Refuting the Single Story of Political Action in Hannah Arendt: Navigating Arendt's Eurocentrism and Anti-Black Racism

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REFUTING THE SINGLE STORY OF
POLITICAL ACTION IN HANNAH ARENDT:
NAVIGATING ARENDT’S EUROCENTRISM AND ANTI-BLACK RACISM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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INTRODUCTION

PERSISTENT PREJUDICE

“One of the reasons for the power and danger of prejudices lies in the fact that something of the past is always hidden within them. Upon closer examination, we realize that a genuine prejudice always conceals some previously formed judgement which originally had its own appropriate and legitimate experiential basis, and which evolved into a prejudice only because it was dragged through time without its ever being reexamined or revised.” –Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics”

The above quote addresses how unexamined prejudice can wreak havoc on politics. Within the larger context of the essay, “Introduction into Politics,” Hannah Arendt’s comments on prejudice and the need to examine and adjust one’s beliefs are part of an introduction into the experience of politics. Similar to Karl Jasper’s *Einführung in die Philosophie* (*Introduction into Philosophy*), Arendt’s essay mirrors her mentor’s book which “led its readers into the experience of communicating philosophic thought.” An introduction into the experience of politics, on the other hand, aims to explore how humans ought to act politically. Arendt defines politics as a distinct and intentional way of existing among other humans which is best exemplified by a participatory democracy. But a crucial hindrance to politics is prejudice; hence, Arendt calls us to critically examine the root of our biases in order to adjust our future judgements and actions. In turn, her goal is to encourage a robust involvement in politics which is mindful of prejudice.

This passage from “Introduction into Politics” makes two relevant claims. The first asserts that past experiences inform present judgements—a claim which can be applied to some of Arendt’s

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2 Jerome Kohn, “Introduction,” in *The Promise of Politics*, viii n. †
infamous arguments. In order to best understand these prejudiced texts such as “Reflections on Little Rock,” “A Reply to Critics”—her response to critics of “Reflections on Little Rock”—and “On Violence,” all of which strongly indicate anti-Black prejudice, it is necessary to follow her own suggestions. Arendt’s suggestion, which is the second relevant claim in this passage, concerns the harmful and dangerous nature of unexamined prejudices. In other words, because of the racist arguments she makes in these texts, it is necessary to examine, as she suggests, and reevaluate her understanding of politics. In this dissertation I examine political action in particular. This reevaluation works toward a more productive political realm which has the potential to be more critical and more inclusive.

The present dissertation examines the roots of prejudice in Arendt’s theory of politics in order to propose a more inclusive model of political action. As indicated above, Arendt’s arguments concerning desegregation in the American South in “Reflection on Little Rock” and the Black Student Movement in “On Violence” perpetuate anti-Black racism—a claim I substantiate in the conclusion. Keeping in mind Arendt’s later prejudice, I critically examine her theorization of political action across a variety of her books and essays with the intent to uncover the roots of her bias.

Through this investigation, I argue that there exist two versions of political action in Arendt’s thought—one which is exclusive because it is ideal in nature and the second which is nonideal and more inclusive. The first can be found in The Human Condition, the primary source Arendt scholars turn for her theorization of political action. I argue that Arendt’s theorization of political action in this text is idealized and utopian in nature. This idealized approach to political action limits the number and kind of people who can participate as political actors. The result is that
the primary version, or single story of, political action within Arendt’s corpus is exclusive to privileged individuals—generally this entails wealthy white men. Yet, I claim that another version of political action exists in Arendt’s thought even though it is often overlooked and underappreciated. Earlier texts such as Rabel Varnhagen: Life of a Jewish Woman and a variety of texts from 1930s and 1940s contain valuable examples of political action which are nonideal in nature or inextricably linked with lived experiences. More specifically, I argue that Rabel, Arendt’s biography of the German-Jewish intellectual who deeply desired social recognition is a quintessential example of an early theorization of political action. The biography’s nonideal nature speaks from a particular standpoint and in turn acknowledges the social and political injustices that impeded Rahel’s attempts at social acceptance. Additionally, I argue that Arendt’s essays and newspaper articles from the 1930s and 1940s act as her practicum after her initial theorization of political action in Rabel. The texts analyzed during this timeframe act as personal examples of political action which Arendt herself enacted. These enactments are nonideal in nature and recognize the lived experience of oppression and persecution, and how that can diminish the possibility of political action.

Proposing two versions of political action within Arendt’s thought is valuable for two reasons. First, it is in response to, and in alignment with Kathryn Sophia Belle’s claim that aspects of Arendt’s thought perpetuate an anti-Black racism. Her 2014 book, Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question, forcefully calls for a reevaluation of Arendt’s politics. My ideal and nonideal versions of political action contribute to Belle’s investigation into Arendt’s anti-Black racism by examining other areas of Arendt’s politics that potentially contain anti-Black racism and Eurocentrism, namely.

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3 The subsequent chapter describes at length what I mean by “a single story,” as explained by Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Adichie. In short, Adichie claims that “a single story” dominates the narrative around an individual or group of people. In this sense, “a single story” perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices.
political action. Through this examination I have developed the two versions which can help readers and scholars of Arendt better understand her prejudices.

The second reason for proposing two versions of Arendtian political action concerns my methodology. As the subsequent chapter elaborates, I am interested in developing an account of Arendtian political action that is reflective of diversity and inclusivity. In this sense, I propose the two versions of political action to create what I call a multi-dimensional account of the concept. Unlike a blueprint, which is two-dimensional, my multi-dimensional account of political action includes both the ideal and nonideal versions of the concept, as well as a plethora of perspectives from scholars of color on political action and its impediments. By including a diverse collection of perspectives, largely from scholars of Critical Philosophy of Race, I intend to promote a more inclusive account of Arendtian political action that does not ignore her racist prejudices.

These two versions of political action ought not exist separately. Instead, I propose that readers, teachers, and scholars of Arendt hold in tension the ideal and exclusive version alongside of the nonideal and inclusive version. I do not intend to propose a reading of Arendt that overlooks her racist arguments and prejudices in order to promote a less problematic version of political action.

In order to propose a multi-dimensional account of political action I begin by outlining my methodology in Chapter 1. This chapter describes the intentionally antiracist approach to this dissertation—an approach aimed at developing a multi-dimensional account of political action that recognizes Arendt’s racism. Antiracist research in the social sciences, Critical Philosophy of Race, Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Standpoint Theory inform my method. Additionally, in this chapter I propose what I call “genuine inclusivity” or a specific reading of Arendt and Arendt scholarship which is mindful of racism.
After establishing my methodology, I turn to *The Human Condition* in Chapter 2. This text is the primary location where Arendt theorizes political action. Yet, as I have indicated above, I argue that her theorization of the concept in this text is ideal, as in utopian. The ideal nature of her explanation of and argument for political action excludes a multitude of individuals and groups. Such exclusion undermines Arendt’s own project in this text which is to encourage more political action. While the idea of political action is not often considered problematic in Arendt’s thought, I argue that its exclusive nature diminishes the possibilities for political action.

The exclusive nature of political action in *The Human Condition* is clearly a problem. As such, I turn in Chapter 2 to Arendt’s second dissertation, *Rahel Varnhagen: Life of a Jewish Woman*. In this chapter I argue that Arendt’s biography of Rahel promotes a nonideal version of political action that ought to be considered alongside the version found in *The Human Condition*. In writing from a nonideal perspective, Arendt provides an account of the concept that is aware of, and attentive to, race, privilege, and epistemic injustices. This early theorization of political action can help to mediate the exclusive nature of political action found in *The Human Condition*. As a result, these two versions can better realize Arendt’s goal of increased political action.

In addition to the nonideal version of political action in *Rahel*, I also turn to the nonideal examples of political action that can be found in a variety of texts Arendt wrote in the 1930s and 1940s. These underappreciated texts continue to add to my multi-dimensional reading of political action, particularly because they contain examples of Arendt enacting political action herself. In this sense, I understand Arendt’s exemplification of political action as her experimentation of her early theory found in *Rahel*. While these examples help to further develop a more robust account of the concept, I argue in this chapter that Arendt’s Eurocentrism begins to impede her initially inclusive account of political action.
Finally, I conclude briefly by turning to the clearly racist texts mentioned above—“Reflections on Little Rock” and “On Violence”—to demonstrate how Arendt’s exclusive version of political action is dangerous. In “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt does not consider school desegregation to be a political issue—a view that limits the possibilities of political action for Black Americans. “On Violence” argues that the Black Student Movement of the 1960s is also not political; however, she lauds concurrent white student activism on college campuses as political action. While these two texts are instructive in their own right, within the context of my two versions of political action, it is clear that minoritized individuals are often barred from political action. Put differently, the version of political action applied to desegregation and the Black Student Movement is ideal and clearly exclusive and this is the version I trace back to *The Human Condition*. Instead of solely relying on this version, by examining these two texts, I argue that we must recognize the multi-dimensional account of political action in order to hold in tension the racist and Eurocentric nature of the concept alongside the nonideal and more inclusive version.

Before moving on to my methodology in the following chapter, allow me a brief but significant rhetorical question. Why should readers, teachers, and scholars of Arendt recognize the racist and exclusive prejudices in Arendt’s theory of political action? I have two reasons—the first of which is relevant to Arendt’s corpus while the second concerns current political sentiments. As I have indicated above, relying solely on Arendt’s theorization of political action in *The Human Condition* undermines her arguments for the expansion of political action. She believes political action has been in decline since late antiquity and that the most salient way to combat totalitarianism is through political action. Given her earnest desire to prevent further totalitarian regimes from gaining power as Nazi Germany did, she ardently argues for a renewed interest in political action.
Yet, the ideal nature of political action in *The Human Condition* restricts the number and kind of people who can participate. Put differently, this version undermines Arendt’s own project.

Additionally, there has been a rise in Arendt’s popularity since Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential election. Academic texts in addition to public philosophy and quotidian news sources have taken up Arendt to understand the rise in popularity of authoritarian figures like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Narendra Modi. While a number of these sources are mainly interested in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, many rely on Arendt’s politics to respond to the terrors of totalitarianism she outlines in *Origins*. Relying solely on *Origins* or *The Human Condition* to understand and apply Arendt’s theory of political action as a countermeasure to the threat of totalitarianism results in the diminished version of political action I outline in Chapter 2. In order to best counteract totalitarianism, a more inclusive and multi-dimensional version of political action is necessary so that more people can become Arendtian political actors. An increase in political actors results in a more diverse and representative participatory politics. Given Arendt’s increased popularity, it is even more important to acknowledge both versions of political action in Arendt’s thought, so that new readers do not enact and promote her problematic and exclusive version of political action found in *The Human Condition*.

