Seeking Vita Contemplativa: A Search for Contemplation in a Secular World

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Seeking Vita Contemplativa: A Search for Contemplation in a Secular World

Senior Project submitted to
The Divisions of Languages and Literature and Social Studies
of Bard College

By
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2014
For my dear friends and confidants who have celebrated with me in times of joy, offered refuge and comfort during adversity, supported me in my public and private life, stood by me through the night, provided company on many adventures, and showed me escape when I needed it most.  
My contemplative life would be nothing without you all.  
My deepest thanks.

“Nam ceterae neque temporum sunt neque aetatum omnium neque locorum: haec studia adulescentiam alunt, senectutem oblectant, secundas res ornant, adversis perfugium ac solacium praebent, delectant domi, non impediunt foris, pernoctant nobiscum, peregrinantur, rusticantur.”  
- Marcus Tullius Cicero, Pro Archia
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my final board, Karen Sullivan, Robert Cioffi and Daniel Berthold, as well as Michael Staunton and David Shein who were on my mid-way. I appreciate the time they all took to read this project. And I am so very grateful to learn from their commentary and criticisms.

A huge thanks to all of my family for their love and support. Your relentless pride in me and all that I do is overwhelming. I am proud to be related to each one of you, and take the same pride in all of your pursuits.

A special thanks to Rose and Christopher Djorup, who have always been encouraging and supportive of my academic and intellectual pursuits.

Thanks to my friend and brilliant peer, Miles Holmes Berson, for helping me in the moments when I deeply regretted not learning Ancient Greek.

I am indebted to Jennifer Gillen, my outstanding peer and even more outstanding friend, who took the time to read my entire project and give thoughtful feedback and editorial suggestions.

Thank you to Robert Cioffi whose guidance toward valuable sources, helpful conversations, and book hunting advice were essential to this project. I am so thankful for his Cicero class, which showed me the complexities and relevance of Cicero to my project. I am deeply grateful that I had to chance to study with him in my final year at Bard.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the invaluable insight of Karen Sullivan, my advisor. Her astute guidance and brilliant suggestions encouraged and fed my quest for vita contemplativa this year, as they have for all my four years as her advisee. Thank you is simply not enough.
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**Introduction**

In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama took pains to detail the obstacles America overcame under his leadership while simultaneously detailing the middle class struggle. In this speech, like many others, the President emphasized the necessity for us to rebuild our economy so that America would remain competitive amongst technologically advancing countries. His plans of actions were multi-faceted. But as leaders in other countries have often done, he looked to the education of America's youth as a means to soothe our economic woes:

Tonight, I’m announcing a new challenge to redesign America’s high schools so they better equip graduates for the demands of a high-tech economy. We’ll reward schools that develop new partnerships with colleges and employers, and create classes that focus on science, technology, engineering, and math—the skills today’s employers are looking for to fill jobs right now and in the future.  

This is part of the Obama administration’s larger legislation designed to spur reform, *Race to the Top*. Where previous administrations have had more straightforward and pointed funding toward reform, *Race to the Top* calls itself a contest designed to foster reform rather than strictly to reform. And it is indeed a contest. *Race to Top*, as its name suggests,

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1 See President Obama’s State of the Union in 2010 and 2012 as well.
is a race. School districts, counties, and organizations all apply for grant money to “win.” Each application is awarded points based on their students’ test performances and STEM oriented reform. Applications are judged against each other using this point system. Above, President Obama speaks of the main judgment criteria – an education that best fosters skills for the “demands of a high tech economy.” As a result, the focus has become primarily on math, science, and engineering purely because these studies create the “skills” needed. These skills, according to our president, will equip graduates for the jobs our economy needs to repair itself. Of course, having skills that will make graduates easily employable is not negative. And there is nothing wrong with studying STEM. The problem comes not from the studying of these disciplines, but from the reason why people have chosen to focus them. An education heavily focused on practical skills, has created an education geared toward instrumentality. The Obama administration uses this education as a means, not as an end in itself. On the White House website for Race to the Top, it clearly states the legislation’s ultimate end which it hopes to use education as a means for:

   America’s ability to compete begins each day, in classrooms across the nation—and President Obama knows we must comprehensively strengthen and reform our education system in order to be successful in a 21st century economy. The case for the link between the strength of American education and the strength of our economy is a simple one—and it is one that all Americans can agree on. Ensuring that every student in our country graduates from high school prepared for college and a successful career is central to rebuilding our economy and securing a brighter economic future for all Americans.

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According to this text, America's economy not only reflects the state of our education, but also depends on these children in classrooms who must compete every day. Because *Race to the Top* is a contest, these students do literally compete every day to pass these tests and receive funding. It seems that winning this competition, would ensure a happy financially secure life in a bustling economy for those students. But because the main goal underscoring this education is its instrumentality to compete in the global economic market, the students are not only responsible for their own futures, but for future of the American economy as well.

Hannah Arendt would find the responsibility that children and students are forced to take on under this system immensely problematic. In her controversial essay, “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt points to the children, who were forced to desegregate by court order, as taking on the burdens of adults. She writes,

> It certainly did not require too much imagination to see that this was to burden children, black and white, with the working out of a problem, which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve...

And then more specifically, on Elizabeth Eckford, the first African American girl the whole nation watched walk to a formerly “whites only” school,

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6 Arendt’s extremely controversial essay that problematized the de-segregation in schools, it is still widely contested. I do not de-segregation in public schools should not have happened in 1956. Many color Arendt’s essay incorrectly as racist or overbearing. I think this sort of reading is reductive and untrue. Arendt, who experienced Nazi Germany, was deeply anxious about any kind of forced takeover of social sphere, limiting the private wishes of individuals. I would hazard a guess that this might be where these sentiments are rooted. Regardless, Arendt used de-segregation in schools as context to illustrate her philosophy that conserves private space. I bring this essay in only to further illustrate this philosophy.

7 Arendt speaks of the newspaper photo of a little girl being escorted to school with a white mob trailing behind her. Often this image is thought to be Ruby Bridges, who inspired the Norman Rockwell painting, “The Problem We All Live With.” The painting depicts a little girl on her way to school, escorted by U.S. Marshalls, walking past racial slurs scrawled on the wall behind her. But Ruby attended the first grade in New Orleans, in 1960, three years after the de-segregation of Little
The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero—that is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be... Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought out in the schoolyards?^8

Arendt paints the adults willing to make children fight their battles for them as cowards, shirking the responsibility of the world they ruined to be inherited by children. Arendt’s disgust derives from her focus on the dichotomy of public and private life, which pervades almost her entire corpus. The public interests of the government being taken up by children, who as children have a right to an immensely private life, was very disturbing to Arendt:

Because the child must be protected against the world, his traditional place is in the family, whose adult members daily return back from the outside world and withdraw into the security of private life within four walls. These four walls, within which people’s private family life is lived, constitute a shield against the world and specifically against the public aspect of the world. They enclose a secure place, without which no living thing can thrive. This holds good not only for the life of childhood but for human life in general. Wherever the latter is consistently exposed to the world without the protection of privacy and security its vital quality is destroyed.^9

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Cited:
Scanned copy of “Reflections on Little Rock” Commentary, a journal that first refused to publish her article, but acquiesced a year later. It is available online here. The pages numbers used will correspond to this publication.


According to Arendt, the vital quality of human life is destroyed when we are consistently exposed to the public “without the protection of privacy or security.” Arendt follows this by remarking that the lack of privacy is why children of famous parents often “turn out so badly.”

School, for children, is a place of transition from the private life of the family to the public life of the world. It should be handled very carefully so as to not completely breach the sense of security that children still need before being thrust completely into the public realm. For Arendt, the risk of Race to the Top would be the compromising of this not yet public space.

What I contend Race to the Top threatens is not private life alone, but the personal activities, faculties, and passions that come along with it. The narrow focus on STEM is not the sole problem. Nor is it problematic for us to aid young people in obtaining secure financial futures. Rather, the problem lies in a pedagogy driven alone by instrumentality. This instrumentality, using education as a means to fix our economic troubles, has resulted in pedagogy only interested in quantifiable or testable skills. Rote learning and rote testing has dramatically increased in order to satisfy this need for a practical economic output from education. In turn, these concerns for practical economic output have fostered the current high stakes testing culture. With funding and success dependent on many of these poorly designed exams issued by “the Common Core” or the state testing boards, public school children are showing anxiety at startlingly young ages.

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12 Here is just one look from just one of the many articles being published on links between negative anxiety and testing. This was published in 1984, when there were dramatically fewer tests, and our government was not anxious to repair the nation from economic collapse. Here is a passage that predicts the results if current trends continued:
kindergarteners exhibiting stressful responses to high stakes testing, studies show that the students understand the enormity of the responsibility that comes with these tests in comparison to their normal evaluative tests given by teachers. These tests breed an educational environment of intense pressure, leaving little time for students to explore their passions or interests that might have less practical outputs. The humanities and arts, thought to have less practical capabilities, have become devalued as a result of this education driven by instrumentality. Even studying science, because it peaks your curiosity or wonder finds no place in this standardized test-driven pedagogy.

I contend that in this new pedagogy, no space is given to a student’s personal passion and subjective necessity. Students are not encouraged to do something because

Furthermore, several recent educational trends are likely to increase anxiety among school-aged children. As the consequences of test performance assume a more important role in school, such as determining whether a child is promoted to the next grade (or eventually receives a high school diploma), children will experience strong apprehension about evaluation, and as a result many of these students will do even less well (Hill 1984). Similarly, the increased use of test scores to evaluate educational programs and greater public pressure for high levels of skill learning and achievement in schools create a more pressure-laden atmosphere. This pressure also should result in more children experiencing strong debilitating anxiety. If these trends continue, the problem of anxiety may become even more serious over the next few years.


14 Martha Nussbaum, in her book, Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities, goes into this point in great depth. She too, sees no issue with STEM education, but rather points to the negative impacts of this practically driven education on our students and the world. She makes the case that the humanities, as well as STEM, when taught properly foster the capacities needed to engage in global citizenship and democracy. Taking examples form America and India, she shows readers what exactly is at stake in a loss of the humanities. She writes that if we continue down this path we will be creating, "nations of technically trained people who do not know how to criticize authority, useful profit makers without imagination...a suicide of the soul.”
they feel it creates meaning or is essential to their lives, because these are not practical or public reasons. I put forth that these personal endeavors correspond to Arendt’s private realm and make up the vita contemplativa, or contemplation. But Arendt has already declared these subjective activities, contemplation, to be “meaningless” in her book, The Human Condition. She writes,

If we compare the modern world with that of the past, the loss of human experience involved in this development is extraordinarily striking. It is... contemplation, which has become an entirely meaningless experience.¹⁵

For Arendt, the contemplative life, which exists as an element of private life, would have trouble finding its place in an education driven by collective instrumentality and public desires. But this drive for instrumentality has existed long before Race to the Top, and its longstanding prevalence in western thought might have been what led Arendt to declare vita contemplativa to be overtaken by and then rendered obsolete by vita activa. This project seeks to combat Arendt’s claim of contemplation as meaningless, and expand its definition, showing its relevance and persistence in our own world, despite mounting obstacles, such as Race to the Top and others.

Contemplation, understandably, can sound like a privileged and leisurely pursuit. While I acknowledge the roots of contemplation to be in a privileged class, this is no longer the case. Nor is contemplation synonymous with leisure. Necessarily left out of the following project is the classical dichotomy of otium and negotium, the division that differentiates one’s time. Otium designated a time apart from duty, where one could spend time relaxing and doing what one pleased in leisure, while negotium designated a time for

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¹⁵ Arendt. The Human Condition. 322-323
duty or work. Contemplation could occur in the time designated for *otium*. But within that
time of leisure, one could also take part in entertaining or escapist activities, such as games
or baths, which would not fall under contemplation. With cursory glance, leisure might
seem to share some of the aims of a contemplative life in contrast to that of the active. But
contemplation, as seen in the following chapters, must always be a deeply engaging and
meaningful practice, which satisfies one far beyond the desire for entertainment alone.

