Chapter Five

Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Place: From Earth Alienation to Oikos

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Introduction

If we want to be at home on this earth, even at the price of being at home in this century, we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with its essence.

—HANNAH ARENDT, "Understanding and Politics" (1953)

Hannah Arendt was a highly unconventional, erudite, original, and independent political thinker, whose work spanned a range of subjects from the growth of banality and thoughtlessness in modern life to their expression in totalitarianism; from an examination of philosophical concepts such as authority, freedom, and judgment to their place in political phenomena like violence, civil disobedience, and revolution; and from biographical portrait of villain (Adolf Eichmann), heroine (Rahel Varnhagen), or friend (Karl Jaspers and Walter Benjamin) to historical assessment of Zionism, cultural alienation, and the civil rights movement. She is recognized widely as a thinker of subtle if controversial distinctions between, for example, work and labor; wealth and property; vita activa and vita contemplativa; the public, private, and social spheres; and force, violence, and power. Her work draws on an equally diverse and eclectic background including phenomenology (particularly Heidegger), fragmentary historiography, the German intellectual tradition, storytelling and journalistic techniques, and Greek and Roman philosophy.

Controversy was a hallmark of her life and her opus. Her preference for the American over the French Revolution, her defense of private property, and her critique of Marxism served to distance her from much of the traditional Left, while her support of workers' councils, admiration for participatory politics, and impassioned assaults on imperialism, bureaucracy, and mass culture alienated her from much of the orthodox Right. She has been viewed variously as conservative, radical, elitist, anarchist, and even antipolitical, though she refused on principle to found or join a school of thought or movement. "Social nonconformism," she once remarked, "is the sine qua non of intellectual achievement," and in this regard she both experienced and courted the role of pariah. Her writings, however, are marked by an intensity, if at times obscure, brilliance and by an unwavering commitment to the recovery of freedom in public life and the reclaimed capacity for political action, topics explored in The Human Condition, perhaps her most fundamental study.

Arendt's early uprootedness and her continued experience with the problem of modern homelessness found a second life in her writings, undoubtedly influencing her thinking on earth and world alienation. Briefly, she was born of Jewish descent in Hanover, Germany, in 1906; studied during the 1920s with three towering intellectuals, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Husserl; and then fled to France in 1933, where she was active in the anti-Nazi opposition and conducted an extensive inquiry into the origins of modern anti-Semitism, work later incorporated in her first major book, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951). In 1941, she emigrated to the United States, where she taught at the New School for Social Research (home to many exiled intellectuals), continued to probe and write about modern political culture from the perspective of classical political theory, and lived out the rest of her life. She died suddenly in 1975 while working on The Life of the Mind, a tripartite study of thinking, willing, and judging. In that work as in others, she speaks of the "condition of homelessness as being natural to the thinking activity," a philosophical phenomenon, or perhaps fact, which no doubt she was weighing against the political realities of apartheid (stateless persons), "blood and soil" ideology, imperialism and the drive for Lebensraum, as well as her own desire to overcome and articulate her feeling of Unheimlichkeit and to be at home in the world.

In this essay, I offer an historical and ecological perspective on Arendt's understanding of earth alienation, nature, and related matters and develop this discussion in a critical manner directed toward contemporary relevance. Though differing with selected aspects of Arendt's views, I find her political analysis and sincere attempts to bring us closer to feeling at home in an
increasingly fractured world, and on an ever-fragile earth, to be engaging, learned, and of lasting value.

Earth Alienation

Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?

—THOREAU, Walden

In the prologue to The Human Condition, Arendt writes of the launching in 1957 of the first satellite, an event, she asserts boldly, that is "second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom." With the projection of this man-made, earth-born, and once earthbound object into the depths of outer space, she locates both a symbolic and an historic step toward realizing the hubristic dream of "liberating" us from nature, biological necessity, and earthly "imprisonment." This desire to escape the earth (and our success in so doing) signifies to Arendt a fundamental rebellion against the human condition, of which the earth is the "very quintessence," and marks our departure into the universe and a universal standpoint taken deliberately outside the confines and conditions in which we have lived from our genesis. This monumental action, too, can be viewed as a prelude to and encapsulation of Arendt's own thinking about the realm of nature, for it is here that she establishes a stark distinction—or, more exactly, opposition—between earth and world and calls attention to an alienation which, she claims, we experience from both spheres. Arendt also shows an early concern with the subject of dwelling—on-the-earth and in-the-world—an activity she speaks of elsewhere as homelessness and rootlessness, and she signals a preference for turning toward or returning to an older conception of the natural and the political, namely, a Greek one. Thus, she announces her intention to "trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins." In the initial pages of The Human Condition, Arendt reveals a penchant for resorting to phenomenological, historical, and, later, etymological accounts of politics and "what we are doing" within and to the world and earth, and for employing spatial metaphors and descriptions in the process. In fact, the satellite which carries us from our home and earthly place into a cosmic space and new Archimedean point is merely the first such vehicle Arendt invokes to launch us into consideration of a politics of the spatial and placial. She examines public and private space, spaces of appearance (the poles) and places of disappearance (the death camps), the inner space and life of the mind, and outer space and its conquest by modern science and technology. In assessing such thoughts on nature and the earth and their relevance for contemporary ecological and political thought, it is necessary to situate her views historically by positioning them against the Greeks (to whom she looks), Marx (whom she criticizes), Heidegger (from whom she borrows), and the Frankfurt School and its heirs (whom she neglects). In this way, one can perhaps better measure her contributions and failings, her blindnesses and insights.

The phenomenon of earth alienation, as Arendt conceives of it, is an interesting but curious and problematic notion. It is typified strangely by an historical expansion of known geographic and physical space which, ironically, brings about a closing-in process that shrinks and abolishes distance. Earth alienation stands in contrast, though not complete opposition, to world alienation. Both originate, in her view, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Arendt, there were three great events which inaugurated the modern age and led to the withdrawal from and loss of a cultural rootedness in place and estrangement from the earth. First, the most spectacular event was the discovery of America and the subsequent exploration, charting, and mapping of the entire earth which brought the unintended result of closing distances rather than enlarging the n. It enabled humans to take “full possession of [their] mortal dwelling place” and to gather into a globe the once infinite horizons so that “each man is as much an inhabitant of the earth as he is of his own country.” Second, through the expropriation of church property, the Reformation initiated individual expropriation of land and wealth which, in turn, uprooted people from their homes. Third, the invention of the telescope, the least noticed but most important event, enabled humans to see the earth not as separated from the universe but as part of it and to take a universal standpoint in the process. From this bellwether moment, Arendt traces our ability to direct cosmic processes into the earth, the reversal of the historic privileging of contemplation over action, a resultant distrust of the senses, and a marked tendency on the part of science to dominate nature. The telescope, in short, “finally forced nature, or rather the universe, to yield its secrets.”

The roots of earth and world alienation seem to be related for Arendt, though two of them—the charting of the earth and the invention of the telescope—are more closely linked with her conception of earth alienation than the third. To these events, we can add the rise of Cartesian doubt, for with it our earthbound experience is called into question with the discovery that the Earth revolves around the sun, a phenomenon which is contrary to immediate sense experience. Cartesian doubt is marked by its universalizability, its ability to encompass everything (De omnibus dubitandum), and to leave the isolated mind alone in infinite, ungrounded space. Modern mathematics and particularly Cartesian geometry are also indicted because they reduce all that is not human to numerical formulas and truths. They free us from finitude, terrestrial life, and geocentric notions of space, replacing them with a science “purified” of these elements. In effect, they take the geo (the earth) out of geometry.
This movement from natural to universal science and the creation of a new Archimedean point in the human mind (a metaphor Descartes employs in the Second Meditation), where it can be carried and moved about, is at the heart of her conception of earth alienation, a distinguishing feature of the modern world. It is this historic process which has enabled us to handle and control nature from outside the earth: to reach speeds near the speed of light with the aid of technology, to produce elements not found in the earth, to create life in a test tube and to destroy it with nuclear weapons. In Arendt’s view, this process is responsible for estranging us so radically from our given home. In fact, she appears to take a step even further in the direction of pessimism when she claims that the earth is, in a sense, dispensable and obsolete: “We have found a way,” she says, “to act on the earth and within terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from outside, from the Archimedean point.” In her essay “The Conquest of Space and the State of Man,” Arendt elaborates on these themes and shows the futility of humans ever conquering space and reaching an Archimedean point, which would constantly be relocated upon its discovery. She suggests that we recognize limits to our search for knowledge and that a new, more geocentric world-view might emerge once limitations are acknowledged and accepted. Arendt is not especially optimistic about such an occurrence but feels that we must recover the earth as our home and begin to realize that mortality is a fundamental condition of scientific research. It is not only modern science which finds culpable, though, for it was philosophers, she asserts, who were the first to abolish the dichotomy between earth and sky (by which she might also mean space since the earth includes the sky) and to situate us in an unbounded cosmos. And so the task of reconceiving our relation to the universe also rests on the shoulders of philosophers.

