Hannah Arendt’s Political Action: A Dialectic of Expression and Deliberation

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

HANNAH ARENDT’S POLITICAL ACTION:
A DIALECTIC OF EXPRESSION AND DELIBERATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY
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“I’ll have grounds more relative than this–the play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.”

—Wm. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.603 (RS 1159)
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INTRODUCTION

What follows seeks to clarify Hannah Arendt’s famous exhortation “to think what we are doing” (HC 5) by means of exploring a resolution to an ongoing interpretive controversy focused on her expressive and deliberative forms of political action. If this clarification succeeds, various criticisms that cast doubt on Arendt’s political philosophy will have to be reconsidered. Thusly reconciled, an expressive-deliberative interpretation may open new avenues for the continued application of Arendt’s political philosophy in conditions of accelerating fragmentation.¹

Arendt’s deceptively simple exhortation, upon close reading, reveals a thread that may be followed through a selection of her most famous works, The Human Condition, On Revolution, and other essays. Following this thread leads to a resolution of the thesis. This line of thought will help to draw together disparate commentators such as Dana Villa, David Ingram, Juergen Habermas, Jane Mansbridge, and others. Arendt’s persistent fascination with drama will here be referenced. Her ‘dramaturgy’ may be shown to be closely associated with what are traditionally considered as expressly political concerns.² Arendt has encouraged us to “think without bannisters” (RPW 336). In so doing she urges us to contest the limits of traditional categories, confronted as we are with new political challenges. Examining the above commentators in light of the thesis will provide opportunities to do so.

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¹Recent events suggest that fragmentation may furthermore be driving an aberrant contest between globalization and a form of nativist authoritarianism in the U.S. and parts of Europe—the excesses of expression and the reticence of deliberation are coming into sharper focus.

²Different approaches to Arendt’s work make use of the social sciences to support their interpretations. Here, select elements of Arendt’s dramaturgy will be considered.
Abstract and Argument: Summary of the Problem and Commentators’ Responses

Commentators disagree about what Hannah Arendt means by political action. This has led some, Dana Villa for example, to suggest that Arendt’s theory is “hopelessly at odds” with itself (AH 59). One interpretation, offered by Richard Bernstein emphasizes that political action is rational deliberation; in another interpretation Arendt identifies political action with expressiveness or the performative expression of personal virtuosity and greatness. Both interpretations taken separately are unsatisfactory. Rational deliberation with others appears to be less what Arendt might refer to as vita activa and more vita contemplativa, or more reflective. If we think of political action along these deliberative lines: as reason-giving oriented toward establishing the truth or rightness of norms-then it would appear to be bound by common conventions of reasoning and inasmuch fails to satisfy the utterly original and free interruption that Arendt says it is. Conversely, if we think of political action as a subjective expression or performance of the identity of the actor and agonal display of her virtuosity (glory or greatness), then it seems divorced from the content of political life, which is to secure agreement among others to act together and thereby generate political power.

Each of the above interpretations separately captures only one aspect of what Arendt means by political action. The deliberative model captures the aspect of constituting political power through collective agreement based on reason-giving (combining a plurality into a polity). The expressive model captures the aspect of natality, originality, spontaneity, and freedom from conventional ways of reasoning.

As Villa argues, these opposing interpretations appear to be irreconcilable, so that Arendt appears to make contradictory (AH 55) claims about political action. The deliberative model
would seem not to be insulated from instrumental action, viz. deliberation about means and ends. Alternately, the expressive model, as described by Arendt, appears to be totally divorced from instrumental action and means-ends deliberation, as if it were “self-contained,” existing only for itself, (i.e., as if the only reason for engaging in it was expression of individual distinction).

**Thesis**

The deliberative and expressive models of Hannah Arendt’s political action can be reconciled contrary to a claim that her theory is incoherent.

The key to this argument is that the expressive interpretation also focuses on how political action exemplifies an objective principle, not merely the subjective quality of the actor. Villa notes this but focuses only on principles that exemplify subjective-attribute principles, such as courage and freedom. But Arendt, in *On Revolution* and elsewhere, explicitly asserts that the principle expressed is the objective norm of promise-making and promise-keeping. Promise-making/keeping implies a weak normative rule—implying free consent among equals to cooperate together for the sake of some purpose. In the paradigm case of revolutionary political action, this purpose does not strive to seek some material (social) end outside of political action; rather it seeks only to found an enduring institutional framework to make possible further and more augmented political action. In this respect it can be said that for Arendt, political action is a kind of instrumental action that chooses institutional means for realizing an end (a “work of art”) at least in a qualified sense. So here we have a case of promising/coming to agreement in which deliberation and reason-giving may revolve back to convention/tradition in order to persuade other actors to make and accept the promise that binds them, but in an original way that radically breaks with that convention.
And here we have another important link between deliberation and expressive action. It is only when we are challenged by others—when the other makes a claim on us to justify our action/speech with reasons—that we are “jolted” out of our passive enslavement to conventional routine and provoked into radically breaking with our old identity and reasonableness. Deliberation in the face of an intersubjective challenge to justify ourselves is what makes possible originary freedom.

This explains how we get from expressive action to rational deliberation. We get from deliberation to expressive action by noting that rational argumentation involves embodied rhetorical enactment or performance in order to be absolutely compelling. Leadership requires charisma which re-“stages” scenes from the past (the American and French Revolutionaries each are referred to by Arendt, as evoking the founding of the Roman Republic OR 202 ff.)

Finally, collective deliberation (argumentation or compacting) is performative in the sense that it is done before an audience. The spectator/audience, however, does not merely judge retrospectively, as if its only function was to passively accept what has gone before as a fate to be memorialized. Rather, if the constitutional founding has been executed correctly, then for Arendt posterity can participate in re-performing the founding through the process of constitutional amendment.

**Three Interpretations of Arendt’s Concept of Political Action**

Looking at three main interpretations of Arendt’s political action will provide background to this discussion. The interpretations are: critical-theoretical, communitarian, and participatory democratic. Each of these groups intends to use Arendt’s conception of action to highlight a different aspect of political life from its own perspective (AH 4 ff.). Each in turn
For participatory democrats, The Human Condition urges us to recall the polis as a center of active civic engagement. It views our founding documents as guides, structures, or “frameworks,” (AH 4) that we work within or activate, rather than regard as antiquated museum monuments or as unchanging commands to which we must passively conform. On this interpretation we actively define our (political) mode of being and collectively constitute our political identity, as well as self-legislate in the Rousseauian and Kantian model of autonomy, or self-determination, in stark antithesis to the necessary, instinct-driven activity of procuring life's sustenance. For participatory democrats, then, Arendt's understanding of political action stands opposite of Hobbes' more traditional instrumental (strategic or prudential) understanding. But modern governmental administration, with its emphasis on technically efficient management, seems to encourage citizens to adopt a passive, deferential attitude toward the ruling elites they elect (recalling Weber’s famous metaphor of bureaucratic society as an “iron cage”) (AH 4-5).

Critical Theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition, such as Horkheimer and Adorno, also warn us about the linkage between the political hegemony of technological rationality and domination. Not surprisingly, later critical theorists, such as Juergen Habermas, expressly look to Arendt in renewing the Aristotelian concept of praxis or political action, which Habermas argues stylizes an alternate kind of communicative rationality: one that recognizes our underlying capacity to build consensus through reasoned discussion and deliberation (AH 5-6).

Using Aristotle’s division of praxis (speech-action) and poiesis (instrumental making) in a somewhat different way than Habermas's, communitarians seek to find in it a distinction
between action oriented toward respecting rights versus action oriented toward realizing goods (or the “good life”). They urge us to emphasize the priority of a communal identity oriented around communicatively shared values and ends over supposedly innate rights to individual private autonomy, or freedom from (and sometimes against) community—the kind of freedom that liberalism extolls in its realistic acceptance of persons as self-interested utility maximizers.

The Arendtian “space of appearances” for communitarians arguably provides for a community oriented constitution of the self, as against (as Kant would have it) the purely abstract, rationally constituted, "universal" moral agent, deracinated from the particular, concrete communal identities that give meaning, value, and goodness and purpose to life (AH 6-8). Villa succinctly restates these issues accordingly:

For the participatory democrat, it is Arendt’s Aristotelian identification of action and politics, and her recovery of the conception of citizenship proposed in the Politics, that open new vistas to contemporary theory. For the Critical Theorist, it is her rediscovery of Aristotle’s distinction between acting and making that is significant, since this makes possible a comprehensive theory of communicative action and consensual rationality. Finally for the communitarian, Arendt restates the fundamental insight of the third book of the Politics: namely, that citizens must be bound together by more than a desire for mutual benefit if they are to experience the existential and moral enrichment that politics can provide (AH 8).

A Brief Summary of Arendt’s Understanding of the Place of Political Action in the Human Condition

In The Human Condition, Arendt strongly distinguishes our activities from each other. She divides her conceptual project and gives us a tripartite view of the active life or vita activa, as distinguished from the more unified contemplative life or, the vita contemplativa. Arendt famously states: “we must think what we are doing” (HC 5) and so she names what we do. Arendt specifies terms for the three parts of our active life: we labor, we work, and we act. Our
labor centers on our biologically sustaining activities like consumption: labor for Arendt is a function of moving rather than striving (moving seems functional, striving entails meaning) and the meaning we might get out of labor is foreclosed in that such an activity merely gives us a platform upon which to conduct our other activities. Work, by contrast, serves to make enduring things that also possess meaning (think: Bay Bridge, aspirin, Manet). But work ultimately falls into an instrumental means/ends cycle: our best crafts generate further (often innovative) craftwork through a process of adaptive learning. We do not break out of this cyclical activity until we address each other in action. Our action together—with each other—is thus esteemed by Arendt as the chief most human among these three activities. What we do with other people in “plurality”—when we uphold each other as “equal” and “distinct” (HC 175)—is to make a shared “space of appearance…wherever we are together in the manner of speech and action” for politics (HC 198-199). To cite Arendt: “Men in the plural, that is men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves” (HC 4).

From the standpoint of deliberative and expressive political action, our discussions with each other need to develop constitutions and political institutions that we can rely on to frame (in spaces of appearance) and preserve the plurality of our politically free action (HC 7).

**A Closer Look at the Conflict between Deliberation and Expression:**

**Villa’s Interpretation**

Recall a claim made in Dana Villa’s argument, where he discusses a tension within the participatory democratic, critical theoretic, and communitarian appropriations of Arendt’s concept of political action. Villa claims:
Unless Arendt can point to some ground or justification of action beyond display and virtue or unless she can show how the criterion of greatness can be reconciled with a...deliberative conception of politics, her theory of political action will seem hopelessly at odds with itself (Villa 59).

The tension Villa refers to arises between deliberative and expressive interpretations of Arendt’s conception of action, which correlate roughly with the communitarian and critical theoretic interpretations, on one side, as against one democratic participatory interpretation that Villa himself advances. Villa's participatory democratic appropriation of Arendt lays great emphasis on the “self-contained” view of “politics as performing art” (AH 52-53). This view of political action cuts action off from the instrumental concerns of daily life. By contrast, according to the deliberative view of political action we remain caught up in these concerns. At its most extreme, deliberation drifts away from the vita activa and into the inner life of the vita contemplativa.

And as Villa points out in his reconstruction of the communitarian appropriation, members of a community may

...deliberate, but not about the most important things...the members of the community are identified by the ends they share [but this] imposes a substantive and severe restriction upon deliberative speech. It renders speech technical in the last instance: [as] only [a] means to the community’s ends, but never those ends themselves, are debated (AH 51-52).

It might be asked further, if these “community ends” are not debated, how are they understood as freely chosen ends at all?

This sort of deliberation begins to recall Arendt’s concern with the vita contemplativa’s ultimately otherworldly and cyclical patterns: “‘The activity of thinking [Aristotle's energeia that has its end in itself] is life.’ Its inherent law...is motion in a circle’ the only movement, that is, that never reaches an end or results in an end product” (LM 123-124). There is a real concern
that deliberation ceases to be public action, ceases to be connected to worldly meaning, as it is reflectively taken up within the internal dialog of the individual mind.

For Villa, it is not deliberation but expressive performance that provides the locus of meaning in Arendt's account of action:

For her, it is the performative character of action that provides the locus of action’s intrinsic meaning or value, its freedom and ‘actuality.’ The peculiar self sufficiency of action must be divorced from any obligation whatsoever… [T]he virtuosity manifest in the performance of action is action’s true reason for being. Action embodies not ‘the good for man,’ but freedom (AH 53).

Understanding what virtuosity (and display) means to Villa, and how it works within Arendt’s concept of political action requires that we turn to a small part of his reconstruction of Arendt’s project in Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political. Here he draws out Arendt’s idea of virtuosity by calling our attention to its use in her essay “What is Freedom,” (BPF 143) Arendt writes:

Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of virtu, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortuna. Its meaning is best rendered by “virtuosity,” that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making) where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in the end product which outlasts the activity and becomes independent of it. The virtuoso-ship of Machiavelli’s virtu somehow reminds us of the fact, although Machiavelli hardly knew it, that the Greeks always used such metaphors as flute playing, dancing, healing and sea-faring to distinguish political action from other activities, that is they drew their analogies from those acts in which virtuosity of performance is decisive (BPF 153, see also HC 206-207).

Arendt’s take on virtuosity, namely, that it is a meaningful momentary excellence found in performance and is an expression of freedom, is the centerpiece of Villa’s reconstruction of her concept of action. He writes: “This passage, with its strong emphasis on virtuosity and performance, indicates just how far Arendt is willing to go in order to identify actuality and
freedom with the activity itself” (AH 53). Villa reads Arendt’s conception of political action as being highly autonomous, “self-contained,” isolated from labor and work, and thus free from necessity.

Villa says that Arendt’s project is animated by a resistance, on her part, to the shaping effects of a traditional (“Socratic,” “[Christian]”) prioritization of contemplation over action (AH 17). A recovery of action might save politics (as Arendt would have it) from a denigrating instrumentalization by recovering a “space of appearances” in which politics, as a recollection of the Greek polis, can take place (AH 17-18). Rather than accept the customary opinion that Arendt is conducting a re-elaboration of certain Aristotelian concepts, Villa argues that Arendt “deconstructs” Aristotle’s principles en route to her “radical” reinvention of politics (AH 4).

Aristotle distinguishes domestic economy or oikos from the political realm (AH 18-19). Arendt articulates this distinction in terms of a division between private and public realms, reaffirming the ancient ideal that “as far as members of the polis are concerned, household life exists for the sake of the ‘good life’” or the politically active life (HC 37, cited in AH 19). Political life, by contrast, is an end in itself. According to Villa, “Arendt makes this Greek distinction the axis for her political theory. Like Aristotle she is convinced that “politics is an end not a means” and inasmuch this shows us a kind of distinctly human freedom” (AH 20).

However our “modern condition” undercuts the polis in that the “rise of the social” reduces the importance of an “atelic” politics—politics as an end in itself, using Aristotle’s term, a politics freed from concerns related to labor or work as Arendt defines them. Villa introduces the term “self-containedness” (AH 25) and Arendtian political action must, in his view be thought of this way. Villa appeals to the Nicomachean Ethics when he writes:
To call an activity “self-sufficient” or “self-contained,” then implies that it is undertaken for the sake of the activity itself, and not for some end beyond it. If indeed, “it is for the sake of the end that all else is done” (NE, 1097a)\(^3\), then a genuinely self-sufficient activity must have its end in performance… (AH 21, see also HC 206).

For Villa, this reflection on activity that is undertaken for its own sake leads us to the “well-known distinction between *poiesis* or productive activity, on the one hand, and *praxis* or action, on the other” (AH 22). A made thing always refers to an outcome that is external to it, whereas praxis is its own end (AH 22). Here I will pass over Villa’s exegesis on labor and work in order to summarily state his paraphrase of Arendt's account of action: “For Arendt, genuine political action is never a means to (mere) life, but the embodiment or expression of a meaningful life. But to determine (or ultimately judge) this meaning we will need to discuss it with each other, and it will be speech alone that can “break free of the life process… [of labor, work]” (AH 31).

Here it is important to note the crucial point Villa raises concerning Arendt’s innovation in traditional political theory. Indeed, for Arendt, political action (especially the modern, revolutionary variant) is itself uniquely innovative, or emancipatory; it breaks from conventional patterns and prejudices through the disruptive power of verbal contestation. In the words of Villa, “genuine political action is nothing other than a certain kind of talk, a variety of conversation or argument about public matters” (AH 31). Villa cites Arendt: “…wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political animal” (HC 3 cited in AH 31).

\(^3\)Also see NE, 1176b.
Villa moves to argue that the distinction earlier described, between *praxis* and *poiesis* “yields a focus on deliberative speech that serves as the basis of Arendt’s broad conception of politics” (AH 33). But how can action be squared with its resistance to the topics of labor and work, or social administration or made things? How can it be squared against language that must apparently avoid any topics that are usually considered meaningful? Villa will press for a “‘self-contained’ politics,” one that he thinks will answer the concerns of commentators like Hannah Pitkin (AH 36) who wonders what might possibly be the topic of all the “palaver” in such a well removed “agora” (AH 36).

Villa’s answer will be to turn to Arendt’s focus on “exemplary political speech” such as “debates attending the founding of the American republic, the deliberations of revolutionary councils…” speeches in general that “revolve around the creation and preservation of the public sphere” (AH 37). It is the deliberation and debate around the creation of constitutions that exemplifies political action in the modern age, for Arendt. For as she notes in *On Revolution* and *Crisis in the Republic*: a constitution is less a prohibitive or shaping document than “…a positive system of power” (AH 37, citing CR 142ff).4

**Problems with Villa’s Position and a Possible Solution**

As against Villa's defense of Arendt's innovative expressive-performing understanding of action, Richard Bernstein argues that Arendt’s political action is vitiated by its separation of the social and the political. Bernstein finds it contradictory that Arendt would insist on the creation of a polity in which equal spoken participation is crucial, while no mention is made of the social equality that makes such political equality equally effective for all (PP 249). Juergen

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4See Chapter 6 below for this idea in relation to the *sensus communis*. 
Habermas similarly criticizes Arendt for having a too narrow conception of action that won’t acknowledge socioeconomic realities (PPP 172-173, cited in AH 39). Villa defends Arendt against these charges by writing, “…the question of content [social or moral concerns] (understood now in the sense of the worldly referent of action) is secondary to the spirit and formal structure of political action” (AH 41). He continues in this vein by adding:

Arendt continues to apply the distinction between praxis and poiesis, a distinction that bars coercive or essentially instrumental modes of action from the public sphere, as well as ‘household’ or administrative matters. Her exclusionary strategy appears less strange if we recall the motive behind her theory of action. Arendt wanted, above all, to distinguish the life of action from the other activities that constitute the vita activa; moreover, she wanted to affirm the endless debate, deliberation, and plurality that characterize [Aristotle’s] bios politikos. By using Aristotle’s distinction to focus on the atelic character of political action, she was able to free action from domination by the socioeconomic realm and thus restore, at least in principle, the inherent value of the plural realm of opinion (AH 41).

Villa offers us a solution, but it is one that he doesn’t fully pursue. It is here that I suggest my argument might take hold and that we can begin to see coherence between the deliberative and expressive interpretations of Arendt’s concept of action. Villa acknowledges that insofar as action is expressive or strictly performative, such an interpretation might well be criticized as noted above. This is so because it is divorced from the sort of deliberation aimed at making constitutions and providing for daily concerns and seems to “promote hero worship and immoralism” (AH 55-56). But here Villa writes:

To some degree, Arendt anticipates these objections to her 'theatrical' conception of politics, appealing to 'principles' as nonfoundational referents for action. According to Arendt, principles 'are the legitimate guides to action,' saving 'the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness.' Insofar as an action manifests a principle, that is, insofar as the appearance of action is inseparable from the appearance of a principle in the world, action ceases to be the sheer display of virtuosity and becomes something else: a

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5Villa notes that George Kateb worries that Arendt’s “politics for its own sake” prioritizes existential concerns over and above moral ones (AH 56).
meaningful, depersonalized, ‘objective’ phenomenon. Arendt [Beyond Past and Future], p. 152. See also p. 243, where she speaks of ‘such political principles as freedom, justice, honor, and courage, all of which may inspire, and then become manifest in, human action’ (AH 55, 281).

It is important here to carefully consider what form a principle guiding us to “a meaningful, depersonalized, ‘objective’ phenomenon” might take. Citing Arendt, Villa mentions principles of “freedom, justice, honor, and courage.” But these principles do not bridge expressive and deliberative action so much as qualify the former. All of these principles seem to constellate around a heroic form of action; they are easily seen to apply to individual kinds of action, actions that might help write an exciting history but which could fail to create the plurality required to honor or remember it. However, Arendt does mention another principle that does bridge the gap between the expressive and deliberative models of action: promise making. On one hand “promising” must be expressed or undertaken initially by an individual, but it is only meaningful insofar as it underwrites a plurality of—initially—two. In On Revolution Arendt will distinguish between the sort of social contract made between a ruler and a people, and the more nuanced higher form arrangement made in constituting a plurality:

Schematically, the chief differences between these two kinds of social contract may be enumerated as follows: The mutual contract by which people bind themselves together in order to form a community is based on reciprocity and presupposes equality; its actual content is a promise, and its result is indeed a “society” or “consociation” in the old Roman sense of societas, which means alliance. Such an alliance gathers together the isolated strength by virtue of ‘free and sincere promises”… (OR 169).

And here she explains:

Hence, binding and promising, combining and covenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence; where and when men succeed in keeping intact the power which sprang up between them during the course of any particular act or deed, they are already in the process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action (OR 174).
Promises, Means, and Ends

Promise making is the incipient form of communicative interaction upon which deliberation is built. It consists of a joint offer and commitment to pursue an end—mutual cooperation for some end—whose underlying claims about means and ends may be challenged, either by one of the parties to the contract or by a third party affected by it. Challenge provokes a reasoned attempt at redeeming the problematic claim, or argumentative deliberation (debate). Richard Bernstein writes that

Debate itself is a form of action, and ‘action,’ (the term that Arendt uses to designate the distinctive and highest form of human activity), is not to be confused or merged with the other forms of the vita activa, labor or work…neither of these are to be confused with action whereby the distinctive humanity of men is revealed. Action is the public disclosure of the agent in speech deed (PP 222).

To say that: "action is the public disclosure of the agent in speech" is to recall the expressive and performative nature of persuasive speech, wherein the character and identity of the speaker itself becomes an aspect of compelling reason. Bernstein thus rightly alludes to the following passage from The Human Condition:

Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain an answer to the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’ This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and deeds…Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor the doer of deeds is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words (HC 158, cited in PP 222).\(^6\)

\(^6\)The content of the political is “who”, but the question is more than self-reflective, it is from outside, from the plurality.
In sum, promise making occupies a particularly high status among Arendt’s suggested principles of action for two reasons: it constitutes unity out of plurality and it maintains plurality in its revelation of the individuality of the speaker.

**Theatrical Deliberative Reenactment**

The preceding discussion of Arendt’s theory of political action suggests a link between expressive and deliberative action in the form of speech action, understood as performative promise making. Deliberation here cannot drift into the *vita contemplativa*; it is not merely philosophical ratiocination—however jointly undertaken—devoted to redeeming truth claims (theoretical or practical knowledge) for its own sake. Rather, deliberation remains tied to the supreme act of promising: social contracting, or the constitutional binding together of future commitments into an enduring polity. Among all of our public displays, constitutional conventions are paradigmatic of the joining of deliberative and expressive political action. The constitutional convention in Philadelphia in 1787 evinces both the performative-expressive and deliberative models here under discussion. Without the kind of charismatic performance of distinguished and courageous statesmen that could persuade the delegates to commit themselves to an utterly unprecedented (new) and highly risky joint undertaking, their own freedom would have lacked that enduring public space necessary for deliberation to continue. To this extent, politics must be theater. In *On Revolution* Arendt discusses how the founding fathers viewed their roles in founding the country; they understood that their distinguished role as “founders” depended on evoking the memory of re-enacting scenes from the American past (the Mayflower Compact) or from antiquity (the founding of the Roman Republic), performing the roles of the “greater ones…” that preceded them (OR 204).
…they thought of themselves as founders because they had consciously set out to imitate the Roman example and to emulate the Roman spirit…No doubt the American founders had donned the clothes of the Roman *maiores*, those ancestors by definition were “the greater ones,” even before they were recognized as such by the people. But the spirit in which this claim was made was not arrogance; it sprang from the simple recognition that either they were founders and, consequently, would become ancestors, or they had failed. What counted was neither wisdom nor virtue, but solely the act itself, which was indisputable (OR 204).

Implicit reenactment at once draws together historical precedents and requires “players” to fulfill the roles that inspire us. And they inspire us because these roles exemplify in action the principles Arendt alludes to in *Between Past and Future*, such as “courage” and “honor.” These subjective character trait principles are linked to less personal principles of freedom, equality, and justice in the master principle that encompasses all of them: promising.

Expressive deliberation also appears in Arendt’s other writings when the subject of political action is framed around justice rather than political constitution. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt evokes theatricality repeatedly, in one case by denying its presence in the performance of the judges, and alternately, by ascribing it to the courtroom and its environs. Arendt notes the importance of the location of the trial (Jerusalem) as an expressive display of Israel’s own distinction as a world-player on par with other nations (EJ 2 ff.). In consideration of the preceding discussion, the subsequent trial deliberation was not, Arendt insists, mere show or theatre (viz., the Eichmann trial was not a show trial), however much it was intended to exemplify the justice of Israel’s nation status and constitute its national identity on the world stage of recognition.
Practical Deliberation and Retrospective Judgment: Actor and Spectator

In the posthumously published *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* Hannah Arendt is interpreted to have held different views on positions occupied by actors and spectators. There is an actor interpretation of Arendt’s view of judgment as it intersects with political action and also an interpretation that insists on the necessarily greater validity found in the retrospective view of the spectator. This division resembles—thematically—the preceding contrast between deliberative and expressive models of action. What follows are some indications of how my earlier discussion of this contrast might resolve the tension between actor and spectator as competing political agents.

Here, the actor is so enmeshed in the spontaneous and momentary act that he or she cannot judge the meaning of what he or she is doing. Not only the consequences but also his or her intentions elude him or her. By contrast, the spectator in this construction seems to enjoy an advantageous position from which to judge the action retroactively and contemplatively, by inserting it within a determining narrative. This redeems the action, but at the cost of explaining it, or effacing its natality, or contingent (and perhaps revolutionary) novelty.

How is it that actors can effectively engage in politics if that they are barred from knowledge of the “play” as it proceeds, on Arendt’s model? According to Ronald Beiner, “Politics, in her view, is ultimately justified by the stories that are told afterwards. Human action is redeemed by retrospective judgment” (HALKPP 118). But, as Ronald Beiner elsewhere points out:

In her earlier writings (for example, in “Freedom and Politics,” “The Crisis in Culture,” and “Truth and Politics”), Arendt had introduced the notion of judgment to give further grounding to her conception of political action as a plurality of actors acting in concert in a public space. Human beings can act as political beings because they can enter into the
potential standpoints of others; they can share the world with others through judging what is held in common, and the object of their judgments as political beings are the words and deeds that illuminate the space of appearances (HALKPP 93).

