Nixon, Jon. "Friendship as Promise." *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 41–60. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472505873.ch-003>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:37 UTC.

Copyright © Jon Nixon 2015. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Friendship as Promise

The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises . . . [B]inding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.

HC, 237

New beginnings

In New York, Arendt and Blücher gathered around them a widening circle of writers, artists and activists, many of whom like them were fugitives from the war. Bound together both by circumstance and in many cases by their Jewish origins, they came together to share and make sense of news that was beginning to filter out of Europe regarding the German concentration and extermination camps. The Brooklyn-born writer and literary critic Alfred Kazin has provided a vivid account of his first meeting with Arendt at one such gathering. The meeting took place in 1946 – five years after Arendt's arrival in the United States, and five years prior to her gaining American citizenship – at a dinner party given by Elliot Cohen, the founding editor of *Commentary*, for Rabbi Leo Baeck:

She was a handsome, vivacious forty-year-old woman who was to charm me and others, by no means unerotically, because her interest in her new country, and for literature in English, became as much part of her as her accent and her passion for discussing Plato, Kant, Nietzsche, Kafka, even Duns Scotus, as if they all lived with her and her strenuous husband Heinrich Blücher in the shabby rooming house on West 95th Street.

Kazin, 1982, 3

This was a highly cosmopolitan milieu: literate and intellectual, politically engaged and endlessly talkative.

The move to America proved to be a turning point in Arendt's life and thought. It is important to remind ourselves, therefore, of the instability of Arendt's life up to this point. In 1941 she had escaped from France to Lisbon, and from Lisbon had set sail with Heinrich Blücher, whom she had married a year earlier, to the United States. They had arrived in May of that year and, after a brief stay in Massachusetts, settled in New York. As news of the German concentration and extermination camps for Jews began to filter out, Arendt started work on what was to become *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She also directed research for the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, which involved visits back to Europe during which she was reunited with Jaspers and his wife, Gertrud, and – more complicatedly – with Heidegger and his wife, Elfriede. In 1950 she became senior editor at Schocken Books. A year later she gained American citizenship and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published to wide acclaim. By this time she was in her mid-forties and had lived most of her life in state of transition.

Unlike many migrants before and since, Arendt did not hold out the hope of returning permanently to her homeland. Indeed, there was no homeland to which she could return. Hamburg, where she had been born, had endured ferocious Allied bombing raids during the war resulting in the devastation of much of the inhabited city as well as the harbour areas. In 1949 the city had been wrapped into the Federal Republic of Germany. Königsberg, where she had grown up, had also been heavily damaged by Allied bombing during the war. Captured and annexed by the Soviet Union and its German population expelled, it had been repopulated with Russians and others from the Soviet Union. In 1946 it had been renamed Kaliningrad in honour of the Soviet leader Mikhail Kalinin. The reshaping of Europe had occasioned not only devastation and destruction, but also the global dispersal of whole communities: at the end of World War II, in an act of population transfer that would now be termed 'ethnic cleansing', some 12 million ethnic Germans fled or were driven out of east and central Europe with Churchill's approval and British participation. Stateless exiles such as Arendt had no option other than to go forward. If the idea of 'home' was to mean anything other than the experience of irreparable loss, then it would have to be remade and rethought.

In Arendt's case it had to be remade without any recourse to family. Her father and much loved grandfather had died when she was only a child, and in 1948 her mother, Martha Beerwald, died. Martha had been unstinting in her support of her wayward and sometimes difficult daughter. She had shared with her the difficulties and privations of exile. She was in her own right a strong woman, but increasingly felt the need to remain close to Hannah. Given what mother and daughter had endured together, this need for proximity was perfectly understandable. However, it was not an easy situation for Arendt as she struggled to forge a career for herself in New York and began to settle into a new marriage with a man whose background and outlook were very different from those of her mother. Martha Arendt became increasingly estranged from her daughter towards the end of her life and Hannah's feelings towards her mother became increasingly ambivalent. Such ambivalence is likely to complicate and intensify the sense of profound change that the death of a parent – particularly a single parent – provokes. Arendt was now on her own with only her second marriage and her friends to provide stability and reliability.

