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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Saying What Is: Herodotus in Hannah Arendt's Thought

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt did not live to complete her anticipated work on judgment, a faculty she considered essential for resuscitating political life against the threat of totalitarianism. Scholars have attempted to reconstitute it, primarily through her Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy. Yet when discussing her turn to judgment, Arendt cites the ancient Greek historian Herodotus as a model, claiming that recovering the ancient sense of *histor* (judge) is crucial to reclaiming human dignity. Herodotus is in fact central to her depiction of the Greeks throughout her work. Excavating his influence not only helps clarify her theory of judgment; it also reveals how she both distances herself from Heidegger and yet retains certain core agreements. Her reading of Herodotus thus helps delineate the intellectual relationship between two of the twentieth century's foremost thinkers, while inviting us to reflect on how and why to read the Greeks today.

Keywords: Arendt; Heidegger; Herodotus; intellectual history; classical political thought

Introduction

While Hannah Arendt did not live to complete her theory of judgment, she deemed it central to "a whole set of problems by which modern thought is haunted"[1]—most particularly, the thoughtlessness and refusal to judge she indicts in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem.*[2] A preliminary glimpse is on

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 216; J. Glenn Gray recalled that she considered it the capstone to her thought: Ronald Beiner, "Hannah Arendt on Judging," in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 89.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovish, 1973); Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York; Penguin Books, 2006).

offer in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, and Linda Zerilli has developed an influential reconstruction.[3] Yet a key resource remains underexplored: the crucial importance of the ancient Greek *histor* (judge), the recovery of which Arendt claims is essential for "reclaim[ing] our human dignity."[4] I argue that Herodotus is central to this. Not only does she consider him the first historian,[5] she also treats him as exemplary,[6] as well as a source for pre-philosophic Greek thought in general—particularly its elements most congenial to her own.[7] I argue that uncovering the role of Herodotus in Arendt's thought—not only in her work on judgment but in her *oeuvre* as a whole—reveals much about her conception of the Greeks, and the role they play in her diagnosis of the problems stalking modernity.

I here intervene in debates over Arendt's philohellenism, buttressing a view advanced by Roy Tsao,[8] Dana Villa,[9] Peter Euben,[10] Jacques Taminiaux,[11] F. C. Sheffield,[12] Miriam Leonard,[13] and Katherine Harloe[14] that she reads the Greeks as offering a phenomenology of politics, not a romantic ideal. Herodotus, I argue, is thus not merely a resource but an inspiration. She repeatedly cites his intention "to say what is," *legein ta eonta*;[15] this is sympatico with her own attempt to reorient thinking around action rather than philosophic contemplation. While Euben has noted the resemblances between Arendt and Herodotus,[16] I go farther. Tracking where and how Arendt cites Herodotus, as I do here, suggests that his influence on her conception of the Greeks is profound. Excavating this also clarifies her intellectual relationship with Heidegger, for both considered a return to the Greeks essential for regenerating modernity.[17] Yet while Arendt cites Herodotus regularly, Heidegger never does. This is indicative of a profound discontinuity in their thought.

[3] Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) explores Arendt's account of judgment.

[4] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 216.

[5] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968; New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 44, 263.

[6] She cites him more than Thucydides (22 vs 11 citations) and, unlike her treatment of Plato and Aristotle, never critically. She cites Homer frequently, but neither as an *histor* nor a historian.

[7] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 18, 32, 120; Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 130, 137, 138.

[8] Roy T. Tsao, "Arendt Against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition," *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 97–123.

[9] Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[10] J. Peter Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 151–64.

[11] Jacques Taminiaux, "Athens and Rome," in *Cambridge Companion to Arendt*, ed. Villa, 165–77.

[12] F. C. Sheffield, "The Greek Philosophers Against Arendt," *History of Political Thought* 40, no. 4 (2019): 547–82.

[13] Miriam Leonard, "Hannah Arendt and the Ancients," *Classical Philology* 113, no. 1 (2018): 1–5.

[14] Katherine Harloe "Hannah Arendt and the Quarrel of Ancient and Modern," *Classical Philology* 113, no. 1 (2018): 20–38.

[15] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 137, 216; *Between Past and Future*,64.

[16] Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism" 160–61.

[17] Ronald Beiner, "The Presence of Art and the Absence of Heidegger," *Arendt Studies* 2 (2018): 9–16; Leonard, "Arendt and the Ancients."

Yet I argue that this break is incomplete. I modify Villa's contention that their relationship is "fundamentally agonistic"[18] as well as Leonard's argument that it is in Arendt's treatment of ancient texts that she "articulates her distance from and rejection of Heidegger."[19] Against Richard Wolin's argument for their fundamental continuity,[20] I build on Ronald Beiner's view that she sought to repudiate him (and often did so) and yet retains more Heideggerian commitments than many allow.[21] Her affinity with Herodotus exemplifies this. The *Histories* vivifies a Greek world emblematic of the space between Arendt and Heidegger, one where the goods of equality and freedom are threatened by war and imperialism. While Arendt's reading of Herodotus is often remarkably sensitive,[22] she at times distorts the *Histories* by reading it through a Heideggerian lens. Arendt's reading of the Greeks is thus not simply a repudiation of Heidegger but reveals the tensions and ambiguities haunting her mediation of his thought and legacy.

I begin by detailing the resonances between Herodotus's *Histories* and Arendt's account of judgment before turning to how her understanding of the Greek world is shaped by her encounter with his thought. I delineate how her turn to Herodotus exemplifies her repudiation of the most hierarchical and illiberal elements of Heideggerian philosophy: two features of her thought most distinct from Heidegger—*isonomia* and natality—are markedly Herodotean. The draw of Herodotus for Arendt, I argue, is that he exemplifies a Greek conception of politics distinct from both Platonic and Heideggerian philosophy. While both Arendt and Heidegger share a similarly dim view of modernity, for Arendt the ancient *histor* offers a means of reclaiming the dignity of human agency in the contemporary world. Despite this, I argue that her otherwise sensitive reading of Herodotus is undercut by Heideggerian themes, particularly his emphasis on *polemos* (war). In conclusion, I explore how her reading of Herodotus invites reflection on whether it is possible to found an egalitarian politics upon Heidegger's fundamentally illiberal philosophical concepts, and what that means for reading the Greeks today.

Taste, narrative, and judgment

In the outline to her promised work on judgment, Arendt invokes Herodotus:

> Here we shall have to concern ourselves ... with the concept of history ... derived from *historein*, "to inquire in order to tell how it was"—*legein ta eonta* in Herodotus ... If judgment is our faculty for dealing with the past, the historian is the inquiring man who by relating it sits in judgment over it. If

[18] Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*.

[19] Leonard, "Arendt and the Ancients," 2.

[20] Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[21] Beiner, "Presence of Art"; cf. Sheffield, "Greek Philosophers," 547.

[22] Sheffield, "Greek Philosophers," 581.

