her than a specimen of the species. Totali-
of this species of the human race as the
ive, all powerful law. Whether it is seen as
of history, this law is actually the law of a
ugh mankind, that finds its embodiment in
ntly put into action by totalitarian leaders.
races on which history and nature have in
will be the first to be handed over to the
l for them. The ideologies that are carried out
s with unswerving and unprecedented con-
ly totalitarian and are much older than the
ve found their full expression. From within
d Stalin have often been accused of mediocrity
as enriched his ideology by even a single iota
overlooks the fact that these politicians, in
of their ideologies, could not help but discover
laws of motion in nature and history, whose
sk to accelerate. If it is the law of nature to
l and unfit for life, a logically consistent racial
ved by one-time terrorist eradications of certain
ories of parasitic and unfit lives can be found,
l of nature altogether—or at least the end of a
to serve such a law of motion in nature. Or if
history that in a war between the classes certain
en it would mean the end of human history if
discovered for the totalitarian government to
ing off. In other words, the law of killing, the
n movements come to power, remains in effect
ents themselves; and it would not change if the
kl come to pass, namely, if they achieved their
umanity under their sway.

Understanding and Politics
(The Difficulties of Understanding)

["Understanding and Politics" was published in *Partisan Review*, XX/4, 1954. Arendt had originally called it "The Difficulties of Understanding"; some material deleted from that first version has been reinstated here. The essay is based on the earlier sections of a long manuscript called "On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding," and additional material from those sections is given here in the notes at the end. The later sections of the manuscript are in the next essay. The Introduction to this volume contains further explanation.]

Es ist schwer, die Wahrheit zu sagen, denn es gibt zwar nur eine;
aber sie ist lebendig und hat daher ein lebendig wechselndes Gesicht. — Franz Kafka

MANY PEOPLE SAY that one cannot fight totalitarianism without understanding it.[1] Fortunately this is not true; if it were, our case would be hopeless. Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an

[1] The notes are at the end of the essay.

unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.

The fact that reconciliation is inherent in understanding has given rise to the popular misrepresentation *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. Yet forgiving has so little to do with understanding that it is neither its condition nor its consequence. Forgiving (certainly one of the greatest human capacities and perhaps the boldest of human actions insofar as it tries the seemingly impossible, to undo what has been done, and succeeds in making a new beginning where everything seemed to have come to an end) is a single action and culminates in a single act. Understanding is unending and therefore cannot produce final results. It is the specifically human way of being alive; for every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger. Understanding begins with birth and ends with death. To the extent that the rise of totalitarian governments is the central event of our world, to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all.

Many well-meaning people want to cut this process short in order to educate others and elevate public opinion. They think that books can be weapons and that one can fight with words. But weapons and fighting belong in the realm of violence, and violence, as distinguished from power, is mute; violence begins where speech ends. Words used for the purpose of fighting lose their quality of speech; they become clichés. The extent to which clichés have crept into our everyday language and discussions may well indicate the degree to which we not only have deprived ourselves of the faculty of speech, but are ready to use more effective means of violence than bad books (and only bad books can be good weapons) with which to settle our arguments.

The result of all such attempts is indoctrination. As an attempt to understand, it transcends the comparatively solid realm of facts and figures, from whose infinity it seeks to escape; as a short-cut in the transcending process itself, which it arbitrarily interrupts by pronouncing apodictic statements as though they had the reliability of facts and figures, it destroys the activity of understanding altogether. Indoctrination is dangerous because it springs primarily from a perversion, not

of knowledge, but of understanding. The result of understanding is meaning, which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer.

Indoctrination can only further the totalitarian fight against understanding, and, in any case, it introduces the element of violence into the whole realm of politics. A free country will make a very poor job of it compared with totalitarian propaganda and education; by employing and training its own "experts," who pretend to "understand" factual information by adding a non-scientific "evaluation" to research results, it can only advance those elements of totalitarian thinking which exist today in all free societies.[2]

This is, however, but one side of the matter. We cannot delay our fight against totalitarianism until we have "understood" it, because we do not, and cannot expect to understand it definitively as long as it has not definitively been defeated. The understanding of political and historical matters, since they are so profoundly and fundamentally human, has something in common with the understanding of people: who somebody essentially *is*, we know only after he is dead. This is the truth of the ancient *nemo ante mortem beatus esse dici potest*. For mortals, the final and eternal begins only after death.

