The Conscience and Political Agency in Martin Luther and Hannah Arendt

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Word Count: 9,910 (excluding abstract and list of references)

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The relationship between the conscience and political action has been widely debated in recent literature. An examination of Luther's pastoral practice of instructing consciences proves helpful in thinking through the relationship. Specifically, Luther saw a clear and assured conscience as enabling free and spontaneous political action, while political tyranny operates, in part, by oppressing the conscience. As such, Luther's understanding of the political efficacy of the clear conscience is remarkably close to Hannah Arendt's insight in her early work that totalitarian terror aims to make the conscience doubtful and equivocal in order to foreclose the possibility of genuinely new action. However, Arendt's later writings demonstrate a view of the conscience as subjectivist, and therefore unpolitical. Luther, in contrast reads the conscience in a more intersubjective manner dependent upon instruction in the Word of God that narrows the gap between politics and the conscience and reveals a practice of pastoral care that is at the same time a practice of empowering political agency.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Hannah Arendt, conscience, civil disobedience, resistance, totalitarianism, preaching

Introduction

In the light of the recent burst of political action such as the protests over police brutality in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the movement for greater democratic freedoms in Hong Kong, the *Mouvement des gilets jaunes* originating in France, among others in recent years, questions about civil disobedience and the political role of the conscience of individuals have taken on increasing importance. Are appeals to conscience and the "higher law" too subjective and individualistic to be political, and therefore, are they poor grounds for civil disobedience? Or, rather, can the role of the individual conscience be understood as a crucial element in the agency of the individual that necessarily has a role to play in enabling genuinely free political action? In this article, I will address these questions by turning to the writings of the political theorist Hannah Arendt and the historical example of Martin Luther's

pastoral practice of care of consciences as evidenced in his 1531 *Warning to His Dear German People*.

Both Arendt and Luther prove deeply illuminating in thinking through the relationship between conscience and political action as both are highly sensitive to the interaction between the conscience and public action. However, they are not without differences, largely due to their differing accounts of conscience. Specifically, Arendt reads the conscience in subjectivist and largely unpolitical terms, whereas, I argue, Luther views the conscience in a more intersubjective manner that narrows the gap between politics and the conscience. Given his understanding of the role of the conscience, Luther's political appeals to it demonstrate how pastoral care of the soul can be understood as simultaneously an act of empowering the political agency of those cared for against the oppression of those who would seek to subject the conscience to violence. As such, I offer a reading of Luther that runs counter to currently prevalent meta-narratives concerning Luther's place in genealogies of modernity and the rise of the atomized individual and an attendant political quietism, and that also illumines the possibilities for rethinking the pastoral role in relation to the political.[1] Furthermore, and perhaps surprisingly, Luther's reading of the conscience serves a more democratic enabling of political agency than that provided in Arendt's account.

Before setting out each thinker's account of the conscience, it is necessary to note the obvious, but still highly important point that Luther is writing in a drastically different

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[1] Negative readings of Luther along these lines are numerous, and include, among others, Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: Chicago University Pres, 2008); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998); Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Vol. IV: Renaissance and Reformation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998).

context than Arendt. He views himself, and the Germans on whose behalf he is writing, as being subject to the threat of tyranny by an unholy alliance between the Papacy and the Emperor. However, this tyranny is something massively different from the totalitarian terror of the twentieth century, and I in no way mean to equate the two or even to suggest that they are analogous. The sheer numbers involved in the mass slaughters in the camps and gulags, and the horrific and insane logic according to which they were administered, seems unimaginable from a sixteenth century perspective. However, despite their radically different contexts, both Luther and Arendt are deeply sensitized to the relation between the conscience and politics, and when read together, provide illumination into how pastoral care and the theological instruction of conscience can serve to provide resistance against efforts at extending political domination while offering a reminder of the dangers of relying on an overly subjectivist interpretation of the conscience.

Conscience in Hannah Arendt: opening a gap between the subjectivist conscience and politics

Arendt on the conscience and totalitarianism

In her early *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt speaks of the conscience in the context of totalitarianism in such a way that would suggest the conscience has great significance for politics. In particular, in her discussion of the concentration camps, Arendt demonstrates the way in which the conscience functions as a form of resistance in her larger account of the manner in which the camps aim to erase the political agency of its prisoners. She calls the camps "the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power."[2] Arendt argues that the purpose of the camps in totalitarian regimes is to eliminate spontaneity and transform the human personality into a mere thing lacking in the ability to begin anything

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 574.

new or act in a way that exceeds the control of the totalitarian system. As she puts it, "Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other."[3] Insofar as spontaneity remains a possibility, and human beings are anything but superfluous, anything more than exchangeable cogs in a machine, then total domination is unachievable.[4]

Arendt speaks of three essential steps in the attempt to reduce persons to mere reactionary things incapable of spontaneous action. First, is the killing of the juridical person. This is accomplished by putting certain categories of people outside of the protection of the law through the use of denationalization. At the same time, the concentration camps are placed outside of the normal penal system. The terrors enabled by demarcating a zone outside of the law into which persons can be placed is symbolized for Arendt by the fact that criminals (rather than the majority who have done nothing wrong either in their own eyes or in the eyes of those detaining them) constitute the aristocracy in the camps. As she writes, "They at least know why they are in a concentration camp and therefore have kept a remnant of their juridical person."[5]

The next step in the attempt to achieve total domination is the murder of the moral person in those placed inside the camps. "This is done in the main by making martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible."[6] In seeking to create conditions of solitude, where no gesture can bear social meaning, where no witnesses survive to bear testimony to those who have been killed before, the conditions necessary for martyrdom are undermined.

