships between their various components – relationships of power and submission – which form networks and which cannot be summarised with the help of a simple story about 'top-down' control, and this could well be true of totalitarianism, *considered as a system*. (To put it another way, there might be 'checks and balances', though *not* the checks and balances for which constitutional democracies are so often celebrated.)

Secondly, compared with modern states, *poleis* were relatively *separate*, each from the others. I do not just mean that they were geographically separate, although they were. You had to travel on foot or by horseback in order to get from one to the other. I mean that each had its own centralised government – be it a group of individuals or a democratic assembly – and its own system for enforcing laws. There would have been nothing much else around to challenge the autonomy of its governing institutions. Compare this with a modern state, where the authority and power of the state itself is rivalled by that of many a transnational, or supra-national, nexus. Multinational business organisations supply one type of example. Multi-state, cooperative arrangements, established by treaty – NATO, the UN, the World Bank, the EU, and so on – supply another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, a note on why exercises such as this matter. Consider the following passage, which is drawn from Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* (2010: vii–viii):

> In the middle of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some fourteen million people. The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. During the consolidation of National Socialism and Stalinism (1933–1938) mass violence of a sort never before seen in history was visited upon this region. The victims were chiefly Jews, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, and Balts, the peoples native to these lands. The fourteen million were murdered over the course of only twelve years, between 1933 and 1945, while both Hitler and Stalin were in power. Though their homelands became battle fields midway

> through this period, these people were all victims of murderous policy rather than casualties of war. The Second World War was the most lethal conflict in history, and about half of the soldiers who perished on all of its battlefields all the world over died here, in this same region, in the bloodlands. Yet not a single one of the fourteen million murdered was a soldier on active duty. Most were women, children, and the aged; none were bearing weapons; many had been stripped of their possessions, including their clothes.

These were terrible events indeed. In fact, the adjective 'terrible' seems inadequate to capture their enormity. The atrocities Snyder describes were committed by the regimes of Stalin and Hitler; that is, is in the name of regimes that have come to be described as 'totalitarian'. Now if (1) there is such a thing as totalitarianism (as opposed to mere tyranny), and if (2) the regimes in question were, in fact, totalitarian and if (3) the evil character of the atrocities is explicable in terms of the latter fact, then we need to know what totalitarianism is if we are to understand what happened. On the other hand, there are considerations that tend to shake the idea that there is any special connection between the two; that is, between totalitarianism and gross atrocity. For example, there may be regimes that qualify as totalitarian according to some criterion – which match List L, for example – but whose misdeeds are in no way out of the ordinary. And then, there are examples of gross atrocity, genocide even, committed by regimes that do not qualify as totalitarian. The massacres committed in the wake of the French revolution, during 'the Terror' may be one example. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 may be another. Then again, if it should turn out that there is, in fact, no such thing as totalitarianism, we shall have to look elsewhere for explanations of these horrors. We shall be returning to these points.

Notes

1 For the passage in which Aristotle draws an explicit parallel between the method applicable in each of the two disciplines, see his *Politics* (350BCE/1981) p. 246ff.
2 See, for example, Raymond Aron's list of the 'five main signs of totalitarianism' in *Democracy and Totalitarianism* (1965/1969) or C.J. Friedrich's list in Friedrich 1954B.
3 This was Hannah Arendt's view. See 1951/2004: p. 211.
4 See, for example, Andrewes (1971) pp. 61–2.

3 The total state

It was Benito Mussolini who wrote that, 'The capital point of the Fascist doctrine is the conception of the State'. He went on to explain that, 'In the conception of Fascism, the State is an absolute before which individuals and groups are relative', and that, 'Individuals and groups are "conceivable" inasmuch as they are in the state' (Mussolini 1933/2015: 41). In making these assertions, Mussolini was echoing the work of his muse, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile. (In fact, Mussolini's essay, *The Doctrine of Fascism*, was partly written by Gentile himself.) As Gentile put the point in another essay, for fascism, 'the state is not a consequence but a principle', so much so that, 'for fascism, the state is a wholly spiritual creation'.(Gentile 1928/2015: 82)

A similar conception informs the work of Carl Schmitt, the German philosopher who refers to, 'The total state, which potentially embraces every domain', something that results in 'the identity of state and society' (Schmitt 2007: 82). It is in the work of these writers – Gentile and Schmitt – that the idea of a 'total state', or as Gentile called it, the 'ethical state' is most fully articulated, and it is upon their work that I shall concentrate for the most part. (Gentile was described by Mussolini as – and he described himself as – 'the philosopher of fascism'; and its certainly true that his connections with the party were strong enough for him to count as Italian fascism's 'ideas man'. Schmitt was an enthusiastic Nazi who joined the German party in 1933 and who retained his Nazi convictions, well after World War Two until his death in 1985.)[1]

In this chapter, then, we turn to some of the philosophical arguments that were sometimes used to justify fascism and the totalitarian vision which went with it. Of course, are differences between the positions taken by these writers. Nevertheless, certain themes are common to the work of both. They share (1) a particular view of the relationship between state and individual, (2) a particular view of the relationship between the state and the nation, and (3) a hostility to liberalism.

I shall take each in turn but, before I do, a point of clarification is in order. It is that, in the earlier sections of this chapter, I shall be treating the arguments of Gentile and Schmitt as *philosophy*, not as *ideology*. The two are easily confused, for a philosophy, like an ideology, is an intellectual system consisting of beliefs and principles (and, of course, the expression 'totalitarian thought' is vague enough to cover both). There is a difference, however, and this lies in the standards appropriate for the assessment of each. A philosophical system must be judged in terms of the coherence of the concepts it deploys, the logical consistency of the arguments it advances, and the credibility of the premises upon which it rests. As noted, Gentile and Schmitt were fascists, but they were also philosophers who advocated totalitarianism, and it is their arguments for the latter that I am about to describe. That's because the present book is a work of philosophy whose chosen subject is totalitarianism – so it is obviously important to consider the philosophical case that has been made for it. As for Stalin, although he was a totalitarian dictator, he did not need a special 'totalitarian philosophy' of his own to draw upon because he already had a ready-made version in a particular interpretation of Marxism. We shall come to that point later, as we shall to the definition of 'ideology'.

State and individual

So, what – if anything – can it mean to say that the 'state is an absolute before which individuals and groups are relative', that, in the conception of fascism, 'Individuals and groups are "conceivable" inasmuch as they are in the State' (Mussolini 2015: 41), that 'In the case of Fascism, State and individual are one and the same things, or rather, they are inseparable terms of a necessary synthesis' (Gentile 2015: 82), or that, 'The equation state = politics becomes erroneous and deceptive at exactly the moment when state and society penetrate each, so that, 'What had been up to that point affairs of state become social matters and, vice versa, what had been purely social matters become affairs of state' (Schmitt 2007: 22). In their manner of expression, these statements – with their references to the absolute, the relative, the 'necessary synthesis', and so on – carry with them the suggestion that they have something profound to convey. Their meaning is hardly transparent, however – so what, precisely, might that something be?

It is true enough, of course, that anyone's identity – a person's values, beliefs, ambitions, plans and projects – are, as it were, a 'function' of the conditions that prevail during his or her life. Social, political, economic conditions – intellectual factors, including religious beliefs and the state of scientific knowledge – all these will have their part to play. A city dweller living in the earlier part of the twenty-first century will, thus, be a very

different individual from, say, an ancient Egyptian, a Bronze Age Greek, a medieval peasant or even – to come closer to ourselves in time – a European of the sixteenth century. Human nature is, if you like, 'culturally determined' to a much greater extent than, say 'cat nature', for we can take it for granted, I think, that there has not been much difference between Egyptian cats, Bronze Age cats, medieval cats, sixteenth century cats, or the cats of our own time. However, the truth of *that* thesis does not yield the conclusion that the identity of individuals is a function of the state *in particular* – i.e. that other factors play a subordinate role – which is the totalitarian claim at issue. In fact, it is perfectly compatible with the alternative view, namely that the workings of the state should be *subordinate* to the requirements of the individual, so it is not even compatible with the practical inference the fascist philosophers under discussion here would like to draw, namely that individuals must be absolutely subordinate to the demands of the state.

But if the fascist/totalitarian view of the relationship between individual and state is different from, and more radical than, the commonplace but credible view that individual nature is, to a great extent, culturally determined, what might the former view be? Here is one suggestion: It is the view that the relationship resembles that between a component and the machine of which it is a part. To explain: Imagine coming across a carburetor, say, or a computer's mouse; but imagine too that neither cars nor computers have yet been invented. Consequently, you have no idea of what a car, or a computer, might be., in which case neither would you know what the carburetor or the mouse were. You would have no idea what these things were *for* – no conception of the wider mechanism within which they might possibly serve a purpose. The example is, of course, fantastical, because no-one could possibly design a carburetor or a mouse without having, at the same time, some conception of what an automobile or a computer is. You could put the point by saying that neither the carburetor nor the mouse could be 'conceivable' without there being the corresponding ideas of 'the car' and 'the computer'. Could it be that, by analogy, individuals – as portrayed by Mussolini – are only 'conceivable' in as much as they are subjects of a state?

Well, perhaps: Its one way to interpret Mussolini's opaque remark (and one that, you could say, has a visual analogue in those perfectly choreographed parades that take place in North Korea, and in which hundreds of individuals express their patriotic fervour by moving as one). But, when interpreted in that way, it should be obvious, too, that the claim is false. It is just not true that, were you to come across an isolated individual – marooned on a desert island, perhaps – you would not understand anything about that person unless you knew the state of which he or she was a subject. It may gain a certain superficial credibility through being confused with the more commonplace view referred to earlier, that human nature is

culturally conditioned, but it is, nevertheless, false. (In philosophy, this is a common phenomenon. An idiosyncratic and questionable thesis – in this case the thesis that the individual is a 'function' of the state – derives a superficial air of credibility through its similarity to a different thesis, the latter being true, but mundane and of no interesting consequence.)

An alternative: the pragmatic view

One way to illustrate the idiosyncratic character of the totalitarian account of the individual/state relationship is to contrast it with the view that the relationship is essentially pragmatic; in other words, that the state is essentially a device for serving the interests and aspirations of individuals. The latter view is consistent with the idea that those interests and aspirations may be conditioned in all sorts of ways – by society, culture, and so on – but, at its core there lies an insistence that individual and state are separate entities, the former being, as it were, 'prior' to the latter. Variants of the pragmatic view can be found in the work of philosophers right across the political spectrum from those on the assertively pro-free market right, according to whom the function of the state should be limited to protection against force and fraud; to those who take the utilitarian view that its function should be that of regulating conflicts of interest between individuals; to more egalitarian and socialistic views, according to which the state should aim to establish fairness in the way individuals are treated. In all these cases it is assumed that individuals act with certain aims in mind, and that the function of the state is, or ought to be, simply to regulate the relations between them as they pursue those aims.

There are, no doubt, wide differences between various versions of the pragmatic account, but the salient point here is that, on any version of that account, there is no need to exaggerate or romanticise the fact that any state must consist primarily of agencies and institutions. For an illustration of the point, take Max Weber's famous definition of the state as a ' human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory' (Weber 2004: loc 2104). On Weber's account, the state must comprise the institutions whose function is to make and interpret law, and which claim the legitimate authority to do so – these being parliaments, for example, and courts. It must also comprise the agencies whose job it is to enforce that law – the police being the main example in most modern states. More than that states must impose taxation if they are to function, and therefore employ officials for that purpose. Where states assume control of the economy, there may also be a central bank, responsible to the state, and nor is it unusual for the operation of other systems – the education system, the railway system, the postal service – to be assumed under the responsibility of the state. All this is familiar enough. My point

here is that, on the pragmatic view, *there is no more to the story than that*, and that there is, therefore, an obvious mismatch between any version of the pragmatic view and, for example, Giovanni Gentile's claim that 'The State is a wholly spiritual creation' (1928/2015: 82). Try persuading yourself – or, indeed, anyone – that the traffic police or the Inland Revenue Service are 'wholly spiritual creations'. You would have to be kidding.

State and nation

Totalitarian philosophy also favours a certain view of the relationship between the state and the nation. In totalitarianism's ideal world, the former embodies and reflects the values and aspirations of the latter. You could say that, on this point, totalitarianism takes as its motto *To each nation its own state*.

Italian fascism's 'official philosopher', Gentile, connects this relationship with the development of Italian national consciousness in the years following the end of World War One. 'For the Italian nation', he wrote, 'the World War was a deep spiritual crisis' and (1928/2015: 71):

> For one kind of person the important point was to fight the war, either on the side of Germany or against Germany: but in either event to fight the war, without regard to specific advantages – to fight the war in order that at last the Italian nation, created rather by favouring conditions than by the will of its people to be a nation, might receive its test in blood, such a test as only war can bring by uniting all citizens in a single thought, a single passion, a single hope, emphasising to each individual that all have something in common, something transcending private interests.

Note how Gentile represents the nation as something distinct from – something 'over and above' – the individual people who compose its membership. Gentile goes on to describe the state as the necessary condition – 'the necessary premise' – for the realisation of this 'new nationalism' (ibid: 77). There is a patently sinister aspect to Gentile's argument as well. For example, take his description of the paramilitary fascist 'squads' – the gangs of thugs who terrorised the opposition in the early 1920s – as the midwives of the new order. These, he describes as, 'the force of a State not yet born but on the way to being' (ibid: 79). Clearly, constitutional niceties were not to his taste.

Carl Schmitt defends a similar view, though with a different argument. According to Schmitt:

(i) 'The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political' (Schmitt 1937/2007: 19);

(ii) '[T]he state is the political status of an organised people in an enclosed territorial unit', and, 'In its literal sense and in its historical appearance the state is a specific entity of a people – Vis-à- vis the many conceivable kinds of entities, it is in the decisive case the ultimate authority'(ibid.); and

(iii) 'The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy' (ibid: 26).

Schmitt enlarges upon the last of these claims as follows (ibid: 26) :

> Insofar as it is not derived from other criteria, the antithesis of friend and enemy corresponds to the relatively independent criteria of other antitheses: good and evil in the moral sphere, beautiful and ugly in the aesthetic sphere, and so on. In any event, it is independent, not in the sense of a distinct new domain, but in that it can neither be based upon any one antithesis or any combination of other antitheses, nor can it be traced to these. If the antithesis of good and evil is not simply identical with that of beautiful and ugly, profitable and unprofitable, and cannot be directly reduced to the others, then the antithesis of friend and enemy must even less be confused or mistaken for the others.

What are we to make of this? Schmitt's argument – with its emphasis upon the determination of a concept's structure and its talk of 'antitheses' – owes something to Hegel. There is also an obvious, if minimal, truth in his assertions that ethics is, in essence, concerned with the difference between ('the antithesis of') good and evil, aesthetics with that between beautiful and ugly, and so on. But why should 'the political' be defined, in confrontational terms, as resting upon a distinction between 'friend' and 'enemy'?

The answer lies in the fact that, for Schmitt, a 'people' is something more than a random assortment of individuals. (His central position is clear enough, I think, although I shall not attempt to extract a fully coherent thread of reasoning from his quasi-Hegelian mode of expression.) On his type of view, 'the German people' or 'the English people' are expressions that refer to something distinct from – something 'over and above' – the aggregate set of individuals who happen to be living in Germany or England at some point in time. (In other words, Schmitt's conception of a 'people' is pretty much equivalent to Gentile's conception of a 'nation'.) For 'peoples', so construed, their members must develop a conception of themselves as forming parts of a greater whole, a wider collective entity – a 'people' – and this means recognising a distinction between themselves and 'the other', or, as Schmitt puts it, between 'friend and enemy'. Add to this the idea that a

state – perhaps I should say a *true* state, or a state *properly so called* – is a feature of a 'people', and it becomes clear that, for Schmitt, the claim that 'the state is the political status of an organised people in an enclosed territorial unit' (2007: 19) adds up to something other than the observation that a state is (merely) the set of agencies charged with the administration of those individuals who happen to inhabit a particular area.

The idea of 'the nation': difficulties

This view is fraught with potential difficulties, and, since my aim in this chapter is to emphasise its distinctive character, let me describe some of them. I will stick to three.

First, there is *the difficulty of establishing precisely what sort of thing a 'nation' might be*. On the view in question, the state is one sort of thing and the nation another. Out of the two, the former is the easier to define. Thus, if the state is, as Weber held, the set of agencies that exercise a monopoly of force over a given area, and successfully claim legitimacy in doing so, then, for any state, describing it must simply be a question of describing that set of agencies. (Nor is everyday usage any help here. In everyday speech nation and state are sometimes held to be distinct – for example, when three distinct nations, England, Scotland, and Wales, are described as being administered by a single state – and sometimes the words 'nation' and 'state' are used synonymously. The British *National* Health Service is, thus, the *state* health service. Likewise, the United *Nations* is, in fact, an organisation for facilitating the relationships between *states*.) But if the nation is something other than a set of administrative agencies, then what – precisely – might it be?

Clearly, a nation cannot be a physical object, something one can see and touch – like a table, a chair, or a cat. Nor can it be a mere aggregate of individual people – at least, not according to the view in question. On that view, the British nation, for example, must be something more than the full set of those individuals who happen to be living in the British Isles just at the moment. There must be something that unites them, or most of them, into a greater whole – the latter being, 'the British nation'. One thing that *can* be said about a nation, however, is that it is a sort of association. I mean that if there are nations, then they have members (nationals), and there will be rules and customs to which those members conform, and to some of which they are required to conform. Unlike clubs, they are not organisations that one may choose to join or leave. Could it be argued, then, that a nation is a sort of non-voluntary practice within which participants conform to rule-governed behaviour – *like* a club in some ways, but not in others? Or, following David Miller's similar suggestion, could it

be argued that a nation is, in some ways, like a sports team. Miller writes (Miller 1975: loc.243):

> When we describe a group of people in this way we imply that they work or play in close proximity to one another. But we also imply more than this: we imply that they see themselves as co-operating to achieve some end, that they regard one another as having obligations to the team.

A team is, thus, more than 'just a bunch of individuals'.

It is an interesting suggestion but, I think, ultimately unsustainable. The reason is that, so far as I can see, there must be a publicly recognisable aspect to a rule-governed activity if we are to distinguish *really* engaging in that activity from simply *believing* that one is engaging in it, or *pretending* to engage in it. For example, in the case of games or sports, it is clear enough that sentences such as 'He is playing chess' and 'She is playing football' are only meaningful thanks to the existence of publicly recognisable rules, rules that define the activities of chess and football. Equally clearly, it is only thanks to the existence of such rules that we are able to distinguish *really* playing chess from *pretending* to play chess, or from simply *imagining* that you are playing chess when you are not. (A group of three-year-olds, randomly moving chess pieces about on a chess board, would not be playing chess.)

In the case of the concept of the nation, then, where might the equivalent public/private distinction lie? It is a good question because, if there is no such line, it would seem to follow that there is, in reality, no such thing as 'the nation', genuinely distinct from the state? One reason for raising it is that there have been notable attempts to identify the existence of the nation with its existence as an idea in the minds of its members. For example, Benedict Anderson argues that a nation is an 'imagined community'. It is imagined, he writes, in the sense that 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson 2006: loc.207). To take another example, proponents of the idea of 'the nation 'are liable to invoke the work of Ernest Renan, the French theologian and historian, and, specifically, his essay of 1882, *What is a Nation?* (Renan 1992). According to Renan, a nation is 'a great solidarity constituted by the feeling of sacrifices made and those that one is still disposed to make' and 'A nation's existence is (please excuse the metaphor) a daily plebiscite' (ibid: 10).

But, if it is Renan's view, as it appears to be, that nations exist if there are people (the relevant nationals) who believe they exist and who therefore behave as if they exist, this obliterates the line between the imaginary

and the real. Why are the nationals he envisages not analogous to children who believe themselves to be playing chess when they are not? So one is tempted to ask. Renan's claim invites the sceptical retort that there are, likewise, people who believe in fairies, who behave as if fairies exist, but that the existence of fairies can hardly be inferred from the fact. The inference could not be drawn – or so the sceptical retort continues – even if a plebiscite, or referendum, were to show that 100% of the electorate believed in fairies. Or, in case that strikes you as too flippant an example, take the case of organised religion, an imposing structure of institutions and practices, founded upon a presupposition that might well be false – or that could be false so far as anyone knows. I mean the presupposition that God exists. (You would not argue that God must exist on the grounds that lots of people go to church every Sunday in the belief that he does.)