> that is so, we may reclaim our human dignity, win it back, as it were, from the pseudo-divinity named History of the modern age …[23]

A few paragraphs before, she bemoaned judgment's "curious scarcity of sources."[24] This heightens the importance of those she does cite. Most prominent is Kant,[25] in whose *Critique of Judgment* she locates a conception of judgment as "not arrived at by either deduction or induction."[26] For Arendt, this renders judgment particularly political—precisely because it does not utilize the tools of philosophy.[27] This, however, is part of the difficulty of theorizing judgment: it resists general terms. While the *Lectures* offer a crucial glimpse of her unwritten account, a theoretical approach will be insufficient; as she quotes Kant, judgment is "a peculiar talent which can be practiced only and cannot be taught."[28] This highlights the importance of practice, and thus of the ancient *histor*—of which Herodotus is both first and exemplary. Tracking the confluences between Herodotus's *Histories* and Arendt's extant writings on judgment thus offers an intriguing hint of the possible contours of her unwritten work.

Indeed, much of Arendt's account in the *Lectures* resonates with Herodotus's practice in the *Histories.* Arendt argues that judgment is particularly political because it communicates and makes public—thereby transforming—subjective perspectives and experiences, thus crafting a "common sense," the *sensus communis.*[29] Crucially, judgment is not determined by metaphysical considerations or universally valid rules, which she deems deeply inimical to political life.[30] Universals shortcut debate, and it is debate which creates a public world, where individual events gain significance.[31] As Zerilli writes, for Arendt the public space is not merely where opinions are expressed but rather "the actual condition of their formation, articulation, and circulation in a broader process of critical thinking and judgment."[32] Public debate allows phenomena to gain significance, precisely because we see them, and see them differently, thereby affirming "worldly reality," in Arendt's words.[33] This assures us that there really is a "there" there, and engages us with one another as we debate the significance of the different appearances of things, the "sameness of utter diversity."[34] Judgment is the faculty appropriate to this, as it offers a way of making persuasive claims without recourse to rules or metaphysics—thus preserving

[23] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 216.
[24] Ibid., 215
[25] For what Arendt gets wrong about Kant's thought (and its consequences) see Matthew C. Wiedenfield, "Visions of Judgment: Arendt, Kant, and the Misreading of Judgment," *Political Research Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2013): 254–66.
[26] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 215.
[27] Ibid., 135–39.
[28] Ibid., 215.
[29] Arendt, *Lectures*, 70–72.
[30] Ibid., 22–27; *The Human Condition*, 20–21; *Life of the Mind*, 135–39.
[31] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 56–58.
[32] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory*, 132.
[33] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57.
[34] Ibid., 57.

the possibility of debate. For Arendt, a full and flourishing politics is only possible if what matters most to us is indeed "up for debate."

This informs her rejection of the philosophic tradition. For Arendt, the invention of philosophy by the Greeks undergirds the entire history of Western metaphysics and its dismissal of action: "the topics of metaphysics remained the same and continued to prejudge throughout the centuries which things are worthy of being thought about and which are not."[35] Whether labelled "nature," "the eternal," or the "objective," truth-claims (ancient or modern) attempt to compel and thus undermine the possibility of debate by foreclosing what can be debated. For this reason Arendt refers to the "anti-political character of truth."[36] This animates her turn to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, for judgments of taste do not rest on universal claims but instead deal with the particular qua particular—and apply only to human beings insofar as we live with other human beings.[37] Arendt thus deems judgment to be "one of the fundamental abilities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm, in the common world."[38] She locates in Kant's account of taste a means of making persuasive judgments that lack the compulsion of rational truth-claims—precisely because judgments of taste are not forced by the facts.

In Herodotus's *Histories* taste figures explicitly as the vehicle of judgment. Herodotus approvingly recounts the response of two Spartans, Sperthias and Bulis, in their encounter with a Persian satrap who urged them to "medize" (surrender to the Persian invasion):

> Hydarnes, your advice with relation to us comes from something less than an equality of position. You counsel as one who has tried one condition but knows nothing of the other. You know what it is to be a slave, but you have no experience of freedom, to know whether it is sweet or not. If you had had such experience, you would bid us fight for it, not with spears only, but with axes as well.[39]

As Herodotus says, "their courage was admirable and also their words";[40] freedom is *glukus*, sweet. Elsewhere, he renders judgments in what we might call aesthetic terms: practices that diminish human dignity are "not pleasing"; those that exacerbate inequality are "ugliest"; and institutions that promote equality and dignity are "best/most beautiful" (κάλλιστος).[41] The importance of taste in the *Histories* is most vividly underscored when it is violated. One of the most chilling depictions of the horrors of despotism (in a work that teems

[35] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 139; see Ronald Beiner, *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit: Essays in Contemporary Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 106–7.

[36] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 260; cf. 239–49.

[37] Arendt, *Lectures*, 67.

[38] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 221.

[39] Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 7.135.

[40] Ibid., 7.135

[41] Ibid., 2.64; 1.99; 1.196. For translation of *kalon*, see Aryeh Kosman "Beauty and the Good: Situating the Kalon," *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 (2010): 341–51; Gabriel Richardson Lear "Response to Kosman," *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 (2010): 357–62.

with them) is a violation of both literal and figurative taste.[42] Feeling betrayed by his advisor Harpagus, the despot Astyages invites him to a lavish feast and afterwards asks if the meal has pleased him. Harpagus replies "very much indeed", at which point Astyages reveals that Harpagus had just dined on the roasted flesh of his only son.[43] Harpagus replies: "whatsoever my lord the king does is pleasing."[44] The vulnerability of life under despotism is epitomized by the grieving father who must proclaim that all that the despot does is pleasing.

In the *Histories*, judgments—whether good, bad, or travesties—are expressed as tastes. While, for this reason, some dismiss his judgments as mere opinion,[45] I follow Rosalind Thomas,[46] Arlene Saxonhouse,[47] and Christopher Pelling[48] in urging that Herodotus offers substantive judgments, which Arendt likewise highlights. But the resemblances run deeper. Herodotus, like Arendt, depicts judgment as a public activity. He opens the *Histories* by calling it an ἱστορίης ἀπόδεξις, a performance of inquiry.[49] In the expansive narrative that follows,[50] Herodotus takes his private experiences and transforms them through his *apodeixis* into an account of political life—one that, like other fifth-century BCE performances, seeks to persuade.[51] Persuasion is underscored through the text's "rival inquirers,"[52] pseudo-*histors* whose cruel experiments teach didactic lessons and silent dissent. Through these foils Herodotus depicts intellectual compulsion as a marker of despotism, on a continuum with physical violence.[53] In contrast, Herodotus presents himself as persuading rather than forcing, through evidence and careful reasoning, while acknowledging that his audience

[42] These incidents are all discussed in greater detail in my forthcoming work on Herodotus.

[43] See Charles Chiasson, "Myth and Truth in Herodotus' Cyrus Logos," in *Myth Truth and Narrative in Herodotus' Histories*, ed. Emily Baragwanath and Matthieu de Bakker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 213–32, for the Thyestean parallels of this episode.

[44] Herodotus, *History*, 1.119.

[45] Lauren Apfel, *The Advent of Pluralism: Diversity and Conflict in the Age of Sophocles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Scarlett Kingsley *Herodotus and the Presocratics: Inquiry and Intellectual Culture in the Fifth Century BCE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[46] Rosalind Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science, and Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[47] Christopher Pelling, *Herodotus and the Question Why* (Austin, TX: University of Austin Press, 2019).

[48] Arlene Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 31–57.

[49] Herodotus, *History*, 1.1.

[50] Arendt highlights the expansiveness of Herodotus: *Between Past and Future*, 64.