Before proceeding, one more distinction of the project is necessary; this is a project
of both literature and philosophy. Using careful close readings to support an argument, a
methodology that both disciplines share, this project responds to Arendt. The project can
be seen most clearly as a philosophy project in that it responds to Arendt, using her work
to frame the project. Thus, I deal within her terms, necessarily dealing with the attitudes
toward public and private life in each chapter as context and influence on the writings and
tradition of *vita contemplativa*. Though I respond to Arendt in ways most necessary for my
argument, I differ from her in that I give more attention to Rome, rather than Greece, and
give ample time to the thinkers of the Middle Ages. The chapter on Cicero’s Rome not only
provides the scholarship missing from Arendt’s work, but also shows a society more
similar to us than that of medieval Europe. The public-oriented existence of the Romans
shares similarities with our own public-obsessed world, providing a context in which
expanding the definition of contemplation can be more fruitful in its comparisons to our
own society. Though very different from us, the medieval chapter of this work acts as a
foundation, showing contemplation during its supposed high point. Without this
foundation, the project would have little to stand on. My argument against Arendt’s claim
that contemplation has become meaningless, in many ways, hinges on a deep
understanding of these medieval thinkers. These close readings require necessary historical context, but the project remains one not of history. If it were, I would be making broad stroke historical claims to people and their lives everywhere, which I am not. I seek instead to find and recover meaning from a tradition thought to be lost, illuminating how its tremendous value might be taken into consideration when we visualize and think about our own lives in an immensely public and practical-minded world.
I: Old Wounds: Contemplation in the Lives of Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Thinkers

“Si universos lucreris, te unum perdens?”
Matthew 16:26

The question, “What does it profit you to gain the whole world, but lose yourself alone?” is at the core of the first book of Bernard of Clairvaux’ s De Consideratione. Our sole defense, according to Bernard, is through contemplation. Contemplation preserves the self.

In the classical world, it is most associated with philosophy. During the period that this chapter focuses on, the twelfth century, contemplation pursues the knowledge and communion with God. It is self-indulgent, a means to its own end. Contemplation corresponds to the private, in that the practice of contemplation happens in a private realm and indulges private concerns. It is a personal endeavor, done for the self. And like the notion of “private,” contemplation has its counterpart in action or the active life. Action occurs in the public realm, means to to a collectively pursued end. The terms vita activa and vita contemplativa are instrumental in Arendt’s thinking; though not her own terms, Action would later become one of the most read and discussed chapters in courses that might include any part of The Human Condition. However, there is no chapter in her work on contemplation. And while contemplation occupies pages of classical and here, medieval thought, Arendt, as seen in the introduction to this project, pronounces that contemplation “has become meaningless” in the modern age.16 What could possibly strip contemplation,

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the exercise at the center of many foundational thinkers, of its meaning? This chapter seeks to illustrate and explore contemplation at its perceived high point, the mid-twelfth-century to the late thirteenth-century, from the Cistercian order to the beginnings of the Dominican and Franciscan order. I seek to show that even during this period, with the shift from cloisters, to Cathedral schools, and finally to universities; there came too a shift in focus from *vita contemplativa* to *vita activa*. This shift shows that our own era is unoriginal in its focus on collective or public need rather than subjective private necessity. Thus, the status of contemplation in this period is not so different from its existence in our own time, as something lusted after despite mounting obstacles.

*On Consideration*, the text that motivates this chapter was written as “advice to a pope,” between 1148 and 1153. The pope, Eugenius III, was the first of the Cistercian order to hold the position. Bernard, a fellow member of the Cistercian order, was deeply invested in the success of his former monk and saw it fit to send him this advice. In this text, Bernard is concerned that in gaining the responsibilities of the papal office, this new Cistercian pope will lose sight of his own responsibilities to himself. While the words of advice are aimed at a new pope, the concerns expressed can be applied far more broadly. Bernard warns of a life swallowed by public duty, bereft of private fulfillment and salvation. But contrary to Bernard's concerns and constant prioritization of the contemplative life over that of active, zeal for contemplation faded in a very visible way in the latter half of the twelfth century. The movement from the monastery, to the university, cloister to city, and creation of the Dominican Order gave birth to the influential man and scholastic exemplar, Thomas Aquinas. Through these movements, we see an increased emphasis on the active and subsequently public life. Though Bernard prized contemplation over all other concerns, he
himself had an extremely active life. He saw himself as an exception, but others began to see him as the ideal. We see the result of this disparity.

**Aristotle**

Bernard was not the first to use the term *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. In fact, as it was alluded to in the previous chapter, a similar use of “contemplative” also appears in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. After elaborating on the moral virtues and their vices, Aristotle finally arrives at contemplation in the last book of *Nichomachean Ethics*. Very simply, the book is concerned with activities that point or lead to the good. But contemplation is said to do this better than anything previously mentioned and bring us closer to *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as “happiness.” Aristotle writes,

> Now, if happiness is activity in conformity with virtue, it is to be expected that it should conform to the highest virtue; and that is the virtue of the best part of us. Whether this is intelligence or something else which, it is thought, by its very nature rules and guides us and which gives us notions of what is noble and divine; whether it is itself divine or the most divine thing in us; it is the activity of this part (when operating) in conformity with the excellence or virtue proper to it that will be complete happiness. That it is an activity concerned with the theoretical knowledge or contemplation has already been stated.\(^\text{17}\)

Contemplation, *theōria* in the Greek, is said to be the activity in accordance with the “highest virtue.” It is the most continuous and a godlike activity. Only gods can contemplate endlessly, but we should, nevertheless, try to model ourselves on them. Contemplation is an end within itself, unlike the virtues and other activities mentioned that are all a means. Other virtues are important, but it is contemplation that supersedes all of them.

Common Biblical Figures

After Aristotle, but before Bernard, early church fathers too wrote on contemplation. Not unlike the concepts of Aristotle or Bernard, contemplation is “an end within itself,” and the “most continuous” and god-like activity. Common to all the church fathers is the use of biblical figures to illustrate the active and contemplative dichotomy. Origen, Augustine, Gregory, and eventually Bernard all discuss the terms through the figures of Rachel and Leah and Mary and Martha.

In Genesis, Jacob comes to the Laban’s land to find Rachel with a flock. She returns to her father, Laban, to tell him that Jacob has arrived. Jacob stays to work for Laban, in which Laban offers him a “reward” of his choosing:


And he waited till a month had passed; then he said, Because thou art my kinsman, that is no reason why thou shouldst work for me free of charge; tell me what reward thou wouldst have. Laban had two daughters; Rachel was the younger and her elder sister was called Leah. But Leah was dull-eyed, whereas Rachel had beauty both of form and face, and on her Jacob’s love had fallen. So he answered, I will work seven years for thee to win thy younger daughter Rachel. Better thou, said Laban, than any other husband I could find for her; stay, then, at my side. So Jacob worked seven years to win Rachel, and they seemed to him only a few days, because of the greatness of his love.  

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18 Genesis 29:14-20
19Knox Translation. Copyright © 2013 Westminster Diocese Nihil Obstat. Father Anton Cowan, Censor. http://www.newadvent.org/bible/gen029.htm (If translation is not cited, it is my own work.)
The tale is often interpreted as one of perseverance and hard work for a desired end. Jacob sees Rachel as the more desirable of the two sisters and works seven years for the marriage he assumes he will receive. But after an unexpected decision on Laban’s part, Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah after the first seven years and must work a subsequent seven years to attain Rachel. The more beautiful in face and other aspects or *decora facie et venusto aspectu*, yet barren, Rachel represents the contemplative life, and the fertile but bleary-eyed or “dull-eyed,” *lippis,* Leah, the active life.

The other figures utilized are the New Testament sisters, Mary and Martha. In Luke 10, Christ visits their home:


In one of the villages he entered during his journey, a woman called Martha entertained him in her house. She had a sister called Mary; and Mary took her place at the Lord’s feet, and listened to his words. Martha was distracted by waiting on many needs; so she came to his side, and asked, Lord, art thou content that my sister should leave me to do the serving alone? Come, bid her help me. Jesus answered her, Martha, Martha, how many cares and troubles thou hast! But only one thing is necessary; and Mary has chosen for herself the best part of all, that which shall never be taken away from her.

Martha is quite literally very active and concerned with far more worldly things, while her sister is focused on Jesus Christ who is currently residing in their home. Christ tells Martha

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20 C. Plautius uses *lippus* to mean literally blind or enflamed in his text about the Roman wars. *Lippus* in other contexts can mean blind to something, as in information or an action.  
21 Genesis 29:14-20  
22 Knox translation.
that the cares she has will all eventually fall away. Mary is the sister who has chosen to
concern herself with *optimam partem or* “the best part of all,” and this “part...shall never be
taken away from her.” This “part” meaning her devotion to Christ over worldly matters,
will outlast any other duty that her worldly life will require of her. Her devotion will be
continuous into her afterlife, while Martha’s concerns will not.

**Gregory the Great**

Gregory the Great uses both sets of figures in his *Moralia in Job* written between 578
and 595 AD. First, we see the story of Leah and Rachel.

It is hence that Jacob serves for Rachel, and gets Leah, and that it is said to him, It is
not the custom in our country to give the youngest before the first-born. For Rachel
is rendered ‘the beginning seen,’ but ‘Leah,’ ‘laborious.’ And what is denoted by
Rachel but the contemplative life? What by Leah, but the active life? For in
contemplation ‘the Beginning,’ which is God, is the object we seek, but in action we
labor under a weighty bundle of wants. Whence on the one hand Rachel is beautiful
but barren, Leah weak eyed, but fruitful, truly in that when the mind seeks the ease
of contemplation, it sees more, but it is less productive in children to God. But when
it betakes itself to the laborious work of preaching, it sees less, but it bears more
largely. Accordingly after the embrace of Leah, Jacob attains to Rachel, in that every
one that is perfect is first joined to an active life in productiveness, and afterwards
united to a contemplative life in rest.23

As mentioned in brief earlier, Leah, though “weak eyed,” is “fruitful” because she can
produce more offspring. But Rachel, though barren, is beautiful. When the mind turns itself
toward contemplation, it produces less, but “sees more.” And when turned toward an active
life, it produces more, but “sees less.” Embedded in his phrasing is the notion of the mind

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“seeing” more or less. While he does not state it explicitly, this use of sight stands in for a sort of access to the divine, which one can become more privy to through contemplation. Similar to Aristotle’s use of contemplation, contemplation brought with it access to truth. But instead of access to truth alone, for Gregory, it is an access to God. Contemplation is the most heavenly or divine sort of aspects of life attainable on earth. After discussing Leah and Rachel at length, Gregory then moves to Mary and Martha,

For that the life of contemplation is less indeed in time [i.e. age], but greater in value than the active, we are shown by the words of the Holy Gospel, wherein two women are described to have acted in different ways. For Mary sat at our Redeemer’s feet, hearing His words, but Martha eagerly prosecuted bodily services; and when Martha made complaint against Mary’s inactivity, she heard the words, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. [Luke 10, 41, 42.] For what is set forth by Mary, who sitting down gave ear to the words of our Lord, saving the life of contemplation? And what by Martha, so busied with outward services, saving the life of action? Now Martha’s concern is not reproved, but that of Mary is even commended. For the merits of the active life are great, but of the contemplative, far better. Whence Mary's part is said to be ‘never taken away from her,’ in that the works of the active life pass away together with the body, while the joys of the contemplative life are made more lively at the end.24

This passage furthers Gregory’s point of contemplation being more eternal, and more divine. As discussed earlier, and in Gregory's own words, the important part of this passage lies in Christ’s words to Martha about her sister, returning to this “part.” This is Mary's choice of a more eternal activity. or one that is “more lively at the end.” Evident here in both passages is a privileging of the contemplative life over that of the active. (“For the merits of the active life are great, but of the contemplative, far better.”) But it is

characteristic of Gregory’s writings to never have a complete dismissal of active life, rather an emphasis that both are necessary. This was evident in both of these Old Testament and New Testament figures.

Prior to those figures, Gregory engages further with this dichotomy in a unique way. He again acknowledges the superiority of the contemplative life compared to the active life. But then warns of an overly contemplative life for a person not fit for contemplation. Referencing a passage from Matthew 5:29-30, he states,

...Some restless spirits, whilst by contemplation they hunt out more than their wits compass, launch out even to the length of wrong doctrines, and, whilst they have no mind to be the disciples of Truth in a spirit of humility, they become the masters of falsities. It is hence that ’Truth’ saith by His own lips, And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes be cast into hell fire. For the two lives, the active and the contemplative, when they be preserved in the soul, are accounted as two eyes in the face.

And while this metaphor of plucking out an eye may seem like a strange metaphor to use, considering the outright privilege that the contemplative life is acknowledged to have, it achieves an important nuance. As Aristotle also acknowledged that not all were capable of contemplation, Gregory makes a similar point. For some, contemplation leads them astray. The contemplative life is overwhelming. In these cases, it would be best to “pluck out” the right eye, or remove contemplation from your life. As unfortunate it must be to miss out on the indulgence that is the contemplative life, the active life can still bring you to salvation. It

25 The metaphor still stems from scripture, coming from Matthew 5:29-30. It is unique in that it does not have the long tradition like that of Leah and Rachel, Mary and Martha.

Original Source: Matthew 5:29-30
would be better to live an active life pointed toward salvation than a contemplative one comprised of "misbelief." Not all are capable of contemplation. One could make a mistake of faith in some way as a result of over-contemplating, or come to an incorrect conclusion.