With that, let me turn to a second difficulty, namely *the difficulty of explaining the relationship between the idea of 'the nation' and ideas of desert and obligation*. Suppose, then that some sense *can* be attached to the idea that there are nations? In that case, the troubles facing nationalism would not be at an end, for the nationalist would then encounter a set of difficulties surrounding the latter notions. For a start, there is the idea that nations deserve their own states. (As noted, it is an idea that is central to the arguments of Gentile and Schmitt – but it is by no means confined to fascists.) This carries with it the implication that others – i.e. non-nationals – are under a corresponding obligation to respect the claim to deserve their own state made by nationals. These twin claims require explanation. (It is a consideration that can be masked – I suggest – by the fact that, in the past, nationalist movements have tended to arise in response to exploitation by a colonial power. While resistance to exploitation may be an evident motive for nationalism, however, it is a motive that cannot be convincingly invoked where there is no exploiting power at hand In short, we need an explanation of why nations – or some nations at any rate – should be entitled to their own states, *simply by virtue of the fact that they are those nations*.) Again, there could also be a problem for nationalists – those who actually have a nation – in explaining why those who do not share their ideals should share their obligations. The latter might include individuals they regard as their fellow nationals, even those who do not regard themselves as members of their own – or perhaps of any other – nation. I mean that, while the former group must presumably suppose that their nationality imposes certain obligations upon them – to pay tax, to vote, perhaps to contribute a period of military service – they must, presumably, regard those obligations as falling upon the latter group too. Nationalism may require some explanation of why this should be. At least, it does if a nation is, as Renan suggests, a sort of 'plebiscite'. In this case, it is hard to see what form such an explanation

might take; in other words, how it would account for those who, as it were, 'vote' for the nation's non-existence.

A third difficulty arises from the fact that *to explain the rise of the nation-state you do not need to invoke the concept of a nation*. On this point consider, firstly, Antonia Fraser's description of the condition of Scotland in 1561, the year in which Mary Queen of Scots returned there from France to assume her reign. According to Fraser, 'Communications within Scotland were exceptionally difficult at this period: roads were poor and ill-maintained, as a result of which journeys were considered hazardous and amazing if they were completed without incident'. They were 'further threatened by the presence of vagabonds on land – whom statutes tried in vain to exterminated – and of pirates on the sea'. Of the population, even 'the border peoples who were comparatively easy to reach, were extraordinarily difficult to subdue for any length of time'. Moreover, 'their own feuds were far more important to them than any dictates of the central government'. Not only that, 'Of the so-called wild Scots, half the population only spoke Gaelic . . . their main contact with the Lowlands was the moving down of cattle to Stirling and the Lowland cattle markets, And '[t]he Western Isles were so distant that they could, when they chose, opt out of central politics altogether, in favour of local feuds' (Fraser 1969: 177–8). Clearly, this is a portrait of a population united neither by geography, nor by language, nor by a common culture. It must, surely, be fanciful to entertain the idea that the disparate elements to which Fraser refers were nevertheless infused with some unifying 'national spirit' – some 'Scotsness' that would eventually take a more definite form – rather as Gentile thought the 'Italian nation' assumed a definite form in the aftermath of World War One (see Gentile 2015: 71ff).

Although sixteenth-century Scotland was considered to be wild and remote by many of those inhabiting more central areas of Europe, the picture Fraser paints is broadly representative of conditions that prevailed right across the continent. It is a picture of relatively discrete communities, ruled by members of an aristocracy, the latter united by ties of kinship into a pan-European network. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, things had changed. The continent was becoming divided into a system of states, each with determinate boundaries and each with an administrative system that was 'sovereign' in Weber's sense of exercising a monopoly of control with those boundaries and claiming to do so legitimately. (The United States and France, with their constitutions of 1787 and 1793, each defining a framework of rules, intended to apply throughout an entire area, are obvious cases in point.)

So, what explains the change? Well, that is a question for historians. My point is only that, in order to explain it, you do not need to tell a quasi-mystical

story according to which some 'spirit of the nation' comes to fruition, assuming a definite form and claiming its rightful territory. All you need is an account of how change came about through pragmatic responses to particular circumstances. For example, the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) tends to play a prominent role in accounts of the rise of the nation-state. It was with this that religious wars that had riven Europe for the past century or so were brought to an end, with the rival powers agreeing to confine their dominion within discrete boundaries. To take a later example, new bureaucratic systems were to require a common language within which to work. (As Eric Hobsbawm notes, at the time of the revolution in 1789, only 50% of the French population spoke French. Other major languages spoken included, for example, Breton, Basque, Catalan, Occitan, and Corsican. It was such factors as the need for a modern administrative system that required a common language (Hobsbawm 1992: 60 ff).). It is, of course, a truism that, once events have taken place, they can create the illusion of having followed some pre-ordained course. With that in mind, it is – I suggest – more realistic to think of stories about the rise of 'the nation' as a matter of looking back and illicitly reading meanings into some preceding sequence of events.

Hostility to liberalism

This aspect of totalitarian thought can be dealt with briefly. That is because it focuses upon just one aspect of liberalism, namely its 'individualism'. Liberalism is, thus, held to maintain that society 'is merely a sum total of individuals, a plurality which breaks up into its single components', and that, 'the ends of a society, so considered are nothing more than the ends of the individuals which compose it and for whose sake it exists' (Rocco 1926/2015: 49). According to Gentile (1928/2015: 82)

> in the case of nationalism, the relation which individualistic liberalism, and for that matter socialism also, assumed between individual and state is inverted' from which we are to take it that, unlike fascism and nationalism generally, liberalism prioritises the ends of the individual over the demands of the state.

As Schmitt sees it, 'The systematic theory of liberalism concerns almost solely the internal struggle against the power of the state'. He observes that, 'For the purpose of protecting individual freedom and private property, liberalism provides a series of methods for hindering and controlling the state's and government's power. It makes of the state a compromise and of its institutions a ventilating system' (2007: 70).

This characterisation of liberalism merits two observations, the first being that it is true enough. Liberalism is, at heart, a world view that tends to represent the state in pragmatic terms as subservient to the needs and aspirations of individuals as they act in pursuit of their various ends. The second is that it is rather minimal – sketchy even. There is so much more to liberalism than the totalitarian sketch allows. Liberalism has, after all, been a major current running through Western political thought since the middle years of the seventeenth century. Its central values have been interpreted in a variety of ways, and by a wide range of philosophers.

By way of illustration, consider the differences between the roles played by individualism in the philosophies of, respectively, Karl Popper and John Rawls. The former, Popper, is an advocate of 'falsificationism' in science, 'piecemeal social engineering' in social planning, and 'negative utilitarianism' in ethics (i.e. replacing the principle 'maximise happiness' with the principle 'minimise suffering') (Popper 1945/2002: 630–1). Each of these approaches involves taking a tentative attitude to its subject matter and – according to Popper – this is an attitude with clear anti-totalitarian implications. For one thing, if all prediction is tentative, as Popper thinks it must be, then it can never be established that history is moving in some particular direction, perhaps towards some future utopian state. This means that it can never be right to sacrifice any individual in the name of (a supposed) historical inevitability. For Popper, 'ethical individualism' – the rejection of the idea that 'the individual should subserve the interests of the whole, whether this be the universe, the city, the tribe, the race or any other collective body' (ibid: 110) – goes hand in hand with these views.

In Rawls's case, individualism takes a different form. He takes it to be a given, 'fundamental' fact that there exist discrete, separate individuals, each of whom has a distinct 'plan of life' and a distinct 'conception of the good'. (This means – roughly – that each has plans, purposes, and a value system of his or her own. It is from this premise that, as readers will know, Rawls goes on to argue that such individuals will choose principles – 'principles of justice' – to which such individuals can agree.)

Both Popper and Rawls follow in a liberal tradition, each in his own way, but at this point it is also worth mentioning Hannah Arendt, even though she rejects the label 'liberal'. Even so, her description of the human condition is 'individualist' in the sense that it is founded upon the premise that a fundamental feature of the human condition is 'plurality'. Plurality, as she calls it, involves the recognition that, in the world, there are others from whom one is separate but to whom one must relate through speech and action. Plurality is, thus, tied up with personal identity. It is, she says, 'the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (Arendt 1958/1998: 8). As

these examples show, 'individualism' and 'liberal individualism' can take very different forms in the hands of different philosophers.

Totalitarian philosophy: summary

That said, and before moving on to the subject of ideology (as opposed to philosophy) two points are worth adding here. The first is that the three theses that have formed the subject of discussion up to this point are by no means confined to totalitarian thought. For example, the argument that aspects of the individual can only be understood as functions of the collectivity of which that individual is a member – if not the state, then the community – can be found in the work of 'communitarians' such as Michael Sandel, and in that of Alasdair MacIntyre. There is no way in which either could be described as an advocate of totalitarianism.[2] The idea that the state should reflect the ideals and aspirations of a certain entity, the 'nation', is compatible with the sort of conservatism that emphasises inherited tradition – the conservatism of Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott, and Roger Scruton. Indeed, Scruton argues: 'The state is no modern invention. Every society contains the seeds of constitution, in the form of custom, tradition, precedent, and law', that it may have to fight to preserve these, and that 'from every successful fight, a degree of "nationhood" emerges'. The outcome of this process – according to Scruton – is the nation-state, which he describes as 'the state at the extreme of self-consciousness' (Scruton 1980: 185). (Here comes that 'spirit of the nation' again!) In my view, none of this is remotely credible. Still, my point here is simply that, whatever you make of Scruton's view, conservatism is one thing and totalitarianism another. As for the argument that liberalism is 'atomistic' and over-individualistic, this is common to writers of both Right and Left. In fact, there are *versions* of all three themes that recur throughout political philosophy. (It would take me too far from my main subject to figure out precisely what to make of this.)

The second point that needs to be made is this. The fact that it is possible to hold versions of the views I have been discussing is – I surmise – partly explained by the fact that they do not really yield the conclusion totalitarian philosophers would like them to. This is the conclusion that the individual, in his or her actions, should be absolutely subordinate to the demands of the state. As Gentile puts it: 'The authority of the State is absolute. It does not compromise, it does not bargain, it does not surrender any portion of its field to other moral or religious principles' (1928/2015: 84). According to Schmitt, it is similarly '[b]y virtue of [its] power over the physical life of men', that, 'the political community transcends all other associations or societies' (2007: 47). It should not be surprising, though, that these conclusions are not, in fact, entailed by the thesis that the individual is 'nothing without' the state,

for the latter is a thesis concerning identity – the human 'essence', if you like – and it yields no particular injunction as to how the state, or the individual, ought to behave. In short, it is one thing for a philosophical thesis to possess credibility and coherence, and another for it to carry ideological force. That is another point we shall be considering.

Totalitarian thought as ideology

Now to turn to the subject of ideology (as opposed to philosophy). I shall take it that an ideology is a system of beliefs and values that – provided that a sufficient number of people adhere to it – helps to keep a social or political order in place. This differentiates ideology from philosophy for, whereas the test of a philosophical system rests upon its ability to meet standards of coherence, logical consistency, and credibility (in the case of its premises), the test of an ideology is its success in maintaining the stability of the social and political order. In short, the test is whether it *works*. From this, it follows that an ideology can be used as an instrument of control by those who rule. By that token, a totalitarian ideology is one deployed by rulers to exert control.

That is not the only definition of 'ideology' available and I realise that some might find it a little naive. For example, I do not mean to suggest the existence of a particular relationship between certain ideas and some deeper feature of the economic and social structure, as Marx and Engels did when they wrote that '[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force'. Marx and Engels add that '[t]he ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas' (Marx 1846: 192). Whatever the merits of their view may be, by 'ideology' I do not mean to echo it. I only intend to refer to one weapon in the armoury that enables rulers to maintain control. Naïve though it may appear to some, it is a definition that suits my purposes here.

A number of points follow. The first relates to a difference between the ways in which the claims of philosophy and the claims of ideology stand to be tested. I mean that the appropriate way to test a philosophical argument – one claiming to derive true conclusions from logically consistent chains of reasoning – is by measuring it against publicly recognised standards of rationality; in other words, by assessing it for logical coherence, as well as by estimating the credibility of the presuppositions from which those chains of reasoning are derived. The test of an ideology, on the other hand, is – so to speak – a matter of determining how well it *works*. In other words, it is a matter of how efficiently it serves to maintain the political order, and

that will, presumably, be an empirical question; one that will have different answers in different cases.

Viewed in the above light, it is noticeable that, just as the totalitarian thought of Gentile and Schmitt does not fare all that well when considered as philosophy (having failed to establish the conclusion that the individual should be absolutely subordinate to the state), neither does it have much success when considered as ideology.

Of course, it is easy to see how a distinction such as Schmitt's between 'friend' and 'enemy' could serve as ideology, and that is by *lending itself* to narratives concerning the way our own 'friends' (who might be the 'Aryan' people) should nevertheless behave towards particular 'enemies' (Jews, 'cosmopolitans' and others). Most ordinary Germans would never have heard of Schmitt, however, let alone read his work. Nor – as I am supposing – would most ordinary Italians have heard of Gentile. If they had been swayed by anything it would have been through myths – the myth of a 'Jewish conspiracy', the myth of 'Aryan' superiority, or the idea that the Roman empire was being recreated on Italian soil.[3]

A second point is that philosophy and ideology, as I have defined them, are overlapping categories. In other words, there can be systems of ideas that fall within both. An obvious example here is Marxism, a system of philosophical ideas that has, at the same time, served as the official ideology of numerous regimes. If some of those regimes have been totalitarian, however, it does not follow that Marxism is a totalitarian philosophy. Of course, you might want to argue that it has totalitarian *elements*, especially if you stand on the right of the political spectrum. The obvious candidate here is Marx and Engels' prediction that the collapse of capitalism will be followed by a repressive 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (see for example Marx and Engels 1848: 261–2). On the other hand, if you stand towards the left, you may be inclined to look more favourably upon their description of that dictatorship as a precursor to a time when: 'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (ibid: 262). All that is as may be, however. It is a point that can be debated by scholars, and it is irrelevant to the consideration that, if Marxism is to serve as ideology, it has to be *used* in a certain way. Of course, the story of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' can easily serve the purposes of tyrannical controllers, but – perhaps – such control can only be established by taking the story out of context.

Thirdly, since the two categories – philosophy and ideology – are by no means coextensive, it follows that there can be systems of ideas that reinforce the political status quo but that, unlike Marxism, can hardly be said to lie within the scope of rational critique. Take the personality cult of

the North Korean 'Dear Leader', for example. with its emphasis upon the fact that Kim Il Sung, the country's first leader, was born on the day that the *Titanic* went down. In his book, *Dear Leader*, Jan Jin-Sung, describes how, shortly before he began work as a propagandist for the regime, his department produced an article that received praise from Kim Jong-il. It 'declared our Great Leader Kim Il-sung to be the Sun of the World'. Jan Jin-Sung explains that 'the evidence in question was the sinking of the *Titanic*'. The date on which the *RMS Titanic* sank, 15 April 1912, also happened to be the date of Kim Il Sung's birth, and he describes how using this coincidence as a form of historical proof, the article explained that 'As the Sun set in the West, it rose in the East' (Jin-Sung 2014: 13). This is neither science nor philosophy. It is magical thinking. Nor does North Korea's official ideology, Juche, contain a systematically presented philosophical position. It is more a set of injunctions to take a steadfast attitude. (The regime's official website states: 'The Government of the DPRK [Democratic Republic of Korea] steadfastly maintains Juche in all realms of the revolution and construction'; and that 'Establishing *Juche* means adopting the attitude of a master towards the revolution and construction of one's country. It means maintaining an independent and creative standpoint in finding solutions to the problems which arise in the revolution and construction' and so on and so forth.)

Conclusion

In conclusion, it turns out that we have yet to determine a criterion for distinguishing totalitarianism from tyranny pure and simple. On the one hand, while totalitarian philosophy invokes the notion of a 'total state' it contains no clue that might help us to recognise such a state were we to come across one. On the other hand, if a specifically totalitarian ideology is, as I put it earlier, a system of ideas that is particularly suitable for use as an instrument of control within a totalitarian regime, it seems that we have failed to find that too. For it seems that there are many systems of ideas that can serve that purpose, and perhaps that any can do so depending upon how skilfully it is deployed.

Of course, my definition of 'ideology' as a set of ideas that serves to maintain a political status quo leaves open the question of *how* those ideas 'work'. Individuals vary. There will be some who actually believe the doctrine embodied in those ideas. Others – the majority perhaps – will take no notice and get along with their lives accordingly. Yet others – ambitious professionals and bureaucrats – will pay cynical lip service to those ideas if they think it will help them get along in life. One thing is clear, however,

namely that you can accept a dominant ideology, in some sense of 'accept' without turning into a brainwashed automaton or a zombie. We shall be turning to the point in a later chapter.

Notes

1 The term 'fascism' is Italian in origin, but here I am using it to cover both Italian and non-Italian movements.
2 See Sandel (1982) and, for example, MacIntyre (1988).
3 For a scholarly account of Nazi ideology at work, see Koonz (2003).

4 Total control

In this chapter we turn to the idea that totalitarianism is, by definition, a form of political system within which the rulers – or 'controllers' – exercise total control over a subservient population, and that it is this that distinguishes it from other forms. It is the idea reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of 'totalitarian' as 'of or relating to a system of government that is centralised and dictatorial and requires *complete subservience* to the state' (my emphasis). Initially, the claim might well strike you as more straightforward than the idea, discussed in an earlier chapter, that totalitarianism's central institution is the 'total state', for even at first glance the latter notion must raise the suspicion that there are complications latent within it. By contrast, the fact of control by those who rule is a feature of our everyday experience, and there is certainly no need to invoke the mysticism inherent in Gentile's remark that the state is 'a wholly spiritual creation' if we are to recognise such control for what it is. First impressions can be deceptive, however. In fact, there are difficulties surrounding the notion that total control is what counts, and some of them will be outlined in this chapter

An argument from definitions

As a start, consider the following definitions. The first is a definition of 'tyranny'; the second a definition of 'totalitarianism':

1 *Tyranny*: System S is a *tyranny* if, and only if, (a) it is structured in a way that places no restriction upon the rulers in their exercise of power, (b) the rulers exercise *extensive* control over the population.
2 *Totalitarianism*: System S is *totalitarian* if, and only if, (a) it is structured in a way that places no restriction upon the rulers in their exercise of power, and (b) the rulers exercise *total* control over the population.

I shall take it that these definitions are accurate enough. The question is whether they pick out phenomena that are, in fact, distinct. If they do, we

may conclude that 'tyranny' and 'totalitarianism' are terms that genuinely denote different types of political formation. Otherwise, we must remain suspicious of claims such as C.J. Friedrich's, discussed in Chapter 2, that totalitarianism is something new – ' a reality with which the mid- twentieth century finds itself confronted and by which it finds itself persistently challenged' (Friedrich 1954A: 1).

Note that in the case of each definition the first clause – the clause requiring there to be no restriction upon the rulers in their exercise of power – is needed because these are meant to be definitions of political *systems*; that is, structures of rules, practices and behaviours. It is, of course, possible for a ruler within the context of a liberal democracy to harbour tyrannical ambitions and behave accordingly – just as possible as it is within a tyranny or a totalitarian system – but in a liberal democracy there will be systems in place for holding such a ruler in check. The definitions reflect the fact that, under tyranny or totalitarianism, those procedures will be absent.

What of the second clause, clause (b)? In the first definition, this refers to 'extensive' control. I have not defined the term 'extensive' itself. That was not necessary, as it is obvious that a political system within which the ruling party or group did not exercise a degree of control that was fairly extensive could hardly count as a tyranny. On the other hand, however, the definition is consistent with there being systems within which the rulers neither seek to establish, nor succeed in establishing, a degree of control that is absolutely total. (Frequently cited examples are the 'enlightened despots' of the eighteenth century – especially the Russian empress, Catherine the Great and Prussia's Frederick the Great.)[1] That said, however, and a tyrant being by definition someone who has the opportunity to exercise a great deal of control, one can appreciate that such a person would more than likely have the motive to extend control as far as he or she can. (Remember Plato's description of the tyrant, discussed in Chapter 2, as someone 'who [having tasted] a single piece of human flesh, mixed in with the rest of the sacrifice, is fated to become a wolf' (Plato 1987: 325). As for the second definition's clause (b), this defines totalitarianism, in the sense currently at issue, as a system within which the rulers have succeeded in establishing a degree of control that is absolutely total.