The most obvious escape from this predicament is the equation of totalitarian government with some well-known evil of the past, such as aggression, tyranny, conspiracy. Here, it seems, we are on solid ground; for together with its evils, we think we have inherited the wisdom of the past to guide us through them. But the trouble with the wisdom of the past is that it dies, so to speak, in our hands as soon as we try to apply it honestly to the central political experiences of our own time.[3] Everything we know of totalitarianism demonstrates a horrible originality which no farfetched historical parallels can alleviate. We can escape from its impact only if we decide not to focus on its very nature, but to let our attention wander into the interminable connections and similarities which certain tenets of totalitarian doctrine necessarily show with familiar theories of occidental thought. Such similarities are inescapable. In the realm of pure theory and isolated concepts, there can be nothing new under the sun; but such similarities disappear completely as soon as one neglects theoretical formulations and concentrates on their practical application. The originality of totalitarianism is horrible, not because some new "idea" came into the world, but because its very actions

constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment.

In other words, the very event, the phenomenon, which we try—and must try—to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding. Nowhere was this perplexing condition more clearly revealed than in the abysmal failure of the Nuremberg Trials. The attempt to reduce the Nazi demographic policies to the criminal concepts of murder and persecution had the result, on the one hand, that the very enormity of the crimes rendered any conceivable punishment ridiculous; and, on the other, that no punishment could even be accepted as "legal," since it presupposed, together with obedience to the command "Thou shalt not kill," a possible range of motives, of qualities which cause men to become murderers and make them murderers, which quite obviously were completely absent in the accused.

Understanding, while it cannot be expected to provide results which are specifically helpful or inspiring in the fight against totalitarianism, must accompany this fight if it is to be more than a mere fight for survival. Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world (crystallizing elements found in that world, since totalitarian governments have not been imported from the moon), the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding. For, although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for. And the resignation, so characteristic of Europe during the last war and so precisely formulated by an English poet who said that "we who lived by noble dreams / defend the bad against the worse,"* will no longer suffice. In this sense, the activity of understanding is necessary; while it can never directly inspire the fight or provide otherwise missing objectives, it alone can make it meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart which perhaps will come into free play only after the battle is won.[4]

Knowledge and understanding are not the same, but they are interrelated. Understanding is based on knowledge and knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding. Preliminary understanding denounces totalitarianism as tyranny and has decided that our fight against it is a fight for freedom. It is true that whoever cannot

*C. Day Lewis, "Where Are the War Poets?" Lewis wrote "honest dreams." —Ed.

be mobilized on these grounds will probably not be mobilized at all. But many other forms of government have denied freedom, albeit never so radically as the totalitarian regimes, so that this denial is not the primary key to understanding totalitarianism. Preliminary understanding, however, no matter how rudimentary and even irrelevant it may ultimately prove to be, will certainly more effectively prevent people from joining a totalitarian movement than the most reliable information, the most perceptive political analysis, or the most comprehensive accumulated knowledge.[5]

Understanding precedes and succeeds knowledge. Preliminary understanding, which is at the basis of all knowledge, and true understanding, which transcends it, have this in common: They make knowledge meaningful. Historical description and political analysis[6] can never prove that there is such a thing as the *nature* or the *essence* of totalitarian government, simply because there is a *nature* to monarchical, republican, tyrannical, or despotic government. This specific nature is taken for granted by the preliminary understanding on which the sciences base themselves, and this preliminary understanding permeates as a matter of course, but not with critical insight, their whole terminology and vocabulary. True understanding always returns to the judgments and prejudices which preceded and guided the strictly scientific inquiry. The sciences can only illuminate, but neither prove nor disprove, the uncritical preliminary understanding from which they start. If the scientist, misguided by the very labor of his inquiry, begins to pose as an expert in politics and to despise the popular understanding from which he started, he loses immediately the Ariadne thread of common sense which alone will guide him securely through the labyrinth of his own results. If, on the other hand, the scholar wants to transcend his own knowledge—and there is no other way to make knowledge meaningful except by transcending it—he must become very humble again and listen closely to the popular language, in which words like "totalitarianism" are daily used as political clichés and misused as catchwords, in order to re-establish contact between knowledge and understanding.

