PRESERVING THE WORLD WE SEEK TO CHANGE:
RECONSIDERING IMAGINATION IN HANNAH ARENDT’S THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Andrew H. Tyner: Preserving the World We Seek to Change: Reconsidering Imagination in Hannah Arendt’s Thought
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This thesis presents a conceptualization of Arendtian imagination that emerges from an analysis of some of Hannah Arendt’s most significant writings. Imagination, on this account, is central to the processes of Arendtian action and Arendtian judgment, insofar as it enables the actor and spectator to imagine a new world that either could look (for the actor) or could have looked (for the spectator) differently from the world that either exists (for the actor) or existed (for the spectator). Importantly, though, the imagined world that facilitates the processes of Arendtian action and Arendtian imagination cannot be so distinct from the world as it exists as to lose any touch with reality itself. Such loss of reality risks actions that are destructive and tyrannical and judgments that are invalid and inattentive. Imagination must be bounded, then, to ensure that the imagined worlds remain close to reality.
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Introduction

Toward the end of her life, Hannah Arendt turned her attention to three mental faculties that she suggests have the potential to prevent the perpetration of evil acts when well used: thinking, willing, and judging. Though a precise account of why these matters became so important to Arendt cannot be fully settled, some scholars point to her understanding of Adolf Eichmann’s thoughtlessness\(^1\) (and its evil consequences) as shaping this direction in her writing.\(^2\) Arendt’s fullest account of thinking and willing are contained in *The Life of the Mind*, and, though she was unable to fully complete her account of judgment before her death, she articulated the outlines of her thinking about judgment most extensively in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, as well as in brief remarks in other works.

In this paper, I present a fourth mental faculty that emerges from Arendt’s writings, a faculty that helps support judgment but is not reducible to it: namely, imagination. I argue that imagination is a capacity that is crucial for understanding Arendt’s conception of action and judgment. I define imagination as the process of imaging a new world in place of the one that currently exists. This new world could either be a future projection of the world as it might be (as is the case for the imagination of the political actor), or it could be a retrospective glance at

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\(^1\)Adolf Eichmann, who I will discuss more fully below, was a Nazi functionary who helped facilitate the transportation of victims to the German death camps. His trial, documented by Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, revealed to Arendt that acts of evil do not require evil intentions; the unwillingness or inability to think can be sufficient.

\(^2\)Consider Danielle Celermajer’s remark that, “just as, subsequent to the study of the Eichmann trial, Arendt went more deeply into questions that it posed about how so many such ordinary people could do wrong, she was moved to try to understand what allowed some to do right” (Celermajer, 2010, 55).
the world as it might have been (as is the case for the imagination of the political spectator). In either case, the new world that the imagination presents looks *differently* from the world as it actually exists.

But what makes Arendt’s conception of imagination unique is that it is bounded to reality. We do not simply conjure up any image of a new world that strikes us and then act or judge in light of that fantasy. Rather, we imagine a new world that bears a close enough resemblance to the world that exists in reality to guide our actions and judgments within limits. These limits are important, for Arendt, since it is only by acknowledging limitations that we avoid actions that descend into excess, tyranny, and needless destruction, and that we avoid judgments that are invalid and inattentive to the particular matter at hand. Judgments that are bounded in this way allow us to measure actions against how they *truly* could have been otherwise. Limitations guide us as we navigate the world, and bounded imagination helps produce these limits.

In what follows, I turn my attention to a variety of Arendt’s discussions of action and judgment, looking beyond instances of Arendt’s explicit treatment of these as discrete human capacities3 in order to gain a full sense of how these concepts work for Arendt ‘in operation.’ I argue that emerging from these discussions is a conception of imagination that is distinct from her explicit treatments of the concept – namely, a conception of imagination that prioritizes constraint over absolute freedom from limitations, such that imagination extends our mental reach outward while ensuring it remains tied to our world. Such imagination finds expression in both Arendtian judgment and Arendtian action.

I turn to Arendtian judgment first, arguing that imagination provides the grounds for judgment by enabling the spectator to imagine a world in which the actor under judgment could

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3As in, for example, her explicit treatment of judgment in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* and her discussion of action in *The Human Condition.*
have acted differently. By comparing how the actor acted with how that actor could have acted, spectators deliver particular judgments against particular actors. But the imagined world that spectators create in order to ground their judgments cannot be so distant from the world that actually exists that their judgments fail to fully comprehend and respond to the matter under judgment. Attentive judgments require that spectators imagine a world in which the actor really could have acted differently, and that that world could have been within reach of the actor under judgment.4 Drawing on Arendt’s practices of judgment, I argue that spectators accomplish this by locating meaningful exemplars,5 either fictive or real, against which a particular actor or action can be judged. Meaningful exemplars ensure that the alternative world spectators have imagined – a world in which actors behave differently than they really did – remains within the realm of possibility. On this account, then, bounded imagination ensures that actors and actions are judged according to the ways in which they could have otherwise acted – ways that are identified through the reality of the world. In this paper, I provide an analysis of Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem and “Auschwitz on Trial” to establish this conception of imagination.

The judgment of the actor relies on a similar practice of bounded imagination. For Arendt, actors who seek to change the world in which they live need to imagine a new world in

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4My use of the term attentive here is borrowed from Danielle Celermajer (2010), and connotes the quality of fully attending to the matter at hand, such that the judgment delivered responds to the reality of the situation. Celermajer’s original usage of this term is instructive: “The distinct quality of appreciating beauty that [Arendt] is drawing from Pericles is one which is neither arbitrary nor purely subjective, but which, on the contrary involves a type of accuracy and attentiveness to the context of the public world” (Celermajer, 2010, 63, emphasis my own). Judgments that are attentive, on Celermajer’s account, contrast with judgments that somehow ‘miss the mark.’

5I use the term meaningful exemplars to denote exemplars that provide spectators with a sense of how else actors could have acted in a given scenario. These exemplars are meaningful because their contexts align well with the actors or activities under judgment. As such, they can reasonably suggest to the spectator how else actors could have acted.
place of the one that presently exists. This imagination, though, must remain bounded by the
reality of what really can happen and what consequences will result. Bounded imagination helps
ensure that actors act in a way that avoids the possibility of excess and destructive fallout that is
inherent in all action.\footnote{Arendt writes of this “thrust toward limitlessness” in \textit{Introduction} into \textit{Politics}, where she discusses the tendency of action to overrun all “limits,” a tendency recognized in Greek thought: “What the Romans did not know and indeed, given the basic experience that inspired their political existence from beginning to end, could not have known were precisely those characteristics inherent in action that had inspired the Greeks to set limits to action by means of the \textit{nomos} and to interpret the law not as a link and a relationship, but rather as an enclosing border that no one should overstep. Because by its very nature action always creates relationships and ties as it moves into the world, there is inherent in it a lack of moderation and what Aeschylus called an ‘insatiability,’ which can be held in check only by \textit{nomos}, by law in the Greek sense of the word…the relationships arising through action are and must be of the sort that keep extending without limits” (Arendt, 2005, 186-7).}

I draw on two of Arendt’s essays, “Lying in Politics” and “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” to articulate this account of the bounded imagination of the actor.

To briefly summarize, bounded imagination charts a middle course between two of
Arendt’s concerns. Bounded imagination helps us avoid actions and judgments that follow from
deductive logic, the ‘logic of history,’\footnote{That is, the sentiment that history is moving inexorably in a given direction, and all of our activity and thinking should be oriented toward history’s natural conclusion.} or the expectations of studies of behavior, while also
helping us avoid actions and judgments that spring entirely from pure fantasy, bearing no
relation to the world as it could be. Such actions risk descending into excess and tyranny, while
such judgments are both deprived of external validity and are potentially inattentive.

\textbf{Situating the Role of Imagination}

To illustrate how my articulation of Arendtian imagination both converges with and
diverges from prior analyses, I turn to three conceptions of imagination that have been
articulated in the literature on Arendt’s thought. I do not dispute these accounts of imagination;
indeed, much of the basis of these analyses lie in Arendt’s explicit writings. Rather, I argue that imagination has a wider use than previous scholars have articulated, one that emerges more centrally from Arendt’s own practices of political thought than in her writings about political thought. Though the account of imagination that I present in this paper is distinct from those presented by the scholars below, I do not argue that it should fully replace those accounts. Instead, I present my interpretation of Arendtian imagination as a separate, supplemental account. The existing literature treats imagination as falling into three general categories: the capacity to represent the perspectives of other people in our own mind, the capacity to represent in our mind an object that is not present, and the capacity to imagine a new reality in place of the one that exists. The first two conceptions of imagination are related, and fall under the category of ‘enlarged thinking’ in Arendt’s works. The third conception is closer to the account I offer in this paper, though I depart from prior articulations of that conception in some notable ways.

Seyla Benhabib (1988) helps clarify what the first account of imagination – that of taking the perspectives of others – requires of us. Benhabib’s concern is to draw attention to two contrasting aspects of Arendt’s account of judgment, an account that Benhabib suggests remains inconsistent throughout Arendt’s works. While judgment, in some contexts, refers to an individual’s inclination to abide by his or her conscience – such that “the Platonic emphasis on unity or harmony of the soul with itself” is preserved – in other contexts Arendt defines judgment as requiring the practice of “enlarged thought,” wherein our judgments gain intersubjective validity by “thinking from the standpoint of everyone else” and attempting to ‘gain the assent’ of a wide variety of perspectives (Benhabib, 1988, 45-7). If these two aspects of judgment are inconsistent (as Benhabib insists they are), then she firmly endorses the latter account as both more political and more morally defensible. But to engage the practice of
enlarged thought, Benhabib insists that we must do more than simply imagine these disparate perspectives that others might take; instead, we must actually talk with others in order to be able to incorporate their perspectives into our intersubjectively valid judgments. Benhabib tells us that the “cultivation of one’s moral imagination flourishes in such a culture [of debate and discussion] in which the self-centered perspective of the individual is constantly challenged by the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives that constitute public life” (Benhabib, 1988, 48).

Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves (2006) presents a slightly different conception of Arendtian imagination than Benhabib’s account, insofar as he incorporates both the first and second processes of imagination that I outline above. For d’Entrèves, imagination helps establish impartial judgments by separating ourselves from the matter under judgment. Because we have the capacity to imaginatively bring a past activity before our mind’s eye, we do not need to render judgments in the immediate time and place where an activity occurred. Our imaginations allow us to “represent objects that are no longer present and thus establish the distance necessary for an impartial judgment” (d’Entrèves, 2006, 376). Alongside this impartiality, d’Entrèves also includes the capacity to represent the potential perspectives of others in our judgments within the faculty of imagination, consistent with Benhabib’s position.

Bryan Garsten presents an alternative account of the first process of imagination – that is, the process of imagination whereby we represent the perspectives of others when delivering judgments. Whereas d’Entrèves leaves the imagined others undefined, Garsten argues that we specify the kind of ‘company we want to keep’ in our judgments by imagining the perspectives of “people with whom one shares particular understandings of particular cases” (Garsten, 2010, 328). Garsten’s broader argument is that Arendtian judgment attempts to chart a middle course between Kant’s understanding of judgment – where all responsibility is alienated from the
spectator by a reliance on a set of rules for making judgments – and Nietzsche’s understanding of judgment, wherein responsibility lies fully with the spectator but is not accountable to any sense of morality. The challenge for Arendt, according to Garsten, was to establish an account of “moral judgments that are not based on a definite set of reasons or rules and yet are also not inscrutable to others” (Garsten, 2010, 328). Imagining the perspectives of the community for which we want our judgments to remain comprehensible helps us achieve this, but only if we engage in a second kind of imaginative exercise – namely, imagining ourselves being affected by the imagined perspectives of others, and thus “to imagine oneself as something other than oneself, and yet still oneself – the capacity to re-present oneself” (Garsten, 2010, 336). Tracy Strong (2012) presents a related notion of the ‘enlarged mentality.’ Whereas Garsten conceives of the relevant community as one of our own choosing, Strong thinks of this community as simply all those in the world who choose to exercise their capacity for judgment.