Regarding the events leading to the arrival and development of earth alienation, Arendt locates several of undoubtedly major importance, but the question might be raised as to whether there are others she neglects such as the microscope, compass, clock, or computer, to name a few of the most significant. The magnetic compass, for example, allowed for the exploration and mapping of the earth as well as the discovery of America. It replaced the natural forces of the winds which previously had directed sailors and had been the subject of a whole mythology (not only for the Greeks who used the word “wind” (anemos) as a synonym for direction, but also for the ancient Chinese who distinguished twenty-four seasonal winds). The compass provided for an absolute reference and a new orientation in space in a manner comparable to the uniformity and universality imposed by the mechanical clock and standardized hour. Similarly, the microscope, which was an invention of the same age as the telescope, allowed humans to probe new, once invisible universes on the earth and to open up a vast and seemingly infinite space within the known world which mirrors the grand cosmos. Galileo, in fact, tried to use his telescope as a microscope, remarking in 1614, “I have seen flies which look as big as lambs.”

As Victor Hugo wrote in Les Misérables, “Where the telescope ends, the microscope begins. Which has the grander view?” Thus, to explore fully our earth alienation, we may have to look to additional historic events and inventions which are imprinted indelibly on the modern age.

As to the meaning of “alienation” in the phenomena of earth and world alienation, Arendt does not employ it in a consciously Marxian or existentialist manner, though there are some similarities. We get an early clue as to what she means in The Origins of Totalitarianism, where she writes that the “alien” is “a frightening symbol of the fact of difference as such, of individuality is such, and indicates those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct tendency to destroy.” This remark is made in the context of a discussion of ethnic homogeneity, but it clearly prefigures her thoughts on earth and world alienation, especially since the spheres which humans cannot change at will are marked by “natural and always present differences” and indicate “the limitations of the human artifice,” words which also could be read to mean “earth” and “world.” A second aspect of Arendt’s conception of alienation seems to involve the idea of being at home on the earth and in the world, a need and right to which Arendt clings with almost “religious commitment.”

Alienation, in this sense, means a loss of roots and a common, shared sense of place, a realm of meaningful pursuits secured by tradition against the forces of change. Indeed, the themes of homelessness and rootlessness are at the center of Arendt’s political concerns (in treatments of totalitarianism or imperialism, for example) and can be compared with Heidegger’s more existential treatment, which comes to the fore with frequency in his later thought.

Generally speaking, for the Greeks, the world of nature and the earth is conceived in bodily terms and metaphors; it possesses a kind of corporeality. This view was initiated by the Presocratics who depicted the earth as organic, animal, or, in the case of Anaximander, as a solid cylindrical body. It was taken up by Plato in the Timeaus where he spoke of the bodies of planets, the world’s body, and the body of the universe; was altered by Plotinus in the Enneads; and is alluded to or developed in subsequent philosophic history. In his late mythic phenomenology, Husserl refers to the earth as “the original ark,” the “basis body” for all other bodies, while Heidegger remarks that “body and mouth are part of the earth’s flow and growth in which we mortals flourish.” Marx, whom Arendt criticizes but also borrows from, argues that “Nature is man’s inorganic body,” and he applies physiological language to the natural realm, speaking about our “metabolism” with nature but also our estrangement from it in failing to exploit it fully.

While embodiment serves to give the earth a form analogous and understandable to humans, it also provides philosophers and other persons with a pretext for disciplining and punishing this corpus, which is usually gendered in female terms.

In contrast, Arendt tends not to construe or speak of the earth as a body.
or even as a place, ground, or particular location in which one lives (as in the earth beneath one's feet). She rejects Heidegger's conception of Earth as a "mythologizing confusion" which cannot serve as any kind of social foundation, though when she does speak of the earth and natural world in phenomenological language, it is strongly reminiscent of her former teacher's work and laden with terms that suggest the activities of dwelling and disclosure.¹⁹

Rather, the earth for her appears to be primarily, though not exclusively a planet (a view Heidegger explicitly rejected), as she comments on circling, discovering, measuring, and locating a point outside it, or writes about the earth as a "globe" which can be brought into the living room, or remarks that "the most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet."²² She is, of course, historicizing and politicizing the problem of earth alienation, but in another sense she is simultaneously helping to cast the earth into universal space by validating the view of it as one homogeneous whole and failing to provide an alternative conception which accounts for geographic difference and the uniqueness of living in particular places. Such depictions also may have the effect of "alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings"²¹ and of representing the world as picture—Heidegger's Weltbild—an event which distinguishes the modern age.²² It might be noticed in this regard that the word planet is related in the Greek to planetes, "wanderer," and planum, "to lead astray," and so implies something which is either without a definite home or place or which has lost its bearings and ground.

Precursors to and Influences upon Arendt

As their telescopes and microscopes, their tapes and radios become more sensitive, individuals become blinder, more hard of hearing, less responsive, and society more opaque. . . . its misdeeds. . . . larger and more superhuman than ever before.

—Max Horkheimer, Dawn and Decline

Arendt's account of earth alienation relies on the work of at least three other important thinkers—Alexandre Koyré, Alfred North Whitehead, and Martin Heidegger, two of whom she acknowledges to some extent (Koyré and Whitehead) and one whom she barely mentions (Heidegger). Koyré, whose landmark work, From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe, was published a year before The Human Condition (though presented as a lecture in 1953) looks at the process whereby humans have lost their place in the world and, more fundamentally, the world we know itself. He traces the scientific and philosophic revolution from Nicholas of Cusa, Copernicus, Galileo, and Descartes through Berkeley, Newton, and Leibniz which brought about the "destruction of the Cosmos and the infinitization of the universe," by which he means the very rapid transition from the closed, finite, hierarchical conception of the world held by the ancients (Figure 5.1) to one marked by indefiniteness, infinity, and ontological parity for the moderns. With this new world-view, he finds we have lost "all considerations based upon value-concepts, such as perfection, harmony, meaning, and aim, and finally the utter devalorization of being, the divorce of the world of value and the world of fact."²³ The direct influence upon and similarities with Arendt's conception should be obvious.

