Editor’s Introduction

Man’s success in exploiting nature to increase his own strength . . . can be regarded as a rape of nature, at least if one shares the biblical view that man was created to care for and serve the earth, and not to force it into his service. But quite apart from who is serving whom . . . it cannot be denied that man’s energy . . . is a natural phenomenon . . . and finally that man, as long as he is dealing only with natural forces, remains in an earthly, natural realm to which both his strength and he, as an organic being, belong.

Arendt, The Promise of Politics

About the topsoil, the creatures that inhabit it, from the microorganisms to the tallest trees, and their complex interdependences, we humans know very little, and we are unlikely ever to know very much. We do know, we seem always to have known, that upon this great gift, this great mystery, we and all our generations absolutely depend.

Wendell Berry, “Starting from Loss”

“Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”
I suppose we all thought that one way or another.
J. Robert Oppenheimer

As I began writing this introduction, a large fire burned at a Russian fuel depot in Crimea. Apparently, Ukrainian drones attacked the Russian installation in what had been part of Ukraine until the Russian invasion of 2014. Until the Ukraine war began last year, Russia had been the major supplier of oil and gas to western Europe, but now most European countries are cutting their energy ties with Russia. By most impartial accounts Russia is suffering economically but the missiles and drones keep falling on Ukrainian towns and cities. Meanwhile the United States and many European countries continue to feed weapons into Ukraine in an attempt to thwart the Russian war effort but also in the hope of limiting the
theatre of war to Ukraine. It is hard to imagine a clearer illustration of the relationship between war and waste economy than what is happening before our very eyes. War economy is waste economy, and every modern waste economy is at its heart a war. What the war in Ukraine demonstrates is that even when waste economies are at war with another, declared or not, they unequivocally share the values of waste economy. Overt war only serves to reveal just how deep these values of waste economy run in our world. Or as Arendt puts it in her appraisal of postwar Germany, “outright destruction took the place of the relentless process of depreciation of all worldly things, which is the hallmark of the waste economy in which we now live.” At war or at peace, we live in a world in which destruction is the constant and seemingly necessary companion of our economic life. Indeed, in the last two centuries we have come to live in a world increasingly defined by the values of industrial waste economy, a world in which war against the natural world is always a declared principle and an active fact.

Our long-standing tradition of promoting the values of what we once called the West and its industrial world while assiduously ignoring its transgressions represents a key thematic in the last paragraph of Arendt’s “Preface” to the first edition of The Origins of Totalitarianism. However, Arendt made it sound as if the bad habits of showcasing the good and hiding the bad of the waste economy might have run its course. And yet, more than 70 years later, we find ourselves in similar predicaments with similar fears and hopes. Or to put it differently—and in terms of the question of care that serves as a theme for this volume’s special section—it is as though the carelessness that now defines our treatment of the given world is no longer so carefree. In short, our debt and obligations to the world we have been given have become harder and harder to ignore but also harder and harder to imagine we can fully repay. What have we been doing this past 70 years that does not follow the dictates of waste economy, of a carelessness to earth and all its inhabitants? In fact, it seems we have extended our expectations of being served by all that has been given, and served in such a way that our only obligation is to continue to expect to be served.

This ever-growing expectation of being served by the world we have been given is questioned by Arendt earlier in the same paragraph from which the opening epigram for this introduction was taken. Precisely because we live in a waste economy of unparalleled and almost unearthly scale can “men living in the midst of such a progress, which they them-

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1Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 252–53. Arendt also alludes to Germany’s rise from the ashes through waste economy which “made Germany the most modern and advanced country in Europe . . .” in the early pages of the “Question of War” section of The Promise of Politics. See The Promise of Politics (New York: Schocken, 2005), 155.
selves have unleashed and which inevitably leads to catastrophe even as it progresses . . . remain lords and masters of the world they have built and the human affairs that are part of it.”

The question regarding the scale and limits of human mastery, both in terms of the human world and non-human world of nature, is obscured by the scope of the waste economy in which we are now fully immersed. To the extent that we have apparently secured our role as lords and masters of the earth, a quest that was announced more than 400 years ago, we have done so by setting up processes and operations which now seem inevitable and irresistible. We have become servants of our own ever growing masterly expectations, due in large part to the successes brought about by this inflated sense of dominance or mastership embodied in the waste economy that defines our world. In short, and this represents another version of the Archimedean point, in seeking only to serve ourselves we now seem destined to serve only destruction and division.