The popular use of the word "totalitarianism" for the purpose of denouncing some supreme political evil is not much more than about five years old. Up to the end of the Second World War, and even during the first postwar years, the catchword for political evil was "imperialism." As such, it was generally used to denote aggression in foreign politics;

this identification was so thorough that the two terms could easily be exchanged one for the other. Similarly, totalitarianism is used today to denote lust for power, the will to dominate, terror, and a so-called monolithic state structure. The change itself is noteworthy. Imperialism remained a popular catchword long after the rise of Bolshevism, Fascism, and Nazism; obviously people had not yet caught up with events or did not believe that these new movements would eventually dominate the whole historical period. Not even a war with a totalitarian power, but only the actual downfall of imperialism (which was accepted after the liquidation of the British Empire and the reception of India into the British Commonwealth) marked the moment when the new phenomenon, totalitarianism, was admitted to have taken the place of imperialism as the central political issue of the era.

Yet while popular language thus recognizes a new event by accepting a new word, it invariably uses such concepts as synonyms for others signifying old and familiar evils—aggression and lust for conquest in the case of imperialism, terror and lust for power in the case of totalitarianism. The choice of the new word indicates that everybody knows that something new and decisive has happened, whereas its ensuing use, the identification of the new and specific phenomenon with something familiar and rather general, indicates unwillingness to admit that anything out of the ordinary has happened at all. It is as though with the first step, finding a new name for the new force which will determine our political destinies, we orient ourselves toward new and specific conditions, whereas with the second step (and, as it were, on second thought) we regret our boldness and console ourselves that nothing worse or less familiar will take place than general human sinfulness.

Popular language, as it expresses preliminary understanding, thus starts the process of true understanding.[7] Its discovery must always remain the content of true understanding, if it is not to lose itself in the clouds of mere speculation—a danger always present. It was the common uncritical understanding on the part of the people more than anything else that induced a whole generation of historians, economists, and political scientists to devote their best efforts to the investigation of the causes and consequences of imperialism, and, at the same time, to misrepresent it as "empire-building" in the Assyrian or Egyptian or Roman fashion and misunderstand its underlying motives as "lust for conquest," describing Cecil Rhodes as a second Napoleon and Napoleon as a second

Julius Caesar. Totalitarianism, similarly, has become a current topic of study only since preliminary understanding recognized it as the central issue and the most significant danger of the time. Again, the current interpretations even on the highest scholarly level let themselves be guided further by the design of preliminary understanding: they equate totalitarian domination with tyranny or one-party dictatorship, when they do not explain the whole thing away by reducing it to historical, social, or psychological causes relevant for only one country, Germany or Russia. It is evident that such methods do not advance efforts to understand, because they submerge whatever is unfamiliar and needs to be understood in a welter of familiarities and plausibilities.[8] It lies, as Nietzsche once remarked, in the province of the "development of science" to "dissolve the 'known' into the unknown:—but science *wants* to do the *opposite* and is inspired by the instinct to reduce the unknown to something which is known" (*Will to Power*, No. 608).

Yet has not the task of understanding become hopeless if it is true that we are confronted with something which has destroyed our categories of thought and standards of judgment? How can we measure length if we do not have a yardstick, how could we count things without the notion of numbers? Maybe it is preposterous even to think that anything can ever happen which our categories are not equipped to understand. Maybe we should resign ourselves to the preliminary understanding, which at once ranges the new among the old, and with the scientific approach, which follows it and deduces methodically the unprecedented from precedents, even though such a description of the new phenomena may be demonstrably at variance with the reality. Is not understanding so closely related to and inter-related with judging that one must describe both as the subsumption (of something particular under a universal rule) which according to Kant is the very definition of judgment, whose absence he so magnificently defined as "stupidity," an "infirmity beyond remedy" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 172–73)?

These questions are all the more pertinent because they are not restricted to our perplexity in understanding totalitarianism. The paradox of the modern situation seems to be that our need to transcend both preliminary understanding and the strictly scientific approach springs from the fact that we have lost our tools of understanding. Our quest for meaning is at the same time prompted and frustrated by our inability to originate meaning. Kant's definition of stupidity is by no

means beside the point. Since the beginning of this century, the growth of meaninglessness has been accompanied by loss of common sense. In many respects, this has appeared simply as an increasing stupidity. We know of no civilization before ours in which people were gullible enough to form their buying habits in accordance with the maxim that "self-praise is the highest recommendation," the assumption of all advertising. Nor is it likely that any century before ours could have been persuaded to take seriously a therapy which is said to help only if the patients pay a lot of money to those who administer it—unless, of course, there exists a primitive society where the handing over of money itself possesses magical power.