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CHAPTER ONE

MOTIVATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

“So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Kathryn Sophia Belle’s *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* is a widely influential, canonical text in Arendt studies. It is also highly controversial. The first section of this chapter aims to outline how *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* influences and motivates this dissertation, how this dissertation differentiates itself from Belle, and how this dissertation advances the scholarship at the intersection of philosophy of race and Arendt studies after, and largely because of, Belle. In short, this dissertation is a continuation of Belle’s critical investigation into Arendt’s Eurocentrism and anti-Black racism. Such an investigation is first and foremost indebted to Belle for her forcefully insightful and persuasive elucidations of the harmful distinctions Arendt made between the private, public, and social spheres of existence. Like all philosophical investigations, there are limits to what one can accomplish in a single book. What I aim to propose here is not a critique of Belle’s limitations in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, nor do I intend to frame this dissertation as an

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2 In *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), Arendt designates the active life, or the *vita activa*, as consisting of three realms of existence: private, public, and social. At times Arendt indicates the social is a realm of its own; however, at other times she indicates the social is the result of private and public activities blending into one another. The public realm is often considered synonymous with politics or the political realm. These three realms, according to Arendt, ought to be kept separate. Her main concern at the outset of *The Human Condition* is that politics is relegated to thought (*theoria*) when it ought to be practical or an active pursuit (*praxis*). Additionally, Arendt is concerned that mass society’s concern with conforming behavior will replace action in the political realm. These two arguments, for Arendt, lead her to claim that the three realms ought to be kept separate in order to privilege and protect politics.
addendum to what Belle might have overlooked. Instead, my engagement with Belle is intentionally collaborative. I view Belle’s work as a successfully run marathon—one of many in a marathon relay. With the publication of *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, Belle has crossed the finish line and it is time for others to carry the relay baton.

After establishing the motivation behind this dissertation, the second half of this chapter explains the methodology guiding the project. I have intentionally chosen to incorporate the philosophies of other women, women of color, and people of color in this project. While I do not exclusively rely on historically minoritized philosophers, I do privilege their scholarship in accordance with feminist standpoint theory and what I argue is an antiracist research methodology. Feminist standpoint theory asserts that minoritized or oppressed individuals can, by virtue of their lived experiences, offer valuable insights that individuals from more privileged groups are insensitive to or ignorant of. As a methodology, feminist standpoint theory is committed to including minoritized perspectives in order to confront and work against the historically predominant, white

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3 Janice Moulton in “A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method,” in *Discovering Reality*, eds. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. P. Hintikka, (Dordrecht: Springer, 1983), argues against the mainstream method in philosophy—adversarial criticism. She claims that “the philosophic enterprise is seen as an unimpassioned debate between adversaries who try to defend their own views against counterexamples and produce counterexamples to opposing views” and that “it is assumed that the only, or at any rate, the best, way of evaluating work in philosophy is to subject it to the strongest or most extreme opposition.” (9) In an attempt to work against the adversary model, I instead embrace a more collaborative model which better reflects antiracist theory and standpoint theory. Intentional collaboration is meant to actively embrace and engage with philosophies and philosophers from historically minoritized arenas. The adversarial paradigm, on the other hand, strikes me as opportunist by incentivizing dissent and argumentation which runs the risk of diminishing the philosophic value of already minoritized voices.

and male, social location from which philosophical knowledge is often developed, disseminated and perpetuated.

**Motivation**

Arendt’s public-private-social division has been the subject of debate and criticism since the publication of *The Human Condition*; and, Belle’s analysis of the racial discrimination inherent in the division persuasively adds to the existing literature. Yet, in addition to Belle’s forceful argument about the division of the *vita activa*, her major contribution to the field of Arendt studies is a renewed, scrupulous investigation—through the lens of the philosophy of race—into the conceptual framework of Arendt’s thought. In other words, I believe *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* opens up the possibility to assess other areas of Arendt’s thought through the lens of race and theories of race-based discrimination.

Belle approaches Arendt’s thought in a way that both appreciates the contributions she has made as one of “the most insightful and influential intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century,” while not “ignoring or bracketing her problematic assertions, assumptions, and oversights regarding the Negro question.” Belle is persuasive in arguing that Arendt’s problematic arguments and essays, specifically “Reflections on Little Rock,” ought not be considered misrepresentative of her thought—fringe ideas that are not reflected in her other, more popular works such as *The Human Condition* or *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* demonstrate that Arendt’s anti-Black and Eurocentric sentiments influence the private-public-social divide in *The

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5 A prominent argument concerning the need for a strict division can be found in Hanna Pitkin’s *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) where she argues that Arendt’s claim that the political realm is shrinking as a result of the social realm is problematic and counterintuitive. See also n20 for continued debate concerning the feminist implications of a strict division of the *vita activa*.

Human Condition. In this sense, Arendt’s distinctions of the *vita activa* are fundamentally skewed by her own perceptions of others, particularly non-central European and non-white Americans.

The move away from classifying Arendt’s problematic texts—“Reflections on Little Rock,” *On Violence*, *Civil Disobedience*, and *On Revolution*—as outliers and toward recognizing them as reflective of or consistent with her thought elsewhere is influential for this dissertation. I claim this is a valuable approach which aims to better understand not only the problematic aspects of philosophical thought and thinkers, but also the argumentative moves scholars make to excuse those problems. Put differently, this approach aims to work against what is called “recentering whiteness”—the habit of privileging white knowledge, perceptions, or traditions over and against others—by making explicit the sustained attempt to dismiss or ignore Arendt’s racist arguments. Belle describes Arendt’s own recentering of whiteness as a “source of entitlement and a position from which one can raise objections—all the while erasing whiteness as a source of the very problem in question.” Belle has in mind Arendt’s correspondence with James Baldwin after the publication of his essay, “Letter form a Region in My Mind,” as well as her correspondence with Ralph Ellison after the publication of “Reflections on Little Rock.” In both instances, Arendt privileges her own theories and arguments over and against those of Baldwin and Ellison. As I will

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7 The idea of “re-centering whiteness” is notably explained by Shannon Sullivan’s *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2014) and George Yancy’s *Look a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012). Sullivan describes the act of re-centering whiteness within the context of “good white liberals” distinguishing themselves from white supremacists. It is a form of posturing that signals one is “good” and not racist; however, such posturing does not work toward any tangible anti-racist goal. Instead, it merely reasserts their privileged existence over and against other whites. Yancy, on the other hand, explains this idea within the framework of narcissism. In Chapter 6 of *Look a White!* Yancy argues that white responses to racism often deny the experience of the other person in question and instead obsessively insist on their virtuous character (157). Above, I refer to the desire to assert Arendt as offering a sophisticated and illuminating account of political action as an example of re-centering whiteness because it too easily overlooks her Eurocentrism and anti-Black racism. If we only read her as a valuable thinker in her early Jewish writings because she’s not being overtly racist like in “On Violence” or “Reflections on Little Rock” we end up insisting that she’s really a good person and disregarding how her racist beliefs affect her political thought.

8 Belle, 5.
demonstrate shortly, an objection to *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* recents whiteness by distracting from how race and privilege affect Arendt’s thought.

As mentioned above, Belle is primarily concerned with the conceptual framework of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*. This means that she focuses on Arendt’s insistence of a private-public-social divide. For the purposes of her arguments, Belle examines how this division affects Arendt’s more problematic texts. While Belle addresses the Arendtian theory of politics as it exists in the public realm, she does not extensively address Arendt’s theory of political action as the activity *par excellence* of that realm. And this is for good reason—an examination of political action, an already contested concept in Arendt’s thought, would be the work of another project. The current dissertation takes up that exact project.

In *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, Belle asserts four main arguments about the relationship between Arendt’s conceptual framework and her misunderstanding of Black American life. Only the first three arguments are relevant to this dissertation, so I will not discuss the fourth and final argument, which concerns Arendt’s theory of judgement. The first, however, claims that Arendt’s understanding of the “Negro question”—an intentionally broad category concerning issues such as segregation, discrimination, or race-based power dynamics—is that the “question” is not a question, but a problem. More specifically, Arendt sees “the Negro question as a Negro problem rather than a white problem.” My interpretation of Belle’s claims is that Arendt is ignorant of the active role white folks play in the Negro question, for example by legalizing segregation, by normalizing discrimination, and by oppressing Black Americans. Belle’s claim infers that Arendt only recognizes the effect of these examples—that Black Americans are segregated, discriminated against, and oppressed—thereby making the problem their own, not the resultant product of white

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9 Belle, 2.
legislation, policy, or habit. For the purposes of this dissertation, this initial argument aligns with my own claims concerning Arendt’s Eurocentrism which I argue inhibits her ability to comprehend beyond her social and cultural horizon. Additionally, I accept this argument of Belle’s as valid and persuasive. As such, the claim that Arendt is ignorant of the white role in the Negro question acts as a premise in my larger argument. By accepting the claim that Arendt is ignorant of the effects of white domination and power on the Negro question, I am able to apply the claim to my narrowed focus—political action. In other words, Belle’s initial argument concerning the “white problem” affects the Arendtian concept of political action, in addition to the public-private-social framework.

Belle’s second argument claims that Arendt’s analysis of the “Jewish question” does not transfer, as one would hope, to her understanding of the “Negro question.” Similar to the Negro question, the Jewish question is an amorphous category of social, religious, and political concerns and deliberations. Belle is right to express dismay at the lost opportunity—Arendt’s own experience as a persecuted Jew, a refugee, and an immigrant could have better informed her assessment of American politics but she did not see it this way. I want to add to Belle’s second argument by claiming that Arendt’s experiences as a Jew and her writings as a political thinker can help us delineate where Arendt fell short so that white academics can avoid her mistakes, particularly within the context of political action which I argue concerns the issue of speaking for others, epistemic hubris, and willful ignorance. Put differently, I aim to narrow my focus on political action in Arendt’s Jewish writings. More specifically, as Chapter 4 will argue, I claim that it is Arendt’s early texts from the 1930s and 1940s that act as a practicum for Arendt. While she had early theories

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about political action at the time, she more importantly enacted them in the 1930s and 1940s in a Jewish context—writing for Aufbau and organizing for Youth Aliyah, for example. It is her direct involvement with Jewish movements and issues that provided her keen insight into the Jewish question. Because she was actively removed from the Civil Rights Movement, Black experiences in the American South, and Black students she did not have a comparable perspective by which she could assess, even humbly, the Negro question.