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[3] Ibid., 573.
[4] See Arendt's lectures entitled "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 58.
[5] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 588.
[6] Ibid., 591.

Furthermore, as Arendt strikingly puts it, in seeking to make their victims entirely anonymous, the operators of the concentration camps seek to take away even the individual's own death. In spite of this undermining of the juridical person, and the attempt to destroy the possibility of martyrdom or even a death of one's own, Arendt argues that the attack on the moral person can still be resisted insofar as the person's conscience remains intact. However, even this is sought out for destruction. "Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph," Arendt claims, "when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal."[7] So then, the moral and juridical person is destroyed by a disembedding from the social relations and structures that make possible both martyrdom and criminality (i.e. both free consent and free opposition is undermined), as well as the stability that comes from identifiable social categories. Destroying these possibilities throws the individual human being back on her own conscience, but this is where the domination would become total, because totalitarian terror destroys the conditions under which conscience adequately operates and makes it "utterly impossible" to do good.[8]

Arendt refers to this third step on the path to total domination, the undermining of the conscience, as the destruction of individuality, "of the uniqueness shaped in equal parts by nature, will, and destiny."[9] In the death of individuality we have the death of politics because of the death of spontaneity. As Arendt puts it, "For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events."[10] Only such lack of

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[7] Ibid., 592-593.
[8] Ibid., 593.
[9] Ibid., 596.
[10] Ibid., 596. Here we see indications of Arendt's important concept of "natality," which she will later develop more fully in *The Human Condition,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958). See also, John Kiess, *Hannah Arendt and Theology,* especially chapter 4, "'That a

spontaneity could make possible the dream/nightmare of totalitarian control. "Those who aspire to total domination must liquidate all spontaneity, such as the mere existence of individuality will always engender, and track it down in its most private forms, regardless of how unpolitical and harmless these may seem."[11] Human beings, to be model "totalitarian citizens," must be reduced to "bundles of reactions." This can only happen inside the camps.

The conscience and civil disobedience

Despite what might look to be a promising link between the conscience and politics given the former's preservation of the possibility of spontaneity, so crucial for Arendt's account of the political in her later writings, Arendt is nonetheless highly critical of the role of conscience in politics. In her 1970 essay, "Civil Disobedience," she argues that conscience is too subjective for arguments raised in its defense to be applied to civil disobedience.[12] Civil disobedients, she claims, are not appealing to moral imperatives or "higher laws," but rather their action comes from being bound together by a common opinion.[13] Without such grounding in common opinion, the door would be opened to disobedience by any individual for any reason.[14] Understood in this way, the counsels of the conscience are unpolitical. She notes that those who seek to ground civil disobedience in the citizen's moral relation to the law often turn to Socrates and Thoreau as examples. However, Arendt claims, Socrates never challenged the laws of the city, but only the judges. Likewise, Thoreau made his case not on the ground of his moral relation to the law as a citizen, but on the ground of his moral

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Beginning Be Made': Natality, Action, and the Politics of Gratitude" (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

[11] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 597.

[12] George Kateb argues, "This essay marked her abandonment of her earlier view that active civil disobedience is a mode of the politics of conscience," *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Oxford: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 98.

[13] Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," in *Crises of the Republic* (London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1972), 55.

[14] Ibid., 56-57. She writes, "…the anarchic nature of divinely inspired consciences, so blatantly manifest in the beginnings of Christianity, cannot be denied," 66.

obligation to his individual conscience. In both cases, it was not concern for changing the world or the laws that drove the "conscientious objectors," but rather a concern with the integrity of the self.

At the end of the day, Socrates could not obey the laws because it would mean being unable to live with himself. But, Arendt insists, there are two difficulties with the argument for not doing something that you will not be able to live with when applied to political or legal considerations. First, the dictates of conscience cannot be generalized, because what may bother my conscience may not bother another's. The conscience is private, unworldly, and about "the relation between me and myself."[15] Second, it presupposes an "innate faculty of telling right from wrong" linked with self-interest, neither of which can be taken for granted.[16] The truths of conscience are only self-evident to those who think, but for those "who don't have intercourse with themselves, they are not self-evident, nor can they be proved. Those men—and they are the 'multitudes'—can gain a proper interest in themselves only, according to Plato, by believing in a mythical hereafter with rewards and punishments."[17] Again, the problem is the solitariness and subjectivity of conscience, made even more problematic by the secularization of belief and the absence of concern for the afterlife. In contrast to the inwardness of conscience, Arendt understands civil disobedience, in the words of Danielle Petherbridge, "as an intersubjective act that is played out in the public political sphere."[18] Understood in this manner, then, civil disobedience is a *political*

[15] Ibid., 84.
[16] Ibid., 64-65.
[17] Ibid., 63-64.
[18] Danielle Petherbridge, "Between thinking and action: Arendt on conscience and civil disobedience," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42.10 (2016): 976; cf. Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," 96.

act carried out by organized minorities rather than "a matter of individuals pitting themselves subjectively and conscientiously against the laws and customs of the community."[19]

Conscience and thinking

In her lectures, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," "Thinking and Moral Considerations," and *The Life of the Mind,* Arendt spells out her understanding of the relationship between conscience and the political in further detail.[20] The first point she makes about the conscience, in line with her treatment in "Civil Disobedience," is that its dictates are only negative. The rules of conscience do not set out principles on which action can be taken, but rather they set forth boundaries that are not to be crossed. Even Socrates's inner voice, his famous *daimonion,* only told him when to abstain from acting, but never positively urged him to take action.[21]

