On Violence: Guns or Roses in Texas? with Reflections on SB 11

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Presidential Address

> *"At the center of morality is not obligation, but the faculties of thinking and judging, which we learn by education—in our ability to cull meaning from the stories of the past."*[1]

For last year's Presidential Address at the annual conference of the New Mexico/Texas Philosophical Society, Andrew Pavelich, in his talk "Should One Own a Gun," presented his reflections on the then-pending legislation for Texas Senate Bill 11 (SB 11), the State of Texas law that would legalize carrying weapons into public university classrooms. He sketched out the arguments for and against owning guns: for saving lives, for self-defense, for preventing serious crimes, against accidental deaths, against wrongful deaths or harm, against suicide, and against taking the life of one's partner. While he provided social scientific data to minimally question the obligation to own a gun, and thus to carry a gun into a public college classroom, what was most significant about Pavelich's talk for me was his focus on the issue of ethical normativity, namely, should I own a gun at all? For me, an even more basic question of ethical normativity entails raising the question about the fact that humans use violence against each other to address their differences. The question then becomes not "should I own a gun," but should I act violently?

In her essay *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt distinguishes between violence and power. She maintains that, even though theorists of both the Left and Right regard violence as an extreme manifestation of power, the two concepts are, in fact,

antithetical. Power comes from the collective will and does not need violence to achieve any of its goals, since, because it is voluntary and willing, collaborative compliance takes its place. As governments start losing their legitimacy, violence becomes an artificial means toward the same end and is, therefore, found only in the absence of power. For Arendt, bureaucracies then become the ideal birthplaces of violence since they are defined as the "rule by no one" against whom to argue and, therefore, recreate the missing links with the people they rule over.

From early on in her treatise, Arendt turns Carl von Clausewitz's dictum on its head, with his definition of war as "the continuation of politics by other means"[2] and later contests Engels's version of that continuity with his definition of "violence as the accelerator of economic development (*On Violence* 6)." Rather, Arendt argues that we are faced in our military industrial societies with the condition of "peace [as] the continuation of war by other means." The acceleration of terrorist attacks, of unexpected violence, is simply—on Arendtian terms—the *predictable* course of events when the language of human relations is reduced to the language of instrumentality and the end of a gun. We can think here of the *apparently* senseless massacre of tourists by Al Quaeda on the beaches of the Ivory Coast, and of the *coordinated* terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels by ISIS.[3] She sets up, in opposition to the predictability of terrorist attacks, a theory of speech-acts that depend on a metaphysics of…

> Events, [which] by definition, [she states] are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures; [she goes on to assert that] only in a world in which nothing of importance ever happens could the futurologists' dream come true. Predictions of the future are never anything but projections of present automatic processes and procedures, that is, of occurrences that are likely to come to pass if men do not act and if nothing unexpected happens; every action, for better or worse, and every accident necessarily destroys the whole pattern in whose frame the prediction moves and where it finds its evidence. (*On Violence* 7)

Her philosophy of action, which is bound up with her philosophy of language, relies on her theory that speech-acts that occur in the public and political realm are, and should be, "free" from coercion. Such speech-acts are the only kinds of human behavior that result in original or authentic kinds of acts, precisely because they are unexpected and unpredictable. What this means is that, for Arendt, action is the result of freedom, specifically, political freedom.

Arendt controversially rejects the legitimacy of political liberalism because it wants to both embrace human rights *and* national sovereignty. She rejects modern forms of liberalism because, while she was at first and in part remained sympathetic to its U.S. social-contractarian form, she came to question that form on the grounds that in practice it does not accept exiles or stateless immigrants,

either through attempting to repatriate them—thus submitting the exile or immigrant to the violence from which s/he fled—or through naturalization, which the "local" population rejects because it threatens their identity and property claims. She supports, alternatively, forms of direct democracy, which are based on authentic authority that is freely worked out in dialogue with equally autonomous members of society. What constitutes society are those members who attempt to persuade each other with their differing opinions and who do not impose on each other the oppressive politics of aristocratic oligarchy, patriarchy or matriarchy with their associated "experts". In this way, she hoped to address the problems of the political origins and problems she found in her studies of historical imperialism and totalitarianism.

Arendt's reflections are set against the background of the violence that has characterized human relations during the course of her lifetime, the first two thirds of the twentieth century. But their applicability can be just as readily extended to encompass the violences that have marked the rest of the twentieth and the twenty-first century. For me, those global wars and genocides are ones that I have personally witnessed, from afar, but also includes acts of violence such as those against immigrants along the U.S. Mexico border attempting to flee persecution, degradation, or death in their homelands. Those acts are closer to my home in El Paso on the U.S.-Mexico Border and thus, like many of my other experiences, have to do directly with my life as a philosopher living with and on that border. In that sense, it is an exercise in phenomenological ethics that stresses my first-person point of view through which any and all interpretations of how the world works and our social relations necessarily have to pass.

More specifically, my reflections today have been provoked by the recent passage of SB 11 in the State of Texas, the state in which I move, dwell, and mostly enjoy my being. The passage of this particular Bill is personal for me and has nothing to do with any kind of indifferent ethical objectivity. Precisely because it is personal, the event takes on meaning since claims of meaningfulness only make sense as they are set in this or that historical context of interdependent and interpersonal significations.

I return to Arendt to address this issue of the dependence of meaningfulness on historical context and take up as an exemplary case in point the history of philosophy. In the relatively recent past, given that human history spans many millennia, an influential group of Anglo-European philosophers spurned those branches of philosophy that have to do with ethics, aesthetics, politics, and religion, even calling for the "Elimination of Metaphysics Through [the] Logical Analysis of Language."[4] Today, we all know that there has been considerable retrenchment in such a draconian intellectual agenda and that streams of Anglo-American philosophers of language have attempted to justify their professional right to speak with epistemic authority about ethics, aesthetics, politics, religion and, yes, even, and especially, metaphysics—at least for professional and

economic reasons; we all need to work for a living after all. But the effect of such a disavowal and retrenchment has been that philosophers, and philosophy as a disciplinary profession, have been struggling with the relevance of their practices. Kwame Anthony Appiah popularized just such a critique with his *Experiments in Ethics*.[5] But before Appiah, in the middle of the century, Arendt resisted identifying herself as a philosopher because of what she considered to be a world-alienating philosophy of language espoused by her fellow philosophers, that made the traditional work of philosophers irrelevant to the essential concerns for understanding and promoting a world that should promote and nourish human well-being.