The third argument Belle makes in Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question, which spans the entire book, concerns the divide between the private, public, and social realms. She claims that this division has racist implications and therefore undermines her ability to understand the Negro question. In so doing, she reads “Reflections on Little Rock” and The Human Condition as interconnected. This argument interprets how Arendt’s strict division of the public or political, social, and private realms of life affects her ability to adequately comprehend the political concerns, activist agenda, and demands of Black Americans in the latter half of the 20th century. The categories are unreflective of reality because they only narrowly perceive her Eurocentric horizon and therefore allow for discrimination in the social realm. As Belle notes, according to Arendt, “The social realm is a space where discrimination should be expected and permitted.” While she explains that Arendt permitted discrimination in the social realm, she also acknowledges that Arendt believes it ought not be considered a political matter, or part of the public realm. Discrimination was a fact of existence, according to Arendt, but it should not be legalized. Instead, it ought to be allowed within the context of social matters such as which hotel to vacation at or which school to send one’s children. Belle cites Arendt in “Reflections on Little Rock” as stating, “There cannot be a ‘right to go into any hotel or recreation area or place of amusement’ because many of these are in the realm of the purely

11 Belle, 45.
social where the right to free association, and therefore discrimination, has greater validity than the principle of equality.” According to Belle, Arendt’s insistence on the private-public-social division is harmful to Black Americans because “The political, private, and social realms are not as clear-cut as her paradigm suggests” because “Social and political inequalities are interconnected and reinforce one another.” Their interconnection is best exemplified by desegregation. While Arendt only conceived of desegregation as a social concern, it was inextricably tied up with political concerns surrounding Jim Crow laws. Desegregation is not purely a social or political concern, but an issue that exists at the intersection of social interactions and political arguments for equal access to education.

While Belle does address the implications the private-public-social divide has on political action, I argue that there is more to uncover that moves beyond the division theorized in The Human Condition. She notes that “Arendt’s exclusionary account of the public realm is inadequate because the public-private divide limits political action for those persons who are confined to the private realm.” In other words, caretakers, domestic workers, undocumented and unprotected immigrants, and children—all groups that remain in the private realm of the home—do not have the same access to politics that more privileged groups do. I take this assessment of Arendt’s private-public divide as a foundational claim in this dissertation. With this claim established, I am able to further investigate

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12 Belle, 44. The quote from “Reflections on Little Rock” occurs on page 52.

13 Belle, 47.

14 As the concluding chapter will address, desegregation and access to mainstream, white America is not universally desired or viewed as wholly positive. See bell hooks’ explanation of the harms desegregation enacted on her safe educational environment when her school district was forced to desegregate in the introduction to Teaching to Transgress (1994). For more detailed analysis of the same by hooks see also Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope (2003), particularly Chapters 5, “What Happens When White People Change” and 6 “Standards.”

15 Belle, 56.
how political action operates, not only in *The Human Condition*, but also in other, less read, texts of Arendt’s such as *Rahel Varnhagen: Life of a Jewish Woman* and her early texts from the 1930s and 1940s. In this sense, I advance this third argument of Belle’s by claiming that Arendt’s theory of political action, in addition to the private-public-social divide, also undermines her ability to understand the myriad experiences of Black Americans.

**Contributions to the Literature**

In summary, it is Kathryn Sophia Belle’s 2014 book, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, which is the main motivation behind this dissertation. Her work in this text is germinal because it has provided fertile material to further advance scholarship at the intersection of philosophy of race and Arendt studies. Albeit controversial, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* is canonical. Anyone working on Arendt and race is remiss to overlook Belle’s impact in the field. In what follows I provide a brief commentary on an important review of *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* as a means to contextualize my methodology. I then end this section with a review of the relevant Arendt scholarship preceding Belle’s book.

Belle’s book is contentious. Reviews, particularly the Arendt Center’s Roger Berkowitz’s, and ensuing scholarship are adversarial. Before turning to this review, I find it necessary to first summarize Arendt’s interaction with James Baldwin. In the fall of 1962, after the publication of Baldwin’s “Letter from a Region in My Mind” in *The New Yorker*, Arendt wrote a letter both congratulating Baldwin and informing him of her authority to critique his arguments. Baldwin’s essay addressed love in the political realm, and Arendt saw fit to tell Baldwin love has no place in

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16 See also David Munson’s review (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, 2017) which faults Belle for focusing too intensely on race in her investigation into Arendt’s private-public-social divide. Not all reviews of *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, however, are adversarial in nature. See Grace Hunt’s review in *Hypatia Reviews Online* (2015) and Howard A. Doughty’s *College Quarterly* 20, no. 2, 2017, review.
that realm—it must stay in the private realm. As Belle recounts their correspondence in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, she notes that Arendt telling Baldwin that she is “‘entitled to raise objections’” “neglects to engage Baldwin on his own terms. Far from articulating exactly how Baldwin’s article has helped her to understand the Negro question differently, Arendt largely ignores the terms of the question as outlined in the very article to which she is objecting.”

In other words, Arendt fails to engage with Baldwin’s own argument, context, or lived experience and instead inserts her conceptual framework—the divisions of the private, public, and social realms—effectively ignoring Baldwin’s argument. I claim that Berkowitz’s review of *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* replicates Arendt’s mistake with Baldwin.

In his review, Roger Berkowitz, the director of Bard’s Arendt Center, begins by conceding that it is not difficult to find racial discrimination at play in Arendt’s thought, yet he quickly asserts her contributions to the philosophical and political scholarship concerning totalitarianism, antisemitism, and civil rights worries concerning anti-miscegenation laws. This quick redirection is the first step in ignoring Belle on her terms. Belle does not deny Arendt’s contributions in other fields but instead is interested in deeply engaging with Arendt’s conceptual framework in *The Human Condition* and its implications for her problematic assessment of Black Americans. The second, and more important step, is his explicit denial of how Belle engaged Arendt’s thought on race. He writes, “To do justice to Arendt’s thinking on questions of race requires moving beyond accusatory citation. What is required is an exploration of how Arendt contributes to our understanding of race within the modern contexts of totalitarianism, de-politicization, and assimilation.”

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17 Belle, 4.

preceding this he notes that that is what Belle “sets out to do,” his review ultimately claims that she does not accomplish this. Yet, I am not convinced that exploring “race within the modern contexts of totalitarianism, de-politicization, and assimilation” is actually Belle’s goal. Instead, this is Berkowitz imposing his own terms of what he thinks constitutes a valuable and valid investigation into Arendt’s ideas on race.

Additionally, Berkowitz goes on to assert that Belle’s claims to “discredit Arendt’s arguments by accusing her of being racist and serve as cover for Gines’s refusal to engage the substance of Arendt’s argument.” In essence, Berkowitz is claiming that Belle’s book does not “do justice” to Arendt’s thought on race because she is merely accusing Arendt of anti-Black racism. While Belle’s book does do more than merely, repetitiously lambast Arendt as racist, I claim that it is necessary to first and foremost recognize and bear witness to the harmful racism which influenced Arendt’s thought. Belle does this and she also goes on to substantiate her claims concerning the wide-reaching influence of anti-Black racism on Arendt’s thought. Berkowitz is unable to see Belle’s substantiation for what it is because he frames an investigation into Arendt on race differently. In establishing the criteria for what constitutes a valid or satisfactory investigation into Arendt’s race-based thinking, Berkowitz fails to engage with Belle on her own terms and, in turn, repeats Arendt’s mistake with Baldwin.

Additionally, Berkowitz’s review is a recentering of whiteness—an attempt to recognize but distract from Arendt’s problematic claims. While there are positive reviews of *Hannah Arendt and

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19 Berkowitz, 817. Kathryn Sophia Belle published *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* under the name Kathryn T. Gines.

20 In *Look a White!* George Yancy advocates for white folks to “tarry” with their racism and racist world. I claim the same ought to happen in light of Berkowitz’s review. By recognizing Arendt’s racism but quickly moving to account for her more positive or generative contributions, the seriousness of racism’s pervasiveness is dampened. We ought to sit with the discomfort of researching racist philosophers and not be too hasty to overlook or distract from their problematic theories or arguments.
the Negro Question that counteract Berkowitz’s assessment, as Director of the Arendt Center he is widely influential. His refrain, that Belle merely repeats the claim that Arendt is racist, is a strawman argument. This dissertation, in order to intentionally avoid oversimplifying Belle’s arguments, aims to pursue an antiracist approach to investigating the role of race and racism in Arendt’s theory of political action. Before addressing how I intend to accomplish this, a brief survey of the appropriate literature preceding Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question is necessary.

There exists a rich scholarship of critical responses to Hannah Arendt’s work. Within feminism, Arendt has often been a source of intrigue and debate, particularly concerning her distinction of the private, public, and social realms of existence and her relative silence on the woman question. While this vein of critique is well-established, criticisms of Arendt’s Eurocentrism and anti-Black racism have more recently emerged in the last three decades. Shiraz Dossa’s The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt, offers a natural starting point for what I claim is a nonideal vein of critique of Arendt’s private-public-social spheres of existence. Dossa focuses on Arendt’s hyper-fixation on the public realm as the sole location of politics and the resultant limitations of such an uncompromising claim. While there is overlap with feminist philosophers, this strain of criticism is less concerned with Arendt’s silence on women and more with the implications of her Eurocentrism. Notably, David Scott and Richard King also address Arendt’s Eurocentrism within the context of the Haitian Revolution and her meta-awareness, yet ultimate acceptance of the confines of Eurocentrism, respectively. And then there is the work of

Robert Bernasconi and Kathryn Sophia Belle who move beyond claims of Eurocentrism to more precisely address Arendt’s anti-Black racism. While Arendt is often thought of as a controversial figure, mostly for her assessment of Adolf Eichmann and his trial, her work on the realm of politics has certainly garnered unsavory attention.

One immediate reaction to this assessment of recent scholarship on Arendt is to ask what sets her apart from any other philosopher with problematic presumptions and arguments. For the purposes of this dissertation, the answer is, most likely nothing. It is unimportant to merely categorize Arendt as racist, outdated, or insensitive to other cultures, ethnicities, or races. I am uninterested in dismissing Arendt out of hand for her harmful missteps; and to be clear, the same can be said of this vein of scholarship. Instead, the aim of this dissertation is to do exactly what Arendt herself claims to be doing—"to think what we are doing"—with the added benefit of hindsight and the intellectual tradition of nonideal critiques of Arendt. Put differently, I aim to advance the scholarship following Kathryn Sophia Belle’s book which forcefully argues for a new understanding of Arendtian politics given her anti-Black racism.

In summary, it is Kathryn Sophia Belle’s 2014 book, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, which is the main motivation behind this dissertation. Her work in this text is germinal because it advances scholarship at the intersection of philosophy of race and Arendt studies. Albeit controversial, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* is canonical. Anyone working on Arendt and race ought not overlook Belle’s impact on the field.

**Methodology**

In this section I outline my antiracist research methodology which relies on scholarship from the social sciences, critical philosophy of race, and Black Feminist Standpoint Theory. Research in

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the field of continental philosophy does not have a prescribed or customary research methodology to counteract racist and white supremacist thought which, I claim, results in the continued dominance of male and white scholarship. However, there are other fields of study from which I glean anti-racist methodological approaches and concerns. I briefly explain some social science approaches to antiracist methodologies, critical philosophy of race’s methodologies and its influence on continental philosophy, and end with Black Feminist Standpoint Theory—all of which inform my approach to Arendtian political action.