In addition to offering only prohibitions, the standard view of conscience is unpolitical for Arendt in that it is deeply subjective and therefore unreliable. She writes, "Conscience supposedly is a way of *feeling* beyond reason and argument and of knowing through sentiment what is right and wrong."[22] Although she is happy to grant that people do have such feelings, they are in no way reliable indicators of what is, in fact, right or wrong. However, she does not want to just hand things over to common opinion or custom, for these, neither, are necessarily reliable indicators of what is right and wrong.[23] Again, it appears that she is after something intersubjective, like common sense as Kant understands it, which she

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[19] Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," 98.
[20] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 159-89; Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (London: Harcourt, 1978).
[21] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 103. Cf. "Civil Disobedience," 63.
[22] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 107.
[23] As Richard Bernstein puts this point, "Mores, customs, habits, rules, traditional standards, could all change 'effortlessly.' They provided no barrier to committing evil deeds. This was the frightening 'lesson' of twentieth-century totalitarianism," *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 165.

argues "is neither objective and universal nor subjective, depending on personal whim, but intersubjective or representative."[24] It grows out of intercourse with people and fits us into community.[25]

The problematic of the conscience and politics began for Arendt with her coverage of Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. She says that she was struck by Eichmann's apparent total inability to think, his inability to consider things from the standpoint of somebody else,[26] and she wondered whether this inability to think coincided with the "disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience."[27] She held that Eichmann did, in fact, have a conscience, but, as Petherbridge puts it, "it had apparently become an instrument of absolute conformity and normalization or habituation."[28] Eichmann's conscience had proved itself to be a receptacle of indoctrination rather than a faculty of morality or judgment. Therefore, "In opposition to

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[24] Ibid., 141. Petherbridge argues that Arendt tries to preserve a space for critical thought independent of public opinion and habituation, but that there then needs to be "an orientation of thinking and conscience around a core value that is not purely subjective." She suggests that Arendt hints at friendship as a value that might fill this role. "Between thinking and action," 975.

[25] Another way to put this point would be to say that Arendt seeks to avoid both the mere conformity of habituation and the tether-less subjectivity of the conscience. As Arne Johan Vetlesen writes, "Either one wholly affirms the solitary path, that of developing authenticity, responsibility and the like *by way of* leaving the mass and its noise behind (in more or less Nietzschean style); or one relinquishes the model of solitariness altogether and affirms a mode of existence that is social, meaning intersubjectively structured (Hegel) from beginning to end. The remarkable thing about Arendt is that she rejects both alternatives. For her, no such either/or is involved. Instead, what is required of the individual is that he or she, by trial and error, develop his or her peculiar *modus vivendi* between the two…" Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27.5 (2001), 30-31.

[26] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 49.

[27] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 160; cf. *Life of the Mind*, 3-5. Dana Villa argues that Eichmann's conscience is the central theme of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. See Villa, "Conscience, the Banality of Evil, and the Ideal Representative Perpetrator," in *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays in the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 42.

[28] Petherbridge, 972. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* Arendt argues that any crisis of conscience Eichmann may have felt regarding the Final Solution was assuaged at the 1942 Wannsee Conference when he saw that all his superiors, who were members of "respectable society," supported it. She writes, "His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which 'good society' everywhere reacted as he did. He did not need to 'close his ears to the voice of conscience,' as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a 'respectable voice,' with the voice of respectable society around him," 126.

Eichmann, Arendt…comes to define *conscience as a 'by-product of thinking'* and consequently it is then the activity (or faculty) of thinking that becomes the key to understanding her view of conscience."[29]

Arendt sets out the distinction between the "accustomed way" of viewing conscience and her understanding of it as a "by-product of thinking" by drawing on the examples of Socrates and Shakespeare's *Richard III*. She says that the usual view of conscience "was the voice of God before it became the *lumen naturale* of Kant's practical reason."[30] However, what Richard III refers to as his conscience, is what Socrates refers to as the "other fellow" who waits for him at home when he returns at night alone.[31] In other words, the conscience for Socrates' refers to his inner dialogue partner, with whom he never wants to be out of sorts. As Arendt puts it, conscience's "criterion for action will not be the usual rules, recognized by multitudes and agreed upon by society, but whether I shall be able to live with myself in peace when the time has come to think about my deeds and words."[32] And both Socrates' inner dialogue partner and Shakespeare's conscience provide only negative proscriptions, they only prohibit me from acting in a way that will make it impossible for me to live with myself later.[33] As Shakespeare puts it, the conscience "fills a man full of obstacles."[34] It is, Arendt insists, properly understood as a side effect of thinking, which only serves to prevent action, and as such it remains at the margins of social and political life, becoming politically consequential only in times of crisis.[35]

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[29] Ibid., 973. Emphasis in the original.
[30] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 186.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Arendt, *Life of the* Mind, 191. On this point, see Petherbridge, 973.
[33] "This conscience, unlike the voice of God within us or the *lumen natural*, gives no positive prescription (even the Socratic *daimon*, his divine voice, only tells him what *not* to do)…" Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 190.
[34] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 187.
[35] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 192.

During times of political emergency, the political significance of thinking comes into play. It provides a cessation to action and creates the space wherein judgment can occur.