In *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Seyla Benhabib confirms this shift in Arendt's later philosophy and her subsequent abandonment of actors as judging and deliberating about their own actions: “Arendt’s interest appears to have shifted from the standpoint of the actor, judging so as to act, to that of the spectator, judging so as to cull meaning from the past” (RMHA 175). This division between actor and spectator plays out somewhat differently than the way in which the division between expressive and deliberative action plays out in the main body of my argument, but the fact that political action is conscious of its own reenactment of scenes from the past, of its own theatrical historicality, suggests that it judges its own significance and worth from a post-hoc narrative standpoint.

In *On Revolution* Arendt recalls the sense in which revolution itself is a paradigmatic reenactment of history that extends or builds on (while breaking with) the past. Subsequent generations need not experience the constitution as an external imposition by the founders that negates their revolutionary potential to act freely. Rather, in creatively amending the constitution as a living document they augment (OR 204) its capacity to provide a more inclusive and freer public space. To cite Arendt:

The very concept of Roman authority suggests that the act of foundation inevitably develops its own stability and permanence, and authority in this context is nothing more or less than a kind of necessary “augmentation” by virtue of which all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment and increase. Thus the original foundations of the American republic; needless to say, the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented. This notion of a coincidence of foundation and preservation by virtue of augmentation—that the “revolutionary” act of beginning something entirely new, and conservative care, which will shield this new beginning through the centuries, are interconnected—was deeply rooted in the Roman spirit… (OR 203-204).
Arendt further presses this model by referring to the Roman god “Conditor” who was “founder and preserver at the same time” as it was his to preside over “growth and harvest” (OR 204). Expressive action exemplifies Arendtian natality. But this spontaneous eruption (interruption of continuity) is also performance and historical re-enactment. It thus recalls or invents its own narrative continuity with the past. In much the same way we who amend the constitution for the sake of expressing our changed identity also augment its promise of freedom, equality and justice. As in the Eichmann trial, we judge our history and ourselves in situating our action along an axis of unprecedented catastrophe or revolutionary progress, enlarged by a vivid and perhaps theatrical imagination (OT 434).

**Conclusion**

I propose to show that Hannah Arendt’s theory of political action is not as incoherent as commentators have generally assumed. I believe that the allegedly incompatible interpretations of this theory that refer to deliberation and expression are in fact compatible. I further argue that they are complementary, counterbalancing weaknesses of each taken in isolation. This complementarity becomes evident when we see that expressive action is guided by a principle of promising that encompasses in exemplary manner subsidiary principles of courage, honesty, freedom, equality, and justice. Inserted within an action of social contracting, the deliberation becomes expressive, ceasing to be contemplative ratiocination regarding truth claims taken in abstraction from personality. Inserted within an action of social contracting, expressive action ceases to be a pointless display of personal distinction and becomes socially and objectively meaningful.
I propose to defend this complementarity of deliberation and expression by turning to Arendt's discussion of constitutional conventions and trials. Finally, I shall defend the hypothesis that the tension between actor and spectator in Arendt’s theory of political action, as well as the tension between practical and historical judgment in her account of political deliberation, can also be resolved. For the practical judgment of the partisan political actor—if it is to rise to the level of statesmanship (leadership) capable of making bold and risky (and unprecedented) decisions—presupposes the historical judgment of the impartial spectator, who reflects on the broader historical significance of what should be done. In this respect, subsequent political action can be said to augment an earlier constitution of freedom.

Chapter Summary

**Introduction.** The introduction presents the thesis and abstract explaining how Arendt’s much contested interpretations of political action may be reconciled by viewing such action as a dialectical relation between expression and deliberation. The positions held by certain schools of thought are described in brief: participatory democratic, critical-theoretical, and communitarian. The idea of the objective fact of promising and its central role in this dissertation is introduced. Commentators are identified in brief. The introduction concludes with reference to how theatrical deliberation, reenactment, and judgment are related to the main thesis.

**Chapter 1.** Arendt’s background in German *Existenz* philosophy and phenomenology is described. The influence Heidegger and Jaspers had on Arendt is examined. Two portions of Arendt’s tripartite division of action, found in the *Human Condition* are detailed: labor and work. Arendt’s engagement with Marx is referenced. This chapter discusses the basis of Arendt’s thought, along with setting the stage for discussion of the thesis and proposed solution. The
current conditions that give rise to Arendt’s discussion of the “rise of the social” and an over
determination in our lives related to two of our basic activities is described. This problem is
related to current political conditions and to the fragmentation of perceived formerly stable social
and political structures.

**Chapter 2.** Arendt’s Political Action is here detailed as it is formulated in *The Human
Condition*; the relationship of action to promising is examined. Promise keeping and promising
are introduced and explained as they appear in Arendt’s early formulations.

**Chapter 3.** The social/political divide is a particular symptom of the difficulties found in the
deliberative interpretation or Arendt’s work. The critical-theoretical interpretation of this
problem will be examined in the writings of Juergen Habermas, Richard Bernstein, and Seyla
Benhabib. The civic republican, or communitarian interpretation will be considered in the
writings of Michael Sandel. Hannah Arendt’s own most recent thoughts on the social/political
divide, as expressed during a conference in Toronto in 1972, will also be examined.

**Chapter 4.** The issue of glory is a particular symptom of the difficulties found in the
expressive interpretation. Participatory democrats Benjamin Barber, Jane Mansbridge and Dana
Villa will be referenced. David Ingram widens the scope of this problematic, his writings will be
considered in relation to this controversy.

**Chapter 5.** This chapter focuses on the later developments of promising as elaborated on in
Arendt’s *On Revolution*. It recapitulates and resolves the dialectic in question by explaining
the objective fact of promising as it fulfills both expressive and deliberative forms of action
related to constitutional conventions. This discussion is divided into six topics: freedom and
equality, deliberative reenactment, power, absolutism/sovereignty, founding, and augmentation.
Chapter 6. This chapter reviews and concludes the previous discussion. It refers to

Hannah Arendt’s Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Between Past and Future, and

Eichmann in Jerusalem. Chapter six opens a discussion on retrospective judgment and practical deliberation. It suggests a possible resolution to the divide between the actor and spectator found in Arendt’s discussion of Kant’s political philosophy and the Critique of Judgment.

Interpretations by Ronald Beiner, Dana Villa, and Leora Bilsky will be compared. This possible resolution echoes the earlier discussion of expression and deliberation and relies on resources provided by that effort. This is followed by some closing comments, considerations, and projections for possible research.
CHAPTER ONE
ARENDT’S PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND AND HER
PHENOMENOLOGY OF LABOR AND WORK

This chapter will examine some of Arendt’s early influences, especially as they have informed key Arendtian concepts, including “world” and “plurality.” The early basis of Arendt’s concept of the disclosure of a particular “who” is of special note. The chapter will also explicate the concepts of labor and work, and the way each of these can be understood in their relation to Arendt’s chief-most category of political action.

Arendt’s philosophy and her concept of political action arise out of specific influences. From these Arendt has developed an original conceptual framework—her version of the existential world—as well as distinct concepts that set the stage for her conception of political action and the dialectic between expression and deliberation. Her conception of political action has roots in her appropriation of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. But her appropriation of that tradition is deeply informed by an existential phenomenological approach to philosophy rooted in the thought of Husserl, Jaspers, and Heidegger.

In a pair of articles examining these early philosophical influences, Sandra and Lewis Hinchman discuss Heidegger’s and then Jasper’s important anticipations of Arendt’s advances on modern *Existenz* philosophy. Arendt’s concept of plurality is grounded in these early formulations. These ideas specify an existential “who” against an ontological “what.”
existing “world” is made up of this plurality as against metaphysical alternatives, alternatives that fail to robustly identify individual actors against philosophical generalizations.\(^1\)

Based in German existential phenomenology, Arendt adopted and expanded an ongoing rejection of traditional philosophy in favor of more worldly approaches (HH 184). Her argument against traditional theories such as “classical liberalism” and “socialism” was that “both treated man as, at bottom, a social instead of political animal” (HH 185). As it turns out, this goes directly to Arendt’s later development of plurality as a mode of anchoring our interpretations and actions to the world, or more precisely, anchoring the idea of world as \textit{us}. World is not a \textit{what}, it is \textit{who}. For Arendt, each person has a biography, a story, and a role in creating meaning.\(^2\)

Husserl, following Kant’s seminal, “phenomenological” clarification of our objective experiential structures by perceptual intuitions of time/space, and the categories of the understanding (\textit{Critique of Pure Reason}), shifted the task of philosophy into the phenomenal world conceived as the only world and thereby “…abolished the entire notion of a ‘noumenal world.’” Husserl argued that the “…data of consciousness…are ‘the world’ for us” and as such questions about their relative “reality” become secondary. Husserl is in this way able to bring a “parity of dignity” between “the phenomena of everyday life” and Kant’s more distant “objects of natural science” (HH 187).

\(^1\)Here we can see Arendt’s “endgame” according to Villa: “Arendt’s theory of action proceeds by lifting praxis, in ‘crystallized form,’ out of its philosophical context and resetting it in an existential one” (AH 11).

\(^2\)Stephen Maloney characterizes Arendt’s concept of world thusly: “…the interpretive, incomplete, collectively built mental picture of human existence that each of us walks around with in our mind’s eye” https://blog.oup.com/2017/10/hannah-arendt-philosophy/
Arendt’s philosophy also found early influence in *Being and Time*. In his 1927 work Heidegger advances Husserl’s early phenomenology such that the worldly “being” of man is taken up in a way that continues to reject the abstract categories of modern philosophy, including the basic contrast of “subject” and “object.” Contra traditional philosophical subjectivity, to be a human *Dasein*, (usually translated in English as “‘being-there,’”) refers first and foremost to being “in the world.” Furthermore this “being-there” happens (we are in a condition of Geworfenheit or “thrown-ness”) in an “organic” and “unreflective” way (HH 189). Arendt’s basic concern with the world of “men” rather than of “mankind” (HC 6) is rooted in Heidegger’s pursuit of *Dasein*. Since we are the only beings for whom existence (and especially death) is an issue, “who” we are matters to us, as against reducing our inquiry to “what” we are, something that Arendt says “can be asked of anything else” (HH 190). The answers to each of the questions: “who,” as a core principal in Arendt’s concept of political action, here gets its start.

What Heidegger refers to as *Existentials* are transcendental categories of existence that apply specifically to questioning, meaning-seeking animals (Dasein), such as human beings. Among these is “care” or *Sorge*: a perspective available only to persons for whom such a thing as the future “in” the world may be of concern. Further, for a person to be “in” for Heidegger means “dwelling” and this entails a fundamental creation of meaning for humans, contra a metaphoric spatial relationship, i.e. a “cup in a cupboard.” Hinchman notes: “…ontological primacy is given to the being of *Dasein* (the human world) and not to the world taken as ‘present-at-hand’ (i.e., as common sense and modern science see it)” (HH 192). The priority of an “existential sense of space” supports Arendt’s conceptual framework. The conceptual division of work, labor, and action such that the “human institutions” fill out Arendt’s “public space of
appearance” spring from “being in” the world in a way that is initiated by action, but which disappears, in a manner of speaking, when tested against the rules of physical existence, or against Kant’s categories (HH 192).³

Heidegger’s anti “humanism” further influenced Arendt.⁴ Distinguished from the Aristotelian tradition that links us to each other in a general way as “rational animals” because of our capacities for speech and “political association,” Heidegger emphasizes the need to “open” and find in “poetic thought” a more basic form of differentiation. To cite the Hinchmans, “This means, then, that Heidegger’s (anti) ‘humanism’ amounts to a departure from man’s individuality and what later Arendt called the condition of human ‘plurality,’ the irreducible manifold of perspectives that makes the human world what it is” (HH 196).⁵ This expansion of perspectives is reflected in Arendt’s “existentials…’world’, ‘worldliness’, and especially ‘worldlessness’” (HH 198). Ironically, Heidegger thematizes “existentials” and gives to Arendt conceptual tools that describe a world in which such things occur as against, for example, the abstract, non-experiential Kantian category of quantity.

The Hinchmans describe that a core similarity between Heidegger and Arendt might be found in their shared understanding of being and appearance, especially as this relates to the expressive side of action and its associations of “glory” (or as Villa will point out below, Machiavellian “virtu”). “[I]f ‘to be’ is actually ‘to appear,’ then glorification actually makes the

³To examine labor, work, action from this perspective undermines Benhabib’s criticism of Arendt’s division as essentialist. Her view is existential and opposed to any fixed human nature that is reminiscent of actor exercises, rather than a view that is committed to any fixed ontological essence. See Chapter 3 below.

⁴See Heidegger’s Letter on Humanism.

⁵Late Heidegger will hold that historical frames of being condition human existence; for Arendt it’s the reverse. Individuals freely constitute their world.
deeds what they are. It is simply one more manifestation of pre-Socratic ontology which we moderns fail to understand” (HH 201). For the sake of this argument, glory and being as such, appearing in Arendt’s space of appearance, are different in degree but not different in kind. For something to be considered a deed or political action, part of the meaningful human story, it needs to be memorable in a way that reminds us of the person who does the deed. Deeds and meanings are anchored to the “who” they involve. Promising, as will be shown, is a basic form of action that necessarily refers to the particular ‘who’ in question, and so promising requires this appearance in at least a minimal sense. Below a discussion of how glory has become caricatured in interpretations of Arendt’s work will be raised.

Additional core concepts in Arendt’s theory of political action may be traced to Karl Jaspers. Jaspers’ philosophy starts from Kant’s upsetting of traditional metaphysical pretensions, and his establishment of the subject as the source of space and time via the intuitions and the logical categories of the understanding. Such a subject is reducible to the “transcendental unity of apperception” (Kant CPR, HH 144) and makes possible an objective world, insofar as such a subject is an abstract condition of identity common to each consciousness. But from this new vantage point, only phenomena, and neither the self as such, nor the world “in itself” could be experienced as an object. As a consequence, “Kant’s restriction of objective knowledge to phenomena seemed to leave open avenues for nonobjective insight. Accordingly, Jasper’s Existenzi-philosophy began at the limits of cognition established by Kant. The Hinchmans go on to discover what they view as a “crucial congruence” between Jaspers and Arendt (HH 144):

In Jaspers, the privileged status Kant assigned to scientific knowledge yields to a “pluralism of perspectives.” Investigating the world as an ‘object’ means establishing a certain relationship between it and the subject, understood as ‘consciousness-at-large’ or ‘consciousness-in-general,’ a detached outlook in which all observers are understood to
be functionally equivalent. But the individual self is more than consciousness-at-large, just as the world is more than an object to be studied by scientific method. In Jaspers’s ‘boundary situations (Grenzsituationen), people become aware of their non-interchangeable existence. For example, confronting one’s own mortality is very different than encountering death as an abstraction to be studied from the viewpoint of an actuary or physician. Death claims one’s own unique, individual self-being and, rightly understood, encourages one to envision the world as a space of appearance for Existenz, revealed through actions and decisions. Thus, the scientific viewpoint and its correlative, the world-as-object, constitute only one (and by no means privileged) perspective; the intentional pair Existenz/world-as-actualization-of-Existenz remains equally valid, indeed perhaps more fundamental. Jaspers therefore criticized Kant’s approach to the dichotomy of objective knowledge/nonobjective thinking as a juxtaposition of ‘two worlds,’ one real and objective, the other merely possible and postulated. In truth, only one world exists, but it shows a different face depending on whether people aspire to comprehend its objective character or to act in it so as to discover and affirm their identities (HH 145).

For Arendt, this conceptual basis opened the way for distinguishing between “what” someone is, and “who” they irreducibly are, and this seeded her concept of plurality. In addition, this allows for decision and action to “initiate” or “create” a self, which according to Jaspers is “neither (psychological) subject nor object” (HH 146), and this may be understood to delimit an area of political activity that has to refer to a political actor in ways that may exclude certain lines of instrumental thought that would leverage social sciences or objectification widely construed, against a specifically political person.

**Main Themes of Arendt’s Understanding of the Human Condition**

As noted above: In her 1958 work *The Human Condition*, Arendt employs a tripartite conceptual division of our activities in a way that helps to specify what political action is, and is not. It works out how a politics that fundamentally grounds our human condition gives way to an imbalance in our world that is caused by other forms of action, viz. labor and work. Rehearsing the deployment of this division sharpens our focus on how Arendt constitutes plurality, story, world, and how an analysis of the act of promising underwrites these
developments and balances our view of her methodology. This is further clarified by reading Arendt’s concept of labor in its darker formulation as slavery. As a consequence certain misunderstandings may be resolved.⁶

According to Arendt, labor grounds us, but its exaggeration undermines political action. Labor has largely shaped our current condition. Precisely: the over-determination of our current condition by labor renders the political irrelevant, it casts us as apolitical, as not “who” we are but by “what” we do and how we view ourselves. A connection can also be made that shows that certain limited underpinnings of labor evoke it in an alternate form as slavery. Since it blocks and can denigrate political action, and since it is our current dominant situation in Arendt’s construction, it is helpful to understand labor in some detail.

**Labor and Slavery**

As noted above, Arendt describes the unyielding circularity of the earthly biological life process to which we are all bound, and names it labor. Our biological imperative is reflected in a specific anti-political/apolitical activity, viz. slavery. *Slavery as such forecloses politics; it is apolitical in this respect. As expressed, it is anti-political.* We bind others: worldly slavery can be described as the anti-political manifestation of the *earthly* condition in distorted form.⁷ When understood as a kind of slavery, Arendt’s conception of labor is best countered by political action both as a matter of individual expression and as collective deliberation. Arendt writes:

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⁶James Miller justifies Arendt’s tripartite division on the basis of the work of “conceptual enrichment” of the *vita activa*, so aimed at defending finally the “space of appearances” and its need for secure new beginnings in a world threatened by an uncertain history (Hill 190). On the other hand, Seyla Benhabib charges Arendt with philosophical essentialism for this separation (RMHA xlv).

⁷It must be noted that the Greek polities that Arendt’s model relies on were won by the use of slaves. This is encapsulated in the story of the murder Arendt notes at the opening of *On Revolution* that gives way to the word. See page 139 below.
To labor meant to be enslaved by necessity, and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life. Because men were dominated by the necessities of life, they could win their freedom only through the domination of those whom they subjected to necessity by force (HC 83-84).  

Political action is characterized by striving for freedom. As animal laborans, we are relegated to biological, even automatic efforts that can bury us in necessity and may sink us in obscurity. Arendt underscores that slaves were taken by force to answer necessity and were obscured from ‘view’ since the mere brute continuation of the species didn’t rise to the level of being admitted to an ongoing human story:

The differentiation between the private household inmate who was a slave and the household head who was a citizen, between activities which should be hidden in privacy and those which were worth being seen, heard, and remembered, overshadowed and predetermined all other distinctions until only one criterion as left: is the greater amount of time and effort spent in private or in public (HC 85).

According to Arendt, the primary purpose of slavery in Antiquity was not for profit or to accumulate reserves, it was to suppress necessity. Slavery was an act of brute-force-delegation aimed at satisfying pressing bodily needs. Slaves don’t get stories. They get obscurity, while those who enslave them get their stories told.

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8 In footnote 10, Arendt notes that Euripides finds slaves “bad” because “they see everything from the viewpoint of the stomach” (HC 84). This idea anticipates concerns raised by Arendt in On Revolution, related to the French Revolution and the sense in which it was co-opted by basic life concerns, viz. bread over its political aspirations of freedom.

9 See Ta-Nehisi Coates, accessed at https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/. This is related to the current discussion because, as Coates describes, the first “white” president is trying to efface the first black president’s legacy.
Arendt’s effort to distinguish labor from other activities swings on a particular question: How might we separate what she will call productive labor from unproductive labor? The answer to this question will open up a perspective on Arendt’s concept of world as such.\(^{10}\)

Early in *The Human Condition*, Arendt takes Karl Marx as foil. She seeks to divide the concepts of labor and work, upon the distinction between productive and unproductive labor, a division Arendt claims Marx does not make.

…the distinction between productive and unproductive labor contains, albeit in a prejudicial manner, the more fundamental distinction between work and labor. It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends on it (HC 87).\(^{11}\)

According to Arendt, Marx characterizes the world as a world of *laborers*.\(^{12}\) For more than a century, Marx’s profound discovery of labor surplus, and its meaning for the life conditions of laborers, will overshadow the distinction Arendt is trying to recover: labor

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\(^{10}\)This kind of distinction will become important for our discussion later since in political action a main concern of the deliberative camp will be: what politics are for, what they do in real administrative and material terms, what outcomes do they produce. Do politics actually produce real worldly goods, measurable outcomes? The expressive camp will insist that we must uncouple outcomes from political action since it is an end in itself. If labor is understood as setting a stage for work, and work for action, then speech-action may play out.

\(^{11}\)This is especially relevant now as technology drives a kind of routinisation in service of economic globalization that separates bodies from working and renders even skilled workers interchangeable, biological contributors lightly related to economic benefits. See how former US Treasury Secretaries discuss income inequality. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/geithner-rubin-paulson-income-inequality_55e9eabde4b093be51bb73c3.

\(^{12}\)Labor and work are etymologically distinct, argues Arendt, in European languages. Arendt justifies this: she claims language “persists” in preserving an important distinction, even though theorists have missed such a clue about our human condition (HC 80). For example, the German “*arbeit*” is related to farm labor and sustenance while “*Werk*” has to do with the creation of lasting objects or artifacts. The noun labor “never designates the finished product” (HC 80). This distinction insists that the noun “work” refers to things that last for a time compared to things that are consumed, bread for example, rather than tables (HC 90).
maintains and work produces. Marx’s (and Engel’s) articulation made the concept of labor appear. That appearance took center stage as an emancipatory movement.\textsuperscript{13}

However, Arendt and Marx are attempting to solve different problems. Marx successfully identifies a pattern of exploitation that amounts to a form of anti-political slavery or indenture in that a few may produce for many. Precisely: many work for a few to exploit; but a few can produce an excess of value that is itself a further target for expropriation. Despite a world history replete with examples of exploitation and violence, according to Arendt, Marx’s otherwise praiseworthy solution has obscured and buried other considerations.

Marx’s understanding of labor has dominated our world-view. It has collapsed the public/private distinction in favor of a social world and has blocked but shaped our view of worldly activity, instead of revealing it in full—Arendt’s \textit{vita activa}.\textsuperscript{14} Marx’s view undercuts how we view the world as an object.\textsuperscript{15} Our lives among the things in the world that last and go towards making it up, stabilizing it and its conventions has taken on a distorted set of transient meanings at the expense of richer human associations related to work and political action. Our relations have been focused narrowly on consumption. To what degree have we lost the chance

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\textsuperscript{13}Marx’s “Labor power” on Arendt’s analysis, is a common denominator for all humans, more precisely all human workers insofar as it tends to transform everyone into some kind of worker, i.e. “servile” or “intellectual” but the transformation erodes the distinction. (HC 91) In Marx, as a political-economic principle, labor is a general quantitative measure of the outcome of effort. What Marx develops in \textit{Capital}—his modern discovery in simplest terms—is that our individual work amounts to more than what is necessary to sustain or reproduce the single life of a worker. We have a unique human efficiency so to speak, and this turns out to be a blessing and a curse. Moreover, the outcomes of cooperative efforts are greater than the sum of the parts, due to the division of labor, (and broadly, to specialization). Teamwork pays off, but who collects? (HC 88).

\textsuperscript{14}Villa calls the collapse of this distinction a “bastard hybrid” (AH 20).

\textsuperscript{15}Arendt goes on to emphasize that it is mere capacity that comprises subjective point of view, or focus of labor, viz. Marx’s successful appropriation of the concept of human power. In this case what is missed is the “thing character of the world” (HC 93), since our attention is drawn away from lasting durability and meaning toward whatever chance we have to sustain ourselves, we become an unknowing part of a process.
\end{flushright}
to express our opinions, and celebrate our political equality because our relations have been
reduced to a calculus wherein we’ve become economic units? Arendt views what she calls the
social as the outcome of immense thrum and sway of the collective laboring human body,\textsuperscript{16} of all
the hunting, gathering, feeding, warring, and, birthing that \textit{has} successfully pushed back
necessity; it continues to play out on center stage, it darkens and renders too quiet our political
being.\textsuperscript{17}

Consequentially, quantitative measures dominate and erode the qualitative assignment of
meaning—the endgame for Arendt’s political action. On Arendt’s argument we cannot simply
count things, nor can we rely on abstract systems of theory to account for our particular stories.
She writes:

The curious discrepancy between language and theory which we noted at the outset
therefore turns out to be a discrepancy between the world-oriented, ‘objective’ language
we actually speak and the man-oriented [here precisely the theoretically projected or
imagined world of abstract ‘man,’ not that of particular ‘men’], subjective theories we
use in our attempts at understanding. It is language, and the fundamental human
experiences underlying it, rather than theory, that teaches us that the things of the world,
among which the \textit{vita activa} spends itself, are of a different nature and produced by quite
different kinds of activities (HC 94).

Arendt argues here that our currently recognized priorities are in fact reversed.\textsuperscript{18} This is
so because we necessarily require a meaningful objectification to manage the world in such a
way so as to increase and understand its ability to sustain us in the first place. Arendt suggests

\textsuperscript{16}Recall for contrast, Marx’s discussion of “species-being” p. 31 ff. in \textit{Economic and Philosophic
Manuscripts of 1844}.

\textsuperscript{17}Or more precisely the darkening and deafening of our current experience due to this should be considered
a loss. It is a loss of an earlier awareness of our active life: in the \textit{Polis}, as Arendt would have it.

\textsuperscript{18}It’s tempting to suggest that Arendt would not recognize that we’ve set any priorities, but that we’ve
drifted in the habits of the ‘social’ instead.
that we need the highest form of action in order to recognize the lower forms, otherwise this concern might not arise. “Labor needs the other activities so that it may emerge in our consideration.” Heidegger’s influence is apparent. Arendt writes:

What consumer goods are for the life of man, use objects are for his world. From them, consumer goods derive their thing-character; and language, which does not permit the laboring activity to form anything so solid and non-verbal as a noun, hints at the strong probability that we would not even know what a thing is without having before us ‘the work of our hands’ (HC 94).

Marx’s political act of identifying us as laborers requires first that we reside in a world in which such a political judgment is possible. We can identify ourselves as labor since we have done the linguistically meaningful political work of assigning, negotiating and settling—or as Arendt would have it, surrendering to such a meaning. We must first discern this life. Then we distinguish it by means of discussion and speech with each other. Arendt’s concern with Marx is that:

Their [objects’] reality depends entirely on human plurality…Viewed…in their worldliness, action, speech, and thought…they are as futile as life itself…The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things (HC 95).

Despite the distinction between the permanence of cultural things and evanescence of consumer goods, Arendt notes that we wear down our world. Even the tangibles and made things we save, and the affairs that give our lives meaning, are subject to the natural process of decay and forgetfulness.