However, as Simon Swift notes in his book, *Hannah Arendt*, Arendt locates the blame for this alienation with Plato and the allegory of the cave and not directly with her contemporaries.[6] Arendt's reading of Plato's cave allegory goes something like this: humans have always been imprisoned in the cave and so they do not know that they are prisoners and they do not know that the shadows cast on the wall by the fire out of their line of sight are just reflections, and thus illusions. What this meant for Arendt is that: first, for Plato and most other philosophers who followed him in the Western tradition, most humans are living lives of illusion and they don't even know it. Secondly, most humans know that there exists a higher world of truth that determines their world of illusion. Thirdly, and most importantly for her interpretation of Plato, is that since childhood we have been coerced and imprisoned in this condition of illusion by our social conditions. This, by the way, is also how she also traces her reading of Marxist ideology, that is, that our social relations of exploitation and enforced alienation depend on the illusory, invisible ideological forces that make us do things in certain ways against our will and against our authentic self-interests. The key to her interpretation, though, which is an essential point for my reflections on the Texas law SB11, is what she does with her understanding of Plato's claim that only the philosopher can escape from the cave into the bright light of the realm of ideas because only the philosopher knows that the illusion is an illusion; he is an expert in discerning true ideas from false ideas. For Arendt, but not only for Arendt, such expert knowledge alienates the philosopher from a society that is chained to illusions that she has seen through. Historically, many philosophers have arrogantly claimed their privilege of being experts in knowing the difference between illusion and reality, in being able to judge whether or not something is bullshit, for instance.[7] This is what Arendt challenges, namely, that social relations are fundamentally coercive—violent—and illusory and that philosophy and philosophers are somehow free of this purported illusion.

Arendt formulated these ideas in an originally unpublished lecture that she gave at Notre Dame University in 1954, describing the ways that Plato's distinctions adversely set into motion ways of thinking about speech and politics that would lead to contemporary forms of philosophical world alienation.

In her reading, focusing on how Plato defines an irresolvable conflict between "dialectic" as the typically philosophical form of thinking and "persuasion" as the specifically political form of speech. The problem with Plato, she argues, is that he taught that attempting to persuade others by my opinion should not to be trusted because doing so simply reiterates the illusions of the cave. However, Arendt maintains that the result of Plato's rejection of the non-expert's attempts at persuasion in favor of the expertise of philosophical dialectic means rejecting the idea that people could hold different opinions that are, or at least can appear to be, equally valid. In support of her position Arendt contends that the world "appears differently to different people, according to their differing standpoints on reality (Swift 24)". Plato, however, taught that the truth, or true ideas, are only available to the philosophers who have dialectically "seen the light" and thus have seen through the illusions of the cave and who do their meta-thinking and meta-ethics in the bright light abstracted from the cave. In doing so, in thinking this way, the philosopher turns away from the actual public realm of speech and persuasion because "true ideas" are beyond all speech and persuasion, as they are beyond all appearance. They are of the Forms; and thus, they are in or from a separate realm of absolute truth. For Arendt, this has created a dangerous precedent that, I argue, underlies and, minimally, allows for the kinds of violence-affirming and, thus, violence-inducing politics of our contemporary world.

Arendt's critique is that Plato's insistence on how philosophy should be practiced puts philosophers historically at odds with anyone seriously interested in engaging in politics as a philosophical task and, most significantly, lays the foundations for turning philosophers and the task of philosophy away from the public, political world. Even more problematic for Arendt, is Plato's apparently contradictory view that the public world should necessarily be ruled by philosopher-kings and philosophical ideas. She calls this Plato's Ideocracy. But Arendt, always a diligent student, shamelessly borrows from Marx's purported materialist attempt to turn the Idealist Hegel on his head and, in her turn, seeks to turn Plato on his head. However, unlike those philosophical giants, Arendt was a phenomenologist and a pluralist and so she thought that even though public space—the space of appearances—could not give us access to truth, or at least to absolute truth as the realm of abstract, formal ideas, she thought that speech-acts of persuasion enacted in the public realm provide us with the possibility to form a meaningful world view through forming meaningful, authentic relations. Only in freely forming such interdependent relations was the possibility of disrupting the dialectic of war and violence possible. Only thus could we philosophize in peace. This is based on her commitment to the need to accept plurality and mutuality—with the concomitant need to hold and validate different opinions or positions—as the fundamental human condition. Against Plato, she also thinks it important to validate 'speech' and speech-acts for their meaningfulness in socio-political relations, that is, for their performative, imitative, and creative functions. However,

her philosophy of language should not be confused with those formalist forms espoused by Austin, Grice, or Searle since Arendt was primarily concerned with a common sense sort of sensus communis, derived from her reading of Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* she read as a teenager. In line with her understanding that politics should ultimately be motivated by friendship and building the life of community in common, as opposed to Plato's forms of truth as justice, Arendt sought situations in which our speech-acts opened up the world to each of us differently, according to our different positions in the world. Persuasion, then, in public places where free speech is freely practiced, would be a way to reconcile, as it were, or to understand and mutually work out in creatively pragmatic and practical ways, our differing claims, needs, and desires. Moreover, as opposed to prioritizing contemplation and Plato's "utopian reorganization of political life," such speech acts prioritize action and "the articulation of different ways of life" (Swift 25).

