

# Approaching political responsibility

A biographical approach of political responsibility in Arendt and Weber



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## Introduction

In a political investigation, one possible approach is the conceptual approach. In a conceptual analysis a concept is decomposed into fundamental constituents. Its necessary and sufficient conditions are determined. This is an a priori analysis of concepts. This is a popular approach: “[f]or many, philosophy is essentially the a priori analysis of concepts, which can and should be done without leaving the proverbial armchair (...) it specifies a set of conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for the application of the concept”.<sup>1</sup> For advocates of this approach, “the analysis of a concept is successful to the extent that the proposed definition matches people’s intuitions about particular cases, including hypothetical cases that figure in crucial thought experiments”.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to the conceptual approach, a biographical approach can be used. The task of a biography is “to enrich understanding in these two ways: by attending, so to speak, to the tone of voice in which a writer expresses himself or herself and by accumulating personal facts that will allow us to see what is said in a different light”.<sup>3</sup> This approach thus seeks a connection between the life and the work of philosophers. Biographical facts can be used to better understand (the purpose of) philosophical work.

This bachelor thesis will use such a biographical approach in understanding the influence of the life of Arendt and Weber on their concept of ‘political responsibility’. In understanding their concept of political responsibility, a conceptual or analytical approach is used. Political responsibility is complex, as it involves the question of what is right and wrong, when is one responsible and who is then responsible? However, these are important questions to ask, as it is often necessary to determine who is politically responsible. Famous and/or contemporary examples of attempts to determine such responsibility are the *Toeslagenaffaire*, the “police actions” in Indonesia, the Srebrenica massacre, the evacuation of Dutch military and personnel from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the Dutch air raid on a car bomb factory in Hawija, MH17 and the Nuremberg trials. Other examples are determining the responsibility of the government in issues such as air pollution and health personnel long-covid. Legally there are ways of determining political responsibility. An example of this is the responsibility of the Netherlands in the Srebrenica massacre. The Netherlands is 10 percent liable for the

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence, "Concepts," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition).

<sup>2</sup> Margolis and Laurence, “Concepts”.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Monk, “Philosophical Biography: The Very Idea,” in *Wittgenstein: Biography and Philosophy*, ed. James C. Klagge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

murder of 350 men in this massacre. This means that the Netherlands has to compensate 10 percent of the damage of the surviving relatives.<sup>4</sup>

The philosophical meaning of political responsibility however, is more difficult to grasp. Both Hannah Arendt and Max Weber explore this concept. Their notions of political responsibility differ. This bachelor thesis will explore the impact of Arendt's and Weber's life – using a biographical approach – on their notion of political responsibility – explored using a conceptual approach. Arendt and Weber are used as examples to support the central thesis: **using a biographical approach enriches and deepens the understanding of complex, philosophical concepts**. The philosophical concept explored is political responsibility.

In validating this thesis, the first chapter will explore what Arendt's definition of political responsibility is. The second chapter will discuss Arendt's life, highlighting two important aspects: her Jewishness and the stateless period of her life. In this chapter these aspects will be connected to Arendt's definition of political responsibility. For biographical facts on Arendt the standard biography by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, titled 'Hannah Arendt for love of the world', is used. Other sources are used to further explore Arendt's biography and its meaning. In the third chapter Weber's notion of political responsibility is explored. In the fourth chapter, his life story will be discussed, especially focussing on the rule of Otto von Bismarck, life in post-war Germany and his Protestantism. In this chapter a connection to Weber's notion of political responsibility will be explicitly made. For Weber's life story two biographies are used: one written by his wife Marianne Weber and one written by Joachim Radkau. In the final chapter 'Conclusion' the outcomes will be discussed and a careful comparison will be made between Arendt and Weber.

## Thesis

Using a biographical approach enriches and deepens the understanding of complex, philosophical concepts.

## Sub-questions

1. How does Hannah Arendt define and explore political responsibility?
2. How is Hannah Arendt's notion of political responsibility embedded in her biography?
3. How does Max Weber define and explore political responsibility?

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<sup>4</sup> Kristel van Teeffelen, "Moeders van Srebrenica teleurgesteld, Nederland 10 procent aansprakelijk voor dood van hun zonen," *Trouw*, July 19, 2019 <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/moeders-van-srebrenica-teleurgesteld-nederland-10-procent-aansprakelijk-voor-dood-van-hun-zonen~bdf7eef7/> (accessed June 5, 2022).

4. How is Max Weber's notion of political responsibility embedded in her biography?

## 1. Hannah Arendt on political responsibility

In answering the first sub-question ‘How does Hannah Arendt define and explore political responsibility?’ this chapter will first explain that human existence is being-in-the-world and being-with-others in the public realm. Then it will be explained that it is this public realm where an act – so not intentions, motivations or identities – can be judged. After this, the guiding character of (political) principles for these acts will be clarified. Finally, (the necessity of) Arendt’s *amor mundi* will be explained demonstrating the core of Arendt’s notion of judgement and responsibility.

### Public life and freedom

Arendt emphasizes the world – or the space between men – as the condition for human freedom. In this space the political act arises and here it can be judged. The existence of the public realm is far from inevitable where people are gathered, because it is artificial. Therefore, “if it is to be preserved, it may require each actor’s continuing care”.<sup>5</sup> The public realm is sustained by human beings and constituted “for and through the principle of human freedom”.<sup>6</sup>

Arendt writes that human existence means to appear.<sup>7</sup> Human existence is not only a being-in-the-world, but also being-of-the-world, i.e., observing and being observed. This being-of-the-world is also a being-with-others, as people together form a common world. Therefore Arendt argues that freedom is a public achievement. Through speech and action a form of friendship among men arises, in the sense that one is willing to share the world with others.

Grounded on this willingness to share the world, Arendt advocates “a new culture based on a public way of life”.<sup>8</sup> Man should be committed to a public community. This community is political. Its members recognize the equality among citizens and “the superiority of care for the world and communal well-being over private interests”.<sup>9</sup> Arendt argues that this well-being, or happiness, is an achievement of public freedom: man departs his private life and enters a community, he is visible to others. He is engaged in the re-public, i.e., the public thing. In the public realm one’s self or identity is not at the centre, it is one’s deeds that are

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<sup>5</sup> Garrath Williams, “Love and Responsibility: a Political Ethic for Hannah Arendt,” *Political Studies* 46, no. 5 (December, 1998): 940.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, “Love,” 940.