[51] Thomas, *Herodotus in Context*; Susan Shapiro, "Learning through Suffering: Human Wisdom in Herodotus," *Classical Journal* 89, no. 4 (1994): 348–55; Christopher Pelling, "Educating Croesus: Talking and Learning in Herodotus' Lydian Logos," *Classical Antiquity* 25, no. 1 (2006): 141–77.

[52] Matthew R. Christ, "Herodotean Kings and Historical Inquiry," *Classical Antiquity* 13, no. 2 (1994): 167–202; Paul Demont, "Figures of Inquiry in Herodotus' Inquiry," *Mnemosyne* 62, no. 2 (2009): 179–205; David Branscome, *Textual Rivals: Self-Presentation in Herodotus' Histories* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Lindsay Mahon Rathnam, "The Madness of Cambyses: Herodotus and the Problem of Inquiry," *Polis* 35, no. 1 (2018): 61–82.

[53] Rathnam, "Madness of Cambyses," 61–82.

may harbor doubt and even hostility.[54] Because his performance recreates what one individual has seen or heard,[55] it renders Herodotus's own particular experiences and perspective public—and thus persuasive.

Herodotus's *apodeixis* exemplifies Arendt's claim that judgments of taste possess validity without compulsion, precisely because of their private character: "smell and taste give inner sensations that are entirely private and incommunicable; what I taste and what I smell cannot be expressed in words at all."[56] Crucially, these subjective experiences become intersubjective through the imagination, which bridges the distance between us and sensory experience by *re-presenting* it. This refashions and renders communicable vanished private experiences,[57] transforming them into potentially public objects for judgment that can be shared with the world—crucially, without compelling others. As she quotes Kant, "one can never compel anyone to agree with one's judgments ... one can only 'woo' or 'court' the agreement of everyone else."[58] To woo others, one must think about how something might appear to them. This fosters an "enlarged mentality" through the attempt to think where one is not:[59] "To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting."[60] Judgment is grounded in the subjectivity of the individual yet attempts to 'think beyond' this by imagining how others might themselves judge—and how one might persuade them. It is a faculty attuned to others and yet not compelled by them. For Arendt, judgment allows for individual thought in conditions of plurality.

Representation is furthered through narrative. As Seyla Benhabib observes, "narrativity, or the immersion of action in a web of human relationships, is the mode through which the self is individuated and acts are identified."[61] Herodotus's *Histories* likewise places individual actors and events in a broad and expansive narrative, in which each occurrence both is conditioned and conditions others to which it is related. Consider his multigenerational account of the Persian empire.[62] He begins with the Median empire that preceded it,[63] showing both the continuities and disruptions between the two; he then traces multiple generations of Persian rulers (Cyrus, Cambyses, Xerxes), who each vivify the limits, potentials, and contradictions of despotism. The *Histories* conclude with a warning from the Persian founder Cyrus, one with resonances for Herodotus's

[54] Herodotus, *History*, 3.80; 7.139. For reader response, see Emily Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[55] Joel Schlosser, *Herodotus in the Anthropocene* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[56] Arendt, *Lectures*, 64.

[57] Ibid., 66–67.

[58] Ibid., 72.

[59] Ibid., 42, 73–77.

[60] Ibid., 43.

[61] Seyla Benhabib "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Arendt's Thought," in *Judgment, Imagination, Politics*, ed. Jennifer Nedelsky and Ronald Beiner (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 188.

[62] Thomas Harrison, "Persian Invasions," in Brill's Companion to Herodotus, ed. Egbert Bakker, Irene De Jong, Hans Van Wees (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 551–578, on the *Histories* as structured around multiple waves of invasions.

[63] Herodotus, *History*, 1.96.

imperialist Athenian audience at the outset of the Peloponnesian war.[64] In the *Histories*, to understand a thing—"the reason why they fought one another"[65]—one must see it (as much as possible) in its entirety. Herodotus's layered narrative, its callbacks and returns,[66] makes this possible.

Herodotus continually comments on the work of the *histor*, highlighting its labor and difficulty, his mediation of competing accounts, as well as what ultimately eludes his attempt to know.[67] This acknowledgment of limits and failure resonates with Arendt's emphasis on corrigibility, which spurs the "perspective-taking" of judgment; for Arendt, individual perspective—one's immediate, subjective sense of things—draws individuals together, insofar as we all experience differently some sort of shared reality.[68] This creates the common world through shared interest; as she writes in the *Human Condition*, "*inter-est*, which lies between people and can therefore relate and bind them together."[69] A multiplicity of perspectives is world-constituting;[70] contestation and difference are the substance of political life. Without this, the common is eroded and human dignity is threatened, whether through the absolute debasement of totalitarianism or the "milder" despotism of isolated, lonely, and utterly private individuals.

This underscores the importance of the particular; individual deeds constitute the common world by supplying shared objects which inform judgment through the exemplary validity they furnish. For Arendt, these particulars allow political actors to derive general concepts from experience rather than universally valid rules or maxims. Memory, the imaginative representation of the past, allows these past events and deeds to be used in understanding the new and the novel—and, moreover, in communicating to others: "what makes particulars *communicable* is (a) that in perceiving a particular we have in the back of our minds ... a 'schema' whose 'shape' is characteristic of many such particulars *and* (b) that this schematic shape is in the back of the minds of many different people."[71] Because it offers a record of these occurrences, history (rather than reason or philosophy) becomes central to her conception of both judgment and politics more generally—and in *Between Past and Future* she credits Herodotus with its invention: "with Herodotus words and deeds and events—that is, those things that owe their

[64] Ibid., 9.122. See Elizabeth Irwin, "The End of the *Histories* and the End of the Atheno-Peloponnesian War," in *Interpreting Herodotus*, ed. Thomas Harrison and Elizabeth Irwin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 279-334

[65] Herodotus, *History*, 1.1.

[66] See Henry Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland, OH: APA Philological Monographs, 1966) for the structure of the *Histories.*

[67] For the narrative voice, see John Marincola "Herodotean Narrative and the Narrator's Presence," *Arethusa* 20, no. 1–2 (1987): 121–37; for uncertainty, see Carolyn Dewald "Interpretive Uncertainty in Herodotus' *Histories*," in *The Authoritative Historian: Tradition and Innovation in Ancient Historiography*, ed. Giustina Monti, Scarlett Kingsley, and Tim Rood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 121–38.

[68] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57–58.

[69] Ibid., 182, emphasis original.

[70] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory*, 274.

[71] Arendt, *Lectures*, 83.

existence exclusively to men—became the subject matter of history."[72] It is for this reason that Arendt deems the *histor* key to reclaiming human dignity from the threat to political life she locates in philosophy.[73]

Herodotus, authoritative source

Yet Arendt's engagement with Herodotus extends beyond his capacity as *histor*. In her works dealing with the Greeks, she takes him as *illustrative* of pre-philosophic ancient Greek experience and thought; it is not just the number of citations, but their *uses* that matter. In the *Human Condition* Arendt turns to Herodotus as her sole source for the Greek understanding of man's place in the cosmos:

> Against this background ... stood mortal men, the only mortals in an immortal but not eternal universe, confronted with the immortal lives of their gods but not under the rule of an eternal god. If we trust Herodotus, the difference between the two seems to have been striking to Greek self-understanding prior to the conceptual articulation of the philosophers ... Herodotus, discussing Asiatic forms of worship and beliefs in an invisible God, mentions explicitly that compared with this transcendent God ... the Greek gods are *anthropophyeis*, have the same nature, not simply the same shape, as man ... Imbedded in a cosmos where everything was immortal, mortality became the hallmark of human existence.[74]

Although this misconstrues Herodotus's depiction of Persian religion, Arendt takes Herodotus as revelatory of the Greek worldview: they hold the gods to be *anthropophyeis*, that is, not merely appearing like but possessing the same nature (*physis*) as human beings. This renders death central to specifically human experience: human beings, unlike the gods whose nature they share, die.