Second, Arendt looks to Whitehead and particularly his work Science and the Modern World, which was published in 1925. While borrowing his insights on the telescope and Cartesian thought, she disregards his thoughts on what he terms the "romantic reaction," a protest by poets on behalf of nature, perhaps because she feels that we should not be misled by very general notions like "the disenchantment of the world" or "the alienation of man," which in her opinion

![Figure 5.1. Greek conception of the spherical cosmos: (1) propelling sphere—invisible, immovable; (2) star sphere (carries other spheres with it) period of revolution: 1 day; (3) Saturn sphere—period of revolution: 29 years; (4) Jupiter sphere—period of revolution: 12 years; (5) Mars sphere—period of revolution: 2 years; (6) Sun sphere—period of revolution: 1 year; (7) Venus sphere—period of revolution: 6 years; (8) Mercury sphere—period of revolution: 3 months; (9) Moon sphere—period of revolution: 1 month; (10) Earth sphere—immovable.](image-url)
often involve a romanticized view of the past (something to which Whitehead arguably does not succumb). Whitehead shows that "we gain from the poets the doctrine that a philosophy of nature must concern itself at least with . . . six notions: change, value, eternal objects, endurance, organism, interrelation."\textsuperscript{24} Though he speaks of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge, the above concepts might also be invoked, mutatis mutandis, to understand his own process metaphysics and philosophy of organism, which exhibits a surprising degree of ecological sensitivity in its reworking of subject-object relations, its critical and creative return to a Greek view of mind in/as nature, its stress on purposive "evolutionary expansiveness," its ethics of inmanence, and its attentiveness to the democratic connotation, communication, and coordination of organic and inorganic entities.\textsuperscript{25}

Third and most important, Arendt's thinking on earth alienation is influenced strongly by Heidegger. This fact is apparent in her thoughts on technology and the shrinkage of the earth, which she finds the result of the invention of the airplane. The airplane, in fact, becomes for her a symbol of the loss of earthly distance which is attained by creating what amounts to a vertical distance between humans and the earth, where formerly horizontal distance was the norm, thereby removing us from our immediate natural surroundings. This abolition of distance was anticipated by the increasing tendency on the part of the human mind to survey, condense, and scale down physical distances in cartography, for example, and was accompanied by an increase in speed which allowed humans to "conquer" space. In addition to the airplane, Arendt mentions steamships and railroads as accentuating this process, though it is a bit surprising that she does not consider the automobile, which has not only altered radically our notions of time, space, and distance but transformed ruthlessly the surface of earth into a network of concrete and led to the erasure of wilderness, the rise of sprawling suburbia, and the imposition of homogeneity and conformity on cultural and political life.\textsuperscript{26}

In his essay "The Thing," Heidegger speaks in language later echoed in The Human Condition. He writes of the "restless abolition of distances," of a "uniform distancelessness" in which "everything is equally far and equally near," and asks, "Is not this merging of everything into the distanceless more unearthly than everything bursting apart?" Or again: "All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel."\textsuperscript{27} Arendt's contemplation of the earth (and world) also emerges directly from the shadows of Heidegger's reflections, as does much of her thinking on homelessness, art, humanism, and the "thing-character of the world" as she terms it. Arendt often gives these subjects a new phenomenological twist or adds a needed political dimension and insight where it is woefully lacking in Heidegger's work, but it is surprising how rarely she acknowledges her debt to him and how little this borrowing is explored in the secondary literature.

In his later work, Heidegger addresses the natural world more directly and empathetically than in Being and Time, where the nature of Nature which is revealed to us remains a concept whose structure is determined solely by human consciousness since it is still "ready to hand" and accessible only to Das-in, who alone can reveal a world. In this writing after the Kehre, however, he shifts his thinking to suggest that animals, plants, and even things can manifest or hold a world. It is here as well that he speaks of the "self-dependent," and "effortless and undisturbed" earth, that which provides a shelter, anchor, and orientation for Being and beings. The earth "shatters every attempt to penetrate it," he says.\textsuperscript{28} It is self-secluding and self-concealing and is set up in a striving opposition to his conception of the world, which is said to be self-revealing. For Heidegger, it is on-the-earth, the "building bearer" that we can understand ourselves and the world we create. It is here that we can find a harmony with nature, what Rilke calls the Urground (the pristine ground), because "all things of earth, and the earth itself as a whole, flow together into a reciprocal accord.\textsuperscript{29}

The opposition of earth and world can be seen most clearly in The Origin of the Work of Art," where Heidegger provides a vivid description of the shoes of a peasant woman, detailing their equipensal nature, and showing how they gather a whole panoramic world into being. We are placed, in effect, inside these ragged shoes—literally put in the shoes of another, or the Other, then walked about in the world which they create. The earth resounds and pulsates in the "stiffly rugged heaviness" of the shoes because we can sense the moisture of the soil in them, the path upon which they walked, and the trudging steps which carried them along. As Heidegger says, "This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman."\textsuperscript{30} This in-gathering of a world by entities other than humans is repeated again at several points in his writing when, in the same essay, we find a Greek temple and, in "The Thing," a jug uniting the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals.

Arendt adopts and adapts this opposition in The Human Condition and in essays collected in Between Past and Future. Her language again resonates with that of Heidegger, as when she speaks of the "effortless earth" or "the earth, inexhaustible and indefatigable" or of "world withdrawal" and decay.\textsuperscript{31} The emphasis on thingness and disclosure is undoubtedly drawn from his phenomenological language, too. In this regard, it should be pointed out that there is, perhaps, a certain natural affinity between phenomenological thinking and ecology, which helps to explain the strains of ecological concern in Arendt's thought. The starting point for phenomenology is that we find ourselves located in a world that reveals itself. The word "phenomenon," in fact, means "the showing-itself-in-itself," that which brings itself to light. The task, then, of phenomenology is to facilitate this encounter and to allow phenomena to be grasped originally, directly and intuitively. In this respect it is very similar to ecological thinking, which also returns us "to the things themselves," as
Husserl put it—that is, to the animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and humans who are encountered and studied within their respective environments.\(^{32}\)

**Contemporary Earth Alienation**

Only in the context of the space race in the first place, and the militarization and commodification of the whole earth, does it make sense to relocate that [whole earth] image as a special sign of an anti-nuclear, anti-militaristic, earth-focused politics. The relocation does not cancel its other resonances; it contests their outcome. . . . Relocated on a T-shirt, the satellite's eye view of the planet earth provokes an ironic version of the question, who speaks for the earth (for the fetus, the mother, the jaguar, the object world of nature, all those who must be represented)?

---DONNA HARAWAY, "The Promises of Monsters"

If one can look back to the precursors of and influences on Arendt's conception of earth alienation, one can also look forward from her view to discover the contemporary relevance and transformations of her thoughts. Indeed, her warnings about earth alienation can be extended to reveal a world more deeply removed from nature and the earth than she imagined. If this process was initiated with the telescope and symbolized by the satellite, it has come to be represented continually by the photographic image of the Earth as seen from space.\(^{33}\) It is this ubiquitous image of a bounded, blue sphere captured from a point outside the earth that enables us to show finally beyond all doubt that Earth is round, definable, and ultimately manipulable from a god's-eye view. In this whole-earth image, an ironic creation of a fractured and fragmented culture, we have located perhaps not simply another picture of the place we inhabit, but have attempted to re-place, via a universalized technological subsystem, our distinct and multifarious senses of place and purpose which have been lost as we have transformed the environment. If this new representation helps us to see Earth potentially as a living organism (as the Gaia hypothesis, Presocratic thought, and Native American beliefs suggest) or as a single cell (as biologist Lewis Thomas speculates), it also "provides us with a small, comprehensible, manageable icon—an easily manipulable token Earth that we can use to replace the unfathomably immense and overwhelmingly complex reality of the world which surrounds us."\(^{34}\)

Today, we see the earth no longer brought so much into people's living rooms as a globe (a multidimensional object often with textured contours), but rather, emblazoned on computer screens and television as an image without depth or true dimensionality. We espy a roadside metallic Atlas locating an Archimedean point and literally raising a huge scaled model of Earth up in his arms in order to sell a brand of tires bearing his name. We find a hologram image of Gaia as an advertisement for McDonald's, one of the worst corporate destroyers of the environment and culture, on the back cover of a special issue of *National Geographic* devoted to saving the rain forests and "our fragile" planet.\(^{35}\) Even oppositional consciousness in the United States and Europe frequently perpetuates and uses uncritically this image of the earth in their literature and campaigns when they compete like corporations for the environmental dollar or vote, as evidenced by the commercialization of the twentieth celebration of Earth Day in 1990.\(^{36}\) We are thus in an era when the image of the earth is often but a floating commodity which is appropriated like any other. In this sense it is a kind of fetish object and one might even speak of a certain "earth pornography" that now exists, as the gendered planet, the "mother of life" (as Plato called it) is not only violated literally by strip mining, deforestation, and radioactive waste, but subjected to the capricious circulation of a voyeuristic media.\(^{37}\) As with most commercial pornography, there is a violent "ripping" or tearing from context (natural surroundings) that has occurred and a repositioning or reterritorializing of the viewed object in a space or place in which it is not normally found, such as against a white background or on a billboard ringed by items for sale.\(^{38}\)