Now, assuming them to be accurate, the question is whether these definitions, considered together, are sufficient to warrant the conclusion that tyranny and totalitarianism are systems of completely different types, and the answer is – clearly – that they are not. The crucial point is the relationship between the notions of extensiveness, on the one hand, and totality, on the other. For while extensive control need not be equivalent to a degree of control that is absolutely total, the latter – total control – is control that is absolutely extensive. In other words, total control is absolute control carried to the extreme. At the most, then, it follows that totalitarianism, as

defined, is a subcategory of tyranny – the subcategory within which control has become absolutely extensive – and not that the two are completely different types of system.

If this is right, it follows that Friedrich is mistaken in thinking that totalitarianism is an entirely new phenomenon. To take an example of a similar claim, George Orwell's distinction between totalitarianism and the old-fashioned 'despotisms of the past' is cast into question for the same reason. This is what Orwell has to say in an essay of 1946 entitled, 'The Prevention of Literature' (Orwell 1968/70A: 88):

> Literature has sometimes flourished under despotic regimes but, as has often been pointed out, the despotisms of the past were not totalitarian. Their repressive apparatus was always inefficient, their ruling classes, were usually either corrupt or apathetic or half-liberal in outlook, and the prevailing religious doctrines usually worked against perfectionism and the notion of human infallibility.

Orwell may have a point, but only if he is making the empirical claim that the totalitarian systems of his own time – as satirised in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1954) – were more efficient than earlier tyrannies. (I leave his observations on the nature of literature to one side.) If they were more efficient – and if efficiency is a measure of totalitarianism so far as Orwell is concerned – then there may be some truth in his remark that, 'the despotisms of the past were not totalitarian'. (That is for historians to decide, not philosophers.) On the other hand, he is wrong if he is claiming that there were two different *types* of system at issue here. In other words, while the despotisms of the past may not have been totalitarian, it may be equally true that the totalitarianisms of Orwell's time were despotisms.

From partial control to total control

At precisely what point does partial control become total control? If other political formations are distinguishable from totalitarianism by the fact that it is only in the latter that total control is exercised by those in power, then it must be possible to determine where the demarcation line between the two conceptions lies. This can be difficult, however.

Let me explain the problem with the help of a simple example of coercion: Suppose that P is a robber and that Q is on the way to the bank, intending to deposit some money there. Suppose also that P accosts Q saying, 'Give me the money or I'll beat you up' and that, not wanting to be beaten up, Q hands the money over. (I am assuming that P clearly means business.) The story is simple, as I said, but we may use it to illustrate a number of points.

The first is that, in the story, P controls Q by getting Q to *act* in a certain way. P might have used a different method for depriving Q of the money. For example, P might have been able to render Q unconscious, with the help of a cosh or some chloroform, or P might have tied Q up. In short, perhaps P could have rendered Q helpless and simply removed the money from Q's possession. In the story, however, P does not do that. Rather, P gets Q to *do something*, namely hand the money over. Related to this, a second feature of the example is that P gets Q to act by using a certain method, that is by changing the options open to Q, and thereby their relative attractiveness. Thus; before P issued the threat, Q would have been happy to keep the money whereas, after the threat, Q is forced to choose between (1) refusing to hand the money over and being beaten up and (2) handing the money over and not being beaten up, with the latter alternative being the more attractive of the two. Thirdly – this being an example of coercion – it is, by the same token, an example of the infringement of liberty. Q is, thus, 'forced' to hand the money over. Q is 'subject to the will of another'; Q's action is not a 'free action'. It is not Q's 'own'.

The example is a schematic representation, a device for representing the fundamental relationships between the ideas with which this chapter is concerned. If you like, it is a sort of diagram. (Incidentally, it is an example I have borrowed from an early piece by Robert Nozick.[2]) It derives its point, in part, from the fact that the method used by P to control Q resembles that used by legislative bodies to control the behaviour of citizens. I mean that, just as P's threat announces that such-and-such consequences will be attached to the alternatives available to Q, so a law is, equally, an announcement that certain forms of behaviour will be visited with certain consequences (punishments or rewards). As the legal philosopher H.L.A. Hart put the point in an essay on punishment, the latter's 'primary operation consists simply in announcing certain standards of behaviour and attaching penalties for deviation, making it less eligible, and then leaving individuals to choose' (Hart 1969: 178). A criminal law is, thus, a kind of threat ('Exceed the speed limit and we will fine you such-and-such an amount'; 'Steal and we will lock you up'). Likewise, a law can, in certain ways, resemble a tax – 'a tax on a course of conduct' according to Hart – although the similarity is by no means exact.[3]

The example should also help to provide a clear perspective on the question at issue, that of how to distinguish partial from total control. That explains the relevance of the example to totalitarianism in particular, for control by the rulers over those they rule, exerted by the former through the alteration of the alternatives open to the latter, is a feature common to all types of political system. It happens not only in liberal democracies, and it is not always done through the public proclamation of laws. It can result

from the arbitrary and unpredictable behaviour of the powerful. (In short, if you think the secret police might be watching you, you are unlikely to feel confident about going for a walk in the evening.)

With those points in mind, then, let us now ask: At what point does P's control of Q cross the line dividing partial control from total control? The answer is not entirely straightforward, for it depends upon what features of the example to count as decisive. There are, broadly speaking, two possibilities.

Total control and the constriction of 'space'

One is to focus upon the fact that, although Q does not perform a free action – Q is, after all, coerced – Q still has a certain room for manoeuvre. Q still 'has a choice' in the sense that Q could decide to try to hang on to the money and get beaten up. It is just that, with the threat, P has, so to speak, confined the area within which Q is free to move. As this illustrates, control by the rulers over the ruled is a matter of degree. It depends on the extent to which the area in question is restricted. Even Winston Smith, the central character of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is able to find a small corner of his apartment, one outside the range of the 'telescreen' through which Big Brother watches and monitors his behaviour (Orwell 1954: 5–6). So, with that in mind, now imagine a continuum along which situations are ranged according to the degree of control exercised in each. Imagine that, at one extreme – the extreme of pure anarchy – there lies the situation in which there is no control whatsoever. The degree of closeness to the other extreme will, thus, be a matter of the extent to which coercive power exercised by the rulers limits the area within which the ruled are free to move. A liberal society within which the rule of law prevails – within which there is, in Hart's words, 'a method of social control which maximises individual freedom within the coercive framework of the law' (Hart 1969: 178) – will lie closer to the former extreme than will the society within which Winston Smith has to hide from the telescreen. Finally, suppose that, having moved through situations in which there is, at each stage, more control, one reaches the far extreme – the extreme of total control, at which point the room within which individuals are free to move has been squeezed to zero.

This is, thus, a model of the relationship between control and liberty from which it follows that *there is an inverse ratio between increase in control by the rulers and decrease in the area within which the ruled are free to act*, in which case we must be forced to the conclusion that total control is a practical impossibility since – as the argument presupposes – rulers only have *total* control when their subjects cannot, as it were, 'move' *at all*, and that is something that could only happen – or so I take it – when the rulers are

in a position to direct every single action and thought of those they rule. As for the distinction between tyranny and totalitarianism, it would follow that, in the 'real world' – as opposed to the world of definitions and concepts – only tyranny can actually exist. Totalitarianism might represent a theoretical ideal to which tyrants may aspire – something resembling absolute zero, the infinitely small point, or the frictionless machine – but that can never be achieved in practice.

Total control and the conflict of wills

Is the foregoing argument sufficient to capture the particularly evil nature of Stalinism and Nazism. Perhaps there will be readers who suspect that it is not; that I have somehow managed to define totalitarianism out of existence and thereby missed the point. In answer to such suspicions, should they exist, let me now go on to argue that, by focusing upon a different feature of the example involving P and Q, one can derive a different account of what total control amounts to.

That other feature is the fact that the story of the encounter between P and Q involves a conflict of wills (P's and Q's). Thus, we can take it that, prior to the encounter with Q, P had wanted to keep the money, or else that P had his or her own plans for it. It is after the encounter with Q, who also wants the money, that P is forced by the threat to conform to Q's will. There are, no doubt, intermediate cases in which the will of neither is completely dominant. (I can imagine a scenario within which P and Q negotiate. In this version, P would like to keep all the money, Q would like to take all the money but, after a discussion, Q agrees not to beat P up provided that P pays Q 25% of the amount.) However, there can also be cases in which the will of one person is completely dominant, and that of the other completely subservient. On this interpretation, it is in the latter type of case that total control is exemplified.

This is the form of total control envisaged by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when she describes the concentration camp system as 'an attack on the moral person'. 'The alternative is no longer between good and evil', she writes, 'but between murder and murder' and she refers to 'the moral dilemma of the Greek mother who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her children should be killed' (Arendt 2004: 583).[4] It is the total control portrayed in the movie *Sophie's Choice*, in the scene where Sophie is forced by a Nazi officer to decide which of her children should be saved, and which sacrificed to the gas chamber.[5] In the latter case, it would be cynical – if accurate – to point out that Sophie has a space within which she is 'free to choose'. She can choose to save one child, or she can choose to save the other. But that is beside the point when it comes to assessing the

extreme degree of evil latent in the Nazi's proposal. The point is that, if it were not for him, she would not have to choose what she should not have to choose.

From model to reality

To summarise: We have now distinguished two theoretical models of the totalitarian relationship between ruler and ruled (or, if you prefer to put it that way, between the controllers and the controlled). Each is derived from a different feature of the schematic story in which P threatens Q. One model portrays control by the rulers as the restriction of the range of options open to those they rule. The other portrays control as a clash of wills. Control is exercised when the will of the controllers dominates. We now turn to the question of how accurately these models represent what goes on 'out there' in the 'real world'.

Control as the restriction of freedom

There are reasons for proceeding with caution here. One is that, with both models, control is exercised through the restriction of Q's freedom. This could raise a difficulty for, while it is true enough that political control can be exercised through the restriction of liberty, and that it normally is, it is nevertheless the case that – considered as concepts – control is one thing and the restriction of liberty another. It is certainly the case that control can be exercised by means other than the restriction of liberty – through propaganda, for example – and, conversely, where liberty is restricted through the closure of options, it does not follow that control is thereby exercised. That is because one can lack the freedom to do things one had no inclination to do in the first place. To take a simple example: in my neighbourhood there are bye-laws that forbid the walking of dogs in certain areas of the local park, and throughout the country now it is illegal to smoke in restaurants. I lack the freedom to do those things. However, I am not prevented from doing them as, in any case, I do not have a dog and I do not smoke. So control does not enter the story.

Or take the example of North Korea during the time of Kim Il Sung, the country's first 'Dear Leader'. (Kim Il Sung's reign lasted from 1948 until 1994, although 'kimilsungism' itself began to lose influence after 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed.) According to Andrei Lankov, the North Korea specialist, this was a time when 'North Korea became a society where the level of state control over the average citizen's public and private life reached heights that would be almost unthinkable in any other country, including Stalin's Russia'. Lankov remarks that: 'In a sense, Kim Il Sung

and his supporters managed to out-Stalin Stalin himself' (Lankov 2013: 34). In short, if anything was an example of what is normally understood to be a totalitarian regime, it was North Korea during those years.

In fact, in the light of Lankov's description of the way peoples' lives were monitored and controlled at that time, his claim that Stalin would have found himself out-Stalined can appear an understatement. For example, Lankov describes how '[a]fter graduation from high school, all North Koreans were assigned to their jobs'. There was no choice. Further: 'The place of residence could be changed only with the approval of authorities, normally in cases when real or alleged needs of the national economy would require somebody to be allocated to a new job in a different place'. Moreover, 'short-term travel had to be approved by the authorities beforehand. A North Korean was not allowed to travel outside his or her native county or city without a special travel permit, to be issued by local authorities'. (For all this, see Lankov 2013: 37.) In their villages or urban blocks, households would be assigned to *inminbans* or 'peoples' groups', each consisting of 20 to 40 families. Each *inminban* would be presided over by an official, always a woman, whose duties included routine maintenance garbage removal and so on – but also learning about 'incomes, assets, and spending habits of all of their charges'. In turn, she would be required to report, regularly, to a 'resident police officer'. (There was a saying, 'An *inminban* head should know how many chopsticks and how many spoons are in every household' (ibid: 38).) Additionally, every Korean over the age of 14 would be required to attend three 'soporifically long' meetings per week. Two would be devoted to ideological indoctrination and a third was known as a 'weekly life review session', 'but [would be] better recognized under the descriptive translation as a "Self-Criticism and Mutual-Criticism Session"'. According to Lankov (ibid: 41):

> Such a session usually meant that every participant (that is, every North Korean above the age of 14) was supposed to give a brief report about the misdeeds and unsound actions of him/herself in the week under review, and how, another member of the same 'organization' [would be] expected to criticize the particular person for the same or different misdeeds.

As for knowledge of the outside world, no tuneable radio was allowed: an official with a screwdriver would soon make sure of that (ibid: 43), Further (ibid: 44):

> [I]n a truly Orwellian twist, the North Korean authorities took care to isolate the populace not only from the foreign media but also from the

> official publications of earlier years. All North Korean periodicals and a significant number of publications on social and political topics were regularly removed from common access libraries and could only be perused by people with special permission.

And so it continues. However, my point is not that the life of ordinary North Koreans was rigidly controlled, although it obviously was. It is the credibility of Lankov's account of the attitude they took to the controls. This seems to have been the attitude ordinary people often take towards busybodying bureaucratic institutions; that is to treat them as a nuisance one just has to live with. For example, when describing the 'weekly life review sessions' Lankov points out that, 'in real life these sessions are somewhat akin to theatrical performances, since people are street-smart enough to not admit anything that might lead to serious consequences', so that '[t]ypically, individuals would admit to being late for their shift or not being diligent enough in taking care of portraits of the Great Leader' (ibid: 40).

Summarising the situation in more general terms, Lankov writes: 'When living in North Korea myself, I could not help but find it remarkable how "normal" the daily lives usually were'; that, 'North Koreans of the Kim Il Sung era were not brainwashed automatons whose favourite pastime was goose-stepping and memorizing the lengthy speeches of their Leaders'; that, 'Nor were they closet dissenters who waited for the first opportunity to launch a pro-democracy struggle or studied subversive samizdat texts'; and that, 'Neither were they docile slaves who sheepishly followed any order from above'. He remarks (ibid: 62) that:

> People in Kim Il Sung's North Korea were mainly concerned about much the same things people in other societies focused on. They thought about their families, they hoped to get a promotion, they wanted to educate their children, they were afraid of getting sick, they fell in love.

It is a description that strikes me as convincing, although I must admit to being no North Korea expert myself. Still, the point here is not the accuracy of Lankov's description, but the possibility it illustrates, namely that one can live with restrictions upon one's liberty without becoming a totally controlled puppet. (Of course, the restrictions Lankov describes would be intolerable to many a metropolitan liberal. Bear in mind, though, that he is describing a society of agriculturally-based peasants.)

The foregoing conclusion applies to the model of control conceived as the restriction of freedom by the blocking of options. However, similar considerations apply in the case of the 'clash of wills' model. The point here is that Sophie's choice, as portrayed in the movie, is an extreme case. In her

situation, one will – the Nazi's – is overwhelming, and her own is completely subservient. There is nothing she can do other than take a horrible option. (Says Arendt: 'Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable' (Arendt 2004: 583).) However, there can be cases that are not so extreme and in which a conflict of wills results in compromise rather than the absolute subjugation of one by the other. By way of example consider, again, the ban on smoking in restaurants, but this time suppose that you are a smoker. Having finished your meal, you would like to light up but, knowing that smoking on the premises is banned, you go outside to enjoy your cigarette. In this case, it is – I suppose – true, strictly speaking, that you are controlled. You are, as the expression has it, 'subject to the will of another', but only to the extent that you make a minor concession in order to do what you most want. (This is the scenario I envisaged earlier, in which P and Q negotiate a compromise.) In present-day societies – that is, in centralised regimes such as Cuba's as much as liberal democracies – my guess is that such compromise between the individual and the rules represents a norm.

Conclusions

The conclusions to be drawn at this point can only be as follows. First; if total control is meant to be definitive of totalitarianism – that is, *if a system counts as totalitarian if, and only if, its rulers exercise total control – then there are, and never have been, many truly totalitarian systems*. In the case of control construed as the restriction of the space within which individuals can move, this is because *total* control can only be construed in hypothetical terms as an ideal, a hypothetical situation that rulers can seek to realise but never quite achieve. To define totalitarianism in terms of that model is, thus, to define the possibility of there being an actual totalitarian state out of existence. By contrast, when construed in terms of the 'conflict of wills' model, total control is a possibility, though nevertheless a possibility that is only realised in the extreme case of one person's will being completely dominated by another's (as in Sophie's choice).

It is true, of course, that Andrei Lankov's description of a North Korea in which freedom is greatly restricted, but in which individuals carry on with their lives in a fairly normal way, contrasts with Timothy Snyder's description of the devastation wrought by Stalin and Hitler in the 'bloodlands' of eastern Europe from the years leading up to World War Two until its end. Snyder, to whose account I referred in Chapter 2, records that: 'In the middle of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some fourteen million people'; and that, 'not a single one of the

fourteen million murdered was a soldier on active duty. Most were women, children, and the aged; none were bearing weapons; many had been stripped of their possessions, including their clothes' (Snyder 2010: 7–8). It is also true that Stalin's and Hitler's regimes are the ones generally treated as paradigmatic of totalitarianism. However, we have yet to determine whether they really exemplified a distinct form – totalitarianism as opposed to plain tyranny – and, if that can be done, whether their being of that particular form should be a factor playing a crucial role in the explanation of the cruelty of which they were such blithe instigators. (In other words, while the statement 'Hitler and Stalin were guilty of mass murder *and* their regimes were totalitarian, and not merely tyrannical' might turn out to be true, the statement 'Hitler and Stalin were able to commit mass murder *because* their regimes were totalitarian (and not merely tyrannical)' might still be false.[6])

A second conclusion is that, even if total control is an impossibility, as the 'restriction of space' model implies, or a near impossibility, as the 'clash of wills' model implies, *it can still serve as an ideal to which tyrants aspire*. This is a consideration with terrifying implications. For the moment, though, the point is simply that, provided the tyrant continues to pursue his or her ambitions by employing techniques of coercion, and provided that human nature remains unchanged, no clear line dividing the concept of totalitarianism from that of tyranny can be determined. It just means that, while tyranny might slip by degrees into totalitarianism (construed as total control) it can never quite reach its destination.

Third, a point concerning the relation between the definition of totalitarian rule as total control and, on the other hand, List L; the list I introduced in Chapter 2 and that itemised the features by which totalitarian regimes are (supposedly) typified. (The list mentioned a charismatic leader, a dominating ideology, a secret police force, and certain other factors.) The point is this: If total control is definitive of totalitarianism, then List L cannot be. At the most it can be a list of the methods that, as it happens, serve to maintain total control in this world at this time. This raises an intriguing possibility, namely that other methods of control and, with them, other forms of totalitarianism are conceivable. It is a possibility we shall consider in the next chapter.

Notes

1 These 'despots' of the Enlightenment period were known for having taken an interest in philosophy, literature, and the sciences, and both welcomed intellectuals to their courts. Catherine conducted a correspondence with Voltaire. It was Frederick to whom Kant was referring when he wrote that 'only a ruler who is himself enlightened and has no fear of phantoms, yet who likewise has at hand a well-disciplined and numerous army to guarantee public security may say what

no republic would dare to say: *Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey*!' (Kant 1970: 59).