Life is a process that everywhere uses up durability, wears it down, makes it disappear, until eventually dead matter, the result of small, single, cyclical, life processes, returns into the over-all gigantic circle of nature herself, where-no beginning and no end exist and where all natural things swing in changeless, deathless repetition (HC 96).
Arendt sets the concept of linearity against futility. Linearity reflects the “stories” of our lives, insofar as we are born, fill out our stories and die, thereby marking each story with an end. Tangible reminders and objectivity itself helps our recollection and the necessary transmission of our stories to each other. Arendt writes this:

The word ‘life,’ however, has an altogether different meaning if it is related to the world and meant to designate the time interval between birth and death. Limited to a beginning and an end, that is, by the supreme events of appearance and disappearance within the world, it follows a strictly linear movement whose very motion nevertheless is driven by the motor of biological life which man shares with other living things and which forever retains the cyclical movement of nature. The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography… (HC 97).

Failing durability—decay—is the boundary or resistance that gives our stories shape, as will be seen below. But the driving efficiency of consumption tends to level our experiences. It tends to make boundaries irrelevant.

Arendt’s criticism of consumerism finds an unlikely ally in Marx. But Marx mistakenly believed that labor could aspire to something nobler: productive work, the engine driving the development of humanity’s faculties.

The hope that inspired Marx and the best men of the various worker’s movements—that free time eventually will emancipate men from necessity and make the animal laborans productive (a betterment of consuming…) rests on the illusion of a mechanistic philosophy which assumes that labor power, like any other energy, can never be lost, so that if it is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life it will automatically nourish higher activities…the spare time of the animal laborans is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites…harbors the grave danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption(HC 133).

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19Futility for Arendt: our recognition of futility is crucial in that we respond to it by striving to resist it. We do so by creating durable things and a world.
The paradigm of animal laborans tends to make the human world disappear, as Arendt would have it, and along with it, the privileged public realm. Arendt has painted a picture of the conditions that obtain due to thoughtlessness, due to our failure to “think what we do.”

...animal laborans was permitted to occupy the public realm; and yet, as long as the animal laborans remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open... [as] mass culture (134).

Recognition of the futility of our condition, viz. human labor in nature and our irrevocable bond to the earth is the core issue for Arendt’s analysis of Marx. To seek to escape this nature distracts us from our task of understanding it. Failure to acknowledge it disarms us.20

Arendt’s Concept of Work

Arendt describes the unyielding circularity of the world making process of utility and names it work. Following Aristotle’s poiesis, Arendt describes that by means of work: we fabricate, forge, build, signal, write and mark out our places in the human-made artifice of the world. This part of Arendt’s vita activa goes part of the way towards making a world that we find meaningful, a world we remember with the markers we set down and the stories we record. Work puts up the artifice that allows us to stage meaning. For this reason it’s tempting to ask if work can escape the circularity of labor. This basic function of utility is the beginning of the linearity Arendt describes in contradistinction to the aforementioned circularity of labor. But Arendt looks beyond work, she evokes Lessing, asking: “‘And what is the use of use?’” (HC 154).

20Current events suggest that the analyses by both Arendt and Marx are growing in relevance, work continues to integrate their perspectives. See Thomas Piketty, Capital in the Twenty First Century, see Louis Menand: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/10/karl-marx-yesterday-and-today
Worldly meaning is noticed in the durability of the things we make, and culminates in the immortality and remembrance of actions narrated in story. Arendt writes:

It is this durability which gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and used them, their ‘objectivity’ which makes them withstand, ‘stand against’ and endure, at least for a time, the voracious need and wants of their living makers and users. From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that—in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that man can never enter the same stream—men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table… [w]ithout a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement but no objectivity (HC 137).

Crucially: “The process of making is itself entirely determined by the category of means and end” (HC 143). What is an end in this sense? Arendt here articulates the way in which worldly demand for goods entertains the desire for continued fabrication, and in this way the worldly artifice expands, but only because of human demand. Here the emphasis rests on what is worldly rather than on what is natural. It rests on demand rather than necessity. An end (telos) is a human issue rather than a natural process. Arendt explains that the “end” in labor refers back to the “exhaustion of labor power itself” not the end of whatever is produced. We grow corn to eat, and to seed, but not finally to keep. The agricultural process of corn farming in the Mississippi River Valleys is clearly intended to sustain life. But the means/ends process to make tables is to hold the meals and meetings of farmers and families for a world that extends beyond a season of growing. More tables means more world recognized as world (HC 143).

Despite the fact that instrumentality increases our experience of durability in the world, Arendt points out that a form of circularity also enters into the work process, when this process is not counterbalanced with action as politics. Utility works itself out in chains where one end may
become a means for another end and so on. “…[I]n a strictly utilitarian world, all ends are bound to be of short duration and to be transformed into means for some further ends” (HC 154).

Meaning is evacuated from utility in that “…utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness” (HC 154). Arendt describes that even Kant is caught in the utilitarian formula, relying on the “paradoxical ‘end in itself’” (HC 156). Arendt notes that the Greeks viewed the instrumentality of *homo faber* as finally “vulgar” when compared to the ends of politics. “The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life in the world of men” (HC 157). Arendt notes the overreach of this anthropocentric viewpoint wherein “man is the measure of all things” in explaining Plato: “The point of the matter is that Plato saw immediately that if one makes man the measure of all things for use, it is man the user and instrumentalizer, and not man the speaker and doer or man the thinker, to whom the world is being related.” A higher point of reference must be found to break the circularity of means and ends (HC 158).

Arendt notes “…the loss of all intrinsic worth, begins with the transformation into values or commodities, for from this moment on they exist only in relation to some other thing which can be acquired in their stead” (HC 165-166). On Arendt’s account, the world of making and utility transitions into an exchange market in which the durability of any made artifact of the world succumbs to its status as a commodity. Durability is rendered secondary if not irrelevant. Such a commodity is a thing that can be exchanged with little reference to its use value as such, but with reference to the system of an economic process that mimics the biological cycle. This process of exchange fails to anchor the world in any system of standards or measures—other
than needful man himself. And since as Plato anticipated, and as Arendt notes against Protagoras: such a measuring only measures in circles. Plato says “[the god should be the measure]” rather than man and what he can fabricate (HC 174).

But notably, art and artworks bear a different status for Arendt: “Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things…so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read” (HC 167-168). It is important here to note that art for Arendt has a worldly component that depends on the same kind of plurality that political action will require. “Works of art are thought things, but this does not prevent their being things” (HC 168-169). It is in this way that one generation communicates the “dead letter” of art “…when the dead letter comes in contact with a life willing to resurrect it…” into the living and ongoing story of humans passing it along (HC 169).

Arendt ties the art of poetry to thought “…in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it” (HC 169), and with memory. Arendt implies that this core world making activity, poetry, touches upon a basic human desire.

…yet even a poem, no matter how long it has existed as a living spoken word in the recollection of the bard and those who listened to him, will eventually be ‘made,’ that is, written down and transformed into a tangible thing among things, because remembrance and the gift of recollection from which all desire for imperishability springs, need tangible things to remind them, lest they perish themselves (HC 170).22

21See below Chapter 6 for the way Arendt, as explained by Ronald Beiner, will relate judgments of aesthetics and politics, for both art and political action require a public showing. Both require the concerted attention of at least two, even if that attention is paid neither in the same place, nor at the same time.

22Here Arendt anticipates her interest and later philosophical commitment to narrative and our recollection see Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Chapter 6 below.
Arendt points out that thought, as distinct from cognition, is unproductive, and as “relentless and repetitive as life itself.” Cognition is related to the sciences and the production of art, (though least of all poetry which she notes is closest to thought). Thought, despite its repetitive nature begins and ends with our lives and so matches our linearity. Thought “…begins to assert itself as his source of inspiration only where he overreaches himself, as it were, and begins to produce useless things, objects which are unrelated to material or intellectual wants, to man’s physical needs no less than to his thirst for knowledge” (HC 171).

The man-made world of things, the human artifice erected by homo faber, becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions, only insomuch as it transcends both the sheer functionality of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use. Life in its non-biological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifest itself in action and speech, both of which share with life its essential futility (HC 173).

Here Arendt’s recognition of futility anticipates what commentators will note below as her truly radical theory of political action (Villa AH 42).

…the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication…neither the driving necessity of biological life…nor the utilitarian instrumentalism of fabrication and usage (HC 174).

If we succeed at “thinking what we do,” if we are able to thoughtfully separate our activities and gauge them for how they play out in our lives we are forced to confront a thoroughgoing futility. We confront the futility of a natural cycle that refers only to its own continuance and would lull us into its process. We are confronted with an incomplete project to exit this continuance made better only by tools ranging from hammers to novels, but processes that expand and improve our awareness of the continuance of our labors. This awareness—in the marketplace—may only increase our sense of futility. And so we’re left with the question what
for? This confrontation with our condition refers us to each other and to the plurality of actors with whom we share this futility.

**Summary of Chapter One**

Chapter One has focused on Arendt’s early philosophical influences (Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Kant) and on her concepts of labor and work. Arendt draws on German *Existenz* thought to distance herself from the traditional concerns and to break with philosophies that might miss the phenomenological information that she seeks in a particular “who” who experiences political life. Arendt reacts to Marx, shifting away from his interpretation of political economy to draw attention to the character of a politics that frees itself from the concerns of necessity. Against a futility we confront in common, Arendt is seeking answers that require her to distinguish the labors of necessity, and the means-ends work that they reflect, from political action. For Arendt, who we are and how we *promise* will finally address her earliest concerns; the answer comes out in her development of the concept of political action.
CHAPTER TWO
ARENDT’S CONCEPT OF POLITICAL ACTION

In Chapter Two, Arendt’s political action as described in *The Human Condition* will be explicated. The basic building blocks of the argument are here supplied. Speech, disclosure, and natality are shown to describe how a political actor is recognized in a worldly setting. Meaning emerges in our unique stories as we speak words and share deeds; these call our attention to a space of appearance where such words and deeds matter most. Our political world is that space of appearance wherein we are freely bound to each other in a process that we discover requires ongoing promising and forgiveness.

In *The Human Condition*, political action manifests as speech. It is deliberative, expressive, and for the purpose of this argument, performative in its construction of relationships premised on promises. Arendt has subordinated the activities of labor and work to a different register. These activities are not ends in themselves. The meanings we seek do not fit the patterns of survival; they are not indexed in the efforts of making. For Arendt, human meaning is most readily found between us, carried by words and deeds about our shared political life.

**Political Speech Underwrites Plurality**

We “disclose” ourselves in speech and action and in so doing mutually recognize others as members of a plurality—we enjoin them to such disclosure. For Arendt: what freedom we get, we get from each other. This is our effective mode of human freedom: disclosure begs an audience and it will turn out that this uncertain plural condition is precisely the cost of worldly
freedom.¹ Our freedom has to lie in an action that has no end but for that which is expressed by the individuals so engaged—meaning. This expression, it turns out, will be the story of an individual, and moreover a story combined with the “web” of stories that will turn out to be plural human history. To be included in this story, as opposed to being relegated to “oblivion,” is a guiding (guidepost) concept for Arendt (BPF 41).

According to Arendt: “Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction.” Only humans can actively contrast ourselves from one another in a way that ultimately builds meaning, Arendt writes: “…alteritas…Otherness…But only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself…” (HC 175-176).

**Natality**

Action is original; its emphasis is on birth and beginning. “Natality” describes how Arendt characterizes our entrance into worldly affairs: “If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals” (HC 178). Natality repeats itself again and again as initiation; our words and deeds introduce us into each component of the world setting.

¹On the concept of world and our collective experience, Stephen Maloney offers this basic but helpful construction: “The earth and the world distinguish the physical reality of human existence (the earth) and the interpretive, incomplete, collectively built mental picture of human existence that each of us walks around with in our mind’s eye (the world). The earth and the world both allow for our experience of individual existence while at the same time benefitting from cultivation by coordinated groups.” Accessed at https://blog.oup.com/2017/10/hannah-arendt-philosophy/
Who we are goes to make up each scene. Worldly engagements “…must contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: ’Who are you’” (HC 178).

In “natality” the earth delivers us, but the world bears us. We cannot know “who” we are fully without the help of the world that acknowledges such beginnings. Glory in this way is an identifier, an illumination. It is a recognition, less so a vanity. According to Arendt: “Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm” (HC 180).

Arendt continues: “The point is that the manifestation of the ‘who’ comes to pass in the same manner as the notoriously unreliable manifestations of ancient oracles, which, according to Heraclitus, ‘neither reveal nor hide in words, but give manifest signs’…What is at stake is the revelatory character without which action and speech would lose all human relevance” (HC 182).

**Authorless Stories and the Theatre**

Arendt notes that our stories are “authorless.” She writes:

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end…The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent [hero] who set the whole process in motion…we can never point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome (HC 185).

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2See Paul Kottman for his excellent investigation into the dramaturgical political in the *Politics of the Scene.*

3See below discussion of the caricature of glory in Chapter 4.
Meaning is carried not by authors but by the web of people related to each other by their stories and memories. Arendt contrasts fictional stories, dramas, with what we experience in life. Authors select among meanings to emphasize. Our sense of world is authorial, especially when this takes shape retrospectively, but in the moment of action we are without author. Meaning is ostensibly captured *ex post facto*.

The position of a stage actor is similar to the position of Arendt’s political actor insofar as such a stage actor is caught in a script, the outcome of which is played as if unknown by convention. The stage actor is required by the form to maintain an open comportment towards the other actors in order that the characters will be presented as believably living the course of their yet “unknown” lives. This form of openness is similar to the requirements of political action, especially speech. We acknowledge a particular ‘who’ in ‘free speech,’ in the unexpected events and outcomes that follow. In the theater, performers must resist the script as the play progresses in order to protect the appearance of spontaneity. Much has been written on

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4 Arendt evokes Hegel explicitly: “Reason itself, the thinking ability which we have, has a need to actualize itself….” She notes that philosophy has “monopolized” this need, but that the desire is always felt by all and that this “form of thought” has as its outcome the stories we live out and shape—consciously—with our thoughts. And further action, the active life, the praxis we issue in is this: “And this is somehow the same sense in which you know it from Hegel, namely where I think the central role is reconciliation—reconciliation of man as a thinking and reasonable being. This is what actually happens in the world” (RPW 303). See also Arendt’s “robot” reference (HC 158).

5 But here it may be more precise to speak of a retrospective spectator not as an author of meaning, but rather one among a handful of editors, lucky editors, who somehow survive and report a particular vision of the story in question. See chapter six below and the discussion of retrospective judgment.

6 I have taken a different approach elsewhere, arguing that performance is itself a form of action. This argument addresses a specific feature of the phenomenology of performance, while Arendt’s overall argument about the analogical relation of politics and stage acting remains intact. Master’s Thesis, Leisen, 2014.

7 As distinguished from scripted speech.
this odd paradox, and upon its close relation to our practice of political speech and action.

Arendt herself writes:

However, the specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and ‘reified’ only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or mimesis, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the drama, whose very name (from the Greek verb dran, ‘to act’) indicates that playacting actually is an imitation of acting” (HC 187).

We playact freedom as a matter of method, we demonstrate action. And so:

This is also why the theater is the political art par excellence, only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others (HC 188).

Arendt on Eudaimonia and Action

The Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia is traditionally defined as well-being or flourishing. However in her own alternate interpretation Arendt explains that for the Greeks, the concept of eudaimonia referred to that “unchangeable identity” that was held by a person throughout their life but seen or recognized only by others (HC 192 ff.). This interpretation of eudaimonia goes to how Arendt develops who we are, dependent on the plurality we share. This relationship extends to the conditions underwriting the objective fact of promising here under consideration. Promises are publications that help us to self-identify, in so doing, we are connected to a community. The community reflects this connection back to us.

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world…it is more than likely that the ‘who,’ which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the daimon in Greek religion which accompanies each man

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8See Herbert Blau, among others, in works such as Audience 1990.

9See Arendt’s footnote 18 p. 193 and her reference to Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex: “…the misery of mortals is their blindness toward their own daimon.”
throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters (HC 179-180).

The eudaimon—only ours, our unique mode—in a sense, is that form of our story or experience that others can see, that “follows us,” but that we cannot turn around fast enough to see. It may be illustrated in the example that performers, much to their chagrin, cannot see themselves in live performance and can only ask others if what they felt of it was also felt by (judged to be so) by others. 10

Expression has a way of demanding inclusion in the plurality, more precisely it is a necessary claim. And it solicits inclusion in the polity. Arendt’s explanation of Eudaimonia supports the dialectical interpretation of expressive and deliberative political action because in this idea is found the drive to express oneself in a self-contained way that is unique to who one is, but it has to be done in a condition of plurality. More precisely the Greek concept of eudaimonia articulates evidence for an argument that we are constituted in and ‘for’ action in plurality—that without this plurality constituted in its unique way, the issue of action and the dialectic of expression and deliberation would not arise. In addition, the concept of eudaimon—at once ours and theirs—helps to explain how during deliberation we are challenged or “jolted” into considering alternate points of view (see above page 4). For it is our interlocutors who have information about us that we do not possess. So in a sense, our first or original “jolt” is the fact that we cannot wholly rely on our own subjective position, but are cast into a situation of being challenged since it is our own story itself we must “agonize” about with our plural companions (HC 179 ff.).

10The constellation of Brecht, Benjamin, and Arendt might be explored from this point of view. The conceit of self-conscious performance arises from what Arendt here describes.
Arendt writes that “The price” of eudaimonia is life itself, lived “piecemeal” but then captured by a story that sums up such a life. But how does Arendt suggest that our eudaimon be received or remembered by those who surround us? “The Greek Solution” to staging our life story is provided by the originary Greek understanding of the polis as a political theater or unfolding drama. According to Arendt, at its core, it is a form of “organized remembrance” (HC 198). Without a setting that allows for the safe and somehow minimally socially organized viewing of our engagements, we cannot be free. This kind of being seen then is crucial to the survival of each of our stories; our involvement in the world depends on this recognition. In the words of Arendt: “It assures the moral actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen” or “being heard, and generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men, who outside the polis could attend only the short duration of the performance and therefore needed Homer and ‘others of his craft’ in order to be presented to those who were not there” (HC 198). Stories emerge in the world and our actions are undertaken in concert:

…the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds.’ Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it (HC 198).

Arendt describes the complexity and underlying purpose freedom expresses, for it is not merely a passive condition we receive. Even to say we fight for our freedom renders it a sort of prize or objectivity that oversimplifies the process. Freedom in a polis for Arendt: “… is the organization of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose…”(HC 198). Freedom is an ongoing process, it draws out particular humans: “It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word,
namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (HC 199).

**Power Opens the Space of Appearance**

On Arendt’s account, the space of appearance is a safe meeting area or sheltered spot where violence is either unlikely or prohibited by custom or mutual consent. It is a human meeting custom. “The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government…”(HC 199). This form of very simple mutual recognition, the promise of a safe space, paired with discourse is necessarily the starting point for any further development of constitutions, legal frameworks, and social contracts.11

Arendt’s conception of power (*Macht*) and the way it arises between people favors small groups of persons where the scope and manner of discourse is direct and simple enough to allow for bonds of trust to be formed:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities (HC 200).

For Arendt, power is how we describe the condition that obtains when we open a register—a space of appearance—in which the natural/brute fact of violence (*Gewalt*), either “violence” (extremity of condition, like weather) that arises in nature or human violence

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11See below for Benhabib’s charge that Arendt’s space of appearance is too traditionally exclusive (men of Athens) or that its topics suffer a narrow agenda.
(war/rebellion/encampment\textsuperscript{12}) is pushed back. This conventionalizes a stage or arena in which actions and deeds can be identified, witnessed for the sake of memory, meaning, constitution making and, story. Arendt writes: “Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men in existence” (HC 200). Arendt goes on to describe the importance of human settlement, to action, of polis to politics.

The only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them, and the foundation of cities, which as city-states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization, is therefore the most important material prerequisite for power” (HC 201).

Arendt adds a fuller qualification to the free exercise of power: “… while violence can destroy power, it can never become a substitute for it” (HC 202). It is the performance of deeds that secures power, exactly during times of crisis, when people undertake to act in concert consistent with, perhaps referring back to the basic constitutional values. Fraternity thus enlivened and ratified the centuries-old constitution of France and its values while reminding the revolutionaries of their power to defend the space of appearance.

It is like a feeble echo of the pre-philosophical Greek experience of action and speech as sheer actuality to read time and again in political philosophy since Democritus and Plato that politics as a \textit{techne}, belongs among the arts, and can be likened to such activities as healing or navigation, where, as in the performance of the dancer or play-actor, the ‘product’ is identical with the performing act itself (HC 207).

Again recall that Arendt charges us to “think what we do,” what we do in the moment of sustaining centuries old stories and political constitutions in a way that empowers the actions of the moment and at the same time conserves and reinvents the basis of these documents. “It was

\textsuperscript{12}Giorgio Agamben discusses encampment in \textit{Homo Sacer}, and elsewhere, a form of violence that suspends the open space of appearance. Encampment checks power, though it perhaps cannot foreclose it even in a camp environment. See Arendt’s \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}. 
precisely these occupations—healing, flute playing, play-acting—which furnished ancient thinking with examples for the highest and greatest activities of man” (HC 207).

**Process**

The process character of action applies particularly to this discussion since the repeating but original augmentation of constitutions by reform or by revolutionary “re” legitimation\(^{13}\) is the concept that captures the scope or sway of such an historical process.\(^{14}\) Arendt discusses that the “process character of action” is an outcome of the unpredictability inherent in a plural situation where actors drive events forward. She continues: “Not even oblivion and confusion, which can cover up so efficiently the origin and the responsibility for every single deed are able to undo a deed or prevent its consequences” (HC 233). Arendt further asserts: “The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end” (HC 233).\(^{15}\)

The process character of action, as Arendt describes it, is radically unpredictable such that the only way we ever can assess or understand it is retroactively (“historian…” HC 233). Our tendency is to hold such uncertainty in contempt and try to avoid it via philosophies and theories of personal sovereignty. But as Arendt writes:

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\(^{13}\)See Ingram in Chapter 4 below.

\(^{14}\)Of similar interest is what Arendt describes as the “boundlessness” of action: For Arendt action is spontaneous, and it is boundless. Historical records are lost and art cannot keep pace. This is the recurrence of Arendt’s natality. “This boundlessness is characteristic not of political action alone, in the narrower sense of the word, as though the boundlessness of human interrelatedness were only the result of the boundless multitude of people involved, which could be escaped by resigning oneself to action with a limited, graspable framework of circumstances; the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (HC 190).

\(^{15}\)Norm Davies in the *History of Europe* notes such a famous deed. Moeriscus opened the gates of Syracuse to save his skin, securing by this narrow action an uncertain but crucial Roman victory that changed the course of history (HE 144-147).
If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men inhabit the earth…sovereignty is possible only in imagination, paid for by the price of reality (HC 234-235).

**Irreversibility, Forgiveness, Promising**

Arendt writes that only by action overlapping itself, can its unpredictability and process character be mitigated. Since action and history as we know them are linear, acts are “irreversible” and so while we cannot change the past, we can change the emphasis and valence of any story by forgiveness. “Forgiveness” allows us to break the chain of action and begin anew.

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have know what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving (HC 237).

More precisely:

**The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises.** The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose ‘sins’ hang like Damocles’ sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind would be possible in relationships between men (HC 237—my emphasis).

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16 According to Arendt, at least since Plato, philosophers have tried to avoid the disorganized, chaotic quality of speech and action in a plural political setting. She writes: “Exasperation with the threefold frustration of action—the unpredictability of its outcome, the irreversibility of the process, and the anonymity of its authors—is almost as old as recorded history. It has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents” (HC 220). But to change the modes of speech and action in politics is to substantively change the world itself, the public nature of plurality: “The calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality, which is the condition sine qua non for that space of appearance which is the public realm. Hence the attempt to do away with this plurality is always tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself” (HC 220).
Here Arendt sets out a core bit of evidence that relates to the thesis under consideration. Recall that promises build upon each other, thereby creating the reasonably safe expectation that I may return to the safe space of appearance. Promises make the power that opens the space of appearances for more promises. Here I may not only express who I am but I may continue to deliberate such that the space of appearance, over time, goes from being a clearing, to a wooden meeting hall, to being a metropolis with an almost unlimited number of many kinds of promises sustaining the daily actions of millions. And crucially, I may expect that we can convert the otherwise merciless process character of action into a form of meaningful human continuity that by innovative augmentation refers us both to the past and the future, forgives the past and promises the future. These promises underwrite not only action itself; but they support labor and work as these activities become more sophisticated, but these promises also rely on conditions that increase risk and what Arendt describes as the “frailty of human affairs” (HC 188).

Arendt goes so far as to argue that the ability to make and keep promises is a primary support to our ability to maintain an identity—no promises, no identity. In addition, these must be carried out in a plurality, for forgiveness and promising to oneself cannot be considered action. They “…remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one’s self” (HC 237). The theater of the mere self is without coherence as well.

How does one renew a broken promise or give a second chance? It is forgiveness that allows for promises to innovate upon their historical precedents, however flawed they might have been in retrospect. Oppressive structures that are written in to constitutions, especially as related to strategies of exclusion of possible actors have to be removed. In a sense we forgive
earlier promises and the actors for their partiality, but as far as this forgiveness supports the renewal of better covenants, this speaks to the augmentation that will be discussed below:

Forgiving...is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven (HC 241).

Freedom and revolution need to be animated by a forward looking action, one that is provided by the moment of the power to forgive, and the generosity (justice) which is also the power to include others despite differences, and to innovate new promises. “The freedom contained in Jesus’ teaching of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance, which [e]ncloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end” (HC 241).

Covenant vs. Unpredictability

Arendt evokes Abraham (“of Ur”) to situate the power of promise in our political history. Beginning with basic community and divinely inspired covenants, Abraham set in motion a tradition of covenant and law, leading to legal institutions, and the constitutionality that has shaped Western civilization. This foundation rests on promise making and keeping. Its power stems from a deep ambiguity or uncertainty about being human in a way that is drawn out by speech and action. Once we shift our attention from labor and work, we are on unstable ground. Political freedom means that unpredictability sharply increases. Arendt writes:

Man’s inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon

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17It is tempting to want to modify forgiveness, or complement it, with an older form of generosity: that of hospitality for strangers, in the ancient Greek sense. While forgiveness performs a specific function in removing impediments to further action, hospitality seems to be important for the increasing rate of globalization, and is set against the nativism that would inspire violence, not welcome. Such a hospitality appears to be implicit in Arendt’s entire project when the space of appearance is coupled with Natality.
the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all (HC 244).

Summary of Chapter Two

In Chapter Two, the basic character of Arendt’s political action was explained. We act in speech/deeds and in so doing we appear (disclose) to each other in a qualified way as political actors. Spaces of appearance develop and invite further speech and action. Mutual recognition in such spaces supports the tradition and practice of a culture wherein our particular stories might have meaning and endure, unlike our biological lives, or our handiworks. It is by the process of action in free words, deeds, and crucially promises, that we enjoin an ideal world with each other. However, Arendt’s concepts have invited strong reaction, and have drawn out demands for clarification from a wide range of commentators. Next we turn to some of the controversies that have emerged in response to Arendt’s thought.
CHAPTER THREE

THE SOCIAL POLITICAL DIVIDE AS UNDERSTOOD BY ARENDT AND HER CRITICS

The task of balancing the expressive and deliberative interpretations of Arendt’s political philosophy can be aided by highlighting two controversies found in the literature reacting to Arendt’s thought. These controversies are emblematic of this division. The selective interpretations that three different traditions impose upon Arendt’s philosophy will become apparent in this exercise.

