

**Zionism on the Moon: Modern Lessons from the Conquest  
of Space and the Jewish State in Arendtian thought**  
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*[O]nly when we recognize the human background against which recent events have taken place, knowing that what was done was done by men and therefore can and must be prevented by men — only then will we be able to rid the world of its nightmarish quality.*

—Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish State*.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will engage in an interpretive, comparative analysis of Hannah Arendt's conception of the Space Race and modern science and her conceptualization of Zionism and its framework. The central argument is that Arendt's work places the inner workings of the Space Race and Zionism on a foundation of alienation: alienation from the world, from the earth, from the human and from the plural. Her conception of the Space Race will be treated at times more broadly as a representation of modernity and earth alienation. Through this examination, Arendt's position remains emblematic of her broader work; we must realize that we are fundamentally a part of the world we inhabit. To be human is to be among the many, the different; it is to be free through action and reflexive thought. We can only rid the world of its 'nightmarish quality' if we resist the modern alienation that prevails in all domains of the modern world, and truly accept and embrace the human condition of the plural.

Living in the modern world today is above all defined by what she calls *world* and *earth alienation*. Both have their origins in the scientific foundations of the modern age, the age of science spanning the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century. *World alienation* entails a radical isolation in which we "either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass. For a mass-society is nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who are still related to one another but have

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt. *The Jewish State* in *The Jewish Writings*. Schocken 2008. pp.384

lost the world once common to all of them.”<sup>2</sup> The conception of being in the world—or worldliness—takes on multiple connotations for Arendt but can be understood in the basic sense as an existential human condition. As Roessler notes, in this first sense, it signifies our reliance on the objectivity of things to accommodate us to life on earth. In a second sense, worldliness denotes the splendour of the public realm. It is the quality of politics, of concerted action, which is only possible under the condition of plurality.<sup>3</sup> Arendt illustrates her conception of what modernity really means: bureaucratic administration, anonymous labour, and elite domination. It means the emergence of totalitarian forms of government as a result of the institutionalization of terror and violence.<sup>4</sup> History as a “natural process” has substituted history as a fabric of actions and events. Homogeneity and isolation erode plurality and dissipate freedom<sup>5</sup> in turn.

*Earth alienation* is this attempt to transcend our earthliness and escape the confines of the planet. This new form of alienation, she argues, developed in parallel with the progress of instrumental sophistication in physics and mathematics.<sup>6</sup> Thus, she’ll ask how the rise of science in the modern age leads an alienated humanity to turn away from the earth; to alienate ourselves from the world that we humans have created. What happens when we increasingly acquire the scientific and technological ability to remake not only parts of our world but the entire world? Sputnik and the sending of satellites into space represent for Arendt this desire to escape the Earth. This drive strives to break the bounds of our earthliness, to free ourselves from all those earthly limitations—our bodies and our human minds—and move into a kind of universal intelligence and universal life that would be free from the perils of earthly living.

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt. *Between Past and Future*. Penguin Classics. 2006 pp. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Roessler. *The Concept of World Alienation in Hannah Arendt*. Arendt Studies 2022. Pp. 6

<sup>4</sup> Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 7th ed. Ohio: Meridian, 1962

<sup>5</sup> Freedom here can be understood as the participation in public affairs and the decision-making process rather than passively accepting the dictates of political power. It is the ability to act in ways that are surprising, unpredictable, different—in other words, human.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958. pp. 262.

Fundamentally, the human condition is characterized by what Arendt calls the *Vita Activa*, or the active life.<sup>7</sup> The first ‘level,’ we might call it, is *labour*, which refers to our activity in terms of biological processes, creating and sustaining life, and tending to our physical needs. The second is *work*, which is activity in terms of the life of humans, the things that we create, the sort of environments or *worldliness* that we establish. The third is *action*. Humans undertake the life of action as a collective, and both the life of thinking and the life of politics are fundamentally part of this domain; action is the political activity par excellence. The very quintessence of this conception of the human condition is the earth.<sup>8</sup> By this, she means that only on earth can man live without artifice. We do not need oxygen pumped into our bodies. We are organically alive on earth like animals. This *living* is part of who we are. We exist and keep existing according to chance and things beyond our control. It's this chanciness that is part of our earthliness. Yet humans are different from animals insofar as we are artificing; we make the world we live in, and yet we are connected to the rest of living beings insofar as we are alive like all other animals. This split ability is the seed of human freedom.