The experience of exile left Arendt with a sense of profound uncertainty: a conviction that human action was irreversible and its consequences unpredictable. If there was no going back – and if going forward was both uncertain and unpredictable – then there was nothing much between blockage and stasis on the one hand and the affirmation of possibility on the other. Arendt had survived for over a decade as a stateless person in a country that, notwithstanding the deep insularity of McCarthyism, had offered her hospitality. In granting her citizenship, America had provided her with a vantage point from which to view the past and survey the future. For the rest of her life she regularly returned to and maintained strong links with Europe, but increasingly Europe was now identified as a point of departure and America as a point of arrival. With the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951 she had achieved a kind of settlement with Europe – Europe as both a geopolitical entity and as an Enlightenment ideal. While continuing to respect and draw on the European tradition of Enlightenment thought, she turned increasingly to the American tradition of emancipatory thought for her key reference points.

Nowhere is this turning point more apparent than in the content and argument of her 1963 *On Revolution*. Her central thesis is that revolution

involves not just liberation from the old order but the constitution of a new order within which citizens can exercise collective agency: '[T]he end of rebellion is liberation, while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom ... [T]here is nothing more futile than rebellion and liberation unless they are followed by the constitution of the newly won freedom' (OR, 133). Freedom is not merely freedom from obstruction, but the freedom to take positive action with others. In developing this thesis she contrasts two great eighteenth-century political upheavals: the American and French Revolutions. The latter, she argues, stalled at the point of rebellion and liberation, while the former followed through to 'the constitution of the newly won freedom.' Moreover, the American Revolution provides us with a rare example of a revolution that results not in 'a constitution imposed by a government upon a people' but a 'constitution by which a people constitutes its own government' (OR, 136). Although there are significant continuities between *On Revolution* and *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, there is also a perspectival shift that reflects Arendt's experience as an American citizen in the twelve years between the publication of these two works.

Arendt still looked to Europe – for ideas and, in the case of the Hungarian Revolution, for inspirational practice – but from a rather different point of view. She was part of a generation of Jewish intellectuals who were never fully assimilated, but who were central to how America was identified – and identified itself – as a global hub of cultural and intellectual influence. Arendt remained betwixt and between – betwixt the old world and the new world, between the past and the future – and that positioning became a central part of her increasingly important role as a public intellectual and public educator. But just as she never sentimentalised Europe, she never sentimentalised her point of arrival: her new world of America. She lived at the epicentre of Western power and influence through what Eric Hobsbawm (1995) called 'the golden years' from the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the 'crisis decades' following the stock market crash of early 1973 and the oil crisis that followed later that year. If – as Hobsbawm maintains – the early 1970s constituted a watershed in the post-World War II history of what he termed 'the short twentieth century', then Arendt lived, in the main, on the 'golden' side of that watershed.

The major published works that were to flow directly and indirectly from her abandoned *Totalitarian Elements of Marxism* – namely, *The Human*

Condition ([1958] 1998), *Between Past and Future* ([1961] 1977) and *On Revolution* ([1963] 2006a) – were all informed by the particular circumstances of ‘the golden years’: circumstances shaped by both the nightmare reality of the Cold War and the American dream of ever increasing prosperity. Both the dream and the reality were consequences of an exponential increase in technological capability. From the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, through the USSR Luna 9 and Luna 13 unmanned Moon landings of 1966, to the first successful US Apollo 11 manned mission to the Moon in 1969, technology drove the geopolitics of the post-World War II era. Arendt – from her new vantage point – grasped the implications of this new phase of technological innovation. She saw that, far from making the world a safer place, it added a wholly new dimension to the unpredictability and uncertainty that she saw as intrinsic to the human condition.

In *The Human Condition* she characterised this new dimension as both dehumanising and demoralising – and, in so doing, foreshadowed later critiques of industrialised and standardised forms of mass production and consumption. Her argument was driven by historical analysis. Whereas, during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, technological innovations such as the steam engine harnessed natural processes to human ends and ‘did not differ in principle from the old use of water and wind power’, later technological developments such as the use of electricity required that ‘we no longer used material as nature yields it to us’ (HC, 148). Instead, ‘we changed and denaturalized nature for our own worldly ends, so that the human world or artifice on one hand and nature on the other remained two distinctly separate entities’ (HC, 148). What she termed ‘automation’ – ‘the process of the conveyor belt and the assembly line’ (HC, 149) – was the culmination of this separation of the human from the natural. It introduced into the human world the possibility of mass production and the corresponding need for mass consumption, while the technological advances that drove it put both the human and the natural worlds at incalculable risk.