**Bernard of Clairvaux**

Bernard’s *On Consideration* also makes use of biblical figures and metaphors. Concerned heavily with the active and contemplative life in the first two books, his text is directed at Pope Eugenius III’s transition from the cloistered life of a monk to the very active duties of a pope. Through the story of Leah and Rachel and a comparison to a wound, Bernard illustrates the deep pleasure of the contemplative life and the pain that comes with the lack of it. These notions of pain and pleasure actually work together to characterize the overt privileging of the contemplative life over active life, and the intense desire that accompanies it.

Like the figures of Rachel and Leah, a discussion of “wounds” is not particular to Bernard. Masses were often dedicated to the “five sacred wounds” of Christ in prayer, going through each wound. And later than Bernard’s time, five rosary beads were often dedicated to the five wounds, requiring a prayer at each bead.²⁷ The wound first appears in *On Consideration* when Bernard shows sympathy for the grief that Eugenius III must be experiencing, or rather, *should* be experiencing. In case Eugenius is not indeed grieving, as he should, Bernard enlightens him:

Novi quibus deliciis dulcis quietis tuae non longe antehac fruebare. Non potes his dissuevisse tam cito, non potes ita subito non dolere nuper subtractas.

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²⁷ Though after Bernard’s time, these wounds are also reminiscent of the "stigmata" the wounds of Christ which would appear as markings on those that would become saints. First appearing in St. Francis of Assisi, any medieval or even modern reader after that point would think of these sacred marks.
Plaga recens dolore non caret. Neque enim iam occalvit vulnus, nec in tam brevi versum in insensibile est. Quamquam, si non dissimules, non deest tibi iugis materia iusti doloris a quotidianus damnis.\textsuperscript{28}

I am aware of the pleasant delights of solitude you enjoyed not long ago. You cannot have become unaccustomed to them this quickly. You cannot so suddenly cease to grieve for them: they were only recently taken from you. A fresh wound cannot fail to cause grief. Your wound has not yet begun to heal; in so short a time its pain has not ceased. Furthermore, unless you deceive yourself, there is continual cause for legitimate grief from daily injuries.\textsuperscript{29}

The wound, the injury that is left after contemplation is torn away, is still fresh. Bernard uses two different words for wound here, the first plaga, and the second and more familiar vulnus. Plaga, which John D. Anderson and Elizabeth T. Kennan translate here as “fresh wound,” can also mean the strike or blow that causes the recent injury. After one has just lost the time for contemplation, the pain is obvious after a recent blow. In the same way one might get a paper cut, albeit a much less intense wound compared the nature of what is discussed here, while reading and then fixate on the new affliction. After receiving the paper cut, most cease their obsession, and get back to what they were reading. And so because this is a recent blow, a plaga, Eugenius must be aware of his injury. And therefore, it is hard not to notice it, to grieve. The danger comes when this plaga, becomes a vulnus, a wound that is not recent.

Noli nimis credere addectui tuo qui nunc est. Nil tam fixum animo, quod neglect et tempore non obsolescat. Vulneri vetusto et neglecto callus obducitur, et eo insanabile, quo insensibile fit. Denique dolor continuus et acerbus, diuturnus eesse non patitur. Nam si non aliunde extunditur, necesse est cedat vel sibi. Enimvero cito aut de remedio consolationem recipient, aut de assiduitate stuporem.\textsuperscript{30}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28} Bernard de Clairvaux, De Consideratione, (Romae, Editiones Cistercienses, 1963) Book I, I
\textsuperscript{30} Bernard de Clairvaux, De Consideratione, (Romae, Editiones Cistercienses, 1963) Book I, II}
Do not trust too much in your present dispositions. Nothing is so fixed in the soul as not to decay with neglect and time. A scab forms over an old, neglected sore, and as it becomes insensible, it becomes incurable. Indeed, a constant sharp pain cannot be born for a long time. If it is not relieved by something external, it must provide its own relief. It is a fact that it will either obtain relief quickly from a cure or produce numbness by its own persistence.\(^{31}\)

If the wound were to remain recent, remembering the loss of the contemplative life would be easy. But as we ourselves know the process of injury, and as Bernard reminds Eugenius, scabs form over wounds. (Though “sore” is used in the Anderson and Kennan translation, it is still “wound” in the Latin, *vulnera.*) It will “provide its own relief” if not given its cure, contemplation. But a curing of the wound is not what Bernard desires for Eugenius. Relief would come in the form of a cure or numbness. And in both cases, the pain of the wound would no longer be felt. In order to keep the wound open, Eugenius must provide some of the external cure that he so ardently desires, but not give himself over completely to contemplation. Bernard wants Eugenius to take time to satisfy his desire for contemplation despite the demands of the papal office, so as not to forget his intense love of contemplation. The intensity and intimacy of this metaphor is no accident.

Bernard continues to characterize the ideal relationship to contemplation through a desire for Rachel, using Rachel and Leah as figures for the active life and contemplative life:

\begin{quote}
Invitus, ni fallor, avelleris a tuae Rachelis amplexibus, et quoties id pati contigerit, toties dolor tuus renovetur necesse est. At quando non contingit?\(^{32}\)
\end{quote}

Unless I am wrong, you are taken away from the embrace of your Rachel against your will, and as many times you experience suffering, your grief will necessarily be renewed. But when do you not experience it?\(^{33}\)

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\(^{31}\) Bernard of Clairvaux *Five Books on Consideration: Advice to a Pope*, 27.

\(^{32}\) Bernard de Clarivaux, *De Consideratione*, (Romae, Editiones Cistercienses, 1963) Book I, I

Eugenius has been torn away from the *amplexibus* or the embrace or even caress of his Rachel. This indulgence is obviously intimate in nature, and purposely so. Contemplation is an intimate act. It must be lusted after, (“How often do you desire her, but in vain?”)\(^{34}\) in the same way that Jacob lusts after Rachel for another seven years before he can marry her.

The use of Rachel to convey a sense of desire and the wound to convey pain, at first, may seem contradictory. But both are intimate and work together in order to define what Bernard sees as perhaps the most important characteristic of the contemplative life: a desire for it so intense that it is painful. The metaphor of the wound combined with that of the lust for Rachel shows Eugenius that the pining after the contemplative life must remain that intense. The wound must remain open; the intense pain characterizing how burning his desire is for Rachel. The intensity, this pain, is key to keeping a contemplative life. Eugenius should not let the wound heal so as to let him forget about his need for contemplation. The most dangerous outcome of this loss would be for this wound to scab over, the result being callousness toward his former love. “*Ita paulatim in cordis duritiam itur, et ex illa in aversionem.*”\(^{35}\) Little, by little, his heart hardening over time, which would lead him to, as it says in the Latin literally turn away. More figuratively, it is a loss of faith, “apostasy,” as interpreted by Anderson and Kennan. He will no longer lust. His heart will harden.

What would be the result of a hardness of heart? In the most extreme sense, it seems a loss of contemplation, even a loss of faith. One would lose oneself in the affairs of men,

\(^{35}\) Bernard de Clarivaux, *De Consideratione*, (Romae, Editiones Cistercienses, 1963) Book I, II
and lose sight of God. For someone who was chosen to lead a people into a life of salvation, it would be a dangerous fate indeed. The passage that opens this chapter appears here:

...laudo humanitatem, sed si plena sit. Quomodo autem plena, te excluso? Et tu homo es. Ergo ut integra sit et plena humanitas, colligat et te intra se sinus qui omnes recipit. Alioquin quid tibi prodest, iuxta verbum Domini, si universos lucreris, te unum perdens?³⁶

I praise your devotion to mankind, but only if it is complete. Now, how can it be complete when you have excluded yourself? You too are a man. For your devotion to be whole and complete, let yourself be gathered into that bosom that receives everyone. Otherwise, as the Lord says, 'What does it profit you to gain the whole world, but lose yourself alone?'³⁷

In his devotion to humanity, Eugenius cannot forget himself. Bernard aptly writes, "Et tu homo es," he too is a man. He must come together in the sinus, the “bosom,” “embrace,” or even the “intimacy”³⁸ that accepts all of humanity, the love of God, which he too deserves through the act of contemplation. Otherwise, gaining access to the entire universe means nothing in the face of losing his one self in the process.

While On Consideration was surely read by more people than just Pope Eugenius III, it was written with the pope as the specific audience. Bernard’s On the Song of Songs, is filled with sermons widely read and used by many. In this work, there is an application of the contemplation and action dichotomy for lives of monks whose tensions of active and contemplative are less clear. Bernard sought to make the division more apparent and even to explain how the two faculties work together in the lives of holy men. He writes,

It is characteristic of true and pure contemplation that when the mind is ardently aglow with God’s love, it is sometimes so filled with zeal and the desire to gather to

³⁶ Bernard de Clarivaux, De Consideratione, (Romae, Editiones Cistercienses, 1963) Book I, V. 6
³⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux Five Books on Consideration : Advice to a Pope. 33.
God those who will love him with equal abandon that it gladly foregoes contemplative leisure for the endeavor of preaching. 39

It is as if Bernard is offering explanation or a sort of consoling for those who find their days filled with preaching and duties of the active life. People who are active often find themselves that way because they must share the love and excitement for God that they have gained through contemplation. He goes on,

And then, with its desire at least partially satisfied, it returns to its leisure with an eagerness proportionate to its successful interruption, until, refreshed again with the food of contemplation, it hastens to add to its conquests with renewed strength and experienced zeal. 40

The relationship continues to go in cycles, with contemplation feeding a zeal for active duties, but active duties forcing the person back into contemplation once a desire for the active life has been satisfied. This constant change could be confusing or disruptive to the sort of contemplative life that Bernard illustrated for us so passionately in On Consideration. He addresses this consistent state of flux here:

Quite often though the mind is tossed to and fro amid these changes, fearful and violently agitated lest it cling more than is justified to one or the other of these rival attractions and so deviate from God's will even momentarily. Perhaps holy Job endured this when he said: 'When I lie down I say, "when shall I arise?" And then I look forward to the evening.' That is, when at prayer I accuse myself of indifference at work; when at work of upsetting my prayer. You see here a holy man violently tossed between the fruit of action and the quiet of contemplation: through all the time involved in what is good he is ever repenting of imaginary sins, every moment seeking for the will of God with tears. 41

39 Bernard of Clairvaux, On the Song of Songs III, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1979.), 57:8
40 Ibid.
Bernard admits that these violent and frequent changes do create unrest. And that amidst this tossing, it is difficult to choose the sort of life one ought to cling to. Understanding this, he offers a solution:

For this man the only remedy, the last resort, is prayer and frequent appeals to God that He would deign to show us unceasingly what he wishes us to do, at what time, and in what measure. In the three words here designated and commended you have, I think, these three things: Preaching, prayer and contemplation.

Bernard tells his eager audience that prayer is the only solution for “this man” who is tossed about in the waves of action and contemplation. God will give guidance to what he should pay his attention to and when. Preaching is the active realm of his life, contemplation obviously the contemplative, and prayer used to distinguish where he should turn his attention.

But who is “this man” that Bernard places in this turbulent scenario? Surely his audience of monks of the order could relate, anyone may have struggled with this. However, it would not be unlikely for this advice to be taken from his own experience. Pope Eugenius was not the first or last important person Bernard gave counsel to. Bernard was called upon from many different eminent men of high religious rank for advice and wisdom. And for a man living in the twelfth century, he traveled extensively around Europe to preach the second crusade, spoke out against heretics, and became heavily involved in various papal affairs. Here are just a few examples: in 1128, he was present and assisted Pope Honorius II in the council of Troyes. It was here that he was instrumental in the founding of the Knights Templar. He became involved in the schism between popes in 1130, ultimately favoring Innocent II and traveling with him around Italy in 1132. In 1140,

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42 Ibid.
at the council of Sense, Bernard had his famed confrontation with Abelard, calling him a heretic, a monk only in habit and name, nothing else. And in 1146, Bernard preached the second crusade in Burgundy and took off on a mission to continue that preaching in Germany. He ultimately returned in France to involve himself in the condemnation Gilbert de la Porrée in 1147. Bernard’s life was anything but cloistered. He was one of the most renowned thinkers of his day, as a result of his traveling and preaching. Compared to the many who heard these sermons, Bernard traveled not only far more than the average monk, but also more than most secular people. How then, do we listen to his advice? Does this throw into doubt the intense focus on contemplation that Bernard triumphed, if he himself spent most of his life devoted to action?

It would be absurd to say that Bernard did not mean what he wrote and even more so to call him a hypocrite. With all of his active work, Bernard himself had his own wound. He must have felt the intense desire for Rachel, missing contemplation from his life. The writings themselves are not dishonest. Bernard actually acknowledges the oddity of his extremely active life, calling himself a monster.

43 “Homo sibi dissimilis est, intus Herodes, foris Ionnes, totus ambiguous, nihil habens de monarcho prater nomen et habitum...” Bernard, Epistola 321.1
A man unlike himself, a Herod in private, a John in public, all of him most ambiguous, having nothing of a monk but the name and the habit...