Yet with the rise of technology, along with our desire to control and increasingly program our lives, this animalistic aspect of human life is increasingly lost to its artificing counterpart. We increasingly lose our connection to life, earth, and the animalistic part of human nature and seek to become simply a human creation. Arendt writes that “it has been the glory of modern science that it has been able to emancipate itself completely from all such anthropocentric, that is, truly humanist concerns,”<sup>9</sup> meaning, modern science seeks the reason behind the reason, the cause behind the cause and seeks to go beneath. Science turns us away from our earthly, human, sensible reasons. It does not give us a human experience of the world, and we must renounce

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid pp.7

<sup>8</sup> *The Human Condition*, pp.2.

<sup>9</sup> *Between Past and Future*. pp. 260

ordinary common sense in order to learn the scientific truth. She writes that “ the point of the matter is, of course, that modern science – no matter what its origins and original goals – has changed and reconstructed the world we live in so radically that it could be argued that the layman and the humanist, still trusting their common sense and communicating in everyday language, are out of touch with reality.”<sup>10</sup>

Through the development of modern science, Sputnik—like test tube babies and other scientific activities—represents for Arendt the desire to live forever and to control our bodies, to create medicine that will allow us to live infinitely, all of which demonstrate a rebellion against the earthliness of human existence that it is given. We want to, in a sense, remake it. We want to live longer, healthier, and in a way in which we don't run into the limitations of our biology and our environment. To Arendt, this is what Sputnik is really about. This drive to leave behind our nature and become purely artificial is the most important drive of the 20th century in what she calls the modern age.<sup>11</sup> What human life has been for thousands of years is on the precipice of undergoing a fundamental transformation, and it may be that the human life we have going forward will be unlike the human life that came before it. Whether that is good or bad, she says we just have to stop to *think* about what we are doing.<sup>12</sup>

The internal mechanisms of Zionism and the Space Race function in remarkably similar ways for Arendt, and point in the same direction. The goal of both State Zionism and the conquest of space seems to be the creation of an artificial world, a new planet where we could live in a perfect environment, with perfect people, and perfect things. It is to develop an eternal biological entity, an everlasting organism: “a people without a country would have to escape to a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 262

<sup>11</sup> Arendt. *Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government*. 1953

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, *The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man in Between Past and Future*. 2006

country without a people; there the Jews, unhampered by relations with other nations, would be able to develop their own isolated organism.”<sup>13</sup> In an attempt to escape *eternal antisemitism*, State Zionists regarded the establishment of a Jewish state as an answer to the Jewish question.<sup>14</sup> Arendt narrows in on this belief—or fallacy—of an *eternal antisemitism*, unaffected by politics or historical development. She argues that what Herzl did not realize was “that the country he dreamt of did not exist, that there was no place on earth where a people could live like the organic national body he had in mind and that the real historical development of a nation does not take place inside the closed walls of a biological entity.”<sup>15</sup>

The aforementioned conceptualization of modern science, in regard to the conquest of space and world alienation, reverberates loudly within the mechanics of this fallacy. It is this desire to finally escape the earth's and our bodies' eternal hostility—to go to “the moon.” In this fallacy, Jewish history as a fabric of actions and events is reduced to a natural, unchangeable process. Arendt writes that “nothing else mattered: differences in class structure, differences between political parties or movements, between various countries or various periods of history did not exist for Herzl. All that did exist were unchanging bodies of people viewed as biological organisms mysteriously endowed with eternal life; these bodies breathed an unchanging hostility toward the Jews that was ready to take the form of pogroms or persecution at any moment.”<sup>16</sup>

She argues that the drive to create a Jewish state came from a misreading of past political lessons. Rather than pursuing a new Jewish politics after World War II, State Zionists created a situation where Jews were dangerously isolated. In Arendt's work, isolation acts as a paralyzing force that threatens political life by making it impossible for individuals to come together, work

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<sup>13</sup> Arendt. *The Jewish State* in *The Jewish Writings*. pp. 382