The unpredictability and uncertainty of the human condition remained an abiding preoccupation which Arendt carried forward from the old world of pre-World War II Europe to the new world of post-war America. The new world was as complicatedly unpredictable as the old world: the clash of American dream and Cold War reality held unforeseen – and unforeseeable – consequences.

As her and Blücher's circle of friends expanded – with an inner circle of friends that were part of her own European, mainly Jewish, community, but now including a wider circle of friends from New York and beyond – the stability and reliability of friendship became increasingly important. She made no grand claims for friendship, but the friendships she formed held out the promise of continuity and stability in a world of discontinuity and instability. As such, they played into her thinking about the nature of power and politics and her understanding of the human condition.

'Isolated islands'

Arendt was forging a language – a rationale and a conceptual apparatus – for analysing what we now perhaps take for granted: the chronic instability of a world that is possessed of the knowledge and resources necessary for global self-destruction. Irreversibility and unpredictability had, she maintained, always been constitutive elements of the human condition. The outcomes of our individual acts of human agency are the consequence not only of those individual acts, but of countless other acts of human agency which interconnect and collide in unpredictable ways and with unforeseeable outcomes. Every action, in other words, enters a dynamic process which proceeds according to its own irreversible and inscrutable logic. 'We can', as Arendt put it, 'at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion', but 'we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome' (HC, 185). The insight that Arendt now added to this analysis was that, in developing advanced technologies that 'changed and denaturalized nature', we had introduced into the field of human action an entirely new element of incalculability and uncertainty: an element that having once entered the world gained permanency within it. 'Modern natural science and technology . . . have', as she put it, 'carried irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm, where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done' (HC, 238).

Although human agents cannot 'undo what has been done', they can exercise their agency in such a way as to interrupt the seemingly inevitable consequential logic of 'what has been done'. Arendt saw the act of forgiveness in precisely these terms – as an interruption to the irreversibility of human affairs.

Forgiveness is usually seen as a moral act, but for Arendt it is also a political act in that it activates the power implicit in plurality. It empowers people to start again, to make a new beginning, to move forward. It is, as she put it, 'the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly' (HC, 241). There were, for Arendt, many unresolved issues relating to forgiveness: the conditions necessary for forgiveness, the category of the 'unforgiveable', the relation between friendship and the possibility of forgiveness. These issues surface throughout her life and work and, as we shall see in the central chapters of this book, have a particular bearing on her lifelong friendships. However, Arendt was adamant that forgiveness provides the possibility of empowerment at the level of the interpersonal and therefore introduces power into the field of human affairs at that level. Power may be embedded in systems and structures, but it is activated by free agents acting in relation to one another. With regard to forgiveness, this acting-in-relation-to breaks the vicious circle of automatic action-and-reaction: 'In this respect forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance' (HC, 240).

If the act of forgiveness interrupts the irreversibility of human affairs, then the act of promising pits itself against the unpredictability of the human condition: 'The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises' (HC, 237). While forgiveness is between persons, promises have a wider remit. Forgiveness operates at the level of interpersonal injustice. The making and keeping of promises, on the other hand, is a wider category embracing a broad field of mutual obligation: inter-state treaty and alliances; within-state social contracts; marital and pre-marital arrangements; and binding relations between individuals. At all these levels the act of promising provides a bulwark against the unpredictability of plural agents exercising their freedom to act. If human plurality generates boundless unpredictability in human affairs, it also generates – through its capacity for mutuality and reciprocity – the possibility of making and keeping promises and thereby setting boundaries to that unpredictability.

This idea of promises as a stabilising power in human affairs has a long history. 'We may', suggests Arendt, 'trace it back to the Roman legal system, the inviolability of agreements and treaties (*pacta sunt servanda*); or we may see its discoverer in Abraham, the man from Ur, whose whole story, as the Bible tells

it, shows such a passionate drive toward making covenants' (HC, 243). However, Arendt's analysis of totalitarian regimes and modes of thinking made her wary of promises that seek 'to cover the whole ground of the future'. Promises, in her view, need to be 'isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty'. Insofar as they seek to colonise 'the whole ground of the future' they become self-defeating in that they eradicate freedom and impose homogeneity and stasis on the heterogeneous flux of human plurality: 'The moment promises lose their character as isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty, that is, when this faculty is misused to cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions, they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating' (HC, 244). Messianic and utopian promises – whether premised on religious or secular values – erode the political.