The foregoing accounts of imagination – all of which are centered around the notion of representative thinking (d’Entréves, 2006) – emerge from Arendt’s work and seem to largely conform with the conception of imagination that Arendt presents in her Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy. I argue, though, that imagination has a broader use for Arendt than what she ascribes to it in the Lectures. This broader use expands the role of imagination from simply

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8 Though, somewhat unclearly, he also suggests this community corresponds to all of humanity.

9 It is also worth noting that some scholars understand Arendt to be departing substantially from Kant in her analysis of him in that text. This is largely the argument presented by Beiner (1997), who notes the seemingly intentional way in which Arendt misinterprets Kant’s writings in her Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy to establish her own account of judgment. This misinterpretation takes two forms, according to Beiner. First, Arendt offers Kant’s Critique of Judgment as the truest form of Kant’s political philosophy, either forgetting or simply ignoring that Kant wrote more explicitly political works elsewhere during his career. Because Arendt thoroughly rejects both Kant’s moral liberalism and historical determinism, she endorses the Critique of Judgment – which prizes “reflective” judgment, judging particulars in the absence of
representing the perspectives of a diverse range of people in our minds as we make our judgments, toward a capacity to imagine a new world altogether where the actors under judgment could have acted differently. Exemplars, insofar as they are real manifestations of other ways of acting in the world,\(^\text{10}\) help this act of imagination stay tied to the world in which we live.

Linda Zerilli (2005) provides an account of imagination that bridges the first process of imagination that I have detailed above with the third account that more closely resembles my own. Working from the premise that Arendt thoroughly rejects determinate judgments that ‘compel’ by means of agreement with common procedures and rules of logic, Zerilli posits imagination as a faculty that allows us to see and judge unprecedented events in wholly new ways – ways that defy prior categorizations. Importantly, though, imagination “in its freedom” is never fully articulated by Arendt, because she “never thought of it as anything more than reproductive” (Zerilli, 2005, 163). Zerilli suggests that the account of “the free play of imagination” she herself develops is truer to what Arendt intended in developing a conception of reflective judgment that eschewed all “rule-following” (Zerilli, 2005, 163). Judgment that is free of all determinate concepts – thus avoiding all ‘compulsion’ – is the kind of judgment appropriate to democratic politics – namely, a judgment that deals in opinion and not in truth claims (Zerilli, 2005, 166). The validity of such judgments rests on the potential for other people

\(^{10}\)That is, ways of acting other than the particular activity that has come under judgment.
to acknowledge the legitimacy of the arguments supporting it, *even if* other people do not accept the final judgment (Zerilli, 2005, 170).

For Zerilli, when we lack a determinate concept under which to subsume judgments, “we hold to an imaginative extension of a concept beyond its ordinary use in cognitive judgments and affirm freedom” (Zerilli, 2005, 171). While this goes further than some other accounts of imagination – particularly those that understand imagination to simply be “the faculty of re-presentation, making present what is absent” (Zerilli, 2005, 173) – she does suggest that it relates fundamentally to the ability to see from the perspective of others. For Zerilli, these two functions of imagination – seeing from the perspective of others and expanding concepts beyond their traditional use – work in tandem. It is worth quoting Zerilli at length to capture her unique sense of this idea:

> In free play, the imagination is no longer in the service of the application of concepts. But the application of a concept was not the task Kant had in mind when he expressed enthusiasm for the French Revolution, which provided no concepts and no maxim for acting whatsoever. To judge objects and events in their freedom expands our sense of community, not because it tells us what is morally or politically justified and thus what we should do, but because it expands our sense of what is real or communicable. (Zerilli, 2005, 178)

Zerilli’s notion of the expansion of concepts bears a similarity to the account of imagination that I present here. Zerilli employs the example of the expansion of equality to the “relation between the sexes” to illustrate such an imaginative expansion (Zerilli, 2005, 181). Similarly, I claim that imagination involves an imaginative connection between two distinct concepts – namely, the world as it is exists, and the world as it *could* (or *could have*, in the case of judgment) existed. Where I depart, though, is in my insistence that such an imaginative exercise should be bounded. This is to say, I call into question the degree to which Arendtian imagination can be free of all constraints. She writes, of the above example, that the expansion of a concept “is not logical –
the concept of equality does not contain within itself the mechanism for its own extension to
disenfranchised groups,” and that forging this expansion is thus a wholly imaginative exercise.
Similarly to Wayne Allen below, I would contest the degree to which we depart from all
“banisters” in exercising imagination. As I claim in this paper, there has to be some guide to our
imaginations – a guide, namely, that keeps the new worlds we imagine in our minds tied to the
world as it currently exists.

Martin Blumenthal-Barby also provides an account of imagination that more closely
approximates my own, particularly insofar as he has drawn on similar textual sources in
establishing his analysis: namely, Arendt’s “Lying in Politics” and “Truth and Politics.” As she
writes and he quotes, “[T]he deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the
capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the
same source: imagination.’ The art of lying is a form of image-making. The image, unlike ‘an
old-fashioned portrait, is not supposed to flatter reality,’ but to offer a ‘full-fledged substitute’ for
it” (Blumenthal-Barby, 2007, 371-2). Importantly, his sense of how Arendt attends to the reality
of the world seems entirely right to me; that is, as an accurate accounting of the facts that really
occurred in this world without claiming that things could have happened in no other way:
“Arendt does not condone the ‘distortion of facts’ (Is not all narrative a ‘distortion of facts’?), yet
she also does not condone the denial of the potentiality of facts, their inherent possibility for
action” (Blumenthal-Barby, 2007, 377). Where we differ, though, is in the scope of our analyses.
Blumenthal-Barby seems to restrict Arendt’s “lies” – that is, her efforts at image-making – to her
analysis of totalitarianism,11 whereas I understand Arendt to employ imagination more widely.

11While his claims are admittedly hard to fully follow, he seems to suggest that by imagining
other responses to totalitarianism and its effects than what actually occurred in our world, Arendt
aims to rob totalitarianism of its totalizing power. Blumenthal-Barby claims that Arendt
Indeed, imagination – producing an image of a world that either does not yet exist or could have looked differently – is a crucial exercise for all actors and spectators, not simply those who are trying to comprehend these unique historical events.

Wider in scope than Blumenthal-Barby (and thus closer to my account) is Wayne Allen’s (2002) discussion of Arendt’s placement in the existence versus essence philosophical divide. What is most intriguing about Allen’s analysis of Arendt is the way in which imagination seems to closely map onto the role I have assigned to it in her thought – namely, as a check on our actions in the world, and a limitation to what we attempt to accomplish. He writes that imagination “offers ‘guideposts’ (as she likes to call them) to a world of men who wish to speak and act together. This makes Arendt ‘conservative’ (scandal!) because imagination connects men to antecedent actions – incidents and events – that make the world a reality that defies ‘remolding’ and ‘reconstruction’ according to the vanities of our time” (Allen, 2002, 352).12 The most apparent difference between our two accounts is that imagination only seems to take people’s minds backwards for Allen; Allen likens Arendt to Burke for the way in which tradition serves to direct imagination. I claim in this paper, though, that imagination provides an image of the world that supplants some features of our current existence and replaces them with something new. New, though, has to be qualified, since the kind of imagination at work here is

“intentionally allows for flagrant inconsistencies, paradoxes, or tensions in her speech act and generates wish fulfillments and imaginations” in order to make totalitarianism a phenomenon that she can understand and judge (Blumenthal-Barby, 2007, 374).

12 Also of importance is the way we both treat examples as bridging differences that arise from human plurality. If two people, from vastly different contexts and perspectives, can point to the same exemplar as worthy of emulation, this establishes a form of validity. Finally, his discussion of the purpose of “understanding” is closely related to my notion that bounded imagination helps provide a limitation to action: “Understanding is an integrating process that not only connects the thinker to actions but to purposes, and thereby tries to reconcile what is done to what is permissible” (Allen, 2002, 353, emphasis my own).
“bounded,” insofar as the new world that imagination conjures up has to bear some resemblance to what came before.

The kind of imagination Allen posits both pushes us beyond reality as it currently exists while restraining us from completely remaking the world in an entirely new form, thus making his account similar to my own. For Allen, searching through “time and space” for worthwhile exemplars is understood as a spur to action, the means through which we can “aspire beyond the banalities” of our existence (Allen, 2002, 354). All the same, Allen also seems to think that exemplars serve a limiting function. He writes that human purpose is understood by Arendt “in terms of beginnings and shared experiences that predate and eventually presage limits to the ‘infinite improbabilities’ of political action,” a process that pushes our imaginations to locate reality among the “actually formed exemplars for living-together” (Allen, 2002, 369).

Exemplars, it seems, both push us beyond the banalities of daily existence but also set limits to what it is we can achieve through action. These limits are themselves arbitrary, since they derive from a history of human accomplishments that “could well have been otherwise.” Just because they are arbitrary does not make these limits worthless, though. He tells us that, “Arendt’s thinking, then, is not entirely ‘without banisters’… but her banisters are certainly not the familiar ones provided by modern philosophy, ideologies, or forms of ruling.” At first glance, this line from Allen would seem to comport entirely with my own account, insofar as I also claim that Arendt’s reputation for ‘thinking without a banister’ is overstated. I argue, though, that the

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14 Consider Allen’s recognition that our wills “can point men too easily beyond their own capacities” to a point of “recklessness” (Allen, 2002, 362).
banisters that Arendt provides for her thinking extend beyond the past and historical accomplishments.

Exemplars can help bind our imaginations to worldly reality, and yet they have no special import for Arendt beyond this purpose. This is to say, we do not value an exemplar because it is a particularly notable or pivotal moment of our shared history; rather, we value exemplars because they make our judgments valid and fully responsive to the matter at hand. What’s more, the status of particular exemplars never becomes universal, even if spectators can assume universal assent to an exemplar’s worthiness and probity. Exemplars serve particular purposes for particular contexts at particular times. The ascent to ‘the universal’ is never complete; treating any particular exemplar as a guide to judging and acting in all contexts uncritically – which might follow from reifying the past in forming our judgments – would be precisely the kind of deductive thinking that Arendt wants us to avoid.

Finally, though she does not discuss imagination, I highlight the contribution of Rosalyn Diprose (2010), whose articulation of “responsibility” emphasizes the notion of “futurity” – a notion that bears resemblance to the priority I argue Arendtian imagination places on ensuring that action remains free of excess and destructive consequences. We both argue that our actions should be limited in such a way that the potential for politics to arise in the world is preserved into the future: “Arendt implies another criterion of judgment that would limit what we can do in good conscience. Here, it becomes apparent that we are not only responsible, and thereby driven to political action, through our own futurity, we are also responsible for maintaining the world for the disclosure of the ‘who’ and hence the futurity of others” (Diprose, 2010, 50).

Though I do not emphasize in this paper the importance of ‘disclosing ourselves’ to others through political action, I do emphasize the central importance Arendt assigns to
preserving the world even as we seek to change it. As Diprose puts it, “the more fundamental basis of normativity and the condition of judgment is maintaining the collective exposure to each other of the uniqueness of the futurity of bodies” (Diprose, 2010, 52, emphasis in the original text). In this paper, I draw a similar conclusion about the orientation political actors should have toward political action – namely, they should be oriented toward preserving a place for politics in the world – and I assign this orientation as a function of Arendtian imagination, which imagines a new world in place of the one that currently exists without losing sight of the realities of what can be achieved and the costs that this achievement would entail. Such attention to reality is the essence of bounded imagination.