In the social sciences, there are ongoing debates concerning antiracist research methodologies. George Dei, Professor of Social Justice Education at University of Toronto, in his introduction to Critical Issues in Anti-Racist Research Methodologies argues that all research, regardless of the field of study, must critically analyze the implication of race on knowledge production. He writes,

Every researcher must acknowledge the crucial impact of race identity and social difference. Our subjective identities and political locations inform how we produce knowledge and come to interpret the world. Along with this important knowledge, antiracist research must acknowledge the inherent asymmetrical power relations that are structured along lines of difference.

While conversations concerning antiracist pedagogy have become more common in the United States since the summer of 2020 when police brutality and police killings prompted nationwide protests and influenced similar movements abroad, there is still more that can be done to develop antiracist research methods in philosophy. As Dei suggests, a starting point is recognition of one’s

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23 By white supremacist, I do not mean membership in a specific hate group. Rather, I mean the institution of white dominance which privileges white knowledge, power, and existence over and against minoritized knowledge, power, and existence.


25 Dei, 5.
social and political location and the related power dynamics. White philosophers have dominated the field and in turn so have white ideals and theories. Intentionally engaging in an antiracist research entails a recurring awareness of the prevalence of white scholarship and its effects on the philosophy of minoritized individuals—a silencing, dismissal, or disapproval of their scholarship and place in the field.\textsuperscript{26} The antiracist research methodology practiced in this dissertation privileges minoritized philosophy and philosophers.\textsuperscript{27} This manifests in two distinct ways—working within the framework of feminist standpoint theory and collaboratively, as opposed to adversarially, engaging with Kathryn Sophia Belle’s arguments in \textit{Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question}.

Scholarship in critical philosophy of race also provides helpful methodological considerations, particularly when applied to history of philosophy and continental philosophy. Investigating a philosophical figure’s, such as Hannah Arendt’s, anti-Black racism is a contentious endeavor. While Arendt’s misguided perspectives on segregation are well known, she is also lauded for her work on racialized thinking and race-based hate in \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}. In Charles Mills’s chapter, “Critical Philosophy of Race,” he refers to Arendt as one of three “important twentieth-century figures for anti-racist theorization” alongside Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault.\textsuperscript{28} Yet, for the purposes of this dissertation, this assessment of her valuable insights must be

\textsuperscript{26} Kristie Dotson in “Concrete Flowers,” \textit{Hypatia} 26, no 2 (2011) makes a similar argument. She claims that “academic philosophy is structured in such a way that established trends in philosophical thought delimit what questions can be addressed, and this is reinforced by the dominant conception of philosophy as critique; this effectively marginalizes problems and/or concerns of diverse people that do not fit comfortably within an already set disciplinary agenda.” (407) See also, Dotson’s “Radical Love: Black Philosophy as Deliberate Acts of Inheritance,” \textit{The Black Scholar} 43, no. 4 (2013), where she argues for the existence and perseverance of Black philosophy. Black philosophy, she argues, is often silenced, questioned, and disregarded as philosophy—a result of predominantly white institutional powers which aim to define philosophy through its white, Western variant.

\textsuperscript{27} Following Dei, this approach embraces antiracist research methods by “giving saliency and centrality to minoritized peoples’ perspectives on the issue of race, social justice, and oppression.” (13)

held in tension with her problematic arguments. As such, I aim to follow Mills’s characterization of a critical philosophy of race methodology as applied to the study of the history of philosophy. He claims that this method attempts “to track the origination and development of race and racism as concepts and framing presuppositions in the work of Western philosophers, and to excavate the ways in which such assumptions might have shaped their thought.” For Arendt, this means examining any changes in her conception of race and how race functions. More specifically, I aim to examine how Arendt’s theory of political action changes when she is operating at the ideal and nonideal levels, and how that affects her thought concerning race and racism.

There is also a wealth of scholarship working on the future of Continental Philosophy, much of which argues for Critical Philosophy of Race’s influence in shaping the future of the field. Unsurprisingly, Kathryn Sophia Belle has written a handful of articles addressing the need for critical philosophy of race investigations into continental philosophy. In “Reflections on the Legacy and Future of the Continental Tradition with regard to the Critical Philosophy of Race,” she argues for a pluralistic approach to philosophy which welcomes minoritized and marginalized thought—most of which is often not considered “philosophy.” The field of Continental philosophy has a history of not being considered philosophy, a charge shared with Critical Philosophy of Race which acts to keep the philosophical tradition predominantly white and Western. While Belle is not arguing that

29 Mills, “Critical Philosophy of Race,” 713.


31 For more on gatekeeping in philosophy, see Kristie Dotson’s “How is this Paper Philosophy?” in Comparative Philosophy 3, no. 1 (2012).
either Continental Philosophy or Critical Philosophy of Race are insufficient on their own, she is interested in promoting their continued confluence, in addition to other minoritized studies such as Africana and feminist philosophies. She writes, “I think that it is possible to use resources from various philosophical traditions to identify and analyze oppressive systems and viable methods to confront and overcome them.” 32 In light of Belle’s pluralistic call to action, I aim to take up Critical Philosophy of Race and Black Feminist Standpoint Theory in this dissertation to make sense of Arendt’s ideal and problematic approaches to race and racism while also latching on to the moments when she nonideally, and less problematically, engages with race.

Before addressing how Black Feminist Theory as a methodology guides this dissertation, I want to outline how I conceive of collaborative, as opposed to adversarial, engagement with *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*. In what follows, I differentiate two approaches to contentious scholarship. The first, which I call “inclusivity signaling,” is a version of adversarial academic engagement. Much like virtue signaling, inclusivity signaling superficially engages with the text at hand, in this case, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, by referencing it and moving on as though the work is not significant or impactful, even though it is. I have found that many iterations of this move take the form of a “yes, but” response. For example, “yes Belle is right that Arendt had some racist tendencies, but we can still find value in Arendt on X.” 33 In its most well-meaning iteration,


33 This approach can be seen in Berkowitz’s review: “Hannah Arendt was German Jew and carried prejudices with her to the United States. It is an easy matter to collect quotations showing that Arendt could be disdainful of East-European Jews, that she found both black South Africans as well as their Boer oppressors uncivilized, and that she thought many of the black students entering American universities in the 1960s academically unqualified. While Arendt is known for her essay “Reflections on Little Rock” that opposes forced school desegregation, she also was an opponent of legal segregation, took a strong stand against anti-miscegenation laws, insisted that slavery was the “one great crime of American history,” and argued that the Black Power movement, for all its problems, better represented real political interests and was consequently more politically meaningful than the white student movement. Arendt wrote at length on antisemitism and developed a detailed theory of racism as an ideology, which she opposed to Jew-hatred and the hatred of blacks.” (1) The first few sentences of the review reveal a “yes, but” approach.
this inclusivity signaling recognizes the important work that Belle accomplishes, but it moves forward as though the only option is to seek out Arendt’s merits despite Belle’s contributions. It is a mere hand-waving gesture to the importance of Belle’s work to our understanding of Arendt. Though I am not interested in proposing that anyone is perniciously utilizing inclusivity signaling, I think it is important to note that anyone writing on Arendt and race must reference Belle. However, I want to argue that there is another, more responsible way to reference her work, and I call that “genuine inclusivity,” which I aim to undertake in this dissertation.

In contrast to inclusivity signaling, “genuine inclusivity” approaches a text like Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question and recognizes that it holds the potential to transform how we conceive of a problematic yet influential philosopher like Hannah Arendt. In this sense, genuine inclusivity intentionally acts against an adversarial model by aiming to collaborate with, instead of argue against, Belle. I argue that Belle’s book ought to change the way we think about and engage with Arendt, though that does not mean that we must throw her out with the bathwater because she, as Belle brilliantly showed us, is mired in deeply rooted anti-Black racism. Instead, we must move forward, holding on to the tension of a racist philosopher who provides a useful, if not contentious, theory of political action. Tension, in this case, is productive because we can benefit from Arendtian political action in a way that recognizes her shortcomings. The difference between the two approaches is small, but what we ought to hold on to is the transformational power of a philosopher like Belle to

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34 In addition to conforming to Janice Moulton’s model of philosophy, genuine inclusivity is informed by standpoint theory. As Sandra Harding explains in “Standpoint Theories: Productively Controversial,” “It is one thing to gesture toward ‘including the excluded’ in our thinking and social projects. It is quite another to engage seriously not only with their ways of understanding themselves and their social relations, but also with their ways of understanding us and our social relations” in Hypatia 24, no. 4 (2009), 193. “Them” refers to non-Western thinkers/peoples but I claim it is also applicable to white normative society in terms of minoritized populations. Without standpoint theory we have one dominant and dominating account of political action per The Human Condition; with standpoint, we can see both the nonideal and ideal accounts of political action while also incorporating additional minoritized and marginalized voices on Hannah Arendt and political action.
the field of Arendt studies. The appropriate approach should take a “yes and” format. For instance, as this dissertation argues, yes, Belle is correct to draw our attention to Arendt’s anti-Black racism and the ramifications of it in her thought, and with that knowledge we can begin to reconceptualize what political action looks like—shortcomings and all.35

Practicing what I call “genuine inclusivity” here is generative in two main ways. On a broad level, genuine inclusivity is a tool to explicate the mired writings of Arendt—with this tool we are able to approach her texts from different angles which take seriously Standpoint Theory. This tool is similar to 3-dimenionsal (3D) modeling software, such as AutoCAD or SketchUp, which create interactive 3D models of architecture, allowing the user to view the building from a myriad of angles.36 In other words, this tool allows and encourages us to read and interpret Arendt from the perspectives of those who are actively aware of her racism and its ramifications. For those who fear this tool will result in a swift rebuke of Arendt as a racist who has nothing more to offer philosophy, fear not. Genuine inclusivity, on a smaller scale, is a tool that allows us to tell more than one story about Arendt, just as the 3D modeler allows us to see many different perspectives of a building.

As I will demonstrate in future chapters, it is all too easy to turn to certain texts as redemptive for Arendt—texts wherein she is largely unproblematic. Yet, even referring to the redemption of a philosopher is, I claim, a category mistake. Redemption connotes a false

35 As will be discussed in Part II of Chapter 4, Arendt’s anti-Black racism is, unfortunately, unsurprising—anti-Black sentiments pervade Western culture. Though it is radically important to acknowledge anti-Black racism and Eurocentrism in Western philosophy, that is not enough, nor does it accomplish much. Instead, it is necessary to analyze how Arendt’s theory of race influences political action, not just that it does.