The first controversy is more precisely a complaint offered by the critical theorists and communitarians: Arendt’s sharp division between the social and political is untenable in the modern world. The second controversy relates to an issue voiced primarily by the participatory democrats. This issue has to do with glory reduced to a narrow form of vanity.

The purpose behind the examinations in Chapters Three and Four is to demonstrate that the solutions to these controversies are rooted in the objective fact of promising. This is so because the particulars of the negotiation between what is social or political, as well as the retroactively assigned glory of a speaker, is in fact underwritten by the standing of a person in the plurality in the first case, and the act of expressing a promise within such a plurality, in the second. So: what is their standing and, how do they promise? Starting with Habermas and ending with Villa, each commentator’s selective use of Arendt’s political action will hint at the solution found in the objective fact of promising.
The commentators disputing Arendt’s division of the social and political have in common a concern for expanding the notion of the political to include the social. For the reasons explored below, their focus on the process of deliberation challenges the boundary Arendt sets up. Interestingly, they anticipate a clarifying revision of the social/political divide that Arendt herself hints at in a conference in 1972 in Toronto.

**Arendt’s Division of the Social and Political**

In Chapter Two of the *Human Condition*, Arendt conceptually divorces the social from the political, the private from the public. On her account, political action arises in the social milieu but exceeds it. Political action is an end in itself; this implies that it has a special status. How does such a status work?

Part of the answer for Arendt is that political action constitutes a plurality. It raises us above what she views as social. It invents our particularly human, plural perspective of a world shared in common. Arendt writes:

> All human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men…Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others (HC 23).

Arendt distinguishes political action from other activities (labor, work) but gives it a grounded priority:

> The *vita activa*, human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something, is always rooted in a world of men and of man made things which it never leaves or altogether transcends (HC 22).

It’s important to highlight this point. Political action is still action, and so remains worldly. What distinguishes it isn’t necessarily only its perceived status among other actions, but its special source in those who engage in it. We take up action in response to each other.
Political action is a specifically human problem, so too glory, as will be seen below in Chapter Four. Arendt finds that Aquinas’ rewriting of Aristotle’s “zoon politikon” to “animal socialis” undermined the properly Greek understanding of politics as a special form of action (HC 23).

Arendt writes:

According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (οικία) and the family (HC 24).

For Arendt, the social is bound up with housekeeping, be it in a single home or as welfare, in a nation-state (“…nation-wide administration of housekeeping” HC 28). The household for Arendt represented an ancient anti political structure that rested on the unquestioned authority of the potentially despotic head. Alternately, the political was comprised of words and deeds that brought people out of pre-political violence: “To be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” (HC 26). For Arendt, political action must leave the household behind to escape the fetters of necessity. And yet, the household—the social—is also implicated in Arendt’s concept of natality and is the root of expression. “Who” we will be starts here. All debaters make their entrances in this way. A tension remains in that the expressive side of the dialectic is most obviously manifested in compelling deliberative speeches of political action, but it is rooted in the social.

The Critical Theoretical Engagement with Arendt

If separated from the social, can political action stand alone in the modern world as an end in itself? Or if it is to be meaningful does it need to be explicitly anchored by social ends?
As did Arendt, mid-century critical theoreticians reacted in the moment to political
disasters and social tragedies. Despite the hopes of nascent peoples’ movements and increasing
social awareness, Totalitarianisms such as National Socialism emerged, wrought wars, violence,
and persisted. The concurrently emerging philosophical project that responded to these crises
was critical theory. Critical theory is described as a “radical social” theoretical project, a
“sophisticated form of cultural criticism.” It emerged in prewar Germany in the early 1920s and
was given early shape and direction by Max Horkheimer. Critical theory responded to the crises
that similarly concerned Arendt; it was also dissatisfied with what were perceived as the
contemplative, staid goals of traditional philosophy. Critical theorists sought to examine the
modern conditions related to “true freedom, justice, and happiness of societies.”¹ In part an
inheritance from Marx, a moral philosophical concern aimed at improving social conditions lies
at the base of the project.² Critical theory seeks the sort of anchor that would attach politics to
real world concerns. But critical theory’s early emancipatory goals were frustrated³ by what
Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer warned against in their 1944 work, the *Dialectic of
Enlightenment.*⁴ They argued that forms of social and political domination are rooted in the core
rationality of the Western Enlightenment, and as a consequence, political systems founded upon

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¹ Ingram writes, while describing the historical basis of critical theory, and the seeds of the “dialectic of
enlightenment”: “Limited to instrumental calculation, reason retained its universal validity at the cost of abandoning
its moral content” (Ingram, Simon-Ingram xxii)


³Or perhaps muddied.

⁴“…from the internal standpoint of the subjects who experience life within the system, society still appears
to be something alien and overwhelming—a kind of fate opposed to their desire for self-determination” (Ingram,
Simon-Ingram xxiii).
such rationality are distorted.\textsuperscript{5} Even democracies are marked by violence, slavery, and other forms of domination; such contradictions amplify suffering, especially among out groups.

Second generation Critical Theorist Juergen Habermas further articulates the school’s work, but seeks to ground Critical Theory’s moral basis, desires, and goals in our communicative action with each other. Habermas turns to Arendt and finds a theorist who shares an interest in how our speech might dignify our condition against ever-present violence. This effort is consonant with one of Arendt’s basic concerns in the \textit{Human Condition}: it ostensibly seeks to move political philosophy, more precisely deliberative practices, away from the \textit{vita contemplativa} and towards action.

\textbf{Habermas, Bernstein, and Benhabib: The Social Political Divide and Selective Use of Arendt’s Political Action}

\textbf{Juergen Habermas’ Use of Arendt’s Conception of Action}

Juergen Habermas modifies Arendt’s analysis of praxis to, in part, underwrite a rigorous articulation of his own discourse ethics project, itself deliberative in character.\textsuperscript{6} However he

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5}Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that rationality, denigrated to a means-ends process of utility serving what turn out to be the whims of capitalist market forces and the concomitant required technical administration is perhaps worse than the conditions entailed by religious or mythical culture. The consequent totalitarianism then, has a similar origin: “the mythic origins of reason, understood as an instrument of classification and identification essential to the constitution of nature and self as unified identities, comes back to haunt rationalized society in the form of a new fatalism” (Ingram, Simon-Ingram xxiii). This is not dissimilar to the futility of slavery and obscurity Arendt warns of as the condition of \textit{animal laborans} becomes dominant.

\item \textsuperscript{6}Heather and Stolz argue that Critical Theorists have failed to understand Arendt’s project because they have prioritized philosophy over politics. In Marcuse’s words “‘Practice follows truth, not vice versa.’” Further they note: “The premise of ‘unending discourse’ which Arendt finds to be the \textit{sine qua non} of humanity itself, is incompatible with a rational standard which transcends it or is immanent in it. Habermas has reversed the relationship between speech and the public realm. For Arendt, the intrinsic distortion of speech, the inherent boundlessness of action which accompanies speech, demeans political theory. For Habermas (both in his own theory and in his misinterpretation of Arendt as a political philosopher) an immanent rationality, a primal ontology, in a word, Truth, entails politics. The result of such a reversal is not only the almost fantastic conclusion that Arendt retreats instead to the contract theory of natural law,’ (fn8) but, more serious for Critical Theory generally, an inability to take political theory seriously” (Heather and Stolz 4-5).
\end{itemize}
rejects Arendt’s conception of political action and its core processes as being mired in Rousseauian social contract theory and “natural law”7 (RPW). Habermas specifically takes issue with Arendt’s division of the social and political. Political action is nothing if not driven by social needs, and this requires a communicative basis. For Habermas we seek to agree—through discourse—how exactly to secure and sustain the very real emancipatory goals of the critical theoretical project. There is little justification to arbitrarily divide the social and political.

Habermas couches his critique of Arendt’s political action in terms of power. Power for Arendt describes concerted political action in a plurality, the use of which holds open a space of appearances, for what may be an ongoing chaotic process of indeterminate political action (OV 44). For Habermas, the analysis of power is a way to ground and situate Arendt’s project historically, and to discern how realistic it is, compared with other theories of power.

In his 1977 article Hannah Arendt’s Communication Concept of Power, Habermas describes his development of communicative action on speech, and its basis in Arendt’s division between the means/ends production of poiesis and the speech of praxis. Habermas seeks to insulate the basic processes of his project from the systematic instrumentalization Horkheimer and Adorno feared. For Habermas (and Arendt), speech is the cornerstone of our actual, better form of life, one that resists domination and sustains freedom in the “lifeworld” as against a systems dominated life, evoking the dangers of Adorno and Horkheimer’s “administered” world

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7See James Miller in Melvyn Hill’s Hannah Arendt: Recovery of the Public World for an alternative take and defense of Arendt’s engagement with social contract theory. Arguably, Habermas too quickly, too neatly disposes of Arendt’s reliance on the fact of promising. Miller elsewhere argues that Arendt clarified her position in The Origins of Totalitarianism, she confirms her view concerning the “breakdown in natural law” in Essays in Understanding (accessed at https://www.lrb.co.uk/v17/n20/james-miller/thinking-without-a-banister).
(DE xii). Defense against this over-administered world requires communication, collective political action, and recognition of the common ground that binds us together.

Habermas writes: “Hannah Arendt…understands power as the capacity to agree in uncoerced communication on some community action” (PPP 171). At the outset Habermas’ idea of “Community action” seems to imply a social action, and so a telos emerges, an end toward which action is presumed to be designed. This signals a point of disagreement between Arendt and Habermas. Arendt’s concept of action explicitly rejects that action necessarily should produce agreement, or a necessary consensus aimed at an outcome; for Arendt, action is its own end, it is “atelic.”

Habermas presses: “The fundamental phenomenon of power is not the instrumentalization of another’s will, but the formation of a common will in a communication directed at reaching agreement” (HACCP page 4). But for Arendt, power observed in the ideal space of appearance underwrites a contest that may not clearly identify a prize. The political for Arendt, at this stage, preserves the space of appearance but not necessarily the agreement that may or may not follow.

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8See below: it remains to reconcile “common will” with the even weaker conception of political action as “work of art” (see above p. 5) wherein the minimal condition is universal suffrage and a durable prohibition against exclusion of individuals or groups.

9As noted by Villa in Arendt and Heidegger, Habermas argues that Arendt’s conception of action seeks to create a “general [or common] will” (AH 70).

10Margaret Canovan writes this in response to Habermas’ article on Arendt: “Having had his own (extremely original) thought processes triggered by Arendt, Habermas then proceeded to read his own ideas back into her books….This is a breathtaking piece, for what Habermas does is to translate Arendt’s concepts into his own terminology, read his own theory into them, and then, when forced to recognize that her conclusions are different from his, accuse her of failing to realize the implications of her own theory.” And this: “Habermas requires that we are able to finally settle political debate, and reach agreement. His system is based on this, it is an underlying principle Arendt doesn’t adopt.” “Arendt...saw no reason to suppose that we can settle practical political disputes by purely rational means.” “Instead, human plurality means that action is always a web of intersecting actions with no common goal or definite consummation, always messy and unpredictable business. This she points out, is precisely
Habermas sets up his critique of Arendt by distinguishing between each of three understandings of power (see page 81, as violence, coercion, and systematic domination). In so doing he identifies Arendt’s innovation against older conceptions of power offered by Max Weber and Talcott Parsons. These theories did not distinguish or valorize speech. According to Habermas, “Hannah Arendt…understands power as the ability to agree upon a common course of action in unconstrained communication” (HACCP 4). Arendt might ask if the presumptive expectation of agreement is itself a form of constraint. The space of appearances, or the agora, is satisfied only by the next contest of speech action. Power resides in those who sustain this minimal condition. But Weber and Parsons do not distinguish power from violence, coercion, or systematic domination. Power is a form of collective exchange, a contest of interests, or transactions that swing on advantage and disadvantage. Arendt, recall, narrowly defines power as that which arises among plural equals, who may “act in concert” since action itself must be concerted and is thus always political (OV 44).

Weber and Parsons, as described by Habermas, analyze a very different sort of environment than the one that Arendt describes. Weber and Parsons describe a realistic politics what makes free politics so difficult to achieve, and so fragile when it exists” (Canovan pp. 107-110, A Case of Distorted Communication: A Note on Habermas and Arendt).

See below, page 173 for the example of protests in Daley Plaza, Chicago. Public demonstrations and simple acts of protest serve to collect and display power in a pure sense. They momentarily retake it from governments. Protestors may not agree on policy changes. They may only call a halt to ongoing onerous actions. If protests are persistent, large, and ongoing, policy changes may flow from such an atmosphere of ‘spectacular’ demand. These forms of political action are pure but can be fleeting. A protest in this sense is a public spectacle of disagreement that may or may not evolve into programs of agreement, or consenting action, or administration. But they are a demonstration of the efficacy of Arendt’s power and signal its possible expansion.

From On Violence page 44: “Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.”
wrested from violent conditions, the influence of which lingers. The Greek agora, the more ideal isonomic conditions of Arendt’s politics are consonant with the basis of Habermas’ discursive project. Yet he disagrees with Arendt’s approach, since it does not address real world social concerns. He writes:

I can only recall here the peculiar perspective by which Arendt lets herself be guided: A state relieved of the administrative handling of social affairs, a politics cleansed of all questions of social politics, an institutionalizing of public liberty that is independent of the organization of welfare, a radically democratic formation of consensus that puts a stop to social repression—that is not a conceivable path for any modern society (PPP 178-179).

Habermas raises three concerns about Arendt’s concept of the political. But all of these concerns reside on a practical level that may be distinguished from the ideal form of power Arendt seems to be describing. First, Arendt’s conception is ideal and doesn’t describe the modern state as concerns the strategic deployment or establishment of lasting power: “she screens all strategic elements, as force, out of politics” (HACCP 16). But even politics as the art of compromise, or the negotiation of interests related to irreducible conflicts, must admit to practical conditions. The realities of threats of coercion, or forceful influence, may take place in asymmetric power situations. Are such situations then not political? Habermas insists that we cannot exclude the idea of strategic action from the political. But he acknowledges, “Political institutions live not from force but from recognition” (HACCP 18). The basis of power as recognition is manifested as electoral promises, that when broken, simply delegitimize held power and remove power (over time) from those who think to hold it.

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13John McGowan argues that Arendtian action is better understood as “utopian,” and that this allays some concerns about the social/political divide. McGowan also suggests the “compensatory idealization” of Arendt’s political action finds its source in the “grim reality” to be found in what was described in her Origins of Totalitarianism (HAMP 263-264).
The use of force isn’t necessarily uncommon in modern politics, but as a critique of Arendt’s ideal concept of power, it misses the mark. Arendt is exactly trying to secure politics from such influences, hence her descriptions of the “frailty” of human affairs (HC 188). Whereas Habermas tackles the issue of real world interest group politics, Arendt appears to reserve her concept for pure action in emergent form: the ideal form that might guide or react to a Habermasian practice that could stray into instrumentalization.

Habermas continues: “Let us understand that force exercised through strategic action as the ability to prevent other individuals or groups from realizing their interests. In this sense force has always belonged to the means for acquiring and holding on to positions of legitimate power. In modern states this struggle for political power has even been institutionalized; it thereby became a normal component of the political system” (HACCP 18). This appears to describe the corruption of administration, something Arendt also seeks to guard against. Public reaction that rejects such corruption when discovered, confirms the legitimacy of promising, against feelings of futility described earlier.14 Arendt’s development of political action arguably avoids what Habermas criticizes. As was the case with Marx and Arendt, different problems are here being solved.

Thirdly: “she is unable to grasp structural violence.” Habermas appears to criticize Arendt’s action theory from the perspective of his own interpretation, as is charged by Canovan

14Arendt says this: “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (HC 200).
But he acknowledges Arendt’s position: “Power is a good for which political groups struggle and with which a political leadership manages things; but in a certain way both find this good already at hand; they don’t produce it. This is the impotence of the powerful—they have to borrow their power from the producers of power” (HACCP 21).

Habermas goes on to explain that the political does function with an element of force or violence, and that examples of Arendt’s ideal are rare, governments that function on agreements “about opinions” of constituents. Habermas argues that structural violence is submerged into the political and so blocks communication and contributes to the formation of ideologies, thereby rendering opinions suspect and promises inefficacious. Here it may be argued that the objective fact of promising, insofar as it is founded in recognition, is in fact what it says it is, a promise rather than a manipulation or false promise. Issues of administrative corruption might, to some extent, make Arendt’s argument for her in that political action is augmented by promising in a plain sense, it leaves the complexities of false agreements and the sorting of ideologies to the strength of ongoing agonistic deliberation.

Habermas concludes of Arendt: “She regards as the basis of power the contract between free and equal parties with which they place themselves under mutual obligation. To secure the normative core of an original equivalence between power and freedom, Hannah Arendt finally places more trust in the venerable figure of the contract than her own concept of a praxis, which

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15It’s tempting to suggest that both Kateb and Wolin make a similar mistake. Wolin also judges Sennett by standards, though they are critically fair, seem to miss the point of an imperfect work. Wolin’s student Villa later takes up Sennett’s book.
is grounded in the rationality of practical judgment. She retreats instead to the contract theory of natural law” (HACCP 23-24). 16

Here again, Habermas appears to be reflecting his own theoretical concerns in forcing a choice upon Arendt between the twin poles of contract and praxis—Habermas favors the latter, but overstates Arendt’s commitment to the former. In fact, John McGowan argues that Habermas misses the mark in that “Something that looks a lot like ‘the contract’ is present…in Arendt, and Habermas is right to locate it within the understanding of power. But the Arendtian contract is significantly different from that found in the classic texts—by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant—in the contract tradition, so we should not assimilate her to that tradition too readily” (HAMP 279). But, Habermas may be right. It is not obvious that Arendt can sustain both the praxis of “practical judgment” and “contract” (or constitution as she understands

16John McGowan disagrees with Habermas, who he believes is “dead wrong” in his claim that Arendt surrenders to a tradition of natural right. McGowan argues that Arendt’s use of contract is not reducible to a Rousseauian tradition, among others. See the discussion in “Arendt’s Utopian Vision” p. 278 in Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics Eds. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan. In a discussion McGowan conducts on the topic of how Arendt avoids violence in constituting or founding he explains: “Power is intersubjectively produced through the activities that create a public world. The founding fathers’ words, then, are a gambit, a step into the unknown through which, by eschewing the violent eradication of opposition, they call forth the responses that will engender the political realm they are trying to create. In one sense, to avoid violence the political actor must value form more than content. To want to achieve something in particular, to desire to carry this or that point, would mean placing commitment to some good above commitment to the ongoing form within which commitments are articulated. This fear of all content as disruptive, this elevation of form over matter, makes Arendtian politics empty (the primary and recurrent complaint again her theory of the political) and marks it close connection to Kant’s (and hence a certain modernist) aesthetic. In another sense, however, Arendt’s politics is not empty and formal at all. Her championing of a particular form is in fact the commitment to two very specific goods—relatedness and freedom—for which she argues strenuously and in a variety of ways. For starters, she argues that freedom is possible only within a polis that highlights relatedness. She also argues that these two goods, as distinct from the alleviation of poverty and other desirable ends, are the only goods that the political can successfully deliver. She also tries in various places to convince us that her chosen goods are superior to other possible goods and thus should be granted priority. (These last arguments are offered forthrightly as flying in the face of everything ‘modern,’ which values ‘life’ above all else.) And, as we would expect, she argues that only a commitment to politics in the form she advocates can protect us from violence” (RPW 280).
the term) in her early formulations of political action. This particular question will return in chapter 6 below (page 174). But for the moment it is important to note that Habermas has effectively drawn attention to the ideal, perhaps unrealistic, quality of Arendt’s political action and its space of appearance. He has pointed out the frustrating way that it seems to resist social concerns. The analysis of power shows us that though Arendt has found a possible special status for speech in political action, so far she has not discovered a way to make use of its power in real social settings.

Richard Bernstein’s Use of Arendt’s Conception of Action

Richard Bernstein will be addressed because his engagement with Arendt on the topic of the social and political divide helps to show how a meaningful deliberation needs the expressive side of the dialectic if it is to remain consistent with Arendt’s descriptions of plurality. Bernstein adopts some, but rejects other components in Hannah Arendt’s theory of political action.

Similarly, another difficulty and solution here emerge that are related to the founding of constitutions and the augmentation of such ‘contracts’ via practical judgment, as Ingram describes in his article “Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Trial of (Post) Modernity or the Tale of Two Revolutions.” Echoing Arendt’s concern elsewhere about the paradox of founding, and ‘illegitimate’ revolutions, Ingram frames the conflict as situated between “pre constitutional legitimation” and “pre political legitimation.” How and when do revolutionary, autonomous peoples bind themselves in acts of political founding, and yet maintain their radically free status? Can circularity here be avoided in light of reference to an external higher founding power than what social “contractors” themselves later author—the very power they might rebel against? Ingram argues that the solution may lie in constituting agreements by reference to a “procedural rule” rather than by reference to prescriptions from, for example, “divine,” or external authorities. In some cases the postmodern reading would avoid the burden of such a rule, and dispose of the question of founding by rendering it all illegitimate. Ingram offers a modern “counter” and sides with Arendt, offering that her interpretation “…accounts for the possibility of legal progress, which presupposes the mediation of transcendent ethical principles and contingent political action”. Here, Arendt’s principle of promising is grounding “contingent political action” (NOS 222-223, 225, 232, 244-245).

Bernstein lauds much of what Arendt develops concerning the importance and centrality of political debate, but dismisses the balance of Arendt’s argument on this point as “unstable” (PP 238) and finally “untenable” (PP 246).
Bernstein investigates the deliberative, debating features of action that support the critical theoretical desire to explain the broader notion of praxis. For Bernstein, Arendt’s project is definitively discursive and debating: praxis means that participants speak and reflect together on their social position, they reflect on the depth of their enfranchisement, and on partially completed emancipatory goals. For Bernstein, debate has to be about the participants. For this reason, Arendt’s development of the concept of plurality helps to underwrite Bernstein’s line of thought. He writes:

Arendt opens the space for thinking of politics in a radically different manner. The issue is not merely a verbal or semantic one, for it can have the utmost significance in the practice of social movements (PP 256).

But a tension emerges in what we consider such deliberation to be. Recall from page 2 above that rational deliberation with others may in some sense conform to contemplation—the vita contemplativa rather than the active life Arendt would have it be. Just as philosophers, judges may seclude themselves to arrive at balanced interpretations of facts—deliberation requires some isolation. In this seclusion or vita contemplativa, the conventions of reasoning, or the process of debating the truth, or alternately debating the rightness of norms may become too technical (what Habermas calls the “pragmatic” discourses that occur mainly among administrative elites), or instrumental, and may resist the original interruption that the expressive side of this dialectic can provide. Such expressive interruptions may help Bernstein press his

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19 Bernstein argues strongly that political action, as Arendt has said in her early work, “is debate”; it is “deliberative” (PP 222).

20 Bernstein: She tells us, almost casually, that “debate constitutes the very essence of political life” (from Truth and Politics in BPF 241) “Debate itself is a form of action” (BOR 207).

21 Bernstein writes: “This telos or regulative ideal is implicit in Arendt’s own claim that no person (in principle) is to be excluded from public freedom” (BOR 214).
case vis-á-vis the social political divide. The interruption can take the simple form of the arrival and inclusion of a newcomer.

So: the social demands of justice aren’t always completely served by the high level of theoretical debate among legislators and administrators (technical elites) or discourse provided by the deliberative side of political action that is an end in itself. This is especially true in the case of the requirement of suffrage or inclusion. Such high level debates may have only a symbolic, or minor impact on real world social crises. At the extreme, contemplation can be isolating. On the other end of the dialectic, inclusion in the plurality, the opposite of such isolation, is a particular demand of expression. Recall, expression reveals to us newcomers, a new “who” to the discussion. Meaningful inclusion then asks: what does the newcomer need? This becomes the topic of debate. Bernstein well understands the constitution of a speaker in a plurality but despite the consonance of Arendtian plurality with his goals, and perhaps because of it, Bernstein strongly criticizes Arendt’s separation of the social and political. This is because it appears to frustrate the goals of including precisely those who are socially excluded and marginalized, e.g. who suffer from poverty or a lack of education. Politics as an end in itself would seem to always seek a more complete, or better discourse, or higher level of debate to legitimate its place in action. Arendt fails to explain her position vis-á-vis the requirements Bernstein argues are necessary to ensure a just or realistic participation in a plurality.

In his essay “Rethinking the Social and Political” Bernstein raises several objections: Arendt doesn’t think through the implications of her claim that “…each person must be given the opportunity” to participate in politics (PP 248 citing Crisis in the Republic 233). Bernstein argues that the social question is converted to a primarily political issue insofar as what is needed
is liberation from want in order to conduct the sort of political action Arendt demands. Bernstein writes:

And it is clear that Arendt is not talking about a formal legal right, for to be able to participate in politics means that one has also attained a level of education and liberation from poverty where one can debate, where one can engage in the activity of mutual persuasion that is the distinctive characteristic of politics (PP 249).

However, Bernstein leaves open the possibility, though Arendt doesn’t acknowledge it, that a more “complex” social political relationship may exist in the modern era, and that her failure to fully explain how we separate the social and political doesn’t necessarily take away from her development of the special quality of the political.

In Toronto, during a 1972 conference dedicated to her work, Arendt seeks to defend the social/political divide from Bernstein’s concerns. She does so by suggesting that the divide can be recognized in the activities of experts, as compared to debaters focused on broader political questions. For example: Bernstein recalls that Arendt asserts that there is a “double-face” to problems such as housing. In certain cases it seems obvious to Arendt that issues surrounding housing ought to be debated, for example “racial integration,” and that other issues are to be relegated to administration, or expert resolution (PP 251-253, RPW 309). She says:

But this is not the locus of any real and serious conflict. Rather, only when we come down to the concrete details of what is decent housing, how it is to be financed, how this is to affect the ‘allocation of resources,’ what priority this is to have, how this relates to ‘property rights,’ do we face genuine issues of social/political conflict (PP 253).

Bernstein reacts:

So insofar as Arendt talks as if there is a relatively clear distinction for separating the social from the political, her claims are not only misleading but already reflect a hidden political judgment—which like all political judgments should be brought out into the open daylight and be debated” (PP 252-253).
Bernstein charges Arendt with inconsistency (as seen in her quote just above) in that she has often been highly critical of social scientists (experts) but would seem to rely on them to resolve the issues of administration, issues that do not rise to the level of political debate but are merely issues of resource distribution and management. Bernstein notes that a “neat division” giving over certain issues to experts is in reality “specious and dangerous” since expert opinion has been shown to be sometimes misguided, as well as sometimes misleading due to known or unknown prejudices, and hidden ideological commitments (PP 254).