Here Bernard attacks both Abelard’s lifestyle and character. He compares him first to Herod the Great, a ruthless king of Judea whose ambition was known to get him into some questionable moral ground. He counters this by saying that, in public, Abelard acts as a John. This criticism of his duplicitous character, question the nature of Abelard’s character, and his motives. And Abelard did have quite the ambition. Known to be extremely competitive in realms of academia, his disputations with others in philosophy were biting. Bernard proceeds to say that there is nothing monk-like left to him. Abelard charades as one, with only the name and the habit left, meaning he is not moderate, chaste, cloistered, devoted, or any of the other qualities that make monks who they are.
Clamat ad vos mea monstruosa vita, mea aerumnosa conscientia. Ergo enim quaedam Chimaerea mei saeculi, nec clericum gero nec laicum. Nam monarchi iamdudum exui conversationem, non habitum.⁴⁴

My monstrous life and my troubled conscious call out to you. Because I am the chimera of my age, I play neither a clerk nor a layman. For long ago, I cast off the association, and habit of a monk.

In calling his life monstrous, Bernard did not mean something sinister or frightening, but a combination of forms. Christ is often referred to a monstrous, in his combination of human and divine. Specifically, Bernard calls himself a “chimera,” a mythological beast that has the head of a lion, the head of a goat, and a tail of a snake. Meaning, he does not have a singular identity or form, he is not a laymen or clerk. He does not say this, but nor is he a secular ruler nor a man of the papal office. Yet, he takes on some duties from each of these roles while abandoning other parts of them. He elaborates in the following line that he long ago, cast off the conversationem and habitum of a monk. Bernard admits that he himself no longer lives the lifestyle that he preaches, and has not for some time. This does mean his writings on the contemplative life are apocryphal. Quite the contrary, this aerumnosa conscientia, shows us Bernard’s own wound, and pining for the contemplative life gone from him. But despite his vicarious writings, which urged others to relish the contemplative life, the perception of Bernard's life’s work had the reverse influence. The influence of the figure of Bernard brought about a pressure on this dichotomy of the active and contemplative. Though he sought to preach the benefits and preference that should be given to the cloistered and contemplative life, his preaching and traveling showed a very different sort of life. Whether he intended to, or not, Bernard became the ideal.

⁴⁴ Bernard, Epistola 250. 4.
Cathedral Schools and The Rise of the University

Great thinkers traveling from place to place, seeking knowledge existed before Bernard. Abelard considered himself to be one of these philosophers. But after Bernard’s many travels and preaching, the phenomenon of wandering scholars only increased. They were not yet at universities, but they were far from their cloisters. These men would travel about, often forming a sort of motley crew, learning from whomever they pleased. One group out of this tradition worth mentioning is the “Goliards” of the late twelfth century, who wandered about finding their home in the cathedrals that would take them in. They were criticized by many as vagabonds, though collectively are attributed to the great work, Carmina Burana. Despite the criticisms they received, others would follow their and others’ examples. More and more people, who formerly would live a cloistered life in a small feudal town, were making their way to these big cities where major cathedrals were located. 45 Le Goff gives a description of them:

Those poor students who had no fixed home, who had no prebend, no stipend, thus set out on an intellectual adventure, following the master who pleased them at the moment. They formed the body of that scholastic vagabondage that was also so characteristic of the twelfth century. They contributed to giving it adventurous, impulsive, bold appearance. But they did not form a class. Of different origins, they had different ambitions. 46

The influx of these “wandering clerks” brought more diversity to those pursuing an education. More and more, those setting out for it were pursuing what Le Goff calls here, “an intellectual adventure.” Or course many of these motives were ultimately religious, and guided by devotion. But many were not. Part of these teachings, though at first

46 Ibid
controversial, were heavily dependent on a study of rational thought and dialectics. Much of this was taken from the classical world. And these teachings were again, not just aimed at budding theologians, though that continued to be viewed as the highest form of profession. They would become medical doctors, philosophers, and lawyers by using education as a means to bring them to the very active desires of their lives.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, we see the age of the universities, which subsumed these smaller collectives known as cathedral Schools. The universities, occurring in cities across Europe, would become the centers of learning and thinking during that time.\textsuperscript{47} It was here, in the university, which housed the perhaps best-known example of an intellectual from the Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas of the Dominican Order.

\textbf{The Dominican Order and Thomas Aquinas}

But before coming to Aquinas’s life and work, let us consider his context as a Dominican, and the Dominican Order’s relationship to the Cistercian Order. In 1206, about half a century after Bernard’s own campaign against heretics, Dominic Guzmán and Diego, a bishop would join twelve Cistercians in Montpellier to launch a new campaign together, which preached against heresy. After the campaign ended, Diego and other bishops departed for posts, and the Cistercians returned to their cloistered monasteries. Dominic, however, infected with a zeal for the active life, saw no place fit for his work. He continued his work preaching and traveling, cultivating a tradition in his wake, creating an order of Friars. This order, which loved preaching and spreading the word of God through teaching, would come to be known as the Dominican Order.

\textsuperscript{47} Le Goff, \textit{Intellectuals in the Middle Ages}. 65.
This is the tradition that Aquinas comes out of. And it is through his life and work that we are able to see what has become of contemplation, in its relationship to the active and public life of university scholars. Aquinas was and is still viewed as the most holy and good of men. He taught many, and produced an outstanding amount of work that is still read extensively today by members of the Catholic Church. The following is not to say he was not religious, or deeply devoted to God. It is instead a complication of his own relationship with contemplation as a result of his surroundings and his work.

Aquinas was a renowned teacher, his preaching quite notable. He was not as self-confident as Abelard, nor did he travel as much as either Abelard or Bernard. But he did teach extensively, and moved many as it is told in his *Vita*. Frequent preaching was required of him in the university, preaching becoming a major part of his life. Teaching, he explains to be part of the active life though informed by contemplation, as Bernard did:

*Sed contra est* quod Gregorius dicit, super Ezech., activa vita est panem esurienti tribuere, verbo sapientiae nescientem docere. *Respondeo* dicendum quod actus doctrinae habet duplex obiectum, fit enim doctrina per locutionem; locutio autem est signum audibile interioris conceptus. Est igitur unum obiectum doctrinae id quod est materia sive obiectum interioris conceptionis. Et quantum ad hoc obiectum, quandoque doctrina pertinet ad vitam activam, quandoque ad contemplativam, ad activam quidem, quando homo interius concipit aliquam veritatem ut per eam in exteriori actione dirigatur; ad contemplativam autem, quando homo interius concipit aliquam veritatem intelligibilem in cuius consideratione et amore delectatur. Unde Augustinus dicit, in libro de verbis Dom., eligant sibi partem meliorem, scilicet vitae contemplativae; vacent verbo, inhient doctrinae dulcedini, occupentur circa scientiam salutarem, ubi manifeste dicit doctrinam ad vitam contemplativam pertinere. Aliud vero obiectum doctrinae est ex parte sermonis audibilis. Et sic obiectum doctrinae est ipse audiens. Et quantum ad hoc obiectum, omnis doctrina pertinet ad vitam activam, ad quam pertinent exteriore actiones.48

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On the contrary, Gregory says (Hom. xiv in Ezech.): "The active life is to give bread to the hungry, to teach the ignorant the words of wisdom."

I answer that, The act of teaching has a twofold object. For teaching is conveyed by speech, and speech is the audible sign of the interior concept. Accordingly one object of teaching is the matter or object of the interior concept; and as to this object teaching belongs sometimes to the active, sometimes to the contemplative life. It belongs to the active life, when a man conceives a truth inwardly, so as to be directed thereby in his outward action; but it belongs to the contemplative life when a man conceives an intelligible truth, in the consideration and love whereof he delights. Hence Augustine says (De Verb. Dom. Serm. civ, 1): "Let them choose for themselves the better part," namely the contemplative life, "let them be busy with the word, long for the sweetness of teaching, occupy themselves with salutary knowledge," thus stating clearly that teaching belongs to the contemplative life. The other object of teaching is on the part of the speech heard, and thus the object of teaching is the hearer. As to this object all doctrine belongs to the active life to which external actions pertain.49

Here, Aquinas clearly acknowledges the better of the two to be the contemplative life. And while speech and teaching are clearly part of the active life, they are informed by contemplation: "speech is the audible sign of interior concept." When a truth is put forth outwardly, it is there that is becomes part of the active life. And it is not just speech, or preaching that corresponds to the active life, but doctrine and other writings as well.

(Omnis doctrina pertinet ad vitam activam, “all doctrine pertains to the active life.”) Aquinas was one of the most prolific scholars. His writings were quickly accepted as doctrine and incorporated into Catholicism’s teachings. According to his Vita, Aquinas was so prolific that he needed three secretaries to handle the amount of writing which was required of the large amount he dictated. In the context of his own writing, Aquinas understood his prolific writing to be a result of his continuous contemplation. And while Aquinas himself understood this, it is unclear if his students or others did. Those admiring or learning from

him would only be privy to his active life as a preacher and a prolific scholar. Much like Bernard, whether or not he intended such a result, Aquinas influenced the way in which one should live as both a prolific public intellectual and a man of high religious rank. Bernard saw himself as the exception to those he lived amongst, a monster. But his reception created him into the ideal. Aquinas did not think himself a monster. And as a result the reception of him was not to view him as an exception, or an ideal, but the rule of how one ought to conduct oneself. The emphasis moved strongly to preaching and writing extensively, shifting the emphasis from the contemplative life to that of the active.

The beginnings of this loss are small, but nonetheless integral to an understanding of the continued status of contemplation as something often subordinated to the active life. We see the wound, even here. If Arendt is right, in deeming contemplation now as “meaningless,” then we have gained the universe and lost ourselves in the process. We would then move away from what was formerly a wound, to behold the scars that we inherited over time. Perhaps, however, she is wrong, and our open wound somewhere remains. If this is the case, where is contemplation? Amidst the chaos of new education reforms that cater to the demands of the public world, how can contemplation sustain itself? How can the wound remain open? In the next chapter, we go back to antiquity, to the age of Cicero, where explicit writings on contemplation are not available. In Rome’s publicly-driven society, which is not unlike our own publicity-obsessed culture, contemplation is seemingly difficult to find. Despite this difficulty, the next chapter aims to find ways to locate contemplation or the desire for it, amidst the very active Rome Republic.
II. Finding Contemplation Through Cicero

"Nihil mihi nunc scito tam deesse uam hominem eum, quocum omnia, que me cura aliqua adficiunt, uno communicem, qui me amet, qui sapiat, quicum ego cum loquar, nihil fingam, nihil dissimulem, nihil obtegam."\textsuperscript{50}

Marcus Tullius Cicero, \textit{Ad Atticum}, 1.18

In a letter to his dear friend, Titus Pomponius Atticus, Marcus Tullius Cicero pleads for his friend to come home to Rome from Athens. He explains with urgency that he needs a \textit{hominem}, a wise person who cares for him deeply, a close friend to speak to without pretense about what vexes him most. At this moment, Cicero calls out to his confidant, Atticus, just as Bernard or Aquinas might call to God for counsel while contemplating. Though explicit mentions of contemplation in Rome are absent, this chapter seeks to find moments of contemplation in the life of Cicero, illuminating places we might look to find contemplation in our own era. Arendt discusses Greek Antiquity in depth in her work,\textsuperscript{51} but focuses much less on Rome. Here, I focus on Rome both to illuminate distinctions missed by her and to explore the important link that is the Roman republic. Stuck between an age after Aristotle and before the Middle Ages, the age of Cicero is the vital link between the birth of contemplation and the medieval culture that would foster the many writings on it. Through focusing on the distinction between public and private in the Roman Republic,

\textsuperscript{50} I must tell you that what I most badly need at the present moment is a confidant-someone with whom I could share all that gives me anxiety, a wise friend who cares for me, to whom I could talk to without any calculation, pretense, or concealment.

\textsuperscript{51} This may have been due to the nationalistic adoption of the Roman Empire by Mussolini during Arendt’s lifetime.
specifically through the lens of Cicero, I argue that contemplation can be found in the more private life of Cicero, despite the intense focus on public life in Rome.

**Publica and Privatis**

Necessarily, this project deals with the concepts of public and private life in Rome. While we may be inclined to make these distinctions stark, Roman life will not comply so simply. The Latin terms themselves better explicate how these terms should be seen—less as distinct realms, but as a continuum. *Publica* literally means belonging to the people. And *privatis*, taking its definition from its verb from, *privo*, is literally translated to mean something that has been deprived from the people or something robbed from the public. Using this idea of ownership over all things, but deprivation in some cases, we find ourselves in varying states of public-ness and privacy. Rather than two clear and separate definitions, a private space or private sphere is simply one stolen away or deprived of this public ownership, a continuum of publicness. With this in mind, I move forward to give a comprehensive idea of how some major aspects of Cicero’s world would have fit into varying degrees of publicness and privacy. Through his own narrative of his education, architecture, and texts, I deal with these complexities accordingly to pursue contemplation in Cicero’s lifetime, the age of the Roman Republic.