36 To mix metaphors, thinking of genuine inclusivity as a form of 3D modeling is useful to avoid listening to a single story. As described above, this metaphorical tool can provide an interactive experience wherein we can easily change the perspective to read Arendt from a different angle. Within this metaphor, we can view Arendt’s text as a building under construction—we’re examining the architecture from a number of perspectives to see how we like the building but also to determine what additions or changes are necessary. This analogy is important because it allows us to actively engage with Arendt’s texts. In engaging in philosophic inquiry as “architects,” we are able to say something such as, “after reading Belle’s argument for the racially exclusive nature of the social-political divide, I want examine where her anti-Black racism undermines political action.”
dichotomy—one is saved or damned. But that approach fails to recognize how inextricably linked
the valuable and problematic aspects of Arendt’s thought are. For instance, in Chapter 4 I argue
that, in her early writings from the 1930s and 1940s, she is concerned with Jewish politics
specifically, that she cautions against speaking for others, and acts out her own philosophy of
political action for herself and her community. If we were operating within a binary, the story we
could tell of the Arendt in these early texts is that her ideas are nonideal and more responsive to real
injustices in the world. Yet, that is only one side of the story. By engaging in genuine inclusivity, we
are able to recognize when she is Eurocentric, myopic, and willfully ignorant. I argue that it is
necessary to hold these two stories or perspectives in tension with one another. If we overlook
Arendt’s faults, we run the risk of re-centering whiteness—sweeping aside Arendt’s shortcomings in
favor of her helpful examples in order to reassert her as a valuable and laudable philosopher—by
only telling the story where she is the venerated political thinker. In promoting the story where
Arendt is the well-respected philosopher that we ought to continue to, uncritically or mildly
critically, cling we lose out on understanding her prejudices and how they affect her theory.37

The quote from Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie states at the beginning of the
chapter that there is a danger in a single story. In her TED talk, Adichie’s cautionary narrative
addresses stereotypes as a form of a “single story.” For instance, she recalls that her college
roommate was surprised to hear Adichie speak English so well because she was unaware English

37 In an ironic twist, I am reminded of the debate over Hitler’s art. There exists the argument that we ought to destroy
Hitler’s paintings. I do not pretend to fully understand this argument because I personally am not moved by the artistic
value in his pastorals. However, even if he were generally understood to be on par with Cézanne or Pissarro, I strongly
believe it is necessary to know that people who are capable of creating beautiful or moving works of art can also be the
most evil, vile, and genocidal of human beings. Inversely, and to a much lesser degree we ought to acknowledge and
learn from those like Arendt who are human and therefore capable of producing stellar philosophical analyses of human
conditions which are covertly Eurocentric and exclusionary. Failure to recognize this aspect of Arendt merely
perpetuates the Eurocentric and exclusionary nature of her work. In other words, political action will continue to be
achievable for only the privileged.
was the official language of Nigeria, and equally surprised when she played Mariah Carey because she thought Adichie only listened to “tribal music.”

Her roommate had a single story of Africans as radically different than Americans. While I turn to Arendt’s “single story” of Black Americans in the conclusion, previous chapters diverge slightly from Adichie’s “single story.” Instead, I investigate how the use of nonideal theory uncovers more than one version, or story, of Arendtian political action. With multiple stories and perspectives, I aim to complete a more detailed, multi-dimensional account of political action that does not ignore Arendt’s shortcomings.

The final methodological influence for this dissertation is Black Feminist Standpoint Theory. In short, genuine inclusivity takes Black Feminist Standpoint Theory seriously. I do not aim to theorize anything new about standpoint theory. Instead, I am simply applying Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, and aspects of standpoint theory in general, to my investigation into Arendtian political action. In other words, what I call “genuine inclusivity” is not a repackaging of standpoint theory under a different name, it is a specific application of the tenets of the theory that Black women—Kathryn Sophia Belle in this instance—have valuable epistemic insight into our predominantly white-normative interpretations of Arendtian political action. Approaching a text with genuine inclusivity aims to recognize the transformational nature of Belle on Arendt studies by revisiting how political action operates. In light of Belle’s powerful argument against the social-public-private divide in Arendt’s thought, I believe it is necessary to extend her critical analysis to

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political action. Doing so is yet another attempt at developing a multi-dimensional rendering of the concept which will take seriously the exclusionary nature of Arendt’s Eurocentrism.

Black Feminist Standpoint Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory are rich, sociological and philosophical fields of scholarship. According to Patricia Hill Collins in “Learning From the Outsider Within,” the theory “consists of ideas produced by and for Black women” wherein it “assumes that Black women possess a unique standpoint on, or unique perspective of, their experiences.”

Collins argues that this unique perspective is, first, important to the self-definition and self-valuation of Black women as a form of resistance while, secondarily, it offers non-Black individuals—presumably those who experience more privilege—valuable insight into “patterns that may be more difficult for those immersed in the situation to see.” In other words, the secondary benefit of Black Feminist Standpoint Theory offers unique and valuable epistemic insight into social and political environments because of Black women’s “outsider” or “stranger” status to white, heteronormative culture. In applying the tenets of this theory, particularly the appreciation for keen and otherwise unseen insights into the Eurocentric elements in Arendt’s thought, we are able to add another descriptive layer to our multidimensional rendering of political action, thereby avoiding a single story or one-dimensional account of the concept. The “outsider within,” then, is the

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40 Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” Social Problems 33, no. 6 (1986): S16. See also Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity,’” in The Centennial Review 36, no. 3 (1992), where she claims that “standpoint theorists themselves all explicitly argue that marginal lives that are not their own provide better grounds for certain kinds of knowledge” (129). This claim addresses the idea that standpoint theory is more than mere ethnocentric or egocentric approaches to knowledge production. Instead, the theory is a genuine embrace of other’s lived experiences. Additionally, Alison Wylie in “Why Standpoint Matters,” in The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader argues that standpoint theory’s “central and motivating insight is an inversion thesis: those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial aspects” (339).

41 Collins, S15. Similarly, Sandra Harding in “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology” claims for standpoint theories, the grounds for knowledge are fully saturated with history and social life rather than abstracted from it” (128).

42 Collins, S15.
epistemically rich position of someone who both understands and is able to produce knowledge on their own culturally-specific life, but also the lives of those they observe and interact with.

As an example, Collins references sociologist Judith Rollins who chose to complete her academic fieldwork as a domestic worker. Rollins, a Black woman, reported being invisible to her white employers who often spoke candidly about her and other matters as though she was not in the room at all.43 Her presence in the white family’s home gave her “outsider within” status to their lives and thought processes, resulting in her ability to produce knowledge on their lives, as well as her own. In the particular instance Collins cites, Rollins remarks that “These gestures of ignoring my presence were not, I think, intended as insults; they were expressions of the employers’ ability to annihilate the humanness and even, at times, the very existence of me, a servant and a black woman.”44 Rollins was privy to the daily activities of the white couple she worked for and understood their interactions with her better than they did themselves. She was more aware of their disregard for her and was able to offer a unique perspective on their unconscious bias.

Standpoint theory not only recognizes the unique production of knowledge from marginalized groups, it also is a helpful tool to understand the social and cultural position of the speaker. In “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” Collins argues that, “All social thought, including white masculinist and Black feminist, reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators.”45 What she means by this is that the knowledge produced by someone such as Belle, reveals Belle’s attitude and perspective on the issue at hand—Arendt’s anti-Black racism—and that knowledge is impacted and informed by her particular experiences and beliefs as a Black woman.

43 Collins, S18.
44 Collins, S18.
But, as Collins points out we can similarly dissect the standpoint of someone like Arendt who I argue operates within a white masculinist sphere. In the same vein, Arendt’s work in *Rahel Varnhagen* and her Jewish writings reflect her particular standpoint as a European, Jewish woman—one which I argue produces, at times, Eurocentric and limited conceptions of political action. I aim to advocate for the value found in Arendt’s nonideal account of political action while, at the same time, prompting awareness of the ideal version of political action.

To further my commitment to an antiracist methodology, I intentionally incorporate relevant scholarship from women. In this effort I aim to account for a variety of perspectives, or standpoints, so that I can develop a multi-dimensional account of political action. Standpoint Theory, more broadly construed, as a methodology intentionally incorporates minoritized voices in an effort to counter dominant narratives. As Sandra Harding notes, in the introduction to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, “We must change the social worlds in which we live as philosophers so that they discourage whites’ perception that our experiences in white supremacist social relations provide the desirable route to discovering philosophic truths and universally valuable wisdom.” Harding calls for a reevaluation which questions the foundations of philosophic inquiry. Because whites have dominated the field of academic philosophy, much of the practice is grounded in the social locations and perspectives of white lived experiences. The result is a field which often only reflects the values, beliefs, and situated knowledge of whites. By intentionally including scholarship from women, particularly women of color, the goal is to open up philosophy to more varied social positions who can provide alternate routes, and destinations when it comes, to “philosophic truths and universally valuable wisdom.” Purposely seeking out the perspectives of minoritized scholars not only provides

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multi-dimensional rendering but it questions and problematizes the dominant narratives which tend to come from white scholars.

In addition to the inclusive nature of standpoint theory, this methodological approach highlights minoritized scholarship as a site of resistance. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins claims that she sees standpoint theory “as an interpretive framework dedicated to explicating how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power.”47 Collins claims that more just social and political conditions are possible if minoritized perspectives are privileged. Similarly, bell hooks claims standpoint theory, or what she refers to as speaking and acting “from the margin,” allows for active resistance against dominant power relations. She asserts that the margin is “much more than a site of deprivation…it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”48 Taking seriously those in the margins means resisting the dominant narrative in Arendt studies, and in turn, genuinely receiving Belle’s arguments concerning anti-Black racism. This does not mean, contrary to much misguided criticism of standpoint theory, that merely because Belle is a member of a minoritized racial group is her perspective to be taken seriously. Instead, it is an intentionally fought for perspective which is the result of political engagement with the systems of power that engage and dominate Black and other minoritized persons. In this sense, marginalization is formative through struggle.49


49 Hooks also notes that the margin “offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.” (157)
One of the main criticisms of standpoint theory is that it unduly privileges the perspectives and arguments of minoritized persons. This claim, as interpreted by Kristina Rolin, asserts that standpoint theory advances an essentialism—that merely by virtue of a marginalized positionality, one is epistemically privileged. This is a misconception concerning standpoint theory as a methodology. Instead, as Rolin notes, “in feminist standpoint theory, the term “standpoint” is meant to designate a moral and political commitment and not merely a perspective on social reality.”50 In other words, this misconception claims that all one needs to do is be a minority in order to deserve epistemic privileging. As hooks’ quote above notes, the margin is a site of possibility and struggle. Standpoint theory is a commitment to including minoritized perspectives which have articulated their struggle in the face of oppression and domination.

While antiracist methodologies specific to philosophy still can be developed, there are many other fields of study which we can draw from to promote a more equitable, inclusive, and just research practice. As Belle notes, “Black feminism in general, and the development of black feminist philosophy in particular, would help to foster a more inclusive and pluralistic continental philosophy.”51 With this in mind, I move forward in this dissertation intentionally and collaboratively engaging with Belle’s arguments in Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question. I also rely heavily on the philosophy and scholarship of Black women and people of color in order to develop a multi-dimensional account of political action in Hannah Arendt’s thought.