As noted, these ideas came from Arendt's originally unpublished lecture that she gave in 1954 at the University of Notre Dame, "Philosophy and Politics," but included ideas that formed her most influential works on political philosophy, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Between Past and Future* (1968).[8]

During the course of the rest of this essay, I focus almost exclusively on the short text that Arendt published in 1970 entitled *On Violence*, finished shortly before she died in 1975. To help identify how that work guides my reflections on Texas law, SB 11, however, I refer to another German-Jewish philosopher who was Arendt's friend and inspiration and who also wrote on violence but fifty years before Arendt did. In 1921, Walter Benjamin wrote an essay entitled "Critique of Violence," which examines the foundation of violence by providing a short, historical account of the systematic institution of positive and natural laws. With this essay, written early in his life, Benjamin gives us what he considered a definitive treatment of the origins and consequences of violence by connecting violence with myth and the formation of the sovereign nation-state, and non-violence with religion and revolution. The essay was more or less ignored, except by the Nazi theorist Karl Schmitt, who thought Benjamin's position endorsed his own views about the need for a totalitarian state. But fifty years, later Jacques Derrida took up Benjamin's essay in an address on the relationship of law to violence presented at the Cordoza Law School, agreeing with Benjamin's entire critique except for the final conclusion about divine violence, intimating that accepting such a position would leave us open to somehow validate an "exceptional" expiatory event like the Holocaust. Since then, Benjamin's essay has been, more or less, an unavoidable standard to be considered by which to 'critique' violence. Slavoj Zizek's book, *Violence*, published in 2008, culminates with his favorable commentary on Benjamin's position, criticizing the contemporary, populist German philosopher, Sloterdyk for his rejection of all "global

emancipatory project[s]" as various forms of pathological Nietzschean resentments. Zizek affirms Benjamin's "divine violence" as neither the "heroic-criminal state-founding violence celebrated by Heidegger" nor "anarchic explosion"[9] but, as Benjamin articulates, it is to be distinguished from "the mythic violence that founds and maintains the state, sanctioned statist violence, but as the "assumption of the solitude of sovereign decision (Zizek 202). The "divine" violent act refers to a spontaneous Event, a means without an end. Zizek aligns such a means without an end to the embrace of violence from figures as diverse as Che Guevara and Søren Kierkegaard, arguing not only that "all you need is love" but also that in order to truly love you have to be able to love with hatred. To love one's enemy is the flip side of loving God—or loving the other—so much so that, quoting from Kierkegaard's "Works of Love," that the Christian would, "if it is demanded, be capable of hating his father, and mother, and sister, and beloved (Zizek 204)".

Other commentaries followed Derrida's. Beatrice Hansen, in her book, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*, published in 2000, devotes the entire first chapter to the theme-setting work of Benjamin's position.[10] And most recently, Simon Critchley pursued his public feud with Zizek by contesting his interpretation of Benjamin as mistaken, namely, that Benjamin was not calling for an affirmation of violent, anarchic "liberatory" revolution but that his "ambiguous" position at the end of his essay—which affirms opposition to the injustices of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence, opens up the real possibility for an actual non-violent response to statist violence that is supported by the mythic narratives that found and provide coherent support for the modern nation-state.[11]

What for me is more important than aligning myself with any of these viable interpretations is that we can move further along in understanding the relationship of violence to the "work" of the state by attempting to better understand Arendt's position on violence and why she avoided directly taking on or taking up Benjamin's controversial stance. It will be helpful, then, to roughly know the position that Benjamin staked out on violence in order to more clearly understand how Arendt's position moves us further along in how she deals with violence, power, force and authority in her book *On Violence*. This will also help me to better articulate my critique of Texas SB 11 and my opinion about how liberal gun laws in Texas and other states in the United States diminish security and the possibilities for exercising free speech.

I look now at Benjamin's essay to better understand Arendt's position and to show how their philosophies help with my critique of violence as that is related to Texas SB 11.

To begin with, Benjamin aligns violence with the very foundations of the modern nation-state including, and especially, constitutional democracies based on variations of the social contract. He then aligns non-violence with revolution but

comes up with a paradoxical formulation of a kind of non-violent/violent revolution. The way that he conceives such a possible non-violence is that the parties in any conflict or possible agreement, have to come to an agreement prior to coming together; not a dogmatic agreement, but one where the parties have to actually talk with each other and agree to non-violence beforehand. And he bases this "prior coming together" not on the traditional starting point for Euro-Anglo-oriented theories and practices of the liberal state, that is, on prioritizing seeking one's own self-interest with its philosophical justifications of autonomy and sovereignty based on labor theories of value that justify my individual rights to property, inheritance, and capital. Instead, after laying out his analysis for how violence is the very guarantee and warrant for governing the modern nation-state, he pivots, as it were, and rejects the natural desires of the violent revolutionaries who see the only possible, pragmatic response to violent oppression in the dialectical response of answering violence with just as much or more violence. In short, Benjamin rejects the putatively realist argument that relative peace and independence can only be established in the ongoing détente of mutually assured destruction that would occur if one party misspeaks or does not hold up their end of the contract. Instead, Benjamin asserts that the only way forward to some kind of non-violent resolution is to begin by guaranteeing that we will act with "love, understanding, and language" in forms of concerted action towards and with each other; that we will agree to stand outside of the dialectical repetitions of violence, deliberately and self-consciously. Doing so is an engaged act and, for the historical-materialist Benjamin, such acts are economically based acts as well, which is why he sets his critique not only in the context of an analysis of law but in an analysis that refers to unjust labor laws, presenting a controversial distinction between violent and non-violent labor strikes. Such a distinction enables us to consider the possibilities of "non-violent" revolutions and Benjamin's creative use of Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* as a baseline for his argument.[12] The controversial part of Sorel's theory is that class struggle and change depend on the creation of a catastrophic and violent revolution achieved through a general strike. Benjamin takes up Sorel's calls for violent revolution through a "General Strike of the Proletariat" (as Arendt also did) but makes a distinction between the state-sanctioned function of labor protests and the non-state sanctioned protest, whereas Sorel identifies both as the general proletariat protest. Benjamin uses Sorel's justification for staging a violent revolution as the *means* to seize control of the labor process in order to argue for the need to make a distinction between different kinds of labor protests—violent and non-violent forms. But as an historical-dialectical materialist, Benjamin understands the argument that in order to counteract one force, another equally strong, or stronger, but opposite force is called for.