<sup>7</sup> James Bernauer, “The Faith of Hannah Arendt: *Amor Mundi* and its Critique – Assimilation of Religious Experience,” in *Amor Mundi*, ed. James Bernauer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 4.

<sup>9</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 4.

significant.<sup>10</sup> Identity is disclosed in these acts and through action one can influence public life. Politics is thus “[a] self-chosen mode of being-of-the-world”, which “consists essentially in constituting small re-publics within which freedom can be practiced”.<sup>11</sup>

### The greatness of deeds

As explained above, political action arises in the public and here it can be judged. According to Arendt greatness, and not goodness, is the only valid criterion by which a political act can be judged. Goodness has no place in the public realm, as it is an end: it leaves no room for rival claims and it is beyond speech and persuasion. Since an end exceeds all other claims, “in its absolute nature lies justification for the means of its realisation, and these, in turn, will tend to be destructive of human living and acting together”.<sup>12</sup> There can be no such things as an end in the public realm, every act ought to be provisional and to rely on cooperation. Thus, however pure one’s intentions, goodness does not belong in the public realm, as one may not lay claim to an end.

Contrary to goodness, greatness can be used as a criterion to judge a political act, Arendt writes that “[g]reatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement”.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above, in the public realm, where political acts are to be judged, one’s deeds are significant and not for instance one’s identity or intentions.

Each act brings something new into the public realm, initiating a chain of events. One’s act, which is tied to one’s identity and represents something personal, ties one to the world. This world is not simply good and may reject an action.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore difficult to know what the right action is. In order to solve this difficulty, one ought to understand Arendt’s distinction between principles and motives. First, the scope of responsibility will be further clarified, before going further into these principles and motives.

### The great scope of responsibility

Arendt argues that an actor is not only responsible for present deeds, but also for past and future actions and for the actions carried out by others in our community. First, Arendt argues that the actor is to be held accountable for past and future actions. Thus, “political responsibility is something that principal political agents, such as governments, unavoidably

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, “Love,” 941.

<sup>11</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 4.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, “Love,” 941.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 205.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, “Love,” 942.

assume not only for their own acts and decisions but also for the deeds and misdeeds of the past”.<sup>15</sup> Notice that Arendt speaks of political agents, such as government, and not of common men. Arendt uses forgiveness and promising as illustrations of this accountability towards respectively the past and the future.

Secondly, there is also the responsibility for deeds done by others. In her essay *Collective Responsibility* Arendt explains that one can also be responsible for deeds not conducted by oneself. Namely, when there is collective responsibility. Arendt writes that there are two conditions for this collective responsibility: “I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve”.<sup>16</sup> Such responsibility depends on the nature of the collective. Arendt gives the (counter)example of a swimmer who drowns in the sea while there are thousand experienced swimmers on the beach. She argues that in this case there is no collective responsibility involved, as there was no collectivity to begin with.

Concerning political communities, we cannot escape collective responsibility. The only escape would be to leave the community, but we cannot live without belonging to one. Leaving a community would thus mean to exchange one community, and its collective responsibility, for another. This great scope of responsibility may seem unfair, but Arendt writes that “[t]his vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellowmen”.<sup>17</sup>

### Principles, action and motives

Due to this great scope of responsibility, it may seem as though our responsibility is endless and arbitrary. This can however be nuanced using Arendt’s distinction between principles and motives, as actions carry within them motives and principles. Principles only exist in the world, they do not act from within the individual, but they inspire from without. Examples of principles named by Arendt herself, in reference to Montesquieu, are “honour or glory, love of equality (...) but also fear or distrust or hatred”.<sup>18</sup> They cannot dictate any goals, as

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<sup>15</sup> Tuija Parvikko, “A Note on Max Weber’s Impact on Hannah Arendt’s Thought,” *Max Weber Studies* 4, no. 2 (July, 2004): 246.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” in *Amor Mundi*, ed. James Bernauer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Arendt, “Collective,” 50.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 152.



principles are too general. Still, an aim can be reviewed in the light of its principle, after the act is initiated.

Action springs from principles. In other words, principles are manifested through action, only as long as the action lasts. An action carries within it its principle, saving it from arbitrariness. When other actors join an action undertaken by an individual, they join in the original principle. In other words, principles inspire actions that follow the original action and when the acts and opinions of other actors are inspired by the same principle, power arises. This neither means that everyone continuously has a clear notion of this principle, nor that the first actor knows precisely what principle is manifested through his actions. The focus is rather on the actual deeds, than on the self who acts.

Motives are drives of the body and the heart, they are situated within the self and not on the public stage. An unprincipled act, i.e., an act assessed in terms of motives, is only public in the sense that it is performed in the company of others. When these acts do find a place on the public stage, it corrupts freedom and action: the actor presents upon the public stage his drives and desires, “which, since they cannot permit of negotiation or principled ordering, inevitably spell confusion and chaos”.<sup>19</sup>

A political action can be judged or understood using these notions of principles and motives. This does not mean that one is good and the other is bad: principled action may be based on dubious motives and actions without clear principles can still be based on pure motives. However, under normal circumstances, meaning the absence of any emergencies, we must concern ourselves with the preservation of the public realm, since it is a condition for human freedom. In this light, one can appreciate, together with Arendt, the guiding character of (political) principles, as it allows a plurality of actors to constitute the public realm.

### *Amor mundi*

Responsibility thus includes responding to others and to the world regarding past and future actions. The world “is the space between persons, fashioned through political action and the durable works which constitute a culture”.<sup>20</sup> Responding to others and to this world is required in order to live together. Not doing so would mean wreckage of the world as the space between men. What saves us from this wreckage is action under a principle, which shows one’s love and responsibility. Because of action under a principle, an action is no

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<sup>19</sup> Williams, “Love,” 944.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, “Love,” 940.

longer arbitrary, because the principle “shines forth with some quality which makes human living together not only possible but meaningful”.<sup>21</sup> The actor responds to the world as it is and carries an ideal into the world, i.e. the actor has a care for the world.