My own standpoint as a white woman relying on the work of people of color and white women to investigate the Eurocentrism and anti-Black racism within Arendt’s theory of political


action complicates this dissertation. As Shannon Sullivan points out in the introduction to *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, white women have contributed to the continued oppression and marginalization of people of color even through their attempts to ameliorate systems of domination. Sullivan is worth quoting at length to better understand the thorny relationship between white female scholars and critical philosophy of race:

> Struggling for others because “proper” women are not “supposed” to speak out on their own behalf is not just the result of sexism and male privilege. It also is a classed—and classic—means by which privileged white women have contributed to the oppression of people of color and the domination of colonized lands. With her self-sacrificing moral purity, the white, middle-to-upper class woman savior is able to speak out on behalf of the helpless, under-class wretches who are too underdeveloped to understand or articulate their needs for themselves—or so the story goes.52

Choosing to write on Arendtian political action’s merits and shortcomings through the lens of critical philosophy of race can be viewed as a form of speaking for those whom Arendt overlooks. This form of speaking on behalf of others from historically marginalized populations can perpetuate a white female savior complex which situates scholars like myself in positions of epistemic superiority and authority. My positionality as a middle-class, white female scholar complicates my intentionally antiracist and standpoint theory-informed methodology. According to Sullivan, awareness of one’s positionality and the social and political power dynamics inherent can help to mediate potential harms. Yet, it is a consistent concern throughout the dissertation. In this sense, I aim to contribute one possible antiracist reading of Arendtian political action with the hope many more from other positionalities will follow.

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CHAPTER TWO

IDEAL POLITICAL ACTION IN THE HUMAN CONDITION

Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* is the primary text Arendt scholars and political philosophers invoke when teaching or explicating her theory of political action. In this sense, *The Human Condition* is seen as the monolithic text for understanding the concept. However, I argue in this chapter that relying solely or predominantly on *The Human Condition* to understand Arendtian political action not only fails to acknowledge other texts that add valuable insight into the concept but also narrowly relies on an exclusionary and overgeneralized theorization of political action. As Chapters 3 and 4 go on to explain, supplementing a reading of political action in *The Human Condition* with *Rahel Varnhagen: Life of a Jewish Woman* and selections from her underappreciated newspaper articles and unpublished essays from the 1930s and 1940s provides a more well-rounded, or multi-dimensional account of the concept. This multi-dimensional account is better equipped to incorporate and account for the political experiences of historically minoritized individuals and groups.

Yet prior to developing these claims, it is necessary to argue that *The Human Condition* alone provides an unsatisfactory account of political action. In order to support these claims, in Part I, I explain in detail Arendt’s account of political action as it occurs in *The Human Condition*. This first part explicates Arendt’s division of the public-private-social realms of existence within the *vita activa* or theory of active life, her theorization of natality and plurality, the concepts of speech and action, and the connection between political action and identity. Entire books have been written on each of these aspects of Arendtian political action, but a brief introduction to these ideas and the relevant
literature lays the groundwork for understanding my claim that political action in this text runs a high risk of being exclusionary and overgeneralized—characteristics of white supremacist thought. As such, in Part II, I advance the claim that Arendt’s theorization of political action is ideal or utopian. While Arendt uses historic examples to frame her argument in *The Human Condition*, her theorization of political action normatively aims for a utopian vision of politics. It is in this section of the chapter that I support my main claim concerning the exclusionary and overgeneralized nature of Arendtian political action. Specifically, I claim that this ideal version of political action offers no way to transfer from Arendt’s ideal account of the concept to widespread application of the concept in the real world. In Part III, I end by examining the implications of interpreting Arendtian political action as utopian and largely inapplicable, namely the ignorance of racial difference, the advancement of privileged actors, and the possibility for epistemic injustices against minoritized individuals and groups. Acknowledging the exclusionary and overgeneralized account of political action in this text aligns with this dissertation’s methodology—to actively seek out white supremacist tendencies in Arendt’s theorization of political action.

### Part I: Arendtian Political Action

*The Human Condition* contains Hannah Arendt’s most explicit articulation of political action. Yet, as Arendt scholar and political theorist Margaret Canovan notes, this text was meant to act as a prolegomena to her mature political theory—a project she never finished.1 Arendt recognized the need to clarify the conditions which allow for robust political life prior to theorizing on politics itself. Her motivation for theorizing the conditions for political life, according to Canovan, stems from her work in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It is because Arendt is deeply concerned with

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reflecting on the rise of totalitarian regimes and recognizing their ever-present conditions for revival
that she wrote *The Human Condition* to understand the conditions of successful, anti-totalitarian
political life. In other words, *The Human Condition* aims to chart how best to exist among other
humans, how to act together to address common concerns and desires, and how to set oneself apart
from others. Interpreting Arendt as normatively prescribing how we ought to act in order to avoid
falling prey to totalitarian regimes again, relies on first comprehending her theory of political action.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt carves up human existence into two pursuits—the *vita activa*
and the *vita contemplativa*. The *vita activa* or the “active life” consists, for Arendt, of labor, work and
action—these three realms are the main focus of the book. The *vita contemplativa*, or the
“contemplative life,” is the subject of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt’s last book which was left
unfinished when she died in 1975. *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt’s deeply metaphysical text, imitates
Kant’s three critiques by exploring thinking, willing, and judging. She died, however, before
completing the third section of this text. Instead of engaging with the metaphysical conditions of life
on earth in *The Human Condition*, Arendt is interested in theorizing the spheres we exist in—the
social, the private, and the public— and the tripartite classification of the *vita activa*—labor, work,
and action. In what follows I explain the social, private, and public realms before moving on to a
brief discussion of how labor and work differ from action.

**The Spheres of Existence**

For Arendt, the private and the public realms of existence are relatively straightforward;
though, one of her main concerns in *The Human Condition* is to argue that these realms of existence
have bled into one another and are no longer as distinct as they ought to be. In order to protect the

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2 For more on the racist implications of Arendt’s social-private-public divide, see Kathryn Sophia Belle’s *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, particularly chapter 3, “The Three Realms of Human Life: The Political, the Social, and the Private.”
public realm from influence, Arendt is interested in keeping these two realms of existence separate. The ideal, as in preferred, private realm, in Arendt’s estimate is informed by an ancient Greek and Roman model which saw it as “the sphere where the necessities of life, of individual survival as well as continuity of the species, were taken care of and guaranteed.” In other words, the private realm is where one’s basic needs—food, water, shelter—are provided. It is also the realm of sexual intimacy, reproduction, and friendship. According to Roger Berkowitz, Arendt also wants to protect the private so that individuals can have space to think critically about their political commitments and judgements. In this sense, a protected private sphere not only concerns issues of survival, but it also allows individuals the space to critically consider aspects of their political lives.

The public realm is also conceived in relation to ancient Greek and Roman models. In its ideal form, the public realm consists of individuals coming together to discuss, debate, and decide political affairs. Informed by the ancient Greek polis, Arendt claims the public realm was where individuals could meet other people and willingly “share in the burden of jurisdiction, defense, and administration of public affairs.” In addition to obvious political necessities, Arendt claims that the public realm reinforces reality. She writes that “the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves.” By virtue of being in the presence of others in the public realm, we are able to verify our experiences. It is easy to connect the

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5 Berkowitz’s consideration of thinking in the private realm is rooted in Eichmann’s lack of critical thinking as the logistical head of transportation for Nazi Germany. He oversaw the transportation of millions of Jews to concentration camps throughout Europe. When individuals like Eichmann do not think about their actions, Berkowitz argues that the political realm suffers.

6 HC, 41.

7 HC, 50.
need to verify what one sees or hears with others with Arendt’s concern for the resurgence of totalitarianism which isolates individuals from confirming horrors witnessed or expressing individuality. When people are able to gather and confirm the reality of their world, they are better prepared to accomplish the community’s “public affairs.”

While the private realm consists of what happens in the privacy of one’s home and the public is the properly political sphere where people interact, debate, and decide how to live among others, the social is, according to Margaret Canovan, “notoriously hard to grasp.” The social, for instance, has at least three main interpretations. According to Seyla Benhabib “At one level, the social refers to the growth of capitalistic commodity exchange economy. At the second level, it refers to aspects of mass society. In the third and least investigated sense, the social refers to sociability, to the quality of life in civil society and civic associations.” Not everyone, however, agrees with all three interpretations. Kathryn Sophia Belle’s interpretation of the social coincides solely with Benhabib’s first sense of the social—an economic and class-based realm. Because she interprets the social as principally concerned with economics, she is able to claim that Arendt’s social realm “is a space where discrimination should be expected and permitted.” In other words, economic inequality is common and a consequence of that inequality is discrimination. Belle uses Arendt’s example of a hotel deciding who to do business with to clarify her interpretation. Arendt claims, according to Belle, that a business can discriminate in this instance because it occurs within an economic realm. Arendt’s logic is that discrimination will occur—that is a fact of human interaction—but it must be confined within the social realm because it has no place in the political realm.

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8 Canovan, 116.


10 Belle, 45.
The second interpretation of the social realm follows closely from Arendt’s analysis of mass society in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She explains that masses of people “form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls,”\(^{11}\) until they are jolted into fervent compliancy by a totalitarian movement. These people, according to Arendt, are unthinking followers. They do not act, as she outlines in *The Human Condition*, they behave or conform according to social norms. She claims that “the monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows for only one interest and one opinion, is ultimately rooted in the one-ness of man-kind.”\(^{12}\) Put differently, social norms require individuals to conform to a standard, not act out as unique individuals with particular needs and desires. Arendt’s main concern is that such uniformity allows for those who conform to cast out those who do not because they are perceived as less than human. In this sense, the social is less a realm than a phenomenon wherein private concerns about survival bleed over into political life resulting in a blurred division between the private and the public.

The final sense of the social, according to Benhabib, is the realm of civilized existence. She claims that it has to do with “patterns of human interaction; modalities of taste in dress, eating, leisure, and lifestyles generally; differences in aesthetic, religious, and civic manners and outlooks; patterns of socializing and forming marriages, friendships, acquaintanceships, and commercial exchanges.”\(^{13}\) Similar to the previous sense, the social here refers to societal norms; yet, Benhabib’s assessment of this sense of the social might better be understood as cultural norms.

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\(^{12}\) HC, 46.