**Arendtian Judgment and the Importance of Reality**

It is worth asking, at this point, why attending to the reality of what really has or could have occurred in the world is so central in Arendt’s thought. Why, in other words, does Arendtian judgment so often function by evaluating actors and actions against meaningful exemplars (whether fictive or those made manifest in the world), instead of exemplars that exist fully in the imagination of the spectator? Arendt’s response to this question would center on the role that recognizing, documenting, and remembering ‘reality’ plays in preserving a world in which public freedom can survive – which, in her articulation of these concepts, means preserving a world in which politics can exist. On her account, “the political realm” of action and opinion functions best when it is circumscribed by certain limitations, that is, when it exists as only one particular aspect of our lives, and does not overrun all of human existence. These

\[15\] Arendt suggests that fiction – or, at least, the right kind of fiction – serves a similar purpose to real exemplars when she writes that, “a good novel is by no means a simple concoction or a figment of pure fantasy” (Arendt, 2006, 257). Pure fantasy bears no resemblance to the reality on which it is supposed to be based, it seems.
limitations are maintained, Arendt suggests, through an articulation and affirmation of reality and of truth. She closes her essay “Truth and Politics” by claiming that:

…what I meant to show here is that this whole [political] sphere, its greatness notwithstanding, is limited – that it does not encompass the whole of man’s and the world’s existence. It is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises. Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us. (Arendt, 2006, 259)

This is not to suggest that judgment establishes the truths that serve to limit “those things which men cannot change at will;” indeed, Arendt is clear elsewhere that judgment derives from “factual truth” while never extending beyond opinion. But basing judgments on reality – in other words, on what really did happen in a similar context and thus what really could happen for the actors and actions under judgment – means preserving the shared world that we all act in and speak about in common, a point of emphasis that Arendt returns to again and again throughout her writings. As she writes, factual truth “exists only to the extent that it is spoken about” (Arendt, 2006, 234). To base our judgments on reality is to affirm that the existing world, with all of its ‘contingencies,’ is prioritized over and above the imagined world of philosophical and rational truths, and to prevent Plato’s denigration of politics from finding expression in the contemporary world.

Centering “factual truth” and meaningful exemplars in judgment preserves the potential for politics in an additional way. Arendt suggests that a continual rehearsal of factual truth keeps totalitarian forces at bay, as the existence of factual truth will always serve to frustrate the ‘organized lies’ on which totalitarian governance – and, increasingly in Arendt’s view, liberal governance – rests. Arendt makes clear that the preservation of this factual truth is not simply a matter of course: “The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim
indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever. Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories – even the most wildly speculative ones – produced by the human mind; they occur in the field of ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing more permanent than the admittedly relative permanence of the human mind’s structure” (Arendt, 2006, 227). The “despotic character” of factual truth, in the sense that it exists “beyond agreement and consent” and simply is, means that it is “therefore hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion” (Arendt, 2006, 236). The recognition and articulation of reality and factual truth, then, not only sets limits to what politics can achieve and the reach to which it can extend, but it also preserves its ability to exist in the world at all.

These reflections suggest the importance of grounding the spectator’s judgment in reality and existing exemplars, rather than the fancies and fantasies toward which spectators’ imaginations might lead them. To do so would be to treat every version of reality and factual truth as interchangeable, with none more attentive to the reality of the world and responsive to context than the next. But there is an equally pernicious danger that bounded imagination helps us avoid, one that operates in the opposite direction of treating versions of reality interchangeably. This is the danger of understanding human affairs to only operate in one way – a way that accords entirely with the results of logical, deductive thinking.

Basing our judgments on simply how we imagine the actors could have performed differently runs the risk of trusting too fully that the world of human affairs operates according to any definitive logic. Arendt emphasizes throughout “Truth and Politics,” though, that such trust is misplaced, insofar as reality, as understood by a comprehension of factual truth, is fully
contingent; things, she reminds us, could always have gone differently: “…for facts have no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are; they could always have been otherwise, and this annoying contingency is literally unlimited. It is because of the haphazardness of facts that pre-modern philosophy refused to take seriously the realm of human affairs, which is permeated by factuality, or to believe that any meaningful truth could ever be discovered in the ‘melancholy haphazardness’ (Kant) of a sequence of events which constitute the course of this world” (Arendt, 2006, 238).

Because our imaginations cannot fully take into account the ‘unexpected,’ which Arendt understands to be the foundation of human action and, by extension, human freedom, the standards of judgment that we surmise in our own minds will often be off the mark. That is, they will fail to account for what people could have done, because the chain of reasoning that derives such standards will be too logical and too deterministic to reflect the reality of human affairs. Arendt offers a similar claim in her discussion of the challenges that the “truthteller” faces when trying to combat a society that is fully beset by lies:

Since the liar is free to fashion his “facts” to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truthteller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were, since the element of unexpectedness – one of the outstanding characteristics of all events – has mercifully disappeared. It is not only rational truth that, in the Hegelian phrase, stands common sense on its head; reality quite frequently offends the soundness of common-sense reasoning no less than it offends profit and pleasure. (Arendt, 2006, 247)

We see here Arendt acknowledge the role that reality serves in grounding our judgment; it provides the very contingency and unexpectedness that our imaginations often cannot conceive. As such, reality provides a guide to spectators as they set their gaze on the particular actors and actions that come under their judgment; that is, the considerations that guide Arendtian judgment
are themselves derived from the realm of human affairs, from the things that really happened.\textsuperscript{16} I argue that an emphasis on reality does not mean an abandonment of imagination; Arendt adopts instead a form of imagination that has been chastened by reality. Imagination is a capacity for imagining a new world in which the actor under judgment acted differently, a process that is aided by identifying and establishing the meaningful exemplars that confirm the reality of this imagined world.

At this point it is worth asking whether Arendt’s emphasis on contingency undermines the account of judgment I have been building. After all, if our understanding of reality and factual truth is that “‘it might have been otherwise’ (which is the price of freedom),” then is reality – that is, what actually happened in a similar context that aligns with the particularity under judgment – the best gauge for what could have happened (Arendt, 2006, 238)? Is not the exemplar against which we judge a particular actor just as contingent, in other words? The critique along this line would ask: If it could have gone any other way, then why not hold the particular actor or action being judged to a standard we surmise in our own minds, one that is higher and characterized by greater probity, courage, or integrity than anything we have witnessed in human affairs?

I argue that this potential critique would be misguided. Though Arendt is clear that factual truth – what actually happened – does not exhaust the possibilities of what could have happened, this does not suggest that anything could have happened. Arendt makes this clear in

\textsuperscript{16}We see Arendt argue in this direction later in the essay, although she seems to be referring here specifically to the reality of the matter being judged, rather than any criteria by which those matters are to be evaluated: “The political function of the storyteller – historian or novelist – is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment – that, again in Isak Dinesen’s words, ‘at the end we shall be privileged to view, and review, it – and that is what is named the day of judgment’” (Arendt, 2006, 258).
the same passage about contingency that I quoted above: “It is true that in retrospect – that is, in historical perspective – every sequence of events looks as though it could not have happened otherwise, but this is an optical, or, rather, an existential, illusion; nothing could ever happen if reality did not kill, by definition, all the other potentialities originally inherent in any given situation” (Arendt, 2006, 238, emphasis my own). I argue that Arendt is here suggesting that, though there are a multitude of potentialities that may follow out of a given context and set of circumstances, those potentialities are not infinite. That is, the possibilities for action and, as is often the case, reaction are limited.17 We are limited, that is, to the real possibilities available to us for acting differently. Though we may not have a full comprehension of all of these real possibilities by examining what actually happened in a given situation, judgment involves searching out as many of those possibilities as we can identify through our analysis of similar situations that share a related context. The importance of supplementing our understanding of all the real possibilities, I argue, helps us understand why Arendt calls upon the examples of Anton Schmidt and Dr. Franz Lucas to ground her judgments, in the examples of Arendtian judgment I discuss below.

Anton Schmidt and the Grounds for Judgment

17As a counter to my argument, though, we should return to Arendt’s claim that, “this annoying contingency is literally unlimited.” This remark proves troubling, since it suggests that, indeed, anything could be possible. If anything is possible – if contingency is unlimited – then why not judge actors according to an imagined world entirely distant from the world as it is? In other words, why not let fantasy take over, and judge actors by standards that bear no resemblance to the world as reality has made it? Arendt provides a potential answer to this problem in her judgment of Adolf Eichmann, and specifically, in her discussion of the distinction between the potentiality of a particular action and its actualization in the world of appearances. This is to say, an action’s appearance in reality makes it a more worthy and valid ground for judgment than a potentiality that is merely deduced from our mental processes. Basing our judgments on existing exemplars helps ensure that our judgments are fully attentive to the matter at hand, as explained above. I return to this discussion below.
Hannah Arendt closes the “Postscript” of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* with a brief statement on the purpose of her book. She writes that, “the question of individual guilt or innocence, the act of meting out justice to both the defendant and the victim, are the only things at stake in a criminal court…The present report deals with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice” (Arendt, 1963, 298). What she communicates in this brief closing paragraph is her resistance to efforts to make the trial into anything more than the trial of one man, whose actions and inactions alone can be addressed by a court of law. All other questions – questions of “the German people in general, or anti-Semitism in all its forms, or the whole of modern history, or the nature of man and original sin” – must reside outside the jurisdiction of the court and the reports on its activity, though Arendt makes clear that “the defendant and the nature of his acts as well as the trial itself raise problems of a general nature that go far beyond the matters considered in Jerusalem” (Arendt, 1963, 286-7).

Arendt claims that she leaves the discussion of such non-juridical matters to the epilogue of *Eichmann*, though even here her evaluation of the performance of the Jerusalem court bleeds into her larger evaluation of the state of human judgment and punishment. After dispatching arguments against the right of the Jewish people to claim jurisdiction over Eichmann’s crimes in a Jewish court of law, she establishes her criticism of the court on three claims, the most central and potent of which is a failure in “understanding the criminal whom they had come to claim” (Arendt, 1963, 276). And yet it is precisely on this count that Arendt goes beyond what the judges could reasonably have considered. To build the case that she wants to be made – namely, that Eichmann’s participation in a project designed to deny human plurality as a central and essential component of the human condition requires us to leave aside any question of the malice that may or may not lie in his heart (Culbert, 2002) – is to go “beyond the limitation set upon
“[judges] through positive, posited laws” (Arendt 1963, 274). Indeed, what Arendt builds toward in her concluding chapters is an acknowledgement of the disconnection between the “demands of justice” and the “inadequate juristic concepts” (Arendt, 1963, 292, 298).

Arendt understands the widely regarded legal notion that an “intent to do wrong is necessary for the commission of a crime” to be a limitation of justice, and she claims that the unprecedented nature of Eichmann’s crime – that he had “played a central role in an enterprise whose open purpose was to eliminate forever certain ‘races’ from the surface of the earth” – should free us from the bounds of intentionality (Culbert, 2002). This is the thrust of her re-articulation of the final judgment in Eichmann’s case, in which the statement she wishes the judges had delivered builds to a final condemnation: “And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations…we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang” (Arendt, 1963, 279, emphasis my own).

Underlying Arendt’s commentary on Eichmann’s trial is a more fundamental question than issues of plurality present – namely, what allows any of us to judge crimes whose scope and context are entirely outside our own realm of experience and comprehension? As Arendt acknowledges toward the end of Eichmann, the “nature and function of human judgment” is a “fundamental problem” that was embedded in all of the prosecutions of Nazi leadership following the close of the war (Arendt, 1963, 294). While Arendt initially discusses this fundamental problem as centering on the human judgment of those who either complied with or resisted Nazi commands to participate in crimes against humanity, she quickly broadens this to include our own ability to judge their judgment – that is, our ability to judge their “capability of
telling right from wrong.” This question of our ability to judge their activities and judgments emerges as the central problem of *Eichmann*, precisely because Arendt has suggested a divergence between the court procedures and legal categories and our capacity to meet “the demands of justice.”