Bernstein further insists: “social liberation is not simply a necessary condition for the possibility of political freedom, but the fate of both are inextricably related to each other” (PP 256). Bernstein believes that for Arendt to “give everyone an opportunity to participate” entails that the social and the political are interrelated since everyone who participates “must have the material means of life…” to do so (PP 249).

The following quote from Bernstein emphasizes that Arendt may have missed the point of her own line of thought:

“Promise” and “hope” are ultimately grounded in the human condition. But for Arendt it is this grounding of promise and hope that gives such poignancy to her tragic vision…The most ominous threat of the modern age is that we may well become beings for whom praxis itself my simply whither away (PP 259).

Bernstein’s concern that praxis might “whither” is a real concern. Arendt has provided resources that would guard against deliberation tending towards contemplation, but she has not integrated them into a coherent statement about political action.

In the conference referenced earlier, Arendt gives Bernstein a hint about how this might work.
Arendt’s Toronto Conference 1972

“Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt” is the title Melvyn Hill gives to his edited transcripts of Arendt’s participation with several interlocutors at a conference on her work in Toronto in 1972 (RPW 301).

Among the revelations Arendt gives us during this conference, two are important to highlight:

1. What is political is variable.

2. The political is an interdependent form of action.

At this conference, Richard Bernstein gives among his sharpest critiques of Arendt’s insistence on the separation of the social and political as noted above. As noted above, Arendt herself has been charged with a failure to specify this topic. However, this time Arendt says:

Life changes constantly, and things are constantly there that want to be talked about. At all times people living together will have affairs that belong in the realm of the public—‘are worthy to be talked about in public.’ What these matters are at any historical moment is probably utterly different. For instance, the great cathedrals were the public spaces of the Middle Ages. The town halls came later. And there perhaps they had to talk about a matter which is not without any interest either: the question of God. So what becomes public at every given period seems to me utterly different (RPW 316).

This bears repeating: “So what becomes public at every given period seems to me to be utterly different!” (RPW 316).

Arendt here shifts the emphasis from a sharp division between what is social or political to conventionalizing a form of political action by making a shared decision about its publicity. 22

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22 An added implication of Arendt’s statement is that her work isn’t necessarily retrospectively romantic and isn’t mired in a declining Greek paradigm. Breezily, she seems to say of the social political divide “whatever” your concern may by, so too “whenever” your concern may arise, as long as it is made public. “All actions relating to the right of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity” See Kant’s Perpetual Peace Appendix II.
And the character of the ‘objective fact of promising’ is nothing if it is not public. Our promises are constituting of “who” we are, this is true because they are revealed, publicized to a plurality of which we are a recognized member. This issue will arise again in Chapter Six.

Seyla Benhabib’s Use of Arendt’s Concept of Political Action

Seyla Benhabib’s theory recalls and makes selective use of Arendt’s work, as she advances her own project. Among her goals is to expand an *effective* plurality in ways that are animated by the emancipatory goals of the critical theoretical project. Benhabib focuses largely on the deliberative side of Arendtian action, though here, as above with Bernstein, we will also be concerned with expression.

For the sake of this argument, coming to terms with Benhabib’s use of Arendt’s political action will do two things. It will continue to address the real world contradictions Benhabib

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23 Benhabib writes: “The nerve of my reformulation of the universalist tradition in ethics is this construction of the ‘moral point of view’ along the model of a moral conversation, exercising the art of ‘enlarged thinking’” (SS 9).

24 According to Benhabib, the difference between “republican or civic virtue” and “participatory democracy” and Critical Theory is that civic virtue resists contemporary institutions, such as the market. Participatory democracy too narrowly—historically speaking—restricts, or tolerates the restriction of enfranchisement. Critical theory widens participation and opens the agenda for discussion: “The exclusive focus on political participation is shifted toward a more inclusively understood concept of discursive will formation” (HPS 86).

25 Arguably, Benhabib is close to the participatory democratic position, if it is understood as an agonism that doesn’t require agreement (Habermas). She writes: “The chief difference between my proposal and Habermas’s is that for him [universalizability] “U” has the effect of guaranteeing consensus” (SS 37). “Consent is a misleading term for capturing the core idea behind communicative ethics: namely the processual generation of reasonable agreement about moral principles via an open-ended moral conversation” (SS 37). “…when we shift the burden of the moral test in communicative ethics from consensus to the idea of and ongoing moral conversation, we begin to ask not what all would or could agree to as a result of practical discourses to be morally permissible or impermissible, but what would be allowed and perhaps even necessary from the standpoint of continuing and sustaining the practice of the moral conversation among us. The emphasis now is less on rational agreement, but more on sustaining those normative practices and moral relationships within which reasoned agreement *as a way of life* can flourish and continue” (SS 38).
identifies in Arendt’s social political division, as was done with Habermas and Bernstein. Next, the expressive side of the dialectic will be shown to be implicit in Benhabib’s work, and so support is found for reconciling expression and deliberation. As a consequence, the issue of publicity emerges and this foreshadows chapter 6, and a way to preserve the special status of the political.26

To begin, Benhabib supports but reacts to Habermas’ communicative rationality, arguing that such rationality has minimally to be paired with a moral component, one that is universal and plural. It is self-improving by virtue of being “reflexive” among its practitioners.27 So, in her engagement with Arendt’s deliberative political action, Benhabib will overall plead for an “historically self-conscious universalism” one that has built in a way to anchor the universal self to an active rather than contemplative form of deliberation (SS 30).

However, Benhabib takes aim at Arendt’s model insofar as it makes sharp separations between the social and political and would seem even to determine the specific locations and topics for deliberation. Benhabib will argue that there are other kinds of spaces for appearance; spaces that better encompass the plurality. In her opinion, an “associational” space arises as people act “in concert” wherever they may be. Freedom emerges, and their power becomes apparent. Deliberation and debate occur in this space, but also it may occur in private homes

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26This will be related to the publicity of aesthetic and political judgment.

27Benhabib writes: “Thus at one level the intuitive idea behind the norms of universal respect is ancient and corresponds to the ‘golden rule’ of the tradition—‘Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.’ Universalizability enjoins us to reverse perspectives among members of a ‘moral community’ and judge from the point of view of the other(s)” (SS 32).
(“household”), or on the street, wherever action emerges. Benhabib collapses the distinction between the expressive (agonistic) and the deliberative component, while she expands the deliberative side of the dialectic. Key to Benhabib’s stated distinction is that the agonistic is appropriate to the Ancient Greek model of deliberation while the associational is modern.

“[M]oral and political homogeneity and the lack of anonymity…” (SS 32) functioned in Greece, while according to Benhabib:

With the entry of every new group into the public space of politics after the French and American Revolutions, the scope of the public gets extended. The emancipation of workers make property relations into a public political issue; the emancipation of women has meant that the family and the so called private sphere became political issues; the attainment of rights by nonwhite and non-Christian peoples has put cultural questions of collective self and other representations on the public agenda. Not only is it the “lost treasure” of revolutions that eventually all can partake in public life, but also equally, when freedom emerges from action in concert, there can be no agenda to predefine the topic of public conversation. The struggle over what gets included in the public agenda is itself a struggle for justice and freedom. The distinction between the social and the political makes no sense in the modern world, not because the economy has become the quintessentially public, as Hannah Arendt thought, but primarily because the struggle to make something public is a struggle for justice (HPS 79 my emphasis)29, 30

28SB writes in “Models of Public Space”: “The distinction between the ‘agonal’ and the ‘associational’ models corresponds to the Greek as opposed to the modern experience of politics. The agonal space of the polis was made possible by a morally homogenous and politically egalitarian, but exclusive community…” (SS 92).

29Benhabib’s conclusion “…the struggle to make something public is a struggle for justice” can be unpacked in the following way: The fulsome polity, if it is consistent with Arendt’s description and development does not have a front entrance for citizens and a side entrance for slaves. The demand by protestors in Ferguson, MO, the demand by Water Protectors at Standing Rock, was for political recognition the complete character of which may be understood as just, by future spectators. Benhabib is right to believe the inclusion in the public realm is required. If I’m not at the table, I may announce to those excluding me that I demand some of the bread at the table. Those not included must first be given a place at the table, the simple administrative sharing of bread is what tables are for, this is a secondary consideration compared to the clearing of a space of appearances wherein a table might be set that includes all comers. (See Villa AH for related discussion of justice pp. 6-7).

30See also: Benhabib in The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt in an analysis of Arendt’s division of the social and political, where she clarifies her concern vis-à-vis justice: “The constitution of a public space always involves a claim to the generalizability of the demands, needs, and interests for which one is fighting. In struggling for the eight-hour working day, or against child labor, or for universal health insurance, one is also struggling for justice, for interests that we as a political community have in common” (RMHA 145).
Consonant with Benhabib’s desire to expand suffrage for political action, the expressive side of the dialectic here under consideration demands that the struggle for a politics that achieves justice is in the first case concerned with “who” to recognize, who to make public.\(^{31}\) This entails, by means of subsequent deliberation, “what” to make public. In the first instance, the entrance of a newcomer might interrupt deliberation, in a way bringing it back to earth. This interruption has the power to redirect deliberation, make it active, and shake it free of any contemplative hindrances. The space of appearances admits all comers, if in fact, the basis of promising is fully acknowledged. The question is: to establish the **standing** necessary to conduct a review of the conditions that may or may not be rendered just. Arendt has, throughout her work, established conceptual divisions that allow us to view our situation; unfortunately she has not, as Benhabib notes throughout her own work, satisfied a process by which we achieve the universal suffrage that would follow recognition that would “justify” promising before the fact, and so make newcomers welcome.\(^{32}\)

Benhabib sharply criticizes what she calls Arendt’s “phenomenological essentialism.” She writes: “In accordance with essentialist assumptions, ‘public space’ is defined either as that space in which only a certain **type of activity**, namely action as opposed to work or labor, takes place, or is delimited from other social spheres by reference to the substantive content of the public dialogue” (SS 81). Benhabib insists that one cannot divide labor from work from action simply because the power relations that obtain that would “set quotas” in a factory, and the

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\(^{31}\)See the above discussion on the obscurity of slavery.

\(^{32}\)Canovan says of Arendt: “She says over and over again that “men, not Man, inhabit the world” and follows with a footnote naming this as a core expression of Arendt’s thought. That matters here because to shatter our structures of generality is to set up Benhabib’s work in advance, to invite inclusion for all, and to reject the frameworks that Benhabib herself also rejects.
“intricate” strategies of distribution of warheads atop missiles are for her an obvious public concern. Benhabib accepts her own associational reading of Arendt as consonant with Arendt’s project but argues that Arendt must abandon essentialism, as well as “agenda” setting for political speech.

What is important here is not so much what public discourse is about as the way in which this discourse takes place: force and violence destroy the specificity of public discourse by introducing the dumb language of physical superiority and constraint and by silencing the voice of persuasion and conviction. Only power is generated by public discourse and is sustained by it. From the standpoint of this procedural model, neither the distinction between the social and the political nor the distinction among work, labor, and action are that relevant. At stake are the reflexive questioning of issues by all those affected by their foreseeable consequences and the recognition of their right to do so (HPS 80-81).

But Arendt is proposing we must think what we do, and if we employ Arendt’s divisions in a qualified way this might actually enhance the reflexive questioning Benhabib endorses. This is suggested since we are making an object of our different roles in the conduct of our lives (as “labor” laboring, “work” working, etc…). In critiquing Arendt’s essentialism, Benhabib seems to topically argue that Arendt makes laborers into labor (see the discussion of Marx and Arendt above page 42, footnote 38). As Benhabib herself notes, Arendt is hardly unfamiliar with labor disputes and the capacity of a chip maker, carpenter, or welder to act in political concert on their own behalf. Such a person is not limited to one role.

Benhabib elsewhere writes:

Arendt’s attempt to separate the political from the economic via an ontological divide between freedom and necessity is, as I have argued, futile and implausible. The realm of necessity is permeated through and through by power relations: power over the distribution of labor, or resources, over authority, and so on. There is no neutral and nonpolitical organization of the economic; all economy is political economy” (RMHA 158).
But here too, cannot Arendt’s so-called essentialism in this qualified sense pertain primarily to our roles? The chip maker, carpenter and welder are probably poor. But their capacity to imagine themselves as political actors is their way out of their economic bind. The chip maker must in fact imagine herself not only as a worker but as a political actor in order to capture the power Benhabib believes Arendt cuts us off from by so called essential divisions.

Does such a division hold open the possibility of an inclusive space of appearance? Does our specific attention to political action—its special status—help us to focus on sustaining our most general promises to each other? If as Dana Villa argues below, the political requires a “constitutional referent” then the agenda may be sufficiently broad. Arendt allowed that what is political may change, see above page 91-92, yet wants to defend politics as distinct, what Villa will call an “autonomous political sphere” (see Chapter 6 below).

Arendt herself causes multiple problems that confuse the matter of where political action takes place, and also in what it consists. But she arguably leaves open the possibility that the “power relations” Benhabib is rightly concerned about may be countered so long as we are able to consistently identify and openly assess our most basic promises, as well as those subsidiary promises that flow from them. Following Benhabib, a key to this will be who and what to make public.

**Michael Sandel’s Communitarian Engagement with Arendt**

In the case of communitarianism, a difficulty arises in how Arendt’s social political division is understood in light of the wider debate between civic republicans and liberals. Historically, liberalism is driven by a desire for expanded freedom and self-determination (LLJ 243/5004). In Arendt, freedom is manifested in a plurality wherein political actors make and
keep promises. Power is created, expanded, and sustained in this way. These promises grow into constitutions that are in turn supported by legal frameworks and norms. The task here is to discover how the question of promising-making and promise-keeping emerges in the communitarian project, and how this school’s reaction to Arendt’s division of the political and social plays out.

Communitarians like Michael Sandel make claims upon Arendt’s concept of political action in their debate with liberalism (AH 6-7). In brief, communitarians reject what they believe to be the empty basis of the universal subject philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (“transcendental unity of apperception”) and John Rawls (“veil of ignorance”) would model rational subjects on, since such a rights bearing model is necessarily detached from worldly concerns and contingencies (LLJ 92/5004). Instead of this speculative framework of rights, communitarians argue that we necessarily seek goods, the highest of which is the formative good of the political life of the community. They are generally attracted to Arendt’s development of the self-ruling self, or selves as a group engaged in concerted political action, and thus identifying and informing each other (LLJ 1367/5004). Such a group expands freedom in the community all the while constituting themselves in their shared words and deeds that arise in, and are thought to reflect, the good ends of the community (LLJ 2960/5004, AH 6-7).

Plurality or Community?

As Villa will point out there is a concern about the status of the plurality in such a community due to the way the standing of political actors is articulated. Villa writes:

For Aristotle, then, citizens participate, but they do so either by commanding or obeying; they are equal but never all at once; they deliberate, but not about the most important things; they are finally, not one, but neither can they be said to constitute a genuine plurality. The Aristotelian notion that the members of the community are identified by
the ends they share imposes a substantive and severe restriction on deliberative speech. It renders speech technical in the last instance: only [the] means to the community’s ends, but never those ends themselves, are debated” (AH 51-52).

The Status of Debatable Ends is Worldly for Arendt

Villa’s reaction to the communitarian use of Arendt’s political action counts on how he develops an understanding of Arendt’s appropriation of Aristotle’s conception of praxis, and her rejection of Aristotle’s teleology—Arendt strongly rejects the prioritization of the end goal of contemplation to be found in Book X of the Nicomachean Ethics. According to Villa since Arendt rejects the telos of contemplation, she can radically reimagine Aristotle’s praxis as distinct from poiesis. She activates it as speech and reshapes it to accommodate worldly contingency and freedom, rather than any contemplative, telocratic or pre-determined scheme.

Villa explains that as Arendt leaves behind Aristotle and Hegel, she embraces a Kantian distinction between reason and intellect (Verstand) (AH 50). He writes:

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this distinction for Arendt, in her eyes the primary accomplishment of Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy was the drawing of a rigorous distinction between matters of truth or cognition, on the one hand, and matters of meaning or practical import, on the other (AH 50).

For Arendt, certain questions will remain forever out of reason’s reach, and so access to the knowledge necessary to design an intelligible end that would fully satisfy such questions is foreclosed. But practical reason is now worldly: it is in service to human meaning in a way that is original, free and moreover it must determine its own ends (AH 49-50).

How does the Community Accomplish its Ends Using Arendtian Resources?

In view of this development, how does the communitarian explain their ends? What is the status of the good life of the community in comparison to the figure of the universal rights bearing individual? What claims do communitarians make upon Arendt’s specific concepts?
It appears that the communitarian argument that favors community goods over the rights of an “unencumbered self” (LLJ 173/5004) incompletely appropriates what Arendt describes as a “positive system of power” (AH 37, citing CR 142ff) with respect to the expansion of freedom. If this is paired with Arendt’s concept that we are “equal in our distinction” (HC 175) the difficulty should come into view. But first it will be helpful to more closely examine some of Michael Sandel’s specifications of the communitarian position to see how this occurs.

Sandel’s Position

In a 1996 interview with the Harvard Review Michael Sandel discusses some of the underlying controversies between liberalism and communitarianism. For Sandel, Arendt’s attachment to Aristotle’s view that the political life is central is of signal importance. Broadly speaking, Sandel argues that the Kantian (or Rawlsian) justification for giving priority to rights over goods is vulnerable to a criticism that such a view creates a rights-bearing self (“unencumbered self”) who lacks access to moral or political underpinnings that can ground such a person in ways that “…may not flow from choice.” The liberal or Kantian view in fact undercuts rights, and even the universalist rationale or justification that would support them. In addition, Sandel argues that secular reason-based liberal institutions must not exclude robust political participation of “…particular moral and religious conceptions,” nor burden the free exercise of those conceptions (HRP 66). Sandel will take this a step further and offer that religious liberty ought to be affirmatively protected in order that it may contribute to the sort of virtuous formation necessary to support a polity (see LLJ 111/5004).

According to Sandel, the underlying issue is less the debate about goods and rights than how such goods and rights are justified in practice, how they are ultimately balanced. Sandel
rejects both the perceived majoritarianism and moral relativism attributed to communitarianism and prefers instead to defend the civic republican tradition that is rooted in a robust capacity for “self-rule” on the part of citizens. Such a capacity is to be cultivated; Sandel refers to “soul craft” or “character formation” and contrasts this with an ostensibly neutral process by which liberalism avoids selecting virtues in favor of a “scheme of rights within which people can choose their own ends, for themselves” (HRP 67). Sandel says:

The justification for rights in the republican conception is bound up with a certain end or goal, namely the end of shaping citizens who will be capable of sharing in self-government. So the right to free speech in the republican tradition, draws its justification from the importance of enabling citizens to engage in political deliberation about the proper ends of the political community. The role of rights, I should add, is of great importance in the republican tradition. It’s not that the liberal tradition favors rights and the republican tradition opposes rights, but the justifications are different (HRP 68).

The Implications of Sandel’s Position

To unpack this: the deliberative process so far offered by Arendt would seem to provide for an open agora, a guaranteed safe space of appearances wherein debaters and newcomers might find the chance to deliberate on political topics that are meaningful, and that especially hold open the chance for ever renewing debate about such topics. As has been established, critical theorists were concerned that such debate must not drift into instrumentalism and it must address the social, especially matters of exclusion and inclusion. It must genuinely welcome newcomers, and the content of the political might change with time. It also may change due to

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33See LLJ 2998: “On this strong view, to say that the members of a society are bound by a sense of community is not simply to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments and pursue communitarian aims, but rather that they conceive their identity – the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations – as defined to some extent by the community of which they are a part. For them, community describes not just what they have as fellow citizens but also what they are, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity. In contrast to the instrumental and sentimental conceptions of community, we might describe this strong view as the constitutive conception” (LLJ 3007-3012).
how acknowledging that publicized content, as publicized, serves to create meaning for the plurality. Taken together, critical theorists and the Arendt of 1972 Toronto have gone some distance towards understanding the agora both as wider and more level—the requirement for entry turns out to be less restrictive. The topics are more diverse.

But Sandel has raised the issue of “moral or political underpinnings” that are somehow made unavailable to a member of the community if it is the case that they are in the community understood as a universal bearer of rights. If this complaint can be made to stand, it is this universal comportment itself that would seem to blind the community member from seeing the very means (underpinnings) by which they might be “crafted” or “formed” such that they will better be able to participate in Arendt’s “self-rule.” It follows that this “self-rule,” practiced in concert with others doing the same, would go towards creating the sorts of citizens who are prepared to sustain the community, the polity as such, to seek its political flourishing and the good that comes of it.

But Arendt’s positive system of power, the deliberative political action flowing from the broad liberal desire for self-determination and an expanding freedom, is, in Arendt’s view a process that has itself its own end. Distinct but equal members would seem to never run out of

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34Recall from the introduction that the polity seeks its own end as a qualified deliberating ‘work of art’ but for this reason remains open ended with respect to goods. This may address Sandel’s concern about intrinsic as compared to instrumental deliberation. For Sandel, Arendt, following Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, insists that to practice self-rule is a central part of fulfilling our best human capacity, and is a good in and of itself. Further, Sandel says that such participation in self-rule cultivates “independent judgment,” deliberative capacity towards the ends of a polity, and encourages forms of what Arendt would call an “enlarged mentality” that would set aside personal aims for the sake of the aims of the group. Political action is an “intrinsic good” for this reason (HRP 69). Importantly Sandel asks: “…why self government matters: does it matter only instrumentally, or also intrinsically? The reason that I hesitate in answering the question is that one can imagine ways of life that don’t seem explicitly political but do call for capacities of deliberation and judgment and the taking of responsibility for common projects as well as for individual ones that cultivate many of the virtues that the republican tradition emphasizes. And it may sometimes be unclear whether those ways of life really count as political or not. For example, a great many people may not be particularly involved in electoral politics or in the activities of the national government--and in that sense
newcomers since they seek to confer equality on distinction in order to expand freedom. Does such freedom extend to a self? Is Sandel’s use of self-rule contradictory? The emphasis is on how the self affirmatively “formed” or “crafted” in the pattern of the community, is a member of the community. This works against what Arendt arguably intended by including in the plurality an equal self-ruler who might offer a deliberative matter that undermines community goods.

Does the communitarian reading of Arendt use her resources to limit deliberation by cutting off expression when its interruptions are too highly original and seem to threaten the underlying basis of the good of the community as an end in itself? A plurality is the outcome of a deliberative expressive process that happens when political action is an end in itself. So, is a community that conforms to Sandel’s description a genuine plurality? Villa would say no because political action according to that description aims at creating and sustaining a distinctive telos: the community’s political identity as an instantiation of publicly valued goods (AH 51).

**Qualified Standing and Qualified Promising**

Overall it appears that the deliberative political actors in Sandel’s formulation have a standing that is qualified by the way it is instrumentalized in favor of the community’s “intrinsic” good, rather than as its own end, enjoining them rather as fully self-ruling debaters in an open ended plurality. The instituting fact of promising then is also qualified since it refers in their lives may not involve political activity or engagement. And yet they might be involved and engaged in civic activities, whether in neighborhoods, or schools, or congregations, or unions, or workplaces, or in social movements” (HRP 69).

35And yet, Sandel goes on to accept that if these engagements can be understood as political in an expansive way, then politics remains central to a “good life” is an “intrinsic good” (HRP 69). Sandel thus overrides Arendt’s social political divide, as does she in Toronto by expanding the definition of what is considered to be political. Sandel concludes: “To resolve competing interpretations of what counts as respecting liberal rights, one may be forced back, implicitly or explicitly, into competing accounts of the good” (HRP 73). This good may be supported either politically or socially.
this case not only to a “constitutional referent,” to borrow Villa’s phrase, but to the unpublicized “moral and political underpinnings” that crucially contribute to the ends of the community. For this reason their standing is constrained and their promises refer to the ends designed by the community.

**Summary of Chapter Three**

By investigating and extending Arendt’s *praxis*, understood here as the deliberative component of Arendt’s political action, Habermas, Bernstein, and Benhabib have drawn out a variety of contradictions made visible by Arendt’s insistence on a sharp social political divide. In Arendt’s political action, deliberation without expression remains problematic. To recap: Habermas drew our attention to the frustrating ideal nature of Arendtian action as evinced by the sharp division between the social and the political. Bernstein confirmed this, insisting on the inclusion of newcomers, and in this hinted at the expressive side of the dialectic that fulfills the plurality. But for this, Arendt’s praxis may “wither,” in Bernstein’s view. In Toronto, Arendt herself unexpectedly opens the way to allowing social concerns to be understood as political, publicly debatable issues. Seyla Benhabib contested the social political divide in a way that further specified both Habermas’ and Bernstein’s concerns, and implicitly set off a discussion of how the standing of a political actor might be further explored in Chapter Six. Michael Sandel also rejects Arendt’s social political divide. Despite his argument that the communitarian position is made more flexible by integrating the social and political, serious questions emerge about the standing of what might be termed a community actor, rather than a political actor.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE CONCEPT OF GLORY AS UNDERSTOOD BY ARENDT AND HER CRITICS;

EXAMINING EXPRESSION

The purpose of examining the way participatory democrats have taken up the expressive side of Arendt’s political action is to specify how they have interpreted glory in the underlying instantiation of the political actor. The clearest statement Arendt makes on this is found in the *Human Condition*:

> This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness…Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm. Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others (HC 180).

This political actor is Arendt’s ‘newcomer,’ (HC 9) and she is at the base of expression. But, a concern arises in that expression can also become not only virtuosity and display, but that such display becomes a caricature, it becomes a vainglorious achievement in ways that block our understanding of the requirement of political instantiation. Following this line of thought will

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1Again for emphasis from the *Human Condition*: “Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain an answer to the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’ This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and deeds…Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor the doer of deeds is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words” (HC 158).

2Recall from the introduction that the way to get glory is in the display of action in the political realm. This is manifested in compelling words and deeds. It is to excel in the moment, in an activity that is an end in itself. Arendt illustrates this by referencing Machiavelli. In her essay “What is Freedom,” (BPF 143) Arendt writes:
help us integrate expression with deliberation by demonstrating the basis for the objective fact of promising. In Chapter Three, we were concerned with how deliberation articulated a standing for a political actor in light of Arendt’s social political/divide. Here we will be concerned that instantiation forms an original promise that grounds such an actor in that deliberative articulation. This will also highlight the fact that expression, for Arendt, makes newcomers of us all, throughout the process of political action.

So: at the core of the participatory democratic interpretation of Arendt’s conception of political action is the idea of expression. The power of the idea of expression resides in ‘showing up’ and demanding recognition. That demand functions as an implicit political promise. Arendt’s work has influenced participatory democrats to articulate a project that seeks to reactivate the ancient polis in contemporary institutional frameworks by waking people up to their democratic opportunities and responsibilities. However, since antiquity, political representation by a few actors on behalf of many has created a distance between people and their institutions.

Glory also describes the attention and focus of others, the light directed upon our immediate political actions and stories “worth remembering” in the sweep of human endeavor. Glory crowns the compelling principles earlier described, such as freedom, courage, honor,

“Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of virtu, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortuna. Its meaning is best rendered by “virtuosity,” that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making) where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in the end product which outlasts the activity and becomes independent of it. The virtuoso-ship of Machiavelli’s virtu somehow reminds us of the fact, although Machiavelli hardly knew it, that the Greeks always used such metaphors as flute playing, dancing, healing and sea-faring to distinguish political action from other activities, that is they drew their analogies from those acts in which virtuosity of performance is decisive” (BPF 153, see also HC 206-207).
dignity, with a quality that illuminates what spectators might view (HC 77, 180). While we are concerned with exciting stories, we are here concerned chiefly with compelling entrances and participation.