\(^{13}\) Benhabib, 28. Benhabib’s mention of marriage as a social concern in this quote supports Belle’s reading of Arendt when she claims, in “Reflections on Little Rock,” that instead of focusing on the social issue of desegregation, Black Americans ought to fight against anti-miscegenation laws which she believed were a properly political issue. Belle is concerned with arguing that the division between social and political is not as clear as Arendt asserts and this example
What is of concern here is that Arendt claims the social realm encroaches on, and blurs the lines between, the public and private realms. She describes the encroachment as “the rise of the social” or the rise “of economic activities to the public realm.” This results in “housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family” becoming a “collective concern.” In other words, when individual issues related to survival bleed into the public realm which ought to be concerned with collective issues, then collective concerns are sidelined. Arendt’s ideal model does not contain a social realm, only private and public ones. In this model, the head of the house manages all biological concerns in private and then in a different capacity exists as a political being in the public realm. Margaret Canovan describes this model well, stating that when the male head of a household “emerged from this dark realm of biological necessity into the light of the public arena to join his peers and to deliberate with them on the concerns of their common world, he left behind him domination, subjection to necessity and concern with biological life, which were merely preconditions for the authentically human activities that went on in the public realm.”

Keeping these realms separate ensures, according to Arendt, that domination stays in the private which allows freedom to exist in the public realm.

But this model separating the private from the public does not exist in reality. And Arendt’s main concern is with the social encroaching on the political—a problem which Arendt sees as distracting people from acting politically by restricting their freedom. In other words, when one’s private and public attention is concerned with survival, then there is no freedom to exist otherwise.

shows that “patterns…of forming marriages” can exist in the social realm while also being protected legally in the political realm.

14 HC, 33.
15 HC, 33.
16 Canovan, 116.
As Dana Villa puts it, “the ‘rise of the social’ thus refers to economic absorption of the political.”\(^{17}\)

The political realm is overtaken by private concerns such as financial security and class-based behavior, leaving no room for engagement with fellow citizens.\(^{18}\)

Much of Arendt’s political thought is not prescriptive, and *The Human Condition* is no exception. Her theorization of the private, public, and encroaching social realms of existence are phenomenological—she is concerned with theorizing the “preconditions” of politics as they appear to her. She is certainly interested in arguing for intentional political action in order to combat the rise of the social realm; however, as mentioned earlier, this text is concerned with laying the foundation for her more mature political theory. Central to these realms are the activities of human existence—the tripartite *vita activa*—labor, work, and most importantly, action.

*Vita Activa*

In general, Arendt’s *The Human Condition* sets out to diagnose why humans do not “act” as they once did. She opens the book with the space race and Russia’s success with Sputnik. This introduction frames her interest in understanding why humans are obsessed with escaping the earth, and in turn, escaping what she argues should be an intrinsic value in action. To contextualize her argument, she explains that the *vita activa*, consisting of labor, work, and action, is largely misunderstood. Most notably diverging from a Marxist definition of labor, Arendt argues that labor is tied to sustenance—building or working to secure shelter, acquiring food, and reproducing. She claims, “labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced

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\(^{18}\) In *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, Margaret Canovan interprets Arendt’s distinction between the social and political as informed by “Greek and Latin terminology.” She claims, “In the sharp Greek separation between the public life of the polis and the private life of the household, Arendt found a vivid model of the distinction which the rise of ‘society’ has blurred” (116).
and fed into the life process by labor.” Arendt defines housework, traditionally carried out by women, as labor. In this sense labor is connected to the private sphere where it operates universally—each individual must labor to survive. The human condition of labor in the private sphere is shared with all humanity. Once again, Arendt’s desire to protect labor within the private sphere is tied to her concern for the reemergence of totalitarianism. If concerns of survival affect all aspects of life, then individuals are stripped of their freedom to do anything but labor to survive.

Work, then, is concerned with the development of community or world building and the fabrication of materials. Architecture, sculptures, and objects constitute “work.” Work occurs collectively with and for others and is intended to outlive the creator, pointing to a quality of permanence. Arendt refers to human “workers” as *homo faber* because they create or fabricate “an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings.” As opposed to labor, work is manufactured by human hands for the purpose of bringing people together, not manipulating natural resources for individual sustenance. Because work does not affect one’s survival—one cannot “work” to make a living and survive, one can only “labor” to do so—there is a degree of freedom associated with this activity. Arendt explains that “Alone with his image of the future product, *homo faber* is free to produce, and again facing alone the work of his hands, he is free to destroy.” Imagine a woodworker, retired from a previous career unrelated to carpentry. This woodworker “works” in the Arendtian sense to create carved bowls, spoons, and cutting boards. Their handiwork is not necessary to survive—they often give their work away or collect it for their own benefit. Additionally, they have the freedom to decide how to design their objects, when to

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19 HC, 7.

20 HC, 7.

21 HC, 144.
“work,” and what to do with their finished product. While the ability to work in the Arendtian sense does not immediately prevent totalitarianism, it does reflect a degree of freedom that creates a common world between people. This degree of freedom, however, is minimal compared to the possibility for freedom in action.

Relatedly, when the social realm blurs the distinction between the private and public, Arendt claims that we lose our ability to differentiate our individual selves while also losing sight of what brings us together. She writes, “What makes mass society,” the world where the private has bled over into the public, “so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.” Work has the ability to bring together radically different individuals so they can relate to one another as homo faber, fabricators that leave behind intimations of their lived experience that survives their time on earth. Yet, when the private overruns the public, work loses its effectiveness.

Last of the three activities is action. Arendt’s main focus in *The Human Condition* is to highlight the diminished pursuit of action in the public realm. Citing Sputnik, she worries that humans would rather avoid addressing humanity’s problems—rising tensions during the Cold War, the risk of resurgent totalitarian power, etc.—by escaping the earth than acting together to fix them. Action, for Arendt, is made possible by the human conditions of freedom and plurality. According to Arendt, through creation and birth “the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.” In an existential statement, Arendt claims that the ability for humans to

\[22\] HC, 52-53.

\[23\] HC, 177.
act—“the principle of beginning”—follows from birth, or what she calls “natality,” and allows individuals to express themselves. Politics is possible because unique individuals possess the freedom to act independently. Without freedom, interactions would be predictable and rigid or worse, monitored, censored, and prohibited like under totalitarian regimes.

In addition to freedom, action is possible because individuals exist among other unique individuals. Early in The Human Condition Arendt notes that “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” Living among a multitude, or what Arendt calls a “plurality” of others allows for action because action reveals identity, setting apart individuals, and rendering distinct the individual from the multitude of others in the public, political sphere. Arendt’s description of the formative nature of action is that “in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, [action] creates the condition for remembrance, that is for history.” In this sense, action is similar to work in that it preserves the narrative of the political actor through historical records. But not all historical records take the form of textbooks and published materials which favor the exceptional political actors. Even the political actor who engages in dialogue and debate with other unique individuals in public is capable of being remembered through stories, diaries, and personal connections because “the disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and deeds.” As such, action requires “plurality,” the idea that others must bear witness to the words and deeds of the individual actor in order to recognize that person. Additionally, the notion of plurality within the context of action is what designates action as political.

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24 HC, 7.
25 HC, 8-9.
26 HC, 178.
In practice, political action consists of speech and action. For Arendt, speech is the most prevalent form of action. The emphasis on speech points to the nature of deliberative politics which require spoken interactions. But speech is also often how individuals reveal their identity to others. Arendt explains by stating, “The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.” In other words, individuals can perform deeds in the public realm and they can be considered instances of political action, but speech is what adds meaning to those actions. More specifically, speech contextualizes the action in relation to the individual. For example, imagine a situation on a public train or bus where a man is encroaching on a woman’s personal space. He asks the woman to smile for him and it becomes clear she is uncomfortable. Another woman physically steps in between the man and woman which cuts off a direct line of sight between the two. The woman who physically moved in between acted in what we can presume to be an Arendtian sense; but, it is not clear to anyone but the actor if this is the case. If this woman were to say something to either the man or woman in this situation to clearly indicate her decision to move in between the two was an intentional attempt to diffuse the situation and prevent further harassment, it would be clear that she acted. Her intentions are made clear through speech and those witnessing the situation would accordingly recognize her actions and her character.

The Web of Human Relations

In Arendt’s characterization of political action, she states that speech and action are only possible because we exist among other humans. For Arendt, “existing” among others occurs in both a physical and metaphysical sense. Arendt’s project in this text is grounded in understanding the

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27 HC, 179.
conditions of human existence and interaction. It is a fact of our quotidian lives that we speak and act with or among others. Tied up with the interpersonal nature of political action is Arendt’s claim that the concept reveals one’s identity—one’s identity cannot be revealed if there are no witnesses. Political action needs other people, and “occurs” in the space between people. However, there are two different senses of “the space between people” for Arendt. In its first sense, it is an objective, real space in the public realm where any two or more people are gathered. In reference to the first sense, Arendt explains that “Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are about some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent.”

The “in-between” references the real, tangible space where action occurs between people. Margaret Canovan, in an effort to explain political action, gives the example of saving someone from a drowning in a river. This act is an example of political action and it occurs in the real world between two people.

But the “in-between” also refers to a metaphysical aspect of acting and speaking. In this second sense, the “in-between” is the space created by the presence of others that are witnesses to one’s speech and action. Whereas the act of seeing someone saved from a river is physical, the act of witnessing that deed and being able to—and quite possibly intending to—relay that event to others is a less tangible shared “in-between.” The web of human relations is reflective of both senses of the “in-between.”

The web image conjures both the tangible and intangible aspects of interpersonal speech and action; however, the concept itself is opaque. To provide more context, Arendt notes that “The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships which exists

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28 HC, 182.

29 Canovan, 131.
wherever men live together....where their immediate consequences can be felt” In this passage, Arendt communicates another key aspect of the concept—consequences of speech and action are felt just as the reverberations of a freshly trapped fly are felt in a spider’s web. The web of relations connects humans to one another, to their actions, and to the consequences of those actions.

Additionally, Arendt claims that the web of relations is the reason why, “with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions...action almost never achieves its purpose.” To make sense of this aspect of the concept, it is helpful to imagine a communal cobweb shared by a handful of spiders. In this fictionalized communal web, there are many intersecting capture-threads which make it difficult for individual spiders to determine if freshly caught prey is nearby—one might step out onto part of their web to consume nearby prey but be immediately impeded by another thread in the way or spider who devoured the prey first. This extended metaphor speaks to both the tangible (threads) and intangible (interest in food) elements of the web. It also addresses how action is, quite literally, an act, not a result. The spider acts by leaving its corner but that does not guarantee the desired result.

The spiders share an interest in catching prey and that is reflected in their interconnected threads. Additionally, by virtue of being in such close proximity to other spiders, it is nearly impossible to avoid one another. In the same way, Arendt communicates that we all have a shared interest in living in the world with others. If we continue to ignore this shared interest, in the way she thought the space race was hoping to escape the earth and humanity, then we are doomed to become less human and more robotic. Action only occurs in the presence of other people, even if the purpose of our action is thwarted by other people we come across. The communal cobweb

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30 HC, 183-4.

31 HC, 184.
image is reflective of the *polis*-model that Arendt idealizes. It is a shared space where radically different people come together to deliberate and problem-solve their community’s issues and concerns. The web of human relations reflects both the physical relationship we have living among other human but it also speaks to our metaphysical interactions.