> At these moments, thinking ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters. When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. The purging element in thinking, Socrates' midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions—is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man's mental abilities. It is the faculty to judge particulars without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules.[36]

So, then, for Arendt, thinking, and thus the conscience, are indirectly of political relevance in that they free the faculty of judgment which is called upon in times of political turmoil when general rules and habituation fail. And as she says in more than one place, this faculty of judgment may serve to prevent catastrophe "when the chips are down."[37] But this means that the consideration of conscience "does not come up politically except in 'boundary situations.'"[38] And again, she argues that thinking rescues judgment, but that only a very "few" engage in this activity, so it does not serve as a site of the enablement of political agency for the "multitude."[39]

The conscience in Luther: pastoral care of the conscience as enablement of political agency

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[36] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 188-89; cf. *Life of the Mind*, 192-93.
[37] Ibid., 189. Cf. Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 79.
[38] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 193.
[39] Sheldon Wolin finds a problematic anti-democratic impulse in Arendt precisely in that she overlooks the relevance of the religious instruction of the conscience in the history of Western politics. He writes, "The historical contribution of Western religions to the political education of ordinary and poor people is almost impossible to exaggerate. Religion supplied a first-hand experience in what it meant to be a member of a community…to refuse to conform for conscience's sake, and, not least, to found new communities." "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political," in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds., *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 300. Richard Bernstein also argues that Arendt's turn to "thinking" is problematic. For example, in the case of Heidegger, he argues that thinking did not free Heidegger's faculty of judgment and deliver him from false decisions concerning the Nazis. Bernstein worries that Arendt never actually justifies her claim that thinking has a liberating effect on the faculty of judgment. See his *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 174-77.

Luther and the conscience

After the famous story of the "posting" of the 95 theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg, perhaps the next most enduring image of Martin Luther in the popular Western imagination is his "stand" at the Diet of Worms in 1521, where he refused to recant of his teaching and writings, purportedly saying, "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."[40] Here the groundwork was laid for what was to become the legacy of the Reformer as the heroic defender of the independence of the individual conscience against the heteronomous forces of political and religious tyranny.

During the Enlightenment, this view of Luther became particularly prominent. As Martha Ellen Stortz writes, "Since the eighteenth century [Luther's] words represent conscience's declaration of independence from popes, councils, constraints of tradition, or anything else that rubs against the grain of integrity. Indeed, Enlightenment secularists valorized Luther, reading him as if he had internalized Kant's command" '*Sapere aude*!' "Dare to know!'"[41] More recently, the stand has also been read negatively by those who place the Enlightenment within the context of a larger narrative of decline, and is seen as a portent for the unpolitical subjectivist inward turn to the atomistic self and away from the world and responsibility for common life and the common good that is said to be characteristic of modernity.[42] As such, it would seem that Luther's notion of the conscience proves Arendt's

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[40] Quoted in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521,* trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 1985), 460.

[41] Martha Ellen Stortz, "*Solus Christus* or *Sola Viscera?* Scrutinizing Lutheran Appeals to Conscience," *Dialog* 44.3 (Summer 2005), 147.

[42] For a historical consideration of both the valorization and villainizing of Luther's appeal to conscience at Worms, see Michael G. Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 1-6. Edward Andrew notes that Luther's notion of the conscience has often been claimed as source of modern subjectivism, *Conscience and Its Critics: Protestant Conscience, Enlightenment Reason, and Modern Subjectivity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 4.

point that it is too subjective a site to reliably turn to for the empowerment of genuine political action.

However, this reading of Luther's view of the conscience fails to do justice to the way in which he understood the responsibility of the pastoral office for instructing the conscience. In turning to his 1531 *Warning to His Dear German People*, we witness Luther's performance of the instruction of consciences by means of teaching both the law and the gospel, to the end of freeing the political agency of those who are unduly burned by their consciences, while simultaneously seeking to put up a barrier against those who would run roughshod over the law and the achievements of the Reformation in tyrannical fashion. Positively, Luther sees freedom from the terrors of conscience as enabling free and spontaneous action, and therefore politics understood in Arendt's sense,[43] while negatively, the conscience serves as a potential check and hindrance to the committal of political evils beyond its role in Arendt's account. In both cases of enablement and prohibition, however, the key is that consciences be properly instructed according to the Word of God.

Luther's insistence that consciences must be instructed suggests an understanding of the conscience that is less subjective and therefore more politically significant than Arendt's account of the conscience. Further, when read alongside of Arendt's insight into the nature and meaning of genuine political action, Luther's account of the conscience demonstrates how pastoral care of the soul can be understood as an act of empowering the political agency of those cared for against the oppression of those who would seek to subject the conscience to violence. In this way, Luther manages to utilize the pastoral office to take a stand against political tyranny without overstepping the bounds of the office as he understands it. In so

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[43] In "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther argues that those who have the good conscience characteristic of faith do all "works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God," 359. In *Luther's Works 31: Career of the Reformer I*, Harold J. Grimm ed. and W.A. Lambert trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957). Hereafter, *Luther's Works* cited as LW.

doing, he demonstrates acute awareness of another shared concern with Arendt, namely, a concern for the danger of the politicization of all of human life and for preserving the means for resisting such false politicization. However, unlike Arendt, he does not push conscience onto the margins serving as politically relevant only in "boundary situations," but instead embeds it inside the larger practice of instruction such that the naturally politically efficacious element of the pastoral role comes to the fore, without falsely "politicizing" the pastoral office in the sense of either subverting it to the service of the state or suggesting its superiority vis-à-vis legitimate political authority.