2 See Nozick (1969). For my comments on Nozick's argument, see Haworth (1990).
3 For Hart's view that a punishment for a crime is not the same as a 'tax on the course of conduct' but similar to it in some ways see *The Concept of Law*, p. 39 (Hart 1961).
4 Arendt is referring to a lecture by Albert Camus, 'The Human Crisis': see Camus (1946).
5 *Sophie's Choice* (1982): Director, Alan J. Pakula. Starring Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, Peter MacNicol.
6 In case it helps to clarify the point, consider the parallel difference in meaning between 'Jack the Ripper was a murderer *and* he was a Londoner' and 'Jack the Ripper was a murderer *because* he was a Londoner'.

5 Dystopia

In 1946 Aldous Huxley added a foreword to his novel, *Brave New World*. In it, he had this to say (Huxley 1955: 12):[1]

> There is, of course, no reason why the new totalitarianism should resemble the old. Government by clubs and firing squads, by artificial famine, mass imprisonment and mass deportation, is not merely inhumane (nobody cares much about that nowadays): it is demonstrably inefficient – and in an age of advanced technology, inefficiency is the sin against the Holy Ghost. A really efficient totalitarian state would be one in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude. To make them love it is the task assigned, in present day totalitarian states, to ministries of propaganda, newspaper editors, and schoolteachers. But their methods are still crude and unscientific.

It is a passage in which Huxley envisages a future 'alternative totalitarianism' (to use my term), within which total control is established by means other than force or indoctrination. Since Huxley's time, dystopian literature, of which his novel is an early example, has developed to form an entire genre. There are numerous examples. However, Huxley's novel is particularly associated with the idea of totalitarianism The same goes for the other dystopian novel I have chosen to discuss here, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1949/1954).[2] That is why I have chosen to focus upon those two novels in particular (and it is unlikely that readers will find my choice surprising).

I should like to know whether there is anything concerning the nature of totalitarianism to be learnt from these texts. That is all. There are, therefore, aspects of these novels that are beside the point so far as this chapter is concerned. For example, it would be a mistake to treat them as straightforward

predictions. Rather, each is intended to supply a satirical comment upon the times during which they were written. In dystopian literature, one authorial technique is to take features of the world as it is at the time of writing, and to exaggerate them to satirical effect. *Brave New World* is, thus, a comment upon a certain form of over-utilitarian, over-optimistic scientism. Huxley's is an imagined future that carries an acid message for contemporary society. By the same token, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a nightmarish caricature of Britain as it was in 1948, the year during which it was written. Indeed, Orwell himself described it as a 'parody' (see Crick 1980: 395). These are interesting features of the novels in question, but I mention them only to set them to one side.

Dystopia as warning

By contrast, it is relevant to our purposes to note one feature of these works, namely that they take the form of warnings. In addressing their readers, their authors are saying, in effect, 'Take care, or this is how things will turn out!' The warnings are fictional, of course, and issued in a satirical, ironic, or tongue-in-cheek sort of way; but nor are they frivolous, and it is worth asking what implications they carry for our understanding of totalitarianism.

To take *Brave New World*, first, then, the non-coercive techniques of control used in the 'new totalitarianism' Huxley envisages are listed in his foreword as including: 'a greatly improved technique of suggestion – through infant conditioning and, later, with the aid of drugs, such as scopolamine';[3] 'a fully developed science of human differences, enabling government managers to assign any given individual to his or her proper place in the social and economic hierarchy'; 'a substitute for alcohol and the other narcotics, something at once less harmful and more pleasure giving than gin or heroin'; and 'a foolproof system of eugenics, designed to standardise the human product and so to facilitate the task of the managers' (Huxley ibid: 13). In the novel, he pictures a future society whose inhabitants, rendered docile and malleable by promiscuity and the use of a drug (soma), are eugenically manufactured, in a sort of factory, to fulfil specific roles. The higher levels of the administration are, thus, staffed by 'Alpha-Plus Intellectuals', menial tasks are carried out by 'Epsilon-Minus Semi-Morons', and so on. (There is more, but you will get the picture.)

Now, in the concluding paragraph of his foreword, Huxley states that we should think of *Brave New World* as a description of what will happen, 'unless we choose to decentralise and to use applied science, not as the end to which human beings are to be made the means, but as the means to producing a race of free individuals' (ibid: 14). Well, maybe it is but, even so, I do not think we can treat as a warning. I do not mean that the human

condition, as it is at present, will not change in ways that result in the situation described by Huxley. That strikes me as highly unlikely in fact – but then, you never know.

My point is, rather, that the characters in the novel are insufficiently like ourselves for it to count as a warning *to us*. Think of it this way: Suppose that you could travel back in time, millions of years, to encounter a group of the ape/hominins from which we humans were to eventually evolve. Now suppose you were to inform them that, one day, their descendants would be creatures who wore clothes, lived in cities, rode bicycles, played football, watched TV, and so on. (Of course, you would have to suppose, too, that they would understand your language and actually know what you were talking about.) Why should they care? Why should they take your information to be a warning? I can see no reason why they should. By the same token, if you knew now, for a fact, that one day humans would develop into the genetically engineered, perfectly socialised, and – moreover – happy denizens of Huxley's brave new world, neither does there seem to be much reason why you should care about that.

Clearly, this is a conclusion that carries an implication for the question of whether 'alternative totalitarianism' – a system in which total control is established, entirely through the use of non-coercive methods – is, in fact, conceivable. The answer, it seems, is that it is conceivable – conceivable in the sense that it can be described in novels such as *Brave New World* – but only with the help of the assumption that human nature can be so radically transformed that inhabitants of any 'alternative' totalitarian system, more human-*like* than human, must bear scant resemblance to ourselves.

This same idea – the idea of a human nature, radically transformed under 'new' conditions – makes an appearance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; but it plays a different role within the context of the narrative. Orwell represents it as a crazed fantasy, not as a possible reality. For example, consider how it informs the notorious monologue – delivered with a 'faint, mad, gleam of enthusiasm' – with which the character O'Brien, party apparatchik and torturer, harangues Winston Smith as he finally succeeds in breaking the latter's will. Here is a slightly abridged extract from O'Brien's speech (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 267):

> Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing. Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself. . . . In our world there

> will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph and self-abasement. Everything else we shall destroy – everything. . . . We have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer. But in the future there will be no wives and no friends. Children will be taken from their mothers at birth, as one takes eggs from a hen. The sex instinct will be eradicated. Procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm. Our neurologists are at work upon it now.

And so on. O'Brien goes on to predict that '[t]here will be no loyalty, except loyalty towards the Party', that 'there will be no love, except the love of Big Brother', that 'there will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy', and that 'there will be no art, literature, or science'. As the passage illustrates, there is a difference between the reality of the world in 1984, as imagined by Orwell – the world actually inhabited by Winston Smith – and the end-state towards which 'the party', with O'Brien as its mouthpiece, is working. Life in the former world is bleak, brutal, and disorientating. It is already the world O'Brien describes as, '[a] world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself' (ibid). However, it is as nothing compared to the world O'Brien anticipates, the world in which human minds are torn to pieces and put together in new shapes, the sex instinct eradicated and the orgasm abolished. It is in line with the ambition to create such a world, that O'Brien (ibid: 269) goes on to say:

> We control life, Winston, at all its levels. You are imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable.

But this could be no more than the crazed 'science fiction' ambition of a zealot – or so we are led to hope. The brutal world described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, thus, not a fully realised totalitarian society, but one infected by the *ambition* to create such a society; and it was this infection that Orwell was concerned to warn us against, not the possibility of totalitarian future itself. As he wrote in a letter of 1949: 'I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive', thanks to the fact that 'totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere' (Orwell 1968/70C).[4] We are, thus, to

take it that the kind of society to which Orwell is referring here is the one described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and not a future world in which 'alternative totalitarianism', operating without the help of brutality and force, has been established.

I suppose it could be consistent with Orwell's world-view that such a future could exist, although it seems unlikely that he would have thought much of the idea. The O'Brien character's notorious vision of the future as 'a boot stamping on a human face – for ever' suggests as much (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 267). (If anything, O'Brien is a victim of perverted idealism.) Certainly, the world Orwell describes – totalitarian as it is but inhabited by people as they are now – would require such methods – lots of boots stamping on lots of faces, in other words. To put it in my terms, then, it is consistent with the picture Orwell paints that totalitarianism 'by other means' is achievable only with the help of a radical change in human nature (although if the stamping is to go on 'for ever', as O'Brien predicts, there is not much likelihood of that).

The problem of happiness

In both novels, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a fictional dystopia is represented by its fictional controllers as having provided a solution to 'the problem of happiness'. Thus; in Huxley's brave new world, the inhabitants reassure themselves, every so often, with the slogan, or mantra, 'Everybody's happy now'. There is one character, 'the World Controller for Western Europe', who pronounces that happiness is the 'Sovereign Good' and that, out of the alternatives, 'Our civilisation has chosen machinery and medicine and happiness' (Huxley 1955: 141 & 183).[5] Similarly, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the party regime's official justification for its existence is that 'the choice for mankind [lies] between freedom and happiness, and that, for the great bulk of mankind, happiness [is] better'. The party's apologists represent it as 'the eternal guardian of the weak, a dedicated sect doing evil that good might come, sacrificing its own happiness to that of others' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 262).[6]

It is worth considering this point more closely. To take Huxley's story first, it is true that the inhabitants of Huxley's brave new world are happy. How could they not be? After all, they have soma and sex to rely on. That apart, they have been genetically engineered to become willing slaves who 'love their servitude' (Huxley ibid: 12). It is noticeable, though, that, this construes the nature of happiness in much the way that Bentham did; that is, as a matter of having pleasurable sensations – pleasures and pains being, as it were, positive and negative instances of the same sort of thing. As is well known, it was Bentham's view that living a happy life is a matter of

achieving a positive balance of pleasures over pains – more of the former than the latter.[7] It is a picture that restricts individual initiative to the area within which decisions are made as to how that balance is to be achieved. My point is that, otherwise, individuals are represented as relatively passive receptors of sensations – pleasures and pains being things you just 'have'. and that Huxley's portrait of the happiness his brave new worlders enjoy represents them as similarly passive in relation to the pleasures they pursue and experience.

Philosophers have interpreted the concept of happiness in other ways, however – ways that sit less easily with Huxley's narrative. For example, the happiness of his characters cannot be the *eudaimonia* of the Greeks. *Eudaimonia* – a word frequently translated as 'happiness' – is the virtue inherent in a life that has been lived and that has gone well. (It is, thus, the interpretation we need if we are to make sense of the advice of the statesman, Solon, to King Croesus – recorded by Herodotus – that he should count no man happy until he is dead. If happiness were a state of mind or a sensation, that would make no sense (Herodotus 2003: 15).) Nor can it be the happiness enjoyed by the discerning person who, according to John Stuart Mill, prefers the pursuit of 'higher' to that of 'lower' pleasures. 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied' said Mill, in a much-quoted passage, 'better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied' (Mill 1991: 140). These conceptions are ruled out by Huxley's scenario because each presupposes a relatively autonomous agent – someone capable of distinguishing alternatives in the light of a value judgment and making a choice on that basis. In the case of *eudaimonia*, this means choosing between different courses of action, which might even be different paths taken through a whole life, and attempting to determine which ones would count as lives lived well As Mill sees things, it means distinguishing between pleasures and, on the basis of a comparison, attempting to determine which are the 'higher' and which the 'lower'. As he puts it, 'if the fool or the pig is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides' (ibid). No such capacity for discrimination is demanded of those who live within the brave new world. That is because all major choices have already been made for them. Having been bred to fulfil specific social roles, they will never find themselves having to choose between differing ways of life or feel dissatisfied with the hand life has dealt them. The only choices they ever have to make are between alternative sources of fun.

Leaving the relative merits of these conflicting interpretations to one side, the point to note here is that Huxley's Benthamite interpretation of happiness goes hand in hand with his deployment of *the control model* in his account of the political relationships that hold within the dystopia he

portrays. The control model is a relatively simple picture of the way things work; one that pictures a ruler, or group of rulers, exercising control over the ruled, with the vector of power moving in a single direction from the former to the latter. I first introduced the control model in Chapter 1, where I suggested that it may give too simple a picture of the power relationships that hold in the modern world. (That was in the context of my discussion of Plato's taxonomy of 'imperfect societies'.) My point now is that it also represents the relationship between individuals and the law in a way that is only partial.

To illustrate the point, recall the story of P and Q, the schematic example I discussed in the previous chapter. In that story, robber P coerces Q saying, 'Hand over your money, or I'll beat you up'. And, by means of the threat, P forces Q to choose between two alternatives, namely (1) refuse to hand the money over and get beaten up and (2) hand the money over and avoid getting beaten up. It is because Q finds the latter the more attractive of the two that Q hands the money over. This is, in short, a story in which P *controls* Q. Not only that, it also models one way in which the law can work, for a law can be a kind of threat ('Do such and such an action, and you will receive such and such a punishment').

It is only a partial model, however, for the only people who might be persuaded to modify their behaviour for fear of incurring a penalty are those contemplating committing the act the penalty is designed to deter. For example, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, the law against smoking in restaurants does nothing to deter non-smokers from doing so, as they were not going to smoke anyway. Then again, what of smokers who, having noticed the sign pointing out that it is illegal to smoke in the restaurant, go outside to light up? Should we say that the law acts as a *deterrent* in this type of case, and that they go outside for *fear* of incurring a penalty? That may not always be an accurate way to describe what happens. For example, it may be that the sign serves to mark a certain line dividing the acceptable from the unacceptable – to 'announce a certain standard of behaviour', as Hart puts it (Hart 1969: 178) – and that smokers in this type of case go outside for reasons of politeness.(In any case, the chances of actually incurring a legal penalty may be exceedingly slim.) It would be more accurate to say that, in such cases, the law leads to a modification of behaviour by acting less as a deterrent than as a 'signpost'.

To summarise: I am suggesting that the idea of 'total control by other means' – exemplified in this case by Huxley's brave new world scenario – derives a certain plausibility through its reliance upon two assumptions The first is a Benthamite interpretation of happiness. By representing the pursuit of happiness as the pursuit of a certain type of sensation, this assigns to the rulers, or 'controllers', the task of, so to speak, 'implanting' sensations

into the consciousness of those controlled. If this were right, the difference between 'old' and 'new' totalitarianism could only be a simple difference in the method used by the rulers to implant the sensations; the latter difference being that, whereas, under the 'old' type, coercion is used to make certain pleasures less attractive and others more so, under the 'new' type, sex, drugs, and yet-to-be-developed techniques of genetic engineering are used. Secondly, Huxley assumes the control model This is implicit within his description of the 'new' totalitarianism as a set-up within which the rulers 'control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude', and equally implicit within his description of the 'old' system as one in which the population *does* have to be coerced.

Against this, and as I have argued, these assumptions are open to question and, not only that, open to question on grounds that introduce such factors as autonomous choice and rationality into the story. (There are, thus, interpretations of happiness that introduce such factors, as do interpretations of the relation between the law and the individual that do not presuppose the control model.) At the very least, such considerations serve to confirm the conclusion that 'totalitarianism by other means' would require changes to human nature and to human relationships that would be even more radical than a casual first reading of Huxley's text might suggest – so radical that his story cannot be taken seriously as a warning *to us*.

Happiness or freedom?

Having paid some critical attention to Huxley's portrait of a 'new totalitarianism' whose denizens are happy (if only in a certain sense), should I now turn my attention to Orwell's novel and subject his representation of a possible future to a parallel critique? That will not be necessary, because the inhabitants of the world Orwell portrays are clearly *not* happy. It is a world that is bleak indeed. With its decaying, rickety infrastructure, its atmosphere in which interpersonal relations are continually poisoned by mutual suspicion, its pointless routine work, and its air of Soviet-style menace infused into society by a shadowy 'party'; it is impossible to see how anyone could be happy living there. Who could be happy in a place where it is so hard to escape the baleful glare of the all-seeing telescreen, where Big Brother is always watching you, where children, whose idea of a fun day out is to watch a public execution, are all too likely to betray their parents to the authorities, and where control is reinforced by deliberately fostered mass paranoia? (In Orwell's world there is, each day, a frenzied 'Two-Minute's Hate' at which 'the heretic Emmanuel Goldstein' is denounced. Orwell describes 'A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge-hammer' which 'seemed to

flow through the whole group of people like an electric current' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 14).)

What is the case, however, is that, in both novels, the authorities justify the existence of their regimes on the grounds that they foster an environment in which their subjects are happy; and, not only that, but on the grounds that a choice had to be made between happiness and freedom – one or the other – and that it was decided to prioritise the former over the latter. We have dealt with the question of whether the inhabitants of the two dystopias, Huxley's and Orwell's, are in fact happy. Clearly, there is a further question as to what these writers understand freedom to be.

To take Huxley first, there is, in fact, a perfectly good sense of 'free' in which the denizens of his brave new world are free; they are free from constraints to do the thing they want to do. In other words, they have what Isaiah Berlin describes as the 'negative' liberty to do those things.[8] Even so, their thoughts and actions have, in the last resort, been determined by the controllers. Should we not, then, describe them as lacking 'positive' freedom in Berlin's sense, that is, the freedom that consists in not being 'subject to the will of another'? Perhaps, but that might be a little too quick – a little slick and formulaic. In the novel, freedom is represented by life in a reservation located somewhere in New Mexico, where people experience a spontaneous, unregulated, existence. There is an imperfectly socialised character, 'the Savage', who hails from there, and with whose suicide the novel concludes. Then again, in his foreword, Huxley expresses regret at having written the book with the idea that 'human beings are given free will in order to choose between insanity on the one hand and lunacy on the other' (1955: 7). He explains (ibid: 8) that:

> If I were to rewrite the book, I would offer the Savage a third alternative. Between the utopian and the primitive horns of his dilemma would lie the possibility of sanity – a possibility already actualised, to some extent, in a community of exiles and refugees from the Brave New World, living within the borders of the Reservation. In this community economics would be decentralist and Henry-Georgian, politics Kropotkinesque and co-operative . . . a society composed of freely co-operating individuals devoted to the pursuit of sanity. Thus altered, *Brave New World* would have possessed an artistic and . . . a philosophical completeness, which in its present form it evidently lacks.

There may or may not be a coherent, philosophically defensible definition of 'freedom' underpinning these remarks but, in any case, this is not the right place to embark upon a discussion of Henry George's economic theory, of Peter Kropotkin's anarchism. It would take us way beside the point.

As for Orwell, in his case, the idea of freedom is connected with intellectual integrity; the ability to maintain one's grip upon the idea that there is objective truth, that there are standards of evidence and logical rationality to which all must adhere. This is contrasted with the ability of the party, in his novel, to dominate the population, not just with the use of terror, but by inducing a kind of collective hallucination. 'We control matter because we control the mind', says O'Brien at one point. Further (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 265):

> Reality is inside the skull. You will learn by degrees, Winston. There is nothing that we could not do. Invisibility, levitation – anything. I could float off this floor like a soap bubble if I wished to. I do not wish to, because the Party does not wish it. You must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of Nature. We make the laws of Nature.

Elsewhere, Orwell commented that, 'The organised lying practised by totalitarian states [is] something integral to totalitarianism, something that would still continue even if concentration camps and secret police forces had ceased to be necessary' (Orwell 1968/70A: 85). It is against this that Winston Smith struggles to continue with the belief that, 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 81).

What are we to make of this? And what are we to make of the similar view expressed by Hannah Arendt (Arendt 2004: 610), according to whom:

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist.

There are, no doubt, many techniques of manipulation available to the totalitarian dictator, so it is striking that both of these writers should have singled out the obfuscation of truth and the undermining of reason for special mention. It raises interesting questions, but ones best left until we reach a later chapter.

A disconcerting fact and a disconcerting question

The disconcerting fact is that, like the controllers in Huxley's and Orwell's novels, the dictatorships that rose to prominence in the 1920s and 1930s derived the considerable support they enjoyed from people who had chosen

happiness over freedom. That is a rather simplified way of putting it, of course. It would be more accurate to point out that the anti-democratic, anti-liberal parties of the Right promised stability, security, and the restoration of national pride. To populations who had survived a devastating world war, followed by severe economic depression, it would have appeared worth paying a certain cost in loss of liberty in order to achieve these advantages. And then, *why not* choose happiness (security, stability, national pride, etc.) rather than freedom. If these values are, in fact, incompatible then you must choose one or the other and, if choosing happiness means choosing totalitarianism, then the disconcerting question is: why not choose totalitarianism – and why not go for it even if totalitarianism brings happiness for most people but misery for some? If there is, indeed, a straightforward answer to it, perhaps we will have reached it by the end of this book.