As tempting as it is to point to the long tradition of viewing human mastery of nature as a modern birthright, and thus summoning figures like Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes, it is the last 70 years that most vividly displays the ambiguous supremacy of human life on earth. What had been a new aspirant vision of human power even as recently as the end of the nineteenth century has become a seemingly inescapable reality in the last half century. In the 30 years from the end of the World War II to the last year of her life, Arendt reflected with great worry on the many ways in which war was still the guiding theme even in times of superficial peace. Therefore, it is no accident that the passages I have quoted from *The Promise of Politics* come from the early pages of the section entitled “The Question of War.”

For Arendt the rise of the contemporary waste economy, which has flourished strikingly in the decades following the end of the Second World War, represents a continuation of war by another means. The rise of waste economy in the postwar period turns out to be a form of ruin or catastrophe that rivals the destructive force of war, but which unfolds in a manner that has allowed us the mirage of progress and peace, of building a better world. For the past 70 years we have covered up the more and more pervasive ruin of waste economy by claims of improving the human world. In fact, this masquerade of ruin as improvement represents an ever more active war against

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2Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 156.

3See, for example, p. 262 of *The Human Condition* where Arendt writes that “. . . still bound to the earth through the human condition, we have found a way to act on the earth and within terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from the outside, from the Archimedean point.” Arendt’s focus in these pages is on the dangers inherent in the rise of early modern science, but it is not hard to think of these words in terms of the dangers at play in the rise and expansion of industrial waste economy, especially in the past century. In fact, science as we experience it today, truly modern science, has itself been transformed by the rise of the industrial waste economy.
the natural and human worlds which we have been given. It is a war against all that we cannot claim to have created ourselves. Or to use a very old and worn out but still powerful word, we are engaged in a war against creation.4

It could be asked if Arendt actually has all that much to say about this war on creation. Does the vulnerability of creation really figure all that crucially in Arendt’s work? In reply, one could point to various major themes in her work, from world and earth alienation to the rise of the Kafkian Archimedean point to her concerns with a renewed connection with the forgotten past. In each of these examples, and many others, Arendt can be said to assume what could be called the primacy of creation. She also assumes that humans, especially us, the most modern of humans, “are possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking) which he wishes to exchange for something he has made himself.”5 This rebellion against creation may have ancient roots, but much of Arendt’s work assumes that the fullness of this human rebellion against creation though modern in form reaches a crisis point in the last century. As Arendt puts it several years before “The Question of War,” this modern to contemporary rebellion against existence is driven by resentment against the given world:

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4I use the term “creation” as a synonym for the world that we have been given, both in its human and more than human form. Thus, my use of the term “creation” emphasizes both the historically given world as well as those natural beings, forms, and structures that we usually assume to be ahistorical. The term “creation” also appears in this essay alongside other terms such as nature, earth, and soil as synonyms that speak to the human dependency on the given world. Each of these terms is limited in its effective capacity to capture the ways in which we cannot fully claim ownership of the world that we call home, either in its nonhuman or human form. However, it seems to me that creation and related terms (i.e., creaturely existence, creatureliness) offer us a way of thinking beyond the scientistic frame of reference and before the secular divide that thinks of religion primarily in the terms of forms of institutional religion that arose as part of the industrial event. In this way, I am following Arendt who uses many of these terms in a mixed and strategic fashion. Other writers such as Aldo Leopold, Ivan Ilych, and Wendell Berry have used these various terms to question or obstruct the dominant discourses chained to the rise of industrial waste economy.

5See James Bernauer’s profound and rich account of what he calls Arendt’s “worldly faith” or “faith . . . in creation” in his “The Faith of Hannah Arendt: Amor Mundi and it Critique-Assimilation of Religious Experience” in Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt (Boston: Nijhoff, 1987), 11, 18. Bernauer’s exploration of Arendt’s unorthodox approach to religious concepts opens up many important lines of questioning related to her views on creation, industrialized religion, secularization, and so forth.

For the first disastrous result of man’s coming of age is that modern man has come to resent everything given, even his own existence—to resent the very fact that he is not the creator of the universe and himself. In this fundamental resentment, he refuses to see rhyme or reason in the given world.\endnote{7}

The war against creation is fueled by our resentment and rebellion against our genetic dependency upon what has been given. We have learned to live almost virtually divorced from the given world, replacing it with a seemingly better and more usable set of humanly contrived structures. Arendt’s view of this wholesale replacement or exchange is clear: “. . . there is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth.”\endnote{8}

For Arendt, the price we pay for the implementation of this radically independent human-made life, one divided against all that has been given, is clearly dire. It amounts to a long and hardly subtle declaration of war against creation, a war that we can only win by losing ourselves as members of the earthly commonwealth.