The conscience in Luther's Warning to His Dear German People

The occasion for Luther's *Warning to His Dear German People* was the breakdown of negotiations at the Diet of Augsburg and Emperor Charles V's declaration of a *Recess* in September 1530. According to the terms of the *Recess* the evangelicals had six months to accept the Catholic position as articulated in the *Confutatio Pontificia*, which was the Catholic response to, and refutation of, the Augsburg Confession drafted by the Lutherans. Specifically, the *Recess* declared that the emperor would seek a general council to decide the question of faith, and in the meantime the old practices would be restored, while the evangelicals were to cease prostelytizing and religious publication. If the Protestants refused to accept the terms of the *Recess* within the six months, they could expect the emperor to use force in order to obtain compliance.[44]

In the *Warning*, Luther is hopeful that violence will not come; in fact, he trusts that the whole matter is in God's hand and that God will prevent it. However, he says, as though speaking in a dream in which there were no God, if the plans set forth in the *Recess* do

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[44] Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532,* trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 405-407 and Martin H. Betram, "Introduction," to "Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People" in *Luther's Works, Volume 47: Christian in Society IV,* ed. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 5-6.

proceed successfully, it will mean that either rebellion, or war, or both simultaneously will follow. However, Luther and his followers can face such a situation with confidence, "Since [their] conscience is clear and pure and assured in this matter, and that of the papists must be guilty and impure and filled with misgiving."[45] In fact, Luther's entire argument in the *Warning* revolves around the question of conscience.

Luther expressly states that he sees it as his duty as a teacher to "warn my dear Germans against the harm and danger threatening them and impart Christian instruction to them regarding their conduct in the event that the emperor, at the instigation of his devils, the papists, issues a call to arms against the princes and cities on our side."[46] He argues that unless he provides such warning, he will not be able to keep his own conscience unsullied. This means, however, that he faithfully execute his pastoral role of instructing the consciences of those under his care with regards to the developing political situation.
He begins to do so by assuring his followers that they have three great advantages over and against their opponents. It is worth noting that the first two both refer to characteristics that Arendt focuses on in her description of the moral person's recourse in the face of domination, namely, martyrdom and the conscience. In highlighting these advantages, we could say that Luther is seeking to shore up and strengthen the moral person of his followers in order to enable their judgment and action in the face of the impending potential threat.

The first advantage the Lutherans enjoy, then, is the potential for martyrdom. Quoting Matthew 5:10: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," Luther argues that death will not be a harm for his followers and him because they are convinced of the truth of God's Word that the persecuted are blessed. The papists themselves even confess that

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[45] Martin Luther, "Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People" in *Luther's Works, Volume 47: Christian in Society IV*, ed. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 15. Hereafter referred to as LW 47.
[46] LW 47: 29.

the teaching of the Lutherans is in accord with Scripture, and therefore the Lutherans can rest assured in the certainty of the divine promise. Luther and his followers can face the impending political crisis with confidence given their confidence that God is true to God's Word.

This leads to the second, and for Luther, the primary practical advantage that the evangelicals have over their opponents, which again is a clear and assured conscience over against the guilty and impure consciences of the papists.[47] In practical terms, this means that the enemies will be unable to pray or invoke God's name for their cause, because "their conscience is too burdened."[48] Meanwhile, the Lutherans will be able to both invoke God's name and pray that God will give their opponents "a despondent, timid, and craven heart when on the battlefield, to prick the conscience of one and then another and prompt them to say: Alas! Alas! I am engaged in a perilous war."[49] Lest his opponents not take this disadvantage seriously, Luther taunts them, "Let him who does not know what it means to wage war with a bad conscience and despondent heart try it now."[50] Luther stresses the politically enabling effect of the good conscience on the one hand, while stressing the paralyzing effect of the burdened conscience on the other. Here he shows a sensitivity to the link between conscience and action characteristic of Arendt in her early *Origins of Totalitarianism.*

Finally, the third advantage the Lutherans enjoy is that in this case they will not have Luther raising his pen to call for a cessation of resistance. In fact, on the contrary, Luther is writing the *Warning* in part to clear the consciences of those who may act in self-defense,

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[47] In his 1526 "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," Luther writes, "For whoever fights with a good and well-instructed conscience can also fight well. This is especially true since a good conscience fills a man's heart with courage and boldness," LW 46:92.

[48] LW 47: 17. For the great significance Luther places on prayer for battles of this sort, see Johannes Heckel, *Lex Charitatis: A Juristic Disquisition on Law in the Theology of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. Gottfried G. Krodel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 18.

leaving it to them to make the proper judgment, without himself calling for armed resistance. He writes:

> …it is not fitting for me, a preacher, vested with the spiritual office, to wage war or to counsel war or incite it, but rather to dissuade from war and to direct to peace as I have done until now with all diligence…However, our enemies do not want to have peace, but war. If war should come now, I will surely hold my pen in check and keep silent and not intervene as I did in the last uprising.[51]

Again, Luther stops short of justifying armed resistance, as he says it is not in accordance with his office to do so, but at the same time he holds that it is not in accordance with his office to judge those who do act in self-defense in this case, and he does not want to hinder those who do so act with the burdens of the conscience. [52] As he puts it, "I will not reprove those who defend themselves against the murderous and bloodthirsty papists, nor let anyone else rebuke them as being seditious, but I will accept their action and let it pass as self-defense."[53] More specifically, Luther wants to free the consciences of those under his care for action, as he does not want to "leave the conscience of the people burdened by the concern and worry that their self-defense might be rebellious."[54] He insists that it is important to get these terms right if the respective consciences of both sides are to be adequately instructed in terms of either being appropriately assured or appropriately terrified. He writes:

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[51] Ibid.

[52] It is worth noting that Luther limits his role to his vocational office, while carrying out that role in such manner that he leaves it to the judgment of others to carry out their particular roles and offices. Here, one might note the consistency between Luther's practice of instruction in a situation leaning toward civil disobedience and what Kyle B.T. Lambelet has called messianic models of the higher law. Messianic models seek obedience to divine law that is not codified. Lambelet contrasts this with natural law models and argues, "The danger for civil disobedience practiced in the mode of natural law is when it becomes obligatory for participants regardless of station," "Lover's of God's Law: The Politics of Higher Law and the Ethics of Civil Disobedience," *Political Theology* 19.7 (2018), 607. Luther allows freedom of judgment in light of vocation, a freedom made possible and protected against antinomianism by the eschatological orientation of the believer's conscience wherein the believer's assurance of conscience is grounded in the already complete work of Christ. Luther envisions the possibility of free response to a law that has already been fulfilled. As such, the relation of the conscience to the law is neither heteronomous nor autonomous.