Writing in 1948, prior to Arendt's *The Human Condition*, a British astrophysicist predicted that "once a photograph of the Earth, taken from the outside is available—once the sheer isolation of the Earth becomes known—a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose." Twenty years later, televised pictures were beamed back by astronauts circling the moon and the conditions for this prophecy were fulfilled. The ironic truth of the speculation, however, is that this "powerful" idea has not led to such inspiring consequences as astronomers like William K. Hartmann have suggested when they claim that "a new frontier is opening. It is interplanetary . . . [and] . . . may produce its own renaissance."\(^{39}\) Since that time, we have been resolute in our determination to escape and replace our natural home with the depths of space where we have established space stations, military bases, and communication systems. Instead of, or at best comonitant with the opening of a new front, there has been vast shrinkage and colonization of space. The promised global village, too, is little more than a tangle economic nexus which has introduced more homogenization than harmony, more tension than tolerance, into our world. As I write, I have come across an article on the Hubble telescope in today's *New York Times* which says that this $1.5-billion-dollar disembodied eye is designed to detect objects in space that are twenty-five times fainter than the dimmest observable objects from earth. Presumably, if we keep looking with the aid of greater technology, we will find some kind of home away from home, or at least distract ourselves a while longer from problems on earth. As Michael Zimmerman writes, "Satellite photos of Earth may be instances of that 'high altitude thinking' (Merleau-Ponty) which conceives of itself as pure spirit rising above the natural world. In such photos, we see Earth reflected in the rearview mirror.
of the spaceship taking us away from our home in order to conquer the universe.\footnote{40}

**Origins and Expressions**

After seeing electricity, I lost interest in nature. Not up to cate enough.

—VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY, Autobiography

Hoorah! No more contact with the vile earth!

—EMILIO MARINETTI

Arendt's conception of earth alienation finds its first expression, not in *The Human Condition* but in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she writes: "Ever since man learned to master it [human nature] to such an extent that the destruction of all organic life on earth with man-made instruments has become conceivable and technically possible, he has been alienated from nature. Even since a deeper knowledge of natural processes instilled serious doubts about the existence of natural laws at all, nature itself has assumed a sinister aspect."\footnote{41} She proceeds to claim that humans in the twentieth century are "emancipated" from nature just as those in the eighteenth century were emancipated from history. By this statement she means that objectivity has vanished and that "absolute and transcendent measurements" such as history, nature, or religion have lost the authority they once exerted. This loss of authority, she argues, was the result of "What is Authority?," held to be identical with the loss of permanence and durability in the world. In Origins, too, she speaks of the "shrinking of geographic distances" and the apparent fact that there is "no longer any 'uncivilized' spot on earth, because whether we like it or not we have really started to live in One World," an overstatement no doubt but not far from the truth.\footnote{42}

It might be conjectured, as Arendt merely begins to do, that nature as ground, source, or referent of meaning, order, and direction has been objectively displaced over time as the physical environment and earth have been radically altered, a process begun not recently but during the ancient Greek period. This more or less objective grounding for society (its ethics and politics) was reinvented in a removed form as God by the Neoplatonists and relocated or re-located in a transcendent realm, away from the daily activities of those who dwell on earth, a sphere which, for thinkers like Saint Augustine, becomes that which brings forth pain and suffering. Contributing to this devaluation and displacement was a very abstractive move from the this-worldly to the other-worldly (always present or latent in Platonism) which has been responsible, in part, for encouraging domination of the earth and environment. In fact, a major source of the current ecological crisis can be traced directly to views which the Bible, Platonic, and Neoplatonic thought have fostered, particularly the idea of a radically transcendent (but not immanent) God (One, Good, or Spirit) who is separated from the natural world which plants, rocks, humans, and other animals know and dwell within. It is this transcendent being or realm which often permits, tolerates, or even sanctifies human domination over the earth and its inhabitants, a tendency undoubtedly given impetus as the Greeks gradually abandoned animistic impulses and came to replace them with more theistic ones. As Lynn White has argued in a well-known essay, "The present increasing disruption of the global environment is the product of a dynamic technology and science which . . . . cannot be understood historically apart from distinctive attitudes toward nature which are deeply grounded in Christian dogma."\footnote{43} A dichotomy thus asserted itself between that which is perceived and protected as sacred and that which is understood and utilized as profane so that nature as it is construed (or constructed) falls almost unifying into the latter sphere. Our perceivable, corporeal world is thereby still a falling away from, a pale imitation of something more perfect and unattainable.

Thus, it cannot be fully said with Arendt that the Greeks completely dreaded the devaluation of nature, for a certain kind of earth alienation had already begun to set in. Arendt's claim, too, that the "notion of man as lord of earth is characteristic of the modern age" and her assertion that it contradicts the Bible, where Adam was put into the Garden of Eden to "serve and preserve it," is not strictly true for several reasons.\footnote{44} First, human domination over and domination of the earth is much older and more deeply rooted than this statement indicates, and second, there are many passages in the Bible which attempt to establish man as master of the earth.\footnote{45}

One might argue further that the Greek view of nature to which Arendt returns was based on a very specific cultural and mythological experience of the natural world, and that with the subsequent historical encroachment, colonization, and domestication of the environment, figures like Descartes or Marx quite "naturally" experienced a diminished nature that allowed them more easily to imagine controlling it or separating humans from it. Philosophical viewpoints cannot be divorced from historical contexts, and while Greek philosophers ruminated on the origins and nature of our world, the Greek land was being desiccated and altered dramatically by human actions. Of great importance was the levelling of forests which occurred primarily between 600 and 200 B.C., during the great Classical and Hellenistic periods, to provide wood for fuel, furniture, weapons, temple roofs, and, especially, to fill the increasing demand for ships. In the *Critias*, Plato describes the result of the deforestation of Attica and points out that "by comparison with the original territory, what is left is... the skeleton of a body wasted by disease; the rich, soft soil has been carried off and only the bare framework of the district left."\footnote{46} Adding to this environmental destruction were the effects of intensive mining and quarrying to obtain minerals and ores. Finally, the most pervasive source of degradation
was the grazing of domesticated animals who roamed on four-fifths of the uncultivated land, destroying many indigenous plants and laying the land open to erosion.47

Thus, while there has been a loss or at least recession of a ground to social and political thought and life, there are nevertheless certain dangers to "re-grounding" an ethics or politics in nature. The history of philosophy is rife with examples of attempts which end in oligarchy, slavery, religious hierarchy, and other forms of domination. Platonic pronouncements such as, "For whereas all that is against nature is painful, what takes place in the natural way is pleasant," can easily lend themselves to misinterpretation and misuse as a debate ensues over what is "natural."48 Arendt is aware of this fact and does not seek false homes, roots, or grounds, but attempts to think without the security of firm foundations. The question remains whether some kind of a ground or place can be located.

**Between Earth and World**

In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth. . . . World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated.