If we place the final paragraph of the “Prologue” to \textit{The Human Condition} alongside the passages from “The Question of War” that I have used to center this introduction we find Arendt focused on the same human dangers to creation, but from slightly different angles. Where Arendt ostensibly restrains herself from discussing the modern world in \textit{The Human Condition}, “The Question of War” (written about a year later) is less reserved in addressing the “world in which we live today . . . born with the first atomic explosions.” The stated purpose of \textit{The Human Condition} (particularly the last chapter) is to “trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins, in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age.”\endnote{9} Like Arendt when she wrote these words, we stand on the other side of this overcoming, the other side of the nuclear decision, the decision to care more for our capacities to create more and more powerful mechanisms and operations to degrade if not outright destroy the given world in both its human and natural forms. Unlike Arendt, we have lived to see much more fully the bitter fruits of this overcoming of creation through the continued rise and expansion of waste economy. In the nearly 50 years since Arendt’s death, we have continued to erect a world dedicated to the total replacement of what we have been given by the operations and machinery of the waste economy. In moments

\endnote{7}{Arendt, \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism} (Schocken: New York, 2004), 630.}
\endnote{8}{Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 3.}
\endnote{9}{Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 6.}
of despair, one is tempted to say that the work of rendering creation a thing of the past, the work of the most modern and seemingly autonomous forms of global waste economy, is nearing completion.\footnote{The current worries over the most advanced machines devised so far, artificial intelligence, were anticipated by Arendt in her account of automation (e.g., \textit{The Human Condition}, 149–53). It is worth noting that she often links the rise of nuclear technology with automation. Indeed, the current fears regarding AI are quite reminiscent of the fears of nuclear technology expressed by many writers and thinkers in the 1950s and early 1960s. In many ways the atomic threshold of 1945 was not a surpassing of waste economy but rather its fulfillment. Likewise, for many of us the rise of new “autonomous” technologies represents another expression of the “evolving” waste economy. Arendt describes these developments as the “growing technicalization of our world” in her 1954 essay, “Europe and the Atom Bomb.” The development of ever more sophisticated machines and our growing dependence upon them to keep our societies operating is a fulfillment of that old modern dream summed up so well by Wendell Berry in \textit{The Unsettling of America}: “If the world and all its creatures are machines, then the world and all its creatures are entirely comprehensible, manipulable, and controllable by humans.” Berry’s point echoes Arendt’s notion of the Archimedean point because these powers of comprehension, manipulation, and control end up backfiring upon their human creators as well as on the creation which define us. See Arendt’s “Europe and the Atom Bomb” in \textit{Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism} (New York: Schocken, 1994), 418. See Wendell Berry, \textit{The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture} (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1996), 230.}

From Arendt’s standpoint the question of the total loss of creation had not yet been decided in her lifetime. As she puts it in \textit{The Human Condition} it “remains to be seen whether these future techniques will transform the household of nature as we have known it since the beginning of our world to the same extent or even more than the present technology has changed the very worldliness of the human artifice.”\footnote{Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 150. Despite her claim of restraint in the “Prologue,” Arendt allows herself to reflect on the modern world here, the world born with the first atomic explosion.} This curiously provocative sentence has much to say about Arendt’s assumptions about the status of creation, both past, present (1958), and future (2023). As Arendt sees it, the reality of technology in 1958 has already brought about significant changes to the human world, but the household of nature on which the human world stands and depends continues to persist in more or less the same form that it has since the human world began. However, in this same sentence Arendt also raises the question, rather ominously, of an eventual transformation of nature that will ultimately exceed the changes to the human world that industrial machine technology has already set in motion. Arendt’s worries over changes in both the human world and in the household of nature represent the two sides of her account of creation. These two sides of creation...
involve a fundamental dependency, one that Arendt enunciates with emphatic brevity in a 1971 letter to Mary McCarthy:

I want to quarrel with your opposition of culture and nature. Culture is always cultivated nature—nature being tended and being taken care of by one of nature’s products called man. If nature is dead culture will die too, together with all the artifacts of our civilization.\(^\text{12}\)

For Arendt the danger of wholesale changes in the status of nature are much more troubling than changes in worldly circumstances, precisely because such upheavals could very well render the humanly made world (i.e., culture) altogether untenable. In short, the two sides of creation would suffer irrevocable harm, as would the creature who by its very definition depends on both sides of creation even as this creature rejects the charge of caring for either side of the given world. In 1958 Arendt claims this harmful transformation of nature “remains to be seen.”