[53] LW47: 19.

[54] Ibid.

> We must not let everything be considered rebellious which the bloodhounds designate as such. For in that way they want to *silence the lips* and *tie the hands* of the entire world, so that no one may either reprove them with preaching or defend himself with his fist, while they keep their mouth open and their hands free. Thus they want to frighten and ensnare all the world with the name 'insurrection,' and at the same time comfort themselves. No, dear fellow, we must submit to you a different interpretation and definition of that term. To act contrary to law is not rebellion; otherwise every violation of the law would be rebellion."[55]

Luther's language is quite telling here. He is worried that his followers will have their "lips" silenced and their "hands" tied. In other words, they will have their capacity for speech and deed taken from them, which is to say, they will have their political agency thwarted.[56] Further, against quietist interpretations of Luther, it is clear in this case that Luther acknowledges limits to the law and calls upon the political agency of the people in defense against unjust law, an extra-legal exercise of political agency that is nonetheless justified and therefore not to be described as "rebellion."

Having laid out the advantages enjoyed by the Lutherans, Luther then goes on to warn his "dear Germans" to refuse obedience to the emperor in the event that he issues a call to arms, stating that such obedience would place an unbearable burden on their conscience, while refusing to obey has the assurance of being in accordance with God's good will. Thus, Luther makes a case for the possibility of something like civil disobedience and he grounds it in appeals to the conscience.

Luther's "prophetic" instruction of consciences

How then is an understanding of the political significance of the conscience served by bringing together Arendt's account with Luther's practice of instructing consciences in his *Warning to His Dear German People*? To put a fine point on it, in one sense the two are quite agreed given that they are both ultimately concerned with freeing the faculty of judgment in

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[55] Ibid., 20. Emphasis mine.
[56] For the link between speech and deeds and the political see Arendt, *The Human Condition.*

the face of a political crisis. However, Luther understands the role of the conscience in the process of exercising judgment in a far less subjective way than does Arendt, and he orients it by the Word of God, which fills the role of an intersubjective reality that Arendt hints at the need for but does not seem to be able to find.[57] So, like Arendt, Luther is concerned for the recovery of the possibility of genuine political life, in his case, a life freed from tyrannical papal and imperial ambitions. However, while Arendt emphasized the significance of the conscience for the empowerment of political agency in her early *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, after the Eichmann trial she began to distrust conscience in political matters given that she saw it as so easily corruptible given its highly subjective nature. This is why Luther's less subjective (one might say more intersubjective) account of the conscience as bound to an external word (*verbum externum*) is so helpful. It allows for recognition of the role conscience might play in enabling political agency, in accord with Arendt's early account, yet its tie into the Word via teaching and instruction means that it is not as open to the criticisms regarding subjectivity that characterize Arendt's later treatments, including her turn away from seeing the political significance of the conscience. In turning to an examination of the manner in which Luther tethers the conscience to an “external word” (*verbum externum*), we begin to see the full political significance of the pastoral role of instructing consciences. Arendt and Luther, perhaps surprisingly, agree regarding the contours of genuine political agency, but Luther's writings point to the site of the conscience as a site for enabling such agency in a manner that opens it to the "many" who hear the Word of God rather than the "few" who “think” in Arendt’s sense of the term. Thus, and perhaps even more surprisingly, Luther’s thought offers a more democratic account of political agency and judgment on this point.

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[57] Cf. note 24 above.

For Luther the conscience is always bound to something—in the case of the Christian to the Word of God. In being so bound, it is not necessarily anarchical as Arendt claims the Christian conscience to be. She argues that it is anarchic because it always commands obedience to God over human authorities, but God is subject to the interpretation of the individual. Luther, in his insistence that the Christian's conscience is bound to the Word of God, and not subjective interpretations of God's speech, provides an example of George Kateb's larger point that, "Arendt does not do this matter justice; she slights both the reference to scriptural authority and the frequently universalist claims present in assertions of Christian conscience."[58] Furthermore, as with Arendt, Luther agrees that the feelings of the conscience are wholly unreliable. As Randall Zachman articulates Luther's view, "If we judge the worship of God according to the feeling of the conscience, we will be led away from even the natural law to our own fabricated works."[59] Thus, the "natural" conscience is not only unreliable, but in fact is contrary to the Word of God.[60]

Given this emphasis on the Word of God, why then is Luther often charged with subjectivism and a move toward interiorization? Michael Baylor is surely correct in suggesting that it is "largely because Scripture itself is now generally viewed in a very different way than it was in the sixteenth century."[61] Luther held to a view of Scripture's authority being tied to its clarity and the certainty of its teaching. Without getting into questions of interpretation and hermeneutics, it is important to note the centrality of Luther's confession regarding the nature of the Word of God and its efficacy and power over its hearers if Luther's understanding of the conscience is not to be falsely characterized as

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[58] Kateb, *Politics, Conscience, Evil*, 98. Baylor argues that for Luther the conscience is neither self-sufficient nor self-contained, but rather needs a foundation outside of itself. Baylor, *Action and Person*, 218.

[59] Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 35.

[60] "Only the gospel, and not the feeling of the conscience, gives the proper interpretation of the law," ibid., 42.