Benjamin was also well aware of the traditions of union labor organization in Germany prior to the violent events of WWI and the founding of the Social

Democratic Party by William Liebknecht in the 1890s, in opposition to the imperialism of Bismarck and Prussia. Those early leaders of politically organized socialism rejected involvement in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 by the labor unions as against their group-interests. He was additionally well aware of the rejection of involvement in the war and the non-violent stance of labor unions and the far-left wing of the SPD by Rosa Luxembourg in 1914. Knowing his sympathies to those groups enables us to speculate on his paradoxical commitment, at a deep metaphysical level, to the divine violence of a non-violent revolution.

Arendt read Benjamin's work and appears to have taken up his distinction without citing him because while Sorel's thought is central to both of them she uses Sorel's ideas differently while building on Benjamin's. Namely, she introduces distinctions between violence, power, and force while Benjamin leaves the ambiguity in play in using the German term *Gewalt*, which can mean both violence and force. But Arendt's focus on the differences in meaning is not a trivial play of semantics on her part. For her, the importance of Sorel's work on violence is in how he recognized the "power" in concerted and skilled group action. Benjamin moved that recognition and potential for revolutionary change along by attempting to distinguish between violent and non-violent forms of revolution. He identified violence with the tradition of myth and non-violence with the traditions of religious narrative and practices. He based this on the context of the history of actual strikes in Germany, such as the mass labor strikes in the Ruhr District, the Rhineland, and in Saxony that erupted in 1919 and that were associated with the fall of the Imperial government, the defeat of the Empire, and the rise of the Weimar Republic. The latter event is notable for its socialist, parliamentary form of government which followed from utterly disastrous displays of violence during World War I.

But the issue of how power works is nonetheless ambiguous in Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* and is not nearly as clear for him as it is for Arendt insofar as she makes a clear distinction between violence and power. Moreover, Arendt argues that authority—as authoritative power—only comes about through non-violent understandings between people; specifically, it comes about through agreements that politically "free and independent" people reach with each other through their respective non-violent speech-acts. With this philosophy of action, she moves Benjamin's analysis of violence forward because, as they both recognize —Benjamin implicitly and Arendt explicitly—the violent exercise of power is ultimately non-legitimate because it is based on *instrumentalism*. The uniqueness of her position is in how she highlights the instrumentality of *action* which is an essential support for my reflections about the problems of Texas SB 11.

In short, the ethos of legalizing gun-carrying and gun use in classrooms entails understanding the gun first and foremost as an instrument *and thus*, critically, as an extension of instrumental relations. With Arendt's philosophical support, I

argue that carrying a gun, revealed or concealed, creates the conditions that eliminate the possibility of free speech because it necessarily creates an environment that is restricted to instrumental relations, both in principle and in practice. As most well-educated U.S. Americans know, proponents of liberal gun laws are quick to proclaim that carrying a gun is a constitutionally protected right to free speech and thus, for them, constitutes a legally protected speech-act that expresses their constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom. That may be so, but I want to resist that interpretation of freedom on the basis of Benjamin's analyses of law and with Arendt's claim that to do violence one has to have an instrument, which is based on the commonsensical position that all acts of violence come from our *ability* to act instrumentally. For instance, I can do violence with my eyes or with my tongue or with my body alone, but accepting Arendt's position entails that each of those acts are secondarily derivative from our ability to use instruments. The essential point is that the capacity for instrumentality is prior to the exercise of the violent act and is that which provides the grounds for enacting violence. Also, and just as significant for her argument and my position, Arendt does not believe that humans are metaphysically evil by nature or are somehow naturally inclined to violence.

As a significant aside, there are many diverse traditions that do support this way of thinking as, for example, the Confucian Chinese tradition of Xunzi, who taught that humans are by nature evil and violent, and that we need the artificial constraints of education and social institutions to discipline and punish us, thus straightening our otherwise crooked or bent virtue.[13] In such a world-view, the masses have to be kept in line with severe punishment by the elite few who are alone capable of full virtue, because of their privileged socio-political background. This, in fact, seems to be the position of Texas lawmakers masked by the lip service that they pay to constitutional protections of free speech. More in line with Arendt's and Benjamin's positions, on the other hand, is the Jewish tradition of "*yetzer hara*" which teaches us about the use and misuse of physical or natural human inclinations. The Jewish tradition argues that humans are born with two inclinations, the *yetzer-hara*—the evil inclination, and the *yetzer-hatov* or the good inclination. And by extension, there is also the Christian tradition of original sin. In both traditions, Jewish and Christian, humans work out their own ultimate happiness freely choosing one way or the other based on the confluence of their biological and environmental conditions.

Because of her Jewish background, Arendt was more inclined to the teaching of free will from the Jewish ethical tradition, evidenced by her choice to write about Augustine's doctrine of neighborly love and the divided will for her dissertation.[14] However, it seems to me that none of these traditions quite capture Arendt's position. Already in her work on Augustine we find her latent critique of instrumentalism with her emphasis on identifying the tension between an inner world of love and the challenge of how to actually live in this world and how we

exercise the techniques of or the techné that emerges from our body. For Arendt, human violence is not natural but is a learned, environmentally conditioned behavior, as is love. They are attitudes and approaches to the world that we work out with each other and that we only learn *from* working and freely speaking with each other.