This accounts for the view of human excellence that Arendt attributes to the Greeks: "the task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things—works and deeds and words—which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves."[75] In a footnote, she specifies that the potentially immortal "works and deeds and words" produced by mortal human beings are captured by the Greek term *erga* (deeds).[76] This too bears traces of Herodotus: in the opening of the *Histories*, he declares that one of his subjects will be "the great and wonderful deeds (ἔργα)" of Greeks and barbarians alike (1.1). Arendt quotes this line in *Between Past and Future*, where she credited Herodotus with being the first to make *erga* the subject

[72] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 44; cf. 263.

[73] For what Arendt gets wrong about Greek philosophy, see Euben, "Arendt's Philohellenism"; Sheffield, "Greek Philosophers."

[74] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 18; see also *Life of the Mind*, 130.

[75] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 19.

[76] Ibid.

of history—thus inventing history itself.[77] Arendt's expansive definition of *erga* coheres with Herodotus; he surveys not only military battles but a whole host of human achievements, from speeches and battles to laws and shipbuilding.[78] Indeed, as Egbert de Bakker argues, Herodotus's metatextual account of his efforts depicts the *Histories* itself as one such great and wonderful deed.[79] Herodotus, like Arendt, includes words among the *erga;* for both, the *histor* too is a doer of great deeds.[80]

Erga bridge the chasm between men and the gods; they are evidence of human excellence. Yet Arendt's criterion for greatness offers a stark contrast to Herodotus. For Arendt, great deeds allow men to:

> attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a "divine" nature. The distinction between man and animal runs right through the human species itself: only the best (*aristoi*), who constantly prove themselves to be the best (*aristeuein*, a verb for which there is no equivalent in any other language) ... are really human.[81]

While this undoubtedly captures some Greek thinking about greatness (Arendt cites Heraclitus), it differs from the distinctions Herodotus draws between human and animal. In the *Histories*, the human–animal difference lies not in proving one's bestness but rather in two key capacities: speech[82] and moderation.[83] The importance of moderation in the *Histories* offers a revealing contrast to Arendt's emphasis on *aristeuein*; both require active effort to develop and maintain. The rareness and importance of moderation for Herodotus is made manifest through his comments on the convention, shared by the Egyptians and Hellenes alone, of forbidding human beings but not animals from fornicating in temples.[84] Herodotus explicitly expresses distaste for those who reason that what is permissible for animals is allowed for human beings; they collapse the distinction between human and animal. Like Arendt, Herodotus deems the human–animal distinction potentially porous, in need of active reinforcement, but for him, this distinction lies not in outdoing but moderation, a capacity that his *Histories* attests is often neglected.[85]

[77] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 51, 44.

[78] Herodotus, *History*, 1.29, 196–7; 2.177; 1.194; 7.44, 96.

[79] Egbert Bakker, "The Making of History: Herodotus' *Histories*," in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Egbert Bakker, Irene De Jong, and Hans Van Wees (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 3–32.

[80] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 173.

[81] Ibid., 19.

[82] Herodotus, *History*, 2.2-4. For Psammetichus's experiment and its role in Herodotus's treatment of language, see Seth Benardete, *Herodean Inquiries* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 1969), 31; Anthoni Sulek, "The Experiment of Psammetichus: Fact, Fiction, and Model to Follow," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 4 (1989): 645–51; Rosasia Vignolo Munson, *Black Doves Speak: Herodotus and the Language of Barbarians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 20–22; Ann Ward, *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 34.

[83] Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 14 for moderation as a central theme.

[84] Herodotus, *History*, 2.64.

[85] Ibid., 1.206; 4.202–5.

Indeed, while Herodotus praises excellent individuals, barbarian and Greek alike, he praises them not for outdoing others, but for their honesty,[86] justice,[87] and wisdom;[88] notably, he also praises a woman, Artemisia, for both her courage and wisdom.[89] The *erga* he praises most emphatically, however, are political: he commends the Medes for freeing themselves from foreign rule;[90] Babylonian laws for promoting equality and community;[91] the Scythians for avoiding domination;[92] and the Athenians for their equal speech.[93] Outdoing is not condemned; when the Persians hear of the Olympics, one man is shocked: "what sort of men have you led us to fight against, who contend, not for money, but purely for the sake of excelling!"[94] Likewise, the excellence of the Persian Cyrus, the founder of the empire, is clear. But such restless striving comes in for critical examination: Cyrus's restlessness leads to his ignominious death—his decapitated head thrust in a wine-bag by the grieving mother and warrior queen Tomyris.[95] Most damningly, the *nomoi* he founded to suit his outsized excellence unleash the madness of his son and successor Cambyses.[96] For Herodotus, particularly human excellence does not consist solely in striving, and is found far from the Hellenic world.

Arendt's treatment of art is even more Herodotean. She argues that the work of art creates a home for human beings, thus transcending the importance of the deeds these works (themselves *erga*) commemorate:

> The "doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words" of action and the spoken word has passed … acting and speaking men need the help of the *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story that they enact and tell, would not survive at all.[97]

Beiner underscores Arendt's astonishing elevation of art above action:[98] the work of art is an *ergon* that saves other individual *erga* from oblivion, both making possible and satisfying the desire for immortality. Notably, Arendt includes history among the arts. The salvific power of the historian is starkly Herodotean:

[86] Ibid., 3.74–75, Prexaspes.
[87] Ibid., 8.79, Aristides; 3.148, 5.48–51, Kleomenes.
[88] Ibid., 1.71, Sandanis; 2.172, 177, Amasis; 4.76, Anacharsis.
[89] Ibid., 7.99.
[90] Ibid., 1.95.
[91] Ibid., 1.196–97. See Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*, 31–57.
[92] Herodotus, *History*, 4.46.
[93] Ibid., 5.78. See Alex Gottesman "The Concept of Isegoria," *Polis* 38, no. 2 (2021): 175–98; Lindsay Mahon Rathnam, "The Marketplace of Ideas and the Agora: Herodotus on the Power of Isegoria," *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 1 (2023): 140–52
[94] Herodotus, *History*, 8.26.
[95] Ibid., 1.205–14.
[96] Ibid., 3.38; see Rosaria Vignolo Munson, "The Madness of Cambyses," *Arethusa* 24, no. 1 (1991): 43–65; Rathnam, "Madness of Cambyses," 61–82.
[97] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 173.
[98] Beiner "Presence of Art," 11.

the intention of the *Histories* is "that time may not draw the colour from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians, fail of their report."[99]

Arendt paraphrases this line in the opening of 'The Concept of History':

> he tells us in the first sentence ... that the purpose of his enterprise is to preserve that which owes its existence to men, *ta genomena ex anthropon*, lest it be obliterated from time ... his understanding of the task of history ... [was] to save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion.[100]

Later in the essay, she repeats this claim: "Herodotus wanted 'to say what is' (*legein ta eonta)* because saying and writing stabilize the futile and perishable."[101] That is, she attributes her conception of the purpose of art, what she terms the "highest capacity" of homo faber,[102] to Herodotus himself: it is his understanding of history, it is what he *wanted* to do. This attribution is striking. Her explanation of the mechanisms of art, *how* it does what it does, is a description of the activity of the *histor*: the source of art is thought, which "is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency ... until they all are fit to enter the world and to be transformed into things, to become reified."[103] This echoes her claims about the imagination in the *Lectures*, discussed above. In both cases, appearances matter, for objects cannot be divorced from their appearance: "everything that is, must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen."[104] Everything that is, is seen and therefore judged not only by its use but by its beauty or ugliness. For Arendt, we are inescapably aesthetic creatures.