Given the absence of precedent with which to address these incomprehensible crimes through juridical processes, we are left with the question of what basis we have to exercise our human judgment. Once we acknowledge this quandary, we can locate an answer to this question in the would-be pronouncement that Arendt writes for the judges in Jerusalem, but not, as Arendt suggests, in the statement’s acknowledgment of Eichmann’s disregard for human plurality (or, more precisely, in Eichmann’s thoughtless participation in a plurality-denying project). Rather, we can locate our grounds for judgment earlier in that paragraph: “You yourself claimed not the actuality but only the potentiality of equal guilt on the part of all who lived in a state whose main political purpose had become the commission of unheard-of crimes. And no matter through what accidents of exterior or interior circumstances you were pushed onto the road of becoming a criminal, *there is an abyss between the actuality of what you did and the potentiality of what others might have done*” (Arendt, 1963, 278, emphasis my own).

I argue that the case of Anton Schmidt demonstrates that the potentiality and the actuality of Eichmann’s activities are *not* synonymous. This is to say, Anton Schmidt’s thinking act of disobedience provides us the grounds to judge Eichmann’s unthinking acts of compliance, and allows us to transcend the difficulty of ‘not being there.’ We are able to imagine an alternative world – a world that could have been possible – in which Eichmann acted differently than he did, and we know that world is possible because Schmidt has demonstrated the validity of that alternative, imagined world. Because Schmidt’s action shifts the realm of human possibility in a
way that expands our grounds for judgment, I argue that his example – his “exemplary validity” – serves as a meaningful exemplar against which Eichmann’s actions can be judged.

Further, I argue that Arendt’s answer to the question of how we are able to judge is an exercise of imagination. We are able to judge Eichmann’s crimes by considering how else he could have acted, a consideration that we derive from a real exemplar (in the form of Schmidt) and that we identify through imagination. This kind of imagination, though, is bounded: while it takes our minds beyond the particularity of Eichmann and his unique circumstances, it prevents us from simply inventing exemplars whole cloth, exemplars that might not have any basis in reality and how things really could have otherwise been. As meaningful exemplars – whose validity derives from their manifestation in the space of appearance – they inform our sense of what the potential for action is in a given context, making that context comprehensible to those of us who were not there.

Arendt introduces the story of Anton Schmidt at the end of a chapter in *Eichmann* in which she details the prosecution’s use of an endless parade of witnesses in order to demonstrate the “horrors” of the Nazis’ wartime activities (Arendt, 1963, 223). Though she expresses skepticism about the necessity and propriety of calling forth witnesses whose histories and recollections had little to do with Eichmann’s participation in the Nazi enterprise (Culbert, 2002), she also entertains the admittedly “foolish” thought that, “Everyone, everyone should have his day in court” (Arendt, 1963, 229). She certainly understands this to be the case for Abba Kovner, whose narration of Anton Schmidt’s assistance to members of the Jewish underground provided “‘a dramatic moment’” in Eichmann’s trial (Arendt, 1963, 230).

Schmidt, an officer in the German army stationed in Poland, had gained some recognition in the Jewish and Israeli communities prior to Kovner’s testimony for his role in providing
“forged papers and military trucks” to Jews in Poland, activities for which he was ultimately discovered, arrested, and executed. But even though his name was not “entirely unknown” to the audience in the Jerusalem court, Arendt remarks that during “the few minutes it took to tell of the help that had come from a German sergeant, a hush settled over the courtroom; it was as though the crowd had spontaneously decided to observe the usual two minutes of silence in honor of a man named Anton Schmidt” (Arendt, 1963, 231). Arendt makes clear, though, that this silence was not simply a memorial for the life and courage of Schmidt; rather, it was also a recognition of the incredible loss that resulted from there being so few Schmidts during the height of Nazi activity: “And in those two minutes, which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question – how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told.”

Arendt makes use of Schmidt’s story to counter the claims of Peter Bamm, a doctor in the German army whose postwar memoir argued that so few of his compatriots resisted their commands because they knew that their efforts and their lives would die “in silent anonymity” if they were found out (Arendt, 1963, 231-2). I will quote Arendt’s critique of Bamm at length, as it is central to a justification of her capacity to judge Eichmann’s actions and inaction during his time as a Nazi operative:

It is true that totalitarian domination tried to establish these holes of oblivion into which all deeds, good and evil, would disappear, but…efforts to let their opponents ‘disappear in silent anonymity’ were in vain. The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. Hence, nothing can ever be ‘practically useless,’ at least, not in the long run. It would be of great practical usefulness for Germany today, not merely for her prestige abroad but for her sadly confused inner condition, if there were more such stories to be told. For the lesson of such stories is
simple and within everybody’s grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of
terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the
countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that ‘it could happen’ in most
places but it did not happen everywhere. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no
more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.
(Arendt, 1963, 232-3, emphasis in the original text)

This “lesson,” I argue, is an illustration of the alternative pronouncement that Arendt wrote on
behalf of Eichmann’s judges. This is to say, if the lesson of Schmidt’s story is that some people
will resist their commands under conditions of terror – even when this means exercising thought,
and even when this means risking death – then we have grounds to consider the “abyss between
the actuality of what you did and the potentiality of what others might have done” to be more
than simply imaginative. Schmidt’s story and example, then, has opened up a space for
judgment, by expanding the notion of what we can possibly think Eichmann might have done
differently.

**Human Judgment and the Problem of Potentiality**

This need of a space for judgment is made apparent in a letter Gershom Scholem
addressed to Hannah Arendt shortly after the publication of *Eichmann*, outlining a number of
objections to her text, most centrally the “tone” with which she treats Jewish inaction and Jewish
collaboration in Nazi activities. In particular, he takes umbrage with Arendt inserting her
judgment into contexts and conditions “to which neither of [them] were exposed”: “Which of us
can say today what decisions the elders of the Jews…ought to have arrived at in the
circumstances?...There were among [the Judenräte] also many people in no way different from
ourselves, who were compelled to make terrible decisions in circumstances that we cannot even
begin to reproduce or reconstruct. I do not know whether they were right or wrong. Nor do I
presume to judge. I was not there” (Arendt, 1978, 243). Scholem advances a claim that would
limit the scope of judgment to whatever contexts or conditions that judges – or spectators, to
adopt Arendt’s later language – find immediately comprehensible through their own lived experiences.

Arendt counters Scholem’s claim in her response to his letter. She writes, first, that the contexts and conditions under which “Jewish functionaries” cooperated are comprehensible, in a sense, if only because the terror under which they acted was not the full terror of the concentration camps. Indeed, she writes that, “these people had still a certain, limited freedom of decision and of action. Just as the SS murderers also possessed, as we now know, a limited choice of alternatives” (Arendt, 1978, 249). But Arendt does not rest her argument on the potentiality for (in)action provided by that limited space of freedom. She goes one step further in countering Scholem’s resistance to exercising his human judgment by claiming that some people did, in fact, make use of that limited space:

In my report I have only spoken of things which came up during the trial itself. It is for this reason that I could not mention the ‘saints’ about whom you speak. Instead I had to limit myself to the resistance fighters whose behavior, as I said, was the more admirable because it occurred under circumstances in which resistance had really ceased to be possible. There were no saints among the witnesses for the prosecution, but there was one utterly pure human being, old Grynszpan, whose testimony I therefore reported at some length. On the German side, after all, one could also have mentioned more than the single case of Sergeant Schmidt. But since his was the only case mentioned in the trial, I had to restrict myself to it. (Arendt, 1978, 249)

Though Arendt, here, is suggesting her capacity to judge Jews and their activities based on the examples of the ‘saints’ who acted differently, her argument applies equally well (and in fact she hints at it late in the paragraph through her employment of Schmidt’s case) to her judgment of Eichmann.

Arendt makes clear in Eichmann’s Postscript that the general sentiment that Scholem has expressed – that is, the hesitancy to judge “if we were not present and involved ourselves” – is widely shared, but notes its seeming absurdity: “…it seems obvious that if it were true, neither
the administration of justice nor the writing of history would ever be possible” (Arendt, 1963, 295-6). I argue, though, that there is more at stake in this predicament than juridical procedure or the writing of historical tomes; indeed, Arendt’s practices of judgment would seem to be subverted by an acknowledgment of Scholem’s claim.

Though Arendt’s account of judgment “between right and wrong,” as explicated in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, centers on the “private sense” of taste, she claims that taste functions primarily as an “analogous” sense in relation to judgment (Arendt, 1982, 61, 65). Her precise meaning in treating taste as an analogous sense is unclear, but I interpret this as a reference to the distinction she makes between taste and judgment, in which “imagination” serves to “transform an object into something I do not have to be directly confronted with but that I have in some sense internalized, so that I can now be affected by it as though it were given to me by a nonobjective [read: internal] sense” (Arendt, 1982, 66-7). To this process of subjecting “an object” to one’s inner sense Arendt applies the term “representation,” and she understands it to be fundamentally important to the operation of judgment, insofar as representation provides sufficient distance between the “spectator” and the object of inquiry to ensure impartiality. Arendt’s language is describing this process is instructive, and is worth quoting at length: “One then speaks of judgment and no longer of taste because, though it still affects one like a matter of taste, one now has, by means of representation, established the proper distance, the remoteness or uninvolvedness or disinterestedness, that is requisite for approbation and disapprobation, for evaluating something at its proper worth” (Arendt, 1982, 67).

18Note that this connotation of imagination aligns with the second process of imagination that I outline in the previous section, and it supports the capacity for ‘enlarged thought.’ This capacity is distinct, though not conflicting, with the capacity to imagine new worlds that I present throughout this paper.
Arendt claims, then, that distance from the object of judgment is central to the validity of our evaluation of it. This distance can take two forms, though. The first is a judgment of something that was at one time sensed by the spectator’s “objective” senses, and is now recalled through imagination to be judged ‘in absentia.’ Art makes a particularly useful aesthetic analogy for Arendt to illustrate this form of judgment, a form that we could also apply to spectators who bear literal witness to acts of public display. But a second form of judgment seems to be equally valid for both Arendt and Kant, and this involves judgment of people and activities that the spectator neither saw nor experienced directly in their public display. She seems to acknowledge this kind of spectator with the figure of “one who is uninvolved, like the spectator who was uninvolved in the actual doings of the French Revolution” – a likely allusion to Kant, who kept abreast of and admired the proceedings of the Revolution from the safe distance of his home in central Europe (Arendt, 1982, 67).

This second form of judgment – judgment of those activities, people, and conditions that we have not ourselves seen or experienced – is centrally important to the argument that Arendt develops throughout *Eichmann*, and yet she seems there to avoid directly answering the charges of those who claim that such judgment is either inappropriate or impossible. If it were true that we lack the capacity to judge activities, people, and conditions that are outside of our direct experience, then we would be acknowledging a fundamental limitation in our ability to apply imagination to represent things we have never seen to our inner senses in the transformation of taste into judgment.\(^{19}\) Insofar as it would be an admission that we can only represent to ourselves the things that we at one time experienced, we would almost be admitting that this

\(^{19}\)Here again, I note that this usage of imagination aligns with the conception of imagination as a ‘distancing’ capacity, as cited in the above literature. This capacity is distinguished from the ability to imagine new worlds wherein the actor under judgment *could have* acted differently, though both capacities share the same name.
faculty of judgment functioned in the same way as taste, as opposed to simply analogously. I argue, though, that the life and activities of Anton Schmidt provide an answer to these charges, both by widening the distance between potentiality and actuality, and by sharpening the focus of the “imagination” exercise that Arendt understands to be foundational to the operation of judgment.