Carrying an ideal into the world is done through willing. The will is the “mental endowment we have for beginning something new”.<sup>22</sup> The will is an I-can, which provides the mind with self-confidence and “prepares an individual will for association with others in creating common action, in demonstrating shared freedom”.<sup>23</sup> Love for the world – or *amor mundi* – as the love for that which is created by acting in the world together, is an essential dimension of this shared freedom. This love

manifests itself through a willingness to judge, our ability to think for ourselves but, more importantly, our capacity to escape our selves and consider experience in a worldly fashion. This means, and this is the heart of [Arendt’s] view of judgment, the consideration and evaluation of experience not only from our own perspective but from that of others. Although she was sharply criticized for her readiness to judge, it had become for her an inescapable human responsibility in our time.<sup>24</sup>

Here, the core of Arendt’s conception of judgement becomes clear: it is necessary to judge and to judge is to take both our own perspective and that of others into account. The love of the world “attempts to overcome the world-alienation which is the source for both the radical evil of totalitarian practice and the cooperation in it by the thoughtless which she spoke of as the banality of evil”.<sup>25</sup> This necessity, or obligation, to judge becomes especially apparent in Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She discusses the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who lacked the capacity to will something deviating from his superior’s orders and his duties. Eichmann had an inability to judge, because he was unable to “look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view”.<sup>26</sup> This inability to judge was “grounded in a self-ish concern with his own interests and an absence of love for the world”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, “Love,” 950.

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 195.

<sup>23</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 6.

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1965), 48.

<sup>27</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 5.

### Arendt on political responsibility

In conclusion, Arendt argues that being-in-the-world constitutes a public realm by entering and acting in public life. In the public realms acts can be judged. Each act brings something new into the public realm, initiating a chain of events with unknown consequences. Even though there are unforeseen consequences, one is still responsible. Arendt explains that actions spring from principles, saving it from arbitrariness. By principled action the actor responds to the world as it is and carries an ideal into the world. In other words, the actor has love for the world and this love manifests itself through a willingness to make judgements.

## 2. Arendt's life and political responsibility

Arendt's intellectual identity was suspended between countries, cultures and epochs.<sup>28</sup> Two themes can be discerned from Arendt's eventful life, both influencing her thinking and philosophical career greatly: her Jewishness and her period of being stateless. In answering the sub-question 'How is Hannah Arendt's notion of political responsibility embedded in her biography?' both themes will be discussed and connected to Arendt's notion of political responsibility.

### Jewishness

Hannah Arendt was born in 1906 into a Jewish family. Arendt was "a bright and independent child, though becoming increasingly prone to melancholy and detachment as an adolescent".<sup>29</sup> She was very intelligent and introspective. As a gymnasium and later as a university student, Arendt "found herself within the overlapping orbits of philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger".<sup>30</sup> These two German philosophers awakened and influenced Arendt's philosophical abilities. However, the political and economic developments in Germany in the 1920s and the growing realisation of how her (Jewish) background stood in the way of a free intellectual and academic life, made Arendt receptive to other and especially Jewish intellectual influences. One of them was Zionist Kurt Blumenfeld, who "awakened and fostered her sense of her Jewish identity and introduced her to the renewal of Jewish consciousness the Zionists had undertaken".<sup>31</sup> According to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, whom Arendt mentored and advised and who wrote the standard biography about her, Arendt became "a Zionist for practical political reasons – because she knew people needed a place to live – and not for religious or cultural ones".<sup>32</sup> She did not identify explicitly with the Zionists.<sup>33</sup>

The first part of her life, Arendt was hardly interested in politics: she did not care for politics and found the Jewish question boring.<sup>34</sup> In the early 1930s however, Arendt could not uphold this disinterestedness: "[w]ith the collapse of the German economy, the electoral success of the Nazis, and the spreading plague of anti-Semitism, the Jewish question no longer seemed

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<sup>28</sup> Steven Weiland, "Biography, Rhetoric, and Intellectual Careers: Writing the Life of Hannah Arendt," *Biography* 22, no. 3 (1999): 379.

<sup>29</sup> Weiland, "Biography," 376.

<sup>30</sup> Weiland, "Biography," 376.

<sup>31</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt For Love of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 70.

<sup>32</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Arendt*, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, "Hannah Arendt on the Stateless," *Parallax* 11, no. 1 (2005): 46.

<sup>34</sup> David Arndt, *Arendt on the Political* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 9.

boring”.<sup>35</sup> She began to work on a biography of Rahel Varnhagen, an eighteenth-century Jewish intellectual. Arendt writes: “I wrote it with the idea, ‘I want to understand.’ I wasn’t discussing my personal problems as a Jew. But now, belonging to Judaism had become my own problem, and my own problem was political. Purely political!”<sup>36</sup> Due to the developments in Germany, the Jewish question had become her problem and thus she turned to politics. Later, in 1964, Arendt was asked what event marked this turn to politics. Arendt responded: “I would say February 27, 1933, the burning of the Reichstag, and the illegal arrests that followed during the same night. (...) This was an immediate shock for me, and from that moment on I felt responsible. That is, I was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander”.<sup>37</sup>

In this reflection of the burning of the Reichstag, we see Arendt arguing that there are public events after which we can no longer stand passively by: “[a] situation calls for action, and we ourselves feel called upon to act (...) Our centre of gravity shifts from private to public life”.<sup>38</sup>

This emphasis on public life is clearly present in Arendt’s writing on political responsibility. As explained in the previous chapter, being-in-the-world constitutes a public realm by entering and acting in public life. Being-in-the-world is simultaneously a being-with-others. Arendt advocates “a new culture based on a public way of life”.<sup>39</sup> Man should be committed to a public community. Each act brings something new into the public realm, initiating a chain of events with unknown consequences. Such an act, or a manifestation, in the public realm becomes *political* when there is active citizenship, meaning action is based “on the value and importance of civic engagement and collective deliberation about all matters affecting the political community”.<sup>40</sup> Political acts concern articulation from different perspectives. Arendt’s realisation in response to the burning of the Reichstag of a shift from private to public life, can be recognised in the emphasis she puts on the public realm in her discussion of political responsibility.

Furthermore, Arendt writes in her reflection on the burning of the Reichstag that it was no longer an option for her to simply be a bystander, as she felt responsible. This realisation is also present in Arendt’s notion of *amor mundi*, i.e., love for the world, and the necessity to

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<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *Political*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *Essays*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Arendt, *Political*, 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 4.