—HEIDEGGER, "The Origin of the Work of Art"

Against Arendt's conception of the earth and earth alienation stands the world and with it the phenomena of worldlessness and world alienation, which cannot be examined here, except as they relate directly to the earth and earth alienation. In this regard, the practice of agriculture is illustrative because it provides a perfect example of the in-betweenness which Arendt characteristically explores, for the tilling of soil is an activity which can be situated between the spheres of earth and world, nature and culture, and labor and work as she conceives them. The transformation of wilderness into cultivated land is paradigmatic of the ostensible transition from the biological cycle to the human artifact. In Arendt's view, agriculture readies the earth for "the building of the world," but the land is not fully a "use-object" since it must be labored upon endlessly, thus necessarily remaining outside the world of work and not being subject to true violation or violence (a point she does not make particularly clear).49 In other words, agriculture does not effect a complete reification in her opinion because a tangible thing does not come into being. In "The Crisis in Culture," Arendt approaches the subject a little differently than in *The Human Condition* by drawing attention to a contrast between the attitude of the Greeks and Romans toward nature, culture, and agriculture, and altering her position (or disposition) somewhat in the process, perhaps inadvertently. The Romans, she argues, first saw nature as closely linked with culture, a word whose origin (from colere) is Latin and means to tend, preserve, dwell, and care for. Second, they viewed art as a kind of agriculture, a way of cultivating the offerings of the earth. Agriculture was therefore a peaceful and natural activity for them. The Greeks, on the other hand, were more influenced by the art of fabrication and saw agriculture as one of the ways of taming and dominating nature, of tearing from the earth what the gods had hidden. In her exposition of these historical views, Arendt seems to prize the Roman perspective over the Greek (somewhat untypically), noting that the Romans preserved the Greek heritage (i.e., cultivated it) and that the Greeks did not even know what culture or cultural continuity were because they were too busy taming nature rather than tending it. She concludes the essay with the assertion that the Romans were the "first people that took culture seriously the way we do."50

Despite its many merits, Arendt's account seems not to have recognized or foreseen the true destructiveness of the very historical practice of agriculture for both the earth (in terms of soil depletion, erosion, forceful re-shaping of natural contours and boundaries) and the human world. We may still be "under the spell of the Roman heritage" as she puts it, but we have gone far beyond even the Greek view of agriculture as a "daring, violent enterprise" because we no longer exhibit any respect for the ability of the earth to respond to our attempts to dominate and domesticate it, or recognize the element of "violence" we inflict upon it.51 Modern agriculture, with the hand of capital, has transformed the land into property and a reified commodity, a fact which is absent from Arendt's depiction. Agriculture, too, as Mircea Eliade has rightly noted, "provoked upheavals and spiritual breakdowns" of a magnitude we can hardly imagine and initiated what physiologist Jared Diamond has termed "a catastrophe from which we have never recovered."52 In fact, there is reason to believe that it contributed to the development of private property and work as a distinct category of life separate from other spheres and activities. As Arendt herself points out, the word for "tilling" later came to mean "laboring" in Hebrew (le'oved), an association implying servitude on the part of humans.53 Agriculture, it might be argued, also enhanced or accentuated social stratification, violence toward women and animals, and the destruction of wilderness areas.54 In contrast to gathering and hunting which it systematically replaced, it is marked by regularization, routinization, and repetition of daily activities, the rise and spread of numerous diseases such as tuberculosis, and the narrowing of food choices. Unlike the dream of escaping Gaia upon which Arendt comments, agriculture is a flight into the earth rather than away from it, and can be said to be a different but related species of earth alienation (one which should be noticed by those contemporary naturalists, ecologists, and "avant-gardeners" who see in a return to the land a panacea for social and political problems). With the transition of agri-culture to agri-business we have lost an element of the past (in the tie to culture) and moved dangerously into a future where the tilling of the soil is now spoken of almost exclusively in economic terms. In the process, we have experienced an even greater sense of "world alienation." If, then, agriculture is a kind of space in-between Arendt's concep-
The Relation of Earth and World Alienation

Give me a place to stand and I will move the world.

—ARCHIMEDES

[Man] found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition.

—FRANZ KAFKA

This brings us to a final question: the way that world and earth alienation relate to one another more broadly, a subject as complicated and controversial as it is ambiguous in Arendt's thought. Arendt remarks that at least in part out of the despair of world-alienation arose "the tremendous structure of the human artifice we inhabit today, in whose framework we have even discovered the means of destroying it together with all non-man-made things on earth." In this characterization, the phenomenon of worldlessness helped to ignite and continues to fuel our distancing from the earth and so seems to precede earth alienation. Such a depiction, however, is too clean and neat, even as a reading of Arendt's writing, and the matter is undoubtedly more complex (though it may not be as astounding as a "chicken and egg" debate about origins). In contrast to Arendt's discussion of earth alienation which has an approximate historical beginning, the Frankfurt School located the conquest of nature in human reason itself. In Eclipse of Reason, Horkheimer asserted that reason's "disease" is that it was born from the desire to dominate nature, and he went so far as to conjecture that "the collective madness" which reigns today "was already present in germ in primitive objectification, in the first man's calculating contemplation of the world as prey." This formulation, in turn, has been subject to trenchant criticism and near-reversal by social ecologists who find the emergence of the idea of dominating nature in the domination of humans by other humans. Without entering into a complex historical and political controversy, little can be said on this debate except that Arendt's thesis may be questioned on the grounds that it is structured too "teleologically" (so to speak) on a few events and inventions and does not consider other forms and sources of alienation from or control over nature.

Nevertheless, she holds that world alienation, which has determined the course of development for modern society, is of "minor significance" compared with earth alienation, which is the distinguishing feature of modern science. George Kateb in turn has qualified this remark with the claim that world alienation is presently a "more actual and widespread" experience and that we are only at the early phases of earth alienation, a pessimistic but possibly accurate portrayal.

Two last critical comments might be offered with respect to her account. First, it is at least questionable whether, as she claims, inner-worldly alienation (or "inner worldly asceticism," in Weber's terms) has absolutely nothing to do with earth alienation, for as I have attempted to point out, the roots of our separation from nature have much to do with the attitudes and institutions which Christianity established and has fostered. Second, at the very heart of Arendt's thought about the earth and world there lies a fundamental ambivalence or ambiguity, which often borders on becoming a contradiction, in the way she looks at the natural and artificial. On the one hand, she finds that the more stable, permanent human world is withdrawing and decaying, giving us the impression that either the realm of nature is expanding and threatening to devour the world of things, or that the human-made artifice is becoming more closely integrated with the natural environment. However, elsewhere she speaks of the fact that little is left of nature; everything natural has become artificial. It is not apparent how these views stand with respect to each other.

Arendt's Conception of Nature

When we speak of a picture of nature . . . we do not actually mean any longer a picture of nature, but rather a picture of our relation to nature.

—WERNER HEISENBERG (1958)

Arendt approaches nature and the natural world through her admittedly "unusual" distinction between labor and work. In developing this distinction, she speaks of nature as belonging to a household (oikos) and emphasizes its circularity, repetition, and endless, changeless, deathless quality. Nature is thereby linked with the realms of necessity, fertility, and animality as well as labor while it stands in contradistinction to the activity of work and the condition of worldliness. Arendt finds labor to be part and parcel of biological processes and life itself (the life of the body and the earth) and argues that it in this sense, the "animal" in the concept of animal laborans is fully justified. She invokes Marx's remarks on labor and nature to emphasize her point, noting with him "man's metabolism with nature," then finds with Locke a basis for private property in the laboring body whose activities, she implies, should not be checked because to do so would "destroy nature." In so doing, though she is seemingly unaware that private property (an "enclosure from the commons") has always been a major threat to wilderness (and society). In contrast to labor, work is unnatural, artificial, and characteristically human. Our existence is likewise described as unnatural and lying outside the "ever-recurring life cycle." Work provides for an objective, stable world of things which are unlike all natural surroundings, and the human condition to which it corresponds is worldliness. Homo faber "works upon" and transforms nature rather than mixing
with it. His job, Arendt says, "is to do violence to nature in order to build a permanent home for himself." 60

Therefore, in every way, we find Arendt linking labor with nature and work with the world, radically separating the two realms from each other, and in the process making associations, distinctions, and divisions which become very difficult and often untenable for her to maintain. These difficulties are evident in her discussions of rhythm and the "thing-character" of the world but from "the viewpoint of nature," as she sometimes puts it, they are most relevant and pronounced in her thinking on necessity, animals, and agriculture. Arendt follows Locke and Marx in characterizing nature as the "realm of necessity" which must be overcome (subjugated and mastered for Marx) in order to reach the "realm of freedom," a conceptual distinction which goes back to Aristotle's Politics. In Marx's words, man must "wrestle with nature," "bringing it under [his] control" in order to subdue the "eternal necessity" which it imposes. 62 Arendt likewise attributes to nature a necessitarian quality and seems to conduce Homo faber's "violence" against the natural world as a form of "protection," because nature "inva$es" the human artefact, "threatening" the world's durability. 63 In the world of nature, she writes in On Violence, "there is no spontaneity, properly speaking," excluding it as she excludes play from the world and Homo ludens from the human condition. 64 Arendt's concept of nature is therefore as "blind" as Marx's. Though she speaks about "nature's fertility," there is little room for it to exist as a fertile idea with social or political import. In this sense, it is a de-natured rather than liberatory concept, as Marcuse attempts to make it in his work. 65

Contrary to Arendt's claims, nature has been a source of freedom, value, and even objectivity—for example, in the writings of Peter Kropotkin, Hans Jonas, Murray Bockchin, and Alfred North Whitehead—and more important, it might serve as at least one guide, among others, for reconstructing social life. 66 Freedom is arguably not a concept restricted solely to the "artificial" world of humans; it is already present in the realm of nature, in which humans find themselves first embedded, though increasingly removed. The political task, then, is not only to enlarge social and political freedom but to reintegrate ourselves with the freedom which exists naturally and to create an ecological sensibility which permeates the human world that has been sharply divorced from the realm of nature. The rift between necessity and freedom is of the same kind as the stultifying dualism which has been established between, for example, "objective" and "subjective" and which has been challenged only rarely with depth and creativity by thinkers in the critical utopian tradition, such as Charles Fourier or Ernst Bloch.