Advancing upon the traditional liberal position, participatory democrats advocate for more direct forms of “strong” democracy against forms of representative democracy may displace participants from direct political action. They advocate for the kinds of participation that augment representation, and sometimes strong forms of agonism that are “self contained.”

For this to work the concept of glory is amplified but sometimes misunderstood in its narrow form as vanity, an overemphasis is placed on some expressions that can frustrate the requirements of deliberation and cause such expression to miss the mark.

**Benjamin Barber’s Use of Arendt’s Conception of Action**

In his 1984 book *Strong Democracy*, Benjamin Barber critiques liberal democracy by selective use of Hannah Arendt’s conception of political action. Though he adopts and extends her arguments related to agonistic debate, he charges Arendt with republican elitism. He resists

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3It is outside the scope of this project to comment extensively on George Kateb’s and Sheldon Wolin’s different critiques of Arendt. But in defense of the liberal project and more precisely representative democracy, George Kateb argues that Arendt must acknowledge the extent to which representative democracy supports her own object and criticism; it also is the seed for instances of revolutionary political action, despite its flaws (Kateb 21). In a demand for a realistic assessment: Kateb argues one cannot ignore or discount representative democracy in the modern era, as he argues Arendt does, because it lacks “the political”, without thereby failing to “sufficiently” address what amounts to the modern reality of its place as the *de facto* political system (Kateb 20). Kateb seeks to force Arendt to acknowledge that representative democracy is at least “second best” and accept it as a realist form of politics with a portion of the political, at a minimum. This is not unlike Wolin’s analysis in his chapter on the decline of liberalism in *Politics and Vision*, wherein he finally argues that the “sorilities of philosophy” and the anxieties of society result in a conflation of self-interest and moral purpose leading to an atomistic but self-serving political society which Arendt would lament. Kateb notes of representative democracy that “[t]he misfortune is that representative democracy, in its unyielding actuality, is very little more than the consecration of selfishness and self-regardingness” (Kateb 26). “The cunning of the theory of consent is that it hides existential subjection”...“All that furious activity comes from a dead core.” Kateb’s argument is that the economic instead *expresses* the political, rather than ruin it, as Arendt’s argument insists (Kateb 38).
what he calls the “unitary theory of public life that advocates ancient republicanism” (SD 118).
Overall, however, it appears Barber will focus on raising up the political actor, exhorting a stronger kind of participation, and a greater particular expression that improves upon liberalism’s defense of the general right of enfranchisement. The reason to examine Barber’s philosophy in particular is that it will help to show that an individual person, understood as a “who,” is revealed (in a basic form of glory), and can be a promisor. Such a political promisor goes towards making up the plurality that becomes a polity. But Barber seeks a participation that isn’t constrained by what he views as Arendt’s nostalgic limitations. As will be shown, his project closely echoes Arendt’s. In all, Barber will help to carve out space for newcomers; his ‘strong democracy’ is supportive of particular persons as political actors who embody promising in the form of democratic participation.

Barber argues that liberal democracy prioritizes the individual over the group and in so doing “offers a politics that justifies individual rights” rather than sustaining individuals acting “in concert,” to borrow Arendt’s phrase. Barber talks about three “dispositions…anarchist, realist, and minimalist.” Each of these comportments approaches conflict differently, but on Barber’s account, they avoid the sort of conflict that would enhance participation; they deflect the sort of agonism Arendt finds crucial to political action as such. Barber argues that each of these will separately “deny,” “repress,” or merely “tolerate” conflict. For this reason they appear to sidestep the political. Notably, the anarchist is the opposite of the newcomer in that what is sought is not recognition into a plurality, but a kind of libertarian assertive individualism. Of the anarchist disposition Barber writes: “Wedded to an absolutist conception of individual rights, this disposition is implacably hostile to political power—and above all to democratic political
power, which because it is more ‘legitimate’ is less resistible” (SD 6). Along the same lines, continuing his argument for a greater agonism, Barber observes: “John Stuart Mill’s caution that all restraint, qua restraint, is an evil [that] permeates liberal political theory and disposes it to regard politics less as the art of using power than as the art of controlling and containing power” (SD 6).

Barber compares the “anarchist” interpretation of liberalism to a realist version that emphasizes the “art of power” and along with it a variety of styles of coercion set within Hobbes’s zero sum game. Advantage, success and failure are got on the rise and fall of each individual’s interest. “What the realists discovered, with Machiavelli, is that fear is self-interest’s secret social servant.” In this paradigm, promise is rendered a utility: “…Nor is succor to be found in pacts of mutual respect, in contracts promising self-restraint, or in covenants pledging obedience to the prudential rules of enlightened self-interest” (Hobbes’s ‘Laws of Nature’ SD 12). Promising needs safe ground. It has to land in a plural situation that not only recognizes who is speaking, who is making such a basic promise, but also recognizes their political right to promise, so that they can gain entry into a functional political setting, contradistinguished from what Hobbes describes.

Barber evokes Arendt: “But it has remained true that from its inception in early social contract theory, liberal democracy has considered both man and law as abstractions” (SD 23). Rejecting the loss of participation such abstractions seem to entail, Barber continues to endorse strong participation. But he misses a point of agreement with Arendt. He sees nostalgia for the ancient Greek polis—arguably itself a caricature of glory—where he might have noticed Arendt’s argument in favor of direct action:
We must do so [participate] too without falling victim to either the nostalgia for ancient, small-scale republics that has made so many communitarian theories seem irrelevant to modern life or to the taste for monolithic collectivism that can turn large scale direct democracy into plebiscitary tyranny (SD 25).

Barber recapitulates: “Strong democracy is consonant with—indeed it depends upon—the politics of conflict, the sociology of pluralism, and the separation of private and public realms of action” (SD 117).

Despite apparent similarities, Barber continues to distinguish himself from Arendt. He writes: “The theory of strong democracy does not quite envision politics in the ancient sense of a ‘way of life,’ and is explicitly hostile to the still more extravagant claim that politics is the way of life. It has no share in the republican nostalgia of such commentators as Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss” (SD 118). Here Barber disposes of Arendt by referencing Samuel Johnson: “How small of all that human hearts endure/That part which laws or kings can cause or cure” (SD 118).

According to Barber,

the theory of strong democracy offers a different and more vigorous response: it envisions politics not as a way of life but as a way of living—as namely, the way that human beings with variable but malleable natures and with competing but overlapping interests can contrive to live together communally not only to their mutual advantage but also the advantage of their mutuality” (SD 118).

Despite Barber’s resistance to an alignment with Arendt, this seems to echo her desire to advance participation in constitutional augmentation.

But Barber does seem to align with Arendt and Habermas in one of his concluding statements. He says: “one perceives in speech itself, in the Greek faculty of reason called logos, the distinctive feature that sets humankind off from the animal kingdom and bestows the twin

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4Canovan’s criticism of Habermas might well apply to Barber.
gifts of self-consciousness and other-consciousness.” To [Barber], “the right of every individual to speak to others, to assert his being through the act of communication, is identified with the precious wellspring of human autonomy and dignity” (SD 311).

As shown, Barber’s program echoes Arendt at several points. But the most important point of similarity between Arendt and Barber is that Arendt’s concept of expression introduces what is new, and Barber’s concept of “transformation” work in much the same way. In this transformation we go from an isolated individual to a newcomer: a particular political actor who is capable of originary promising in a plurality.

The purpose of examining Barber’s work in this discussion is to highlight how promising works in a plurality. It emphasizes its point of origin in an individual. Promising in this case can take the form of a public, compelling, political act of participation. In basic terms, the question is “will you participate?” Showing up is the promise fulfilled. While Arendt goes to great lengths to identify promisors acting in concert, Barber emphasizes the importance of the strong individual stance. Such an individual participant constitutes promising by making it recognizable in the plurality. Such an individual legitimates promising by embodying its expression.⁶

Jane Mansbridge’s Use of Arendt’s Conception of Action

How do such promisors develop into a polity? As a gloss: Arendt would have the newcomers of political action described in the Human Condition seek to meet each other in agonistic debate in the councils described in On Revolution (OR 234 ff.). In theory this would

⁵“The stress on transformation is at the heart of the strong democratic conception of politics” (SD 119).

⁶See the example of “tank man” page 137 below. Strong individual action constitutes a form of political action, the promise of which may be apparent only retrospectively.
produce the sort of strong democracy Barber favors. But, as Arendt laments, the councils were not provided for by the constitution, and the ‘way of living’ of democratic participation Barber describes has not materialized. What developed instead? Here it is possible to see that the sort of political failure Arendt warns about in *On Revolution* takes place when a stronger form of expression does not clearly underwrite robust deliberation.

Jane Mansbridge endorses Arendt’s development of a robust plurality in her own work. But she warns that Arendt’s desire for direct participatory democracy does not, in practice, work as an agonistic proving ground. Rather, it tends towards a unanimity that undercuts the initiatory requirements of expression and fails to support a vibrant deliberation. Mansbridge examines political expression in practice—such as she finds it in sociological case studies. She catalogs the behaviors of participants where the appearance in politics seems to sometimes miss the concerns of particular persons. Here it is possible to see that disclosure, the possibility of glory (or recognition), and the chance to deliberate fail to resist modern conformism.

In *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, Jane Mansbridge argues that we would do well to develop the skills and tolerances needed to toggle between “Adversary Democracy” and “Unitary Democracy” (or “friendship” democracy) depending on what issue is at stake. Mansbridge defines “Adversary Democracy” as a representative form of politics that seeks to level out disputes by vote, including majority rule, and ballot actions. “Unitary Democracy” assumes a face-to-face engagement that builds consensus, equal respect and seeks to cultivate recognition of common interests (BAD 5). Mansbridge’s concept of “friendship” democracy is egalitarian; it is marked by an equality that is bestowed and supported by the bonds of friendship.
though it acknowledges that there is no strict equality. Mansbridge argues that Arendt’s vision of the council system described in *On Revolution* is too narrow. According to Mansbridge:

Hannah Arendt, for example, argues that only with a council system of small face-to-face assemblies can democracy achieve the values that come with the direct participation of every citizen in the public affairs of the country.’ But Arendt’s vision is limited by naïveté about how these small face-to-face assemblies would actually work. Her goal is ‘political freedom’—a citizen’s ability to speak and act publicly, to be a ‘participant in government.’ She detests unanimity and the ‘role of a unanimously held ‘public opinion,’ for she believes that “no formation of opinion is even possible where all opinions have become the same.” Arendt thus makes the small face-to-face the ultimate defense against the tyranny of unanimous public opinion. However while decentralization to small councils might well produce the local differences and consequent national debate she predicts, the face-to-face assemblies themselves would generate strong pressures toward unanimity, as did Selby, Helpline, and probably even the Greek polis to which she harks back” (BAD 292).

But Arendt’s arguments on the topic of councils in *On Revolution*, when taken with her comments at the Toronto conference moderate her own position and help to insulate it from Mansbridge’s criticism. Arendt explains that what is political and debatable changes (RPW 316). The charge that face-to-face democracy tends towards unanimity in the cases described may not work to defeat Arendt’s much wider point. Just as political topics change from time to time and across cultures, so too do the participants’ rhetorical skills, and their capacities and tolerances for various styles and forms of debate.7 The historically narrow examples Mansbridge uses may not be good predictors of future democratic action, they also do not fully explain democratic action of the past.

But Mansbridge on Selby town meetings notes:

These people had debated energetically the practical and ideological sides of issues vital to the town. Several years later, when I had finished interviewing the workers at Helpline and had thought through the implications of my research, I realized that friendship as

7Political debate in the new realm of social media is only beginning to be understood as expression can now take on semi-anonymous avatars online, and rhetorical intensity seems to be rewarded rather than censured.
well as fear pushed Selby toward unitary democracy. But it was the fears I noticed first (BAD 59-60).

But is this the sort of town hall Arendt imagined? Mansbridge’s concern with unanimity perhaps makes Arendt’s case for her. Does such a tendency toward unanimity evince a failure of the political meeting at the outset? Mansbridge says that:

Local assemblies will always tend to apply unitary procedures even when interests conflict. But if they could learn to guard against this tendency and to shift from unitary to adversary procedures and back again, depending on the goals they wish to pursue and the extent to which their members actually have interests in common, they would serve their members interests better and might, in passing, help to create a citizenry more able to judge the democratic performance of the nation state (BAD 292).

Further:

I argue on the contrary, that if local assemblies are to be lawmaking bodies as well as debating societies they must be able to handle equitably conflicting interests, including private interests. The fully unitary approach that Arendt proposes would accentuate the tendency in small assemblies toward a false consensus that benefits the more powerful (BAD 376).

Mansbridge’s conclusion adopts Arendt’s perspective in part:

…we must distinguish ideals appropriate to situations where we all have common interests from situations where we have conflicting interests…On the national level, such a democracy must be primarily adversary. But it must be an adversary democracy that truly seeks to protect interests equally and consequently judges itself on its ability to produce proportional outcomes in moments of conflict. Very small democratic organizations must be primarily unitary. In small workplaces and neighborhood democracies, a citizen could learn the communal virtues, partake of a “community of values” (R. Mangabeira Unger⁸) become a genuine “participator in government” (Arendt) and at the same time, learn to adopt different democratic procedures for dealing with common and conflicting interests (BAD 300).

Viewed retrospectively Mansbridge’s studies can be challenged. Prima facie, the Helpline and Selby studies appear to be good examples of democratic processes of that time and period and there is no reason to question their methodology. But if a long view is taken in light of Arendt’s complaint at the end of *On Revolution*, questions arise. At no time have we had the benefit of the sorts of councils Arendt believes we might have had, were it the case that Jefferson had solved the problem. The problem was that of constitutionally providing for local and direct democratic participation. Recall Arendt was writing *On Revolution* during a period in American history when voluntary participation in associations, trade unions, local lodges and councils was at a comparably high level. Despite these praiseworthy examples of public meeting and debate, Arendt still lamented the sort of participation she imagined might have occurred, had a way been found to effectively write participation into our founding documents more than a century earlier. In this light: do the object examples of Helpline and Selby, insofar as they demonstrate unanimity in debate, and therefore a less than robust democratic process, counter Arendt’s point, or do they confirm it?

However Mansbridge’s wider concern about describing democratic participatory processes is a welcome enhancement to this discussion since it fills out the details of how promising functions to support the polity. The development of public debate rides on how consensus is formed and how ballot measures might even out differences over time. Current events and low levels of democratic participation in the US and worldwide only lend urgency to this question. Voting/ballot legitimacy has become an unexpected crisis due to reliance on technological means to count votes. The imposition and increase of corporate media and corporate social media amplifies and often distorts communication. These factors have radically
changed the forms democratic, and now virtual democratic, participation take. For these reasons, Arendt’s concerns have taken on new relevance.

**Dana Villa’s Use of Arendt’s Conception of Action**

In *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, Dana Villa develops a participatory democratic interpretation of Arendt’s political action. Following Habermas, among others, Villa argues that Arendt’s conception of action is not only a furtherance but a radical departure or “reconstruction” of Aristotle’s conception of *praxis*; this praxis, Villa argues, will be “self contained,” it is a praxis as an end in itself, barring instrumentalism (AH 36).  

As noted above Villa’s interpretation defends the view that Arendt’s notion of action is mainly expressive, but does it rely on a form of glory misunderstood? The worry for the thesis here under consideration is a misunderstood increase in radical subjectivity. This is a frustration of the basic intent behind the participatory project, and risks a retreat into the *vita contemplativa*, of which Arendt warns. Too strongly divorcing expression from mundane goals and ends, while demanding a greater degree of participation would seem in some cases to reflect back on itself, just as instrumentalism creates its own endless cycle. But in this case, the end or unintended consequence would appear to be an **amplified form of self-recognition** that fails to attach to any object other than that *process* of self-recognition itself—in a word glory, but in a modern, destructively futile formulation.  

In this, the compelling characters we need to drive representative politics are compelled by themselves and by their immediate performance, they

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9 In agreement Villa cites Habermas’ argument that Arendtian action is a “renewal of Aristotelian praxis” (*Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power*), but that Arendt alters this praxis, going much further.

10 Process” is not accidental. It’s not within the current scope to examine the way the “process” character of the action of basic expression and disclosure—in an Arendtian sense—might undermine politics.
are somehow not attached to the wider network of promises (or a constitution) they were ostensibly elected to tend to and protect.  

But Arendt’s adherence and extension of Aristotle’s sharp separation between the private life of household (οἶκος) concerns and the public or political life is crucial to Villa’s reading.  An Athenian citizen’s liberation or freedom from want—parasitic on slavery—underwrote an entry into the activities of the polis, a “good life” of “noble and just actions, of ethical and intellectual virtue” (AH 18). Villa emphasizes that for Arendt’s project “…the difference between public and private corresponds to the difference between freedom and necessity” (AH 19). Villa writes of Arendt’s adoption of Aristotle’s position:

An individual must have daily contact with fellow citizens concerning matters of a more than instrumental significance if he is to develop his potential for reasoned speech and his sense of justice. It is precisely in political interaction that the capacity for choice, judgment, and action is fully exercised, and that freedom is concretely realized (AH 19).

But freedom—read as the artifice of equality conferred (see below)—must be anchored not only to free persons in the plural, it must be anchored to free persons in their individual distinction.

Villa continues: “Arendt makes this Greek distinction the axis of her political theory” (AH 20). The specific character of action as “atelic” or “self-contained” is drawn from Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. As Villa notes:

If, indeed, ‘it is for the sake of the end that all else is done’ (NE, 1097a), then a genuinely self-sufficient activity must have its end in performance; otherwise, the activity must be

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11 Embodiment power (as Kantorowicz describes of kings) self-consciously in fantasy is tempting in this diversion from political action.

12 This issue may be put to Mansbridge’s analysis, see above. From Arendt’s perspective, even those democratic processes may be impoverished, and the analyses that rely on them may be incomplete.
viewed as incomplete and imperfect prior to its (logically and temporally distinct) end” (AH 21).

“Self-sufficient activities, with their connotation of full actuality or perfection, are atelic (ateleis): ‘we seek to derive nothing beyond the exercise of the activity’” (AH 21-22, NE, 1176b).

From this comes the Aristotelian distinction “between praxis and poiesis.” Since these are “generically” different, Villa notes that Aristotle rejects that production, fabrication are relatable to the good life since these are means for ends beyond their tasks. Recall from above: “The life of action, available to the free citizen, manifests or is the good in the same way that flute playing is music; performance, not the product, is the end in each case” (AH 22).

Villa explains that Arendt’s goal exceeds that which Habermas presumes in the above referenced essay:

Pace Habermas, her [Arendt] appropriation attempts to do more than simply distinguish labor from action or instrumental from practical reason. It seeks to illuminate a dimension of action and freedom that transcends altogether the Weberian problematic of rationalization and its discontents (AH 23).

Villa writes:

Throughout her work Arendt focuses on deliberative speech…Political debate is end-constitutive: its goal does not stand apart from the process, dominating it at every point, but is rather formed in the course of the ‘performance’ itself. Through such deliberation, individuals rise above merely strategic considerations and engage questions that have a direct bearing on the kind of political community they see themselves as part of. Genuine political deliberation does not move at the level of ‘in order to,’ but rather at the level of ‘for the sake of’” it ultimately is concerned with the meaning of our life in common” (AH 32).13

13This is also a point made by Michael Sandel, and Critical Theorists by different means. Each school under consideration wrestles with Arendt’s concept of plurality and tries to interpret our common life “world”, albeit with different accents.
And yet in order to debate about “our life in common” as Villa describes it, do we need a way to anchor our commonality that extends beyond recognizing merely that we are together as humans? Glory-seeking doesn’t appear to be linear; circular radical narcissistic subjectivity can make of others a dark mirror in which we find a link but too easily overwrite worldly meaning with self-consideration. Arendt’s principles of courage, justice, etc., help to refer us to external considerations but not far enough. The objective fact of promising anchors us to another person, a person who has their own priorities, requirements and differences, so considered in the language of the promise itself. This is true, by extension of our greater social contract.14 Our life in common requires comparable circumstances by which we index each other, and our necessary connection to other situations. As discussed above, the Arendtian principle of justice as adopted by Benhabib can retrospectively inform our assessments of everyday conditions without undermining the basis in the objective principle of promising.

Villa extols the virtues of traditional liberalism as against both Critical Theorists and Communitarians:

The communitarian regards action favorably so long as it does not split the community or undermine a fulfilling sense of membership: the Habermasian does so insofar as it contributes to a progressively rationalized and genuinely universal consensus. Plurality and disagreement are viewed by both schools as essentially problems in need of a solution. In this regard, it is difficult to escape the impression that liberalism, with its affirmation of pluralism and suspicion of group feeling, is more deeply rooted in the soil of politics than some of its contemporary competitors (AH 78).

He says of Arendt:

She believes that our essential political obligation is not to ourselves, or the community, but to the world, that “shared home for mortal men” (fn213 citing On Humanity in Dark Times in Men in Dark Times, AH 78).

14It is tempting to suggest that the fact of promising and contracting in the Constitution of 1787 found this very tension in one of its controversies: that of how to account for slaves. The contradiction between the fact of promising and the accommodation to slave owners was apparent.
Villa points out: “Deliberative speech, political debate, when engaged in by public-spirited citizens, is ‘an end in itself,’ because here the quarrel over ‘means,’ about the appropriate action to take, is always already a quarrel about ends” (AH 32).

**David Ingram Widening the Scope**

It can be argued that this *always already* quarrel about ends that Villa mentions above, signals a way the various schools of thought here discussed might be drawn together so that we can understand how promising emerges. David Ingram helps to integrate some of these concerns and places this discussion within the ambit of the modern and postmodern debate about the crisis in judgment that is a symptom of contemporary fragmentation mentioned in the introduction. This foreshadows the promised discussion on Arendt’s thought on judgment and the actor and spectator in Chapter Six.

Ingram’s position, consonant with Jean Luc-Nancy is that whether one sides with the modernist Arendt (and with Habermas) or with postmodernist Lyotard (here arguably aligned with the communitarian camp and a grounded relativism), the “roots of Reason go deeper” toward a “prediscursive” “community of discourse” in the figure of “a universal ideal of community” (PKAL 51). Ingram defends the “autonomous perspective” sought by modernists against the relativism of postmodernity, but notes:

…the postmodernist, no less than the modernist, must acknowledge a higher community of discourse, and for two reasons: first, because the constant state of revolution endemic to the postmodern condition fosters an autonomous perspective oriented toward the idea of indeterminacy and conflict, in short, toward plurality for its own sake; second, because the affirmation of pluralism implies the idea of a community wherein everyone agrees to disagree (PKAL 52).

Ingram explains that “[modern rationalism culminates in a kind of postmodern embrace of abstract liberal ideas such as rights or toleration. Since these meanings are empty, or
indeterminate they must be politically contested in order to achieve any (fleeting) stable meaning at all. We contest such meanings from the standpoint of incommensurable world views and ideologies that are ultimately rooted in our individual identities, as shaped by our participation in ways of life that are as much about habit and that resist fully rational understanding. The upshot is that although we live in a postmodern fragmented world, we are still guided by the regulative ideal of a community of mutual respect; toleration which invites us as citizens and political actors to step out of ourselves and adopt, in Arendtian terms, an “enlarged mentality” (Cite conversation and annotation 8/1/2018 Ingram).

**Summary of Chapter Four**

The political actor makes an entrance into the polity by demanding it in “words and deeds,” notably in the deed of ‘showing up.’ This entrance operates on two levels. It is an instantiation of a political actor into the plurality in the form of recognition. Additionally such an entrance is a promise of participation made between the entrant and the polity. Adopting Arendtian themes, Barber explains that ‘strong democracy’ requires that we participate directly in order to sustain the health of the polity, we weave such a polity into our daily actions. In this an individual promisor is found to be the site of a political promise. Jane Mansbridge takes up the details and practices of democratic action for such individual promisors as they act in concert. In this way a process of contest and consent becomes visible in the wider polity. But Mansbridge shares Arendt’s worry that certain forms of participation fail to draw out from political actors the robust and agonistic kind of debate democracy would seem to require. Is Arendt right that the ‘rise of the social’ has potentially dissuaded participants from fully entering a politically active process, to their own detriment? Dana Villa calls our attention to how
political action can be prevented from losing its special status in our lives, he protects the political process from fading from view and from sinking into forms of instrumentalization. But, in supporting a “self-contained” form of political action he has left open a way for narcissism and demagoguery to make vainglorious the very expressive resources we most need to identify and safeguard a more balanced political action. Ingram helps to close Chapters Three and Four by taking a longer view of the process of fragmentation of democratic processes, and “world” as such. He finds that the regulative ideal of a community of mutual respect, understood as Arendt’s enlarged mentality, is the basis of the plurality that becomes a polity. Next, in Chapter Five, we can examine how promising will integrate expression and deliberation.
CHAPTER FIVE

PROMISING RELATED TO ARENDT’S THEMES IN ON REVOLUTION

We turn to Arendt’s On Revolution to discover how the objective fact of promising works. Promising will be shown to resolve the original thesis. It will integrate the two conflicting interpretations of Arendt’s political action so far under discussion.

Recall that Habermas and other critical theorists who are concerned with deliberation, have pressed Arendt to combine social and political concerns. This effort has in part countered the risk of instrumentalization; it has sustained an active, rather than contemplative polity. It has done so by revising the space of appearance. New positions, new standings, and new roles have been carved out. This is the consequence of an expansion in the topics of debate to include those public matters demanded by an inclusive polity. This act of including newcomers is highlighted by the expressive interpretation. Participatory democrats, following Arendt, have emphasized the “glory” to be found in the entrance of a newcomer—such an instantiation rides on a demand made by words and deeds, especially the basic deed of showing up (at a border for example) to demonstrate eligibility in the plurality.¹

The reader will recall from the introduction that promise making occupies a particularly high status among Arendt’s suggested principles of action for two reasons: it constitutes unity out of plurality and it maintains plurality in its revelation of the individuality of the speaker.

Using resources found Arendt’s On Revolution, it remains to show how promising is expressed

¹Strictly speaking, in Arendt’s thought, everyone is always already eligible.
among newcomers in their new standing and roles made available by a more inclusive polity. The simple figure that will help to explain this is ‘the level playing field.’

Interestingly, in her 1963 work *On Revolution*, Arendt prefaces the main discussion of the French and American Revolutions by making an allusive comparison between two animating principles she claims have shaped Western political history: the “state of nature” and “salvation.” According to Arendt, we are confronted with the formative paradigm of Cain—we advance our engagements, matching them to a seminally violent state of (fallen) nature. But we are interrupted by a specifically human call: the voice of John the Baptist who foretells salvation. In this comparison we find ourselves caught by violence, but we found the polis in the “Word.”

**Action as promising in speech is the word Arendt is evoking.**

Six major themes emerge in *On Revolution* that are key to understanding the complex role that Arendt assigns to the category of promising in constitutional political action.