As Beiner notes, this section evokes Heidegger.[105] In a letter to Heidegger, Arendt makes clear his complicated influence on the *Human Condition* as a whole:

> You will see that the book does not contain a dedication. If things had ever worked out properly between us—and I mean *between*, that is, neither you nor me—I would have asked you if I might dedicate it to you; it came directly out of the first Freiburg days and hence owes practically everything to you in every respect. As things are, I did not think it was possible, but I wanted at least to mention the bare fact to you in one way or another.[106]

[99] Herodotus, *History*, 1.1.
[100] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 41.
[101] Ibid., 64; cf. 44.
[102] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 73.
[103] Ibid., 168.
[104] Ibid., 173.
[105] Beiner, "Presence of Art."
[106] Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, *Letters 1925–1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2004), 122–23, letter 89; Arendt expressed a similar view about the dedication to the Life of the Mind (174, letter 28). Emphasis in original.

This admixture of ambivalence and gratitude captures the ambiguities of the intellectual connections between the two.[107] Beiner underscores a key agreement: both believe that "[l]iving a properly human life requires participation in a genuine world, and possessing a genuine world is not a spontaneously available given."[108] Some worlds—most pressingly, the modern one—are not genuine and thus woefully inadequate.[109] Both turn to the Greeks as an exemplar of a truly authentic politics, contact with which might yet spur a radical reorientation of modern life. Yet despite this agreement, Arendt's commitments are, as Beiner notes, "fundamentally egalitarian"—whereas Heidegger's are profoundly illiberal.[110]

I argue that the presence of Herodotus in Arendt's work—and his absence from Heidegger's—is part of her attempted mediation of Heidegger's thought. Her central departures, pluralism and natality, are both Herodotean, which has not been noted in the scholarship. Herodotus's influence is more explicit in her account of pluralism and equality: she cites Herodotus as the source for the ancient Greek conception of *isonomia*, equality or equal law. In the *Human Condition* Arendt writes: "The most famous and most beautiful reference is the discussion of different forms of government in Herodotus (iii.80–83), where Otanes, the defender of Greek equality (*isonomie)*, states that he 'wishes neither to rule nor be ruled'."[111] In *On Revolution*, Arendt explicitly states that she "follow [s]" this passage,[112] treating it as revelatory of the self-understanding of the *polis* as well as the particularly political bent to the Greek understanding of freedom.[113] By highlighting the importance of equality and freedom in the *Histories*, Arendt demonstrates her sensitivity as a reader: it is a thematic concern throughout.[114] Yet not only does she treat this passage as revelatory, she deems it beautiful.[115] If appearances and aesthetics are inescapable, an essential component of judgment,[116] it matters that Arendt judges this beautiful: it is to her taste.

The link between natality and Herodotus is not as straightforward. While Arendt identifies Augustine as the originator of the concept of natality,[117] there is much resonance between her account and Herodotus's text. The depiction of *erga* as a form of birth ("with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human

[107] See Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, for an overview of the intellectual relationship between the two.

[108] Beiner, "Presence of Art," 12.

[109] Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*, 8, likewise notes that Arendt shared Heidegger's "conservative reactionary 'diagnosis of the times.'"

[110] Beiner, "Presence of Art," 12; cf. Timothy Berk, "Dialogue, Dasein, and Destiny: Heidegger's Challenge to Dialogical Political Theory," *Comparative Political Theory* 3 (2023): 1–31.

[111] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 32 n. 22. For a discussion of isonomia, see John Lombardini "Isonomia and the Public Sphere," *History of Political Thought* 34, no. 3 (2013): 393–420.

[112] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1968; New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 285.

[113] Ibid., 30–31.

[114] See Herodotus, *History*, 1.196–97; 3.83; 4.46; 5.78; 7.135.

[115] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 32.

[116] Ibid., 173; Arendt, *Lectures*, 67.

[117] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 177.

world, and this insertion is like a second birth"[118]) evokes the opening of the *Histories.* Herodotus promises to record *ta genomena ex anthropon*, translated literally, "the things generated out of/born from human beings."[119] Elsewhere, Arendt quotes this line in Greek and asserts that Herodotus makes his subject (and thus the subject of history itself) "those things that owe their existence exclusively to men."[120] Indeed, Herodotus attends to a range of things he depicts as originating from human beings: language, laws, empire—even the names of the gods.[121] My claim is not that Herodotus rather than Augustine is Arendt's source; it is rather that Herodotus's orientation to beginnings offers a suggestive parallel to hers, another reason why Herodotus is to her taste (and not to Heidegger's). Both Arendt and Herodotus underscore the importance of generation, creation, and the new.

Arendt's attention to *erga* is tied to her attempt to construct a phenomenology of political experience—of what is real rather than theorized. She shares, at a deep level, Herodotus's dedication to *legein ta eonta.* If the Greeks are central to her reconstructive phenomenology, in the *Life of the Mind* she takes Herodotus as illustrative of pre-philosophic Greek thought as a whole; Arendt points to his intention to "say what is" as the decisive contrast to philosophic *nous*, the concern with the eternal.[122] *Nous* transformed (one might say corrupted) the earlier *logos*, which Arendt, citing Herodotus, terms the "specifically, uniquely human ability that is also applied to mere 'mortal thought,' opinions or dogmata, to what happens in the realm of human affairs"[123]—mortal matters that *nous* came to regard as mere seeming,[124] thus ushering in a turn away from human affairs to the realm of the eternal.[125] Arendt wishes to return to what is, to politics without philosophy; Herodotus, who said what was, is emblematic of this lost world.

What Arendt shares with Herodotus, the interest in human affairs, speaks to the gulf between her and Heidegger—at least as Heidegger saw it:

> Unlike you, I am only slightly interested in politics. For the most part, the state of the world is clear, after all. The power inherent in the essence of technology is scarcely recognized. Everything moves along at a superficial level. The individual can no longer do anything to oppose the arrogance of the "mass media" and the institutions—and nothing at all when it comes to uncovering the origins of thinking in ancient Greek thought.[126]

[118] Ibid., 176.
[119] Herodotus, *History*, 1.1.
[120] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 41, 44.
[121] Herodotus, *History*, 2.2; 1.29, 99; 1.125–26; 2.53. For the gods, see Scott Scullion, "Herodotus and Greek Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 192–208.
[122] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 137.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 137–38.
[125] Cf. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 46–47.
[126] Arendt/Heidegger, *Letters 1925–1975*, 208, letter 158.