Arendt, it seems, excludes freedom from nature and the possibility of discovering freedom in our experience of, or relationship with, the natural world because she construes it only as a narrow political concept—it is the raison d'être of her particular conception of politics—and one which must manifest itself in a public space and in the agonistic field of action. It is humans alone who have received the "two-fold gift of freedom and action." Nature, on the other hand, is something which for Arendt, like Heraclitus, remains hidden, and the "life process is not bound up with freedom but follows its own inherent necessity." "It can be called free only in the sense that we speak of a freely flowing stream," she says in "What Is Freedom?" 67 Freedom is won by transcendence of and alienation from nature, the processes of life, and the "curse" of necessity. 68 That nature is conceived in these terms—necessity, fertility, and darkness—almost by definition excludes the possibility of locating freedom within it. In fairness to Arendt, one need note that she was understandably suspicious of the invocation and spiritualization of nature in political discourse, given the atavistic conceptions put to use by the National Socialists and others, including perhaps her mentor, Heidegger. 69 She holds, for example, that totalitarian thinking found intellectual support in the Darwinian theory of evolution and that tyranny was depicted as an extension of "natural" processes. 70

If it is true that the Greeks did not know "freedom" as we know it (because it was an exclusively political notion and they were a people submerged in politics), it is also true that neither do organic societies (who in most ways are pre-political in Arendt's sense) since there is no sharp conceptual split between "freedom" and "domination" (or necessity) for them. Freedom in a broader, though no less important sense is a fundamental, even if unconscious condition of their social life. Moreover, there is no pronounced division between nature and culture (or wilderness and society) since the two spheres are not distinguished as such. To the extent that they are, there is a healthy cross-fertilization between them. The freedom they find in nature informs and guides the freedom they found in society. 71

From Greek to Green:

Techne, Politeia, and Communitas

Orbiting the earth aboard Friendship 7 in February 1962, astronaut John Glenn noticed something odd. His view of the planet was virtuously unique in human experience. . . . Yet as he watched the continents and oceans moving beneath him, Glenn began to feel that he had seen it all before. Months of simulated space shots in sophisticated training machines and centrifuges had affected his ability to respond. In the words of chronicler Tom Wolfe, "The world demanded awe, because this was a voyage through the stars. But he couldn't feel it."

—Landon Wyner, The Whale and the Reactor

If Arendt's conception of nature is problematic, her thought is more directly relevant to green political theory because of its critique of modern science and technology and its vision of a politics compatible with the current
ecological challenge to capitalism, productionism, and industrialism. First, Arendt offers an insightful analysis of modern technology and science. She argues that in a society given to the primacy of laboring, "the world of machines has become a substitute for the real world." However, such a "pseudo world," as she calls it, "cannot fulfill the most important task of the human artifice, which is to offer mortals a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves." In this regard, Arendt distinguishes between tools and machines: the former are guided by the hand and exist within the stable world of work, but are replaced by the latter, which are associated with the repetitiveness of labor and which reinforce or redirect bodily processes. This substitution alters our understanding of means and ends and tends to undermine a sense of public permanence. Nevertheless, in her view, the problems related to technology are not tied to the question, are we the slaves or masters of our machines? They are rather twofold: first, whether machines will serve the world or tend to destroy it, and second, the concern that future automation will intensify and magnify life processes and rhythms, wearing down the durability of things.

With the historical ascendancy of the notion of process, Arendt discovers a loss of worldly objectivity and a tendency to privilege action over all other activities, including contemplation, fabrication, and laboring. This new predilection is especially dangerous because it is typified by humans acting into nature and bringing with them an element of unpredictability, particularly in the area of technology, where nature and history have been wedded and interfused. Arendt finds in Whitehead’s formulation, "Nature is a process," the most persuasive argument for this intervention and claims that it is one of the axioms of all branches of modern science. Arendt had the foresight to see and to caution us as well about what might now be termed a broadly postmodern view of nature and technology. Such a perspective is a logical outgrowth of nature as process and is characterized early on, as she suggests, by the ability to start new natural processes and to "unchain" natural forces. For Arendt, this "stage" of modern technology begins with the discovery of nuclear energy and goes far beyond former periods when (1) nature’s power was used to substitute for or to augment human power (e.g., windmills), (2) technology merely imitated natural processes (e.g., the steam engine), and (3) we changed and "denaturalized nature for our own worldly ends" so as to sever earth from world (e.g., electricity).

Arendt had intimations of a time when life will be made "artificially," and "the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature" will have been cut. The attempt to make life in the test tube and to create superior human beings with advanced technology, she avers, is of the same nature as our desire literally to escape the earth, so that it can be seen as part of the phenomenon of earth alienation. She thus anticipates the rise of biotechnology and even Dostoevski’s biopolitics, along with their darker implications. For just as fire technology allowed humans to solder, forge, melt, and heat objects for particular ends, genetic engineering now enables us to stitch, splice, edit, program, and delete living beings. Instead of depicting nature in mechanistic metaphors and locating its intelligence in a divine mind (the Renaissance view) or speaking of it in terms of human progress and evolutionary process (the modern view), near-autonomous science and technology have begun to reduce the natural world to mere pieces of information and to characterize it in the language of cybernetic feedback loops, self-organizing programs, and the like. One wonders invariably if there might be a more reductive and earth-alienated phase waiting in the offing for, as Arendt remarks, "there is no reason to doubt that present ability to destroy all organic life on earth." The use of scientific and technical knowledge then, remains for her an important political question for democratic society as a whole, not one simply for professional politicians and scientists. In fact, to the extent that "technic" and metaphors of fabrication have infiltrated the political realm, substituting "making" for "acting," they have contributed to the rise of technocracy and acted so as further to debase public life.

Second, Arendt’s thought is in line with the left-green perspective in terms of its critique of capitalism, unchecked consumerism, industrialism, and productionism. With the rise of the social sphere (which blurs the distinction between the public and private realms) and the triumph of animal laborans, Arendt locates the emergence of an unencumbered consumer society. Such a society knows no natural or sustainable limits to growth. It is in this sphere that Arendt finds conformity, normalization, flight from the public world, and loneliness. The social sphere is marked by an "unnatural growth of the natural" that devours the objectivity and excellence of public life, protects private accumulation (not property), and leads to a rule of no-one (but not no rule). Consumer society and its fictitious common household, the nation-state, are for Arendt bound intimately with an economy of vast "in which things must be almost as quickly devoted and discarded as they have appeared." Arendt further criticizes the "anthropocentric utilitarianism" of man qua Homo faber who, as "measure of all things," treats nature and the "things themselves" as mere means and as valueless material for his own consumption or production-related ends. In this vein, the contemporary green critique points up the necessity of changes not only in patterns of consumption, but also in the modes of production. However, Arendt resists the turn to Marx, whom she calls the "Darwin of history." Her differences with Marx stem from his understanding of labor, which he conflates with work in defining productivity, and his conception of power which, in her view, disregards its distinctly political dimension. At a conference just prior to her death, she commented on the "cruelty" of capitalism and remarked that she did not share Marx’s "great enthusiasm" for it, which she finds present in the opening pages of the Communist Manifesto. Arendt acknowledges that Marx correctly foresaw the withering away of the public realm, but unlike Marx, she seeks to recover
political action and to protect the public sphere as civic community. She notes finally that a material condition for the industrial revolution was the elimination of forests, recognizing like Carolyn Merchant the links between industrialism and the "death of nature." It is still perplexing that she did not consider the insights of critical theory and the Frankfurt School on these and other matters.  