What this means for my opposition to Texas SB 11 is that—for Arendt—the *only way to notice* the instrumentality of our engagements with each other is through actually engaging with each other in public discourses that are non-violent, in public spaces that provide the *conditions* for non-violent discourse, and that suspend that instrumentality which means—again from an Arendtian perspective—that we either have to create or maintain such public spaces. We learn about the violence of instrumentality by practicing speech-acts of love and understanding in a context of respect for differences of opinion and of free expression. With that in mind, the core of Arendt's work, in what I call a phenomenology of the political, turned into various efforts to create such kinds of public spaces in a process that sh*e* referred to in various places as the philosophy of natality. Such spaces can be and perhaps should be institutional, but more importantly they become public spaces where we can talk with each other that is non-violent and, following Benjamin, are set up with the preconditions that we will engage in language—in speech-acts—that develop relationships of understanding and love. Arendt develops those ideas from what she says about caritas and neighborly love, forgiveness and generosity, first set out in her Augustine book but then more extensively developed in her magnum opus, *The Human Condition*.[15] For both of these philosophers, the university should be one of those spaces/places, because the university is the 'protected' space where we learn to develop the philosophical tools of thinking, listening, and speaking that enable us to visit the thoughts and "worlds" of others without colonizing them for our own instrumental self-interest. Rather, we learn to listen and to understand the other precisely because their position is different than mine and because that other may have something to teach me which is not something that I can learn from myself. Learning from the shared stories and perspectives of others—and their meaning-endowing acts—takes me out of my isolated and lonely world into relationships of new knowledge, new ideas, and collaborations and co-productions that would only be possible by developing forms of mutual cooperation.

For Arendt, there is another essential distinction that determines the difference between violent and non-violent uses of power, namely, the philosophy of acts and action that she works out, based on how she differentiates between the power of genuine authority and the misuse of power in authoritarian rules of governance. She distinguishes between organic force as that which happens when a crowd gathers together and is whipped up into a frenetic frenzy, when the speaker draws on the "organic" force of the audience by drawing them into agreeing with and thus "mindlessly" imitating her dogmatic stereotypes and prejudices. What results

is violence, authoritarian violence. It is what happens when a speaker speaks to her followers and urges them to physically and brutally attack those who protest against what she is saying: "Get them out of here!" "I would punch him in the face if I could!" "In the old days, there were punishments for that kind of (protesting) behavior!"[16]

But that's not an *authoritative use of power* which, for an Arendtian, can only be non-violent precisely because it presupposes the condition of the creation of a public, physical space where non-violent dialogue can occur. I agree with Arendt's assertion that the only way that one can get things done in the world that is non-violent *and* productively engenders new and flourishing growth in any community is by respecting the dignity of others through allowing others who differ from me to have their say. We make new beginnings through listening to others *first*, which is a practice that ensures and encourages the mutuality of sovereign freedoms. As Arendt learned from her own experience and through the research that she did in writing and publishing *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, I have to allow the other person to have her freedom which means providing for the conditions for the kind of free speech-acts that are not constrained by instrumental conditions.[17] I learn from and with the other—in relationships of mutual respect but not in relationships of fear and coercion, fearing that violent reaction from the other for a misdirected remark or with which I am coerced to agree or disagree, at the point of a gun—open or concealed.

Those observations seem obvious and commonsensical to me, but what is more difficult is how to connect the use of instrumental violence and validating or sanctioning that use as law, a move that I explored in more detail in a talk that I delivered at the University of Texas at El Paso on Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, and my claim that such sanctioning *via* Texas SB 11 legally establishes the gun-toting citizen in a role as a free-roving quasi-vigilante.[18] This law extends the already arbitrary state-sanctioned violence of the police state, which Benjamin so aptly criticizes as the foundation and maintenance of all state militaristic violence.

For me, and from Arendt's perspective, coming to terms with how violence plays out matters, and not for trivial meta-ethical or semantic reasons, but precisely because of our lived world conditions. Arendt was writing from the perspective of the student revolutions of the 60's and 70's, the Vietnam War, the Cold War and her own lived experiences of fascism, totalitarianism, and genocide-inspired exile. Each of these instances represents massive political exercises of police-force-as-brutality or instrumental, dictatorial military force on global and local bases. For example, it is an instrumental use of violence to *not* allow students to protest, to not allow people to determine their own governing ways, and to *not* allow others to peacefully disagree with me or any other governing body, in public. Moreover, and this is directly relevant for the critics of Arendt, these are not academic thought experiments of the Kantian public and private use of reason. Because of her concern for action and practical-political application, she does not let Marxism off

the hook either, asserting that there are misunderstandings of how violence works in misinterpreting Engels and Marx. In fact, while she initiates her argument by noting how Engels diagnosed the problem of violence completely in how he recognized that it is entirely based on the instrumental use of protection of property, protection of my inherited, ill-begotten property rights that then need to be protected violently, that is, instrumentally. But she also proceeds to criticize both Marx and Engels for their ideas about abolishing the working class through violent means, which presupposes some ideal condition of the abolishment of labor. She notes that the key argument in Engels' "property" essay hinges on the underlying attack on how property is a cornerstone for the Capitalist market economy system.

That is how Arendt starts off her book and her argument, namely, that violence is property based and executed through instrumental means (a gun, a bomb, etc.), and that the protection of property rights, or one's professional privilege, or one's inherited "rights" are all based on "instrumentality" and the instrumental use of reason. Arendt is critical of the property-based argument as just another ends-means justification and so, ultimately, she is also critical of the attempts to justify violence for the sake of a "just" revolution of the colonized or dispossessed by Sorel, Fanon, and the Italian activist Portelli. The most obvious consequence for Arnedt's position is that being "engaged" does not always or necessarily have to entail violence.

But what she also gets from Benjamin is a new-found ability to critique the account-giving or storytellings of others for their unexamined protection of injustices. Here is the distinction that she wants to make: giving an account that relies on recreating a myth or creating a new fiction, even for the sake of liberating the masses from oppression, is unacceptable for her because it does not engage with the sources of the instrumental use of power or, by extension, the instrumental use of reason. The complication with Arendt's critique is that someone like Fanon wants oppressed people to be engaged, but not manipulated, and that sometimes such engagements call for acts of violence, because that is the only way that the oppressed can actualize their own autonomy and freedom, that is, through themselves. As I noted earlier, Zizek defends Benjamin's similar position, namely, Benjamin's defense of coming to a decision that entails violence as one, however, that simultaneously commits me to an internal dialogue that takes form as a deliberate, responsible, and serious intellectual and ethical struggle. It is both an internal and external struggle precisely because engaging in any act of violence necessarily changes the existing "external" socio-political order. And "internally" one has to fret for oneself and not follow, dogmatically or obediently, the dictates of the violent proposals of this or that leader. Rather, one has to rely upon one's own moral lights to act, not for some ideological end but for a personal end that only makes sense in the moment and not by its situatedness in this or that political context. Moreover, the injustice which calls for a violent response has to be

apparent.