Both see a resuscitation of Greek thought as essential, yet Heidegger is dismissive about the possibility of individual agency in modernity (as he says, "the individual can no longer do anything"), while Arendt thinks that individual agency is still possible. Herodotus's emphasis on the fertile possibilities of individual deeds clearly resonates with Arendt's hopes—and not Heidegger's despair.

The *histor* versus history

The threat to agency—and the *histor*'s role in resuscitating it—is foregrounded in the "Concept of History" in *Between Past and Future.* Arendt there offers a history of history:

> Let us begin with Herodotus ... [h]is understanding of the task of history—to save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion—was rooted in the Greek concept and experience of nature, which comprehended all things that come into being by themselves ... and therefore are immortal ...[127]

Here, as in the *Human Condition*, the tension between immortality and mortal humanity can only be imperfectly resolved by the potentially immortal deed. This is because of the singularity of *erga:*

> the great deeds and works of which mortals are capable, and which become the topic of historical narrative, are not seen as parts of either an encompassing whole or a process; on the contrary, the stress is always on single instances and single gestures. These single instances, deeds, or events interrupt the circular movement of daily life ... The subject matter of history is these interruptions—the extraordinary, in other words.[128]

By recording these interruptions, the "futile" actions of man can gain something of the immortality of the natural world: "[t]hrough history men almost became the equals of nature, and only those events, deeds, or words that rose by themselves to the ever-present challenge of the natural universe were what we would call historical."[129] In Arendt's presentation, the ancient Greeks understood great human deeds to rival nature. Meeting this challenge immortalized great human deeds (and their doers).

For Arendt, the ancient Greek historians not only saved individual deeds from oblivion (and, with this, the dignity of individual agents) but also crafted a kind of impartiality she deems more conducive to politics than contemporary "neutrality." She argues that ancient impartiality—which she locates in Herodotus's intention to praise Greek and barbarian alike,[130] even claiming that he

[127] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 41–42.
[128] Ibid., 42.
[129] Ibid., 47–48.
[130] Ibid., 51.

originates it[131]—is possible precisely because it lacks any concept of historical progress and is therefore unconcerned with the so-called "judgment of history."[132] Arendt contends that impartiality creates a common world because it keeps alive the dispute and debate constitutive of such a realm: "the Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view."[133] This is on display in the *Histories.*[134] This impartiality is possible, Arendt contends, only because the ancient historian sought only to judge what is worthy of preservation, not the true meaning of what happened. Ironically, it is this refusal to judge that keeps alive dispute and thus makes possible a common world.

In contrast, the modern concept of history denies the possibility of a shared world: "the birth of the modern idea of history not only coincided with but was powerfully stimulated by the modern age's doubt of the reality of an outer world 'objectively' given to human perception as an unchanged and unchangeable object."[135] Sensation tells us nothing of the sensed object, thus reducing everything other than moral principles or self-interest to mere matters of "taste," yet without a shared reality, we cannot render these tastes explicable and thus persuasive to others. One person might prefer beer, another wine; another might prefer democracy, yet another fascism—and nothing can mediate between them. The utter unreliability of our senses to disclose the world leads to a new emphasis on making and technology, for if we cannot know the world as it is, we can at least understand what we ourselves have made.[136] This technological turn shifts attention away from particular deeds by insisting on the importance of process and progress,[137] which in turn renders the past meaningless: it "cancels out and makes unimportant whatever went before."[138] For Arendt, the modern concept of history degrades the worth of the particular; what the *histor* celebrated and preserved no longer matters.

Yet this view of progress still grants the past a certain dignity as a step along the way. For Arendt, what is truly catastrophic is the nihilism that follows when faith is lost in *any* narrative of history, as happens when any given interpretation can force the particular to fit its parameters:

> what is really undermining the whole modern notion that meaning is contained in the process as a whole … is that not only can we prove this, in the sense of consistent deduction, but we can take almost any hypothesis and act upon it, with a sequence of results in reality which not only make

[131] Ibid., 263.
[132] Ibid., 51.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Herodotus, *History*, 1.1–5, 5.86, *inter alia.* See Joel Alden Schlosser "Herodotean Realism," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 239–61; Schlosser, *Herodotus in the Anthropocene.*
[135] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 53.
[136] Ibid., 58–60.
[137] Ibid., 61.
[138] Ibid., 79.

> sense but work. This means quite literally that everything is possible not only in the realm of ideas but in the field of reality itself.[139]

That the past can be persuasively interpreted in any number of contradictory ways gives rise to the belief that "everything is possible." But rather than liberating human beings from the dead hand of history, this allows for the emergence of totalitarianism, which, as Arendt summarizes, "is based in the last analysis on the conviction that everything is possible—and not just permitted."[140]

In sum, the concept of nature foundational to modern science stimulated a notion of history as process, ultimately giving rise to a technological understanding of the world and, as a consequence, profound world-alienation.[141] For Arendt, technology has utterly transformed the world, and the disenchantment of history has rendered it meaningless. Human beings are left utterly alone, consumed by the drive for comfortable self-preservation; or, desperate to create meaning—any meaning—they are made into a mass under totalitarianism: "This twofold loss of the world—the loss of nature and the loss of human artifice in the widest sense, which would include all history—has left behind it a society of men who, without a common world which would at once relate and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass."[142] It is this bleak picture of modernity—one she shares with Heidegger—that drives Arendt's turn to judgment. This is central to her work: as Beiner puts it, "the impetus behind Arendt's affirmation of politics and active citizenship was neither romanticism nor utopianism, but *fear* and *dread*."[143] The turn to the *histor*—and Herodotus—is key to her project of preserving human freedom against threats both novel (totalitarianism, nihilism) and old (the drive to transcend particularity through contemplation of eternal truths).

Flourishing and nature

I suggest, however, that Arendt mistakes both Herodotus's practice of judging and the nuances of his depiction of nature—precisely because of the Heideggerian quality of her understanding of the Greek concept of nature. This is evidenced by her contention, discussed above, that the Greeks understood nature to be a rival, and that men must meet "the ever-present challenge of the natural universe."[144] This is deeply agonistic: nature here is not a *telos* or a guide but a rival that must be outdone. Not only does she attribute this view to Herodotus,

[139] Ibid., 87.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., 89.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Beiner, *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit*, 117, emphasis original. For more on how totalitarianism informed Arendt's thought, see Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
[144] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 47–48.

she takes it as the essential "Greek concept and experience of nature."[145] Furthermore, she deems this to be self-evident: "Herodotus ... never would have doubted that each thing that is or was carries its meaning within itself and needs only the word to make it manifest";[146] for the Greeks, "great things are self-evident, shine by themselves ... the poet (or later the historiographer) has only to preserve their glory."[147] For *erga* to be worthy of preservation, human beings must challenge and outshine nature; this is so primary that these individual deeds required not understanding but beautiful words to preserve their (self-evident) glory.