From this perspective the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham was deficient in that it imposed upon the future a preordained destiny: a destiny determined by the radical inequality between, on the one hand, the maker and keeper of the promise (Yahweh) and, on the other hand, the beneficiaries of the promise (Abraham, Isaac and their descendants). It sought, that is, 'to cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions' (HC, 244). Its basis in inequality and its closure in respect of the future are at odds with what Arendt most valued in the act of promising. Promising, for her, was not a defensive recoil from the unpredictability of the future – not a way, that is, of transcending, denying or erasing the unpredictable – but an acknowledgement of the *fact* of that unpredictability: a way of moving forward together into the unbounded uncertainty that constitutes the human condition. It presupposes equality and freedom and finds form and expression through the many different ways in which 'the many [are] bound together'.

It is the specificity of promises – their boundedness – that ensures the possibility of their fulfilment: to promise everything is to promise nothing; to promise something is to be bound by a specific commitment. Implicit in the substance of any promise are the terms of its fulfilment. The specificity of what is being promised – the substance of the promise – is fundamental to the making and keeping of promises. Promises, then, are defined by what it is they promise: by their content. But they are also defined by the nature of the relationships within which they are undertaken. While maintaining that a

fundamental characteristic of all promises is that they can ‘only be achieved by the many bound together’, Arendt highlights the significance of the terms upon which ‘the many [are] bound together’ (HC, 245). She distinguishes between promises on the basis not only of what is being promised but of how the promise is being undertaken: the quality of relationship within which the promise is embodied.

When these conditions are fulfilled, argued Arendt, promise activates power: ‘[B]inding and promising, combining and covenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence’ (OR, 166). The making and keeping of promises thereby becomes a key element in what Arendt called ‘the syntax of power’: ‘[P]ower is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and the keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty’ (OR, 167). Commenting on her notion of power, J. M. Bernstein (2012, 64) argues that ‘mutual promising is the analogue in Arendt’s political theory of the Aristotelian doctrine of friendship’. It is in the specificity and equality of that mutuality – as expressed, in exemplary fashion, through friendship – that the power of promising emerges: ‘It is speaking as promising, speaking as the positioning of oneself in social space in the mode of answerability, and hence responsibility, that finally gives substance to Arendt’s notion of power – power as nothing other than the social bond formed by speaking in a promissory mode’ (p. 64). A ‘specific promise’, as Bernstein puts it, ‘*institutes or creates* a social bond . . . a promise is, in miniature, a beginning and a founding: it begins a new history in our relation by creating a bond between us that stretches out into the future’ (p. 67).

Considered in this light, a friendship provides the promise of certainty and continuity in a world of uncertainty and discontinuity, but always within the bounds and constraints of that particular friendship. The promise implicit in friendship loses its ‘binding power’ when it seeks ‘to cover the whole ground of the future’ and thereby control the boundless uncertainty and discontinuity within which it is located. Friends may offer a respite from a world of uncertainty and discontinuity, but they cannot rescue one another from it. They are inextricably bound to its plurality. Through our friendships we learn to relate to one another as free and equal agents and, crucially, to carry what we

have learnt from those friendships – by way of the exercise of freedom and the recognition of equal worth – back into the world. The promise that friendship provides is not the promise of an escape from the world, but the promise of a gathering of the resources necessary to enter the world as free and equal agents. Friendships sustain us: their intrinsic promise is one of mutual sustainability within the wider world.

That is why Arendt placed a value premium on enduring friendships. Old friends understand one another not only as friends, but also as persons with complex histories that include all the multi-layered unpredictability and discontinuity of the human condition. In Arendt's case that unpredictability and discontinuity involved exile and resettlings, divorce and remarriage, and the necessity of writing for – and to – the moment. The longer and more enduring a friendship is, the greater the possibility of that friendship comprehending and sustaining the broad sweep of the personal narratives of each of the friends. 'It is not only', argues Seyla Benhabib (2003, 126) in her analysis of Arendt's account of human action, 'that we are the subject matter of the stories of others but also that we discover who we are and come to know ourselves through the words and deeds we engage in, in the company of others.' New friends may enjoy the excitement of relating their life stories, but for old friends the knowledge is there already: tacit and implicit in each new meeting, lodged in the memory of the friendship.