**Public Identity and Collective in Rome**

Marcus Tullius Cicero was born in 106 BC in Arpinum, a town southeast of Rome. Cicero did not grow up in the city that he would later spend his life caring for. His father, not actually being a Roman citizen himself, was not able to participate in politics. He was

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52 If interested in Cicero’s biography further, see Plutarch’s life of Cicero in his *Parallel Lives* or a more contemporary biography enjoyed by new students and advanced classicists, Anthony Everitt’s *Cicero: the life and times of Rome’s greatest politician*. New York: Random House, 2001.
still of the notable equestrian class which endowed him with friends in higher places. His father would push for him to have the sort of education he knew would produce a public life and public career for Cicero. This would be successful, as Cicero would go on to become a famed orator, lawyer, and politician. He would hold his first office at quaestor of Sicily, and the consul in 63 BC. He would later be invited by Julius Caesar to join Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey), Marcus Licinius Crassus (Crassus), and Caesar himself in what would come to be known as the First Triumvirate. Cicero, suspicious of Caesar’s intentions for the Republic, would decline. Cicero lived through the dramatic assassination of Julius Caesar, a plot executed to protect the Republic from the private ambitions of Caesar. This intense commitment to public life, at whatever cost, underscored the Rome that Cicero lived in. The following section illuminates how this idea of sacrifice for the collective was imbedded into the history and ancestry that the Roman Republic would claim proudly as its own.

**Stories of Sacrifice in Roman Republic History**

Roman life was thought to be a constant negotiation of duties, to family and friends, but above all to Rome. With this public identity, *Romanitas* as the supreme concern, much was required to be sacrificed in its pursuit. This concept, integral to the Republic, begins with the ousting of the Tarquin Kings, and then leads to a conspiracy against the one who rid Rome of them, Lucius Junius Brutus. In Book II of his *Ab Urber Condita*, Livy writes,

> Erant in Romana iuventute adulescentes aliquot, nec ii tenui loco orti, quorum in regno libido solutior fuerat, aequales sodalesque adulescentium Tarquiniorum, adsueti more regio vivere. Eam tum, aequato iure omnium, licentiam quaerentes, libertatem aliorum in suam vertisse servitutem inter se conquerebantur: regem hominem esse, a quo impetres, ubi ius, ubi inuria opus sit; esse gratiae locum, esse beneficio; et irasci et ignoscere posse; inter amicum atque inimicum discrimen nosse;  

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53 Livy, *Ab Urber Condita, History of Rome*, Book 2.3
There were some young men of high birth in Rome who during the late reign had done pretty much what they pleased, and being boon companions of the young Tarquins were accustomed to live in royal fashion. Now that all were equal before the law, they missed their former license and complained that the liberty which others enjoyed had become slavery for them; as long as there was a king, there was a person from whom they could get what they wanted, whether lawful or not, there was room for personal influence and kindness, he could show severity or indulgence, could discriminate between his friends and his enemies.\textsuperscript{54}

These young men, sons of Brutus, accustomed to living by these kings’ standards, come together to protect their own personal preferences and passions, because to live without their formal privilege, what they saw as agency, felt like slavery in comparison. This fight for private interests, like the monarchy, would be thwarted by Brutus. His sons quickly led themselves into danger. The example of one’s unwavering and absolute dedication to the Roman Republic comes when these conspirators are caught and punished. Livy writes,

\begin{quote}
Direptis bonis regum damnati prodiores sumptumque supplicium, conspectus eo quod poenae capiendae ministerium patri de liberis consulsatus imposuit, et qui spectator erat amovendus, eum ipsum fortuna exactorem supplicii dedit. Stabant delicati ad palum nobilissimi iuvenes; sed a ceteris, velut ab ignotis capitis, consulis liberi omnium in se averterant oculos, miserebat non poenae magis homines quam sceleris quo poenam meriti essent: illos eo potissimum anno patriam liberatam, patrem liberatorem, consulatum or tum ex domo Iunia, patres, plebe, quidquid deorum hominumque Romanorum esset, induxisse in animum ut superbo quondam regi, tum infesto exsuli proderent. Consules in sedem processere suam, missique liciores ad sumendum supplicium. Nudatos virgis caedunt securisque ferunt, cum inter omne tempus pater voltusque et os eius spectaculo esset, eminente animo patrio inter publicae poenae ministerium.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

After the royal property had been disposed of, the traitors were sentenced and executed. Their punishment created a great sensation owing to the fact that the consular office imposed upon a father the duty of inflicting punishment on his own children; he who ought not to have witnessed it was destined to be the one to see it


\textsuperscript{55} Livy, \textit{Ab Urber Condita, History of Rome}, Book 2.5
duly carried out. Youths belonging to the noblest families were standing tied to the post, but all eyes were turned to the consul’s children, the others were unnoticed. Men did not grieve more for their punishment than for the crime which had incurred it— that they should have conceived the idea, in that year above all, of betraying to one, who had been a ruthless tyrant and was now an exile and an enemy, a newly liberated country, their father who had liberated it, the consulship which had originated in the Junian house, the senate, the plebs, all that Rome possessed of human or divine. The consuls took their seats, the lictors were told off to inflict the penalty; they scourged their bared backs with rods and then beheaded them. During the whole time, the father’s countenance betrayed his feelings, but the father’s stern resolution was still more apparent as he superintended the public execution.\(^56\)

Doing what he deemed necessary for the safety of the new republic, Brutus had his own sons executed for the sake of Rome’s future. Though the Romans’ values and tolerance of violence was different than our own, Brutus does not execute his own sons easily. This is a sacrifice. Livy tells us that Brutus’ \textit{voltus} betrays this difficulty, but he proceeds to head the public execution of kin for the safety and sanctity of Rome. This story becomes integral to the stories of Rome’s foundation. Reference to it can be found in Virgil’s \textit{Aeneid}, in book VI when Anchises tells Aeneas of Rome’s future. Virgil writes,

\begin{quote}
\textit{vis et Tarquinios reges animamque superbam}
\textit{ultoris Bruti, fascisque videre receptos?}
\textit{consulis imperium hic primus saevasque securis}
\textit{accipiet, natosque pater nova bella moventis}
\textit{ad poenam pulchra pro libertate vocabit,}
\textit{infelix, utcumque ferent ea facta minores:}
\textit{vincet amor patriae laudumque immensa cupidio}.\(^57\)
\end{quote}

Wait,
Would you like to see the Tarquin kings, the overweening Spirit of Brutus the Avenger, the fasces he reclamed?
The first to hold a consul’s power and ruthless axes,


\(^{57}\) Virgil, \textit{The Aeneid}, Book VI, Lines 940-948.
Then, when his sons foment rebellion against the city, their father summons them to the executioner’s block in freedom’s noble name, unfortunate man... however the future years will exalt his actions: a patriot’s lost wins out, and boundless lust for praise.\(^{58}\)

Anchises tells Aeneas of the future of Rome, wherein Brutus calls for the ousting of the Tarquins, the necessary execution of his sons “pro libertate,” and a founding of the glorious Republic.\(^{59}\) It is this Lucius Junius Brutus, known to be related to the Marcus Brutus, the Marcus Brutus who played a central role in the famed conspiracy against Julius Caesar. The conspirators against Caesar saw a man motivated by his own private concerns and self-interest. The conspirators assassinated Caesar to protect Rome against tyranny. Plutarch tells us of so many moments during the plot against Caesar that express this suppression of private concerns for the public good. Most notably, it is the famed Marcus Brutus who must endure the constant torment of public and private demands. Just before the assassination, Brutus’s wife, Porcia, is overcome with anxiety from all that she knows about the impending events. Plutarch writes in his life of Brutus,

> She had not time to betake herself to her chamber, but, sitting as she was amongst her women, a sudden swoon and a great stupor seized her, and her color changed, and her speech was quite lost. At this sight her women made a loud cry, and many of the neighbors running to Brutus’s door to know what was the matter, the report was soon spread abroad that Porcia was dead; though with her women’s help she recovered in a little while, and came to herself again. When Brutus received this news, he was extremely troubled, not without reason, yet was not so carried away by his private grief as to quit his public purpose.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{59}\) The ousting of the Tarquins comes at the end of Livy’s Book I in *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*.

Hearing the news that his wife may in fact be so ill she is close to death, Brutus presses on because of the public necessity. But like his ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, this was indeed a sacrifice of personal attachments, one not easy to make. Both were saddened and troubled by the choice they had to make. But in both cases, nothing could stand in the way of public need, and both carried on. For the subjugation of private motivations of the glory that is Rome was integral to Rome’s foundation and beginnings, this sentiment carried through to the Republic.

**Cicero’s Education for a Public Life**

As mentioned earlier, Cicero’s father would ensure that Cicero received the sort of education which would prepare him for a successful public life in Rome. Scholarship on his education is often based solely on the text of his speech, *Pro Archia*. Delivered as the defense of a Greek poet and Cicero’s tutor, Archias, whose claim to Roman citizenship was in question, the speech also contains reflection on the education that Cicero himself received. Cicero writes,

> Quam multas nobis imagines--non solum ad intuendum, verum etiam ad imitandum--fortissimorum virorum expressas scriptores et Graeci et Latini reliquerunt? Quas ego mihi semper in administranda re publica proponens animum et mentem meam ipsa cognititione hominum excellentium conformabam… Quod si non his tantus fructus ostenderetur, et si ex his studiis delectatio sola peteretur, tamen (ut opinor) hanc animi humanissimam ac liberalissimam iudicaretis.\(^61\)

How many images of the noble men, carefully recorded, have both the Greek and Latin writers left to us, not solely for us to look at, but also to imitate? And always putting these before me while I guide the public state, I modeled my own spirit and mind after the very thought of these excellent men.  
... Even if there was no great fruit to be reaped from them, and they were only used for pleasure, nevertheless, it is in my opinion that you would judge them to be the most human and free ways to stretch the mind.

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Cicero here is defending the practical purpose of the kind of education he received from Archias. This guidance in public affairs is later referred to as the *fructus* of these pursuits, in contrast to the less practical or pleasure that are derived from them. While considered “practical,” in that it prepared for public life, this education consisted primarily of Greek poetry and literature, quite different from our own notions of practicality. This idea of practicality is defined in contrast with Greece’s educational philosophy, in its “impracticality,” studying for the pursuit of wisdom and learning for learning’s sake. Though they may have consisted of the same texts and myths, each culture’s outlook on the function of education was different in this tension of practicality versus impracticality. Cicero would go on to harness the practical benefits that this sort of education would bring him as a successful orator, modeling himself after the brave and great men he read about during his schooling. In the time of the Republic, if you were the first in your family to serve on the Senate and participate in public life then you were considered a *novus homo*. Cicero’s father, with high hopes for his son and well-off friends to tip him off, was sure to get his son the sort of education that would lead to public life in Rome. Clearly a success, Cicero would go on to participate in a variety of public affairs as stated earlier, including receiving a consulship. Cicero took full advantage of the practical benefits, but his

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education also brought him other benefits, which were less public and more private in nature. These more personal fruits of education, those in which contemplation might be found, are to be elaborated on after a brief understanding the public and privateness of spaces in Rome.

**Public and Private Spheres in Rome**

Before delving further into Cicero’s life, specifically his intimate relationship with Atticus, we must understand the spatial context of public and private spaces in Rome. Much of the scholarship done on public and private life in Antiquity is in reference to spatial places. In the passage cited in the following section, from the *Pro Archia*, Cicero references public life using the term *foris*. Translated as “in public” or in the “forum” by some, it has the literal meaning of a door or gate, the implication being that public life happens out of the doorway, out of the home. While simplistically, this may be true, many of the functions of the homes of Roman politicians were not so protected or private. Transactions with clients as well as entertaining of political connections would occur at the home. There would often be as many as three entrance gates to a *domus*. The smaller of the gates would often provide the sort of literal and figurative barrier from public life, being the gates you might enter and leave every day from your home. But a larger gate, the main entrance of the property would be opened to signify the master’s readiness to take guests. Outer portions of the *domus* were for these types of visitors. Often it would be opened in the morning to signify a master’s willingness to take his clients’ offerings and tributes. After entering through the gate, one would find oneself in the vestibule. While part of the home

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proper, it acted as transitional space where one would still be subject to a critical eye. If one were to make it past the vestibule and into the hall, one might have been a guest considered of some prestige, at least higher than a client. Perhaps invited for a dinner party or were political friends visiting with a proposition, in these cases and more, one might find oneself in the hall or the peristyle of the home. Thereof course were spaces that were not open to public or visitors, usually bedrooms located away from these more public and transitional spaces of the *domus*. Even the home, which is often set up in contrast to the forum, is rather public by our own standards. It seems strange, but unlike ourselves, or even the medieval people—Romans were rarely alone. Most activities were done with others. Thus, personal moments might not have to occur necessarily in solitude, but in some smaller contrast to the immensely and wholly public world of the forum.