Notes

1 The novel was first published in 1932.
2 Henceforth referred to by its title, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
3 'Hyoscine, also known as scopolamine is a medication used to treat motion sickness and postoperative nausea and vomiting'. In parts of South America it is also known as the 'Devil's Breath' drug, and is said to be capable of 'zombifying' people. This reputation could be exaggerated.
4 It is important to get this straight. In the BBC documentary, *George Orwell: A Life in Pictures* (2003) the words spoken by O'Brien in the novel are portrayed as being spoken by Orwell himself. This obscures the difference between the world Orwell thought possible – the world of *1984* – and the world anticipated by enthusiasts such as O'Brien.
5 Similarly, in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* – the novel that set the pattern for this type of fiction – there is a character who describes the dystopia he inhabits as having brought 'a mathematically infallible happiness' (Zamyatin 1993: 3). Orwell, who was impressed by Zamyatin's book, thought that, 'Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* must be partly derived from it' (Orwell 1968/70B: 96). However, Huxley always denied this.
6 This is the official justification. As O'Brien's monologue makes plain, the regime's true *raison d'être* is power for its own sake.
7 For Bentham's view see Bentham (2000), especially chapters 1–5.
8 Here, I am referring to Berlin's famous essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (Berlin 1969). In the present context, it would be irrelevant to elaborate Berlin's distinction in any detail.

6 Interim

Some weeks ago, I was taking a walk in my local park when I witnessed the following event. A small dog had slipped its lead and was making a run for it. Its owner was chasing it. He looked desperate, he was out of breath and, although he was running as fast as he could, the dog was outstripping him. As he ran, this is what the man shouted: 'Come here! Come here YOU FASCIST!'

The dog was not really a fascist, of course. Even the average fascist is more intelligent than the typical dog for, unlike fascists, dogs are incapable of forming even the most rudimentary political opinions. You only had to look at the yapping, snapping little tyke to see exactly what its owner meant though, and the incident provided a good illustration of how a political term can be deprived of precise meaning and degenerate into a simple term of abuse. In my neck of the woods it can be routine for those of a left-ish or liberal persuasion to label those they dislike as fascists. But then many another political term can be stripped of its true meaning in the same way. For example, the way 'fascist' is sometimes used by leftists is mirrored by the way 'liberal' is often used by those on the right as a term of abuse for those they dislike. Just say that you support gay marriage, for example, or state-funded health care – or say that you think a woman has a right to choose an abortion, or that you are opposed to the death penalty – and someone standing to the right of you will call you a liberal. You will be called that because this person thinks you're a schmuck, not because he or she has conducted a cool analysis of your political standpoint.

As for 'totalitarian', here – once again - it appears easy enough to agree with Barbara Goodwin's view that the term 'has been hopelessly debased by its regular use as a term of abuse'. (Goodwin 1987: 186.) It is indeed used as a term of abuse and – or so I would add – especially by members of the political Right wanting to attack some measure they dislike on the grounds that (as they think) it represents an infringement of liberty. On the other hand, though, it could be that Goodwin is too hastily jumping to a conclusion. Note her reason for dismissing the term as one whose use has become 'hopelessly

debased'. It is that, 'When the USSR (before 1991), China, Cuba, Haiti, and the Philippines (before 1986), El Salvador, Argentina and (until the mid-1970s) Greece, Spain, and Portugal are all described by the same epithet, there is no possibility of analysing the differences between their political systems, or passing discriminating judgements on their varying ideologies and goals' (ibid: 186–7). In short, she holds that these regimes differ from each other to such an extent that there is no meaningful way of assigning them to the same category; which suggests – in turn – that she is approaching the idea of totalitarianism from the standpoint of a political taxonomist.

Now, it is true enough that, so far, we have met with little success when conceiving totalitarianism as a suitable subject for the latter approach.

So far, we have met with little success when treating totalitarianism as a suitable subject for (what I have been calling) 'political taxonomy'. I mean that, when beginning with the assumption that totalitarianism is a distinct political form – like democracy, say, or oligarchy or tyranny – we have found nothing to distinguish something that might be labelled 'totalitarianism' from the last of these. Traditional taxonomies, such as Plato's, are of no help, and nor does totalitarian philosophy with its story about the 'total state' serve to define a genuinely distinct political *form* as opposed to a highly repressive tyranny. As for the idea of totalitarianism as total control, it seems that total control – or, at any rate, total control without cruelty and pain – would only be possible in a state populated by beings unlike ourselves – by cyborgs or automata.

Earlier, I made an alternative suggestion that, rather than treating totalitarianism as a distinct political form – a form whose contours we have, as yet, failed to determine – it may be preferable to think of totalitarianism as representing an ideal, a state of affairs to which ambitious tyrants may aspire, but that they may never perfectly achieve; something akin to the frictionless machine. That would, at least, have the advantage of blurring the distinction between totalitarianism and 'mere' tyranny, but in a way that clarified the relationship between the former and the latter. Totalitarianism would, thus, stand at one extreme of a spectrum, with less extreme examples of control ranged elsewhere along the line. That way, there would be no need to search for a sharp definitional line dividing full totalitarianism from regimes such as that of, say, Cuba, which displays many of the features included in List L, but which is by no means as radically repressive as those of Hitler or Stalin.

My point is that if totalitarianism were a genuinely distinct phenomenon, and especially to be feared, then we should expect an account of totalitarianism's nature to explain why this should be so. However, if we think of totalitarianism as lying at one end of a spectrum, then we have to face the fact that a regime may be totalitarian in many respects, but acceptable to many of those who live under its sway. Earlier, I gave the example of North Korea in the days of Kim Il Sung – or, at any rate, the North Korea of that time as described by

Andrei Lankov (Lankov 2013). If we are to believe Lankov, it seems that life during that period was tolerable, although the petty ministrations of the authorities must have been irritating. As another example, we might choose Cuba where there is – or, rather, was until recently – a charismatic leader, namely Fidel Castro; where there remains an ideology to which all are expected to subscribe (Marxism), a single party (the Cuban Communist Party), and where it is the case that the government exercises monopolistic control of the media, the education system, and the diffusion of propaganda. (Hence the match with List L.) The island is hardly a liberal's paradise, of course, as a reading of the 2018 *Human Rights Watch* report on Cuba will confirm.[1] According to the latter there were, in the year 2017–8, cases of arbitrary detention, intimidation of dissidents and protestors by the police, travel restriction, and imprisonment for political reasons – all this in addition to the usual restrictions on freedom of expression. But, if these are reasons for describing it as totalitarian, it is also true that there is no evidence of massive discontent amongst the population there. To a great many Cuban citizens, the regime is not merely tolerable – as was Kim Il Sung's regime to North Koreans – but deserving of positive support. At any rate, that is how it seems to me.[2]

But if we have yet to determine a distinct form, something that might appropriately be labelled 'totalitarianism', and if we have, as yet, to explain the fearsome character such a political formation is reputed to possess, might there not yet be another approach available? It is possible, for the expression 'totalitarian regime' is, in fact, ambiguous. On the one hand it could be taken to mean that totalitarianism is a distinct type of regime. On the other hand, however, it could be taken to mean that a 'totalitarian regime' is the sort of regime you tend to get when certain conditions prevail – totalitarian conditions – these being *something other than* the regime itself. To think of things in the latter way is to think of the relationship between totalitarian conditions and a totalitarian regime as resembling that between a disease and a symptom. Think of a rash. There are various diseases – chickenpox, measles, smallpox, syphilis, certain allergies – of which a rash may be a symptom, but in none of these cases is the rash itself the disease. Perhaps the same goes for the relation between totalitarian conditions that give rise to a certain type of regime – the totalitarian regime – and the regime itself. Could it be, then, that if we are to understand totalitarianism we must comprehend a state of the world – a fallen state into which we are condemned to exist, as exiles, through the operation of long-term historical forces? It is with that possibility in mind, that we now turn to the philosophy of Hannah Arendt.

Notes

1 At www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/cuba.

2 This opinion is based purely upon personal experience, not upon the result of some systematically organised survey.

7 Arendt

The elements of totalitarianism

This chapter's subject is Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/2004).[1] Her aim in writing it was, as she put it, to give, 'a historical account of the elements which crystallised into totalitarianism' followed by an 'analysis of totalitarian movements and domination itself' (Arendt 1953: 78).[2] In this short chapter my own aim can only be to produce a sketch, its purpose being to give some idea of the approach she takes to the subject, its strengths and its weaknesses.

Arendt's discussion is long and detailed,[3] and so I have chosen to focus upon just two of its elements. One is her critique of the idea that we have 'natural' or 'human' rights. This has aroused a certain amount of interest recently – from outside philosophy as much as within it – largely because of its relevance to the refugee crisis by which the world is beset at present, and which shows no sign of abating.[4] The other is her discussion of our ability to distinguish fact from fiction and, with it, the idea that to live under totalitarian conditions is to inhabit a delusory world. The latter takes us to the heart of Arendt's *weltanschauung*.

'The rights of man'

Within the philosophy of the modern period the idea that we have 'natural' or 'human' rights first gained traction during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Two influential expressions of that idea – the two upon which I shall concentrate – are John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1689/1993) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contrac*t (1762/1968). These are texts that seek to place constraints upon the arbitrary exercise of authority by defining principles against which the actions of specific regimes can be measured.[5] They contain ideas that find expression in some famous documents. For example, the United States' Constitution carries an unmistakable echo of Locke's founding premise that we have

natural rights to life, liberty, and property; and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen bears the mark of Rousseau's influence.

The texts in question are classic examples of 'social contract theory'. Arendt, on the other hand, is anything but a social contract theorist. This suggests that one way to illustrate the distinctive character of her own approach is to contrast it with the social contract story, and that is what I propose to do. Accordingly, I shall take three conceptions each of which plays a crucial role in both cases, though a very different role in each. The conceptions are (1) the idea of a 'no-state situation' (as I shall call it);[6] (2) the idea that, even in a no-state situation, there is a 'natural law' to which all are subject, and that it defines the natural rights we all have; (3) the idea that we have rights that are 'extra-federal' in the sense that they lie beyond the legislative reach of any single state authority. As I shall argue, Arendt misrepresents the argument of the major social contract theorists but, as I shall also argue, she demonstrates a certain insight. She is, if you like, right for the wrong reasons.

The no-state situation

This is the situation from which the institutions of the state are absent. There is no law-making authority and there are no law-enforcing agencies. (There is no parliament, for example, and neither is there such a thing as a police force.) Within the classic versions of social contract theory, the no-state situation takes the form of the 'state of nature', the situation from which individuals are pictured as seeking to escape by, as it were, 'signing up' to a social contract. These days, there is general agreement amongst philosophers that the social contract story is an exercise in 'rational choice theory', i.e. that the state of nature is an imaginary conception that plays a role in determining why rational agents would agree to the institution of a state, or to place such and such limits on the exercise of authority. (At any rate, that is how John Rawls, whose publication of *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 has been responsible for a revival of interest in social contract theory, sees it.) By contrast, the no-state situation as portrayed by Arendt is all too real. As she sees it, to have become stateless is to suffer a great misfortune. It is to be condemned to a feral existence, living as part of a numerous mass – a refugee, for example, forced to migrate with countless others, 'welcomed nowhere and . . . assimilated nowhere' (OT: 341). Examples of stateless persons she lists include people who,

> took refuge in statelessness after the first World War in order to remain where they were and avoid being deported to a 'homeland' where they

> would be strangers (as in the case of many Polish and Romanian Jews in France and Germany) the post-war refugees who had been forced out of their countries by revolutions, and were promptly denationalised by the victorious governments at home.

In this category she lists, in chronological order, 'millions of Russians, hundreds of thousands of Armenians, thousands of Hungarians, hundreds of thousands of Germans, and more than half a million Spaniards – Jews denationalised by the Nazis, including those deported to a Polish camp as well as those who managed to escape from Germany' (OT: 354). Had Arendt been writing now, she would no doubt have included the many more millions of forcibly displaced persons, presently living in camps or seeking asylum in more stable parts of the world.[7]

In fact, there is no straightforward contradiction between the two descriptions, for each plays a different role within an argument. On the one hand – as noted – the social contract version is a hypothetical construct designed to play a role within a chain of *a priori* reasoning. On the other hand, Arendt's is a description of an existing state of affairs accompanied by a moral judgement (that the state of affairs is deplorable). Even so, we should note one difference between them, namely that individuals within the state of nature are pictured by social contract theory as being in a position to negotiate and so establish a system of civil rights with a 'sovereign' to enforce them. (They do so via 'the social contract'.) Indeed, in Locke's version they already have rights – they have 'natural' rights – so you could say that theirs is not so much a 'no-state' as a '*pre*-state situation'. By contrast, the stateless mass of refugees and other 'superfluous' people are in no position to do any such thing. (A refugee camp is just that – a refugee camp. It is not a 'state of nature'.) It is, thus, a particular strength of Arendt's account that it captures an aspect of reality that social contract theory – an approach to the understanding of politics that remains influential – is incapable of reflecting.

'Natural' or 'human' rights

This is the idea that we have rights – 'natural' or 'human' rights[8] – in addition to the 'positive' rights we have as specified by the particular legal systems that prevail within the territories we happen to occupy. In Locke's version of this conception we are said to have those rights even in the absence of a civil law; that is, even in the state of nature. That is because our natural rights are, as Locke thinks, defined by a 'law of nature' that carries supreme authority both inside and outside the boundaries of particular states. (In fact, out of the major social contract theorists of the Enlightenment period – it is only Locke whose argument matches the pattern Arendt has in mind

when conducting her critique, so I shall concentrate on his argument here.)[9] As it happens, I do not find Arendt's objections to the idea that there are human rights especially persuasive. Let me first say why. (There are three reasons.) I will then explain wherein I think the value of her contribution to our understanding of human rights does lie.

Firstly, then, the idea that we have natural rights, as defined by the law of nature, raises the question of how we know what those rights are. There is no authoritative legal document in which to search for an answer – no legal expert to consult – and so, clearly, the analogy between a (supposedly existing) law of nature and everyday positive law cannot be exact. Nor can it help to insist (weakly) that there are rights we have 'simply by virtue of being human'. True, there are features we possess simply by virtue of the fact that we are human – examples are our opposable thumbs and our relatively large brains. But these are directly observable. Any rights we may have are not.

Think along such lines and it is easy to appreciate why Arendt should have come to equate the idea of human rights with the invocation of some mysterious human nature – a common human 'essence' from which our possession of such rights flows. She states, for example, that:

> The very language of the Declaration of Independence as well as of the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme* – 'inalienable', 'given with birth', 'self-evident truths' – implies a belief in a kind of human 'nature' which would be subject to the same laws of growth as that of the individual and from which rights and laws could be deduced

and refers to the 'paradox' involved in the doctrine of inalienable rights, namely that, 'it reckoned with an "abstract" human being who seemed to exist nowhere' (OT: 378 & 370). Against this, Arendt insists upon referring, not to 'Man' in the abstract, but only to 'men' – specific individuals located in specific historical situations.

The trouble with Arendt's argument on this point, however, is that, although the notion of a universal human essence is indeed questionable, you do not have to invoke it in order to support the idea that there are human rights. Even Locke, whose argument most closely resembles the stereotypical portrait Arendt paints, is not open to the objection in question. On the contrary, he derives the conclusion that we have natural rights to life and liberty from the existence of a perfectly ordinary, observable fact, namely that, while there are many 'natural' differences between individuals, there is none that confers an entitlement on the part of some people to exert authority over others. As Locke put it, there is 'nothing more evident' than that 'the Lord and Master of [us] all' has *not* 'by any manifest Declaration

of his Will set one above another, and confer[red] on him by an evident and clear appointment an undoubted Right to Dominion and Sovereignty' (1689/1993: 263). (The language may be archaic, but the point is one with which any twenty-first century egalitarian – any feminist or anti-racist – can agree.) Far from the invocation of a supposed human 'essence', you could say that Locke's argument amounts to the denial that there is any such thing.

So, that is my first reservation over Arendt's account of human rights. My second relates to her insistence that any rights we genuinely have can only be *effective* rights; moreover, that such effectiveness can only derive from the 'positive' rights we have through membership of a community. As she put it, there must be a 'right to have rights' and, as she thought, under the conditions of her own time such a right could only come through citizenship of a nation-state. It is this 'right to have rights' that stateless persons are said by Arendt to lack. She wrote (OT: 375):

> The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion – formulas which were designed to solve problems *within* given communities – but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever.

On this, my comment is that Arendt is – of course – right to hold that ineffective rights are worthless rights. However, this is not a consideration that need invalidate the idea that there are natural or human rights. On the contrary, in the hands of Locke – say – the natural law is there to set moral limits to the positive law; the latter being effective law formulated and enforced by actual legislatures. So, it is not true that natural law theory need exclude the possibility of effective positive law. It is just that it sets the latter within a particular context.

My third reason for being unconvinced by Arendt's argument lies in its inability to distinguish 'the right to have rights' from 'the right to have *equal* rights'. This would not matter at all if she attached no value to equality, but she does. She writes, for example, that 'man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals' (OT: 382). Let me put the problem as follows: Suppose that you are confronted with a choice between three options, and that you rank these in order of preference, with A being your most preferred option, B your second most preferred, and C your least preferred. In this case, it is obvious that you would opt for A. But now suppose that, for some reason, the opportunity to choose A has been ruled out. You must choose between B and C. Given your preference ranking then, again obviously, you will choose B. You will see the difficulty facing Arendt's argument if you suppose that A is a situation

in which all are equal – in which you will have the same rights as everyone else – that B is a situation of inequality in which you have rights, but fewer rights than some of the others, and that C is a stateless situation in which you will have no rights at all. Clearly, if all three options are available, then you will opt for A. But what if A has been closed off? According to Arendt, statelessness is by far the worst situation to find oneself in, in which case you will choose B, the situation of inequality, on the grounds that having *at least some* rights is preferable to having no rights at all. It follows that, if Arendt is to avoid the conclusion that inequality of effective rights can be acceptable, she needs to introduce a normative element into her argument with a view to excluding it, and that is what the idea of natural rights, as defined by natural law, is meant to do.

Extra-federal rights

This is the idea that there are rights that lie beyond the legislative reach of any single state government. It is distinct from the idea just discussed, that there is a law of nature to which all are subject, although it is easy to appreciate how the two can be confused. That is because, in the hands of a thinker such as Locke, the natural law *also* serves as an extra-federal standard. For an example of an extra-federal standard which does not assume the existence of a natural law, however, one need look no further than the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights This cannot be changed by any single government, so it is extra-federal in the sense at issue and, as it states in its preamble, it aims to set 'a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations'. Like Locke's law of nature, it, thus, aims to supply a normative measure against which the actions of individual governments can be assessed, but its content was not derived *a priori*, through a philosophical argument, but from discussions that took place between members of a committee.[10] Even so, for all their extra-federal character, the UN Declaration and the institutions associated with it form part of a system for regulating the relations between *states*. If you are to benefit from the arrangement, that will, most likely, be thanks to the fact that you are a citizen of a state. If you fall beyond the confines of any state – if you are part of a superfluous mass, a refugee for example – then any benefit you derive will only be down to chance.

A shift in perspective

Just here, I should confess that there will be readers who, being familiar with Arendt's work themselves, will feel that with my discussion thus far I have rather missed the point. Up to now, I have been treating her discussion

of rights atemporally, as if she and I were sitting in a seminar room together, and each trying to subject the other's view to critical examination. Such an approach is fair enough, I think. It *is* relevant to the assessment of her work to note that she misportrays the social contract theory of the Enlightenment period. It is equally important to note – as a journalist might – her achievement in drawing attention to a tragic feature of the contemporary world with which neither contemporary political structures nor contemporary political thought are well-equipped to deal, namely the tragedy of statelessness. We underestimate her achievement, however, if we think of her as doing just those things, for it is Arendt's intention to represent that tragic situation as the outcome of a developmental process. It is a process that involves ideas – largely, if not entirely, with ideas reflecting reality and changing with alterations in reality itself.