<sup>40</sup> Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves, “Hannah Arendt,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019).

judge. When an actor has love for the world, this love manifests itself through a willingness to make judgements. It is necessary to judge and to judge is to take both our own perspective and that of others into account. Arendt was criticized for this readiness to judge, but “it had become for her an inescapable human responsibility in our time”.<sup>41</sup> Here again, the influence of the Reichstag burning is visible: Arendt became engaged in politics as she felt she could no longer be a bystander. It was her – and our – obligation to judge.

### Statelessness

From 1933 up until 1951 Arendt was stateless. This statelessness “taught her the elements of political life (...) When people are left with no political space, only the “hazards of friendship and sympathy” and the “great and incalculable grace of love” offer them any confirmation of themselves and their dignity”.<sup>42</sup> In trying to understand totalitarianism, specifically Nazi totalitarianism, Arendt’s sense of politics deepened: “[h]er personal experiences as a stateless Jew who was compelled to flee Germany, France and finally Europe provided her with a distinctive perspective for understanding action and politics”.<sup>43</sup>

Through her personal experiences Arendt understood why being a citizen is needed to live a fully human life. According to Arendt the most basic right is “right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community”.<sup>44</sup> Seeing millions of people lose this basic right taught Arendt two things. Firstly, she understood that losing one’s home or place in the world and one’s political status means losing one’s humanity. Secondly, her personal experience with losing this basic right “marked her understanding of the frightening terrors of twentieth-century bureaucracy. It was not the rationality of bureaucracy that she emphasized, but its sheer irrationality”.<sup>45</sup> In other words, “[s]tatelessness (...) was the basic phenomenon that provoked her reflections (*Nachdenken*) on the meaning of politics. Without the opportunity to exercise political rights, to belong to a political community, one could not live a fully human life”.<sup>46</sup> Statelessness led to Arendt’s understanding of the meaning of politics and of one’s responsibility for public life. The importance and necessity Arendt grants to belonging to a community are also present in her notion of political responsibility. The

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<sup>41</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 6.

<sup>42</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Arendt*, 257.

<sup>43</sup> Bernstein, “Stateless,” 54.

<sup>44</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego & New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), 296-297.

<sup>45</sup> Bernstein, “Stateless,” 49.

<sup>46</sup> Bernstein, “Stateless,” 58.

community is a condition for freedom. This community is political. Its members recognize the equality among citizens and “the superiority of care for the world and communal well-being over private interests”.<sup>47</sup> It is in the presence of others that acts appear and are judged.

In 1951 Arendt was granted American citizenship. This citizenship “was precious to her; it relieved her of her stateless condition and gave her a role in a republic, the form of government she admired above all others”.<sup>48</sup> This eighteen year long period of statelessness were followed “by the achievement of certain forms of connectedness”.<sup>49</sup>

Arendt was motivated by her love of the world.<sup>50</sup> Despite having seen many horrors in their lives, Arendt and her husband were guided by their love for the world:

The horrors they had known in their twenty years together echoed in their judgments and shadowed their vision. Though in public they spoke neither with the pessimism of cowards nor the optimism of fools, the moments when they “saw the world black,” as another friend put it, gave them starting points for reflection. But these reflections were guided by *amor mundi*, by love of the world. Arendt could write elegiac descriptions of the beautiful world in one letter and catalogues of its dreariness in the next.<sup>51</sup>

According to Young-Bruehl, Arendt’s experiences of both horror and love gave her the capacity for *thaumadzein*, the ability to wonder at the world and its spectacles. Arendt’s work revealed a “freedom from the old suspicion of unworldly philosophers that there is neither beauty nor meaningfulness in human affairs”.<sup>52</sup>

### Arendt’s life and work

In conclusion, the influence of both Arendt’s Jewishness and statelessness are visible in her work on political responsibility. After the burning of the Reichstag, Arendt turned to politics, on account of her Jewishness. She realised the importance of public life and she explained she could no longer merely be a bystander. Both aspects can be recognised in Arendt’s discussion of the importance of the public realm and the necessity to judge in her notion of political responsibility. Her personal experience with statelessness gave her insight in the meaning of

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<sup>47</sup> Bernauer, “Faith,” 4.

<sup>48</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Arendt*, xiv.

<sup>49</sup> Weiland, “Biography,” 381.

<sup>50</sup> Weiland, “Biography,” 375.

<sup>51</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Arendt*, 299.

<sup>52</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Arendt*, 299.

politics and the necessity of belonging to a political community. Despite her statelessness, Arendt was motivated by her love for the world.



### 3. Max Weber on political responsibility

The answer to the third sub-question ‘How does Max Weber define and explore political responsibility?’ is to be found in Webers *Politik als Beruf* – or Politics as a Vocation. This work is a debate on what the best and most appropriate ethical framework is for political life.<sup>53</sup> He proposes two political ethics: the ethic of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) and the ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). In this chapter, there will first be given a short overview of important terms in Webers work, such as politics, state and dominance. After this a discussion of politics in modern states – in times of Weber – will follow. Finally, the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility will be explored, putting emphasis on the importance Weber grants to unforeseeable and foreseeable outcomes of actions.

#### Politics and the state

*Politik als Beruf* was delivered by Max Weber as a speech in Munich in 1919. According to Weber politics means “to strive for a share of power or to influence the distribution of power, whether between states or between the groups of people contained within a state”.<sup>54</sup> A state is a community of human beings which, within a specific area, lays claim to the monopoly on legitimate use of violence. Between the state and its members there is a relation of dominance, based on this legitimate use of violence. The justification of this relation of dominance is threefold: (1) traditional rule, based on respect for cultural patterns and tradition, (2) charismatic rule, based on trust in personal abilities of an individual and the devotion and obedience towards such an individual and (3) rational-legal rule, based upon the validity of enacted laws and regulations.<sup>55</sup>

State officials, representing the state, are obedient towards the state not only because of the previously mentioned justification, but due to two other reasons. The state officials receive material reward and social prestige, both of personal interest to them. The fear of losing these two forms of reward constitutes the base of the state officials obedience towards the state.

#### Professional politicians

Weber notices an expropriation process in modern states: leaders have replaced established authorities and try to appropriate personnel and material belonging to the state. This has

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<sup>53</sup> Bradley E. Starr, “The Structure of Max Weber’s Ethic of Responsibility,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27, no. 3 (1999): 408.

<sup>54</sup> Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, eds. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 33.