<sup>14</sup> Arendt. *Antisemitism: Part One of The Origins of Totalitarianism 2021*. pp.7

<sup>15</sup> Arendt. *The Jewish Writings*. pp. 382

<sup>16</sup> Arendt. *The Jewish Writings*. pp. 382

together and pursue a common concern.<sup>17</sup> It eliminates plurality. Eternal Antisemitism replaces antisemitism from a political phenomenon shaped by historical events into one that is timeless and undying. Arendt shows that this “catastrophic end to the history of the Jews in Europe was neither accidental nor inevitable” but instead was the result of the complex history of Jewish-gentile relationships.<sup>18</sup> The key feature of Jewish history in the modern period for Arendt is the Jews' worldlessness, leading to a political blindness and misunderstanding of the implications of their own actions and those of their opponents.<sup>19</sup>

Arendt focused on the type of contemporary antisemitism that emerged with the spread of nation-states and became transnationalized with the growth of imperialism. As the ideological blaming of Jews, antisemitism cannot be understood by common-sense fallacies as such, but by an examination of the forms of government and the relationship of the Jew to government and society in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, which meant that when groups wanted to target Jews, they had a ready audience.<sup>20</sup> It was important, she argued, not to look upon the Jewish community as simply passive victims of this political antisemitism but as agents, meaning the ways Jews would interact with the outside community made a difference. State Zionism became an ideology because it assumed *eternal antisemitism* would be just that—eternal. Initially, they embraced it and thus came to, in a sense, need and even value it. The ideological embrace of antisemitism then became a necessary part of Zionism.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the Jews sought to escape its grasp by forming this new state where they would be safe; she writes, “they escaped to Palestine as one might wish to escape to the moon, to a region beyond the wickedness of the world. True

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<sup>17</sup> Arendt. *Ideology and Terror*.

<sup>18</sup> Ron H. Feldman. *The Jewish Writings*. pp. xlvi

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt. *Antisemitism*. pp.9

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Graubart. *Jewish Self-Determination beyond Zionism: Lessons from Hannah Arendt and Other Pariahs*. 2023

to their ideals, they established themselves on the moon; and with the extraordinary strength of their faith they were able to create small islands of perfection.”<sup>22</sup>

The Zionist ideal rings a familiar tune. The attempt to escape the world's perils rests on a foundation of worldlessness and an unearthly reality, an unhuman reality in that one must renounce one's plurality to become out of touch with the world and isolate oneself from it. She says that, from the outside, Herzl “sought a place inside reality into which the Jews could fit and where at the same time they could isolate themselves from it.”<sup>23</sup> Graubart outlines that the genuine goal of the Jews in Palestine is the building up of a Jewish homeland, which Arendt distinguishes from a Jewish State.<sup>24</sup> This goal, both argue, must never be sacrificed to the pseudo-sovereignty of a Jewish State. Arendt saw the creation of the Jewish state and what it represented to a decolonizing Arab world would make Israel’s position in the Middle East perpetually precarious.<sup>25</sup> This, in turn, would be used by the Jewish establishment to shut down Jewish dissent; In *To Save The Jewish Homeland* she wrote that “Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population secluded inside ever-threatened borders absorbed with physical self-defense to a degree that would submerge all of their interests and activities. The growth of a Jewish culture would cease to be the concern of the whole people. Social experiments would have to be discarded as impractical luxuries and political thought would center around military strategy.”<sup>26</sup> It is in this way that Israel has been a net source of conformity to Jewish life in the diaspora rather than the hope of cultural Zionism, which would be a

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<sup>22</sup> *The Jewish Writings*. pp. 349

<sup>23</sup> *The Jewish Writings*. pp. 384

<sup>24</sup> Graubart. *Jewish Self-Determination beyond Zionism*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Arendt. *The Jewish Writings*. Pp. 396

revitalization. Isolation makes it impossible for individuals to come together and act in concert. It denies our human condition and worldliness.<sup>27</sup>