1. Freedom and Equality
2. Deliberative Reenactment
3. Power
4. Absolutism and Sovereignty
5. Founding
6. Augmentation

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2See James Miller’s “Novelty…” for his interpretation of Arendt’s use of “word” in her opening of *On Revolution*.

3Arendt lays claim to mundane salvation in the words of John the Baptist, and his promise, rather than the extra-mundane salvation offered by Christ as word.
In what follows, I will briefly show how each of these themes informs Arendt’s understanding of promissory political action.

**Freedom and Equality**

Our capacity to speak promises—insofar as it causes us to distinguish ourselves—demands that we confer an equal standing upon others in a plurality. This requires that we render each other free. From freedom we get equality. Freedom as Arendt explains it, is freedom from rule, and has its origins in the Greek city state. “No-rule” or “isonomy” is the condition by which no one need rule since the effort expended to ensure the situational equality of all—in the public space of appearances—results in freedom for those qualified to appear (excepting slaves, and those relegated to the household, or craft arena—and so the qualifications are contested). “Hence, equality…frequently seen as a danger to freedom, was originally almost identical with it” (OR 23). But here Arendt notes that equality was supported by one’s involvement in the world, this contrary to equality of birth or condition. “The equality of the Greek polis, its isonomy, was an attribute of the polis and not men, who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth” (OR 23). Arendt writes:

> The reason for this insistence on the interconnection of freedom and equality in Greek political thought was that freedom was understood as being manifest in certain, by no means all, human activities, and that these activities could appear and be real only when others saw them, judged them, remembered them. The life of a free man needed the presence of others. Freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together—the agora, the marketplace, or the polis, the political space proper (OR 24).

A minimal requirement for newcomers to make promises to each other is that they must be able to undertake them freely as members of the sort of situation or “city” Arendt describes above. Political actors can make and keep promises to each other if they are on a level playing field as regards political status and enfranchisement. The promise to execute democracy by
means of voting is one example of this. But as noted above by Bernstein and Benhabib, contemporary mutual promisors cannot be too dissimilar in respect of material means. As stated, such freedom is achieved by a mutual effort and involvement to open a space of appearances that legitimates such undertakings. Recognition is required for the newcomer, recognition of commitments kept brings further recognition, and broken commitments bring sanction and elicit forgiveness and reconciliation.

**Theatrical Deliberative Reenactment**

Recall from the introduction that constitutional conventions—such as the one in Philadelphia in 1787—are paradigmatic examples of the integration of the expressive and deliberative models here under consideration. We are able to see promising in this integration. As earlier stated, without the public display and charismatic performances of the distinguished and courageous statesmen that could persuade the delegates to commit themselves to an utterly unprecedented (new) and highly risky joint undertaking, their own freedom would have lacked that enduring public space necessary for deliberation to continue. In a manner of speaking this makes politics theatre. Arendt writes:

…they thought of themselves as founders because they had consciously set out to imitate the Roman example and to emulate the Roman spirit…No doubt the American founders had donned the clothes of the Roman maiores, those ancestors by definition were “the greater ones,” even before they were recognized as such by the people. But the spirit in which this claim was made was not arrogance; it sprang from the simple recognition that either they were founders and, consequently, would become ancestors, or they had failed. What counted was neither wisdom nor virtue, but solely the act itself, which was indisputable (OR 204).

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4Greed and wealth concentration (hoarding) that lead to predatory economic practices undermine freedom and equality.
The practice of reenactment is a form of promise that draws on historical resources that are available to all. Our hopes for the future, so based on our understanding of the past, puts us on a level playing field with each other with respect to this information.\(^5\) We regularly evoke the past in political action. Senators recall past debates, the rules of deliberation, and even in the very words of their predecessors. Rich or poor alike, be they educated or self-taught, may avail themselves of the tradition that informs political actions. This is the content of reenactment. This is not only a practice of compelling and articulate leaders, but is displayed in the body of a protestors in a simple act. People have long taken the streets. The tank man of Tiananmen Square in 1989 remains anonymous, yet his courage aligns with the principles Arendt lays out in *Between Past and Future*. The only way a single individual can level the playing field against half a dozen tanks is by means of a public display of courage. Figuratively speaking he is not alone in the future because his action—and that photograph—guarantees the immortality of his political act, though he remains unnamable. Insofar as a promise is a form of communication, we join each other in the shared transmission of our political culture, so far made up out of the past patterns and choices of freedom and equality. This political culture ties us to past political actions such as the founding of the constitution, and it casts us forward into the roles of stewards that will guard and augment this lasting promise.

**Power Transmits Promises**

Power transmits promises because we must act in concert if that action is to be understood as political. Freedom, equality, and the processes of reenactment that reconcile the past, present and future are all embodied in people acting together. What is at stake, according to

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\(^5\)Access to this information is a matter, a condition of freedom.
Arendt, is that constitutional government must be based “…on the foundation and correct distribution of power” (OR 148). Arendt cites Montesquieu in order to explain the distribution of power in the American development:

…power and freedom belonged together, that conceptually speaking, political freedom did not reside in the I-will but in the I-can, and therefore the political realm must be construed and constituted in a way in which power and freedom would be combined (OR 148-149).

Arendt charts the discovery by Adams and others that “power arrests power” and for this reason the “checks and balances” on powers work not because the federal government limits the state and draws from its power, instead the federal and state governments both increase in their unique powers and as such balance or “arrest” the power of the other. Bicameral legislatures, and the tripartite divisions found in state and federal governments, are symptoms of the condition of an innumerable number of promises dispersed across what figuratively is a level field of political actors lending their shared power, conferring legitimacy upon these governing institutions. Recent instances of mass demonstrations have made clear that this widely dispersed power still is able to grow, as well as check excess and overreach.

According to Arendt this new kind of power emerged in the North American colonies because Europe didn’t have the “townships” and similar organizational power structures that were found in the new world. Arendt refers to the early work of the colonists, some of which even took place upon the Mayflower before landing. At the core of this practice was both a conservative mistrust the passengers held for each other, as well as a great confidence in their ability to form a compact, a “civil body Politick” and this was founded on “…the strength of mutual promise” (OR 166). This in turn was enhanced by further promises, as a consequence, political power aggregated with these bonds:
The greatest revolutionary innovation, Madison’s discovery of the federal principle for the foundation of large republics, was partly based upon an experience, upon the intimate knowledge of political bodies whose internal structure predetermined them, as it were, and conditioned its members for a constant enlargement whose principle was neither expansion nor conquest but the further combination of powers (OR 167).

Arendt calls this “‘cosociation’” (OR 168). This is to be subdivided into two kinds of social contracts that Arendt explains. Cosociation is founded on promises and is at its base a consensual combination of what turns out to be a web of promises, each supporting another aggregating into a social structure or society. It does so “…in the old Roman sense of societas, which means alliance. Such an alliance gathers together the isolated strength of the allied partners and binds them into a new power structure by virtue of ‘free and sincere promises’” (OR 169). “Cosociation” is an active process of leveling the field such that there is enough transparency, enough freely displayed information that trust is a meaningful component of promising.

**Absolutism and Sovereignty Undermine Promising**

Arendt traces the sources of some of the failures of the French Revolution to its historical source in absolutism, features of which lingered in that project. Absolutism, even its lingering effects, undercuts promising because it eradicates the level playing field by claiming for itself (in the person of a king) the right to be the final maker and breaker of promises. No polity can yet

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6Understanding this development is aided by knowing the fact that the American Revolution was an outgrowth of a limited monarchy; the French Revolution arose in a political situation of absolutism. Philosophically speaking, Arendt explains that: “On this point…” the American Revolution took Montesquieu’s “separation of powers” as model and the French Revolution adopted Rousseau’s “…notion of General Will, inspiring and directing the nation as though it were no longer composed of a multitude but actually formed one person, became axiomatic for all factions and parties of the French Revolution, because it was indeed the theoretical substitute for the sovereign will of an absolute monarch” (OR 155).
emerge. As Arendt describes, in the absolute monarch "is a Corporation in himself that liveth ever"…“law and power coincided…” but:

…the framers of the American constitutions, although they knew they had to establish a new source of law and to devise a new system of power, were never even tempted to derive law and power from the same origin. The seat of power to them was the people, but the source of law was to become the Constitution, a written document, an endurable objective thing, which to be sure one could approach from many different angles and upon which one could impose many different interpretations, which one could change on demand in accordance with circumstances… (OR 156).

Sovereignty, as Arendt reads it, creates the same problem vis-à-vis promising because it destabilizes the individual promisor. Sovereignty appears not to seek shared power with others. It renders their promising suspect and what might be thought of as the ‘interior level playing field’ is ruined since actors caught up in sovereignty conflicts proceed from a tactical comportment. They are always on a warlike footing, in a manner of speaking. She writes:

In this respect, the great and, in the long run, perhaps the greatest American innovation in politics as such was the consistent abolition of sovereignty within the body politic of the republic, the insight that in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same (OR 152).

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7 On corruption, Arendt recommends greater visibility: “The only remedies against the misuse of public power by private individuals lie in the public realm itself, in the light which exhibits each deed enacted within its boundaries, in the very visibility to which it exposes all those who enter it” (OR 256).

8 James Miller on sovereigns, citing Heidegger: “…the modern philosophy of will, in its individualistic voluntarism, issues in a political philosophy that is strangely apolitical, a thinking that lauds lonely rulers, these ‘violent men’ unafraid to use ‘power to become preeminent in historical being as creators, as men of action. Preeminent in the historical place, they become at the same time apolis, without city or place, lonely, strange and alien, without issue amid the existent as a whole, and at the same time without statute and limit, without structure and order, because they themselves as creators must first create all this,’ In these terrifying words of Martin Heidegger, which condense the essential outcome of a politics of individual will, Hannah Arendt might have observed the immolation of Western political thought.” Miller later explains: “Instead of the stormy transvaluation of value by lonely heroes, Arendt proposes a collective effort to establish an abiding structure of shared public principles, principles that to the extent they embody ‘We can’ and the will to coexist, rule out arbitrariness and the caprice of a political creator ‘without statute or limit.’ At the core of this artificial ‘human power’ would lie that most precious of human faculties, which Arendt believes enables men to fabricate principles and institutions that will endure the passage of time: the ability to make promises. Indeed the greatest application of this faculty comes precisely in the act of beginning, when pledges and promises are exchanged. Thanks to this reciprocal transaction, a space for human freedom can be secured.” Miller concludes: “For the ‘issue at stake’ is precisely ‘representation
Eliminating sovereignty allows the aforementioned power to multiply and diversify. Power is multiplied and diversified as decision-making authority is passed along a line of plural citizens who may thereby exercise authority in locales they occupy. Power and authority, when set apart from sovereignty, can follow the scope, breadth, and depth of a growing plural citizenry and, more often than not, contentious overlaps in authority do not outnumber the cases where local authority is expressed. Arendt writes:

Clearly the true objective of the American Constitution was not to limit power but to create more power, actually establish and duly constitute an entirely new power center…it indeed came to be…Constitutio Libertatis, the foundation of freedom (OR 152-153).

**Founding**

This leads us to how founding is related to promising. Founding is the event that transforms a plurality into a future polity, it opens up the level playing field so that political actors can meet each other in expressive display and deliberation. They can make the promises that will extend the founding. Arendt writes: “Once we turn from these theories and speculations about influences to the documents themselves and their simple, uncluttered and often awkward language, we see immediately that it is an event rather than a theory or tradition we are confronted with” (OR 172).

Promises are not only moments, but they are documented and citable in our daily lives, as they need to be: “Hence, binding and promising, combining and covenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence… [a] process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly

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9See below for Arendt’s discussion of “wards.”
structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action…world building …[for] posterity” (OR 174-175). Arendt here encapsulates the way deliberation and expression are tied together in promising. Note in the citation immediately following, that deliberation anchors the republican principle and that expression sustains identities in alliances:

In other words, the mutual contract where power is constituted by means of promise contains in nuce both the republican principle, according to which power resides in the people, and where a ‘mutual subjection’ makes of ruler ship an absurdity—‘if the people be governors, who shall be governed?’—and the federal principle, the principle of a ‘Commonwealth for increase’ (as Harrington called his utopian Oceana), according to which constituted political bodies can combine and enter into lasting alliances without losing their identity (OR 170).

Arendt writes further:

…that power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of making and keeping promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty (OR 175).

Foundation sets the “process character of action” in motion. Foundation is tied to plurality and as such the power it develops reflects the way a plurality organically turns from one generation to the next, but importantly remembers and speaks of both the novel future and the past.

The very concept of Roman authority suggests that the act of foundation inevitably develops its own stability and permanence, and authority in this context is nothing more or less than a kind of necessary ‘augmentation’ by virtue of which all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment and increase (OR 203).

Similarly, Arendt notes of the situation in America: “Thus the amendments to the Constitution augment and increase the original foundations to the American republic…” (OR 203). This is the basis for the Constitution’s authority, explains Arendt.
In answer to her own charge “to what we do,” Arendt argues that what we “do” is to begin things. Underneath all of our other activities lies this human activity, itself a kind of renewing sense of our awareness of power. Each speech, each action, each compact begins a new course of affairs, it starts its own thread or story line. Arendt writes:

What matters in our context is less the profoundly Roman notion that all foundations are re-establishments and reconstitutions that the somehow connected but different idea that men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners, that the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact the human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth (OR 213).

Arendt does note the implicit contradiction or difficulty of avoiding an “authoritative” “absolute” reference that would undergird founding and the law insofar as it will “…establish a ‘perpetual union’” or a lasting sequence of compacts and promises memorialized by law (OR 182). Arendt describes the problem of a vicious circle in constituting:

...those who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional, that is they have no authority to do what they have set out to achieve. The vicious circle in legislating is present not in ordinary lawmaking, but in laying down the fundamental law, the law of the land or the constitution which, from then on, is supposed to incarnate the ‘higher law’ from which all laws ultimately derive their authority (OR 184).10

But Arendt continues:

What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or to be more precise, that beginning and principle, principium and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it makes its appearance in the world. The way the beginner starts whatever he intends to do lays down the law of action for those who have joined him in order to partake in the enterprise and to bring about its accomplishment. As such, the principle inspires the deeds that are to follow and remains apparent as long as the action lasts (OR 214).

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10 For more detail on this topic see David Ingram’s *Novus Ordo Seclorum* and Juergen Habermas’s *Hannah Arendt’s Communication Concept of Power*. 
Augmentation

Constitutions are augmented by amendment. Expressive deliberation is ongoing. To recap: It is hoped that we confer and receive freedom and equality from citizens and newcomers in the creation of a polity that we enliven by reference to past actors. We reenact their words and deeds; these guide our efforts. As power expands across the level playing field we seek to create, the lingering effects of absolutism are rejected, and the tyrannies of sovereignty are avoided—this is largely due to the transparency of our actions. All of this is to say we found such a polity from our own status as newcomers in a polity that requires revision and reinvention at all times. But how do we keep it?

Arendt points out that we revise and augment the constitution by means of new conventions and by the adoption of new amendments. How this works exactly raises a problematic issue for Arendt, one that Mansbridge and Barber commented on above. Arendt writes that Jefferson continued his thinking on this particular matter following his witnessing of France’s revolution and impractically sought to build in to the constitution provisions (“schemes”) for sustaining the “space of freedom” via once generational replications of constitutional conventions that would amend and “augment” rather than necessarily liberate (OR 236). But Jefferson further anticipated the need for basic political spaces of appearance and meeting in the form of “townships” and “meeting halls” (OR 238). Arendt explains that the founders missed the chance to incorporate these small-scale political spaces into their considerations due to a focus on the other side of the problem, namely representation. This remained a concern for Jefferson until his death in 1826 (OR 238).
Arendt cites Jefferson: “As Cato concluded every speech with the words, *Carthago delenda est*, so do I every opinion, with the injunction, *divide the counties into wards.*”

Arendt points out that since the French Revolution “statesmen, historians, political theorists, and, most importantly, by the revolutionary tradition itself…” this exhortation has been ignored or missed (OR 252-253).

Arendt identifies the basic unit of the larger republic in “…the elementary republics of the wards…” (OR 259). She asserts, “The councils, obviously, were spaces of freedom” (OR 268). This particular issue remains vexing. Contemporary life would appear to make such basic meetings even more unlikely, even quaint. Arendt relies on a spatial metaphor to describe how we might meet each other every day as newcomers in a plural polity. Below, and drawing on Arendt’s dramaturgy, Villa will offer a path to a new argument, one that imagines “meeting halls” differently.

**Summary of Chapter Five**

The purpose of Chapter Five was to demonstrate how the objective fact of promising integrates the deliberative and expressive interpretations of Arendt’s political action. By means of six key concepts, promising is drawn out as the crucial integrating factor in political action. In brief, we are joined together by promising because, as *equals* we confer *freedom* upon each other. We draw upon historical resources and tradition to *reenact* the very *deliberative* practices that are available due to such conditions of freedom and equality. Political *power* is the outcome of such concerted action. Power is distributed (by expression and deliberation) along the routes made available by the conferral of equality and freedom in the polity. The extension of such *power* also relies on avoiding a basis in *absolutism*, or reliance on the concept
of sovereignty. By successfully avoiding these pitfalls, this process refers back to a founding that paradoxically calls for its own continuing augmentation. Augmentation continually acknowledges its founding by revisiting, sustaining, and innovating upon original basic principles, chiefly the promises that join us together, contained in constitutions.
CHAPTER SIX  
CONCLUSION AND REVIEW: THE ACTOR AND SPECTATOR,  
RETROSPECTIVE JUDGMENT AND PRACTICAL DELIBERATION  

This dissertation opened by noting a conflict between specific interpretations of Hannah Arendt’s conception of political action. The controversy between the deliberative and expressive interpretations cast doubt on the integrity of Arendt’s political philosophy. It obstructed our view of an argument that favors a complementarity between them that is based on the objective fact of promising.

Arendt’s theory of political action understood as primarily deliberative is described by critical theorists like Richard Bernstein, and Seyla Benhabib as a form of debate in which people come together as an equally franchised plurality. Juergen Habermas found new pathways in Arendt’s work for his discourse ethics and the extensive development of our understanding of the role the Greek concept of praxis might play in contemporary communication. By means of communication and debate, we arrive at an activated polity. This polity might sustain its own efficacy, its continuation, and (ideally) equal footing among its members by means of norms, constitutions, and expanding legal structures.

Expressive political action explains how we enter the polity. It describes capturing attention in original words and deeds. We distinguish ourselves through actions viewed by others as courageous, honorable and compelling—in this way we might move others to action. Participatory democrats like Barber discuss the need for stronger forms of direct participation,
and expression might serve this need by providing compelling examples of sorely missed involvement in the political process. Expression gets for us an entrance and it asks us to do something. Another participatory democrat, Dana Villa is concerned that political action must conform to Arendt’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s virtu. In seeking glory in the excellent performance of actions—political actions—we may sustain and advance the polity. This particular interpretation of expression emphasizes that it is its own end. It seeks only to cultivate an ongoing agonistic politics that might reproduce and justify itself in safeguarding political action from instrumentalism.

The weakness found in deliberation is its reticence. The practice of deliberation can drift into a contemplative mode—Arendt’s “vita contemplativa.” Arendt acknowledges the requirements of internal moral dialogues, especially in later writings such as The Life of the Mind, but she worries that our deliberative practices might fail to be translated into action.¹ Another concern for deliberation is that it may become identified with merely securing means and ends. This is the worrisome side of Western rationality, the instrumentalization warned of by Adorno and Horkheimer, and later elaborated by Habermas. This feared decline in political action has a parallel that is elucidated by Arendt in the Human Condition as the “rise of the social” and the surrender of our politics to a merely working, or worse, a unconsciously laboring society. Our attachment to our own role in securing meaning for ourselves via political action is weakened.

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¹Arendt cites Kant, noting this seeming contradiction, “Company is indispensable for the thinker” (HALKPP 10).
The weakness found in expression, absent a deliberative component, has to do with an exaggeration of glory. If expressive political action loses sight of its end in itself, its atelic quality fails, and it may be diverted into meaningless self-display. An otherwise compelling expression or reenactment that is a call to action can manifest in a caricature of glory if it becomes exaggerated or narcissistic. The solution lies in the Arendtian principle of promising, and its effect on its subsidiary principles of courage, justice, and equality.

As was shown, expression yields to deliberation because it must be meaningfully recognized. After a person emerges and is recognized: a “who” has, as its core publicly initiatory action, the act of promising. This has to be executed in a plurality rendered as a polity for such a promise to take root. Deliberation must yield to expression in order that it may escape the reticence of contemplation and in so doing avail itself of expression’s initiatory energy. In this way, because of the requirements of mutual recognition, promising develops as social contracting.

And so recall: inserted within an action of social contracting, the deliberation becomes expressive, ceasing to be contemplative ratiocination regarding truth claims taken in abstraction from personality. Inserted within an action of social contracting, expressive action ceases to be a pointless display of personal distinction and becomes socially meaningful.

Our action in concert grows in scope and complexity. Because we promise in an expanding network of such contracts and promises, we ultimately augment our constitutions and legal structures (manifested in trials) by acting upon more or less stable interpretations of those entities. But we don’t merely interpret documents and practices. We act upon them by imagining the situations and comportments of original founders. We evoke and we reenact the
political action—deliberative and expressive—of our forbearers. We weave this action into our contemporary setting. 1787 looked back to Rome to act and furthermore, to cast itself forward to the present day. We test procedures and processes against our current fragmented situation and against our own visions of what the future might bring. In this we yet “think what we do” so our descendants will augment our actions and better our promises, while they try to sustain their own.

The process of reenactment leads us to consider certain parallels between the preceding larger discussion about expression and deliberation, and Arendt’s examination of Kant’s political philosophy. References to the actor and spectator, as well as a relation to practical deliberation and retrospective judgment will be considered. How might these issues be connected? A key to this is the Arendtian concept of plurality and its relation to Kant’s sensus communis. Here it may be suggested that Arendt’s implicit/explicit dramaturgical bearings (as interpreted by Dana Villa) point to new avenues of research that may enrich our understanding of plurality, and of the sensus communis. The dramaturgical lens may bring the sensus communis, and the public function of judgment therein, into sharper relief. Here the inquiry will swing on two issues: What is the status of the spectator with respect to the plurality? How exactly does disinterested reflective judgment work in a political (as distinguished from an aesthetic) setting?

The commonly accepted interpretation of Arendt’s discussion of the actor and spectator and reflective judgment is mainly found in Ronald Beiner’s Hannah Arendt: Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy. Leora Bilsky’s engagement with Beiner, Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, and judgment will also be addressed. Villa’s comments on the political setting will be referenced. Parallels with the discussion of expression and deliberation will be noted.
The Status of the Kantian Spectator

In a series of lectures given between 1964 and 1970 in New York and Chicago, Arendt took up the topic of Immanuel Kant’s “nonwritten” political philosophy. Her main sources are the Critique of the Power of Judgment, and The Conflict of the Faculties, among other texts (HALKPP 19).

Arendt raises the issue of Kant’s esteem for the French Revolution, comparing it to his oft-stated judgment against all revolutionary action itself. At stake for Kant is a general hope for progress that is shown in the distant spectators’ open partiality to the French Revolution, despite the underlying risk of this sentiment, since they were subjects of absolutist monarchies themselves. Kant writes:

Owing to its generality, this mode of thinking demonstrates a character of the human race at large and all at once; owing to its disinterestedness, a moral character in humanity, at least in its predispositions, a character which not only permits people to hope for progress toward the better, but is already itself progress insofar as its capacity is sufficient for the present (HALKPP 45).

Arendt explains that for Kant:

The importance of the occurrence (Begebenheit) is for him exclusively in the eye of the beholder, in the opinion of the onlookers who proclaim their attitude in public…Without this sympathetic participation, the ‘meaning’ of the occurrence would be altogether different or simply nonexistent. ‘For it is this sympathy that inspires hope’ (HAKLPP 46).

For Kant not only are the actors and spectators separated in their specific experiences of such an event, but the consequence of their mutual involvement in the situation reveals, in the attitude of the spectator, reason for hope. “The spectator, because he is not involved, can perceive this design of providence in nature, which is hidden from the actor” (HALKPP 52).
As Beiner describes, the bifurcation of actor and spectator is “unmistakable”; it is necessary to “redeem meaning” such that we capture our history, stories, and glory from an adequately informed perspective. A political actor is disqualified from this perspective because such an actor does not have, and cannot yet have, an adequate view of events. Her view of action is superseded by a future observer’s perspective and in the present we are left in the moment, ‘true actors’ insofar as we do not have a script to direct our political actions or the perspective to judge their meaning(s) (HALKPP 118).

**The Status of Arendt’s Actor and Spectator**

According to Beiner, Arendt shifted her emphasis from practical deliberation, emblazoned by the actor, to the spectator’s retrospective judgment, starting in or slightly before 1970 in her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” Pressing on in her unfinished work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt shifts from the practical concerns of enmeshed political actors to the topics of thinking, willing, and an unwritten examination of judgment. Here—as a function of the operation of judgment—the reflections of “historians and storytellers,” of the “blind poet,” take precedence (HALKPP 91-92). Beiner writes:

The emphasis shifts from the representative thought and enlarged mentality of political agents to the spectatorship and retrospective judgment of historians and storytellers. The blind poet, at a remove from the action and therefore capable of disinterested reflection, now becomes the emblem of judging. Removed from a first-order perception, the objects of judgment are re-presented in imagination by a mental act of second-order reflection. The blind poet judges from a distance, which is the condition of disinterestedness (HALKPP 91-92).

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2 True actors in the contradictory sense that stage actors are aware of the story’s end but act as if they are not. Here, the use of the theatrical analogy is problematic.

3 Perhaps we are confronted with a similar scaling problem now, and thus the appearance of fragmentation. It seems right that Arendt would seek a position of remove from which to reconcile the events she witnessed. Our current embroilments in a data-rich world tempts the same. How do we reconcile events we do not witness but experience in virtual form?
But is it possible to resist this bifurcation and rather interpret Arendt’s political action in such a way that combines actor and spectator in one person? Is our understanding of this problematic improved if we seek for the actor and spectator the same sort of complementarity as was found in expression and deliberation? But how then is the imagined “second order reflection” of disinterested judgment preserved, if it is made by the unified actor-spectator? Despite Arendt’s own claims to the contrary, there is nothing in her theory that requires us to conclusively divide actors and spectators in the way she describes. Arendt’s quick assertion that no actor would “put on a spectacle” without spectators might apply readily to the theatre, but not so political action; it’s not clear that we must understand spectatorship in this strictly separate way (HALKPP 125). Arendt’s own use of the dramatic terms “actor” and “spectator” invites an alternative speculation, one that encompasses the discussion of judgment but presses somewhat beyond.5

Arendt and Kant’s Conception of Reflective Judgment

In her collection of essays Between Past and Future, Arendt explains that in the Critique of Judgment, Kant could no longer count on the “lawgiving faculty of Reason” and its demands for self-agreement. In politics what was needed was a

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4 Citing Kant from The Contest of the Faculties, Beiner notes that the “universal disinterested sympathy” expressed by the spectators of the French Revolution underwrites the qualities of universality and disinterestedness that apply to both aesthetic and political judgments. According to Beiner: “This famous passage shows unmistakably that political judgment, is reserved to the spectator” (HALKPP 124). Beiner explains that Arendt agrees: “We…are inclined to think that in order to judge a spectacle you must first have the spectacle—that the spectator is secondary to the actor; we tend to forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it. Kant is convinced that the world without man would be a desert, and a world without man means for him; without spectators” (HALKPP 125).