Privacy and contemplation might still occur with others present, it just depended on who these individuals were. In a letter begging his dear friend Atticus to come home, Cicero writes,

> Ita sum ab omnibus destitutus. ut tantum requietis habeam, quantum cum uxore et filiola et mellito Cicerone consumitur. Nam illae ambitiosae nostrae fucosae amicitiae sunt in quodam splendore forensi, fructum domesticum non habent. Itaque, cum bene completa domus est tempore matutino, cum ad forum stipati gregibus amicorum descendimus, reperire ex magna turba neminem possimus, quocum aut iocari libere aut suspirare familiariter possimus.  

> I am so utterly forsaken that all my moments of relaxation are those I spend with my wife, my little daughter, and my darling Marcus. My brilliant worldly friendships

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65 Peristyles were courtyards that existed in most Roman homes of some wealth. In some cases the peristyle also acted as an entertaining space. In other times and places, it was designed to enhance the more private spaces of the home. This seems to depend on the home’s own architecture, the occupants, and the exact location. (See p. 357 of *A History of Private Life.*)

might make a fine show in public, but in the home they are barren things. My house is crammed for a morning, I go down to the forum surrounded by droves of friends, but in all the multitude I cannot find one with whom I can pass an unguarded joke or fetch a private sigh.  

The home, despite being less public than the forum, is no more comforting to Cicero here. Cicero’s family and political friendships are no substitutes for the comfort and familiarity that Atticus provides. It is this friendship, more than physical space, which carves out privacy for Cicero’s privacy and personal contemplation.

Friendship

Much is written on Rome’s emphasis on public life and the importance of sacrifice for the good of the collective. But what must be sacrificed in its wake? Other than self-interest, what is sacrificed? Familial and marital relations, these relations that exist in the more private realm of the home, are part of this private sector. But as seen with Brutus, these will be sacrificed in time of need. I am hesitant to reduce the private lives of this publically minded society to so little as family and political ambition. Where then, could private life, or even contemplation exist? I argue that friendship in Roman antiquity, specifically for Cicero, is able to sustain and nourish a private life, giving space for contemplation.

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67 Cicero, M. Tullius, and David Roy Shackleton Bailey. *Letters to Atticus I*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. D.R. Shackleton Bailey has done tremendous work on Cicero’s letters, re-ordering and ascribing new dates to some. I used his editions for most of my research—though the letters I found most interesting had unchanged dates. This letter, 1.18- is often quoted. An excerpt is featured in Anthony Everitt’s biography that was previously mentioned.
Cicero defines friendship as existing only in good men. This is not at all unlike the definition that Aristotle gives in *the Nicomachean Ethics*. It is very likely that Cicero was familiar with this work that treated friendship as the fruition of a life of Virtue. Cicero’s own relation to friendship can be seen in the extensive record of letters kept between his lifelong friend Atticus, and himself. We will look to those later. Cicero also writes directly on friendship in his *De Amicitia*. Dedicated to Atticus, the dialogue outlines the importance of friendship and its necessary defining characteristics. Much of the text is concerned wherein friendship cannot exist (between un-virtuous men, where vice is present, etc.). In order to give context to Cicero’s actual practice of friendship in his letters, it is imperative to look to *De Amicitia*. In the beginning of the text, Cicero writes,

> ego vos hortari tantum possum ut amicitiam omnibus rebus humanis anteponatis; nihil est enim tam naturae aptum, tam conveniens ad res vel secundas vel adversas.\(^{69}\)

All I can do is exhort you to rank friendship above all other things in human life. There is nothing so natural, nothing so beneficial, either in favorable or unfavorable circumstances.\(^{70}\)

The high esteem that Cicero holds friendship is evident here, and is carried through a similar tone in the rest of the text. Cicero is also concerned with showing not just the importance of friendship, but also its distinctiveness relative to other associations.

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\(^{68}\) The truest friendship, then, is that of the good, as we have frequently said; for that which is without qualification good or pleasant seems to be lovable and desirable, and for each person that which is good or pleasant to him; and the good man is lovable and desirable to the good man for both these reasons. Now it looks as if love were a feeling, friendship a state of character; for love may be felt just as much towards lifeless things, but mutual love involves choice and choice springs from a state of character; and men wish well to those whom they love, for their sake, not as a result of feeling but as a result of a state of character.

\(^{69}\) Cicero, *De Amicitia*, V:17

Sic enim mihi perspicere videor, ita natos esse nos ut inter omnes esset societas quaedam, maior autem ut quisque proxime accederet. Itaque cives potiores quam peregrini, propinqui quam alieni...

Indeed it is clear to me that we are born into the world with a certain natural bond of association between all of us, but a greater one according as we are placed nearer to each other: fellow countrymen are closer than foreigners, and relatives closer than strangers. 71

This portion of Cicero’s definition is particularly nuanced, something not included in Aristotle, and perhaps more specific to Rome. This is his support for the strength of friendship. It begins with the obvious: fellow Romans are closer than foreigners, due to commonalities and distance. And blood relatives are obviously closer than strangers. But Cicero goes on to say that friendship is stronger than all three.

cum his enim amicitiam natura ipsa peperit; sed ea non satis habet firmitatis. Namque hoc praestat amicitia propinquitati, quod ex propinquitate benevolentia tolli potest, ex amicitia non potest; sublata enim benevolentia amicitiae nomen tollitur, propinquitatis manet. Quanta autem vis amicitiae sit, ex hoc intellegi maxime potest, quod ex infinita societate generis humani, quam conciliavit ipsa natura, ita contracta res est et adducta in angustum ut omnis caritas aut inter duos aut inter paucos iungeretur. 72

With these, nature itself has created a bond of friendship...but not with sufficient stability; for friendship itself is greater than family connections, in that the latter can exist without goodwill, but not the former. If goodwill is taken away from the name of friendship disappears, but that of the family relationship still remains. 73

71 Cicero, Marcus Tullius, and J.G. Powell. *Cicero: Laelius, on friendship & The dream of Scipio: Laelius de amicitia ; Somnium Scipionis*
72 Cicero, *De Amicitia*, V:19-20
73 Cicero, Marcus Tullius, and J.G. Powell. *Cicero: Laelius, on friendship & The dream of Scipio: Laelius de amicitia ; Somnium Scipionis*
Friendship is stronger even than family bonds, which are naturally established, because of the presence of goodwill. This goodness or virtuousness, which is required of friendship, is not required of these other relations. One is related to one’s fellow Roman through your citizenship alone, not your goodness of character. It is with this goodwill, and the natural bond that we have amongst all humans, Cicero asserts, that makes friendship most strong.

Quanta autem vis amicitiae sit, ex hoc intellegi maxime potest, quod ex infinita societate generis humani, quam conciliavit ipsa natura, ita contracta res est et adducta in angustum ut omnis caritas aut inter duos aut inter paucos iungeretur.\(^7^4\)

However the best way to realize the power of friendship is to understand this, that out of the infinitely large association of the human race, which nature itself brought together, friendship is something so concentrated and brought down into a small narrow space that every instance of real affection exists either between two people, or a small number. \(^7^5\)

Cicero asserts that there is relation in the association of the human race; we do have association and connection despite our magnitude. Friendship should be thought of as the concentrated version of our human bond, into a smaller and more intense relation, and buttressed by goodness. These definitions of friendship, which show its importance to Cicero, again, are taken from the *De Amicitia*, a work of philosophy that Cicero intended to be read by many. Due to the nature of this project, we must acknowledge the publicness of this work in contrast to some of the more private works, such as Cicero’s letters, which we turn to next.

\(^7^4\) Cicero, *De Amicitia*, V:19-20

\(^7^5\) Cicero, Marcus Tullius, and J.G. Powell. *Cicero: Laelius, on friendship & The dream of Scipio: Laelius de amicitia ; Somnium Scipionis*
On Letters

Before moving to the subjects of Cicero’s letters, we must consider letters and their complex place in the spectrum of public and private life in antiquity. Though they serve more personal purposes than speeches, we must resist the impulse to designate them purely as private. And while less public than speeches, they are unlike the personal emails or text messages one might exchange with a friend today. First, the mode of deliverance was not so protected. The letters were of course, hand delivered. Their form of postal service was much less secure than our own. Cicero might ask a neighbor if he was sending a slave to Athens soon and send a letter with the slave. Wax seals were often in place too, which provided some security. This uncertainty of arrival and possibility of interception was not unknown to Cicero.76 Even if this information were relayed privately and secretly, his letters were not private for long. Soon after his death, they were published in volumes. Some scholars maintain that some of the volumes may have been published in his own lifetime—and that Atticus was the accomplice in much of this.77 This certainly complicates the place of letters as potentially private.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the overt publicness of speeches and political life, letters, especially those between Cicero and Atticus, are often different because of their subject matter that does not appear in speeches. Atticus and Cicero became friends during their early boyhood schooling and remained so throughout their lives, though most of this

76 Cicero often signs off letters with this knowledge. “But on these points I will write to you more minutely at another time; for in the first place I am not yet quite sure about them, and in the next place I dare not intrust a letter on such weighty matters to such a casual nobody’s son as this messenger.” (Atticus 1.13, D.R. Shackleton Bailey)

friendship was through letters. While Cicero led a public and political life in Rome, Atticus left for Athens to pursue his studies in Epicureanism. He would make visits to Rome, but he resided away from Cicero for most of his life. Despite their differences in life paths, the friends had great respect for one another, and their intimacy is evident from their letters. Their letters discuss a variety of things; Political advice and suspicions are included but they are discussed with regard to feelings, emotions, anxieties, which do not appear in speeches. Perhaps the subject that is most moving in the letters is the evidence of friendship between Cicero and Atticus, and the contrast of this relationship to other relationship in Cicero’s life. Cicero writes here to Atticus,

Nihil mihi nunc scito tam deesse uam hominem eum, quocum omnia, que me cura aliqua adficunt, uno communice, qui me amet, qui sapiat, quicum ego cum loquar, nihil fingam, nihil dissimulem, nihil obtegam. Abest enim frater aphelestatos et amantissimus. Metellus non homo, sed "litus atque aer et solitudo mera." Tu autem, qui saepissime curam et angorem animi mei sermone et consilio levasti tuo, qui mihi et in publica re socius et in privatis omnibus conscius et omnium meorum sermonum et consiliorum particeps esse soles, ubinam es? Quare te exspectamus, te desideramus, te iam etiam arcessimus. Multa sunt enim, quae me sollicitant anguntque; quae mihi videor aures nactus tuas unius ambulationis sermone exhaeurire posse.

78 Letter 1.17- Cicero assures Atticus of his appreciation and respect for him despite their differences, namely in Atticus’s choice for a more private life.

for I am thoroughly persuaded of your unselvishness and magnanimity, nor did I ever think that there was any difference between you and me except in our choice of a career. Ambition led me to seek official advancement, while another and perfectly laudable resolution led you to seek an honourable privacy. In the true glory, which is founded on honesty, industry, and piety, I place neither myself nor anyone else above you. In affection towards myself, next to my brother and immediate family, I put you first. For indeed, indeed I have seen and thoroughly appreciated how your anxiety and joy have corresponded with the variations of my fortunes. Often has your congratulation added a charm to praise, and your consolation a welcome antidote to alarm. Nay, at this moment of your absence, it is not only your advice—in which you excel—but the interchange of speech—in which no one gives me so much delight as you do—that I miss most...

79 Cicero, Ad Atticum, 1.18, Rome, January 20 60.
I must tell you that what I most badly need at the present time is a confidant—someone with whom I could share all that gives me anxiety, a wise affectionate friend to whom I could talk without pretense or evasion or concealment. My brother, the soul of candor and affection, is away. [* is not a person at all – ‘sea shore and air’ and ‘mere solitude.’] And you whose talk and advice has so lightened my worry and vexation of spirit, the partner in my public life and intimate of all my private concerns, the sharer of all my talk and plans, where are you? ... I go down to the forum surrounded by droves of friends, but in all the multitude I cannot find one with whom I can pass an unguarded joke or fetch a private sigh. That is why I am writing and longing for you, why I fairly summon you home. There are many things to worry and vex me, but once I have you here to listen I feel I can pour them all away in a single walk and talk.²⁸⁰

This does not conflict with the definitions that Cicero gives, but it certainly shows a more intimate and personal account of friendship. Atticus is a confidant, while away in Rome, Cicero calls out to him for guidance, assurance, and respite from public life, much like one might call out to God in contemplation the medieval world. This is not so different than the personal benefits that Cicero insists one would receive from education that are apart from the practical fruits he makes reference to in the passage quoted earlier from the Pro Archia.