What has happened to the clever little rules of self-interest has happened on a much larger scale to all the spheres of ordinary life which, because they are ordinary, need to be regulated by customs. Totalitarian phenomena which can no longer be understood in terms of common sense and which defy all rules of "normal," that is, chiefly utilitarian, judgment are only the most spectacular instances of the breakdown of our common inherited wisdom. From the point of view of common sense, we did not need the rise of totalitarianism to show us that we are living in a topsy-turvy world, a world where we cannot find our way by abiding by the rules of what once was common sense. In this situation, stupidity in the Kantian sense has become the infirmity of everybody, and therefore can no longer be regarded as "beyond remedy." Stupidity has become as common as common sense was before; and this does not mean that it is a symptom of mass society or that "intelligent" people are exempt from it. The only difference is that stupidity remains blissfully inarticulate among the non-intellectuals and becomes unbearably offensive among "intelligent" people. Within the intelligentsia, one may even say that the more intelligent an individual happens to be, the more irritating is the stupidity which he has in common with all.

It seems like historical justice that Paul Valéry, the most lucid mind among the French, the classical people of *bon sens*, was the first to detect the bankruptcy of common sense in the modern world, where the most commonly accepted ideas have been "attacked, refuted, surprised and dissolved by *facts*," and where therefore we witness a "kind of insolvency of imagination and bankruptcy of understanding" (*Regards sur le monde actuel*). Much more surprising is that as early as the eighteenth century Montesquieu was convinced that only customs—which, being mores,

quite literally constitute the morality of every civilization—prevented a spectacular moral and spiritual breakdown of occidental culture. He certainly cannot be counted among the prophets of doom, but his cold and sober courage has hardly been matched by any of the famous historical pessimists of the nineteenth century.

The life of peoples, according to Montesquieu, is ruled by laws and customs; the two are distinguished in that "laws govern the actions of the citizen and customs govern the actions of man" (*L'Esprit des Lois*, Book XIX, ch. 16). Laws establish the realm of public political life, and customs establish the realm of society. The downfall of nations begins with the undermining of lawfulness, whether the laws are abused by the government in power, or the authority of their source becomes doubtful and questionable. In both instances, laws are no longer held valid. The result is that the nation, together with its "belief" in its own laws, loses its capacity for responsible political action; the people cease to be citizens in the full sense of the word. What then still remains (and incidentally explains the frequent longevity of political bodies whose lifeblood has ebbed away) are the customs and traditions of society. So long as they are intact, men as private individuals continue to behave according to certain patterns of morality. But this morality has lost its foundation. Tradition can be trusted to prevent the worst only for a limited time. Every incident can destroy customs and morality which no longer have their foundation in lawfulness; every contingency must threaten a society which is no longer guaranteed by citizens.

For his own time and its immediate prospects, Montesquieu had this to say: "The majority of the nations of Europe are still ruled by customs. But if through a long abuse of power, if through some large conquest, despotism should establish itself at a given point, there would be neither customs nor climate to resist; and in this beautiful part of the world, human nature would suffer, at least for a time, the insults which have been inflicted on it in the three others" (*L'Esprit des Lois*, Book VIII, ch. 8). In this passage, Montesquieu outlines the political dangers to a political body which is held together only by customs and traditions, that is, by the mere binding force of morality. The dangers could appear from within, as misuse of power, or from without, as aggression. The factor that was eventually to bring about the downfall of customs in the early nineteenth century, he could not foresee. It came from that radical change in the world which we call the Industrial Revolution, certainly

the greatest revolution in the shortest span of time mankind has ever witnessed; in a few decades it changed our whole globe more radically than all the three thousand years of recorded history before it. Reconsidering Montesquieu's fears, which were voiced almost one hundred years before this revolution developed its full force, it is tempting to reflect on the probable course of European civilization without the impact of this one, all-overriding factor. One conclusion seems inescapable: the great change took place within a political framework whose foundations were no longer secure and therefore overtook a society which, although it was still able to understand and to judge, could no longer give an account of its categories of understanding and standards of judgment when they were seriously challenged. In other words, Montesquieu's fears, which sounded so strange in the eighteenth century and would have sounded so commonplace in the nineteenth, may at least give us a hint of the explanation, not of totalitarianism or any other specific modern event, but of the disturbing fact that our great tradition has remained so peculiarly silent, so obviously wanting in productive replies, when challenged by the "moral" and political questions of our own time. The very sources from which such answers should have sprung had dried up. The very framework within which understanding and judging could arise is gone.