For Arendt, however, that is not enough. She departs from Benjamin's paradoxical position and bases her critique of violence on her understanding of the science of the day and how science is used to justify a way of exercising politics that says this is the natural way for humans to act because they are naturally violent, self-seeking, and determined by their material conditions. She is critical in this regard of both Hobbes and of the social Darwinists, who used different modes to make the same claim, namely, that it is natural to use violence because that is the nature of things. For those theorists, humans are by nature violent beings and need a social contract or a stronger violent force to keep them in order.

Arendt begins her critique of Hobbes with a quote from *Leviathan*: "Covenants, without the sword, are but words (Arendt, *On Violence,* 5). She builds her position by recounting the traditional understanding of Hobbes's materialistic metaphysics that thus entail a consistent and thoroughgoing mechanistic determinism. What this obviously means is that everything can be explained in terms of matter and motion and that there are no grounds for immaterial substance or powers. In terms of values, good and evil are simply what we desire or detest and freedom is simply the force of unimpeded desires, even though free acts are physically originated. The problems with materialism in general and Hobbes's version in particular is that, in brief, given that everyone is free to follow their self-interests, humans are naturally in constant strife with each other which makes it impossible to (completely) satisfy those self-interests. And since self-interests can never be completely satisfied one is always compelled or perhaps condemned to live an unsatisfied existence resulting in a natural state that Hobbes famously characterized as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The consequence of Hobbes' metaphysics, moreover, is that we are in a "war of all against all." As a consequence, and as is well known, in such a Hobbesian world humans are driven to society and to form social contracts for both rational and passionate self-interested reasons but primarily to seek peace so that they can work to obtain and enjoy material possessions.

In *The Sovereign and the Social: Arendt's Understanding of Hobbes*, Annelies Degryse reconstructs Arendt's argument that Hobbes is not only the political father of totalitarianism, but of the violent consumption practices of the modern mob as the Blob. I will not go into the details of Degryse's argument here, but the gist of it is that under the authoritarian governance of the social contractarians, beginning with Hobbes, the ultimate warrant of violence that underlies the modern liberal state correlates with the socializing function of modern bourgeois, capitalist societies. It is interesting to note that in his *History of Political Philosophy*, John Rawls claims that Hobbes's *Leviathan* is the greatest single work of political thought in the English language.[19] For Degryse, Arendt's alternative to Hobbes, and by extension to Rawls, is her metaphysics of presence which entails that "only actually acting brings about the political."[20]

In *On Violence*, Arendt is unambiguous about the problems with Hobbes' metaphysics. For Hobbes, because humans are by nature violent on the one hand and seek to meet their desires to consume and to secure property on the other hand, they must give up their "rights" to naturally redress—through violence—the lack of fulfillment of their desires, contractually ceding that right to the state monarch that acts on their behalf. Arendt criticizes Hobbes' formulation of the social contract as a *means* to create an agreement where we create sovereign nation states that merely displace the violent compromises that we have already accepted as the "normal" state of affairs of living in fear of the potential violence that we face with each other. Her critique aims at what she took to be the Hobbesian science of the day and what she saw as the adverse political consequences of its blunt scientific materialism and determinism. As Arendt goes on to say, we humans are not plants; we humans are also not non-human animals; we are human animals, but even more than that we are humans who think and reflect self-reflexively on ourselves and on our condition. We create technology and we freely create art. Her trenchant critique of what she understood to be liberal, social contractarian ways of thinking has resulted in her phenomenology of the political as being dismissed as conservative and anti-liberal. But it is clearly not conservative and, from my perspective, given the depth of her understanding of the metaphysics of human nature on the one hand and her mastery of the history of philosophy and the politics and science of her day, such criticism strikes me as shallow and self-serving. Clearly, she does not entirely disavow the political endeavor and, in fact, professes just the opposite, namely, that we need to reform our political systems top to bottom and from the inside out. At the core of her critique is scientific positivism that atomizes people into an alienating "rights" way of thinking that is based upon affirming the necessity of acting competitively and thus violently towards each other. She is relentlessly critical of the sorts of Ayn Randian pseudo-metaphysics—objectivism—that underwrites libertarian individualism and that promotes ongoing self-serving competition, rather than collaboration. Such thinking can also be aligned with Rawlsian "liberal" ideal theory. It is based on what I often refer to as the "last man standing" kind of practicing philosophy.

Where Arendt is critical of Ayn Rand and John Rawls who can be brought into a strange kind of self-serving collusion that minimally provides for the intellectual structures that maintain neo-liberal, colonizing governments—she is just as critical of those on the "violent" left such as Franz Fanon. The weakness of Fanon's prognosis in dealing with the psychopathology and brutality of colonization is his insistence that one only achieves coherent creativity by a body of people that can be brought into violent coherence. Arendt insists that we do not have to foster creativity out of violent coherence, which leads to the mob mentality of fascism and of mindless authoritarianism. Rather, her counter-position is that we can act creatively through what she calls a philosophy of natality (Arendt, *The Human Condition* 178) What she means by a philosophy of natality is the sort of dialogical

phenomena that engenders new and fruitful ideas through talking with each other in free terms. Her point is that there are really only two ways to understand power: (1) when power is collapsed into force, resulting in being stuck in the metaphysics of an atomizing dynamic of violence which, as solitary and violent can never lead to "actual" power; or (2) power as non-hierarchical and non-instrumental and thereby non-omnipotent. Instead, "actual" power is relational and potential, that is, its exercise releases ever-new potencies and possibilities.