Let us thus return back to Arendt's concern regarding science, the conquest of space and the human condition. She believes that “man's coming of age” has led to the resentment of everything given to him, even his own existence.<sup>28</sup> We resent the earth and the very fact that man is not the creator of the universe. Just as we believe we've become gods and are in control, we resent anything that shows our weakness. In this fundamental resentment, she says, we refuse to see that the world is beautiful, that there are rhymes and reasons in the given world. In his resentment of a world we no longer see as beautiful, man openly proclaims that anything is permissible and, beyond that, that anything is possible.<sup>29</sup> The alternative to this resentment is a “fundamental gratitude” for the few elementary things that are invariably given to us, such as life itself and the existence of man and the world.<sup>30</sup>

She concludes the *Origins of Totalitarianism* by saying that in the political sphere, this gratitude for the world insists that we are not in it alone. We can be reconciled with the variety of humanity and with the differences between human beings, which are daunting precisely because of the essential quality of the rights of all men and the responsibility that derives from them for all acts and misdeeds committed by people different from ourselves. By coming to understand that man was created with the power to procreate, we can realize that it is not one man but many who inhabit the earth. Plurality is at the forefront of Arendtian thought, thus, it comes as no surprise when it takes center stage in her critiques of both Zionism and Modern Science. The

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<sup>27</sup> Arendt. *Ideology and Terror*.

<sup>28</sup> Arendt. *The Origins Of Totalitarianism*. pp.438

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Roy T. Tsao. *Second Thoughts, New Beginnings: Notes on Arendt's Unmarked Itinerary from The Origins of Totalitarianism to The Human Condition*. 2007

creation of an artificial world is purchased at the cost of plurality as a fact of human existence. This fact of human life—that we live amongst others—must be fully fundamentally felt, experienced and embraced in the face of growing alienation to return to our fundamental human quality. In *the Jewish State*, she writes a passage which is worth including in full:

Only when we come to feel ourselves part and parcel of a world in which we, like everybody else, are engaged in a struggle against great and sometimes overwhelming odds, and yet with a chance of victory, however small, and with allies, however few—only when we recognize the human background against which recent events have taken place, knowing that what was done was done by men and therefore can and must be prevented by men—only then will we be able to rid the world of its nightmarish quality. That quality taken in itself and viewed from the outside—by people who consider themselves as cut off from the nightmarish world in principle and who are thus ready to accept the course of that world “realistically”—can inhibit all action and exclude us altogether from the human community.<sup>31</sup>

Plurality, yes, is dangerous and harrowing. It can be a threatening and demanding engagement and understanding of those who are meaningfully different from us as part of our common world. Yet, she writes, “Whatever else it may be, Palestine is not a place where Jews can live in isolation, nor is it a promised land where they would be safe from anti-Semitism. The simple truth is that Jews will have to fight anti-Semitism everywhere or else be exterminated everywhere.”<sup>32</sup> Without plurality, and instead retreating to isolation in the face of perceived eternal hostility, we craft a nightmare. As she explores the possibility of gratitude for plurality and this plurality as what makes human life glorious, its absence in the foundations of both these

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<sup>31</sup> *The Jewish Writings*. pp. 384

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 385

frameworks—perhaps due in part to a lack of reflexive thought<sup>33</sup>—is palpable. Arendt understands antisemitism and modern science as a political question to be addressed alongside other communities and peoples. Her idea of politics addresses questions of meaning and identity uniquely. As stated by Butler, Arendt is “more concerned with possibilities of political belonging that do not rely on established forms of individualism (...), freedom is not an attribute of individuals but an exercise and concerted action that is performed by a ‘we’ and which, in the exercise and performance, institutes that ‘we’ as the social condition of rights themselves.” Arendt emphasized that politics is the realm of human action and plurality, where freedom appears through the ‘we’ of action.<sup>34</sup>

For Zionism, the ignorance of the Arab dilemma, argues Sternhell, was chiefly because Israelis knew that this problem had no solution within the Zionist way of thinking. As further outlined by Said, peace between Israelis and Palestinians is complicated to imagine. One group claims they fought a war of liberation, leading to the establishment of their independence. The other asserts that their society was dismantled, with much of the population displaced.<sup>35</sup> This irreconcilable divide was evident to multiple generations of early Zionist leaders and thinkers, just as it was to the Palestinians themselves.<sup>36</sup> In the face of this seemingly irreconcilable plurality, Butler highlights Arendt’s support for a federalized structure in Palestine, where Jews

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<sup>33</sup> In *Thinking and Moral considerations* (1971), Arendt's claim is that thinking is entirely negative and undermines established customs and codes of conduct without replacing them with a positive doctrine. Plurality is an essential feature of the thinking activity and its relation to freedom and humanness, which are necessary conditions of all political life.