Arendt admits that there is an element of interpretation to this preservation: in the *Human Condition*, she writes that "[a]ction reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants ... [it is] the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story."[148] Yet the meaning that the "backward glance of the historian" perceives and thereby makes is straightforward:

> action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis.*[149]

As an account of judgment, this is curious. It seems to suggest that the historian judges only what is great—and that the standard of greatness is plain, that is, requires no judgment. At stake is not the nature of greatness but whether a given *ergon* disrupts the ordinary and thus rivals nature. As Wolin notes, this is markedly Heideggerian: "For Arendt, as well as Heidegger, politics is primarily a matter of *existential self-affirmation*: a terrain of virtuoso performance and individual bravado, a proving grounds for authenticity."[150]

But it is not Herodotean. This is evident if we consider an episode from the *Histories* that comes closest to Heideggerian/Arendtian overcoming. Pixodarus urges his fellow Carians to be better than nature in their fight against the Persians—yet this is in service not of individual excellence, but the survival of a community.[151] Even so, his advice is not taken; so far from being self-evident, this standard of "outdoing" is rejected by the Carians (who are defeated). Something else is at stake. The difference between Herodotus and Arendt is suggested when Herodotus restates his topic shortly after he begins:[152]

> I will go forward in my account, covering alike the small and great cities of mankind. For of those that were great in earlier times most have now

[145] Ibid., 41.
[146] Ibid., 64.
[147] Ibid., 52.
[148] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 205.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*, 69, emphasis original.
[151] Herodotus, *History*, 5.118.
[152] Pelling, *Herodotus and the Question Why*, 29–30.

> become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before. Since, then, I know that man's good fortune (εὐδαιμονίην) never abides in the same place, I will make mention of both alike.[153]

That is, rather than evaluating deeds in terms of what rivals nature, Herodotus tracks the flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of human beings—wherever and whenever it is found (and lost).[154] The meaning of flourishing, however, is not straightforward. The different peoples Herodotus surveys offer competing visions of its character. For Cyrus, flourishing consists of empire, of having the "ten thousand good things" by ruling over others;[155] for the Scythians, it lies in escaping domination;[156] for the Athenians, it is to dwell in a city where, in striving for the city, one wins for one's very self.[157]

Indeed, one of the most famous episodes of the text is a debate over flourishing: the confrontation between Solon, the Athenian law-giver known for his wisdom, and Croesus, the doomed Lydian despot.[158] During Solon's travels, he came to stay with Croesus. Croesus took the wise man to see his vast treasury, and then asked "whether, of all men, there is one you have seen as the most blessed of all." Herodotus observes that Croesus was in no doubt that "he himself was the most blessed."[159] But Solon's answer reveals a very different view of blessedness: the happiest man, he says, is Tellus the Athenian:

> In the first place, Tellus' city was in good state when he had sons—good and beautiful they were—and he saw children in turn born to all of them, and all surviving. Secondly, when he himself had come prosperously to a moment of his life—that is, prosperously as it counts with us—he had, besides, an ending for it that was most glorious: in a battle between the Athenians and their neighbors in Eleusis he made a sally, routed the enemy, and died splendidly, and the Athenians gave him a public funeral where he fell and so honoured him greatly.[160]

While Tellus excelled in battle, the point is not his strength but the whole of his life. Solon makes this clear when, after Croesus pressed him to name his second happiest (still not Croesus!), the despot is "sharply provoked"[161] and demands that Solon explain himself. Solon provides a whirlwind speech expounding the frailty of human life: "man is entirely what befalls him"; while

[153] Herodotus, *History*, 1.5. For travel and motion in the *Histories*, see Susan McWilliams, *Traveling Back: Toward a Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Clem Wood, "I am Going to Say: A Sign on the Road of Herodotus' Logos," *Classical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2016): 13–31.

[154] Schlosser, *Herodotus in the Anthropocene*, for "earthly flourishing."

[155] Herodotus, *History*, 1.126; 9.122.

[156] Ibid., 4.46.

[157] Ibid., 5.78.

[158] See Pelling "Educating Croesus." Arendt discusses this passage (*Life of the Mind*, 164–65) yet does not mention the examples he gives.

[159] Herodotus, *History*, 1.30.

[160] Ibid., 1.30.

[161] Ibid., 1.31.

riches might help an individual withstand the vagaries of fortune, "wait till he is dead … till then call him not blessed but lucky."[162]

Over the course of the encounter, the meaning of happiness is interrogated, both explicitly in Solon's speech and implicitly through Herodotus's treatment. Croesus began by asking who is most *olbios*—"blessed" but with connotations of "wealthy." But Tellus's life is noted not for its wealth but for its completion, its ordinary excellence (children, grandchildren, sufficient but not extraordinary wealth), culminating in an honourable death in service of his city. As a stunned Croesus presses Solon to name the second most blessed, Solon makes the even more surprising selection of Cleobis and Biton, two twins who died in their sleep (despite being in the flower of their youth) after performing a supreme feat of service for their mother—for which she prayed that the gods give them "whatsoever is best for man to win."[163] While Solon and Croesus had been using the language of *olbios*, Herodotus marks this shift through his narration: "So Solon assigned his second prize in happiness (εὐδαιμονίης) to these men"[164]—moving from blessedness to flourishing.

Solon is not Herodotus; Herodotus does not speak through his characters but instead either renders explicit judgments in his own voice, or, as scholars have shown, through the staging of the text—the interplay generated between competing stories, the meaning developed through the drama rather explicitly stated.[165] Yet this debate demonstrates both Herodotus's interest in questions of *eudaimonia*, of what constitutes human flourishing—and his philosophical approach. That is, Herodotus offers neither a didactic moral with an easily extricable teaching, nor is he a relativist who abjures any substantive vision of human flourishing.[166] Instead, his inquiry is philosophical; it examines the past, the various deeds of human beings, as offering a guide to a deeper and more complete understanding of human flourishing,[167] nature,[168] and thereby human beings themselves. He considers alternative ideals and, through the generational span of his *Histories*, can trace more fully the unintended consequences, costs, and potentials of competing visions of flourishing.[169] Rather than a chronicle of the self-evidently great, the *Histories* is a philosophically rich, fundamentally

[162] Ibid., 1.32.

[163] Ibid., 1.31.

[164] Ibid., 1.32.

[165] For interplay of polyvocal stories, see Schlosser, *Herodotus in the Anthropocene;* for dramatic staging, see Emily Baragwanath, "Characterization in Herodotus," in *Fame and Infamy: Essays in Characterization in Greek and Roman Biography and Historiography*, ed. Rhiannon Ash, Judith Mossman, and Frances Tichener (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16–35; for irony and dramatic interplay as communicating meaning in the *Histories*, see Matthieu de Bakker, "Herodotus on Being Good: Characterization and Explanation," in *Fame and Infamy*, ed. Ash et al., 52–66.

[166] This is the view of Apfel, *Advent of Pluralism*, 179, 196; as well as Kingsley, *Herodotus and the Presocratics.*

[167] Schlosser, *Herodotus in the Anthropocene;* Pelling, *Herodotus and the Question Why.*

[168] Thomas, *Herodotus in Context.*

[169] See esp. Matthew Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel: Accountability and Advice in Ancient Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Christopher Pelling, "Aristagoras: 5.49–5.97," in *Reading Herodotus: A Study of the Logoi in Book 5 of Herodotus' Histories*, ed. Elizabeth Irwin and Emily Greenwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 179–201.

aporetic approach to grasping the elusive truth of human beings, offering provisional judgments and competing nonideals of political life as it provokes readers to grapple with the significance of these.[170] Herodotus's inquiry, his practice of judgment, is not separate from his philosophy but an aspect of it. He does not merely record the self-evidently great but rather investigates it.