*Anton Schmidt, Arendtian Action, and the Possibility of Beginning*

What is particularly striking about the story of Schmidt is the way in which it at least partly conforms to the account of action that Arendt outlines in *The Human Condition*. While a close reading of her account in relation to Schmidt is beyond my scope here, I will note a component of ‘Arendtian action’ that has particular relevance for a discussion of Schmidt. Arendt understands action’s central importance to be its capacity to start something new that “cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before” (Arendt, 1958, 177-8). This creation of something wholly new – that is to say, this beginning – “always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle.” Action, then, necessarily involves a divergence from what was expected – a defiance of this statistical probability; indeed, “the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.” Schmidt performed just such an infinitely improbable action with his disruption of Nazi activity against the Jews of Poland. At the very least, we can acknowledge that it was a divergence from the “overwhelming odds of statistical laws,” insofar as Arendt notes the “devastating shortage” of other people like Schmidt (Arendt, 1963, 231).
I think it is important, though, that Arendt claims these beginnings only appear in the *guise* of a miracle, instead of actually being miracles. We understand figures like Schmidt to be miraculous, insofar as we had no grounds to expect his intervention before his appearance. His intervention, though, cannot be something miraculous – cannot be something otherworldly – without moving outside of the realm of the human and the human condition. Indeed, she makes it explicit that the “unexpected can be expected from [man], that is he able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (Arendt, 1958, 178). This is important for our purposes. If it were otherwise, if these disruptions of what came before and the beginning of something new were simply miracles, we would have no grounds for judging someone like Eichmann. Eichmann would simply be an ordinary man, and Schmidt would be something other than a man. If Schmidt were something other than a man, we could not use his example to validate the imagined, alternative world in which Eichmann acted differently than he did. Arendt wants us to resist understanding the human condition in this way.\(^{20}\)

To be clear, I am *not* claiming that Schmidt “interrupted the inexorable automatic course of daily life” in Nazi-occupied Poland in such a way that could have allowed Eichmann to thoughtfully disobey or subvert the commands he was given (Arendt, 1958, 246). Such a claim would misunderstand the relationship both between Schmidt and Eichmann, and between Schmidt and Eichmann’s realm of wartime activities. Rather, I am claiming that Schmidt’s action under totalitarianism – that is, his disruption of what came before and his construction of something new – demonstrates that Eichmann *could* have performed his own thoughtful action, 

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\(^{20}\) I should, perhaps, not make more of this distinction between miracles and guises of miracles than Arendt does. She claims, near the end of the chapter, that action “is, in fact, the one miracle-working faculty of man” (Arendt, 1958, 246). I maintain, though, that this is a miracle that Arendt expects people to achieve. This is her intention when she explains it as the “infinite improbability that occurs regularly.”
in his own station. Schmidt’s action helps us understand that people can and do act even under conditions of terror – that conditions of terror neither snuff out the possibility of miracles nor turn statistical improbabilities into statistical impossibilities.

**Exemplary Validity and the Use of Imagination**

I argue that the way in which Schmidt’s story should be used is as a case of “exemplary validity,” a concept that Arendt alludes to late in the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* and defines more clearly in her seminar notes – notes that Ronald Beiner considers to be “an indispensable piece in the puzzle” of understanding Arendt’s account of judgment (Arendt, 1982, 79). Arendt considers exemplary validity to apply to a judgment of a particular person “that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule” (Arendt, 1982, 84). She employs the example of Achilles to illustrate how a Greek citizen might evaluate a person’s courage, and she seems to suggest that this Greek citizen would judge courage by this person’s relation to Achilles. She writes, “Imagination is again necessary: one must have Achilles present even though he certainly is absent.” Exemplary validity sharpens the faculty of imagination; we can clearly represent to our inner senses a model of the trait or concept by which we hope to judge someone alongside the person we are attempting to judge. Crucially, though, our imaginations operate within certain limits in identifying and establishing these exemplars. We are bounded to the world that we share in common through the production of meaningful exemplars – either real or fictive – that have manifested themselves in the space of appearance. In my own conception of Arendtian imagination, this is so because the imagined, alternative worlds wherein the actor under judgment acts differently cannot be too distinct from the world as it really is. Meaningful exemplars whose context aligns closely with the actor under judgment help ensure the validity and attentiveness of these imagined alternatives.
Central to exemplary validity is a shared recognition of whatever “particular” is judged to be exemplary. Arendt makes use of the example of Napoleon Bonaparte to refer to the exemplary validity of Bonapartism, noting that, “the validity of this example will be restricted to those who possess the particular experience of Napoleon, either as his contemporaries or as the heirs to this particular historical tradition” (Arendt, 1982, 84-5). Though Arendt does not make this explicit in the seminar notes, this shared recognition of exemplary validity is closely related to two of the foundational elements of judgment she explicates earlier in her lectures: namely, sensus communis and communicability.

Communicability, for Arendt, is what makes particular judgments valid or invalid. If I am able to communicate my particular judgment on a matter, it is because that judgment will be intelligible to my interlocutor, and this means I have not wandered too far astray from the standards of judgment we share in common. Arendt makes this point clear by employing commonplace examples of judgment that we find either communicable or non-communicable: “One is not overeager to express joy at the death of a father or feelings of hatred and envy; one will, on the other hand, have no compunctions about announcing that one enjoys doing scientific work, and one will not hide grief at the death of an excellent husband” (Arendt, 1982, 69). These examples suggest that judging death to be a cause for joy or celebrating hatred or envy fall outside of the sensus communis – or, the standards that “judgment appeals to in everyone” (Arendt, 1982, 72) – while judging the scientific enterprise to be a worthwhile human endeavor or the death of a loved one to be a cause for grief falls within the sensus communis.

The sensus communis is bound to a particular community of judges or spectators, and thus Arendt claims that a person “judges always as a member of a community” (Arendt, 1982, 75). Arendt does not intend to reify exclusionary boundaries with this claim; rather, she affirms
that the status of a “world spectator” is what we should all aspire to, even though at present “one is supposed to take one’s bearings from the idea, not the actuality” of this identity (Arendt, 1982, 75-6). Insofar as this “cosmopolitan existence” does not yet seem to be a full reality for Arendt, we judge based on the communicability and *sensus communis* of a more constrained community of spectators. In this way, Achilles is only a case of exemplary validity for a Greek citizen, while Bonapartism is only communicable to the inheritors of the French historical tradition.

I argue, then, that the way in which the prosecution in the Eichmann case, along with the immediate and wider audiences, judged Anton Schmidt can be considered a case of exemplary validity, and this status of exemplary validity provides Arendt grounds for judging Adolf Eichmann. We might say that just as Greek citizens can look to Achilles as a model of courage – as the standard by which all others should be judged on that count – the community of spectators constituted by the audience of scholars, Israeli citizens, and survivors who kept abreast of the activities and aftermath of Nazi Germany could look to Schmidt as a model of how one can act defiantly and admirably under conditions of totalitarianism and terror.\(^\text{21}\) Employing the judgment of Anton Schmidt as a case of exemplary validity sharpens the focus of our “imagination” as we judge Eichmann, insofar as we do not have to stretch our inner sense too far to compare Eichmann to an example of how someone else could have acted in his situation. Anton Schmidt provides a ready example.

**The Frankfurt Trial and the Nuances of Criminality**

As I argued, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* provides a lens into Arendt’s practices of political judgment, wherein she judges a particular actor (Eichmann) against a real exemplar (Schmidt)

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\(^{21}\)To clarify, the “audience” I refer to both includes and extends beyond the audience in attendance at the Jerusalem courtroom. Arendt would surely be a member of this audience, both because of her attendance and her wider scholarly and ethical concerns.
whose activities under conditions of totalitarianism allow Arendt to understand how else
Eichmann could have acted. Imagination is required for the spectator to imagine a new world, a
world in which Eichmann acted differently than he did. This new, imaged world cannot be pure
fantasy, though, and needs to remain bound to reality in order to deliver attentive judgments
based on how else an actor really could have acted. Meaningful exemplars – in the form of
Anton Schmidt in this particular case – help ensure the reality of these imagined worlds.

I turn now to Arendt’s “Auschwitz on Trial,” an essay republished recently in
Responsibility & Judgment. This essay helps us see why judgment must originate in an
understanding of the particular context of the actor under judgment before it attempts to locate
exemplars and the imagined, alternative worlds they represent. This is to say, Arendt’s
commentary on the proceedings and outcomes of the Frankfurt trial – in which low-ranking Nazi
guards were tried for their criminal activities at Auschwitz – reveals the danger of judging an
actor through the use of meaningful exemplars when the particularities of his or her actions are
misunderstood or under-specified. This helps to clarify that judgment, on Arendt’s account, is a
two-fold process that involves an understanding of particulars and the assessment of those
particulars in light of how else an actor could have acted. The cost of misunderstanding
particulars, then, is an imagined alternative that is somehow inappropriate, inattentive, or unjust.
“Auschwitz on Trial” demonstrates both the complications that arise from these ‘misassessments’
of the particular and the need to generate or determine new exemplars and imagined alternatives
in the absence of meaningful exemplars.

Arendt makes clear throughout “Auschwitz on Trial” that the prison guards on trial at
Frankfurt were not Eichmann, and could not be either legally or morally judged in the same way
or by the same criteria as he had been. Whereas Eichmann was the “desk murderer par
“excellence” – the thoughtless bureaucrat who shied away from scenes and thoughts of human suffering and excused his activity through clichés and his own ambition – the guards on trial were recognizably criminals of a more traditional mold. She writes, “these ‘intolerable cases’…were no desk murderers. Nor – with a few exceptions – were they even ‘regime criminals’ who executed orders. Rather, they were the parasites and profiteers of a criminal system that had made mass murder, the extermination of millions, a legal duty” (Arendt, 2003, 228). Arendt makes clear that both Eichmann and these guards are criminals, but they are criminals of an entirely different stripe.

This difference, it seems, turns on two counts. First, whereas Eichmann was technically proficient but imaginatively rather shallow – such that he carried out plans with exceeding efficiency but very rarely crafted plans of his own – these guards took action on their own initiative. And very often, these plans were in conflict with German law as it existed both before and during the Third Reich. And second, where Eichmann thought little of the victims that he helped to exterminate, the Jewish prisoners that the guards were charged with overseeing were central in their work – and, more to the point, inflicting pain was a point of pride and amusement throughout their tenure as guards.

This is the essence of Arendt’s claim that the Frankfurt trial “reads like a much-needed supplement to the Jerusalem trial,” and she spares no detail in marking the contrast (Arendt, 2003, 241). Though graphic and quite disturbing, a selection of their deeds is worth quoting at length, insofar as I suggest that Arendt includes them specifically to draw such a strong juxtaposition to the figure of Eichmann that she had drawn three years earlier:

No one in high position had ever bothered to give instructions for such “details” as the “rabbit chase,” the “Boger swing,” the “sport,” the bunkers, the “standing cells,” the “Black Wall,” or “cap shooting.” No one had issued orders that infants should be thrown into the air as shooting targets, or hurled into the fire alive, or have their heads smashed
against walls; there had been no orders that people should be trampled to death, or become the objects of the murderous “sport,” including that of killing with one blow of the hand. No one had told them to conduct the selections on the ramp like a “cozy family gathering,” from which they would return bragging “about what they have taken from this or the other new arrival…” They hadn’t been sent to Auschwitz in order to get rich and have “fun.” (Arendt, 2003, 247)

If part of the senselessness of Eichmann’s crimes was the seeming inefficiency and inexpediency of maintaining a series of death camps in the midst of a massive war effort, then the senselessness of the guards’ crimes was their willingness and ability to take advantage of a criminal regime and a criminal environment to distinguish themselves by their own crimes, crimes that served no purpose other than their own pleasure.

What becomes clear from Arendt’s analysis, though, is the inadequacy of Not Eichmann as a category of legal, moral, or political judgment for these criminals. This confusion over the kind of criminals these guards were and the nature of their crimes is what Arendt calls the “big lie” of the trial, claiming that the “prosecution had indicted for ‘murder and complicity in murder of individuals,’ together with ‘mass murder and complicity in mass murder’ – that is, for two altogether different offenses” (Arendt, 2003, 242). And the fallout from this confusion is significant: “Only at the end of the book [documenting the proceedings of the Frankfurt trail]…does one realize how much damage to justice was done – and inevitably done – because the distinctive line between these different offenses had become blurred.” To assess the Auschwitz guards as mass murderers is to misunderstand the particularities of their crimes, which is doubly problematic when we attempt to categorize those deeds within the same legal and moral judgments as had been applied to Eichmann.