On a last note, it can be said that Arendt belongs in a broad sense to the communitarian and, particularly, the civic republican tradition, which is as old as Aristotle but as recent as the ideas of Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin or, in a different light, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer. Unlike some communitarians, however, Arendt is critical of forms of political community rooted in custom and racial, religious, or ethnic identity. Rather, she conceives of the political community as based upon active citizenship, collective deliberation, and civic engagement. Arendt’s neo-Aristotelianism (as with Hans Jonas, Ernst Bloch, and Bookchin) also implies a commitment to social and natural equilibrium, aesthetic, and ethical balance, and face-to-face public relations, meaningful foci for an emerging ecological society. In this philosophical tradition, community remains coextensive with smaller and prior forms of association, but can reach out potentially to touch larger spheres, including the natural world. In contrast to liberalism, communitarian thought often stresses the polis and the particular rather than the cosmos-polis and the universal; virtue ethics as opposed to Kantian or utilitarian morality; conceptions of the good and good life over notions of the right; freedom as against a more narrow view of justice; and the embedded self instead of atomistic individualism. Like many left-greeks and communitarians, Arendt identifies herself with or praises the revolutionary tradition, direct political action and direct democracy (rather than representation), decentralization, forms of organization such as the council system (rather than political parties), and potestas in populo. Given these orientations, her writings can serve to inform and inspire green political theory and action.

Conclusion: Out of Space and Into Place

To know the spirit of place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in.

—GARY SNYDER, The Practice of the Wild

While Arendt shows a keen interest in and insight into the spatial, she does not explore fully a politics or phenomenology of the placial, which is regrettable since place, in an important sense, precedes space in that it makes or clears room for its possibility. In this regard, earth alienation involves less a conquest of space, as Arendt suggests, than it does a loss of place. Her emphasis on the spatial may perhaps be explained by the fact that spatial metaphors and images are often used in traditional descriptions of how the mind and thought stalk and stumble toward clarity, a subject which always preoccupies Arendt the philosopher (a characterization she rejects), who feels the necessity to withdraw from the world in order to think about it. She writes, for example, "Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the polis." She later holds that the polis is not even a physical location and describes it as a sort of ambulatory or peripatetic entity that materializes in a "space of appearance." "Wherever you go, you will be a polis" were the memorable words of the Greeks. Though this statement is accurate, it does not reflect completely the extent to which the polis provided a locus of orientation. In a sense, it functioned as a sphere of political placing which was analogous to the chora, the Platonic receptacle and placers or superloculator. Heidegger indicates, too, that the Greeks did not even have a word for "space" because they experienced the spatial on the basis of place (topos) and not as extension. In his understanding, chora "signifies neither place nor space but that which is occupied by what stands there." He speculates that chora is "that which abstracts itself from every particular, that which withdraws, and in such a way precisely admits and makes place" for something else. Elsewhere he writes, "spaces receive their being from locations and not from space."

Finally, in addition to the critical comments on Arendt’s thinking about nature and the earth offered earlier, several others might be advanced. First, while Arendt delineates public and private space and defines each in relation to the other, she ignores the importance of natural space (or place) and its political or prepolitical dimensions. Natural spaces and places might be defined loosely as those areas generally outside or between the oikos and the polis which are neither strictly public nor private, but which often ground, embed, or even enclose the agonistic and cooperative political spaces, a phenomenon which can be grasped by observing the way that different peoples have settled by and been shaped by the surrounding environment. These areas include the woods, rivers, seas, caves, and sky but also parks, lakes, and beaches where human-human and human-nonhuman contact is frequent. In these spaces and places, there are flourishing communities which merit the respect of humans who enter and often disrupt or destroy them. Thus, while it is right to say that a forest or field can be a public space when "action in concert" occurs there, it is important to recognize that they are already complex and diverse locations which offer us more than "raw materials," "resources," or a res publica, even if they are by nature nonpolitical (though the disposition we have toward such places is often very political).
Second, it must be borne in mind that Arendt writes from a strongly urban, intellectual perspective that sometimes emphasizes cosmopolitan values and which is frequently very distant from a more intimate understanding of the earth and natural environment. Coupled with this orientation is an extremely strong attachment to the Greek tradition which occasionally blinds her to important anthropological insights into property, wealth, or art, for example, which might call into question her lapses into cultural conservatism. Finally, while Arendt is able to raise important questions, she is unable to provide many practical solutions concerning earth and world alienation and, given contemporary problems, those at which the hints may not appear to us to be sufficiently radical. In this regard, the nascent schools of thought and the corresponding social movements in bioregionalism, socialist ecology, ecological feminism, and social ecology have something to offer. In a day when much of humanity is more concerned with exploring “outer space” than recovering our own sense of earthly place, this kind of thinking can help us to reframe our relationship with nature and with the world and enable us to establish a new, more participatory and cooperative perspective on the natural home we inhabit. In the end, it might be said that Arendt did not so much initiate a dialogue with the earth itself as she suggests in “Understanding and Politics” (and as the Orphic Rilke did in the Duino Elegies), but rather kindled a valuable inquiry into the origins and meaning of our changing relation to and transformation of our given home. The task falls to the rest of us to continue and to deepen this discussion.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

4. Ibid., pp. 2, 6.
5. Ibid., p. 250.
6. For an interesting discussion of the role of the telescope in scientific practice and its impact on a new epistemology, see Paul Feyerabend, Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge (London: Verso, 1975), especially chaps. 9–11. In line with Arendt, Feyerabend argues: “The first telescopic observations of the sky are indistinct, indeterminate, contradictory and in conflict with what everyone can see with his unaided eyes. And the only theory that could have helped to separate telescopic illusions from veridical phenomena was refuted by simple tests” (p. 121).
8. In his search for rock-solid certainty and an Archimedean punctum firmum, Descartes loses—of all things—his footing. He finds wandering (ibeare) to be a form of error, that is, a deviation from truth. Yet it is precisely his wandering ramblings and wondering ruminations (his methodical questioning quest) which allow him to constitute the cogito and to affirm his own awareness, which in turn steers his search. His meditations rely upon a methodos, or literally a path or way, which guides, coordinates, and eventually places him securely in the world, something which could not be accomplished by pure thought alone, which is no-place and belongs to no-body.
9. Ibid., p. 262, emphasis added.
10. Arendt, “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” in Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought (New York: Viking Press, 1968). In a more literal and phenomenological sense, we live not on the earth as we are wont to think, but within it, since the earth includes the heavens (or sky and atmosphere) as well as the soil and the sea, a point brought out by the Gaia hypothesis and suggested in Merleau-Ponty’s later writings. See David Abram, “Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth,” Chapter Four, this volume. Compare John Muir’s journal entry of 16 July 1870: “Most people are on the world, not in it—have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them—undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate.”
13. Marx distinguished four kinds of alienation in the labor process: (1) alienation from nature and the sensuous external world expressed in the relation to the product of one’s labor; (2) estrangement from the self and one’s activity; (3) alienation from the human species-being; and (4) estrangement from other humans. Arendt’s thinking cuts across some of these distinctions, though she probably would not acknowledge Marx’s third sense since she is skeptical toward essentializing notions of human nature. There are also certain vague similarities to Heidegger’s use of unheimlich (uncanny, or literally not-at-home) and freud (alien or strange) in Being and Time.
16. For example, at an address delivered in his hometown of Meskirk in 1955, Heidegger begins by speaking of homeland and asks, “Does not the flourishing of any genuine work depend upon its rootedness in the soul of a homeland?” In his “Letter on Humanism,” he suggests that “Homelessness . . . consists in the abandonment of being by beings,” and in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” he raises the question, “What if man’s homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the real plight of dwelling as the plight?”