<sup>55</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 34.

caused the emergence of the first generation of professional politicians: politicians who place themselves at the disposal of leaders. Politics is a side activity for these politicians, a way to make their living, it is not their main vocation.

There are two ways to make politics your profession: living *for* politics or living *from* politics. These two ways do not exclude each other: one lives both for and from politics. Living for politics means fulfilling one's life with it. Someone who lives for politics either "enjoys the naked exercise of the power he possesses or he feeds his inner equilibrium and his self-esteem with the consciousness that by serving a "cause" he gives his own life a meaning".<sup>56</sup> One lives from politics when one earns a living by making a profession out of politics.

Weber distinguishes the responsibility of political leaders from that of officials. When an official receives an order, he ought to carry it out "on his superior's *responsibility*, conscientiously and exactly as if it corresponded to his own convictions".<sup>57</sup> Even if he were to disagree, the order must be carried out by the official. The political leader, on the contrary, acts solely on his own responsibility. This responsibility may and can not be denied or transferred to someone else.

According to Weber a politician should at least have the following characteristics: passion, a sense of responsibility and a sense of proportion.<sup>58</sup> With passion, Weber means a commitment to the cause. However, "mere passion, however sincerely felt, is not enough in itself. It cannot make a politician of anyone, unless service to a "cause" also means that a sense of *responsibility* toward that cause is made the decisive guiding light of action".<sup>59</sup> For this, a sense of proportion is needed, meaning one engages with reality, while preserving distance and composure. The tension between passion and proportion is present in every politician. He is "faced daily and hourly with the task of overcoming in himself a very trivial, all-too-human enemy: common or garden vanity, the deadly enemy of all dedication to a cause and of all distance, in this case, the distance from oneself".<sup>60</sup>

### Ethic of conviction and ethic of responsibility

*Politik als Beruf* consists of three levels, one of which is the conceptual or ethical level, which is "constituted by Weber's belief that ethical and institutional concerns are bound up with the

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<sup>56</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 40.

<sup>57</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 53.

<sup>58</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 76.

<sup>59</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 77.

<sup>60</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 77.

decision-maker's view of the world".<sup>61</sup> This is the level where the distinction between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility takes places.

Weber argues that states may have different ends, but they all employ the same means, namely violence. These means should serve an end. Weber writes: "[t]he *nature* of the cause in whose service the politician strives for power and makes use of power is a matter of belief [...] But some belief or other must always be *present*".<sup>62</sup> Thus, a belief or sense of commitment is a requirement for a politician. All ethically oriented action can be guided by either an ethics of conviction or an ethics of responsibility.<sup>63</sup>

Acting in accordance with an ethic of conviction means doing what one believes is right, without having responsibility for the (unforeseeable) outcomes. This means that one "feels "responsible" only for ensuring that the flame of pure conviction, for example, the flame of protest against the injustice of the social order, should never be extinguished".<sup>64</sup> Maintaining this flame of conviction is the purpose of the actions of a conviction politician: "[t]o keep on reigniting it is the purpose of his actions".<sup>65</sup> This conviction politician disregards any consideration for consequences. In other words, the ethics of conviction "are absolute and unconditional and accordingly do not, and cannot, take into consideration any possible consequences of that action or that refusal to act".<sup>66</sup> Weber is very clear on those who are conviction politicians: they do "not really, truly, and objectively have the vocation for politics in its innermost meaning that they had imagined themselves to have".<sup>67</sup> This does not mean that a presence of the ethic of conviction means an absence of the vocation for politics. On the contrary, the ethic of conviction in combination with the ethic of responsibility constitutes a vocation for politics. This will be explained after explaining what acting in accordance with the ethic of responsibility entails.

Acting in accordance with an ethic of responsibility means answering for the consequences of one's actions. In other words, this ethic only considers actual consequences: to "argue for responsibility is to require the acknowledgment that the consequences of a given action are

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<sup>61</sup> Starr, "Structure," 413.

<sup>62</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 78.

<sup>63</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 83.

<sup>64</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 84.

<sup>65</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 84.

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Adair-Toteff, "The Theological Context for Weber's Two Types of Ethics," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 276, no. 2 (2016): 245.

<sup>67</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 93.

one's own, no matter whether or not one intended them".<sup>68</sup> The ethic of responsibility is constructed regarding conflict, which is present in every aspect of life:

Conflict is the key to Weber's understanding of the requirements of an adequate ethical stance. Weber is a value pluralist. Ethical action is rarely unambiguous, and his ethic of responsibility is constructed as a form of moral endeavor within the context of the value struggle that emerges in ethical and institutional life.<sup>69</sup>

Within the ethic of responsibility there are incompatible values and rationalities. Unlike the ethic of conviction, these values are not hierarchically ordered. Therefore, "moral seriousness is characterized by inevitable struggle, and it has a tragic dimension that cannot be eradicated".<sup>70</sup> The political agent should be aware of this inevitable struggle of values, take into account the different values at stake and let them influence his conduct. By doing so he takes responsibility for the outcomes, whether intended or unintended, of his actions.

Weber makes a distinction between the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction, due to an absence of intentionality as an excuse in the former and an overdetermination of intentionality in judgement in the latter. These two conceptually distinct ethics are existentially linked, and can come together in an individual. When this happens, this individual is mature. This "mature person will find himself at some points in his life at a place where the two ethics come together, as they must in anyone who has an identity of his or her own".<sup>71</sup> Weber writes: "only when taken together do [the two ethics] constitute the authentic human being who is capable of having a "vocation for politics.""<sup>72</sup> Thus, only in a mature person can the two ethics meaningfully come together and in this combination the ethic of conviction can be a meaningful addition to the ethic of responsibility.

### Weber on political responsibility

To summarize, Weber puts emphasis on regarding the outcomes of an action and the struggle of values in determining responsibility. A political leader acts solely on his own responsibility. The politician must possess at least three characteristics: passion, a sense of responsibility and a sense of proportion. Furthermore, a belief or sense of commitment is

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<sup>68</sup> David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, "Introduction," in *The Vocation Lectures*, eds. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), xli.

<sup>69</sup> Starr, "Structure," 419.

<sup>70</sup> Starr, "Structure," 425.

<sup>71</sup> Owen and Strong, "Introduction," xlii.