As Arendt settled into her life as a US citizen and public intellectual, she gathered around her an ever-widening circle of friends from different walks of life. Her old friendships were special, but not exclusive. She never sought to distinguish friendships on any other basis than their promise of mutual sustainability in a world of uncertainty and discontinuity. She was at one with the Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian canon of writings on friendship in emphasising its ethical and political relevance in any attempt to lead a good life, build the good society and strengthen the polity. However, she was at odds with much of that canon in her implicit rejection of its exclusionary categories, its schematic ordering of friendships and its idealisation of 'sovereign' friendship. If we are to understand what, according to Arendt, friendship holds in promise, then we need to distinguish her notion of friendship from some of the strands of thought comprising the tradition within which – and against which – she wrote.

‘Truthful dialogue’

Friendship is the major subject of two of the ten books comprising Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* – so called because they are believed to be based on notes from his lectures at the Lyceum, which were edited by or dedicated to his son Nicomachus. These two books – Book 8 and Book 9 – are placed immediately prior to the final book and provide the conceptual bridge between the earlier books that focus primarily on the virtues and the final book that focuses on pleasure and the life of happiness. (Contemporary usage fails to capture the full ethical weight that Aristotle attaches to ‘pleasure’ and ‘happiness’, which in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere in the Aristotelian canon carry the sense of ‘human fulfilment’ or ‘flourishing.’) The notion of friendship is therefore pivotal to the ethical framework elaborated by Aristotle and – in its emphasis on the civic bases of the good life – provides vital linkage to his political thought. Friendship, insists Aristotle, is a necessity: it is ‘most necessary for living’ (Aristotle, 1976, 258). Through friendship we actualise the virtue of justice – ‘friendliness is considered to be justice in the fullest sense’ (Aristotle, 1976, 259) – and through justice we achieve the conditions necessary for civic and political order. Friendship is a necessity because without it we are unable to engage fully as citizens in the life and work of the polity.

This emphasis on the centrality of virtue in the formation of friendship reverberates through the classical literature on friendship. Cicero, writing in the first century BCE, concludes the final section of his epistolary essay, ‘On friendship’, with the affirmation: ‘I repeat what I said before. It is virtue, virtue, which both creates and preserves friendship’ (Cicero, 2012, 43). Plutarch, who spanned the first and second centuries CE and whose view of the world informed and inspired the European Renaissance world view, argues – in his essay on ‘How to distinguish a flatterer from a friend’ – that a friend is like a musician: ‘[I]n retuning his instrument for the mode of goodness and benefit, he loosens here and tightens there, and consequently, although he may often be likeable, he *always* does good’ (Plutarch, 1992, 74). What Suzanne Stern-Gillet (1995, 109), in her study of Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship, calls ‘the moral community’ comprises both the citizenry and friendship: ‘At its widest the moral community coincides with the polis (city-state), and at its narrowest it consists of the circle of primary friends’.

This general insight into the relation between goodness and friendship is part of the classical legacy that Arendt inherited and that infuses her own thinking about friendship. For Arendt the promise inherent in friendship is that of truthfulness, which constitutes a necessary condition for what Arendt understands by politics: 'The political element in friendship is that in the truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other's opinion' (PP, 19–20). Truthfulness, which for Aristotle was the virtuous mean between the excess of boastfulness and the deficiency of understatement, is for Arendt a state of mutual understanding that exists between friends and that forms the moral bases of the polity. Politics is, as it were, ethically grounded in 'the truthful dialogue' that constitutes friendship.

There is, however, another albeit related strand of Aristotelian thought that is less amenable to Arendt's way of thinking. Book 8 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* focuses on the distinction between three kinds of friendship: friendship based on utility, friendship based on pleasure and friendship based on goodness. This schema is hierarchical with reference to the values Aristotle ascribes to each of the kinds of friendship: friendship based on goodness provides the apex of a triangular formation, the baseline of which comprises utility and pleasure. The terminology used to define this category of friendship invariably highlights its superiority: 'perfect friendship', 'sovereign friendship', 'primary friendship'. Although this superior form of friendship may be useful and is certainly pleasurable, it is distinguished from the other categories by inclusion of virtue as its prime constituent: 'Only the friendship of those who are good, and similar in their goodness, is perfect' (AE, 263). At the apex of the triangle is the kind of friendship that is different not just in degree but in kind from ordinary friendships.

