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## Between past and future : six exercises in political thought / Hannah Arendt

In this part of the story Plato touches upon the deepest reason for the conflict between the philosopher and the polis. And it is true that self-control has remained one of the specifically political virtues, if only because it is an outstanding phenomenon of virtue where I-will and I-can must be so well attuned that they practically coincide. This diagonal force would in one respect differ from the two forces whose result it is.

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Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, book I, chap. They too can be seen in their full significance only if their common root is discovered. Their common denominator is immortality.

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For very long times in our history, actually throughout the thousands of years that followed upon the foundation of Rome and were determined by Roman concepts. This aspect of Plato's doctrine of ideas had the greatest influence on the Western tradition, and even Kant, though he had a very different and considerably deeper concept of human judgment, still occasionally mentioned this capacity for subsuming as its essential function. *The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance* 7.

## Between Past and Future

The actual consequence of this political interpretation of the doctrine of ideas would be that neither man nor a god is the measure of all things, but the good itself—a consequence which apparently Aristotle, not Plato, drew in one of his earlier dialogues.

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That tradition, our heritage from Rome, no longer relieves us of the necessity of thought by supplying usable, ready-made answers. There is nothing in this situation that is altogether new.

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Thus, without premonition and probably against their conscious inclinations, they had come to constitute willy-nilly a public realm where-without the paraphernalia of officialdom and hidden from the eyes of friend and foe-all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in deed and word. History receives into its remembrance those mortals who through deed and word have proved themselves worthy of nature, and their everlasting fame means that they, despite their mortality, may remain in the company of the things that last forever. Before the generation of Rene Char, whom we have chosen here as its representative, found itself thrown out of literary pursuits into the commitments of action, another generation, only slightly older, had turned to politics for the solution of philosophic perplexities and had tried to escape from thought into action.

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No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from The Viking Press, Inc. This gradual shift of emphasis is not arbitrary, because there is an element of experiment in the critical interpretation of the past, an interpretation whose chief aim is to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language-such as freedom and justice, authority and reason, responsibility and virtue, power and glory-leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality.

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In this predicament action, with its involvement and commitment, its being engaged, seemed to hold out the hope, not of solving any problems, but of making it possible to live with them without becoming, as Sartre once put it, a scoundrel, a hypocrite. The testament, telling the heir what will rightfully be his, wills past possessions for a future. Had ancient philosophy known of a possible conflict between what I can and what I will, it would certainly have understood the phenomenon of freedom as an inherent quality of the I-can, or it might conceivably have defined it as the coincidence of I-will and I-can; it certainly would not have thought of it as an attribute of the I-will or I-would.

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