I draw on Arendt's position in order to be able to better criticize the intent of Texas State legislators and the proponents of liberal gun laws for what seems to me to be their attempt to instrumentally create an ongoing climate or environment of instability that allows them to control and maintain their colonized or colonizing privileges. Arendt's alternative, by contrast, is to create the political conditions for actual spaces such as the spaces of our university classrooms—that allow for the possibility for people to speak and to act creatively and freely with each other without the fear or exercise of violence, and without the specter of violence hanging over our conversations. I align myself as a philosopher and educator with her project because I also understand how it can be seen to contribute to flourishing forms of sustainability, but that argument is part of my larger project. Arendt proposes that we establish those conditions where the philosophy of languages that we teach our students are such that we learn to engage the language of instrumentality, without having to engage with the language of a gun. Construing such language as an expression of free speech ignores, I maintain, the ontological condition of the gun as instrumental.

For Arendt, the bottom line is that violence is instrumental, and when one is immersed in an environment where instrumentalism and utility are the guiding values, that is, when education is done at the legislated end of the barrel of a gun, then, I suggest, we would be well advised to adopt Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*, that we sell our poor children as food for the rich and be free of the burden of caring for them by educating them to become responsible citizens of the state of Texas. Our Texas lawmakers have reinforced the ultimate warrant of the modern, liberal nation state that the law can be enforced arbitrarily by any anonymous gun-toting citizen. Licensing is not the critical issue at stake in this case. What is at stake is what we mean in the United States and the State of Texas by a liberal education. I would agree with Arendt in her final analysis that we have lost our moral compass in our educational endeavors by confusing force with power, that is, by mistaking the spontaneous authoritarian exercise of power—which is necessarily enacted with violence and instrumentality—with the ethical restraint of authoritative power, which is enacted in the non-violence of public spaces of free-speech, collaboration and mutual agreements. Such public spaces are where we respect the differences of each other and attempt to persuade and not arrogantly bully the other.

Arendt created a judgmental grid, building on what Benjamin sets up by

strongly differentiating between violent and non-violent protest and revolution. And like Benjamin, who pointed out the possibility of acting "in concert" in non-violent ways—and specifically identified the university as one of those places where the language of love and understanding can and should take place—the implication for both of them is that the university is also one of those places to cultivate non-violence. Arendt goes one step further by wading deeper into the political domain and distancing her analysis of violence from that of Benjamin's who, in his critique of violence, drew more directly on the treatment of violence by Sorel and Fanon.

Unlike Benjamin, Arendt clarifies how her work *is* about institutions as such, and not just political institutions. It is also about the university as an institutional place where we can practice and engage in critiques of political institutions. In good Hegelian fashion, she philosophizes about the institutionalizing and bureaucratizing of things as an important task for the modern philosopher and educator. And at the deeper levels of her analysis we find her positioning our perspectives, that unless we can address the process and the conditions for how we carry on our philosophical dialogues then we are going to be stuck with the authoritarian use of power which, for Arendt, is both fascist and totalitarian.

Underlying this critique of the authoritarian use of power is an additional critique of what counts as progress. Arendt wants to know: what have we learned from studying the history of our choices in deciding which laws are going to govern our lives? Are we making any progress at all? What are the signs of progress?

As I mentioned earlier, Arendt self-consciously identified with Rosa Luxembourg who led the pacifist wing of the Leftist SPD Socialist Party in Germany at the beginning of WWI, in 1914. Arendt was born in 1906 so she learned about fascism and pacifism only later in life, because of her own experiences of exile and the violence of National Socialism. And while she famously supported putting Eichmann and other Nazi leaders to death for their involvement in the genocide of European Jews and many millions of other designated enemies of the state, I want to put forward the claim that her position continues to be one upon which we can build to challenge injustices and the those sorts of violent means enacted into the legal systems of the modern liberal nation state, unjust laws that promote or nourish instrumental forms of violence.

As many know, the white rose is the oldest of roses and has long symbolized pure love and peace, expressing friendship, respect and hope. During the 20th century, this has become even more poignant and powerful. During Nazi wartime in Germany, a non-violent intellectual resistance movement, a group of students from the University of Munich—many of them philosophy students led by their philosophy professor, Kurt Huber—banded together to non-violently resist the violent laws and brutal militarism of the Nazis, enforced through legislating a philosophy for children that would normatively produce a comprehensive class of

German citizens faithfully replicating the noble leadership principles set up by philosophers of the state such as Karl Schmitt and, at least in the early days of Nazism, Martin Heidegger. But some of the university students involved in that educational endeavor, conscripted to serve in the German military, had personally witnessed the persecution of Jews on the Russian Front and in the Warsaw and Lodz ghettos. They called themselves The White Rose. The six most recognized members of the German resistance group were arrested by the Gestapo, tried for treason by the People's Court (*Volksgerichtshof*) on February 22nd, 1943 and put to death by guillotine the same day at Stadelheim Prison in Munich.

White Rose survivor Jürgen Wittenstein described what it was like to live in Hitler's Germany:

> The government—or rather, the party—controlled everything: the news media, arms, police, the armed forces, the judiciary system, communications, travel, all levels of education from kindergarten to universities, all cultural and religious institutions. Political indoctrination started at a very early age [they were very effective philosophers for children], and continued by means of the Hitler Youth with the ultimate goal of complete mind control. Children were exhorted in school to denounce even their own parents for derogatory remarks about Hitler or Nazi ideology. (http://www.historyplace.com/pointsofview/white-rose1.htm)

The students acted in concert, attempting to avoid the comprehensiveness of the Nazi fascist government to invade every corner of their private thoughts and activities. They printed leaflets, intending to spark the consciences of their fellow students and German citizens, with the following messages:

> *Isn't it true that every honest German is ashamed of his government these days? Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes—crimes that infinitely outdistance every human measure– reach the light of day?*
>
> *—1st leaflet of the White Rose*

> *Since the conquest of Poland, 300,000 Jews have been murdered in this country in the most bestial way… The German people slumber on in dull, stupid sleep and encourage the fascist criminals. Each wants to be exonerated of guilt, each one continues on his way with the most placid, calm conscience. But he cannot be exonerated; he is guilty, guilty, guilty!*
>
> *—2nd leaflet of the White Rose*

Almost all of the students and their mentor, Huber, were caught and put to death but their leaflets were smuggled out of the country and dropped by airplane in cities across Germany by the Allied Forces. The students who were involved in The White Rose, who attempted to create a non-violent revolution in the face of overwhelming forces of normativizing teachings and practices of violence, are today considered heroes and as reminders streets, schools and statues have been institutionalized as part of the teaching of non-violence.