This strand of Aristotelian thought led – possibly erroneously – to an idealisation of friendship that is alien to how Arendt thought about and lived her friendships. Notwithstanding the premium she placed on categorical distinctions, these were not distinct categories of thought that she applied to her understanding of friendship and its ethical and political implications. One of the best-known idealisations of friendship is that contained in Michel de Montaigne's essay 'On friendship', which is in effect a eulogy to his friend Étienne de La Boétie who died in 1563 just before his thirtieth birthday. This friendship, we are told, was incomparable, unique: 'a friendship so complete

and perfect that its like has seldom been read of, and nothing comparable is to be seen among the men of our day' (Montaigne, 1958, 92). It was a friendship destined to happen and made in heaven: 'There is . . . some inexplicable power of destiny that brought about our union . . . I believe that this was brought about by some decree of Heaven' (97). It involved a submission of one's will to that of the other such that the friendship became all-consuming:

it was some mysterious quintessence of all this mixture which possessed itself of my will, and led it to plunge and lose itself in his; which possessed itself of his whole will, and led it, with a similar hunger and like impulse, to plunge and lose itself in mine. I may truly say *lose*, for it is left us with nothing that was our own, nothing that was either his or mine.

Montaigne, 1958, 97–8

To the modern ear, Montaigne's metaphors evoke a sense of charged romantic eroticism. Yet he clearly, and without any hint of defensiveness, distinguishes his friendship with Etienne from what he calls 'that alternative permitted by the Greeks' – by which, presumably, he means what we would now term homosexuality. He is, he insists, providing us with an account of a 'complete and perfect friendship' that is intimate but not sexual. The promise of friendship, for Montaigne, can only be fulfilled through a 'complete and perfect friendship' that is unique and incomparable and that finds its fulfilment in 'some mysterious quintessence' in which the will of the other is compelled 'to plunge and lose itself in mine'. It is in an attempt to highlight the uniqueness and exclusivity of this kind of friendship – and distinguish it from 'commonplace and everyday friendships' – that he quotes a statement traditionally attributed to Aristotle: 'Oh my friends, there is no friend!' (99). There is, he seems to be saying, no 'complete and perfect friendship' among all my 'commonplace and everyday friendships'.

Montaigne sharpens the Aristotelian distinctions between kinds of friendship to the point at which, as Lorraine Smith Pangle (2003) in her study of Aristotle's philosophy of friendship states, 'it becomes puzzling why [Aristotle] continues to call the lesser forms friendships at all': 'Why does he waffle on this point and pull back from saying unambiguously that only a union of virtuous men who love one another for their characters is friendship at all?' (45). Her response to this question is that although only one of Aristotle's three categories of friendship has as its primary object pleasure, all three

categories are infused with pleasure: 'Both friendships of pleasure and those of virtue truly aim at pleasure and truly achieve it, although the perfect friendship does this in a more stable and reliable way and brings other benefits in addition' (55). Aristotle requires a broad and inclusive categorisation of friendship in order to prioritise pleasure; but within that broad and inclusive categorisation he requires a hierarchical ordering of friendships in order to prioritise stability and reliability. All friendships provide pleasure, but the best friendships hold out the additional promise of stability and reliability within which virtue may be nurtured and sustained.

Given her emphasis on the unpredictability and uncertainty of human affairs, Arendt placed great importance on the stability and reliability of friendship. It is unsurprising therefore that she placed a premium on her older and more enduring friendships, the stability and reliability of which had been tried and tested by time and exile. In that sense, her thinking is all of a piece with Aristotle's ordering of friendship as interpreted by Pangle. However, the exclusivity that Montaigne read into Aristotle's notion of 'perfect friendship' – and the loss of 'my will' in the 'mysterious quintessence' of such friendship – is totally alien to Arendt's notion of friendship: friends do not lose themselves in friendship, but gain an affirmation of their distinct identities through friendship. Nor do they cut themselves off from the world through their friendship. Friends share some measure of intimacy, but carry the plurality of that world into their friendships in such a way as to both enrich those friendships and enhance one another. This emphasis on individual autonomy within friendship – and the openness of friendship to the world – is central to Arendt's notion of what constitutes friendship.