[61] Baylor, *Action and Person*, 268.

subjectivist. In his dispute with Zwingli over the nature of the Lord's Supper, Luther stressed the active nature of the divine Word. He says of Christ word's as spoken into the present via Scripture, "So his word surely is not merely a word of imitation, but a word of power which accomplishes what it expresses."[62] As Oswald Bayer puts it, Luther's Reformational discovery was that "the verbal sign (*signum*) is itself the reality (*res*)."[63] The significance for our purposes here is that God gives Godself in God's Word as it is first encountered in the gathered church. Therefore, even the interpreters of Scripture are subject to the active and living power of Scripture as Luther understands it. The Word which encounters the church and the Spirit-indwelt believer in Scripture is the Word who created and who is the sovereign over history. As such, even the individual interpreter and her hermeneutical methodologies are placed under the promises and judgments of the Word to be interpreted—the interpreter is herself interpreted. This objectivity of the Word as a living and active subject destabilizes any attempt to capture Scripture under a pre-determined methodology, as well as resisting any merely subjective interpretation broken free from the larger interpretive community. The latter implication follows upon Luther's insistence that God always gives God's Spirit by means of the material and external.[64] He writes, "the Spirit cannot be with us except in material and physical things such as the Word, water, and Christ's body and in his saints on

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[62] LW 37:181.

[63] Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, eds. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 129.

[64] As the Large Catechism puts it: "The Holy Spirit must always work in us through the Word," *The Book of concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 438. In his "Against the Heavenly Prophets," Luther argues, "Now when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward facts should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him…" LW 40: 146.

earth."[65] By means of the Word of Scripture, both written and preached, Christ in the Spirit makes himself present to believers.[66] As such, the living and active presence of Christ and the public ecclesial setting are foregrounded in Luther's understanding of the relation of believers to Scripture.[67]

Given the boundedness of the conscience and the unreliability of its feelings, and the public and external nature of the Word for Luther, teaching is crucial for the proper functioning of the conscience. Luther holds that the conscience can both ignore true teaching or be enslaved by false teaching. In either case, the conscience comes to light not so much "as a power of autonomous self-legislation," but rather as "a power to receive instruction." And true instruction is only that which is based upon the Word of God.[68] It is for this reason that Luther gives so much attention to teaching and instructing consciences in countless letters, sermons and occasional writings.[69] In all of this, Luther is not concerned with providing abstract ethical principles that apply to cases, but rather he seeks to instruct the conscience such that those in his care can believe, think, and act out of genuine freedom and experience the gracious goodness of God in all areas of human life—political, economic, and ecclesial.[70] In his *Warning,* Luther articulates his fear that all of these things will be undermined if the

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[65] "That These Words…'This is my Body,' 1527," LW 37.96.

[66] "For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels, 1521," LW 35:121.

[67] For a fuller account of Luther's theology of the Word, see my *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), chapter 2, "The Word of God in Luther's Political Theology."

[68] Zachman, 28. Baylor notes that the scholastics would have agreed about the need for an instructed conscience given that humans are not autonomous: "His conscience, like his reason in general, needs to be educated in the divine will that has been revealed to him," *Action and Person,* 109. Kimberley Brownlee perhaps offers something of a contemporary secular analogue to this understanding of the conscience. She is careful not to associate the conscience with the voice of God, but rather argues that the conscience must be cultivated such that it becomes knowledgeable and responsive. See her *Conscience and Conviction: The Case for Civil Disobedience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52.

[69] Stortz, 150.

[70] For a full treatment of this point see Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: *Luther's Doctrine of the Three Estates*," in *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 90-118.

provisions of the *Recess* are allowed to stand. He argues that with the Reformation's restoration of true teaching, the people—young and old, men and women—know the catechism which teaches the real meaning of the gospel. And as a result of this instruction in the gospel, they have been instructed not only about worship of God in the sense of the first table of the Decalogue, but also about temporal government, marriage, life in the household, and economic relations.[71] It is at this point that we can see how Luther understands faithful exercise of the pastoral teaching office as being highly relevant not only for "spiritual" matters, but also for political and economic matters, given that the Word of God is efficacious and is the fundamental underlying reality sustaining the created world. Here is not an inflated sense of the pastoral office, but rather a deep confidence in the Word that does not return empty (Isaiah 55:11). As the Word goes forth from the pulpit, it necessarily will speak to and form political and economic life via its active instructing and shaping of its hearers. In the freedom that follows this encounter with the living Word, Luther's hearers are encouraged to exercise judgment in response to concrete realities rather than becoming tethered to principles subject to the kind of distortion one finds later in Eichmann's perverse appeal to Kant's categorical imperative.[72]

Given this description of Luther's understanding of the conscience, and the ways in which it differs from the Christian conscience as portrayed in Arendt's criticism, we are now in a position to make sense of Luther's performance of the instruction of consciences in his *Warning* in a manner that displays the political implications of such instruction. In the

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[71] LW 47: 52-53.

[72] Both Luther and Arendt are ultimately concerned with the exercise of judgment in the case of political particulars, and neither think that general *a priori* principles can do the work necessary for carrying out such judgment. Luther would worry that such principles come to serve the false imaginings of the human heart, while Arendt clearly shows the way that such principles can be monstrously disfigured when she analyses Eichmann's claim to be acting consistently with Kant's moral philosophy in carrying out orders on behalf of the Third Reich. See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 135-138.