But where does the war on creation stand now, some 65 years after Arendt’s ambiguous prediction concerning the future of nature and world? Has the household of nature been compromised in fundamentally new ways in this past half century? Or are we still in the interim of the “remains to be seen”? Many believe the die has been cast, the naming of the new epoch, the Anthropocene, means the changes brought about by the careless caretaker of creation, the human, are irrevocable and irreversible. The anthropogenic event of global waste economy has been settled. All that is left is the mourning of what has been lost and cannot return or be recuperated.

For others of us, the perhaps overly hopeful, the question of irreversibility or recovery is not yet settled. Despite clear evidence that the global waste economy, the war against creation in which every industrialized nation participates is all but won, the question remains open for many. For the cautiously optimistic, the future is not yet settled, and our fate is not yet sealed. For those unable to think beyond the ideology of the global waste economy, there is no problem that cannot be solved by a blind faith in new technological developments. Once again, Arendt anticipates our shared predicament when she writes that “the central events of our time are no less effectively forgotten by those committed to a belief in an unavoidable doom, than by those who have given themselves over to reckless optimism.”

\(^{12}\)Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy: 1949–1975 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 293. It is important to note that in her objection to McCarthy’s view of the connection between nature and culture Arendt seems to be endorsing something like the “biblical view that man was created to care for and serve the earth” that she mentions in the opening epigram.
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... Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal; that both are articles of superstition, not of faith.”

In any event, despite our ideological leanings, we are all bound together by a common feeling of uncertainty. For Arendt this contemporary game of progress and doom arises from a forgetfulness of the difference between what we have made and what we have been given. And yet this forgetfulness is productive because it frees us from any responsibility to honor this difference. This productive forgetfulness which has arisen with the global waste economy in the past 150 years has served to call into question any remnant of meaning that the term “creation” might hold for us. And yet Arendt persists in relying upon the principle of creation as a continuing standard of reference. This reliance on creation is closely related to her rejection of the typical understanding of secularization as a focus on this world over the next. Instead, she sees the rise of secular understanding as part of our growing worldlessness, a worldlessness fueled in large part by the ever-growing operations, products, and by-products of the waste economy. Her appeal to *amor mundi* is also an appeal to the creation that necessarily grounds this world-preserving condition of caring for the world and all that grounds its very possibility.

Without a doubt, Arendt focuses primarily on the human side of the living principle of earthly plurality. However, as she suggests in the opening epigram, to be human is to be one organic being among many, human and otherwise. Thus, the decimation of plurality beyond the human is a correlative to the loss of plurality within human bounds, the loss of living forms in the human world and the earthly realm on which it has for so long depended. Arendt continues to be relevant insofar as she reminds us of the troubled world we have made out of what has been given to us and the fact that we have also been given care for this world. This human obligation of caring for creation is especially burdensome because what it means to be human is now largely defined by our blind allegiance to waste economy, a commitment which makes us the chief agents of destruction and ruin of what has been given. We have at least as much to undo as to do in this world in which a “highly organized, mechanized, and centralized humanity . . .”

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14 See p. 320 of *The Human Condition* where Arendt links the rise of worldlessness (and “self-fulness”) to her questioning of the meaning of the word “secular.” Arendt points to the rise of contemporary secular life as loss of world masquerading as concern for worldly matters. The fact that she referred to The Human Condition project as her *Amor Mundi* book takes on a curious meaning when considered in this light of this loss of world, especially in the light of her persisting faith in creation. Again, James Bernauer’s essay “The Faith of Hannah Arendt” helps us to think about ways in which Arendt’s central worry over the contemporary rise of worldlessness relates to her account of creation, especially as the loss or ruin of creation.
has all but decided “. . . that it would be better for the whole to do without a certain part.” Yet, the parts that we have lost, or rather which we have done our best to discard, parts of humanity, parts of other living kinds, and parts of our past, do not die away but live on as haunting reminders of what we have done and what we have not done.