<sup>72</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 92.

required. All ethically oriented action of the politician can be guided by either an ethics of conviction or an ethics of responsibility. The ethic of conviction emphasizes doing what is believed to be right, while acting in accordance with an ethic of responsibility means answering for the consequences of one's actions. Despite having an inevitable struggle of values, the politician should take these different values into account and let them influence his conduct. By doing so he takes responsibility for the outcomes, whether intended or unintended, of his actions. It is in a mature individual that these two ethics can come together. This individual then has the vocation for politics.

## 4. Weber's life and political responsibility

Max Weber was born on April 21, 1864 in Germany. He was a “man of impeccably bourgeois origins and upbringing, he was also at the intersection of several of the most progressive dimensions of German and European intellectual, cultural, and artistic life”.<sup>73</sup> During his life he shortly served in the military, became a university lecturer, a professor of law and economics, a professor in political science, a lawyer, a parliamentarian and finally became an honorary professor, laying down his university duties and continuing to write.<sup>74</sup>

### Bismarck and political education

A great amount of Weber's work was aimed at promoting “the political education of the German public, an education he felt sadly lacking in the aftermath of the long rule of Otto von Bismarck”.<sup>75</sup> To explain this, the foundation of the German Empire in 1871 must first be explained.

The German Empire was a confederation of states, meaning that each member state can decide to leave the federation. In 1867 the North German Federation was established. Bismarck, as the Chancellor of the biggest state Prussia, wanted to scale up from this federation to a German Empire. He realised that his closest allies “were the National Liberal party and that they expected a national legislature that would exercise parliamentary control over the executive”.<sup>76</sup> In 1871 the German Empire was launched. The foundation of this empire was an unusual one, “because it originates from a large number of states which were already unified by language and culture, but not by the institutions”.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, this foundation unified different political entities which had a long tradition of independence. With the foundation, the National Liberals “got their legislature (the *Reichstag*), and universal, equal, direct manhood suffrage was introduced across the Empire. But Bismarck neutered its powers by creating a confederation of states, which was constituted in a ‘federal’ council (the *Bundesrat*)”.<sup>78</sup>

Bismarck had, according to Weber, “in creating a national parliament (the *Reichstag*) (...) neutered its ability to mature as the political centre of the nation”.<sup>79</sup> Parliament is the

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<sup>73</sup> Owen and Strong, “Introduction,” ix.

<sup>74</sup> Marianne Weber, *Max Weber a Biography*, ed. Harry Zohn (London: Routledge, 2017), 701-708.

<sup>75</sup> Owen and Strong, “Introduction,” x-xi.

<sup>76</sup> Sam Whimster, “Max Weber and federal democracy,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 19, no. 4 (2019): 348.

<sup>77</sup> Cristiana Senigaglia, “Parliament and nation-building: Max Weber and the German State,” *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 34, no. 1 (March, 2014): 76-77.

<sup>78</sup> Whimster, “Federal democracy,” 348.

<sup>79</sup> Whimster, “Federal democracy,” 347.

institution “that represents the unity of the nation on the basis of its citizenship, since it is elected through the universal, direct, secret, and equal suffrage”.<sup>80</sup> In other words, parliament embodied the people as a united nation and therefore it embodied the democratic component of the new German Empire. However, the powers of parliament were severely limited, “since the bills were proposed by the Chancellor and preventively discussed and approved by the Federal Council, whose sessions were not open to the public”, therefore in the process of making new laws “[p]arliament was (...) excluded from the legislative activity and its members did not have a right of initiative”.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the Chancellor, i.e., Bismarck, was not responsible to parliament.

Bismarck thus neutered the ability of political maturity, because he “concentrated the power in his hands, limited the influence of Parliament and subjugated this by calling elections every time there was a relevant conflict between Parliament and Government”, diminishing “the decision-making of the representative power” and weakening “its relationship with the nation”.<sup>82</sup> Marianne Weber, Max Weber’s wife and author of his biography, would later write that Bismarck “was in sole control and tolerated only minions or willing tools around him”.<sup>83</sup>

According to Weber, Bismarck caused a situation in Germany in which no person could replace him. Due to his policies he ensured “that none would have adequate training in responsibility and political experience to assume leadership”.<sup>84</sup> On Bismarck’s legacy, Weber writes:

He left behind him a nation without any political sophistication, far below the level which in this regard it had reached twenty years before [i.e., in 1870]. Above all, he left behind him a nation without any political will of its own, accustomed to the idea that the great statesman at the helm would make the necessary political decisions (...) The great statesman did not leave behind any political tradition (...) A completely powerless parliament was the purely negative result of his tremendous prestige.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Senigaglia, “Parliament,” 77.

<sup>81</sup> Senigaglia, “Parliament,” 78.

<sup>82</sup> Senigaglia, “Parliament,” 79-80.

<sup>83</sup> Weber, *Biography*, 116.

<sup>84</sup> Owen and Strong, “Introduction,” xi.

<sup>85</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and society, an outline of interpretive sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 1392.

Weber concerned himself with the political education of Germany throughout his life. For instance in his *Politik als Beruf*, where the main issue was “how it is achievable again for Germany to have professional politicians with genuine leadership qualities”.<sup>86</sup> The focus on political education and the lack of political experience is thus present in Weber’s notion of political responsibility. As explained in the previous chapter, Weber argues that politics means “to strive for a share of power or to influence the distribution of power, whether between states or between the groups of people contained within a state”.<sup>87</sup> Power is *shared* or *distributed*, it is not in the hand of one man, as was the case during the rule of Bismarck, who “left behind him a nation without any political will of its own”.<sup>88</sup>

Weber makes a distinction between an ethic of vocation and an ethic of responsibility, but “only when taken together do [the two ethics] constitute the authentic human being who is capable of having a "vocation for politics."”<sup>89</sup> Weber calls this maturity: “the mature person will find himself at some points in his life at a place where the two ethics come together, as they must in anyone who has an identity of his or her own”.<sup>90</sup> Being mature means coming to terms with the fact that the consequence of one’s action are both unknown and do not make sense. He writes:

I find it immeasurably moving when a mature human being – whether young or old in actual years is immaterial – who feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethics of responsibility reaches the point where he says, "Here I stand, I can do no other."<sup>91</sup>

This maturity stands in contrast with the “nation without any political sophistication” and “with any political will of its own” that Bismarck left behind.<sup>92</sup> Here again, the influence of the difficult period of time in which Weber lived is visible.