<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, *Performative Agency*. (2010). pp.158

<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, *The One-State Solution*. The New York Times, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Zeev Sternhell. *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State*. Princeton University Press. 1999

and Arabs would coexist as equals within a larger European federation.<sup>37</sup> This structure aimed to eliminate the significance of majority-minority dynamics while allowing each group to cultivate its own national culture. Simultaneously, Jewish-Arab councils, established from the village level upward, would promote close cooperation and mutual understanding. Arendt explained this approach sought to resolve the Jewish-Arab conflict at “the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness.”<sup>38</sup> Arendt rejected the homogeneous nation-state model in general, so for Zionism, this meant delinking Jewish self-determination from the state projects and finding new political models that would enable coexistence for multiple National groups.

Rather than the hope of cultural Zionism, which would be a revitalization, Israel became a net source of conformity to Jewish life in the diaspora as well as isolation; "In order to survive, they must break free from a past dominated by chance and take deliberate control of their future. The Zionist movement, and the kibbutzim in particular, hold significance not only for the Jewish people but for humanity as a whole. They show that, through collective action, even a dispersed people can create a thriving society. The so-called natural processes only lead to inevitable results when ‘man’ leaves the realm of politics.”

In *Hannah Arendt's challenge to Adolf Eichmann*, Butler raises the question: how does genuine thinking connect each "I" to a collective "we," such that destroying any part of humanity's plurality not only harms others but also undermines the very essence of the self—defined as intrinsically linked to that plurality—and the conditions necessary for thinking itself?<sup>39</sup> In a discussion of the banality of evil, she says that while individuals like Eichmann could conceive, formulate, and implement genocidal policies, such actions cannot truly be called

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<sup>37</sup> Judith Butler. *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. 5. Chater 5: Is Judaism Zionism? 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Arendt. To Save the Jewish Homeland in *The Jewish Writings*. 1948. p.400

<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler, *Hannah Arendt's challenge to Adolf Eichmann* The Guardian. 2010.

"thinking" in the reflective sense. For Arendt, having "intentions" meant engaging in reflective thought about one's actions as a political being, recognizing that one's life and thinking are inherently tied to the lives and thoughts of others. It is in this way that Arendt wants us to 'think about what we are doing.'

The *Conquest of Space* essay is her attempt to answer the question of whether man's conquest of space increased or diminished his stature. To answer this question is not a scientific activity. Scientists have no advantage over humanists in trying to answer the question of what happens to the dignity or stature of man in the age of science. It is an activity of thought, and in times of historical crisis, thought ceases to be a marginal affair. Undermining all established criteria and values prepares the individual to judge for themselves, rather than allowing himself to be dragged along by the actions and opinions of the majority. This is what she means by "thinking without a banister."<sup>40</sup> The fact that the models of the past no longer correspond to new realities is a problem and testifies not only to the importance of stability and precedence for our understanding, but also for our ability to communicate with each other, to find each other in the obscure. The endless novelty of contemporary events prolongs the inability to find a basis for understanding and communication. Alienation from the world is this radical isolation.

Through this, Arendt presents an account of conquest and colonialism as fundamentally flawed—whether it be of Palestine or of space. By engaging in the thinking activity, we realize we are plural, and conquest is rendered illegitimate as it goes against the fact of the human condition of living among many. One reason why genocide is radically impermissible in her thought is that we have no choice with whom we cohabit the earth. We must embrace and have a fundamental gratitude for pluralism to be free; we must act and think. Arendt's emphasis on thinking and plurality highlights the faults she perceives in modern science and Zionism. Both

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<sup>40</sup>Arendt. *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding*. Schocken, 2018.

lead us to become alienated from each other, from the world, from the earth, and ultimately from ourselves as humans. In the face of modernity, we must come to realize that we are fundamentally a part of the world we inhabit and act against radical isolation.

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