Caring for the world means caring for the past and the earthly world we have been given. It depends on a “fundamental gratitude for the few elementary things that indeed are invariably given to us, such as life itself, the existence of man and the world.” This is not an exhaustive list necessarily, but even as Arendt frames it in the 1951 “Concluding Remarks” there is not much else to be included. The other human conditions that Arendt will itemize in *The Human Condition*, natality and mortality, plurality, and the earth, are necessary implications of the earlier list. For Arendt all these conditions are gifts which humans have been given as part of creation. The fact that we have spent much of the last two centuries striving to deny these gifts by our almost single-minded dedication to the proliferating operations of waste economy only demonstrates how little we understand our role as guardians of creation. Instead, we live as if waste economy was our greatest gift, to ourselves and all the others, past, present, and future. We celebrate the loss of creation as an active gain, destruction as the noble prelude to a constant reconstruction, carelessness as the highest vocation of the human. Or as Auden put it in *The Sabbath*, a poem written the same year that Arendt wrote “The Question of War”:

Ruins and metallic rubbish in plenty  
Were all that was left of him  
Whose birth on the Sixth had made of that day  
An unnecessary interim.

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16 The shared community in which all living kinds share represents an expansion of the conditions that Arendt poses ostensibly as belonging to humans. But we belong to these gifts rather than owning them exclusively as humans. Only insofar as these gifts of creation are shared in a diversity of forms by all organic beings as well as by the forms that serve as the earthly grounds for the many forms of life on earth can humans be said to be part of what Berry calls the “creaturely commonwealth of earth, water, and air . . .” See Wendell Berry, *The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice* (Berkeley: Shoemaker, 2022), 288. There are many important resonances between Berry and Arendt concerning the relationship of human culture and nonhuman nature. See, for example, p. 106 of *The Human Condition* and the opening section of *The Life of the Mind*.


By our constantly expanding commitment to global waste economy, we have shown a disregard for creation in general, but especially for the role of humans as caretakers of creation. Instead, we have taken care to create an expanding set of operations and habits to expedite the using up of all of creation as consumable resources. If the logic of the waste economy that we have inherited should indeed be allowed to play itself out fully, then it may be that the human capacity to care will be reduced to a remembrance of what once was. This remembrance of the past may take the form of mourning for what has been irrevocably lost.

Of course, for Arendt, irrevocable loss is no more guaranteed than irrevocable gain. The gifts of plurality and natality, gifts granted to all living kinds, mean that even such an impoverished remembrance leaves open the possibility of creation rekindling itself through us. Perhaps a remembrance of what has been will also rekindle a remembrance of ourselves as human. Arendt ends the same letter to McCarthy in which she asserts the dependency of human culture on nature, as well as the defining human obligation to take care of nature, by quoting the third version of Hölderlin’s hymn, Mnemosyne: “And there is much that needs to be retained, like a load of wood on the shoulders.” A remembrance of where we stand, in the midst of creation, may be burdensome, but it is a bearable weight. To return to the opening epigram, it is the weight for which humans were born, the responsibility of taking care of the place we have been given. It is the burden of belonging to the earth, a burden from which we have been actively dreaming of liberating ourselves for quite some time. The price for such liberation is not the loss of creation, but of making of ourselves “an unnecessary interim.” This quest for liberation from the cares of earthly belonging and remembrance is the essential fuel of global waste economy. However, the end of the fossil fuel economy will not necessarily put an end to the forgetfulness and carelessness that have thus far defined our modern world. The human war on creation will only end when we take into account the larger earthly community that Arendt herself invokes in the first chapter of her last book, The Life of the Mind:

Living beings, men and animals, are not just in the world, they are of the world, and this precisely because they are subjects and objects—perceiving and being perceived—at the same time.

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19 *Between Friends*, 295. I have used a slightly different translation than that provided by Arendt. The rich implications of the fact that the goddess Mnemosyne was an ancient earth goddess, a titan goddess, was not lost on Hölderlin, nor I suspect on Arendt.

Only when we take on our shoulders the heavy burden of belonging with all the others in the world that has been given to us, a world always larger in scope than both the human world and the natural, will we be deserving of the title of caretakers of creation. Will we continue to serve the principles of industrial waste economy and thus be of service to nobody and nothing but destruction and loss? What remains to be seen is whether these caretaker beings will rediscover their essential responsibility to care jointly for the earthly community and the human world, or instead lose their abiding identity in their victory against what has been given . . . and themselves.

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much more than the human world or even the natural world. The opening lines of the first page begin with “The world men are born into contains many things, natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal . . .” She goes on in the first paragraph to speak of “[d]ead matter, natural and artificial” depending on “the presence of living creatures” and the “worldliness of all living things. After reading the first page or two of this section any questions concerning Arendt’s views on creation would seem to be put to rest. In fact, her account of creation seems to embrace something like Aldo Leopold’s concept of a respectful “biotic community” or what Berry’s describes as the “creaturely commonwealth of earth, water, and air . . .” See Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 240. See Berry, The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice, 288.