But if the Auschwitz guards were not bureaucratic murderers and desk criminals – and, as such, could not be judged in the same way as Eichmann – then neither could they be considered traditional criminals and judged by the same terms that those crimes warrant. The environment
in which the guards performed their crimes, Arendt suggests, is simply too distinct from our normal frames of legal and moral reference to allow us to judge them in this way. Sadistic though their crimes were, Arendt maintains that, “these monsters were by no means sadists in a clinical sense, which is amply proved by their behavior under normal circumstances, and they had not been chosen for their monstrous duties on such a basis at all” (Arendt, 2003, 251). This is to say, Arendt does not deny that these are monstrous men who performed monstrous deeds, but she resists judging them in a vacuum. Their environment must be understood as informing the particularity of their actions and crimes.

This environment, though, proves difficult to comprehend through our existing legal, moral, and political criteria. As she writes:

…in the nearly hundred-year-old [German penal code], there was no article that covered organized murder as a governmental institution, none that dealt with the extermination of whole people as part of demographic policies, with the ‘regime criminal,’ or with the everyday conditions under a criminal government…let alone with circumstances in an extermination camp where everybody who arrived was doomed to die, either immediately by being gassed or in a few months by being worked to death…Hence, what the old penal code had utterly failed to take into account was nothing less than the everyday reality of Nazi Germany in general and of Auschwitz in particular. (Arendt, 2003, 242-3)

Arendt had already attended to the challenges that these legal restrictions posed to Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem, but here she suggests something else; namely, that “naked criminal guilt” looks different depending on the environment in which those criminal deeds were performed. Criminality and brutality in an environment of near-certain death is distinct from criminality and brutality is less unusual environments. Because these guards lived in an environment in which there was “‘no one who was not guilty…intolerable guilt’ [had to be] measured by rather unusual yardsticks not to be found in any penal code” (Arendt, 2003, 244). And it is these “unusual yardsticks,” I argue, that constitute the two-fold process of Arendtian judgment that I discussed above.
Arendt’s elucidation of the challenges of judging the Auschwitz guards bears resemblance to her discussion of the Jerusalem trial in a crucial way – namely, the difficulty of exercising judgment when “we were not present and involved ourselves” (Arendt, 1963, 295-6). I argue that Arendt alludes to this challenge when she writes that what “is most difficult to imagine in retrospect is this ever-present atmosphere of violent death; not even on the battlefield is death such a certainty and life so completely dependent on the miraculous” (Arendt, 2003, 243). In other words, our capacity to render legal and moral judgments are constrained not only by the inadequacy of the German penal code of 1871, but also by our inability to imagine ourselves in an environment where dying was the norm and living was the exception. The question presented to us as spectators is: how can we justifiably imagine an alternative world in which the actors could have acted differently, when we were not present ourselves and have no idea what other avenues of action were available? On Arendt’s account, similar failings of imagination plagued the Jerusalem judges, who could not imagine the choices of an ambitious civil servant caught up in a criminal bureaucracy, and Gershom Scholem, who could not imagine being in the position that the Jewish councils faced under the Third Reich.

But just as I have argued that Arendt makes use of Anton Schmidt to facilitate this faculty of imagining an alternative world in which Eichmann acted differently, allowing her to deliver judgments on both Eichmann and the Jewish councils, I claim that Arendt presents us in “Auschwitz on Trial” with another actor who becomes a meaningful exemplar through whom we can imagine the Auschwitz guards acting differently and thus cast judgment on their crimes. Arendt needs a new exemplar in this particular judgment, because the particularities of Anton Schmidt’s actions are too distinct from the guards’ criminal activities to be of any use. Anton Schmidt defied bureaucratic orders and exercised independent thought in resisting the totalitarian
regime in which he was immersed. As such, he is a useful foil to Eichmann, whose failures to act in a similar fashion led him, eventually, to Jerusalem. While the Auschwitz guards similarly exercised independent thought and acted on their own initiative, they differ from Schmidt in an important aspect: whereas Schmidt (and Eichmann) acted under and against conditions of bureaucratic regularity and regime control, the Auschwitz guards acted under entirely dissimilar conditions. As Arendt writes, “what came out of the bureaucratic calculations [in the death camps] was the exact opposite of predictability. It was complete arbitrariness. In the words of Dr. Wolken – a former inmate, now a physician in Vienna, and the first and one of the best of the witnesses: Everything ‘changed almost from day to day. It depended on the officer in charge, on the roll-call leader, on the block leader, and on their moods’ – most of all, it turns out, on their moods” (Arendt, 2003, 250-1, emphasis in the original text).

What we require in order to spur our imagination in this case – while also keeping it bounded – and facilitate the process of Arendtian judgment, then, is an actor who faced similar conditions of ever-present death in a context of unpredictability and arbitrariness, but who somehow managed to act in admirable and morally defensible ways. Arendt presents such a figure in Dr. Franz Lucas, a defendant who was only stationed at Auschwitz for a brief period of its history. Early in the essay Arendt marks his difference from his co-defendants, noting that he “does not show open contempt for the court, does not laugh, insult witnesses, demand that the prosecuting attorneys apologize, and try to have fun with the others. One doesn’t quite understand why he is there at all, for he seems the very opposite of an ‘intolerable case’” (Arendt, 2003, 234). But his exemplar status is drawn from more than just his behavior in the courtroom. His deeds on behalf of the prisoners of Auschwitz distinguish him from his co-defendants. At personal risk to his own safety, he sought ways to save inmates from the gas chambers, helped to
secure food for starving prisoners, and was “‘the only doctor who treated [them] humanely’” (Arendt, 2003, 249).

Arendt is clear that confusion over the legal code and the most accurate classification of the crimes of the defendants have led to a perversion of legal judgment in Lucas’ case: “The lack of definitive yardsticks for judging crimes committed in these extraordinary and horrible conditions becomes painfully conspicuous in the court’s verdict against Dr. Franz Lucas,” in which he received “three years and three months of hard labor – the minimum punishment” (Arendt, 2003, 248). Because the court had failed to adequately distinguish crimes against individuals – which was the chief offense of most of the defendants at Frankfurt – and complicity in mass murder, Lucas was found guilty of the second crime, despite the recognition of almost everyone in the courtroom that his presence at Auschwitz was, in fact, beneficial to the prisoners.

I claim, though, that Lucas serves a second purpose for Arendt, beyond bringing attention to the inadequacies of the German penal code. Just as Anton Schmidt allows Arendt to exercise moral judgment against Eichmann and the Jewish councils, so too does Lucas – who faced all of the same conditions as his co-defendants, save for the brevity of his time in Auschwitz – allow Arendt to cast moral judgment on the Auschwitz guards. This is to say, our inability to imagine this “this ever-present atmosphere of violent death” does not foreclose the possibility of judgment, because we have the example of a person who acted differently than what the guards present us with. Lucas’ presence in the courtroom – and the witness testimony to his probity – allow Arendt to claim that, “one thing is sure, and this one had not dared to believe anymore – namely, ‘that everyone could decide for himself to be good or evil in Auschwitz’” (Arendt, 2003, 252).
This decision – this choice of how one can and should act – is crucial for Arendt, because it allows her to divert attention away from what Dana Villa calls “transhuman” ideas, and focus on the actions and deeds that fall under her moral judgment (Villa, 1999, 58). She writes that, “one might be tempted to indulge in sweeping statements about the evil nature of the human race, about original sin, about innate human ‘aggressiveness,’ etc., in general – and about the German ‘national character’ in particular,” but she cautions that we should resist such temptations (Arendt, 2003, 251). She had already made a similar claim about the inability of legal judgment to take such ideas into account in Eichmann in Jerusalem, when she writes that, “the German people in general, or anti-Semitism in all its forms, or the whole of modern history, or the nature of man and original sin” must lie outside of the court’s jurisdiction (Arendt, 1963, 286-7). In “Auschwitz on Trial” she seems to apply this stricture to moral judgment, as well.

Any such “sweeping statements,” it seems, only serve to obscure the particularities of what these criminals did and did not do. To invoke “transhuman” ideas is to close one’s mind to Dr. Lucas’ heroic efforts and the “not too numerous instances in which the court was told how ‘occasionally a ‘human being’ came into the camp’ and after one short glance left in a hurry: ‘No, this is no place for my mother’s child!’” (Arendt, 2003, 251). To invoke collective guilt, for Arendt, would be to ignore the irreducible fact that “those who stayed year in and year out, and did not belong to the select few who became heroes in the process, represented something of an automatic selection of the worst elements in the population” (Arendt, 2003, 252). To invoke the character of the German people would be to equate Eichmann, Hitler, Schmidt, the Auschwitz guards, and Dr. Lucas. This conflation of actors and actions, though, is anathema to the project of Arendtian judgment.
Contingent Reality and the Limitations of Action

Though the judgment of the spectator and the judgment of the actor are not coterminous, I argue that imagination helps establish a crucial linkage between these two capacities. Just as the judgment of the spectator relies upon a bounded imagination that abstracts away from the particular matter at hand to identify an alternative world wherein the actor under judgment behaved differently, employing meaningful exemplars to establish the validity of those imagined alternatives, so too do actors, on Arendt’s account, need the capacity to imagine a new world in place of the one that they presently inhabit. This new world, though, cannot be so distinct from the world as it exists as to require excessively destructive practices to bring it about. Rather, Arendt promotes the exercise of bounded imagination that brings into focus a world that can be realized through limited action. The judgment of the actor, then, is guided by the exercise of bounded imagination.

Arendt’s concern with actors’ limitations is apparent in her discussion of twentieth-century natural scientists. Arendt sees a distinct threat in the activities of the agents of modern science, whose pursuit of the world as it exists “behind appearances” has the potential to make obsolete and meaningless our entire sense of truth and reality. Arendt lays bare the challenge that the advancement of modern science poses in the opening lines of “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man”: “To understand physical reality seems to demand not only the renunciation of an anthropocentric or geocentric world view, but also a radical elimination of all anthropomorphic elements and principles, as they arise either from the world given to the five human senses or from the categories inherent in the human mind” (Arendt, 2006, 260). Insofar as our sense perceptions are what orient us to the world and enable us to see, hear, and experience the reality on which all action and judgment have to rely, this “renunciation” – this
negation of what ‘laymen’ had come to regard as manifest truth – destabilizes the world that, as Arendt puts it elsewhere, we have built between one another, this public space of appearance in which our activities are seen and given meaning.

This loss of reality has two meanings for Arendt in this essay. There is, for one, the almost total conceptual shift that underlies the shift from the world of appearances to an examination of what lies “behind appearances.” I suggest that for Arendt, though, the second, more troubling loss of reality is the inability of the scientist and the layperson to talk to one another any longer – that is, the inability to connect their language, meanings, and discursive systems, such that any kind of common effort, whether action or judgment, can no longer exist between them. This inability to communicate between the scientist and the layperson is not simply a disconnection between two people; rather, Arendt suggests, it is a disconnection between two parts of the scientist’s self:

The fact is not merely that the scientist spends more than half of his life in the same world of sense perception, of common sense, and of everyday language as his fellow-citizens, but that he has come in his own privileged field of activity to a point where the naïve questions and anxieties of the layman have made themselves felt very forcefully, albeit in a different manner. The scientist has not only left behind the layman with his limited understanding; he has left behind a part of himself and his own power of understanding, which is still human understanding, when he goes to work in the laboratory and begins to communicate in mathematical language. (Arendt, 2006, 263, emphasis my own)

Arendt here endorses two propositions: first, the impossibility for any of us to transcend the human world – the world of appearances – and live in a world of pure mathematical abstraction; and second, the difficulty of controlling the destructive fallout if we come to forget our fundamentally human limitations. This latter concern Arendt calls the “main problem,” telling us that, “man can do, and successfully do, what he cannot comprehend and cannot express in everyday human language” (Arendt, 2006, 264). Arendt notes a range of manifestations that this
separation of action and comprehension can take, from computers “whose doings we cannot comprehend although we have devised and constructed them” to “the invention of the most murderous gadgets” to a complete disregard for “the survival of the human race on earth or, for that matter, about the survival of the planet itself” to releasing “energy processes that ordinarily go on only in the sun” (Arendt, 2006, 264-73).