However, Montesquieu's fears go even further, and therefore come even closer to our present perplexity than the passage quoted above would indicate.[9] His main fear, which he puts at the head of his whole work, concerns more than the welfare of the European nations and the continued existence of political freedom. It concerns human nature itself: "Man, this flexible being, who bends himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of others, is equally capable of knowing his own nature when it is shown to him and of losing the very sense of it (*d'en perdre jusqu'au sentiment*) when he is being robbed of it" (*L'Esprit des Lois*, "Preface"). To us, who are confronted with the very realistic totalitarian attempt to rob man of his nature under the pretext of changing it, the courage of these words is like the boldness of youth, which may risk everything in imagination because nothing has yet happened to give the imagined dangers their horrible concreteness. What is envisaged here is more than loss of the capacity for political action, which is the central condition of tyranny, and more than growth of meaninglessness and loss of common sense (and common sense is only that part of our mind and

that portion of inherited wisdom which all men have in common in any given civilization); it is the loss of the quest for meaning and need for understanding. We know how very close the people under totalitarian domination have been brought to this condition of meaninglessness, by means of terror combined with training in ideological thinking, although they no longer experience it as such.[10]

In our context, the peculiar and ingenious replacement of common sense with stringent logicality, which is characteristic of totalitarian thinking, is particularly noteworthy. Logicality is not identical with ideological reasoning, but indicates the totalitarian transformation of the respective ideologies. If it was the peculiarity of the ideologies themselves to treat a scientific hypothesis, like "the survival of the fittest" in biology or "the survival of the most progressive class" in history, as an "idea" which could be applied to the whole course of events, then it is the peculiarity of their totalitarian transformation to pervert the "idea" into a premise in the logical sense, that is, into some self-evident statement from which everything else can be deduced in stringent logical consistency. (Here truth becomes indeed what some logicians pretend it is, namely, consistency, except that this equation actually implies the negation of the existence of truth insofar as truth is always supposed to reveal something, whereas consistency is only a mode of fitting statements together, and as such lacks the power of revelation. The new logical movement in philosophy, which grew out of pragmatism, has a frightening affinity with the totalitarian transformation of the pragmatic elements inherent in all ideologies into logicality, which severs its ties to reality and experience altogether.* Of course, totalitarianism proceeds

*At a conference held the year this essay was published, Arendt further distinguished totalitarianism from pragmatism. "Totalitarianism is distinguished from pragmatism in that it no longer believes that reality as such can teach anything and, consequently, has lost the earlier Marxist respect for facts. Pragmatism, even in the Leninist version, still assumes with the tradition of occidental thought that reality reveals truth to man, although it asserts that not contemplation, but action is the proper truth-revealing attitude. . . . Pragmatism always assumes the validity of experience and 'acts' accordingly; totalitarianism assumes only the validity of the law of a moving History or Nature. Whoever acts in accordance with this law no longer needs particular experiences." *Totalitarianism: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, March 1953*, edited, with an introduction, by C. J. Friedrich, Cambridge, MA, 1954, 228. —Ed.

in a cruder fashion, which unfortunately, by the same token, is also more effective.)

The chief political distinction between common sense and logic is that common sense presupposes a common world into which we all fit, where we can live together because we possess one sense which controls and adjusts all strictly particular sense data to those of all others; whereas logic and all self-evidence from which logical reasoning proceeds can claim a reliability altogether independent of the world and the existence of other people. It has often been observed that the validity of the statement 2 + 2 = 4 is independent of the human condition, that it is equally valid for God and man. In other words, wherever common sense, the political sense par excellence, fails us in our need for understanding, we are all too likely to accept logicality as its substitute, because the capacity for logical reasoning itself is also common to us all. But this common human capacity which functions even under conditions of complete separation from world and experience and which is strictly "within" us, without any bond to something "given," is unable to understand anything and, left to itself, utterly sterile. Only under conditions where the common realm *between* men is destroyed and the only reliability left consists in the meaningless tautologies of the self-evident can this capacity become "productive," develop its own lines of thought, whose chief political characteristic is that they always carry with them a compulsory power of persuasion. To equate thought and understanding with these logical operations means to level the capacity for thought, which for thousands of years has been deemed to be the highest capacity of man, to its lowest common denominator, where no differences in actual existence count any longer, not even the qualitative difference between the essence of God and men.