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<sup>86</sup> Hinnerk Bruhns, “‘Politics as a Vocation’: A contribution to Germany’s democratisation in 1919?” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 19, no. 4 (2019): 325.

<sup>87</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 33.

<sup>88</sup> Weber, *Economy*, 1392.

<sup>89</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 92.

<sup>90</sup> Owen and Strong, “Introduction,” xlii.

<sup>91</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 92.

<sup>92</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and society, an outline of interpretive sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 1392.



## World War I

Weber's famous lecture *Politik als Beruf* was given in January 1919, two months after the ending of World War I.

In this post-war Germany, the first steps towards a new, democratic Germany were just taken, in the form of the federal elections that took place on January 19, 1919. *Politik als Beruf* therefore “coincides with the period in which the transition is accomplished from monarchy to democracy, although the form of the new political order is still uncertain”, simultaneously “the new order is under threat from the revolutionary and separatist endeavours, especially in Bavaria. Besides, the territorial, political and economic integrity of the new Germany is placed in question due to the demands of the victorious powers, particularly France”.<sup>93</sup> Even though the monarchy was replaced by democracy, for Weber this had not yet have the result of a proper political education, in which leadership qualities could be cultivated. During the war, Weber had concerned himself with “various ideas about the future of the young generation that would return from the war” and not with “the successful war, but, as he expressed it, the successful peace”.<sup>94,95</sup> After the war he had in vain “hoped that the homecoming soldiers might have acquired factual knowledge and judgements: a basis for a more objective and more reasonable German policy”.<sup>96</sup>

His previous “Bismarckian experience of an impotent parliament vis-à-vis the imperial government and its bureaucracy led Weber to believe that only a powerful, self-confident parliament could put a check on bureaucratic rule”.<sup>97</sup> In his work, Weber identifies a few conditions for a democratic and post-war Germany: “[p]olitics as a profession, professional politicians with leadership qualities and a working parliament”.<sup>98</sup> Weber thus campaigned for a president elected directly by the citizens – a Reich President. The conditions identified by Weber clearly overlap with what is discussed in the previous chapter on the notion of political responsibility in Weber's work. The leadership qualities are the characteristics every politician should have according to Weber: passion, a sense of responsibility and a sense of proportion.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Bruhns, “Germany's democratisation,” 321.

<sup>94</sup> Bruhns, “Germany's democratisation,” 323.

<sup>95</sup> Bruhns, “Germany's democratisation,” 326.

<sup>96</sup> Bruhns, “Germany's democratisation,” 323.

<sup>97</sup> Pedro T. Magalhães, “Charisma and Democracy: Max Weber on the Riddle of Political Change in Modern Societies,” *Topoi* 41, no. 1 (2021): 74.

<sup>98</sup> Bruhns, “Germany's democratisation,” 326.

<sup>99</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 76.

The years prior to WWI were marked by the culmination and blooming of the German economy. The outbreak of WWI “resulted in a deterioration of living standards” and Germany “was not prepared to wage a four-year war that demanded an unprecedented amount of resources – [it] had initially hoped to win the war within six weeks”.<sup>100</sup> When the war ended, Germany was blamed for the entire war. Weber concerned himself with the ‘question of guilt’ thereafter. He joined the Heidelberg Alliance: a collective with the aim of scientifically disproving the German war guilt.<sup>101</sup> This question of guilt “posed itself here with particular force for an ethic of responsibility”.<sup>102</sup>

Here again we see a deep connection between Weber’s life – in this case life in post-war Germany, concerned with the question of guilt – and his work. In the previous chapter it is explained that the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility are not completely separated. However, in his lecture *Politik als Beruf* he mentions the “profound abyss between acting in accordance with the maxim governing an ethics of conviction and acting in tune with an ethics of responsibility.”<sup>103</sup> This notion of a profound abyss seems to be influenced by life in post-war Germany:

Although there is no logical contradiction between them, Weber associates the two ethics with quite different and opposite human types, in whom totally different passions are at work. That was indeed how things looked in Germany after the end of the war: there was no possible bridge of understanding between the passionate pacifists and those whom the defeat had filled with a dark spirit of vengeance; and when Weber spoke of the ethic of conviction he was thinking first and foremost of the pacifists.<sup>104</sup>

## Protestantism

The last biographical fact to take into account is Weber’s protestant background. Weber was a protestant growing up in protestant circles. One of his most famous works – maybe even the most famous – is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. One of Weber’s biographers writes that “scarcely anyone familiar with Weber’s life and *The Protestant Ethic* can resist feeling that there is an intimate connection between the two”.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>100</sup> Matthias Blum & Matthias Strebler, “Max Weber and the First World War: Protestant and Catholic living standards in Germany, 1914-1919,” *Journal of Institutional Economics* 12, no. 3 (2016): 7.

<sup>101</sup> Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 503.

<sup>102</sup> Radkau, *Biography*, 503.

<sup>103</sup> Weber, *Vocation*, 83.

<sup>104</sup> Radkau, *Biography*, 516.

<sup>105</sup> Radkau, *Biography*, 198.

“[m]any themes in the book on Protestantism may be seen as directly mirroring Weber’s own situation at the time: his isolation and despair, his feeling of being doomed, his longing for release, his struggle to find a way of living that would save him”.<sup>106</sup> In this book Weber argues that the protestant – or Calvinistic – work ethic was a major force behind the emergence of modern capitalism. The essence of modern capitalism according to Weber is that “[m]an is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs”.<sup>107</sup>

Characteristic to the traditional type of enterprise is “the continual accumulation of wealth for its own sake, rather than for the material rewards that it can serve to bring”.<sup>108</sup> Weber asks himself what drives such a accumulation of wealth without a desire to use it for worldly pleasure. Weber finds the answer in “the ‘this-worldly asceticism’ of Puritanism, as focused through the concept of the ‘calling’ (..) It refers basically to the idea that the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfil his duty in worldly affairs”.<sup>109</sup> Weber discusses the concept of the calling extensively and puts emphasis on its individual component: one is called *individually* and therefore obligations are imposed upon an *individual*: “[t]he only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling”.<sup>110</sup> Weber detects in this doctrine of the calling “extreme inhumanity”, as the individual who “surrendered to its magnificent consistency” was utterly alone in achieving “the most important thing in life, his eternal salvation”.<sup>111</sup> The individual can rely upon no one:

No one could help him. No priest, for the chosen one can understand the word of God only in his own heart. No sacraments, for though the sacraments had been ordained by God for the increase of His glory, and must hence be scrupulously observed, they are not a means to the attainment of grace, but only the subjective *externa subsidia* of faith. No Church, for though it was held

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<sup>106</sup> Radkau, *Biography*, 200.