Once again, a comparison with Locke will serve to illustrate the point. As it happens, there is one striking similarity between Locke's experience and Arendt's, namely that, like Arendt, Locke spent a part of his life as a refugee. He was a refugee of a different kind, however, an intellectual living more or less independently in the Netherlands, politically engaged, with aristocratic connections, and in a position to negotiate with others with a view to initiating political change. This was a person who would return to England in 1688, accompanying William of Orange at the time of 'the Glorious Revolution'. He would not have been familiar with the existence of a numerous stateless *mass* – 'the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history', as Arendt described it, 'the existence of an ever-growing new people comprised of stateless persons, the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics' (OT: 352–3). Arendt reminds us that it is with the latter that contemporary political structures are ill-equipped to deal.

As for political thought, both Locke and Rousseau place, centre stage, the ability of individuals to negotiate with each other, their purpose being to establish a framework within which rights are respected. In Locke's case, as we have seen, the negotiation takes place between individuals situated with a 'state of 'nature'. Within Rousseau's scenario, rights are derived by an agreement between citizens, concerned to 'defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all' and yet remain free (1762/1968: 60). Neither entertains the possibility that such negotiating might not be possible and, since such negotiation is not an option for those who compose the stateless mass of our own time, neither can adequately address the plight of the latter.

The foregoing argument is my own, not Arendt's. However, it is consistent with her own conclusion that, just as the nation-state system cannot adequately cope with the reality, so political philosophy has been, up to now, incapable of addressing the phenomenon at the level of thought. (So, on this

particular issue, I suppose you could say that, in my view, Arendt is right but for the wrong reasons.) That said, I should add that Arendt's discussion of 'the rights of man' only takes up one chapter of her book, although it is a chapter that is, in many ways, representative of her approach.

The book is like a jigsaw picture and the chapter just one component of the latter. The picture she builds up is one of a society – a 'mass society' within which a numerous body of 'superfluous' individuals has become a significant presence. In addition to 'superfluous', adjectives Arendt uses to describe their situation include 'isolated', 'atomised', 'impotent', 'lonely', and (in *The Human Condition*) 'worldless'. This is said to supply the social soil in which the totalitarian mentality, and then totalitarianism itself, can easily bloom. Arendt is using these words in a specialised sense of her own, of course. The inhabitants of mass society may experience 'loneliness', but it is not an affliction that can be cured by joining a social club. But before turning to that point, we must consider some of the other pieces that go together to form the picture she constructs.

The retreat into fantasy

Truth and falsity: fact and fiction

To live under totalitarian conditions, the way Arendt portrays them, is to be the deluded inhabitant of a fantasy world. She writes (OT: p. 610):

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist.

What can she mean by this? To take the distinction between truth and falsity first, it is, in fact, hard to quarrel with the contention that our ability to distinguish the two is contingent upon the recognition of, and respect for, certain standards (if, indeed, that's what she means by 'standards of thought'). These are *publicly available* standards; 'publicly available' in the sense that – while there may be individuals unprepared to acknowledge them, or even incapable of recognising them – they are, as it were, 'out there' in the world for anyone who looks to see. They are, moreover, *objective* standards; 'objective' in the sense that their decisive force – i.e. their relevance to the distinction at issue – is quite independent of any opinions this or that individual may have about that relevance. (A scientifically established claim, for example, is – by definition – one that has passed certain empirical tests; these being tests that it must pass, *and be seen to pass*,

when repeated.) Similarly, in the case of truths that purport to be established by reason (as opposed to observation), it must be possible – in the last analysis – to demonstrate that the chains of reasoning used to support them observe fundamental principles of logic, principles that are, likewise, publicly available and objective. (Clearly, an argument that made the ability to determine logical consistency a matter of solipsistic introspection would be a non-starter. For example, it is notorious that Descartes, who makes that ability dependent upon the having of 'clear and distinct ideas', could never explain how to distinguish the latter from ideas that are 'obscure and confused'. As Arendt remarks at one point: 'The elementary rules of cogent evidence, the truism, that two and two equals four cannot be perverted even under the conditions of absolute loneliness' (OT: 214).)

That, at any rate, is how I make sense of the way Arendt connects the loss of 'the capacity of experience and thought' with the loss of contact with one's fellows (OT: 610). If I am right, then her point is, as I say, familiar and uncontentious. The same goes for a related, but different distinction, that between fact and fiction. Like the ability to distinguish truth from falsity, this also relies upon the existence of public standards, although, in this case, the standards are less formal. By way of illustration, take the case of Victor Laszlo who, as readers familiar with classics of the cinema will know, is a character in the movie *Casablanca*. In the movie, Laszlo (played by Paul Henreid) is portrayed as a Czech resistance fighter who has made his way to Vichy-occupied Morocco, having escaped captivity in a Nazi camp. In the final scene, he boards a plane bound for Lisbon, accompanied by his wife Ilse (Ingrid Bergman) and we, the audience, are reassured that, from Lisbon, he will make it to freedom to continue his resistance activities. There is, therefore, a parallel between Lazlo's career, as portrayed in the movie, and Hannah Arendt's own, for she also escaped from a Nazi camp, made it to Lisbon and, from there, to freedom. Even so, we can be sure that, whereas Laszlo's story is fictional, Arendt's is not.

How come? The answer is pretty obvious, I think. It is that there is, in each case, a stable context of conditions – 'background conditions', 'signposts', 'clues', call them what you will – and it is from the existence of this context that our ability to distinguish fiction from fact derives. For example, we know that *Casablanca* is a movie, and we know how to tell a movie from a news report. We also know that, when observing the activities of Laszlo and Ilse – together with those of Rick and Captain Renault, the characters who see them off at the airport – we are 'really' watching Henreid, Bergman, Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains at work. For that matter, we can discover that the 'Rick's Café' that now exists in Casablanca itself was – as its website states – 'designed to recreate the bar made famous by Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in the movie classic'. (In short, it was the movie

that came first.) In Arendt's case, the clues are of a different character. There are no actors involved, but it is on record, for example, that there really was a Nazi-run camp (at Gurs in southern France – you can still visit the site). It is also on record that there was an escape by female inmates (of whom Arendt was one) and Arendt herself is remembered by the students she taught and the colleagues with whom she worked at various American universities.[11] All such facts stand testimony to the truth of her life story.

But if all that is obvious enough, it has an implication that is – perhaps – not so obvious, if only because that implication is less frequently spelt out. The implication is that, should it be possible to manipulate, subvert or break down the 'normal' context of standards and conditions that renders our ability to distinguish truth from falsity, fact from fiction, then our ability to draw those distinctions may become impaired. It is one of Arendt's insights that this is so, and a great deal of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is devoted to an account of how such manipulation has, in fact, been effected by actual totalitarian regimes. In our own time – or so it may be worth adding – the example of 'fake news' might have been used to illustrate the point. If, indeed, there is such a thing as 'fake news' then it must be distinct from news which is simply laced with bias, lies, misinformation, mistakes, and lies. The popular press has always been biased and mendacious, so there would be nothing new about that. For 'fake news' to qualify as a genuinely new phenomenon then, I suggest, one way for it to do so might be through the elimination of a context within which the ability to distinguish fact from fiction is possible. (Could it be argued that the influence of the internet is helping to eliminate that context? Perhaps – but that is another story.)

From party to 'movement'

In any case, the examples upon which she draws are, of course, the regimes of Hitler and Stalin. The features to which she draws our attention include the following: (1) the dissolution of the entire class system. Arendt recounts how, in Russia, this was instituted by the Bolshevik government during the early 1930s, beginning with the imposition of artificial famine and deportation upon the property-owning classes and then sweeping through the structure as a whole (the 'liquidation' of the *kulaks*, in other words) (OT: 425ff). This contributes to the 'atomisation' of which 'mass society' is a culmination. The same goes for (2) the breakdown of the party system, something with which the liquidation of classes goes hand in hand, and the replacement of the political party with the idea of the movement. Unlike the party system, which originated with the need to balance conflicts between the interests of various groups within the context of the nation-state, the latter creates a sense of perpetual motion in the individuals who compose the

'mass', and has a destabilising, disorientating effect. Moreover (3) unlike membership of a party – which may be demonstrated by the production of a party card, for example – the claim that you are part of a movement is not open to empirical test. As Arendt puts it, 'there is hardly a better way to avoid discussion than by releasing an argument from the control of the present and by stating that only the future can reveal its merits' (OT: 456). (The 'standards of thought' can no longer be applied in such cases.)

Similar considerations apply to (4) the propaganda disseminated by totalitarian regimes. In the times of Hitler and Stalin, this tended to assume a certain 'scientificality' (Arendt's word). In other words, it made claims of a scientific *form* – claims that might appear scientific to those unprepared to examine them too closely – but that were, in fact, nothing of the sort. As an example, take the notorious idea of a 'master race'. As Arendt points out (OT: 533):

> The Nazis did not think that the Germans were a master race, to whom the world belonged, but that they should be led by a master race, as should all other nations, and that this race was only on the point of being born.

It is a point on which she cites Himmler's comment that the 'Germanic world empire' is in any event still centuries off (ibid). All this is compounded by the natural enough tendency on the part of 'the masses' to refuse to recognise the 'fortuitousness that pervades reality' and to seek refuge in a 'lying world of consistency' (OT: 463 & 464). It is this that partly explains the tendency to swallow the Nazi story of 'a Jewish world conspiracy' (OT 463–4); likewise the uniform character of the 'confessions' extracted from the victims of Soviet show trials; a uniformity which could never be achieved in the real world, but only in the

> lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations (OT: 464–5).

A weird internal logic

Finally, Arendt argues that unlike 'normal' dictatorship or tyrannies, totalitarian regimes have no *raison d'être* that is, so to speak, 'external'. I mean that, whereas one can imagine oppressive political arrangements being justified (by someone or other) on the grounds that they are necessary for the

solution of some crisis – an economic crisis or a war – or by the ruling elite themselves, simply on the grounds that it is there to service their own greed, no such 'utilitarian' explanation appears to have been available in the case of genuinely totalitarian regimes – not according to Arendt. On the contrary – and to take her example – not only did Stalin's 'liquidation of classes' make no political sense, 'it was positively disastrous for the Soviet economy. The consequences of the artificial famine in 1933 [having been] felt for years throughout the country' (OT: 427). Again, in the Nazi case 'the only permanent economic function of the [concentration] camps has been the financing of their own supervisory apparatus; thus from the economic point of view the concentration camps exist mostly for their own sake' (OT: 573). 'The incredibility of the horrors' is, thus, ' closely bound up with their economic uselessness' (ibid).

Far from complying with any 'utilitarian' rationale, totalitarianism, according to Arendt, has a weird internal dynamic of its own. It 'uses the state administration for its long-range goal of world conquest'. It 'establishes the secret police as the executors and guardians of its domestic experiment in constantly transforming reality into fiction', and 'it finally erects concentration camps as special laboratories to carry through its experiment in total domination' (OT: 511). With this, Arendt's compelling picture is complete. It is – in summary – a portrait of a world in which normal social relations have broken down. Its inhabitants are cowed and isolated. Having lost the ability to distinguish reality from illusion, they are easily manipulated through the use of propaganda and terror, the necessity for each being inversely proportional to that of the other. It is, in short, a world riven by mass psychosis.

Totalitarianism as idea and as reality

It is one thing to paint a compelling picture, however, and another to advance a thesis that will stand up to critical analysis. In other words, it is time to consider some of the more problematic features of Arendt's arguments.

As a start, note that Arendt is offering a description of totalitarianism *considered as an idea*; that is, a pattern to which actual arrangements may correspond to a greater or lesser extent. That is the clear implication of – for example – her remark that 'even Mussolini, who was so fond of the term "totalitarian state", did not attempt to establish a full-fledged totalitarian regime' but 'contented himself with dictatorship and one-party rule' (OT: 411). It is, equally, implied by her observation that totalitarian governments never consider their programmes to have been completed until they have achieved world domination (OT: 537). (From this we can infer, presumably, that no *fully* totalitarian regime is likely to exist in the near future.) It is also implied by her conjecture, in the 1958 'Appendix' to *The Origins*

of Totalitarianism that, in the future, '[t]otalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man', the reason being that annihilation is 'the swiftest solution to the problem of overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses' (OT: 624). All this suggests a 'real world', aspects of which are partially totalitarian, though not completely.

There is, thus, a contrast between Arendt's approach and those empirical studies that treat certain regimes as paradigmatic and, through a comparative study, seek to determine their common elements. (List L, the 'working specification' of totalitarianism I introduced back in Chapter 2, might be the outcome of such a procedure.) The contrast means that some regimes that might normally be counted as totalitarian – even regimes that might usually count as paradigmatic of the latter – fail to pass the test set by Arendt. One example, as just noted, is Mussolini's regime. As noted in Chapter 3, it was with the rhetoric of Italian fascism that the idea of 'the total state' first entered the modern political vocabulary; so you could say that Italian fascism served as midwife at the time of totalitarianism's birth. Even so, Mussolini regime was insufficiently 'pure' to count as totalitarian when assessed against Arendt's criteria. Another example might be one that has been discussed already, the regime of Kim Il Sung, the dictator who ruled North Korea between 1948 and 1994, and whose *modus operandi* as described in Chapter 4. As you will recall, Kim's subjects were so closely monitored and controlled that – as Andrei Lankov the North Korea expert puts it – they can be said to have to 'out-Stalined Stalin himself' (Lankov 2013: 34). Even so, if we are to believe Lankov, then – for all the nuisance and irritation interference in their lives must have caused them – the attitude of the agricultural peasants over whom Kim ruled towards the ministrations of the bureaucracy was not much different from that of modern Westerners who grumble about the inevitability of taxes. The element missing from these cases, so far as Arendt was concerned, would be the attempt to change human nature itself; that of 'transforming the human personality into a mere thing', as she put it, 'into something that even animals are not' (OT: 565).

Still, these are discrepancies that can be discounted, or so one might argue. After all, 'totalitarianism' is not a word in 'ordinary language' – or so it may be argued – and so one has a fair amount of leeway in choosing how to define it. If one definition stipulates that genuine totalitarianism must involve the attempt to change human nature itself – which, according to Arendt, would be the element missing from the regimes of Mussolini and Kim Il Sung – whereas another definition treats the regimes of the 1920s and 1930s as paradigmatic, then so be it. That said, however, there are

genuine questions to be raised concerning the relationship between idea and empirical reality in Arendt's work. For example, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is not a novel, which means that the relationship between her account of totalitarianism considered as an idea and, on the other hand, the facts she adduces in support of that description does not parallel the relationship between, say, the fictional totalitarian state described in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the reality of life in Britain in 1948. True: there are striking resemblances between each author's conception of totalitarianism. (Both represent totalitarianism as a delusional fantasy. Compare also Arendt's insistence (OT: 214) that 'the truism, that two and two equals four cannot be perverted even under the conditions of absolute loneliness' with Orwell's that, 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows') (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 81). Unlike Arendt's, however, Orwell's text is, straightforwardly, a work of fiction. Its readers know very well that the world he describes is imaginary – that it is not 'the real world' – and its satirical power derives from their ability to recognise pointed resemblances between the two worlds – imaginary and real. Nor does Arendt's representation of totalitarianism resemble Plato's description of an ideal state, serving as a standard to which reality may approximate but never exactly match. The difference is that, whereas Arendt's description purports to be *supported* by facts – and while it purports to *explain* them – the only facts to which Plato's description of the way things ought to be are facts that have not yet come into existence.

So, where does the problem lie? In fact, there are several. The first is that so many of Arendt's factual claims actually presuppose the accuracy of her description of totalitarianism considered as an idea. They are, in short, 'theory laden'. To illustrate the point, let me take a cue from natural science and make it a principle that, if an explanation is to be genuine, then it must be possible to describe the *explanandum* (the thing to be explained) in terms that are logically independent of those that state the *explanans* (i.e. the explanation). (To take the usual example, the statement that opium puts you to sleep 'because it has a "dormitive power"' does not add up to a genuine explanation; the reason being that it is just another way of saying that opium puts you to sleep 'because it puts you to sleep'. By contrast, a statement that opium puts you to sleep because it has such and such chemical properties – not being a tautology – would count as a genuine explanation.)

One example of a factual claim made by Arendt – one that violates the principle – is her description of the concentration camps as 'laboratories'. This can only make sense when viewed in the light of her characterisation of totalitarianism as an *experiment*. To drop that particular description is not – of course – to detract from the camp system's evil character. They remain cruel institutions designed to gratify the sadistic appetites of a racist

regime. It is simply to deny the applicability of a particular theoretical story to their case. Or, to take another example, in an account of the show trials conducted under Stalin, Arendt recounts how,

> to the wonder of the whole civilised world, he [the party member having been charged and found guilty] may even be able to help in his own prosecution and frame his own death sentence if only his status as a member of the movement is not touched.

Such a person's extracted confession demonstrates, according to her (OT: 409–10), how

> within the organisational framework of the movement, so long as it holds together, the fanaticised members can be reached by neither experience nor argument; identification with the movement and total conformism seem to have destroyed the very capacity for experience, even if it be as extreme as torture or the fear of death.

In short, these are presented by her as cases of loyalty born of extreme fanaticism. Against this, it must surely be possible to suggest that the victims of the show trials had been 'softened up' through treatment so extreme that anything else – even death – had become preferable.

As these examples show, there are alternative explanations available for many of the phenomena to which Arendt refers – explanations that do not presuppose some 'ideal' specification of totalitarianism. Moreover, for alternative explanations, you often need do no more than consider the sequence of events, as they occurred. Turn to history books, for example, and you will find an account of the *Holodomor* – the artificial famine imposed by Stalin upon the Ukraine, in which millions of people died – as the work of a ruthless dictator, bent upon modernisation, needing to feed the workers engaged in it and, at the same time, seeking to punish the Ukrainian peasants for resisting collectivisation and for harbouring movements for independence. You do not need to invoke a meta-conception according to which totalitarian measure are frequently marked by the absence of a utilitarian justification.[12] It seems that there could be another classical principle of logic at stake here, namely Occam's Razor (the principle that '[e]ntities should not be multiplied without necessity').

'The banality of evil'

This is the appropriate point at which to mention Arendt's famous reference to 'the banality of evil'. It is the expression she coined to denote the particular form of nastiness exemplified by Adolf Eichmann, the high-ranking

Nazi official who had been responsible for the deportation and murder of millions – Jews and others – during the period of the Holocaust. After the war, Eichmann had fled and taken refuge in Argentina. From there, having been kidnapped by the Israeli secret service, he was taken to Jerusalem and put on trial in 1961, indicted on 15 criminal charges, including crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes against the Jewish people. Arendt attended the trial as an observer, and her report on the proceedings (originally for *The New York Times*) is contained in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963/1977).[13]

So, what can Arendt have meant? Well, dictionary definitions of 'banal' tend to include the words 'commonplace', 'ordinary', and 'trite'; and there is no doubt that Arendt thought Eichmann banal in these respects. From her perspective, his banality lay in the way he never thought beyond the demands placed upon any good bureaucrat (EJ: 287):

> Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all . . . and this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post.

But – note – the list of synonyms does not include 'innocent' or 'blameless' – and, as a writer, she was someone who chose her words carefully. Criticisms of Arendt along the lines that she was excusing Eichmann – on the grounds, perhaps, that he was 'just obeying orders' or 'only a cog in the machine' – are, therefore, wide of the mark. On the contrary, her point was that Eichmann was *both* banal *and* evil; that, 'He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*' (EJ: 287, Arendt's emphasis) – and that he should have thought about what he was doing (i.e. colluding in the murder of millions). It was, thus, she says, 'sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period' (ibid).

In fact, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* itself contains other examples of the banal, but equally evil, behaviour exemplified by Eichmann. One is Himmler, of whom Arendt writes that he, 'was himself "more normal", that is, more of a philistine, than any of the original leaders of the Nazi movement', and that, 'He was not a bohemian like Goebbels, or a sex criminal like Streicher, or a crackpot like Rosenberg, or an adventurer like Goering' (OT: 447–8). Yet it was Himmler who became the supreme architect of the Final Solution. Later, she describes the 'real horror' that began when the SS took over the administration of the camps (OT: 585):

> The camps were no longer amusement parks for beasts in human form, that is, for men who really belonged in mental institutions and prisons

> [but when] they were turned into 'drill grounds' on which perfectly normal men were trained to be full-fledged members of the SS.