As Jacques Derrida (1997, 215–16) – in his unravelling of the exclamatory statement 'Oh my friends, there is no friend!' – suggests: '*there is never a sole friend*. Not that there would be none, but that there never is one. And one is already more than one, with or without my consent . . . This multiplicity makes the taking into account of the political inevitable'. Plurality for Derrida – as for Arendt – is the defining feature of friendship, which is why 'there is no friend' (in the singular), only 'my friends' (in the plural) who relate to one another within the context of what Derrida calls 'the desire for multiplication' (215). It is because of this desire that friendship inevitably takes into account the political: the power implicit in plurality. Friendship promises protection from

the unpredictability and uncertainty of human affairs and the resources of stability and continuity necessary to engage with that unpredictability and uncertainty. It promises a sense of self-worth and of mutual recognition. Friendship is not an escape from but a re-engagement with the plurality and – as Arendt would term it – the worldliness of the human condition.

The fragility of friendship

Montaigne's idea of 'perfect friendship' – whereby, as Sarah Bakewell (2010, 108) puts it, La Boetie 'changed from being Montaigne's real-life, flawed companion to being an ideal entity under Montaigne's control' – has political implications in that it addresses issues relating to the power that is generated between persons: the power, that is, of plurality. The idea of friendship as consisting of two free and equal individuals who protect and border each other – while also reaching beyond the protective boundaries of their particular friendship – speaks back to the idealising assumptions underpinning the notion of 'perfect friendship'. The friendship between free and equal individuals is necessarily a relation between real-life and flawed companions. For friends to idealise the entity of the other is to seek control of that entity and thereby deny the freedom and equality upon which the friendship is based.

Such friendship also speaks back to the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the notion of 'perfect friendship': if women share friendships on the basis of freedom, then they are affirming both their freedom as women and their gender equality. In a patriarchal order, such friendships between women are subversive – between men and women such friendships threaten the very bases of that order. In the case of Arendt we also have to throw into this complex mix her own 'Jewishness': her sense of herself as being socially located within a category that predetermined her identity as 'Jewish'. Against that predetermined identity she demanded her own self-determination: a self-determination that did not deny its origins, but required of those origins the capacity for new beginnings. Friendship, for Arendt, constitutes one such beginning in that it forms from two independent substances a relationship based on mutuality: "The paradigm for a mutually predicated relationship of independent "substance" is *friendship*". Central to that paradigmatic formulation,

as understood by Arendt, is that neither of the friends loses her or his 'substantial independence and identity' (LM, 98).

Arendt's preoccupation with the complex interplay of origins and beginnings in the constitution of 'substantial independence and identity' is a thread running through all her work. It is clearly discernible in her early *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*. This strangely autobiographical biography explores the life of Varnhagen – born in Berlin in 1771 as the daughter of a Jewish merchant – with reference to her Jewish origins. It was the origins that necessitated what Arendt presents as Varnhagen's tragic struggle to overcome her 'pariah' status as a Jewish woman while avoiding the fate of the 'parvenu' who is never fully accepted within the society to which she is a newcomer. How to enter fully into a world of established interests and hierarchies? The tragic irony upon which the biographical narrative turns is that Varnhagen can only ever insert herself into history by acknowledging that she will forever be an outsider. Through that acknowledgement comes an acceptance of the inescapability of her origins. So, at the end of a life dedicated to conversing and corresponding in German and French with many of the literary luminaries of her time, she reverts – Arendt tells us – to writing 'whole paragraphs in her letters to her brother in Hebrew characters, just as she had done in her girlhood ... Rahel had remained a Jew and pariah. Only because she clung to both conditions did she find a place in the history of European humanity' (RV, 258).

Arendt began this particular work in 1929, shortly after she had completed her dissertation on St Augustine's concept of love. By 1933 she had completed a draft of the book, although two chapters were added later such that the study was not finished until 1938. The work was finally published in 1957, but by then she had introduced the case of Rahel Varnhagen into her 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as part of the analysis developed in the chapter on 'the Jews and society'. Seyla Benhabib's (2003) *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* helped establish *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* as a major work in the Arendtian corpus. Benhabib emphasises the crucial importance of the Jewish salon in the culture of *fin de siècle* eighteenth-century Berlin society. For a brief period, the Jewish salons were places within which the public and private intersected in a new kind of social space. 'The salons', Benhabib writes, 'are also spaces in which friendships are formed: these friendships are more personal than political, but here again the lines are not clear; the salons are

spaces in which personal friendships may result in political bondings.’ These ‘bondings’, she goes on to argue, may result in friendships that are exclusively neither private nor public, but primarily civic: ‘[B]oth the polis and the salons contribute to the formation of “civic friendship”, either among a group of citizens or among a group of private, like-minded individuals who can gather for a common political purpose’ (20).