Warning he famously takes on the mantle of the "prophet of the Germans."[73] The title is significant in the light of the relation between the prophet and the conscience. In his *Lectures on First Timothy*, Luther writes, "It is the nature of all hypocrites and *false prophets* to create a conscience where there is none, and to cause conscience to disappear where it does exist."[74] As the "German prophet," we could say that Luther aims to achieve the opposite, and he does so by teaching both law and gospel. Luther's preaching resounds as law to the papal and imperial forces such that their conscience will be stricken, and simultaneously his preaching is of evangelical freedom to those who would resist imperial encroachment. His preaching thus takes the two-fold form of the Word of God, which kills and makes alive. While this logic and grammar is typically read in individualistic and soteriological terms, what we see in the *Warning* is Luther utilizing this same grammar, but in a social and political register. Just as the Word that kills and makes alive is applicable to individual souls, the same two-fold operation of the Word is at play in the divine governance of history as the Word is preached from the mouths of faithful pastors. Luther is confident that the Word will ultimately determine the outcome in the aftermath of Augsburg, and as a "prophet" he is simply proclaiming what must be insisted upon given the nature of the divine Word. Hence, he insists that his opponents will become fainthearted, while he calls on those who have been converted to the gospel to persevere in what they have been taught according to the Word, lest they burden themselves with the guilty and unsure conscience that would necessarily follow from obeying and complying with the demands of the *Recess.* At the same time, he is insistent on preventing his opponents from burdening those who would act in self-defense with the dictates of conscience, with creating "a conscience where there is none." And in this

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[73] LW47: 29.

[74] LW 28:311, quoted in Randal Zachman, "Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and Søren Kierkegaard*," Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 10.12 (Dec 2010), https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/235 (last accessed 31.12.2018). Emphasis mine. Cf. Zachman, *Assurance of Faith*, 27.

way, he shares Arendt's Socratic-Shakespearian understanding of the conscience not so much as a call to action, but as "that which fills a man full of obstacles." Precisely in this way, he does not overstep the bounds of his office by calling for armed resistance, but neither does he tie the hands of those who may judge that the crisis requires such action.

Conclusion: The conscience and political agency

It is in the practice of instructing consciences such that space is left open for the exercise of judgment that Luther's understanding of the conscience in its connection to politics shows its greatest similarity to Arendt's understanding of conscience as a side effect of thinking. In *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, Luther defines the conscience: "For conscience is not the power to do works, but to judge them. The proper work of conscience (as Paul says in Romans 2 [:15]), is to accuse or excuse, to make guilty or guiltless, uncertain or certain. Its purpose is not to do, but to pass judgment on what has been done and what should be done, and this judgment makes us stand accused or saved in God's sight."[75] Ultimately, however, as the context in Romans makes clear, what frees or enslaves the conscience according to Luther is the law and the certainty of judgment and the gospel that proclaims that judgment has already occurred in Christ in whom forgiveness is found. And it is the assurance that there is a God who is both merciful and just that enables one to enter the situation with the confidence necessary to act (grounded on the promise of forgiveness) without falling into the arrogance that is tyranny (grounded on the reality of divine judgment). For this reason, Luther ends his *Warning* by reminding those on both sides of God's judgment. "Henceforth," he writes,' "I shall let Him judge who will, must, and also is able to do so. He will not tarry, nor will he fail."[76] In freeing conscience, in taking this

[75] LW 22:298. Cited in Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 20-21.
[76] LW 47:55.

ultimate power of determining guilt or innocence out of human hands, Luther re-opens the horizon to the possibility of free human action and the promise of politics by reaffirming the boundedness of human life.

What does the loss of expectation of divine judgment imply for our time if it is the hope and fear of judgment that makes possible free human action and ensures the freedom of the human conscience which stands as the penultimate bulwark against the tyrannical drive to politicize all of life? It is precisely in this loss of a sense of divine judgment that Arendt sees a great danger in modern politics. She writes:

> Nothing perhaps distinguishes modern masses as radically from those of previous centuries as the loss of faith in a Last Judgment: the worst have lost their fear and the best have lost their hope. Unable as yet to live without fear and hope, these masses are attracted by every effort which seems to promise a man-made fabrication of the Paradise they had longed for and of the Hell they had feared.[77]

Arendt insists that given the loss of the hope and fear that attended the Last Judgment, modern humanity cannot reproduce "the idea of an absolute standard of justice combined with the infinite possibility of grace."[78] And this means that instead, humanity comes to believe that everything is possible, which Arendt argues, "is the fundamental belief of totalitarianism."[79] The belief that everything is humanly possible, that there is no hope or fear of a transcendent judgment outside of our own, means being thrown back in upon ourselves.

Luther found the only way out of this dilemma of being thrown back in upon oneself was to be addressed by a trustworthy external Word that instructs the conscience. According to Luther, attentiveness to this Word warns against the danger of confusing the institutions of church, government, and the home economy, and aiming to hold them all together in singular

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[77] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 585.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 573.

human rule, much as Luther sees the papacy seeking to do in his own time. This is a refusal to live under God's own ordering of the world. But such refusal is to undermine both individuality and sociality, it is to undermine the possibility of spontaneous joint action that arises from the irreducible individuality of the human creature. In instructing the conscience while remaining bound to the limits of the pastoral office, Luther seeks to maintain the integrity of the divinely instituted forms of life—*politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*—distinguishing the three and recognizing their proper limits and boundaries, without thereby separating them. This can be seen with particular clarity in Luther's practice of pastoral care in his *Warning*, which is at the same time a practice of empowering the political agency of those under his care against the oppression of those who would seek to subject the conscience to violence. But the entire practice is dependent upon a basic faith that a just and merciful God judges and acquits, and that we can hear the Word of such a God. Without such faith, there can be no hope, and therefore no politics as Luther understands it. Politics will, instead, be made to bear human fears and hopes in a quite different and unbounded manner, a manner that Arendt diagnosed as leading logically to totalitarianism. Can we hear such an external Word again in our time? The realization of our hopes for a just democratic politics may require that we do.

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