What had happened to those 'perfectly normal men'? We can take it that, in Arendt's view, it was the circumstances of totalitarianism that rendered it possible for such ordinary people to behave in such evil ways, but why should we believe this to be so? Other questions remain unanswered too. For example, there is the question of whether the model with which I chose to illustrate the 'theory-laden' character of Arendt's account – drawn from science, and with a strict distinction between theory and evidence – is, in fact, the right model. The point is that, so far, we have only considered half the story. We have yet to consider the philosophical narrative against the background of which *The Origins of Totalitarianism* needs to be viewed if it is to be judged accurately. That narrative is contained in her book, *The Human Condition* (1958/1998), and it forms the subject of the following chapter.

Notes

1 Henceforth referred to by the abbreviation OT.
2 Arendt came to regret the inclusion of the word 'origins' in the title of her book. She said that it 'suggests, however faintly, a belief in historical causality which I did not hold when I wrote the book and in which I believe even less today' (OT: 617). As the quotation to which this note refers show, she would have preferred 'elements'. It reflects her book's analytical purpose more accurately.
3 Arendt's book is divided into three parts. The subject of the first is antisemitism and that of the second is imperialism – these being phenomena that preceded the appearance of totalitarianism proper. The question of the extent to which Arendt's book forms a unity is an interesting one but, in any case, I have chosen to focus upon Part Three, whose subject is totalitarianism.
4 See, for example, the articles by Williams (2017); Malik (2019); Stonebridge (2019) – also my own contribution to *The Philosophers' Magazine* (2017).
5 Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) was – of course – the initial inspiration for the resurgence of social contract theory during the seventeenth century. I have omitted his work from the list because he was less concerned to place restraints upon authority than he was to justify absolute authority.
6 The expression is Robert Nozick's.
7 UNHCR's annual Global Trends Report – released on 19 June 2018 – shows that 68.5 million people around the world were forcibly displaced at the end of 2017. 16.2 million people were newly displaced during the course of the year. 31 people are newly displaced every minute of the day.
8 If there is a difference between 'natural' rights on the one hand and, on the other, 'human' rights, then I must admit I fail to see what it might be. In any case, it is not a point over which I propose to quibble.
9 For Hobbes, a 'law of nature' (so called) is a prudential maxim derived by reason from the need for self-preservation. Within Rousseau's scenario, rights are

derived by an 'agreement between citizens', concerned to 'defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all' and yet remain free. Neither story matches Locke's account at all closely.

10 The example is my own, not Arendt's. Arendt herself expressed a scepticism over 'the confusion created by the many recent attempts to frame a new bill of human rights', which she considered to have 'demonstrated that no one seems able to define with any assurance what these general human rights, as distinguished from the rights of citizens, really are' (OT: 372). It is a remark that reflects her scepticism of the idea that there are rights, other than the effective 'rights of citizens'. In my view, such scepticism is misplaced.

11 See, for example, Richard J. Bernstein's reminiscences of Arendt on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbFOD0oLnps&t=233s.

12 See, for example, Snyder 2010 and Applebaum (2018). *Contra* Arendt, it does appear that the Holodomor had a utilitarian rationale. It was the acceleration of a five-year plan, and the suppression of dissent in Ukraine.

13 Henceforth referred to by the abbreviation EJ.

8 Arendt

From public realm to 'worldlessness'

Right at the core of Arendt's philosophy there lies a contrast between two states of affairs. These are wide in their embrace. Each is defined by the broad framework of social, political and historical circumstances within which humanity finds itself at a particular point in time. In one situation, individuals are portrayed by her as confronting each other, through action and speech, as equals within the context of a 'public realm' or 'public sphere'. We are invited to view it as an ideal, a situation to which reality would do well to correspond – if only it could. In the other situation, the public realm has withered into insignificance. It may even be completely lacking. It is a state of the world within which individuals experience their situation as one of 'worldlessness'. They are isolated, atomised, impotent and, in a certain sense of the word, 'lonely'. It is this worldlessness that, according to Arendt, renders them vulnerable to 'totalitarian' influences. The discussion contained in Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958/1998)[1] – the text which forms the subject of this chapter – is centred upon the difference between these two state of affairs.

If we are to understand Arendt's philosophy correctly, then, our first task must be to determine precisely what she means by a 'public realm'. That is the task to which we turn in the following section. In the section after that we turn to the distinctions she draws between three broad categories of human activity, the categories of 'labour', 'work' and 'action'. As noted in the previous chapter, Arendt rejects the idea of a fundamental 'human nature' or 'essence'. However, she also thinks that grasping the distinction between these three categories is fundamental to our understanding of what it is to be human; 'fundamental', she says, because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man' (HC: 7). Finally, we consider the relationship between the philosophical thesis developed in *The Human Condition* and the analysis of totalitarianism contained in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. I am assuming, of course,

that it is essential to understand that relationship if we are to grasp Arendt's argument correctly.

What does Arendt mean by 'the public realm'?

For an answer to this question there is little point in dwelling upon her definition of 'public'. As she sees it, the term 'signifies two closely related but not altogether identical phenomena'; these being 'first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody' (HC: 50) and, second, 'the world itself, in so far, as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it' (HC: 52). The former definition refers to (what I suppose you could call) *publicity of appearance*. Any entity or event is public in this sense if it is there to be witnessed by anyone who cares to do so. The latter definition refers to what might be called *publicity of access*. A building or an area such as a park is public in this sense if anyone is entitled to enter it, irrespective of who they might be. (By contrast, an item of private property, to which only certain individuals have access, would – obviously – exemplify privacy of access.) It might be possible to quibble with these uncontentious definitions, but there would be little point. They are – as it used to be said – more or less in line with 'ordinary language'.

Considered by themselves, however, these are definitions that inadequately reflect the distinctive character of the relationship that holds between the inhabitants of the public realm as Arendt conceives it to be. To gain a more accurate idea of what she has in mind, one needs to consider, also, that, according to Arendt, the public realm is a *political* realm – and 'political' in a particular sense of the term. The latter is the sense it carries when contained in one of Aristotle's famous remarks; the remark usually translated as, 'man is by nature a political animal' (350 BCE/1981: 59). Within the context of Aristotle's *Politics*, it is a remark that reflects his assumption that the taxonomical approach taken by zoologists to the study of animals is equally applicable to the study of political institutions. (Aristotle's many works include *The History of Animals*, an impressive study of comparative zoology (Aristotle c. 335 BCE/1910).) In the passage, then, Aristotle is drawing attention to a certain difference between humans and other species and that is a difference in natural habitat. It is, thus, Aristotle's view that, while every animal has its natural habitat or 'home' – as examples, he refers to bees and other 'gregarious animals' – the human is the only animal for whom the natural habitat is the *polis*, i.e. the small city state of the type by which the Greece of his time was characterised. As for Arendt, in her sense of 'political', the political relationship between individuals within the public realm is, thus, meant

to resemble *the type of relationship that held between the citizens of the polis in ancient Greece*.

Two objections and a potential misunderstanding

But *in what respects* is the former relationship meant to resemble the latter? Well, to put it roughly, the relationship between those who inhabit the public realm is portrayed by Arendt as a relationship of *equals*. It is also a relationship within which each person is, so to speak, completely *open and transparent* to the others – that is in both word and action. If you like, you can think of the public realm as, metaphorically speaking, a 'theatre' or 'arena' within which everyone is, as it were, 'on show' to everyone else. Those are the respects in which their relationship is meant by Arendt to resemble the relationship between members of the ruling caste in ancient Greek society.

Before attempting to explain the point in more detail, it is worth mentioning a couple of objections to which Arendt's analogy has been thought open, at least by certain critics. Both are way wide of the mark, but worth mentioning anyway if only to clarify what is really at issue here. The first was raised by W.H. Auden in an early review of *The Human Condition*. Auden describes the book as an exercise in misplaced nostalgia – a wished-for but impossible return to Greek times. Auden argues that '[t]he necessary pre-political condition for the free community of persons is violence and slavery', and concludes that 'Miss Arendt is more reticent than, perhaps, she should be, about what actually went on in this public realm of the Greeks' (Auden 1959: 74). But Auden is jumping to a conclusion. He is assuming, firstly, that a public realm can only exist thanks to the efforts of an exploited subclass – slaves being his example. That may well have been the case in ancient Greece, but Auden needs a reason for supposing that it must be now. Secondly, he must have been aware that Arendt's knowledge of the classics was extensive, and that she would have known very well that slavery had existed throughout the ancient world, not just in the Athens of the fourth century BCE. In any case, her more than obvious concern for the victims of totalitarianism can hardly have been consistent with the suggestion that she might be sympathetic to an arrangement she thought dependent upon slavery.

A parallel objection suggests that Arendt's thought is tainted with a certain misogyny, a certain hostility to feminism. On the face of things, this can appear just as absurd as the previous objection given the manifest concern for justice and equality that runs throughout her writing. Also, and to be fair, no critic I know of has insisted upon the objection, although a number have pointed out how Arendt laid herself open to it. Seyla Benhabib,

for example, remarks that, 'women and their activities are invisible in her [Arendt's] theory of politics'; that 'Hannah Arendt's political thought, like the Western tradition in general, remained "gender blind"'; and that (Benhabib 2000: 124):

> Even worse, some of Arendt's characteristic distinctions as between the 'public realm of politics' and the 'private realm of the household' appear to condemn women in the most traditional ways to the private sphere of care for the necessities of daily life.

Now, it is certainly the case that classical Greece was a stratified society within which men had the upper hand and in which women were allotted subordinate roles. It is a fact that lends support to objections along such lines, as does the lack of enthusiasm Arendt herself expressed for certain features of the modern women's movement. There is a television interview, for example, in which, on 'the question of women's emancipation', Arendt remarks: 'I have actually been rather old-fashioned. I have always thought that there are certain occupations that are improper for women, that do not become them, if I may put it that way' (1964/2003: 4). But these are attitudes that must – surely – be forgivable in a woman who was born as long ago as 1906, and who would have reached 64 in 1970, at the beginning of the decade in which the modern women's movement began to gain momentum. The same goes for her insistence, in her writing, upon defying what has now become convention by using the word 'man' to include both men and women, using 'his' where it would now be more usual to write 'his or hers', and so on (ironic, given that the Greek *anthropos*, the word Aristotle himself would have used, is gender-neutral).

The main problem with the objection in question, though, as with the previous objection, lies with its assumption that Arendt is fetishising Greek society as a whole, with slavery and misogyny intact. In fact, however, she is emphasising just one aspect of Greek society, namely the *relationship* that, as she thought, held between members of the ruling caste in the *polis*; and it is perfectly consistent with this to hold that a similar relationship can exist between individuals placed in more egalitarian circumstances – in the absence of a caste system, for example, or between women and men situated together.[2] That this was indeed Arendt's view is rendered quite clear by passages such as the following (HC: 198 My emphasis):

> The *polis*, properly speaking, *is not the city-state in its physical location*; it is the *organisation of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together* for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.

The potential misunderstanding I have in mind is simply the assumption that the public realm must have an actual physical location; an enclosure, perhaps, with a sign reading, 'Public Realm: Main Entrance This Way', or maybe an official building with the same words inscribed over the door. That might strike you as a silly assumption – so silly, perhaps, that it is hardly worth mentioning. I am not so sure, though – and for three reasons. The first is that it certainly makes sense to speak of the public realm – albeit in metaphorical terms – as a 'theatre' or 'arena'. The second is that the passage contained in Aristotle's *Politics*, and from which Arendt draws inspiration – the passage in which Aristotle states that, 'man is by nature a political animal' – is preceded, only two paragraphs earlier, by a discussion of the formation of the household. Aristotle is describing how, as he thinks, the state develops from earlier institutions – the village and, before that, the household itself. In Greece these were, literally, spaces, and the Greek aristocrat, on his return from the city – having, perhaps, spoken at a meeting of the assembly – would literally cross a threshold when entering his household, moving from one space to the other. The third is that, in another famous work of Greek political philosophy, Plato's *Republic*, the rulers of his imagined ideal state are described as inhabiting a special enclosure of their own – as did the rulers of ancient Sparta. So, perhaps, the assumption is not as silly as all that. Either way, my point is, quite simply, that you do not have to think of the public realm in *those* terms.

The public realm's value: not instrumental

By an 'instrumental' argument, I mean an argument that claims that some activity – or, as in this case, the involvement in a certain type of relationship – has a certain consequence or outcome. An instrumental argument that is also a justification for that type of activity, or the support of that type of practice, must also hold that the outcome in question is good or desirable. Within philosophy, the best-known instrumental arguments are – I suppose – those advanced by the utilitarian philosophers of the nineteenth century, and that justify activities or states of affairs on the grounds that, out of the range available, they are the most likely to contribute to 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. (The intrinsic value of happiness itself is assumed to be obvious.) Of course, utilitarians do not maintain that individuals must *themselves* be motivated by a desire to promote the general happiness. On the contrary, utilitarians tend to maintain that it is the job of legislators to create a legal and institutional framework within which individuals, by their actions, bring about the greatest happiness, whatever their motives may happen to be. According to the utilitarian movement's great pioneer, Jeremy Bentham, it is, thus, the 'object' of a system founded upon

the principle of utility to 'rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law' (1789/2000: 87) while, at the same time, recognising that humans are, as he thought, entirely motivated by self-interest. Still, my main point is that Arendt's argument for the virtues of the political relationship is *not* an argument *like that*.

The social realm

For another example of an instrumental argument – though one that justifies an activity in the light of an outcome whose value is, perhaps, not so obvious – take the view expressed by Marx and Engels' assessment, in *The Communist Manifesto* that, 'The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' (1848/2000B: 247). If Marx and Engels are right here, then one function of the state – with its laws assigning specific property rights to specific individuals, its courts, and so on – is to ensure the relatively peaceable resolution of disputes between owners of private property (the latter being one of 'the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'). If you are, yourself, a 'bourgeois', and in a position to take advantage of the mechanism, then you will, presumably, regard this as a point in favour of the state. On the other hand, however, if you are a member of the proletariat to whom *The Communist Manifesto* is addressed – and therefore, by definition (according to Engels and Marx) exploited by the bourgeoisie – you are likely to take a different view.

Now, my reason for referring to Marx and Engels' dismissive assessment of 'the executive of the modern state' at just this point is that it invites comparison with an argument of Arendt's own; one in which she describes the genesis of another 'realm' – 'the social realm' as she calls it. Arendt describes this as including the family household, an archetypically private form of association within which (as she suggests) relations of inequality must prevail if it is to function. (So, this is a reference to 'private realm of the household' of the sort that worried Seyla Benhabib on the grounds that is appears 'to condemn women in the most traditional ways to the private sphere of care for the necessities of daily life' (2000: loc.776). As I pointed out earlier, Arendt's contrast is drawn with Aristotle's account of the genesis of the state in mind. She is following the route of his exposition. It does not follow that she endorses his attitude to women.)

As for the social realm itself, Arendt argues that its rise, 'coincided historically with the transformation of the private care for private property into a public concern', and she supposes that, 'Society, when it first entered the public realm, assumed the disguise of an organisation of property-owners who, instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth,

demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth' (HC: 68). The social realm is, thus, portrayed as an arena within which public institutions and practices are deployed but, nevertheless, in the service of ends (the protection of property) that are essentially private. By the latter token, you could say – following Marx and Engels – that it is an arrangement for 'managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie', although I am sure that Arendt would not have put it quite that way. The main point here, however, is that it is its 'private' aspect that distinguishes 'the social realm' from the public realm. Instrumental considerations may well be relevant to our understanding of the former, but not to the latter. The two are, therefore, distinct.

But what do they actually do?

The upshot of my discussion so far is that, if Arendt's argument were instrumental, then she would be recommending her hypothesised public realm on the grounds that it contains features that facilitate the achievement of certain, supposedly desirable, ends. But she is not doing that. On the contrary, she is recommending it simply on the grounds that a certain form of relationship – the 'political' form – holds between those who inhabit it.

Note that if you misread Arendt's argument as instrumental then one of the features you are likely to find puzzling about it is her failure to supply anything by way of an account of what individuals located within the public sphere *actually do*. There is, for example, no reference to any mechanism or a process, something that might help individuals resolve disputes or disagreements – precisely the sort of thing one would expect if she were thinking of the public realm in instrumental terms. Nor is there any reference to specific tasks that might be considered the special province of the public sphere's inhabitants. Instead, what we tend to get are metaphors. For example, she states that '[t]he public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and prevents our falling over each other, so to speak'; and that, by contrast (HC: 52–3):

> What makes mass society [our 'worldless' condition] so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.

This is frustrating. We may live in 'mass society', as Arendt thinks, but what can it mean to suggest that we now spend more time 'falling over' each other – and *what form* this 'gathering together' is supposed to take. How does it *work*? Again, what can it mean to say (ibid: 52) that:

> To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.

Where does the table come in? After all, while it may be true that, in some sense of the expression, I 'share a public space' with my fellow Londoners, it is not true – not *literally* – that we are all sitting around a table. If it were, the table would have to be very big, and it would be impossible for those sitting at one side to communicate with those sitting at the other. But these are, of course, metaphors designed to illustrate that what is at issue here is a relationship, not a specific function or set of functions.

From fact to value?

As noted earlier, Arendt regards the public realm as representing an ideal – as a condition whose passing we should lament and as a standard against which to measure the shortcomings of our present situation. Her answer to the question of why this should be so involves relating her conception of the public realm to certain facts; these being, as she thinks, fundamental features of the human condition. Three are forms of human activity – the ones she labels, respectively, 'labour', 'work', and 'action'. Each is 'fundamental', she says, 'because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man' (HC: 7). Arendt states: 'All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality' (HC: 8). Although it is – as a fourth – 'natality', and not '[its converse] mortality' which, she says, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought (HC: 9). Underpinning all these (in some way), there is, she says, 'the human condition of plurality . . . the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world' (HC: 7).

These are lines that stand in need of explanation. If Arendt is seeking to derive a 'value judgement' – i.e. that the public realm is an ideal – from a set of factual claims, then she will not be the first political philosopher to have attempted *that* feat. It will, therefore, be interesting to consider whether she succeeds where others have failed. Should we assume that Arendt is attempting to root the value of the public realm in some supposed human nature, or 'essence'? Apparently not, for she explicitly rejects the idea that there is any such thing, insisting that 'nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things' (HC: 10). It is true, however, that – as just noted – she thinks of 'labour', 'work', 'action'

and 'plurality' as fundamental features of the human condition, so, if these are not features of human nature, it is legitimate to ask in what sense *are* they supposed to be fundamental? It would be too quick, I think, to dismiss Arendt's argument out of hand on the grounds that it commits 'the naturalistic fallacy' – and, in any case, it is a long time since *that* antiquated charge could be made without qualification.[3] Then again, a 'rational choice' argument is another method for deriving values from facts. For example, Rawls seeks to derive principles of justice (i.e. values) from stipulations concerning what counts as rational (i.e. facts). It is perfectly obvious, however, that Arendt's is not a rational choice argument.

So, if Arendt's argument is neither a straightforward deduction from 'fact' to 'value' nor an exercise in rational choice theory – and if there is no other 'standard' category it appears to fit – the question of the precise pattern her argument actually takes becomes intriguing. We shall turn to that question shortly. Before that, we need to consider the distinctions she draws between 'labour', 'work' and 'action'. These may be words with everyday meanings, but they are also words to which Arendt attaches specialised meanings of her own.

'Labour and 'work'

Labour, then, is defined by Arendt as, 'the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labour' (HC: 7). The definition is clear enough, I think. A paradigm example of labour, in Arendt's sense of the word, would be the activity of tilling the soil. The soil is tilled, seeds are planted, crops grow, crops are consumed, and so the life of those who labour in this way is continued. Otherwise, no trace of the activity remains. You labour in order to live. That is the whole point of the process, and once labour's product is consumed, the process must be repeated all over again if life is to continue.