Conclusion

Arendt's vision of Herodotus is in many ways remarkably accurate; it captures his impartiality, the prevalence of taste, the use of narrative to deepen understanding of the political world. Yet she errs in depicting the *Histories* as a straightforward record of triumphs in the struggle against nature. This misapprehension reveals where Arendt, despite her manifest differences from Heidegger, retains key Heideggerian concepts. The pre-Socratic Greeks loom large in Heidegger's philosophy as an example of a genuine confrontation with being, the urgency and authenticity of which was lost in the Socratic/Platonic turn to metaphysical speculation. Heidegger deems recovering this to be necessary—in order to kindle the potential of the German *volk*.[171] As Gregory Fried has urged, much of this rests on the primacy for Heidegger of Heraclitus, fragment 53: "*Polemos* (war) is both father of all, and king of all: it reveals on one hand the gods and on the other human beings, fashions slaves on the one hand, the free on the other."[172] In his 1934–35 lectures on Hölderlin, Heidegger translates the Greek *polemos* as the German *Kampf*—a highly suggestive choice in 1930s Germany, to say the least.

Arendt had left Freiburg to study in Heidelberg in 1926. Her affair with Heidegger ended in 1928, and they did not communicate between 1933 and 1950. But Heidegger claimed in a letter to Carl Schmitt in 1933 that *polemos* had been central to his thought *for years*: "your quote from fragment 53 of Heraclitus particularly pleased me in that you did not forget the basileus [king], which gives the fragment its full meaning, if one interprets it completely. I have had such an interpretation with respect to the concept of truth set down for years"[173]—thus dating Heidegger's reading of *polemos* back to what Arendt termed the "first

[170] See McWilliams, *Travelling Back*, for travel writings as nonideal theory.

[171] Berk, "Dialogue, Dasein, and Destiny"; as Heidegger writes (quoted by Berk, 12): "If we hearken back to this Greek inception, this is *not an arbitrary whim* or just some pedantic habit, but rather the deepest necessity of our German Dasein ... again, we do this not to complete Greek civilization, but rather to draw on the fundamental possibilities of the proto-Germanic ethnic essence and to bring these to mastery." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 71, emphasis original. For Heidegger, National Socialism, and the Greeks, see Charles Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); see also Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 71–74.

[172] Translation my own; see Gregory Fried, *Heidegger's Polemos: From Being to Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[173] Letter of August 22, 1933, Heidegger to Schmitt, trans. G. L. Ulmen, in *Telos* 72 (Summer 1987): 132.

Freiburg days."[174] After Arendt and Heidegger reconciled in 1950, their correspondence shows that Arendt was a keen reader of Heidegger's work (at times overseeing translation into English), that they had discussed Heraclitus—and that she continued to hold Heidegger in the highest regard.[175] As she wrote to him near the end of her life: "no one reads the way you do, and nobody before you did either."[176] The regard seems mutual: writing in 1969, Heidegger tells Arendt that "[m]ore than anyone, you have touched the inner movement of my thought and my work as a teacher, which has remained the same since the *Sophist* lecture."[177] Even if we doubt Heidegger's self-proclamation that *polemos* was long central to his thought, that his "inner movement" has remained the same—and that Arendt, "more than anyone," grasps it—their intellectual relationship clearly did not end after their romantic one did.

The centrality of outdoing and rivalry to Arendt's depiction of the Greeks echoes uncomfortably with Heidegger's fascination with *polemos.* At the very least it distorts her reading of Herodotus. Herodotus does recount a war and inquire into its causes, but, in the *Histories*, war threatens flourishing and is the primary reason why it "never abides in one place."[178] I argued above that Arendt's turn to Herodotus exemplified her turn away from Heidegger. That she persists in depicting the human orientation to nature as one of rivalry suggests that this turn is incomplete. This matters for more than reasons of intellectual history. As Tim Berk has shown, Heidegger's enthusiasm for the Nazis is not incidental, an unfortunate quirk of biography, but rather the fruit of his conception of the importance of the confrontation with Being.[179] As Berk writes, Heidegger saw in Nazism his hoped-for solution to the ills of modernity—but only with the aid of the Greeks:

> Heidegger saw a *possible* way out of what he understood to be the nihilism inherent at the end of the history of Being … through the kindling of the spiritual potential of the German Volk … The Germans could only fulfill this mission, Heidegger insisted, through a dialogue with the Greeks …[180]

Heidegger's view of the Greeks is thus not incidental to his fascistic commitments, but essential to them. That Arendt retains this language should be concerning, if we are looking for intellectual resources to combat the resurgence of authoritarianism. If her turn from Heidegger is incomplete, it requires further study and serious engagement—informed precisely by awareness of how deeply Heidegger's conception of the Greeks (which Arendt partially shares) is bound up with his fascist political philosophy. As Beiner warns, Heidegger's thought should

[174] Arendt/Heidegger, *Letters*, letter 89.
[175] Arendt/Heidegger, *Letters.*
[176] Arendt/Heidegger, *Letters*, 211, letter 161.
[177] Arendt/Heidegger, *Letters*, 163, letter 118.
[178] Herodotus, *History*, 1.5.
[179] Berk, "Dialogue, Dasein, and Destiny"; see also Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots*, and Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars 1933–1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
[180] Berk, "Dialogue, Dasein, and Destiny," 11, emphasis original.

not be dismissed but rather approached with care: "if one is handling intellectually radioactive materials, one has to be much less naïve about what one is dealing with."[181] It is worth considering whether Arendt's negotiation of Heidegger's philosophy can successfully cleave its "radioactive" roots. Her reading of the Greeks is both informed and constrained by this attempt. Excavating Arendt's Greeks can deepen our appreciation of how one might encounter such dangerous minds—and of how one might, despite best intentions, err. The Greek intellectual world was far more complex than Arendt (and Heidegger) depict—and a fuller, more nuanced picture of the lively debates, tensions, and contradictory ideals of the Greek world can help inform our own approach to the most unsettling political questions today.

That is, Herodotus might better accomplish what Arendt sought to do. This is because of the way his investigation of nature makes possible his pre-modern defense of individual flourishing, human dignity, and equality—while also attending to the very real problems and obstacles undermining the attempt to realize these. In the *Histories*, power corrupts, as clearly outlined in the Persian Otanes's critique of despotism, but it also serves real if limited ends.[182] Free speech energizes but it unleashes stupidity and greed;[183] the attempt to create better political institutions is laudable but can end catastrophically, as did Maeandrius's attempt to institute *isonomia.*[184] Herodotus offers a clear-eyed investigation of human flourishing and the profound obstacles to it, the manifold reasons why "fortune never abides in one place."[185] We can deepen our understanding of political possibility through a genuine comparison of ancient and modern—not the faux conceit of a brutal warrior culture against a "soft" modernity, or by discarding or minimizing all that is uncomfortably foreign about the Greeks—but rather through striving, as best as possible, to see them as they were—that is, to say what was.

[181] Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, 14.
[182] Herodotus, *History*, 3.80; 1.96–100, 126.
[183] Rathnam, "Marketplace of Ideas," 147–49.
[184] Herodotus, *History*, 3.142–49.
[185] Ibid., 1.5.

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