Arendt identifies the essential capacity that allows scientists to achieve this conceptual disconnection between “the world of senses and appearances and the physical world” (Arendt, 2006, 268) as imagination. Imagination, Arendt suggests, frees our minds from the restrictions imposed upon them by our limited, sense-restricted brains. She writes, “the human brain which supposedly does our thinking is as terrestrial, earthbound, as any other part of the human body. It was precisely by abstracting from these terrestrial conditions, by appealing to a power of imagination and abstraction that would, as it were, lift the human mind out of the gravitational field of the earth and look down upon it from some point in the universe, that modern science reached its most glorious and, at the same time, most baffling achievements” (Arendt, 2006, 266, 268). This passage provides a crucial lens into Arendt’s conception of imagination – both in regard to science and the work of scientists, as well as in the broader world. We can identity at least three components to imagination that Arendt lays out in this passage and earlier: it can separate our minds from the sense perceptions that define our lives on earth, its limitations exist only in terms of the “laws that rule the immensity of the universe,” and its operation is fundamental to our “glorious and…baffling achievements” (Arendt, 2006, 260, 266). Beyond these there is a fourth component to her articulation of imagination, a component that I suggest is probably equally concerning to Arendt – namely, the total absence of a “will to power” for those scientists who used their imaginations to usher in “the most radical and the most rapid
revolutionary process the world has ever seen” (Arendt, 2006, 266-7). This is to say, that these scientists could introduce the world to unprecedentedly destructive technologies and capacities without even meaning to – that the consequences of their actions could be mere unhappy accidents, in other words – suggests not only that the scientists have failed to attend equally to the world of senses and the world of physical realities, and not only that scientists have lost the ability to talk to laypeople, but that the world of the mind, the world of action, and the world of consequences have become wholly separated, as well. When imagination is given free rein, the consequences, far from being simply uncontrollable, are “‘not even thinkable’” (Arendt, 2006, 263).

To be clear, unthinkable consequences do not mean, for Arendt, that we simply cannot know the consequences of the revolutionary accomplishments our imaginations have enabled us to achieve. Indeed, Arendt is clear that scientists do, in fact, know the potential consequences of their activities, even as they ignore them or weigh them as meaningless in comparison to scientific advancements’ inevitable and undeniable momentum. Arendt suggests that the distinction between knowing the consequences and comprehending their meaning is really the distinction between the scientist and the citizen, even when these are the same person. I quote her at length in this passage:

The very integrity of science demands that not only utilitarian considerations but the reflection upon the stature of man as well be left in abeyance…The simple fact that physicists split the atom without any hesitations the very moment they knew how to do it, although they realized full well the enormous destructive potentialities of their operation, demonstrates that the scientist qua scientist does not even care about the survival of the human race on earth or, for that matter, about the survival of the planet itself. All associations for ‘Atoms for Peace,’ all warnings not to use the new power unwisely, and even the pangs of conscience many scientists felt when the first bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot obscure this simple, elementary fact. For in all these efforts the scientists acted not as scientists but as citizens, and if their voices have more authority than the voices of laymen, they do so only because the scientists are in possession of more precise information. Valid and plausible arguments against the ‘conquest of space’
could be raised only if they were to show that the whole enterprise might be self-defeating in its own terms. (Arendt, 2006, 270, emphasis my own)

Of particular note in this passage is both the scientist-citizen distinction outlined above and Arendt’s concerns about the privileged position precise information enjoys over and above ‘humanist’ concerns. Arendt is not denying the legitimacy of the scientists’ precise information, nor is she claiming that their achievements should necessarily be rolled back or diverted. Rather, Arendt suggests that the inability to comprehend the consequences of our imagination-inspired actions through humanistic lines of questioning and reasoning will lead us into trouble. These concerns lead Arendt to suggest that we need to instill some limitations into these activities if they are to serve the purposes of humanity.

Our approach to and engagement with science has transcended any limits and undercut the potential they might have to prevent our excesses. This seems to be the conclusion Arendt draws from her discussion of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which claims that “there are certain pairs of quantities, like the position and velocity of a particle, that are related in such a way that determining one of them with increased precision necessarily entails determining the other with reduced precision” (Arendt, 2006, 271). This principle should caution us, as scientists and citizens who live in a world shaped by science’s achievements, about the limits of what we can know, comprehend, and accomplish. Instead, Arendt seems to suggest, we have transcended the problem altogether, by knowingly or unwittingly refusing to acknowledge that there is anything in the universe besides ourselves (thus eliminating anything to be uncertain about): “From this [Heisenberg] concluded that the modern search for ‘true reality’ behind mere appearances, which has brought about the world we live in and resulted in the Atomic Revolution, has led into a situation in the sciences themselves in which man has lost the very objectivity of the natural world, so that man in his hunt for ‘objective reality’ suddenly
discovered that he always ‘confronts himself alone’” (Arendt, 2006, 271). Arendt employs as an illustration of this an astronaut who journeys farther and farther from earth, “where each actual physical encounter with his surroundings would spell immediate death,” save for the wealth of instruments he has encapsulated himself within, such that he will be “less likely ever to meet anything but himself and man-made things the more ardently he wishes to eliminate all anthropocentric considerations from his encounter with the non-human world around him” (Arendt, 2006, 272).

Arendt’s claim, I argue, is that ‘man’s conquest of space will diminish his stature’ precisely because the attempt to conquer space, find the reality behind appearances, and see the universe from the Archimedean point are all bound to fail. Our attempts to ascend to this theorized Archimedean point, to see from the perspective that we “anticipated by sheer force of abstraction and imagination,” will not take us toward any definite destination, insofar as “man can only get lost in the immensity of the universe, for the only true Archimedean point would be the absolute void behind the universe” (Arendt, 2006, 272). And in the meantime, as we search for and “abstract” ourselves away from the world of the senses toward this elusive point – this point from which the scientists’ search for the truth behind appearances proceeds – we engage in activities that are “far from harmless or unequivocally triumphant” – namely, “we release energy processes that ordinarily go on only in the sun, or attempt to initiate in a test tube the processes of cosmic evolution, or build machines for the production and control of energies unknown in the household of earthly nature” (Arendt, 2006, 273). Arendt suggests that these kind of fantastically unnatural and destructive productions only make sense if the scientists operate from the Archimedean point – that is, if they abstract themselves away from any kind of humanist concern and disconnect themselves from the parts of themselves that still act as citizens. But
insofar as this Archimedean point can never be reached nor this level of abstraction obtained, our actions taken from this ‘point’ and perspective are not just foolish, they are dangerous: “Without as yet actually occupying the point where Archimedes had wished to stand, we have found a way to act on the earth as though we disposed of terrestrial nature from outside, from the point of Einstein’s ‘observer freely poised in space’” (Arendt, 2006, 273).

All of this should impress upon us the importance of recognizing and prizing limitations, according to Arendt. Once we discover that we always only ‘confront ourselves alone,’ in other words, this should chasten us against excessively unnatural or overreaching actions, since all of these actions will impact us and only us.\(^22\) I once again quote Arendt at length to capture her idiosyncratic sense of limitations:

\begin{quote}
In that case,\(^{23}\) he would only take possession of what is his own, although it took him a long time to discover it. These new possessions, like all property, would have to be limited, and once the limit is reached and the limitations established, the new world view that may conceivably grow out of it is likely to be once more geocentric and anthropomorphic, although not in the old sense of the earth being the center of the universe and of man being the highest being there is. It would be geocentric in the sense that the earth, and not the universe, is the center and the home of mortal man, and it would be anthropomorphic in the sense that man would count his own factual mortality among the elementary conditions under which his scientific efforts are possible at all. At this moment, the prospects for such an entirely beneficial development and solution of the present predicaments of modern science and technology do not look particularly good. (Arendt, 2006, 273)
\end{quote}

\(^{22}\)This seems to be why Arendt adopts Kafka’s assertion that, “Man…‘found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition’” (Arendt, 2006, 272).

\(^{23}\)Though the “case” she mentions here is vague, it seems to reference a situation in which “man recognizes that there might be absolute limits to his search for knowledge and that it might be wise to suspect such limitations whenever it turns out that the scientist can do more than he is capable of comprehending” (Arendt, 2006, 272-3). Even if we recognize these limitations, though, our limited ventures into space to “be at home in a ‘territory’ as large as possible” would be “far from…harmless or unequivocally triumphant.”
Arendt here claims that positioning the human world and humanistic concerns in the center of scientific and technological endeavors is the means by which we can establish limitations on the reach of modern science. These limitations are the only way to prevent the excesses of modern science from ‘destroying’ the stature of man altogether (Arendt, 2006, 274). We should note that Arendt is not claiming that scientific progress needs to be rolled back and the pursuit of scientific discoveries scrapped altogether. Rather, she is claiming that our pursuit of scientific achievements should be limited by a recognition of the worldly consequences of these pursuits and innovations.

Arendt’s analysis of actions’ limitations finds further expression in “Lying in Politics,” where she returns to the discussion of reality’s essential contingency – that is, its noncompliance with what we expect should happen – discussed above. Subtitled “Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” “Lying in Politics” presents Arendt’s commentary on “the extravagant lengths to which the commitment to nontruthfulness in politics went on at the highest level of government…including throughout the ranks of all governmental services, military and civilian” (Arendt, 1972, 4). Here she presents us with two groups of civilian and military actors who are unable to fully attend to and comprehend reality, but who fail in contrasting ways: namely, calculating “problem-solvers” and ‘anti-Communist ideologues.’ That these actors should

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24 The “stature of man” is a point of emphasis throughout her essay. Though it is not explicitly defined, it seems to mean a sense of human beings as important entities in the universe, and the rightful focus of our social, political, technological, and scientific endeavors. The original usage of the phrase is found in the question to which the essay responds, a question posed by the publication Great Ideas Today in 1963 (Arendt, 2006, 292).

25 These problem-solvers were state officials who had been “drawn into government from the universities and think tanks, some of them equipped with game theories and systems analyses, thus prepared, as they thought, to solve all the ‘problems’ of foreign policy” (Arendt, 1972, 9-10). Arendt presents them as people who “prided themselves on being ‘rational,’” beholden as they were to “the world of sheer mental effort” (Arendt, 1972, 11).
obscure reality and factual truth in their pursuit of action is unsurprising for Arendt, insofar as action depends on a certain denial of the world as it is. All action is the beginning of something new, and something new must always replace what was there before. Because of this, action only proceeds if we can imagine away facts as they are and put in their place the future as it might be: “In other words, the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination” (Arendt, 1972, 5).

The judgment of the actor, grounded as it is in bounded imagination, consists of the capacity to imagine this future world in which new beginnings will find expression without losing grasp of the world as it still is. And it is precisely this form of judgment that the actors detailed in “Lying on Politics” failed to exercise. For the problem-solvers, self-characterized as “rational,” their rationality found itself in tension with the facts of the world. This tension consisted of more than simply a denial of reality outright; indeed, Arendt notes that the problem-solvers were “eager to find formulas…that would unify the most disparate phenomena with which reality presented them; that is, they were eager to discover laws by which to explain and predict political and historical facts as though they were…necessary” (Arendt, 1972, 11, emphasis in the original text). Rather than total denial, this tension consisted of hewing reality to fit a world that abided by these laws and rules of rationality. This act, though, compromises actors’ judgment and invites “radical destruction:”

…reality never presents us with anything so neat as premises for logical conclusions. The kind of thinking that presents both A and C as undesirable, therefore settles on B, hardly serves any other purpose than to divert the mind and blunt the judgment for the multitude of real possibilities. What these problem-solvers have in common with down-to-earth liars is the attempt to get rid of facts and the confidence that this should be

26This is unsurprising for Arendt, who notes that reason’s “aversion to contingency is very strong” (Arendt, 1972, 12).
possible because of the inherent contingency of facts. (Arendt, 1972, 12-3, emphasis my own)

These problem-solvers deny contingency to the extent that it suggests their plans might go awry, but embrace it when they wish away facts that compromise their theories. This strained relationship with contingency underlies a “remoteness from reality” that characterized civilian and military decision-making (Arendt, 1972, 20).