Again, here is the passage that opened the chapter, Cicero writes,

_Nam ceterae neque temporum sunt neque aetatum omnium neque locorum: haec studia adulescentiam alunt, senectutem oblectant, secundas res ornant, adversis perfugium ac solacium praebent, delectant domi, non impediunt foris, pernoctant nobiscum, peregrinantur, rusticantur._ ²⁸¹

For other studies are not fitting to very time, nor for all ages nor all places; these studies sharpen the youth while diverting the moroseness of old age, they make prosperous events even better yet also offer refuge and comfort from adversity, they feel like home but don’t hinder us in the public, they pass the night with us, accompany us on our travels, and offer the escape of the country.

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²⁸¹ Cicero, *Pro Archia.* Sec. 15
Cicero desires relaxation from public duties and the alleviation of personal vexing through Atticus, in the same way that the study of literature can provide comfort in adversity. Atticus could easily be a part of the public sphere, standing with Cicero in a crowd, as confidant amongst the multitudes, in the same way that literature would not impediunt foris. In times when one might be alone, or desire solitude, a rare phenomenon in Rome, it is your friend or literature that keeps you company and passes the night with you, traditionally one of the few places of privacy.\(^{82}\) If we were to look for contemplation in Roman antiquity, this is the place it would exist. As Aristotle defines contemplation, it is best done amongst friends. And as it comes to be known in the medieval world, it provides personal relief and respite from the active life, while also making a successful active life possible through contemplation’s inspiration and respite. In another letter to Atticus, Cicero writes,

\[
\text{postremo non labor meus, non requies, non negotium, non otium, non forense}
\]
\[
\text{res, non domesticae, non publicae, non privatae carere diutius tuo suavissimo atque}
\]
\[
\text{amantissimo consilio ac sermone possunt, atque harum rerum commemorationem v}
\]
\[
\text{erecundia saepe impedivit utriusque nostrum; nunc autem ea fuit necessaria propte}
\]
\[
\text{rer eam partemepistulae tuae, per quam te ac mores tuos mihi purgatos ac probatos es}
\]
\[
\text{se voluisti.}^{83}\]

In short, whether working or resting, in business or in leisure, in professional or domestic affairs, in public life or private, I cannot for any length of time do without your affectionate advice and delight of your conversation. Delicacy has often kept you and me from putting these things into words, as it has now been necessary to do

\(^{82}\) Coleman, Kathleen. "Letter from the President." American Philological Association Newsletter 34, no. 11 (2011): 1-3.- The idea that daylight patterned days and spaces in antiquity, with the control over our own light sources, we now self pattern.

\(^{83}\) Cicero, Ad Atticum 1.17
because of the passage in your letter which you have set out to justify yourself and your manner of life to me.\textsuperscript{84}

In this passage from a letter which Cicero reassures Atticus of his respect and value in his life, Cicero writes that none of his work or leisure would be possible without the counsel and conversation from Atticus. The rhetoric here is remarkably similar to that of the first passage quoted in this chapter from the \textit{Pro Archia}, illustrating the need that Cicero has for something intimate to span all spheres of his life, giving him something for all that he does to thrive on. Just as the medieval scholar seeks counsel from God during hours of contemplation in order that he might recuperate from active duty, so does Cicero look to Atticus for something identical in their friendship.

III: Expanding Arendt’s Definition of Contemplation for a Secular World

“...Secularization, the modern loss of faith inevitably arising from Cartesian doubt, deprived individual life of its immortality, or at least of the certainty of immortality. Individual life again became mortal, as mortal as it had been in antiquity, and the world was even less stable, less permanent, and hence less to be relied upon than it had been during the Christian era.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Secular, *saeculum* in Latin, is used to denote worldliness. In the bible, it refers to belonging to an age of mortal men, *ἀἰαίζω* in Greek. Hannah Arendt calls the modern world secular, in so much as man realizes himself as one of the world, ripped apart from his individual immortality. Having nothing left except this world, Arendt asserts that man’s only concern is the immortality of his species. The individual takes solace in the future existence of his own kind, focusing on the preservation of life and the continuation of the human race. Man’s valuing of biological life fosters constant concern for the making and producing of things that protect the existence of the human race, creating a life of action. Through this focus on *vita activa*, Arendt asserts that we lost *vita contemplativa* in the process. Going as far to declare it “meaningless,” she writes,

> If we compare the modern world with that of the past, the loss of human experience involved in this development is extraordinarily striking. It is... contemplation, which has become an entirely meaningless experience.

Given the robust tradition of contemplation in Western thought, Arendt’s diagnosis is startling. Is it really possible for contemplation, *vita contemplativa*, to hold no meaning in

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86 Ibid.
our world? Arendt would of course say yes, insisting our focus has shifted to the active life in the secular world rather than that of the contemplative. The concept of *vita activa*\(^88\) drives the content and method of the work, steering the reader into three sections. Labor, Work, and Action are the categories that Arendt insists make up the *vita activa*. Her culminating thesis in her book shows a victory of the *animal laborans*, a victory of labor\(^99\) over action. Meaning, humanity’s chief focus is on activities and processes that create and preserve life, not on their immortal futures as individuals. This becomes translated to a focus on mortal life, rather than immortality. This secular world is where Arendt insists contemplation has become meaningless. By expanding the definition of contemplation, I contend that not only does contemplation exist in our secular world, but could once again be an activity of great value.

**Arendt’s Definition of Contemplation**

Arendt characterizes contemplation as a pursuit of Truth that is done in solitude, inactively. More specifically, she discusses what she recognizes as two possible definitions of contemplation. The first is a “shocked wonder at the miracle of human Being,”\(^90\) the classical definition. But Arendt points to a second definition as predominant, what she recognizes as the medieval definition. Arendt writes,

> In the tradition of philosophy, it is this second kind of contemplation that became the predominant one... the motionlessness which in the state of speechless wonder is no more than an incidental, unintended result of absorption, becomes now the condition and hence the outstanding characteristic of the *vita contemplativa*. It is not

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\(^{88}\) The book widely held to be *The Human Condition* in German is actually titled *Vita Activa*. Though held to be the same work, it should be noted that the texts do have some differences and are not identical versions of one another.

\(^{99}\) Arendt defines *labor/animal laborans* as those activities done for the pursuit of creating/preserving life, strictly in a biological necessity sort of sense.

\(^{90}\) Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 302. - A sentiment first from Plato and then echoed by Aristotle.
wonder that overcomes and throws man into motionlessness, but it is through the conscious cessation of activity, the activity of making, that the contemplative state is reached. If one reads medieval sources on the joys and delights of contemplation, it is as though the philosophers wanted to make sure that homofaber would heed the call and let his arms drop, finally realizing that his greatest desire, the desire for permanence and immortality, cannot be fulfilled by his doings, but only when he realizes that the beautiful and eternal cannot be made.91

When discussing contemplation and its defining characteristics, Arendt uses Thomas Aquinas as her sole source.92 Knowing this, it is likely that Arendt’s definition was also influenced by Aquinas’s famous writings on the beatific vision. Arendt writes that the “contemplative state” is reached through cessation, a throwing oneself into motionlessness. This “state” that Arendt describes is remarkably similar to the beatific vision known from both Aquinas and Dante, the immediate knowledge of God, characterized by motionless awe. When Dante, at the end of Paradiso, beholds the light and power of God, he is still after the long journey, struck motionless by awe.93 It is a moment defined by Aquinas as “perfect happiness,” to happen fully in the afterlife at the moment when viewing God, communing in his essence.94 These are the writings and images that supply Arendt with her medieval definition of contemplation. This is the contemplation that she declares “meaningless” in the modern age in The Human Condition. She argues, based on the definition illustrated above, that the contemplative life has become subordinated to the active life, and then proceeds to focus on exploring the defining features of the vita activa.

91 Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. 303.
93 In this moment, the pilgrim cannot find the words to describe the experience. Gutav Dore’s woodcut illustration of this moment is particularly moving. It is attached at the end of this chapter for reference.
94 Aquinas, Thomas, Summa Theologica, First part of the second part, Q. 3, Article 8.
Arendt’s Argument

Arendt defines *vita activa* by splitting it into three separate distinctions: Labor, Work and Action. Calling contemplation meaningless brings Arendt to believe in a world that focuses purely on *vita activa*. And because Western thought before this point put enormous focus on *vita contemplativa*, her project seeks to define and explore distinctions made within that of the *vita activa*. My issue comes with the following argument, which suggests a complete loss of contemplation.

Arendt proposes that since the seventeenth-century, there has been a “reversal of the hierarchical order between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.“ With the rise of modern science practices, contemplation has become subordinated. Arendt writes,

> It is a matter of historical record that modern technology has its origins not in the evolution of those tools man had always devised for the twofold purpose of easing his labors and erecting the human artifice, but exclusively in an altogether non-practical search for useless knowledge. Thus, the watch, one of the first modern instruments, was not invented for purposes of practical life, but exclusively for the highly "theoretical" purpose of conducting certain experiments with nature.

Science exists now as a way to solve practical problems, and often make human life easier, or more resilient in many cases. For much of Western thought pre-seventeenth-century, Arendt reminds us this was not the case. Arendt uses the watch as an example; showing us that perhaps the most practical of instruments was once regarded as the most high-minded and theoretical. Reflected in the origins of scientific inquiry, the Greeks pursued scientific studies because they thought they would bring their pursuers closer to Truth.

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95 I do not disagree with her project, or with her distinctions necessarily. Definitions of the active life are scarce. Arendt’s focus on this and work on the subject is invaluable. I purely disagree with her willingness to cast off *vita contemplativa* so quickly.
97 Ibid
chapter briefly discussed the ways in which Roman education departed from its Greek predecessor. The Greeks preferred the pursuit of pure knowledge to that of practical results. Though these investigations might have practical side effects, like the keeping of time, their original intention was based in pure truth seeking. This is no longer the case. Especially visible in medicine, experiments are no longer concerned with investigating the mysteries of the human anatomy to find truth, but to discover practical implications that may aid others. Arendt furthers this point, saying that this hierarchical switch stemmed not only from man progressing into a “practical being,” but from his desire to understand the world through the work of his hands, what Arendt calls action.  

Man no longer trusted contemplation to yield nature’s secrets. Arendt writes,

> Nothing indeed could be less trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching truth than passive observation or mere contemplation. In order to be certain one had to make sure, and in order to know one had to do. Certainty of knowledge could be reached only under a twofold condition: first, that knowledge concerned only what one had done him-self—so that its ideal became mathematical knowledge, where we deal only with self-made entities of the mind—and second, that knowledge was of such a nature that it could be tested only through more doing.

Arendt is particularly fond of the example of the telescope. The telescope, made by man, is able to see things not accessible through contemplation alone. This is what made Galileo Galilei’s work with the Copernican model so revolutionary. This was not just a new theory, but fact proven through a man made instrument. A thesis proved through the hands of man, it had the capability to be proved again and again by anyone who might look through it. Arendt views this empiricism as dominating, pushing what she sees akin to rationalism,

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99 Ibid.
100 Galileo is mentioned through her work, particularly the idea that an Archimedean point can be achieved through the sort of telescopic view, [include a more substantial definition of Archimedean point here]
and contemplation aside. The scientific method would become dominant, the theory and
the demand for its proof and constant provability through repeated trials. Pushing past the
advent of practical science and empiricism, Arendt goes on to make a statement that is even
more radical in this reversal. She writes,

Actually, the change that took place in the seventeenth century was more radical
than what a simple reversal of the established traditional order between
contemplation and doing is apt to indicate. The reversal, strictly speaking,
concerned only the relationship between thinking and doing, whereas
contemplation, in the original sense of beholding the truth, was altogether
eliminated.\textsuperscript{101}

Contemplation falls out here, and instead is replaced by Arendt with “thinking.” She follows
this with assurance that “thought and contemplation are not the same.”\textsuperscript{102} And that rather,
thinking would replace contemplation. She briefly defines thinking here as something that
was originally thought, by Plato, to lead to contemplation. She writes,

Since Plato, and probably since Socrates, thinking was understood as the inner
dialogue in which one speaks with himself (\textit{erne emauto}, to recall the idiom current
in Plato’s dialogues); and although this dialogue lacks all outward manifestation and
even requires a more or less complete cessation of all other activities, it constitutes
in itself a highly active state.\textsuperscript{103}

She argues that thinking, is actually part of the \textit{vita activa}, and though while it may seem
passive, it is active. With this distinction she allows thinking to be part of her category,
action, which is part of the \textit{vita activa}. This leaves the \textit{vita contemplativa} and contemplation
to become “meaningless.”\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Arendt, Hannah. \textit{The Human Condition}. 291.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Arendt, Hannah. \textit{The Human Condition}. 292.
A More Expansive Definition

I cannot argue against empiricism and the scientific method that Arendt points to with her examples standing as our preferred methods to seek truth. This is obvious. But I am less convinced by Arendt’s diagnosis of contemplation as meaningless. I do see basis for the shift of focus from the *vita contemplativa*, to that of the *vita activa*. Even at its high point, the medieval era, the first chapter shows this gradual change in focus. But I am still unconvinced that it is meaningless, or obsolete in our own world. I argue for a more expansive definition of contemplation than the one Arendt puts forth.