For those engaged in the quest for meaning and understanding, what is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment. Newness is the realm of the historian, who—unlike the natural scientist, who is concerned with ever-recurring happenings—deals with events which always occur only once. This newness can be manipulated if the historian insists on causality and pretends to be able to explain events by a chain of causes which eventually led up to them. He then, indeed, poses as the "prophet turned backward" (F. von Schlegel, *Athenaeum*, Frag. 80), and all that separates him from

the gifts of real prophecy seems to be the deplorable physical limitations of the human brain, which unfortunately cannot contain and combine correctly all causes operating at the same time. Causality, however, is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences. Not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past "causes" which we may assign to it (one has only to think of the grotesque disparity between "cause" and "effect" in an event like the First World War[11]), but this past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it.[12]

Whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past, history comes into being. Only then does the chaotic maze of past happenings emerge as a story which can be told, because it has a beginning and an end. Herodotus is not merely the first historiographer: in the words of Karl Reinhardt, "history exists since Herodotus" ("Herodotus Persergeschichten," *Von Werken und Formen*, 1948)—that is, the Greek past became history through the light shed on it by the Persian Wars. What the illuminating event reveals is a beginning in the past which had hitherto been hidden; to the eye of the historian, the illuminating event cannot but appear as an end of this newly discovered beginning. Only when in future history a new event occurs will this "end" reveal itself as a beginning to the eye of future historians. And the eye of the historian is only the scientifically trained gaze of human understanding; we can *understand* an event only as the end and the culmination of everything that happened before, as "fulfillment of the times"; only in action will we proceed, as a matter of course, from the changed set of circumstances that the event has created, that is, treat it as a beginning.

Whoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality actually denies the subject matter of his own science.[13] Such a belief can be concealed in the application of general categories to the whole course of happenings, such as challenge and response, or in the search for general trends which supposedly are the "deeper" strata from which events spring and whose accessory symptoms they are. Such generalizations and categorizations extinguish the "natural" light history itself offers and, by the same token, destroy the actual story, with its unique distinction and its eternal meaning, that each historical period has to tell us. Within the framework of preconceived categories, the crudest

of which is causality, events in the sense of something irrevocably new can never happen; history without events becomes the dead monotony of sameness, unfolded in time—Lucretius's *eadem sunt omnia semper*.[14]

Just as in our personal lives our worst fears and best hopes will never adequately prepare us for what actually happens—because the moment even a foreseen event takes place, everything changes, and we can never be prepared for the inexhaustible literalness of this "everything"—so each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins. It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected *new* with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance. He must know that, though his story has a beginning and an end, it occurs within a larger frame, history itself.[15] And history is a story which has many beginnings but no end. The end in any strict and final sense of the word could only be the disappearance of man from the earth. For whatever the historian calls an end, the end of a period or a tradition or a whole civilization, is a new beginning for those who are alive.[16] The fallacy of all prophecies of doom lies in the disregard of this simple but fundamental fact.

For the historian, to remain aware of this fact will be of no greater importance than to check what the French would call his *déformation professionelle*. Since he is concerned with the past, that is, with certain movements which could not even be grasped by the mind if they had not come to some kind of end, he has only to generalize in order to see an end (and doom) everywhere. It is only natural for him to see in history a story with many ends and no beginning; and this inclination becomes really dangerous only when—for whatever reasons—people begin to make a philosophy out of history as it presents itself to the professional eyes of the historian. Nearly all modern explications of the so-called historicity of man have been distorted by categories which, at best, are working hypotheses for arranging the material of the past.[17]