5 Beiner himself notes the necessarily arbitrary quality of his division of Arendt’s use of judgment (HALKPP 92).
different way of thinking, for which it would not be enough to be in agreement with one’s
own self, but which consisted of being able to ‘think in the place of everybody else’ and
which is therefore called an ‘enlarged mentality’” (BPF 220).

It’s tempting to suggest that this use of judgment is among the first moves out of contemplation
and into the type of action with which Arendt is primarily concerned. She further writes:

And this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgment knows how to transcend its own
individual limitations…cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the
presence of others ‘in whose place’ it must think, whose perspectives it must take into
consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all (BPF 220-
221).

Of note is the similarity between the use of judgment and political action in that neither
can operate without other people, on Arendt’s account. Action must be in concert, and judgment
must, as Arendt interprets, exceed its own limitations by connection to others.

In his essay “Judging—the Actor and the Spectator,” Richard Bernstein identifies an
important contradiction in Arendt related to judging. Also from Between Past and Future (221),
Bernstein writes:

The capacity to judge is a specifically political activity. Yet judging is also characterized
as the mental activity of the spectator who seeks to understand the meaning of the
spectacle of human affairs. Judging is at once the faculty par excellence of those who
participate and engage in action and the faculty of non-participating spectators. To judge
and to act are presumably radically distinct. How are we to make sense of this? (PP
219).6

The short answer is our shared situation, our plurality—and the plural world set in motion
by those who came before us.7 Within this setting we judge, and publicize judgments about
things we hold or experience in common. Recall from the introduction above that Ronald Beiner

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6Bernstein finds that Arendt’s thought on “council systems” emphasized “mutual debate” and “public
happiness” this a change from an early focus on “disclosure” or personal “glory” for the actor (BOR 212-213).

7See Arendt’s discussion of the “process character of action” Human Condition p. 230 ff.
writes of this possible relationship: “…They can share the world with others through judging what is held in common” (HALKPP 93).

How do we judge what we have in common? The key to this lies in how Arendt uses Kant’s faculty of judgment as it is described in the *Critique of Judgment*. As Beiner explains it, Arendt’s uptake of Kant’s judgment moves from an explanation of *determinative judgment* whereby we subsume a particular object under a rule, to *reflective judgments* whereby we attend to experiences that challenge our understanding, as they do not fit under any available rule. In the first case, for example, matters of natural science and our experience of it are considered, such as Kant treated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Because we experience the natural world in demonstrably similar ways, we can consider such experience as universally valid. In the second case the imagination is employed and matters of aesthetics are considered. The beautiful, the sublime, and political action all demand a new practice of judgment. How does this sort of judgment work for politics?

**Situating the Spectator**

Recall for Arendt that we redeem meaning when retrospective judgment is made by an observer who is situated apart from the action. Such an isolated spectator has a view provided by time and distance and for that reason is comparable to an audience member in a theater who watches a play. The story that unfolds can be viewed as ‘whole,’ and this lends coherence that is amenable to the creation of meaning. This is a process not dissimilar from the way Kant finds hope in the open sympathies expressed from afar for the activities of the French Revolution.

Alternatively, an actor and spectator are one and render judgments in the midst of the action. Such an actor/spectator would then be forced to transmit or share meaning somewhat
differently. Does Arendt offer additional resources that would contradict the argument Beiner makes, beyond her earlier commitments to the actor participant?

Arguably the answer is yes to both questions and has to do with Arendt’s more basic concept of plurality. But first, how does Arendt situate us in the plurality? She “aestheticizes politics” (AH Chapter 3, ff.) and adopts Kant’s reflective judgment as a way to come to terms with political judgments since these can be considered by imagining the opinions of others to whom we have access so situated in what Kant calls the “sensus communis.”

As for common sense: Kant was very early aware that there was something nonsubjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense…[Kant]: “In matters of taste we must renounce ourselves in favor of others”…in Taste egoism is overcome”…We must overcome our special subjective conditions for the sake of others. In other words, the nonsubjective element in the nonobjective senses is intersubjectivity. (You must be alone in order to think; you need company to enjoy a meal.) (HALKPP 67).

And moreover: “The sensus communis is the specifically human sense because communication, i.e. speech, depends on it” (HALKPP 70).

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8Beiner recalls Kant’s Critique of Judgment, in describing “Taste as a kind of sensus communis”” Kant writes: “...by the name of sensus communis is to be understood the idea of a public sense, i.e., a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of the collective reason of mankind…This is accomplished by weighing the judgment, not so much with the actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else, as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently affect our own estimate” (HALKPP citing CPJ 121-122).

9Beiner citing Arendt in Freedom and Politics: “[Kant] expounds two political philosophies which differ sharply from one another—the first being that which is generally accepted as such in is Critique of Practical Reason and the second that is contained in his Critique of Judgment. That the first part of the latter is, in reality, a political philosophy is a fact that is seldom mentioned in works on Kant; on the other hand, it can, I think, be seen from all his political writings that for Kant himself the theme of “judgment” carries more weight than that of “practical reason.” In the Critique of Judgment freedom is portrayed as a predicate of the power of imagination and not of the will, and the power of imagination is linked most closely with that wider manner of thinking which is political thinking par excellence, because it enables us to “put ourselves in the minds of other men” “(HALKPP 102).

10Kant will refer to the sensus communis as a kind of “pluralism” (HALKPP 120) and Beiner describes Arendt’s representative thinking that, for the sake of politics, prioritizes opinion that “derives its own distinctive dignity from the condition of human plurality” (HALKPP 106 citing Truth and Politics) over and against the truths sought by philosophers.
Beauty, Sublimity, and Politics

In her essay “The Crisis in Culture,” Arendt justifies the use of aesthetic judgment in politics. Beiner points out: “The reason ‘love of beauty’ can be encompassed within ‘political judgment’ is that they share the fundamental requirement of public appearance, they presuppose a common world” (HALKPP 103). Arendt says: “The common element connecting art and politics is that they both are phenomena of the public world” (BPF 218). But the assent that Kant describes, that we share in finding roses beautiful, or mountains sublime, is very different from what plays out in the political realm. Of this two-purpose (aesthetics and politics) activity of “taste” Arendt writes:

To classify taste, the chief cultural activity, among man’s political abilities sounds so strange that I may add another much more familiar but theoretically little-regarded fact to these considerations. We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in questions of what pleases and displeases. From the viewpoint of this common experience it is as though taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it. If we think of this sense of belonging in political terms, we are tempted to regard taste as an essentially aristocratic principle of organization. But its political significance is perhaps more far-reaching and at the same time more profound. Wherever people judge the things of the world that are common to them, there is more implied in their judgments than these things. By his manner of judging the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of persons he is, and this disclosure which is involuntary, gains in validity to the degree that it has liberated itself form merely individual idiosyncrasies. Now, it is precisely the realism of acting and speaking that is the political domain in terms of activities in which this person’s quality comes to the fore in public, in which the “who one is” becomes manifest rather than the qualities and individual talents he may possess. In this respect, the political realm is again opposed to the domain in which the artist and fabricator live and do their work…Taste debarbarizes the world of the beautiful by not being overwhelmed by it; it takes care of the beautiful in

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11Arendt writes: “There are two mental operations in judgment. There is the operation of the imagination, in which one judges objects that are no longer present, that are removed from immediate sense perception and therefore no longer affect one directly, and yet, though the object is removed from one’s outward senses, it now becomes an object for one’s inner senses. When one represents something to oneself that is absent, one closes, as it were, those senses by which objects in their objectivity are given to one. The sense of taste…is an inner sense…This operation of imagination prepares the object for “the operation of reflection.” And this second operation—the operation of reflection—is the activity of judging something” (HALKPP 68).
its own personal way and thus produces a culture...Humanism, like culture, is of course of Roman origin; ...I choose a Roman example to illustrate the sense in which taste is the political capacity that truly humanizes the beautiful and creates a culture (BPF 223-224).

To advance this argument and connect it with what has gone before: taste and the space of appearance cannot on their own stabilize the political world. In politics, assent is manifested in the figure of the *sensus communis*, wherein communication, speech, and especially publicity depend on the efficaciousness of the objective fact of promising. Promising secures the space of appearance wherein political action can be carried out.

But how is it the case that political judgments can be disinterested in this political *sensus communis* wherein it would appear that all the judgments must be interested? For Beiner these political judgments imagine the position of a possible “collocutor,” and for this reason they remain disinterested. According to Beiner it implies a commitment to communicate my judgment...Judgment is the mental process by which one projects oneself into a counterfactual situation of disinterested reflection in order to satisfy oneself and an imagined community of potential collocutors that a particular has been adequately appraised (HALKPP 119-120).

As Beiner continues, the public use of judgment tries to render the world coherent or at least intelligible “...and conferring intelligibility is the meaning of politics...” (HALKPP 100). But this “counterfactual” “projection” seems alien to the action Arendt would seem to require; after all we are dealing with publicity, not contemplation.

**Situating Eichmann in Jerusalem**

Trials, specifically, show the aforementioned ‘publicity’ that demonstrates reflective judgment. Much like constitutional conventions, trials can also show us deliberative reenactment. Leora Bilsky’s article *When Actor and Spectator Meet in the Courtroom: Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Judgment* illuminates this discussion well. Also, legal structures publicize
and guard the efficacy of promising in the space of appearance. They stabilize our standing insofar as we get say and sustain “who” we uniquely are among our partners.

The following is a gloss on some of the legal contradictions found in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. At each stage, legal precedent is challenged and recreated. Eichmann is captured, charged, and imprisoned in 1945 by the Allies at the end of WWII. In 1946 he escapes and avoids the Nuremburg Trials by hiding in Argentina. Eichmann lives secretly under the legal protection of Argentina until 1960. Israel hunts Eichmann, among others, and successfully kidnaps him in an extra-legal action in Buenos Aires, May 11, 1960. Argentina protests the slight to their sovereignty and demands Eichmann’s return. Refusing, Israel holds him, and proceeds to charge Eichmann for war crimes/crimes against humanity committed 15 years earlier during WWII in his capacity as an SS *Obersturmbannführer*, an organizer of the Holocaust. Israel tries and finally executes Eichmann, hanging him on 31 May 1962. Israel disperses his ashes into the sea.

The fact that Israel went through the trouble to try Eichmann demonstrates, each step of the way, a wider concerted form of political action. The trial itself serves as an interesting case in demonstrating how the process of expressive deliberation can quickly expand and flexibly augment legal mechanisms, inventing new legal precedents as action demands.

As noted above in the introduction, Eichmann’s trial ran the risk of becoming a show trial due to the position and new standing of Israel on the international scene. As Arendt describes, David Ben Gurion’s influence was felt in the courtroom as judges and prosecutors were selected knowing that the eyes of the world were on the events in Jerusalem—according to Arendt, the judges resisted the temptation to theatricalize the event, maintaining a sense of deliberative
restraint. But in a sense, the fact that Ben Gurion was able to mount a trial at all achieved the showing that was needed. The interplay of actor and spectator during Eichmann’s trial: reflected in the courtroom by those performing the actions of the justice process, and by spectators both near and far, by Eichmann and Arendt herself, is bound up in Arendt’s concern with judgment.

Leora Bilsky notes:

Thus, in her lectures [HALKPP] Arendt attempts to formulate a theory of judgment that will be capable of accommodating action’s tendency to force open all boundaries and bring the unprecedented into the world. This point is obscured in Arendt’s more theoretical writings but is illuminated in the book dedicated to an actual legal judgment - *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Bilsky 139).

Arendt argues that we bring reflective judgment to bear, especially in cases where previous “yardsticks of judgment” are no longer effective. Beiner notes:

The Eichmann affair brought to Arendt’s full awareness judgment’s function of assimilating in a humanely intelligible way whatever most strenuously resists such assimilation (HALKPP 99).

Bilsky notes Arendt’s point of departure in Kant, underscoring that what Kant sees in the “the onlooking position of the spectator…is the position of the judge” (WASMC 138). Bilsky asks: “what can we learn from this move from spectator to judge?” Bilsky argues that the move is crucial in Arendt’s view because the judge does not (and cannot) wish to escape from the cave of opinions, since opinions are central to the act of judgment. In other words, his spectatorship is a situated one, within human affairs” that are partial. The recent events of WWII could not but help shape the emerging legal community of Israel at the time of Eichmann’s trial (WASMC 138).

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt notes a tension in who was accused, who stood for trial: “For it was history, that as far as the prosecution was concerned, stood in the center of the
trial. ‘It is not an individual that is in the dock at this historic trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history.’” However: “Despite the intentions of Ben-Gurion and all the efforts of the prosecution, there remained an individual in the dock, a person of flesh and blood” (EJ 19-20).

Emphasizing the latter point of view, and rather than accept the Kantian metaphor that is suggestive of a distant judge, Bilsky notes that Eichmann’s judges were also flesh and blood:

…turned out to be three Israeli judges (Moshe Landau, Yitzhak Raveh, Benjamin Halvei) who were located in space (Jerusalem) and time (1961), performing their role of judging the deeds of Adolph Eichmann. It was there that Arendt confronted justice’s demand that the wall between actor and spectator be overcome and that real communication occurs in order for a just judgment to be rendered (WASMC 138).

Bilsky reads Arendt’s use of Kant differently than does Beiner. For Bilsky judgment remains “situated”; it resists being drawn away for exclusive use by a removed spectator.

Further Bilsky writes:

Caught in the dichotomy between actor and spectator…. we lose sight of the way in which Arendt's theory of judgment is directly informed by her understanding of action and her experience of legal judgment. Thus, in her lectures Arendt attempts to formulate a theory of judgment that will be capable of accommodating action's tendency to force open all boundaries and bring the unprecedented into the world. This point is obscured in Arendt's more theoretical writings but is illuminated in the book dedicated to an actual legal judgment - *Eichmann in Jerusalem*” (Bilsky 139).

Eichmann had to be dealt with in person in Israel, not Argentina. Arendt left New York and went to the trial in person. Bilsky continues:

The trial, as a juncture of legal, moral and political judgments, resists any attempt to reduce judgment to one of the two poles (actor or spectator) and demonstrates how judgment can only proceed from an ongoing dialogue between actor and spectator. I would argue that precisely this dialogic conception of judgment, this situating of judgment “in between” actors and spectators, is Arendt's unique contribution to our understanding of judgment…Thus, Arendt arrives at the unexpected conclusion that a trial is similar to a theater play in one fundamental issue: “both begin and end with the doer, not with the victim” (WASMC 140-142).
Bilsky raises many questions here. But for the purposes of this discussion, a way has been opened to consider that Kant’s model of the disinterested historical spectator can be compared to a model in which the actor and spectator are combined. While it seems reasonable to argue that the “blind poet” has an adequate view of events and might effectively redeem meaning, Arendt herself has explicated alternative approaches to understanding history, and these approaches challenge Kant’s model, especially as regards redeeming meaning, especially in consideration of the events of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{12}

In such a model, as Bilsky has described, the actor and spectator are combined in one person. The spectator is immediately present and is the acting judge in this case. Three judges are situated in the same local plurality in Eichmann’s courtroom. Such judges must somehow start to reconcile Eichmann’s role: they must identify “who” he is in the wider international, historical plurality even as they caused him to become spectator to the stories of those other witness actors, victims who turn out to survive him twice. The judges are emblematic of situated spectators; they are required to act upon their situation, to use reflective judgment.\textsuperscript{13} This doesn’t necessarily disqualify Beiner’s “blind poet” but it shows that meaning, or interpretation begins in the action itself, among the actors who guide their own meanings and report their own stories—this is made all the more clear; not only the fact of Arendt’s own actions \textit{of} interpretation within

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\textsuperscript{12}See for example Arendt’s extended discussion of Benjamin’s \textit{Theses on the Philosophy of History} in her introduction to \textit{Illuminations}, part III: Pearl Divers.
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\textsuperscript{13}Beiner writes: “In judging, as understood by Arendt, one weighs the possible judgments of an imagined other, not the actual judgments of real interlocutors” (HALKPP 92). Beiner’s point can here be set aside since in this discussion, the spectator is situated, the sharp division of spectator and actor seems artificial though it appears to conform to a path Arendt was exploring at the time of her death. Here, both the imagined, anticipated judgments of real interlocutors, and their actual uttered judgments, must be weighed by the actors and spectators. It is tempting to compare the demonstrations of the mode of theatre, its phenomenology, with the melee of a lived political act done in concert, or a trial such as Eichmann’s.
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the trial as an acting participant, but also the challenges to her interpretations and the well-known controversies *Eichmann in Jerusalem* set in motion, upon being made public, action ensued.\(^{14}\)

**Disinterested Judgment**

How is it possible to preserve disinterested judgment in a setting in which the actor and spectator are combined? How does such disinterested judgment function in a political setting as opposed to an aesthetic one? Furthermore, can the complementarity found between expression and deliberation help guide an effort to enrich an understanding of this relation between a plurality of unitary actor/spectators?

In an essay taking up Arendt’s dramaturgy referencing Juergen Habermas and Richard Sennett, Villa focuses on the concept of a commonly situated world, a shared space of appearance that works on (at least) two levels.\(^{15}\) This is consonant with Arendt’s own thoughts as expressed in *Crisis in Culture*, cited at length above, page 162. It is also aligned with Beiner and Bilsky’s interpretations of disinterested judgment, and with the trial setting to which Bilsky refers. In this case, Arendt’s analogy to dramatics is more richly articulated, and opens up paths for additional research. Here, instead of referencing trials, it refers to constitutions. Villa writes:

> To act, for Arendt, means appearing on a public stage, before diverse equals. In so doing, we leave behind the private self of needs, drives and a diffuse interiority. We take on a public persona; create a public self, one whose words and deeds are judged by the ‘audience’ of our civic peers. Arendt’s insistence on the social/political and public/private distinctions highlights the discipline, stylization, and conventionality assumed by the virtuosic political actor in the presentation of such a self. Only if actor and audience are adept at distinguishing between their civic/political selves and the self driven by material and psychological needs can something like a relatively autonomous political sphere exist.

\(^{14}\)The debate continues between Richard Wolin and Seyla Benhabib: https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/whos-on-trial-eichmann-or-anrendt/

\(^{15}\)It is beyond the scope of this discussion to fully explore Richard Sennett’s *Fall of Public Man* and the interesting way Villa compares Habermas’ and Sennett’s related discussions of Arendt’s publicly appearing world, in his essay “Arendt’s Theatricality” in *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (PPT 112-122).
Concern for this ‘in-between,’ for the structure of institutions and terms of association it sets, is what marks the political actor…In other words, action must have a constitutional referent for it to qualify as political for Arendt (PPT 118).

Political action as expressive aligns with what Villa calls the “public persona.” Such a person engages in practical deliberation, or in-the-moment action in concert with others so situated. Expression is required in order to “appear on a public stage, before diverse equals.”

Political action as deliberative aligns with retrospective judgment since the actor/spectators so involved in such concerted action are required to become “adept at distinguishing between civic/political selves…” and their other selves who require material forms of support. This effort is retrospective insofar as it has to enact judgments that not only account for immediate contemporary participants, but such deliberations are made by world historical actors (“civic/political selves”) drawing on past precedents with an eye towards maintaining promised continuity with future actors. On two levels, we continue to judge from a situated position of remove, in a manner of speaking. This is because political power used in concert can override,

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16Theatricality and political presentation raise questions. Villa notes elsewhere on the issue of the historical public persona: “Once public role-playing or mask-wearing was no longer seen as the medium of a specific truthfulness—as the means by which the actor’s voice could ‘sound through’ while his private self remained protectively hidden—the notion of a public persona became permanently and irrevocably tainted. The very conventionality of the public realm now became the problem, with the result that an impersonal presentation of self became suspect and politically self defeating. With the Revolution, we enter an epoch in which public worlds and deeds are seen as either self-serving appearances (and therefore false) or the expression of the actor's ‘true,’ authentic self...This way of viewing actions and speech, Arendt maintains, was simply impossible for Socrates or Machiavelli, both of whom thought of acting in a theatrical sense that did not obscure truth, but rather enabled it to appear” (PPT 138).

17Recall from above from Arendt’s On Revolution: “The very concept of Roman authority suggests that the act of foundation inevitably develops its own stability and permanence, and authority in this context is nothing more or less than a kind of necessary “augmentation” by virtue of which all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment and increase. Thus the original foundations of the American republic; needless to say, the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented. This notion of a coincidence of foundation and preservation by virtue of augmentation—that the “revolutionary” act of beginning something entirely new, and conservative care, which will shield this new beginning through the centuries, are interconnected—was deeply rooted in the Roman spirit…”(OR 204).
but augment immediate individual interest. Political power that ignores immediate material needs may in turn guarantee them in the long term by establishing better political structures that protect rights. It’s tempting to recall the difference between the French Revolution and the American Revolution, as interpreted by Arendt in *On Revolution*. It sustains such interest in parallel, but does so insofar as such interest also sustains the interests of co actors. This construction is an advance on Beiner’s “collocutors,” it is concerned with action without jettisoning contemplation (PPT 118).

Villa’s “relatively autonomous political sphere” is sustained by actors operating on two levels but distinguishing their actions, and those of their co actors on the basis of, as Villa argues, “a constitutional referent” which is to say the reference point, the object of promising. Here “civic/political” kinds of concerted action are played out by actors’ bearing in mind their roles as world historical actors with ties to the past and promises to the future, not merely enacting their own narrow interests or the needs of narrow communities or selves (PPT 118).  

Reflective judgment finds in a political, as opposed to aesthetic setting, the object that signals universal validity to us is not a “rose” to use Kant’s example, or a specific object of beauty or sublimity, but the more diffuse object of promising and the universality of that promising having an inclusive suffrage. The beauty of such an object has to be found in the “art” of the engagement, the sublimity might be found in the “ecstatic” form of time, from past to future, that Arendt’s political action must occupy. It must occupy it in this sense because it is done in concert with generations both past, present and future.

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18See page 84 above: this argues contra Habermas that practical deliberation (praxis) and contract (constitution) may be minimally drawn together in this qualified way.
Arguably, the promises propagated in such a setting, vis-à-vis reflective judgment conform to Kant’s description of such judgment in the sensus communis (“predicated on freedom” rather than “will”) because inasmuch as they are promises they are projected into the future, imagined and actual in the moment of concerted action. But the fabric of promising is also made up of minute agreements and sustained expectations, or acts that rely on expectations of good faith acting (HALKPP102).

Arendt’s dramaturgy, as laid out by Villa, delivers an explanation of a far richer phenomenological milieu of political action, a constitutional convention in 1787, or a trial in 1961, than the less developed paradigm of the “blind poet” observing and sympathizing with the actors embroiled in the French Revolution in 1798.

Political actors, confronted with novel situations, employ their imaginations. They have “enlarged mentalities” because the social political situation demands it. Participation in the

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19A further course of research would argue that promises cannot be actual, any more than constitutions. Rather than the paper of the matter, the action, the expected field of good faith and commitments required to sustain such promising action is borne by imagination, the catalog of outcomes and disappointments is assuaged by Arendt’s forgiveness, see Chapter 2 above.

20A reflective political judgment may require an object like an action, interaction, or a response to a promise kept or broken. Contra Beiner, the object “not perceived”—a situation of political action (based on promising), is arguably an object incompletely or only partially perceived: the object of shared imagined “perception” among plural actors. Standing in place in Daley Plaza, or the Washington Mall, showing up for a demonstration, all of which I perceive, is also my imagination of the shared expectations, commitments, and the presence of co actors, understood as political co actors, rather than understood as passersby. Rendering a judgment on such a shared object requires the creation of a new rule or placeholder: it is a new form of concerted political action. Actors imagine themselves and their co-actors as interacting on a broader stage that enacts the plurality, even a plurality across generations. They are world-historical actors putting themselves not only in the place of their immediate co-actors, but also in the situations of an unlimited community of predecessors, contemporaries, and future actors who will be confronted again with the requirement to act into the unknown in concert. Such actors, in the trial case noted above, including even Arendt as witness, were not only confronted with Eichmann himself, but with his political actions stretching from who he in particular was in the recent past, even to the present. After all, isn’t the ongoing controversy over Eichmann’s monstrosity (or banality) about how he in particular was able to extend his political judgments and actions throughout a political system?
matters at hand require more from perception than what is needed for work (done in isolation) or labor (biological survival). To quote Arendt:

The point of the matter…is that my judgment of a particular instance does not merely depend upon my perception, but upon my representing to myself something which I do not perceive (HALKPP 108).

The history, tradition, and possibility of better, even revolutionary political actions are the things “not perceived.” They are imagined; and yet they are staged in concert with others. The very thing that produces deliberative reenactment as such, the felt need to innovate upon what has gone before to augment some constitution or law is the creative expressive demand of natality practiced upon that very extant deliberative record or constitution. It is the bettering of promises. The reenacting actors at once conduct a spontaneous political action—an amendment—that has no guarantee of success but for their own commitment to the innovation or augmentation upon what has gone before, the same sort of ground they too will later be judged to have walked.21

This is not unlike the practice in theatre of producing the revered cannon of plays from Aeschylus to Hellman, recreating, restaging in order to augment our experience of a story because it has not yet been solved. It is here possible to project further research into Arendt’s political dramaturgy. Her work has yet to be fully mined for references to theatricality; her early life and writings may give hints to her thought in this regard. Richard Sennett’s, *Fall of the Public Man*, read together with much of Habermas’ work, as Villa has started, may help to enrich such an investigation. Paul Friedland’s, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* on the topic of the French Revolution may both

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21OR 206 “If these legends could teach anything at all…ff.
challenge and amplify Arendt’s *On Revolution* as it assesses the basis of political change that appeared to run parallel with Denis Diderot’s writings on the theatre. Early modern and modern theatricality, and modern revolutions appear to be more than accidentally connected by a similar period in time. In this respect, the practice of the theatre turns out to be functional demonstration of the back and forth of political meaning as it is traded across history between actor/spectators even as if political action were moving across a stage.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{22}\)In his work *From Ritual to Theatre* Victor Turner writes this: “For me, the anthropology of performance is an essential part of the anthropology of experience. In a sense, every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, poetry, is an explanation and explication of life itself, as Dilthey often argued. Through the performance process itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of sociocultural life is drawn forth—Dilthey use the term *Ausdruck*, “an expression, “ from *ausdrucken*, literally, “to press or squeeze out.” “Meaning is squeezed out of an event which has either been directly experienced by the dramatist or poet or cries out for penetrative imaginative understanding (Verstehen). And experience is itself a process which “presses out” to an expression “which completes it.” Here the etymology of “performance” may give us a helpful clue, for it has nothing to do with “form,” but derives from Old French *parfournir*, “to complete” or carry out thoroughly” A performance, then is the proper finale of an experience” (FRT 13).
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