The definition she gives is quite narrow, in contrast to the two chapters previous which show contemplation’s rich and complex background. She writes,

> It is not wonder that overcomes and throws man into motionlessness, but it is through the conscious cessation of activity, the activity of making, that the contemplative state is reached. If one reads medieval sources on the joys and delights of contemplation, it is as though the philosophers wanted to make sure that homofaber would heed the call and let his arms drop...\(^{105}\)

Arendt characterizes contemplation here in a way which can be collapsed into her own terms, devaluing it and calling it simply the *homo faber* in disguise, making what might remain of the tradition fit neatly into her description of *vita activa* in the modern age. She refers to contemplation here as the “contemplative state,” a point that is reached. It is here that I took my basis for making reference to the beatific vision earlier, which is indeed a state that is reached, usually in the afterlife. But contemplation, as seen in previous definitions and use by scholars in these past chapters, is much more than a state of mind—it is an activity which one makes time for. Contemplation, while not active, is an act in the

minds of medieval thinkers, a thing that is done or participated in. For Aristotle, this activity, though apart from action, still something that is done for the ultimate goal of happiness.\textsuperscript{106} He writes,

Now, if we take away action from a living being, to say nothing of production, what is left except contemplation? Therefore, the activity of the divinity which surpasses all others in bliss must be a contemplative activity, and the human activity which is most closely akin to it is, therefore, most conducive to happiness.\textsuperscript{107}

Aristotle refers to contemplation as an “activity” here, \textit{ἐνέργεια}, \textit{energeia}, or action, operation, energy, which is different from the motionless and passive absorption of truth that Arendt paints it to be. Arendt would classify this activity as thinking, but this activity is clearly designated as contemplation by Aristotle. And although Arendt makes reference to Aquinas, she fails to see the where Aquinas recognizes contemplation as more than a state, but as something which consists of many actions. He writes,

Accordingly, then, the contemplative life has one act wherein it is finally completed, namely the contemplation of truth, and from this act it derives its unity. Yet it has many acts whereby it arrives at this final act. Some of these pertain to the reception of principles, from which it proceeds to the contemplation of truth; others are concerned with deducing from the principles, the truth, the knowledge of which is sought; and the last and crowning act is the contemplation itself of the truth...\textsuperscript{108}

Contemplation is crowned by the sort of beatific vision kind of moment which Arendt makes reference to earlier. But here Aquinas shows us that contemplation itself consists of “many acts” before it arrives at this final stage, which he again refers to as an act. Arendt might argue back that this “active” description of \textit{vita contemplativa} would fall under the

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\textsuperscript{107} Ibid

\textsuperscript{108} Aquinas, Thomas, \textit{Summa Theologica}. Second part of the Second part qu. 180, art. 3.
\end{flushleft}
thinking, which she places under *vita activa*, but these subsidiary acts during contemplation cannot be collapsed fully into her terms. As mentioned earlier, thinking and contemplation are not the same. The personal and intimate characteristics of the tradition and the subjective necessity, which compels it, are absent from Arendt’s definition of thinking. Based on the thinkers and traditions examined in the past chapters, with a more expansive definition established in Cicero’s world, I think contemplation served and could still serve a purpose other than the pursuit of Truth in motionless solitude. The thinkers discussed in previous chapters used contemplation not only for their faith, but also for their intimate cares, concerns, and subjective needs.

**Arendt on Private Space**

Based on their writings, contemplation is an activity done purely for one’s self; it is a meditation on subjects or problems, and personal reflection. Coloring this tradition of contemplation is a certain degree of privacy, something that Arendt prized. Contemplation, while often occurring alone in the medieval context, would happen in the intimate and sheltered moments between friends in the classical world, thinking through concerns with a confidant, like we see in Cicero and described by Aristotle. It is at the heart of private life. Despite her narrowing of the tradition of contemplation, Arendt extols the importance of private life and private property as support for the plurality in the public sphere. This individualism that privacy encourages preserves our differences and subjective needs in “a place of one’s own.”

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109 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 69-70. (Arendt writes that this, in the classical world, differentiates one from a slave.)
The four walls of one's private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world, not only from everything that goes on in it but also from its very publicity, from being seen and being heard. A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense. The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in...\textsuperscript{110}

The conservation of privacy pervades throughout \textit{The Human Condition} as well as throughout Arendt’s other work. Her controversial essay, \textit{Reflections on Little Rock} hinges on a protection of private spaces and private whims,\textsuperscript{111} without the intrusion of the government on the private and social realms. She writes,

The third realm, finally, in which we move and live together with other people- the realm of privacy- is ruled neither by equality nor by discrimination, but by exclusiveness. Here we choose those with whom we wish to spend our lives, personal friends and those we love; and our choice is guided not by likeness or qualities shared by a group of people...but ...by [one's] uniqueness...\textsuperscript{112}

Arendt valued this sort of private life so strongly, a place governed by free choice, that it supported her to quite controversially criticize forced de-segregation of schools. The protection of the subjective wants and desires of the individual is integral to her notion of

\textsuperscript{110} Arendt, Hannah. \textit{The Human Condition}. 71.
\textsuperscript{111} The essence of her argument and its relevance to this project can be seen here: “To force parents to send their children to an integrated school against their will means to deprive them of rights which clearly belong to them in all free societies – the private right over their children and the social right to free association. As for the children, forced integration means a very serious conflict between home and school, between their private and their social life, and while such conflicts are common in adult life, children cannot be expected to handle them and therefore should not be exposed to them.” Arendt, Hannah, “Reflections on Little Rock.”
\textsuperscript{112} Arendt, Hannah, “Reflections on Little Rock.” 52.
freedom and individuality. Hence, this is why it is so shocking that she casts aside contemplation so quickly.

Contemplation is at the heart of this private life, providing a respite of “four walls” from public duties, a complete giving over to subjective needs and personal thoughts that must be dealt with. A life without this privacy could become what Arendt would call “shallow,” just as a life without contemplation is warned against as unsatisfying by many thinkers. And while Arendt does not account specifically for contemplation in her writings on private life, contemplation, in its less narrow definition is not opposed to the defining characteristic of private life and its importance.
Conclusion

These Four Walls:
Finding Contemplation in a Secular World

We live in a world where the each moment has the capability to be made public. Through the unimaginable recent progression of communication technologies and rise of online social networks, our lives now have infinitely more possibilities to be shared with hundreds, or even thousands of people. No one is forced to share these moments, but many they choose to do so. Posting pictures or making announcements online was once reserved for major life events like graduations, weddings, and birthdays. But coverage is no longer reserved for these key moments, but given to every second. Technology is actually designed in a way that encourages the broadcasting of the every day. Again, this sharing is usually dependent on choice. Some, many even, would never dream of posting a picture of their morning’s oatmeal and banana at the dining hall with a sepia tinted filter. But if they wished to – they could. In comparison to other eras, this makes our own difficult to understand in respect to public and private space. Theoretically, we could have privacy away from the public gaze with friends or by ourselves. Unlike the Romans, we are privileged to be able to find time alone. But in comparison to the medieval lives discussed in the first chapter, our lives are much more public in their potential. This puts us in a complex position. We do not yet have the continuum of public and private distinctions that Rome experienced, with privacy defined only by the deprivation of the public. We live in a time graced with what might seem like an enormous privilege, with the choice to make
certain things public and others private. But more and more people have become interested in broadcasting their breakfasts or telling the world about the bad traffic on their morning commutes. These types of posts, tweets, and statuses, are commonplace. This makes the information shared with friends, in a private four walls, all the more valuable. With a higher value placed on these chosen and selected moments, the need for contemplation is most vital.

**Contemplation in a Secular World**

But where might we find contemplation in our own world? For someone of particularly strong faith, the definitions provided in the first chapter might sustain them. But for those who do not, and even for those who do, I contend that contemplation can still be found in other places.

As it was in Cicero’s world, studying or schooling can still be a place of contemplation. Books continue to provide counsel, respite, and meaning to many lives. The drive to study, whether humanities related or not, provides the strong subjective necessity needed for contemplation. The passion that drives one person to read novels might be the same for another to study the complex species relationship within an ecosystem. In all cases, there is a drive to pursue this study not for the practical benefits, but for the personal meaning the work brings to life. Being a student or simply being enrolled in school is not enough. Enrollment and degree status is actually inconsequential to contemplation. A student doing schoolwork solely for the purpose of getting a degree or a job would not be considered to be contemplating during their study. But someone studying or doing

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113 Though often related to schoolwork, I use the word *study* in that it means a genuine commitment to something, just as Aristotle uses the word previously quoted in passages from *Nicomachean Ethics.*
anything with commitment because it has great personal qualifies as contemplation. The personal need to do, read or study this might not be explicit, but the feeling to do it is intense and motivating. Professors who spend their life studying a topic because of this feeling of intense personal motivation, not the aspect of getting a job, would be the candidates for contemplation.

An expected criticism of this mode of contemplation might be an accusation of elitism, or ivory tower worship. But contemplation in our secular world is not necessarily steeped in blue blood nor does it exist only as the elitists’ idol, though it may have it once may have been guilty of such. The passion that exists to do something or partake in something that brings meaning exists outside the university. Those who read Danielle Steele again and again with fervor and feel a certain subjective necessity to read her novels, experience their own version of contemplation in the modern age. The teenagers who rush home every day after school to re-watch a favorite movie for another time, not for its entertainment value alone, but for the meaning it imparts and critical ideas it conjures, they too experiences contemplation. For these are things done not for means of public good or practical profit, but instead satisfy a personal and private need.

And perhaps the least elite version of contemplation that exists in our world occurs within the bonds of friendship. Like Cicero writes, friendship offers respite and place to mull over personal cares, concerns, and reflections on life. In the context of our own world, with infinite sharing capabilities, the choice for something to remain private amongst friends has become all the more valuable. This might happen through re-occurring email exchanges that call out for counsel and support. Or late night phone calls to a far away friend in times of need. Contemplation is found in the personal exchanges had in Arendt’s
“these four walls”114 and by the self created privacy, when those closest to you keep your thoughts private.

**Keeping Wounds Open**

I acknowledge that these moments of personal exchange between friends, and time spent alone reading a book of one’s choice can be increasingly hard to find due to financial constraints and day-to-day demands. I do not deny Arendt’s claim that our world is emphatically focused on *vita activa*. This happened even during contemplation’s high point, and it is problematic now more than ever. Private whims and personal desires were and are still sacrificed for the perceived collective good. This is why Barack Obama’s education reform can be seen as problematic. With funding going toward programs primarily concerned with using studies and education for practical outputs, where is there space for the interests and passions of those who might not be interested in STEM? The encouragement of following subjective passions and necessities often starts in school, with the student being introduced to a variety of subjects and experiences. If these experiences are limited, or taught in a way that only emphasizes their practical output, contemplation has begun to be evicted from our public schools. I fear the days when no space is given in schools or in life to follow personal passions that might guard against an overwhelming shallowness and impersonal existence.

What I fear more than the defunding or disregard for contemplation by our government or society, would be that the individual would become numb to this loss of contemplation. Again, contemplation, even at its height was not always given the time and space needed. But the desire for it, despite the shift in focus, was there. Arendt misses this point entirely.

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114 “These four walls” is the repeated phrase Arendt uses throughout her work when referencing privacy, to designate a safe and private space for the individual to thrive.
when discussing contemplation. Perhaps the most prevailing characteristic throughout the
tradition of contemplation is the deep longing for it despite knowing that duties of the
active life will take precedent in daily life. Monks must preach and write. Cicero must go
about politics while Atticus must study in Athens. And we must deal with daily demands
before giving ourselves over to a favorite book or an intense conversation with a friend.
This has not changed. *Vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* continue to exist in tandem, giving
value to each other. But the desire still exists, in the moment a student ceases what they are
doing to finish a paper or feels the urgency to get back to an experiment, or moments
where we desperately want to get to a friend to confide in; these are moments of wanting
contemplation. While it may be hard to make time for them, it is the desire alone, to give
meaning and depth in our lives, to steal us away from the public eye, that matters. Whether
or not we can indulge in them is inconsequential, because the importance is the recognition
of this want, the knowledge that the wound prevails. As long children and parents continue
to complain about a system of schooling that overburdens children with the responsibility
of the global market, professors long for their sabbaticals, and good friends miss each other
over long distances; the desire for the contemplative life remains alive. We might look to
give it more space in our very active world and cherish the meaning it could bring to our
lives. Though this desire, even amongst a world that often chooses to exist outside “these
four walls,” will keep our wounds open, protecting us from a scarred and shallow existence.
Appendix

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