In 1996, more than 40 years after that non-violent attempt by the students and teachers involved in concerted actions of The While Rose, attempts to recreate a public space without guns where free speech and the working out of differences of opinion could take place, peace accords were signed in Guatemala after 36 years of civil war. To commemorate those agreements, every day a white rose is placed on the Peace Courtyard of the National Palace to mark another day of peace. We know that in both places, acts of violence rather than acts of peace have taken place and continue to happen.

But let us imagine, with those students and Arendt, what a different climate we might have in our classrooms in Texas if instead of attempting to perform speech-acts in the ethos created by legally sanctioning concealed handguns, we would awake from our slumber as students and teachers and by coming to class carrying open or concealed white roses? In order to begin implementing such a philosophy of natality, and in order to interrupt the incremental implementation of legally sanctioned violence, I extend to each and every reader of this article a symbolic rose to carry with you in the hope that if you were thinking of packing a gun during your next classroom visit, that you would begin to think and act otherwise.

NOTES

1. See Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" in *Responsibility and Judgment*; Edited and Introduction by Jerome Kohn; New York: Schocken, 2003; 49 ff. Arendt criticizes the moral concept of "obligation" as a form of coercion.

2. Hannah Arendt. *On Violence*, New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World; 1970; p. 5. See also Karl von Clausewitz, *On War* (*Vom Kriege*). Edited and translated by Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989; originally published posthumously by his wife Marie von Brühl in 1832). Clausewitz argues that war is always an instrumental extension of *Politik*, justified by the strength of one's emotional and political motivations and that it is essentially.

3. On 13 March 2016, three gunmen opened fire at a beach resort in Grand-Bassam, Ivory Coast, killing at least 19 people and injuring 33 others. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. On the morning of 22 March 2016, three coordinated suicide bombings occurred in Belgium: two at the Brussels Airport and one at the Mallbeek metro station killing thirty-two civilians and the three perpetrators. The bombings were the

deadliest act of terrorism in Belgium's history. On Friday 13 November 2015 in Paris, France and the city's northern suburb, Saint-Denis, three suicide bombers struck outside the Stade de France in Saint-Denis during a football match. This was followed by several mass shootings and a suicide bombing at cafés and restaurants. Gunmen carried out another mass shooting and took hostages at an Eagles of Death Metal concert in the Bataclan theater. The attackers killed 130 people, including 89 at the Bataclan theatre. The attacks were the deadliest on France since the Second World War.

4. See Rudolf Carnap. "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language" in Alfred Jules Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism*; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1966; pp. 60-81.

5. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), for his argument on how analytic philosophy has created a moat between its professional obsession with moral dilemmas and thereby created a 'moat' of irrelevance between its professional thought experiments and how the world actually works.

6. See Simon Swift, *Hannah Arendt* by Simon Swift. London: Routledge, 2008; p. 23 ff.

7. See Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. The popularization of Frankfurt's claim has led to the likewise 'populist' Anglo-American philosopher bias (at least in the 21st century) in judging any work that does not meet the 'standards' of the Anglo-American philosophical tradition for 'truth'—that is, stipulated standards of correct grammar and linguistic usage, as bullshit. The philosophical style of John Symons, who was once a regular member of the New Mexico-Texas Philosophical Society, fits into this latter category.

8. For a good overview of the coordination of these ideas, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004; p. 294.

9. See Slavoj Zizek *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York, NY: Picador/Macmillan, 2008; p. 201.

10. Beatrice Hansen, in her book, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*,

11. See Simon Critchley, "Violent Thoughts about Slavoj Zizek" in *Philosophy and the Return of Violence: Studies from the Widening Gyre*, edited by Christopher S. Yates and Nathan Eckstrand. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011; pp. 61-80.

12. See Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*. Geneva: Editions Labor et Fides, 2006 (originally published 1908). Sorel was a French revolutionary syndicalist whose work Benjamin was introduced to by Bertolt Brecht and Ernst Bloch. Syndicalism: economic socialism—alternative to capitalism, whereby industry would be run by cooperative and mutual confederations or syndicates, composed and managed by labor unions/workers; to overcome industry aristocracy through union democracy, informed and managed by skilled workers to create fair practices.

13. Xunzi ("Master Xun") was one of the most sophisticated and influential philosophers of China's Warring States period (479–221 B.C.E.). He considered himself a follower of Confucius and was one of the central early figures in the consolidation of what came to be thought of as the Confucian tradition.

14. See Hannah Arendt, *Love and St. Augustine*. Edited by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott

and Judith Chelius. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. This was Arendt's unpublished doctoral dissertation which deals with love for the world, for the sake of its independent self and thus as a good towards which we aim or desire.

15. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958; 238-243.

16. These are from Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. For example, the last quote comes from a rally in the eve of the Iowa caucus, 23 February 2016: http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/02/trump-on-protester-id-like-to-punch-his-face.html (retrieved 4 January 2018).

17. See *Origins of Totalitarianism*

18. See my unpublished Invited Talk: "On Religion and Violence: Language, Anarchy, and Walter Benjamin" invited lecture for The Religion and Culture Speakers Series, co-sponsored by the Race, Authority, and Violence in the 21st Century Lecture Series at the University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso; 15 February 2016.

19. According to Rawls: "Hobbes's *Leviathan* is the greatest single work of political thought in the English language." See John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007; p. 1.

20. See Annelies Degryse, "The Sovereign and the Social: Arendt's Understanding of Hobbes" in *Ethical Perspectives: Journal of the European Ethics Network 15. 2, (2008)*, p. 239.

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