<sup>107</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005), 18.

<sup>108</sup> Anthony Giddens, “Introduction,” in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005), xi.

<sup>109</sup> Giddens, “Introduction,” xii.

<sup>110</sup> Weber, *Protestant*, 40.

<sup>111</sup> Weber, *Protestant*, 60-61.

that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* in the sense that whoever kept away from the true Church could never belong to God's chosen band, nevertheless the membership of the external Church included the doomed. They should belong to it and be subjected to its discipline, not in order thus to attain salvation, that is impossible, but because, for the glory of God, they too must be forced to obey His commandments. Finally, even no God. For even Christ had died only for the elect, for whose benefit God had decreed His martyrdom from eternity.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, Weber writes that for one's eternal salvation, which is the most important thing in life, the individual is entirely on his own. Weber's protestant background is linked to his emphasis on the individual, which can also be detected in his work on political responsibility. According to Weber a political leader acts *solely* on his *own* responsibility. This responsibility may and *can not be denied or transferred to someone else*. Furthermore, the vocation for politics can merely be present in an *individual*, i.e., the mature individual in which the two ethics come together.

### Weber's work and life

In conclusion, Weber's work is strongly influenced by his life. More specifically, its aim is influenced by the political landscape in which he grew up, lived and worked. This landscape was marked by Otto von Bismarck, who neutered the ability of the people to reach political maturity. Weber's work was aimed at promoting political education. This is also visible in his work on political responsibility, in which he emphasized that politics means that power is shared and in which he explains how to reach political maturity, namely by having politics as a vocation. Secondly, living and working in post-war Germany strongly influenced Weber's work on politics, e.g., his notion of political leaders and parliament and his work on (the abyss between) the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility. Finally, due his protestant background Weber emphasized the individual, which can again be detected in his work on political responsibility, especially the work on the political leader.

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<sup>112</sup> Weber, *Protestant*, 61.

## Conclusion

The task of a biography is “to enrich understanding in these two ways: by attending, so to speak, to the tone of voice in which a writer expresses himself or herself and by accumulating personal facts that will allow us to see what is said in a different light”.<sup>113</sup> Both these tasks seemed to be fulfilled in the relation between the work and life of Hannah Arendt and Max Weber.

### Hannah Arendt

Arendt’s work on political responsibility emphasizes the importance of and necessity for the public realm. Actors act into the public realm and here their actions are judged. Arendt’s realisation of the importance of the public life was initiated by the burning of the Reichstag. This event caused her turn to politics, because she realised that she could no longer merely be a bystander while her people, the Jewish people, were being suppressed and marginalized. Another important feature in Arendt’s work on political responsibility is the political community, the importance of which she realised due to her 18 year long period of statelessness. Despite this statelessness, Arendt was motivated by her love for the world.

Due to the biographical facts presented in the second chapter, the tone of Arendt’s voice can be better appreciated. Arendt was primarily motivated and moved by her love for the world, despite the horrors she experienced. Two of these horrors were what happened to her people, the Jewish people, and the loss of the right to have rights, i.e., her statelessness. Seeing her work in light of these horrors and difficulties, changes the tone in which we hear Arendt speak and her words are given a stronger meaning. Personal facts on Arendt, “allow us to see what is said in a different light”.<sup>114</sup>

### Max Weber

In his work on political responsibility, Weber puts emphasis on regarding the outcomes of an action and the struggle of values in determining responsibility. Action of the politician can be guided by either an ethics of conviction or an ethics of responsibility. It is when the ethics come together in an individual, that this individual is mature. The emphasis on this maturity can be explained using the political landscape in which Weber’s work is situated. This landscape was the German Empire ruled by Otto von Bismarck, who neutered the ability of the people to reach political maturity by preventing proper political education. Much of Weber’s work is aimed at improving political education, including his work on political

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<sup>113</sup> Monk, “Philosophical Biography,” 4.

<sup>114</sup> Monk, “Philosophical Biography,” 4.

responsibility. In this he emphasizes that politics means that power is shared. Furthermore, he explains how to reach political maturity, namely by having politics as a vocation.

Weber worked and lived in Germany in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this post-war Germany in need of proper democracy, Weber identifies the necessary conditions, such as politics as a profession, professional politicians and a working parliament. The conditions are present in his notion of political responsibility. Furthermore, Weber's protestant background influenced his work, which is detectable in the emphasis he puts on the individual.

Being aware of the political background against which Weber writes, allows us to better understand why and for what purpose Weber worked. Living in an empire without proper political education and with a powerless parliament, explains the urgency of understanding politics and politics as a vocation. Understanding the urgency of Weber's work sheds different light on his work.

### Comparing Arendt and Weber

Making a comparison between two philosophical concepts is extremely difficult, let alone taking biographical facts into account in this comparison. Nevertheless, a comparison can carefully be made between Arendt and Weber.

As discussed in the second chapter, the influence of Arendt's Jewishness – and her experience of the burning of the Reichstag – on her work is apparent in her notion of being-in-the-world, which constitutes a public realm. Being-in-the-world is simultaneously a being-with-others. Arendt thus emphasises the shared and collective side of action and responsibility. Weber, on the other hand, emphasizes the individual side of responsibility: a political leader acts solely on his own responsibility and responsibility may and can not be denied or transferred to someone else. In chapter four this is connected to his protestant background.

In both Arendt's and Weber's work the influence of biographical facts – in this case Jewishness and Protestantism – is clearly visible. However, outcome of this influence is opposite: while for Arendt her Jewishness led to an emphasis on the shared and collective side of action and responsibility, for Weber his Protestantism led to an emphasis on individuality.

### Biographical approach

The definition and explanation of political responsibility in Arendt's and Weber's work and the exploration of their biographies has proved the thesis 'using a biographical approach enriches and deepens the understanding of complex, philosophical concepts'. By bringing the

themes of statelessness and Jewishness for Arendt and the rule of Otto von Bismarck, live in post-war Germany and Protestantism for Weber in connection with their exploration of political responsibility, the understanding of this concept is enriched and deepened.

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