Fortunately, the situation of the political sciences, which in the highest sense are called upon to pursue the quest for meaning and to answer the need for true understanding of political data, is quite different. The great consequence which the concept of beginning and origin has for all strictly political questions comes from the simple fact that political action, like all action, is essentially always the beginning of

something new; as such, it is, in terms of political science, the very essence of human freedom. The central position which the concept of beginning and origin must have in all political thought has been lost only since the historical sciences have been permitted to supply the field of politics with their methods and categories. The centrality of origin was indicated, as a matter of course, for Greek thought in the fact that the Greek word *archē* means both beginning and rule. It is still fully alive, though generally overlooked by modern interpreters, in Machiavelli's theory of political power, according to which the act of foundation itself—that is, the conscious beginning of something new—requires and justifies the use of violence. In its full significance, however, the importance of beginnings was discovered by the one great thinker who lived in a period which, in some respects, resembled our own more than any other in recorded history, and who in addition wrote under the full impact of a catastrophic end which perhaps resembles the end to which we have come. Augustine, in his *Civitas Dei* (Book XII, ch. 20), said: *"Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit"* ("That there might be a beginning, man was created before whom nobody was"). According to Augustine, who might rightly be called the father of all Western philosophy of history, man not only has the capacity of beginning, but is this beginning himself.[18] If the creation of man coincides with the creation of a beginning in the universe (and what else does this mean but the creation of freedom?), then the birth of individual men, being new beginnings, re-affirms the *original* character of man in such a way that origin can never become entirely a thing of the past; the very fact of the memorable continuity of these beginnings in the sequence of generations guarantees a history which can never end because it is the history of beings whose essence is beginning.

In light of these reflections, our endeavoring to understand something which has ruined our categories of thought and our standards of judgment appears less frightening. Even though we have lost yardsticks by which to measure, and rules under which to subsume the particular, a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality. If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action, namely, that form of cognition, distinct from many others, by which acting men (and not men who are

engaged in contemplating some progressive or doomed course of history) eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists.

As such, understanding is a strange enterprise. In the end, it may do no more than articulate and confirm what preliminary understanding, which always consciously or unconsciously is directly engaged in action, sensed to begin with.[19] It will not shy away from this circle but, on the contrary, will be aware that any other results would be so far removed from action, of which understanding is only the other side, that they could not possibly be true. Nor will the process itself avoid the circle the logicians call "vicious"; it may in this respect even somewhat resemble philosophy, in which great thoughts always turn in circles, engaging the human mind in nothing less than an interminable dialogue between itself and the essence of everything that is.[20]

In this sense the old prayer which King Solomon, who certainly knew something of political action, addressed to God—for the gift of an "understanding heart" as the greatest gift a man could receive and desire—might still hold for us. As far removed from sentimentality as it is from paperwork, the human heart is the only thing in the world that will take upon itself the burden that the divine gift of action, of being a beginning and therefore being able to make a beginning, has placed upon us. Solomon prayed for this particular gift because he was a king and knew that only an "understanding heart," and not mere reflection or mere feeling, makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and makes it possible for them to bear with us.[21]

If we wish to translate the biblical language into terms that are closer to our speech (though hardly more accurate), we may call the faculty of imagination the gift of the "understanding heart." In distinction from fantasy, which dreams something, imagination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real. Whenever we talk of the "nature" or "essence" of a thing, we actually mean this innermost kernel, of whose existence we can never be so sure as we are of darkness and density. True understanding does not tire of interminable dialogue and "vicious circles," because it trusts that imagination eventually will catch at least a glimpse of the always frightening light of truth. To distinguish imagination from fancy and to mobilize its power does not mean that understanding of human affairs becomes "irrational." On the contrary, imagination, as Wordsworth said, "is but another name for . . . clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And Reason in her most exalted mood" (*The Prelude*, Book XIV, 190–92).

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding, for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact and mere knowledge erects artificial barriers.

Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding,[22] we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have. We are contemporaries only so far as our understanding reaches. 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 the essence of totalitarianism.

NOTES

1. Additional material from the manuscript: From this they conclude that in light of the complex structure of the phenomenon, only organized research, that is, the combined efforts of the historical, economic, social, and psychological sciences, can produce understanding. This, I think, is as wrong as it sounds plausible. Information contained in every newspaper in the free world and experience suffered every day in the totalitarian world are enough to launch the fight against totalitarianism. But neither of these, together or alone, promotes any true understanding of its nature. Nor will understanding ever be the product of questionnaires, interviews, statistics, or the scientific evaluation of these data.

2. Facts must be enough; they can only lose their weight and poignancy through evaluation or moral preaching. There no longer exists any accepted morality upon which sermons can be based and there does not yet exist any rule which would promote non-arbitrary evaluation. The actual fight against totalitarianism needs no more than a steady flow of reliable information. If from these facts an appeal emerges, an appeal to Freedom and Justice, to mobilize people for the fight, then this appeal will not be a piece of abstract rhetoric.