24. Alfred North Whitehead, Science and Modern World (New York: The Free Press, 1925), p. 88. Whitehead remarks that "the nature-poetry of the romantic revival was a protest on behalf of the organic view of nature, and also a protest against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter itself" (p. 94).


29. Ibid., p. 47.

30. Ibid., p. 34.


33. Heidegger remarked, "I was worried when I saw pictures coming from the moon to the earth. ... The uprooting of man has already taken place. ... This is no longer the earth on which man lives." Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us: Der Spiegel's Interview with Martin Heidegger," Philosophy Today 30 (Winter 1976): p. 277.

34. Yaakov Garb, "Perspective or Escape? Ecofeminist Musings on Contemporary Earth Imagery," in Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), p. 270. Garb argues that a "distancing, disengaged, abstract, and literalizing epistemology is quintessentially embodied in the whole Earth image where the visual mode of understanding is applied to the entire planet" (p. 267).

35. McDonald's has recently stopped to the hypocrisy of printing a glossy pamphlet entitled "We-ology," which tries to portray to children that it is an ecologically responsible corporation.


37. My use of the term "earth pornography" is intentionally speculative and provocative, designed to initiate thought about the frequent use of earth imagery by ecocritics and the media. It is vaguely analogous to Rosalind Coward's use of the term "food pornography" in Female Desires (New York: Grove Press, 1985) and stands in contrast to explicitly sexualized body imagery. On the one hand, the image of earth as living organism and nurturing mother functioned for many years as a restriction on certain human interventions into nature as, for example, mining (Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature [New York: Harper and Row, 1979]). On the other hand, "Sex-Typing a gender-free entity also reinserts an anthropomorphism that alienates Earth by trying to render it in our image" (Patrick Murphy, "Sex-Typing the Planet," Environmental Ethics 10, no. 2 (1988): 155–169).


42. Ibid., pp. 235, 297.


44. Arendt, The Human Condition, op. cit., p. 139n.


46. Plato, Cratylus, in Collected Dialogues, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Bollingen, 1961), p. 1216 [131b]. This denuding of the earth in Greece, as elsewhere, has accelerated greatly in recent years, and now less than one-tenth of the country is covered with trees.

47. For a broader picture of historical attitudes toward nature, see J. Donald Hughes, Ecology in Ancient Civilizations (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975).


51. Ibid, p. 213.


54. For a wide-ranging critique of this institution, see Zeran's Elements of Refusal, pp. 63–76; and Paul Shepard, Nature and Madness (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982).


56. Arendt, Between Past and Future, pp. 53–54.


61. Arendt excludes rhythm from the realm of work (Human Condition, p. 145), ignoring the role it often plays in the activities of writing, creating music, sculpting, or woodworking, for example. The sharp distinction between labor and work which is drawn in terms of life expectancy is also suspect. Her example of the table and bread (Human Condition, p. 94) is no longer so revealing, for today we have bread and bread products whose life outlasts that of our throwaway furniture.


64. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p. 158n. For a consideration of the central place of play in the human condition, see Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950); for its importance for political thought and action, see Francis Hearn, "Towards a Critical Theory of Play," Telos 30 (Winter 1976–1977): 145–160. One of Arendt's few sympathetic comments on the subject, in an otherwise scornful treatment, occurs in her essay, "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," where she writes of the generation of radical students in the 1960s and their spontaneity: "It turned out that acting is fun. This generation discovered what the 18th century had called 'public happiness,' which means that when man takes part in public life he opens for himself a dimension of human experience that otherwise remained closed to him and that in some way constitutes a part of complete happiness." Arendt, Crisis of the Republic (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 203.

65. Marxs's fruitful but problematic treatment of this subject is most explicit in his chapter "Nature and Revolution," in Counterrevolution and Revolt (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), though he considers it elsewhere at times.


67. Arendt, Between Past and Future, pp. 171, 150.

68. Arendt, The Human Condition, pp. 120–121.


71. For an interesting discussion of primitive societies and the politically relevant insights we might glean from them, see Stanley Diamond In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Communism (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1974). Diamond has carved out a small field in what he terms dialectical anthropology, a unique blend of critical social theory and anthropology.


73. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p. 62.


75. In contrast to earlier historical representations of nature, a postmodern view appears to conceive of nature in nonanalogue, informational terms.


77. Ibid., p. 2.

78. At a meeting of the National Institutes of Health Genetic Engineering Committee in 1985, for example, scientists were describing the horse as a temporary encumbrance for the genetic information housed in the animal because at one point in history no horses existed and, in their view, at some future point horses will not exist. They saw the horse as a set of programs or instructions that operate through negative feedback to maintain homeostasis.

79. Arendt, The Human Condition, p. 3.

80. For an examination of the conjunction of techné with politéia, see Ian K. Woolner, Autonomous Technology (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977); and The Whale and the Reactor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). One should note the surprising absence of a discussion of technology in Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism and its relation to or role in the Holocaust. For the only study focused on Arendt's perspective on science and technology of which I know, see Peter Tijmes, "The Archimedean Point and Eccentricity: Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Science and Technology," Inquiry 35, nos. 3/4 (December 1992). Tijmes offers an interesting fut, I believe, untenable treatment of Arendt on world alienation and related matters, claiming with Helmut Plessner that "alienation is not a phenomenon of modernity, but a constitutional feature of human beings" (p. 401). Even if such a view were correct, it downplays the qualitative changes in and historical heightening of this phenons non brought about or accentuated by the role of economic arrangements, modern technology and scientific developments.


82. Ibid., p. 155.


85. The Frankfurt School and its heirs' image of nature and the natural world is a mixed and ambivalent one, which begins with a penetrating but problematic contribution by Adorno and Horkheimer, moves to the utopian but technologically optimistic views of Marcuse and, trails into the contemporary anthropocentrism of Habermas's communicative ethics. For a consideration of Marcuse's and Habermas's views, see C. Fred Allord, Science and the Revenge of Nature: Marcuse and Habermas ( Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1985). For a perspective on Arendt and critical theory, see

86. A distinction can be made between "communitarians" and "civic republicans" in terms of the types of community, kind of identity, and conceptions of the political to which they turn. Two of the most cited works of the new communitarians are Michael Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

87. For example, J. J. Gibson claims that "places are ecological layouts." "Where abstract space consists of points, ecological space consists of places—locations or positions." The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), pp. 200, 65.

88. There is a growing literature which makes connections between place and ecophiloosophical ideas. See Gary Snyder, The Practice of the Wild (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990); Paul Shepard, Nature and Madness; and Edward Casey, Getting Back Into Place (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). Interestingly, Charles Molesworth has found a basis for comparing Arendt's The Human Condition with the ecopoetic and political views of Gary Snyder, author of Earth Household, Turtle Island, Riprap, and other works in terms of their distinctions between earth and world, use of placal vocabularies, and location of an Archimedean point. See Molesworth, Gary Snyder's Vision: Poetry and the Real World (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), pp. 123-128.

89. Arendt quotes Aristotle as saying that "wherever on earth somebody devotes himself to thinking, he will attain the truth everywhere as though it were present." She comments that "philosophers love this 'nowhere' as though it were a country (philo-chorein) and they desire to let all other activities go for the sake of scholaein (doing nothing, as we would say) because of the sweetness inherent in thinking or philosophizing itself." (Arendt, The Life of the Mind, p. 200.)


91. Plato's receptacle is that "in which" physical things are constituted from forms, unlike Aristotle's substrate as that "out of which" (ex hou) they come.

92. For Aristotle, to be is to be somewhere, to be emplaced or seeking to return to one's natural place (topos oikeios), as it could be said of water qua rain or the other elements. This view was so powerful that it held sway for two thousand years until it was replaced by Newton's law of universal gravitation, which does not strictly explain an experience or locate a force (that can be seen, heard, or touched), but simply states its effects.


96. One possible response, among others, to the problem of dwelling and earth alienation is bioregionalism. According to Kirkpatrick Sale, the bioregion is an area "defined by its life forms, its topography and its biota, rather than by human dictates; a