Of particular interest in Arendt’s commentary is the way in which a reliance on deception – the deliberate lie and denial of factual truth – can extend to both self-deception and a disinterest in facts and reality altogether. What starts as lying, in other words, becomes delusion and blindness. She writes, of the “dangers of overclassification,” that “not only are the people and the elected representatives denied access to what they must know to form an opinion and make decisions, but also the actors themselves, who receive top clearance to learn all the relevant facts, remain blissfully unaware of them. And this is so not because some invisible hand deliberately leads them astray, but because they work under circumstances, and with habits of mind, that allow them neither time nor inclination to go hunting for pertinent facts in mountains of documents” (Arendt, 1972, 30). Operating in this environment, with this ‘habit of mind,’ seems to be both the cause and essence of misjudgment and failure to judge.

The remoteness from reality that constitutes this ‘habit of mind’ takes two distinct, but related, forms. Both of these forms, I argue, underpin the improper exercise of imagination – that is, imagination in its destructive, unbounded form. Maintaining distance from reality involves not only the fact-denying exercise discussed above, but also establishing a separation between decisions and their manifestations in the world. This is to say, the problem-solvers that Arendt criticizes throughout “Lying in Politics” not only dismissed facts and consequences that deviated from their rules of logic, but they also closed themselves off from comprehending the
costs of their decisions. Thus Arendt writes that, “it may be only natural for problem-solvers, trained in translating all factual content into the language of numbers and percentages, where they can be calculated, to remain unaware of the untold misery that their ‘solutions’ – pacification and relocation programs, defoliation, napalm, and antipersonnel bullets – held in store for a ‘friend’ who needed to be ‘saved’ and for an ‘enemy’ who had neither the will nor the power to be one before we attacked him” (Arendt, 1972, 19). These problem-solvers, Arendt notes, “did not judge; they calculated” (Arendt, 1972, 37). But their remoteness from reality – their unwillingness and inability to judge – also made them strikingly bad calculators, insofar as they could assign probabilities to a range of outcomes without accounting for what those outcomes “would actually mean” in reality (Arendt, 1972, 37). Arendt characterizes the upshot of this separation between the problem-solvers and the world in which they acted as destructive. She writes that, “no such control, given by reality itself, ever existed in the minds of either the decision-makers or the problem-solvers” (Arendt, 1972, 38). And later: “In spite of all the later calculations of ‘costs, returns and risks’ of certain acts, the calculators remained totally unaware

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27 It is also worth mentioning here the relation between this failure of imagination and an aspect of Benhabib’s “moral imagination” not discussed above. Benhabib claims of moral imagination that it is a faculty that “activates our capacity for thinking of possible narratives and act descriptions in light of which our actions can be understood by others” (Benhabib, 1988, 35). By this, she means that actors who exercise moral imagination think beyond the immediacy of their moral intentions to determine how it is that their (morally grounded) actions will be received and interpreted by others. My account of Arendtian imagination shares with Benhabib’s conceptualization an attention to context and the consequences of our activities. Our actions do not always affect the world in the ways we think they will; actors who exercise bounded imagination are fully aware of the world in which they act, and anticipate the reactions and wider consequences of their activities within it. Where I depart from Benhabib, though, is in widening imagination’s use to matters beyond questions of morality. An actor, on Arendt’s account, should attend to the potential consequences of any of his or her actions, not simply those actions where his or her status as a moral individual is at stake.

28 She likens the problem-solvers to gamblers, in this regard, for whom “nothing real is at stake” (Arendt, 1972, 38).
of any absolute, nonpsychological limitation” (Arendt, 1972, 38). This inability to connect their decisions with the facts of the world represents a failure of imagination, a failure that blinds actors to the nature of consequences and their importance to action. This failure of imagination derives from the neglect of crucial questions that actors who exercise bounded imagination ask of themselves: In what ways can the world really change? By what means would we have to bring this about? What would the consequences of those means be?

Arendt is clear that it is not simply an inordinate faith in calculations and the power of logic that can insulate decision-makers from reality and the facts of the world. Ideology, too, serves this role. The ‘anti-Communist ideologues’ who served alongside the calculating problem-solvers in mapping the United States’ policies in Vietnam fell victim to the same estrangement from reality that characterized the intellectuals. Indeed, though their thinking and formulations were “less brainy” and less technical than those of their problem-solving counterparts, their thinking and formulations were “not less efficacious in shielding men from the impact of reality and in ruining the mind’s capacity for judgment and for learning” (Arendt, 1972, 40). These leaders, Arendt suggests, attempted to look to recent and historical exemplars to guide their action, but did so imprecisely and, plainly, inaccurately. She writes:

These men prided themselves on having learned from the past – from Stalin’s rule over all Communist parties, hence the notion of “monolithic Communism,” and from Hitler’s starting a world war after Munich, from which they concluded that every gesture of reconciliation was a “second Munich.” They were unable to confront reality on its own terms because they had always some parallels in mind that “helped” them to understand those terms. When Johnson, still in his capacity as Kennedy’s Vice-President, came home from an inspection tour in South Vietnam and happily reported that Diem was the “Churchill of Asia,” one would have thought that the parallelism game would die from sheer absurdity, but this was not the case. (Arendt, 1972, 40, emphasis my own)

Of interest here is the seemingly similar way she presents the use of “parallels” to the conception of judgment that I have outlined above. What she decries is the unthinking use of the past to
shed light on the present; that is, the use of the past to help us comprehend our present conditions without thinking through the particularities of our own time and how they might diverge from the past.

While this bears some resemblance to the analysis of Arendtian judgment that I have established above – in that the use of exemplars is used to pass judgment on present actors and actions – a crucial distinction is in order. Arendtian judgment must first take account of the particulars before those particulars are subjected to judgment. Obscuring those particulars – as in, for example, seeing in the Auschwitz guards a group of Eichmanns instead of a group of cruelty-loving criminals – leads to poor judgment. While historical exemplars might help us comprehend how else an actor or group of actors could have behaved in the world based on what else has happened in the space of appearance, these exemplars cannot help us understand the present, insofar as the present has to be ‘confronted’ ‘on its own terms.’ This is to say, comprehension entails seeing the present as it really is, and not as simply a repetition of some prior phenomenon from history. Without an attentive comprehension of the present, sound judgment is difficult. To see Munichs and Churchills everywhere is to understand the present nowhere. What Arendt demands of political actors29 is an attentive comprehension of reality that cannot be accomplished through heuristics, historical comparisons, or rules of logic and rationality.

**Conclusion: Preserving the World We Seek to Change**

Much to the frustration of many of her critics, Arendt refrained from ever defining a particular outcome to be achieved from political action and engagement in the public sphere. Rather than claim one single normative end toward which all public activity should be oriented,

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29She demands this of political spectators, as well, though the stakes are different.
Arendt instead valued the participation in political speech and deed as an end in itself\(^ {30} \), and outlined throughout her writings the kinds of sensibilities and priorities that political actors should maintain to preserve the space of appearance in which political activity unfolds. This preservation, which I have discussed above, explicitly draws Arendt’s attention in the closing passages of *Introduction into Politics*, where she discusses the stakes of the wars and revolutions she found the world in the midst of. She suggests that a politics based almost solely on “brute force” has the potential to “annihilate” the space of appearance and the whole realm of politics altogether; for this reason, actors engaging in violent activity need to be guided by a “goal,” since goals “limit both ends and means and thereby seal off action from the danger of immoderation always inherent in it” (Arendt, 2005, 196).

In the context of warfare and violent action, goals serve to ensure that the aftermath of violence is peace. This outcome is always in doubt, though, since the tendency of action is excess, underwritten by the singular focus with which actors pursue ends. She writes that the “only thing that can in fact resolve, or at least mitigate, this murderous conflict between meaning\(^ {31} \) and ends – a conflict equally inherent in both wars and revolutions – is a goal. For the goal of all force is peace – the goal, but not the end, since it is by the goal that we must judge all individual uses of force, applying Kant’s dictum (in *Perpetual Peace*) that nothing should be

\(^{30}\) Indeed, Seyla Benhabib writes, “According to [Dana] Villa’s reading, Arendt becomes a ‘high modernist’ who insists ‘on politics for the sake of politics’” (Benhabib, 2003, 197), though it should be noted that Benhabib herself disputes this characterization.

\(^{31}\) For context, she writes of meaning that, “the only meaning that an action employing brute force can reveal and make visible in the world is the immense power of compulsion in human intercourse, and this quite independent of those ends which the force was intended to achieve” (Arendt, 2005, 198).
allowed to happen in war that would make a subsequent peace impossible” (Arendt, 2005, 198).  

Arendt’s use of goals need not be restricted to matters of violence and peace, though.  

Since the preservation of the space of appearance and the world that exists between people – that is, the preservation of the possibility for politics – is a central priority of public activity for Arendt, this preservation should inform the goal by which action is oriented.  

We might, then, revise Arendt’s dictum above to read, ‘nothing should be allowed to happen in public action that would make subsequent political life impossible.’ If the goal of action should include the preservation of future political life, then bounded imagination helps ensure our fidelity to this

32It should be noted that Arendt is unclear on whether goals even can exist when violence is introduced. Though the passage above would seem to suggest that goals and ends exist separately in violent pursuits, she also writes that, “Only when brute force with its arsenal of means is introduced into the space between people – where until that point nothing has passed back and forth except speech, which is devoid of tangible means – do the goals of politics become ends, which are as firmly defined as the model on which any physical object is produced and like it determine the choice of means and justify and even sanctify them” (Arendt, 2005, 193, emphasis my own).

33Indeed, she admits that, “most of our experience with politics has been gained on the battlefield of brute force,” even though we know that her conception of political action is more expansive than this (Arendt, 2005, 199).

34I return to Diprose’s account of Arendt’s political ethics, where she draws attention to the distinction between force and power on precisely this matter: “…as Arendt puts it: ‘Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the lifeblood of the human artifice’…and power’s ‘only limitation is the existence of other people […] because human power is the condition of plurality…’ Force, on the other hand, through ‘violence can destroy power’…In general, force destroys the power of potentiality by closing down futurity and annulling the disclosure of uniqueness that sustains the ‘web of human relations’” (Diprose, 2010, 51).
goal. This is to say, the goal of any political act should constrain the imagination in such a way that the resulting action never leads to the erasure of the space of appearance.

Bounded imagination, in the service of goals, sets limits to political action, limits that help prevent action from descending into the excess and destruction that always remain a possibility whenever we begin an action, the consequences of which we can never be wholly sure of— which is to say, all action for Arendt. Because action contains these seeds of excess and destruction, we have to bind our imaginations to the reality of the world to prevent these seeds from bearing fruit. Even as actors seek to change the world around them and replace what exists with something new, they must do so in a way that preserves the world itself, and preserves the possibility of future actors making their own changes in the world. Bounded imagination is the foundation of such worldly action.

I should add, though, that this does not mean that there are not other “normative” bases of Arendt’s thought, to borrow Seyla Benhabib’s word (2003). Indeed, Benhabib’s own articulation of “anthropological universalism” could be another normative base of Arendtian action and judgment (Benhabib, 2003, 195-8).

Though Strong (2012) argues that Arendt eschews the entire notion of goals altogether, we can see from his substantive discussion that the ultimate end of the “political realm” for Arendt is similar to what I describe here: “…the political realm is, in the end, not primarily about achieving goals, even if politics is. It is about maintaining a space in which humans can speak to each other without a last word ever being possible or desired” (Strong, 2012, 365). I argue that this helps us understand the notion that the space of appearance is threatened by more than simply total war, though that is the immediate context of her discussion in the Introduction into Politics. All activity that eliminates the role of action in the world represents a danger to the space of appearance.
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