Although the Jewish community was at the heart of this salon culture, the salons brought together a mixed society of aristocratic and middle-class intellectuals and artists. What bound them together was that none of them fully belonged to respectable society. It was a social space within which Varnhagen’s ambivalent status as part-pariah and part-parvenu was not entirely disadvantageous: a space within which a new ideal of humanity – the joy of conversation, the search for friendship, and the cultivation of intimacy within a setting that combines the public and the private – was generated and nourished. In what Arendt calls ‘the vague, idyllic chaos which the Jewish salon of those days represented’ (RV, 127), Varnhagen’s own salon – situated in her attic room on Jägerstrasse – was preeminent. Attended by almost all the important intellectuals of Berlin – notably, Schleiermacher, Schlegel and Wilhelm von Humboldt – it became the intellectual hub of what we would now think of as German Romanticism.

While respectful of the salon culture, Arendt recognised its extreme vulnerability. The Jewish salon, she argued, ‘had good luck for three decades’, but ‘was the product of a chance constellation in an era of social transition’. As such it did not signify ‘that the German Jews had attained to social rootedness’. The opposite, she argued, was the case: ‘precisely because the Jews stood outside of society they became, for a short time, a kind of neutral zone where people of culture met’ (RV, 127). Within that zone they remained relatively safe: their exceptionalism provided them with some limited security. It was, ironically, as they became *unexceptional* – as they began to be assimilated – that they no longer had the protection of that neutrality and were perceived as a threat. This is the dilemma that constitutes Varnhagen’s tragic fate: remain an outsider and risk being perceived as a ‘pariah’ or become a ‘parvenu’ and risk being excluded as a threat.

Varnhagen, insisted Arendt, cannot be abstracted from history, because her fate as a Jewish woman is implicated in the social and political transitions of

her time. If history had provided Varnhagen – briefly – with a space for ‘civic friendship’, then it also provided her with the experience of inescapable exclusion. Friendship was not – and could never be – a means of escaping history. Written against the reality of the relentless rise of Nazism, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* bears testimony to the fragility of friendship and the vulnerability of the conditions necessary for friendship to flourish. She was prescient in foreseeing – if not the full horror of Nazism – the conjunction of historic forces that would render that unique and unprecedented version of fascism a possibility. It was with Varnhagen’s condition as a Jewish woman – located at a particular point in time – that Arendt identified; and it is because of the nature of that identification that Arendt described Varnhagen as ‘my closest friend, though she has been dead for some one hundred years’ (quoted in Young-Bruehl, 1982, 56).

Arendt, in this early work, sought to derive meaning from a particular life – a life over which the person who lived it had no ultimate authority. Varnhagen, as Arendt shows, was born into a pre-existing web of human relationships within which her words and deeds initiated processes which, as well as affecting, were also affected by innumerable wills and actions of other actors and speakers. Varnhagen was not – and could not be – the author of her own life story because the processes she initiated were boundless, irreversible and unpredictable in their consequences. Nor, in seeking to derive meaning from Varnhagen’s life, was Arendt claiming authorship of it. She was seeking, rather, to interpret it from her own historically located position as a Jewish woman living, like Varnhagen, through a period of immense social transition and political upheaval. Central to that interpretation was the significance of – and, crucially, the fragility of – friendship. For Varnhagen, as for Arendt, friendship promised some stability and continuity in a world of inescapable uncertainty. Indeed, it was that inescapable uncertainty that made friendship meaningful. But – and this is Arendt’s central insight – it was that same uncertainty that renders friendship inescapably fragile. The world of human plurality that, in all its boundlessness, irreversibility and unpredictability, makes friendship possible renders it also chronically vulnerable from within and without.

Plurality brings with it the possibility of freedom and agency, which Arendt saw as necessary elements in friendship. But she also saw the need for continuity

amidst the uncertainties that are inherent in a world of boundless plurality. The power of promise meets the challenge of plurality through engagement and complementarity. In the following four chapters, the twin themes of plurality and promise – of freedom and continuity, of uncertainty and security – are explored through four friendships that shaped Arendt's life and informed her work. They also trace – in retrospect – the arc of her movement from one world of ideas to another world of ideas. Her flight from the old world to the new world denoted, for her, a geographical shift of location, but was indicative also of a wider geopolitical shift in the world order. The implications of that geopolitical shift reverberated through Arendt's writing and had a profound influence on her life and work and on her personal and political commitments.