By contrast, *work*, in Arendt's sense is an activity with a legacy. 'Work', she says, 'provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings', adding that, 'Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all' (HC: 7). As she puts it later, 'The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labour of our bodies . . . fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice' (HC: 137). Thus, whereas the product of labour is immediately consumed by the labourer, the product of work outlives the worker and succeeding generations of workers too. To put the point another way, it is through 'work' that each generation transforms the world, and that, as a result, the subsequent generation inherits

a world that is different from the world it inherited from those who came before it. Consequently, there are, you could say, greater differences between present-day humans and Bronze Age humans than there are between present-day cats and Bronze Age cats.

With her distinction between labour and work, Arendt is, again, following Aristotle. Like him, she is concerned to determine the features that distinguish humans from other animals and, while it may be possible to make pedantic, 'picky' criticisms of her distinction, it seems to me that she is broadly correct. For example, her contention that the necessity for labour as a means to the continuation of life is common to humans and animals – to most animals at least – is plainly true. And she is, surely, right to point out that we are the only creatures who 'work' in her sense, changing the world through our efforts and, in so doing, creating a history for ourselves, a culture and a civilisation.

It is important to note, I think, that Arendt's distinction can only be persuasive provided that one treats it as a distinction between two *conceptions*, and not between two groups of activity, some being carried out in one place or at one time, and others at another place or time.[4] Realistically, one must recognise that a single activity may qualify as labour when viewed from one perspective, and as work when viewed from another. Take the wage relationship, for example. On the one hand, it is certainly true that the person who works for a wage is, typically, motivated by the need to survive, just as the person who tills the soil is so motivated. The wage enables the labourer to purchase means of survival (food, and so on). This is consumed more or less immediately and so the process, from labour to wage to purchase, must be repeated over again. For these reasons, when viewed from the perspective of Arendt's schema this person's efforts must count as labour. On the other hand, if it is an object that makes a change to the environment – something that acquires a relatively permanent presence in the world, for example, those efforts must count as work.

Action

The presuppositions upon which Arendt's interpretation of 'action' rests include the following: (1) that within 'the web of human relations', action and speech play equivalent roles; (2) that action, like speech, has meaning; (3) that action, like speech, requires a context with which more than one person is present. It is hard to find fault with these assumptions, and a simple example should serve to illustrate why. Suppose, then, that you are standing in a room by yourself, unseen by anyone else, and that you hold out your arm at right angles to your body. Now consider: are you performing an action? In answer, I suppose you could respond by saying that you

are performing the action of 'holding out your arm' – an action that could just as easily be described as a 'movement'. But could you be described as, for example, 'signalling that you are about to turn right', 'pointing the way to the supermarket', 'demonstrating a position in yoga', or indeed any of the other actions that might involve extending your arm at right angles? Clearly not, for if your movement is to qualify as an action by (1) carrying meaning ('I am about to turn right', 'the supermarket is over there', 'you do it like this') then (2) there must be a context (you are driving a car, someone has asked you the way, you are teaching yoga) in which (3) other persons are present (other motorists, the person seeking directions, your yoga class).

If those are banal and obvious points, then their very obviousness is a feature from which Arendt's argument derives strength. There is also more to the story here for, while points (1)–(3) apply to action, the way the word 'action' is ordinarily understood, Arendt also attaches a particular significance to 'action' as she understands it to be. Accordingly, she states: 'With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance', She goes on to say (HC: 176–7): 'This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labour, and it is not prompted by utility, like work' but that, its impulse springs from the beginning, which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. And (HC: 179):

> In acting and speaking, men show who are they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does.

As these passages show, Arendt draws a strong connection between 'action', in her sense of the term, and personal identity. It seems that, within the public sphere, it is not just your words and your deeds that carry meaning. You carry meaning with your very *self*. Now, put this idea together with some of the other points we have noted in the course of this chapter so far, and you get a picture of a public realm with the following features. First; it is a condition of plurality, a basic condition of human action such that, 'we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who has ever lived, lives, or will live' (HC: 8). Secondly, each confronts the others as a unique individual, revealing himself or herself

as such through speech and action. You could say that, within the public sphere each person confronts the others as an actor, not only in the obvious sense at issue here – the sense in which to be an actor is to be the initiator of action – but in the theatrical sense of 'actor'. (As one commentator, Jacques Taminiaux, has noted, there is certainly something theatrical about Arendt's conception (2000: 158ff).) The point here – thirdly – is that 'action', as conceived by Arendt, is distinct from what she calls 'behaviour'. The latter results from the imposition, by society, of 'innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalise" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement' (HC: 40). Behaviour is characteristic of the 'social realm', which is typified, as noted earlier, by the use of public mechanisms for the regulation of interests that are essentially private. By contrast, the business of those who inhabit the public realm is, essentially political. (That's in the Aristotelian sense of 'political' of course.)

The ideal and the real

To recap: Thus far, in this chapter's discussion of Arendt's argument, we have distinguished two of its main elements. One is her description of a public 'realm' or 'sphere'. This is characterised by the 'political' relationship that holds between its occupants – 'political' in Arendt's (and Aristotle's) special sense of the term, that is. The latter is a relationship of equals in which each person, through speech and action, is – as I put it earlier – transparent to the others. According to Arendt, the relationship between the male aristocrats who administered the Greek *polis* was of this form. However, it is conceivable – and consistent with Arendt's argument – that 'political' relations could hold between individuals in more egalitarian circumstances, between both men and women, and without the need to rely upon the efforts of subordinate orders.

The second element is a description of 'the human condition' cashed in terms of our possession of certain capacities. We are said to *labour* in order to survive, just as other animals must, but we are distinguished from other animals by the fact that, by our *work*, we transform our environment, so much so that, thanks to our efforts, the world we leave to our successors is different from the one we inherited from those who went before us. We also speak and *act*, and the meaning of our actions is, as it were 'read off' by our peers. Each individual is different from the others – each has a unique personality – and it is by action that each reveals himself or herself to the others. *Plurality* – the fact of manifold individuals, each taking a different perspective and each having entered an already plural world with a new life to lead (natality) – sets the context for these features.

The question that now arises is that of how the two elements are related, for the former element – the description of a 'public realm' – is meant to represent an ideal, a standard against which to measure the shortcomings of our present situation. But why should this be? It is clear, according to her, that the ideal character of the public realm is rooted in the latter set of facts, above. But how is it rooted? I have already pointed out that Arendt does not rely upon a conception of 'human nature', that nor is hers an exercise in 'rational choice theory', and that neither does she commit 'the naturalistic fallacy'. Even so, there appears to be a movement from fact to value within her argument – a normative gap to be crossed – so it is now time to consider how she manages to cross the gap.

As I see it, then, Arendt does so – and successfully – with the help of three theses, each of which is key to the understanding of her philosophical position. To take each in turn, there is, firstly, *the thesis that we humans are distinguished as a species by the possession of certain capacities*. According to Arendt, these are the capacities already noted – for labour, for work, and for action. (Following Marx, to whose influence upon Arendt we shall turn in a moment, I am inclined to call these 'species capacities'.) It is true that, as she says, our capacity for labour is shared with other animals, although our capacities for work and for action are not – but it is the combination of the three that distinguishes us from the others and is, thus, in a sense, *definitive of what it is to be human*. This thesis reflects an orientation on Arendt's part that is, in a sense, 'biological'. (She is following Aristotle after all.) However, note that there is rather more than taxonomy going on here. That is because a distinctive feature and a definitive feature are by no means the same thing. It is, for example, a fact that, if a cat is ginger, there is an 80% probability of its being male. Similarly, if a cat is tabby, there is a 100% likelihood of its being female. These are distinctive features of the ginger cat and the tabby cat respectively, but they are also accidental features from which no conclusion concerning what distinguishes cats *as a species* can be drawn. Likewise, no conclusion can be drawn from the fact that there are variations of colour within the human species. We might all have been the same colour, or some of us might have been some colour that nobody actually is. That would have made no difference to our understanding of what it is be a member of the human species.

A second thesis *lays emphasis upon the fact of radical plurality*. This means that, unavoidably, we share the public realm with others, each with different projects, and each with a different identity of his or her own. It means not only that each individual reveals himself or herself to the others through speech and action, neither of which would have any function were

it not for the fact of plurality, but also that, through 'work', we are each constrained to cooperate with others in order to complete projects.

Thirdly, Arendt maintains that *there is a difference between flourishing and mere survival*. Here again, the parallel with Aristotle is evident, for it was Aristotle who wrote that a man without a city is 'like an isolated piece in a game of draughts' (350 BCE/1981: 59–60) and not, note, that a man without a city cannot survive. It is consistent with this idea that Arendt should assume, as she does, that some environments are more conducive to human flourishing than others, and also that *human* flourishing is a matter of the degree to which certain capacities, and notably the capacity for action can be exercised. In summary then, the three theses just outlined, (1) that it is the capacities for work and action that distinguish humans, as a species, from others, (2) that radical plurality is an inescapable fact and (3) that some environments are more conducive to human flourishing than others, add up to the conclusion that the public realm, as typified by the Greek *polis* (according to Arendt) is the environment most conducive to human flourishing.

Taking stock of Arendt's argument

Within mainstream political philosophy, there has been a tendency to sideline Hanna Arendt's work; even to ignore it completely. For just one illustration of the point, take the Blackwell anthology*, Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Goodin & Pettit 2006). Its index contains just four references to Arendt and none to totalitarianism; and this in a serious work that contains 48 scholarly essays, each written by a distinguished academic. There are other examples; one being John Rawls's *Collected Papers* (1999). This includes work produced by Rawls between 1951 and 1997 and yet the index contains no mention of Arendt. More surprisingly, nor does it mention totalitarianism. This is surprising, for it means that one of the twentieth century's most influential political philosophers had little to say about one of the twentieth century's most alarming political developments.

Step only slightly away from the mainstream, however, and you will encounter quite a few introductions to Arendt's work; monographs whose opening chapters will tell you just how significant her contribution to political thought has been. Richard J. Bernstein's recent study of Arendt's thought is typical in this respect. Bernstein opens by remarking that in 1975, the year in which she died, Arendt was 'scarcely considered to be a major political thinker'. He then points out that things have changed radically, and he explains the increased interest people are now taking in Arendt by the fact that she was 'remarkably perceptive about some of the deepest problems, perplexities, and dangerous tendencies in modern life' adding that,

'many of these have not disappeared; they have become more intense and more dangerous (2018: 1).

Arendt and the tradition of German philosophy

If Arendt's approach can appear unfamiliar – or, to be precise, if it can be unfamiliar to philosophers schooled in the departments of universities where English is the dominant language – that is partly because she was the inheritor of a different tradition of thought. Unlike – say – Rawls, who self-consciously revived the social contract approach taken by Hobbes, and who could assume a working knowledge of British utilitarianism in his readers – Arendt's intellectual precursors include Hegel, Marx and, of course, her mentor Martin Heidegger. As she put it herself, 'If I can be said to "have come from anywhere", it is from the tradition of German philosophy' (PHA: 392). Let us now consider this.

To take Heidegger first, it seems to me that it is possible to exaggerate his particular influence upon Arendt's thought. At any rate, it is not true that 'you cannot understand Arendt unless you understand Heidegger'. However, it is certainly possible to discern a certain Heideggerian line of thought running throughout *The Human Condition*, and it is a line of thought that echoes Heidegger's view of the nature of the world as it is 'given' to humans in experience. Like a number of other philosophers working in the earlier years of the twentieth century, Heidegger was, thus, concerned to break down a particular model of the human mind's relationship to the world.[5] I mean the Cartesian model that portrays the mind as a sort of non-physical box, one that contains mental entities ('ideas') that somehow correspond to physical entities located outside the box. (Readers familiar with the history of philosophy will know that the model is very influential indeed.) Accordingly, Heidegger spends time in an attempt to describe the world of phenomena, that is, the world as it is experienced. A hammer, for example, is portrayed by Heidegger as experienced by a carpenter in a particular way; one that reflects that carpenter's activities and intentions. Accordingly, he writes:

> The less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is – as equipment.

He goes on to say (1926/1962: 98): 'The kind of Being which equipment possesses – in which it manifests itself in its own right – we call "readiness-to-hand"'. Heidegger's way of putting the point does not help, but we can

agree with him that, however we experience the hammer, it is not in the way portrayed by the Cartesian model, as an image projected onto a screen from somewhere behind it.[6]

Still, this present book is not an exercise in the philosophy of mind, and nor was Heidegger much interested in political philosophy, and so we need follow his analysis of 'Being' no further. We ought to take note of one implication of his view, though, namely that, were humans to disappear from the world, so would the world as they experience it, the latter being a world of hammers, shoes, tables, chairs, and so on. Of course, I do not mean that the material of which they are composed would literally vanish into thin air. I mean that they are the things they are – hammers, shoes, and so on – only thanks to their relationship to human plans and purposes. The world as we experience it is, in short, freighted with intention (and a table is only a table because someone has designed it to put things on). Without human intentionality, all that would be left is the world as it might be described by science – a world of atoms and molecules eternally interacting in accordance with the laws of physical nature.

Arendt expresses the same thought in *The Human Condition*. She writes that, 'Nature and the cyclical movement into which she forces all living things know neither birth nor death as we understand them' and that, 'Without a world into which men are born and from which they die, there would be nothing but changeless eternal recurrence, the deathless everlastingness of the human as of all other animal species'. Arendt holds that, by contrast: 'The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences, but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart' (HC: 96–7). It should be clear, then, that when Arendt describes the activities of labour, work, and action as 'fundamental' in the sense that, 'each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man' (HC: 7), she means that they are 'given' in the Heideggerian sense – the sense in which the hammer is 'given' to the carpenter. Read in this way, *The Human Condition* becomes the story of the way in which human experience – fundamentally structured by a sense of plurality, a knowledge of one's own separateness and one's own unique individuality, and a knowledge that one's life had a beginning and that it must come to an end – is nevertheless changed over time in response to changes in social conditions.

In my view, however, the thinker whose influence is the most evident in the aspects of Arendt's work under discussion here is not so much Heidegger but Marx – and particularly one of Marx's early works, the essay, 'Alienated Labour' contained in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx 1844). In that essay, like Arendt after him (and like

Aristotle) Marx defines the features that, as he thinks, distinguish humans from other animals. For Marx, the distinguishing feature is the centrality of the role played, in human life, by the activity of production. 'It is true that the animal, too, produces' he writes. 'It builds itself a nest, a dwelling, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc. But it only produces what it needs immediately for itself or its offspring; it produces one-sidedly whereas man produces universally' (ibid: 90). Similarly to Arendt, Marx also holds that it is through production that humans change the nature of the environment they inhabit. He writes that it is through work that 'he [man] duplicates himself not only intellectually, in his mind, but also actively in reality and thus can look at his image in a world he has created' (ibid: 91). These are, as I put it in the previous section, capacities that distinguish humans, as a species, from others. Both thinkers hold that some environments are hostile to the development of such capacities, and that some are not. For Marx, the exercise of such capacities in a hostile environment results in 'alienation'. For Arendt, their suppression can result in the anomic 'loneliness' conducive to the rise of totalitarianism.

While Arendt herself was no Marxist, she certainly drew inspiration from his work, which she described as a source of 'a great wealth of . . . ideas and insights' (HC: 79). Marx's mistake – so far as she was concerned – was to prioritise the role played by labour in determining historical change, and thereby endorse the idea of historical inevitability. (That is in her sense of 'labour' of course.)[7] As for the argument from 'species capacities' I set out in the previous section, I should like to think that it resembles Marx's argument from the nature of 'man' as a 'species-being'. But I could be wrong about that (Marx can be pretty obscure). If so, then provided that I have helped to illuminate Arendt's view, I am happy.

Conclusion

If this chapter has turned out to be longer than I intended it to be, then there is a good reason for the length. It is that, as she described herself, 'coming from the tradition of German philosophy' (PHA: 392), Arendt's approach will be unfamiliar to many readers of this present book. Accordingly, I have tried to give as clear an account of her argument as I can, and to illustrate its strengths. I am assuming, of course, that *The Human Condition* sets the context within which *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has to be understood, the latter being one of the few full-length philosophical treatments of the subject extant.

Each text contains a complex account of the relationships that can hold between, on the one hand, the way we perceive ourselves and our relationships – to each other and to the world we inhabit – and, on the other, the social and

political structures within which our lives are framed. In her version of the story, tensions arise. We continue to proclaim the rights of man, for example, within the context of a nation-state system that, creaking at the seams, is incapable of accommodating those rights, or we find ourselves 'worldless', cast adrift from a public sphere within which we might have found a natural home.

But there are, no doubt, other ways to tell the story. It is true that points in Arendt's particular narrative may be open to criticism. (As I argued in the previous chapter, one such point is her account of the genesis of the idea of human rights.) It seems to me, however, that the true value of her insight lies, quite simply, in the perception that there is a story there to be told. It is an insight we would do well to take seriously for we are, ourselves, living through times in which profound changes are taking place – changes that ought to prompt a rethinking of our social and political relationships.[8]

Notes

1 Henceforth referred to by the abbreviation HC.
2 Seyla Benhabib refers to Arendt's description of the eighteenth-century literary salons, run by Rahel Varnhagen in Berlin. Benhabib argues that, unlike the *polis*, the salons can be thought of as constituting an egalitarian woman-friendly public sphere. See Arendt 1974 and Benhabib 2000, p. 14ff. See also Lyndsey Stonebridge's description of life among 'large concentration of artists, writers, and intellectuals' in the camp at Gurs where Arendt was imprisoned (Stonebridge 2018: loc.1099).
3 It would be hard to argue that there is a 'naturalistic fallacy' without invoking a discredited theory of meaning according to which words stand as names for things in the world.
4 For a (surprising) example of this mistaken assumption see Canovan (1992) p. 125ff.
5 Another was Wittgenstein. See Wittgenstein (1953).
6 I should like to thank James Grant for his advice on Heidegger.
7 See Arendt's essay, 'From Hegel to Marx' (2005).
8 The changes that have come along with the rise of the internet are one example, although it would take someone with more technological expertise than I possess to explain what those might be. Another example is the increasing need for transnational institutions.

9 Conclusion

My decision to write a book about totalitarianism arose partly from a sense of privilege or, should I say, luck at having lived through the period of relative stability and calm that since 1945, and in 'the West' at least, followed murderous turmoil. That sense was followed by an equally strong sense of the fragility to which our institutions are prone. At the turn of a card or the roll of a dice, things can change completely, or so it seemed to me. I also had a sense that the world of my own time was returning to a state resembling that which prevailed throughout Europe during the 1930s. (I still have that sense.) These apprehensions are, I believe, shared by many, and I suppose my attempt to 'nail' the concept of totalitarianism – to determine its contours with some degree of accuracy – is, in part, an attempt to come to terms with them.

It has turned out, however, that defining the concept with any degree of precision can be a difficult matter. Why should this be? Well, as I pointed out in an earlier chapter, the word 'totalitarianism' lacks firm roots in 'ordinary language'. On the contrary, it is a technical term – 'theory-laden' – which means that one has a certain amount of leeway in deciding how to define it. Various possibilities have been described in the foregoing pages. One is to take what I suppose you could call the 'packaging' approach. It is what you do when you follow a strategy of political taxonomy. You, as it were, assume that totalitarianism can be placed in a box labelled 'totalitarian regime' and placed on a shelf next to other boxes labelled 'democratic regime' or 'oligarchic regime'. This sanitises totalitarianism by underestimating the degree of interconnectedness that holds between institutions in the modern world, and thereby underestimating, equally, the power of totalitarianism to contaminate.

Discovering a principle for distinguishing totalitarianism conceived as a distinct political form (such as a regime) from tyranny pure and simple has turned out to be equally problematic. We have encountered one obvious dividing line, however, and that is the contrast between those accounts

of totalitarianism that seek confirmation in empirical reality, and those that portray the denizens of a totalitarian world as the deluded victims of mass psychosis; completely divorced from reality. As noted earlier, Mussolini's regime was – arguably – an example of a regime that would qualify as totalitarian on the former count, but not on the latter.

The view of totalitarianism as psychosis (as you could call it) is the one taken by Orwell, by Hannah Arendt, and implied by the analyses of the idea of total control contained in Chapters 4 and 5. Ironically, although this is a view that represents totalitarianism as an impossibility, it is also the most realistic way to think of the role played by totalitarian ideas in the modern world. For the malign presence of the totalitarian spectre to make itself felt, it is sufficient that there should be despots, and would-be despots, who aspire to resurrect it. Such can be the manner of spectres.

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