Review of Relevant Literature

A number of criticisms of Arendt’s construction of political action are worth addressing. To begin, it is important to differentiate a number of criticisms on how political action is characterized in *The Human Condition*. I have organized what I think is the relevant literature on political action into three categories of critique—interpretive, feminist, and philosophy of race.

**Interpretive Literature**

The interpretive category includes scholars that theorize political action as they interpret it in Arendt’s texts. There are a variety of interpretations but most promote either a single or twofold account of action. George Kateb’s interpretation is that “The heart of Arendt’s account of action in her writings is that authentic political action is speech—-not necessarily formal speeches, but talks, exchanges of views—in the manner of persuasion and dissuasion. Political speech is deliberation or discussion as a part of the process of deciding some issue pertaining to the public good.”32 Focusing in on speech as a vital aspect of political action, Kateb argues that the concept is best exemplified through vibrant, participatory democracies—especially when those democracies are most concerned with the participatory whole. In other words, political action per Kateb needs to be free from biological concerns that rely on basic needs and survival—that is a facet of the private realm.

Instead, political action should entail conversations in one’s community and with political leaders that concern the community’s development.

On the other hand, Dana Villa and Margaret Canovan argue that Arendt’s account of political action is agonal or exceptional, respectively—it is demonstrated by the few, heroic characters that perform on the world’s political stage. Villa, in “Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action” argues that political action is performative.\(^{33}\) The actions of great political leaders are performed for their country and for the world and they are long remembered for their outstanding public deeds.

Canovan takes a slightly different approach and instead argues that political action can be understood on two levels. On an introductory level, Canovan argues that action “is a very broad category of human activity that covers interactions with other people that are not matters of routine behavior but require personal initiative.”\(^{34}\) As previously mentioned, Canovan goes on in her interpretation of the last activity of the \textit{vita activa} to say that saving someone drowning in a river is Arendtian action, whereas “going to work is usually not.”\(^{35}\) It is important to note that Canovan’s example reflects exceptional actions—it is not an everyday action to save someone’s life from a potentially dangerous river. Beyond the introductory level, she acknowledges that Arendt’s explanation of political action is not so straightforward in \textit{The Human Condition} and that it is necessary when explaining the concept to discuss how political action reveals one’s identity according to Arendt. At this secondary level, political action according to Canovan is speech and


\(^{34}\) Canovan, 131.

\(^{35}\) Canovan, 131.
action done by exceptional people in the public realm, as exemplified by the ancient Athenians. She
gives the example of Ancient Athens where “every citizen had the chance to be a hero, while the city
provided an ‘organized remembrance’ to save his deeds from oblivion in case no Homer should be
on hand.” As long as one’s actions were retold, their exceptional identity lived on past their death.
By Canovan’s estimate, political action is largely relegated to the special few who history has
recorded and admired.

In an attempt to address some of the previous critiques of Arendtian action that claim it is
elitist in that it only applies to exceptional political actors, Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves’s *The Political
Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* claims that there are two accounts of action that Arendt gives us that
function simultaneously. The first, which he calls “expressive” refers to those in the public that do
exceptionally make their identities known through heroic deeds. However, he claims that many
scholars overlook the second aspect of action which he calls “communicative.” Entrèves argues
that there is a tension between these two accounts of action but that it is a productive tension,
reflective of modern politics with elected leaders and masses of people participating in the
democratic process. In Seyla Benhabib’s *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, she also promotes
a two-fold model of political action that builds off of d'Entrèves’. Instead of using the terms
“expressive” and “communicative,” Benhabib claims Arendtian action is best understood as agonal
and narrative. The agonal model of action accounts for those great, heroic actions of people like
Alexander Hamilton or Achilles, whose extraordinary actions reveal their character to the public;

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36 Canovan, 135. The quote “organized remembrance” can be found in *The Human Condition*, 205.


38 Entrèves, 65.

39 Benhabib, 125.
while the narrative model is “a kind of democratic or associative politics that can be engaged in by ordinary citizens.” This second model of action relies on the presence of others to do more than witness great deeds—those in the public realm engage with one another. Though minimally different models, d’Entrèves and Benhabib interpret Arendtian action to account for both individual and cooperative action.

**Feminist Critiques**

In Melissa A. Orlie’s “Forgiving Trespasses, Promising Futures,” she targets the result of political action and how it can be problematic for intersectional sensitivity. The downside to political action is that the result and reception are out of the actor’s control. From a feminist perspective, Orlie argues that political action—like her involvement in the activism surrounding the misogynistic and racist media coverage of the 1990 “Central Park jogger” trial—can have unintended consequences. In her example, she recognizes that the predominant white feminist interpretation of the case thought that any nod to minority groups would distract from the goal of publicly addressing misogyny—a classic refrain of white feminism. Without addressing the consequences of political action in ideal and nonideal terms, Orlie communicates that one problem with political action is that it has the potential to be too generalized and too ideal to help prevent the oversights of white feminism. In particular, Orlie notes that in this situation, “political action required that we question our own and others’ ‘identities.’” From Orlie’s perspective, political action necessitates recognizing how race, class, sexuality, and gender—not merely gender alone—affect the public perception of a

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40 Benhabib, 125.


42 Orlie, 338.
case like the Central Park jogger. However, according to Orlie, many white feminists at the time denied the value of recognizing intersectional identities and instead acted as if their fight for gender justice was generalizable beyond race, class, and sexuality. In this sense, the political action invoked by white feminists in this case actively ignores the nonideal and intersectional positionality of other activists fighting to shape public perception around this high-profile case.

In her survey essay, “Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt,” as well as her book Turning Operations, Mary Dietz argues that a number of feminist critiques of Arendt focus on the gendered division between private (female) and public (male) and therein forget that the labor-work-action division in The Human Condition is descriptive, not normative. In other words, she claims that Arendt is not claiming that women ought to remain in the private realm whereas men ought to belong in the public. Instead, she is making descriptive statements—women labor and men work. Dietz claims that leaves action ungendered and open to whoever musters up the courage to act and speak, risking ridicule and dismissal. Additionally, she claims that “Without action to insert new beginnings (natality) into the play of the world, Arendt writes, there is nothing new under the sun; without speech, there is no memorialization, no remembrance.”

Dietz’s interpretation claims that Arendtian political action ought to be reaffirmed by feminists.

Less optimistically, Hanna Pitkin argues alongside Villa and Canovan, that those who are capable of political action “resemble posturing little boys clamoring for attention. (‘Look at me! I’m the greatest!’ ‘No, look at me!’)” Pitkin draws careful attention to the small and privileged number of people—white males—that are most capable of Arendtian political action. In all, a plethora of

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feminist critiques, some even aware of intersectionality and the dangers of white feminism, have
debated the merits of Arendtian political action.45

Philosophy of Race Critiques

And last of all, as has been made clear in the introduction, Kathryn Sophia Belle published
the preeminent critical philosophy of race-influenced critique of Arendt's private-social-public
divide. In short, Belle argues that the tripartite construction racistly assigns desegregation to the
social category, as opposed to the public. It is important to note here that Belle argues that Arendt
holds differing positions on what is public and what is social for whites and Blacks. Though Belle
does not explicitly focus on political action, it is impossible for her analysis of Arendt's anti-Black
racism in the private-social-public divide to not engage with the contents of the public realm—
action. In essence, the deeds of the Black students on the frontlines of desegregation do not count
as political action for Arendt under Belle’s argument—they are instead demoted to the social realm.

In Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education, Danielle Allen
also agrees that political action is reserved for the Achilles-like characters throughout history, and
that for Arendt, desegregation was a social matter, not a public one. Instead, political action ought to
“secure political rights, like the rights to vote and hold public office, and also private rights, like the
right to marry whom we please.”46 Political action did not include young adults and children on the
frontlines of desegregation. As Allen and Belle point out, desegregation was considered a social issue

45 For more feminist interpretations of Arendt's politics see also Adriana Cavarero, “‘A Child Has Been Born Unto Us':
Arendt on Birth,” philoSOPHIA 4, no. 1 (2014), 12-30 and Fanny Söderbäck, “Natality or Birth? Arendt and Cavarero on
the Human Condition of Being Born,” Hypatia 33, no. 2 (2018), 273-288. Additionally, see Amy Allen, “Solidarity After
Identity Politics: Hannah Arendt and the Power of Feminist Theory,” Philosophy and Social Criticism 25, no. 1 (1999), 97-
118, for more on solidarity in Arendt. Allen’s article argues that Arendt’s understanding of solidarity is helpful in cross-
cultural coalition building within the feminist movement.

46 Danielle Allen, Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education (Chicago: University of
because she claimed it had to do with “nonheroic economic and ‘vital’ interests.” In other words, Arendt believed that the Black parents that sent their children to previously segregated schools were doing so for personal economic gain. Though more will be said in depth about Arendt’s troubled analysis of desegregation in the final chapter, it is helpful to note that these two philosophers have paved the way for continued research into Arendt’s problematic theorization around race.

**Part II: Ideal Political Action**

Now that I have outlined some of the basic concepts in Arendt’s theory of political action, in the ensuing section I argue that the concept is ideal, as in utopian, in nature and therefore susceptible to overgeneralizations which too often exclude minoritized individuals and groups. I begin by briefly explaining how I take up the terms “ideal” and “nonideal” before applying them to Arendt’s inspiration for the public realm and political action—the *polis*. As Chapter 3 explains in more detail, Arendt was no stranger to storytelling. I claim that her account of the ancient *polis* is fictionalized in a way that makes it ideal and therefore exclusionary. I then turn to Charles Mills’s work on ideal theory to further support my reading of political action as ideal in *The Human Condition*. Applying Mills’s philosophy of ideal theory to Arendtian political action in this text reveals how Arendt’s desire for a more active and collaborative political culture is undermined by her ideal and utopian approach.

In reading *The Human Condition* as ideal, I claim that this text has a realistic potential to prioritize whites and marginalize people of color. It is important, however, to first define my use of “ideal.” According to Laura Valentini, political philosophers have taken up the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory, yet there is no standard interpretation for what those terms mean. In her article, “Ideal vs. non-ideal theory: a conceptual map,” Valentini separates the terms into three

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47 Allen, 26.
categories: “(i) full compliance vs. partial compliance theory; (ii) utopian vs. realistic theory; and (iii) end-state vs. transitional theory.” For my purposes, I am taking up the second distinction between ideal and nonideal wherein the ideal links up with a utopic goal or sense of normative political action whereas the nonideal approach advocates for a political action that is more reflective of and responsive to the actual cultural and societal surroundings of a culture, society, or country. Within the context of The Human Condition, I argue that Arendt’s political action is utopian in that it reflects how political action ought to be in a best possible world. But, there is no acknowledgement for how to move from the ideal version of political action to real world application of it.

In this most basic sense, an ideal account of political action could be as innocuous as advocating for a political realm where everyone’s voice is genuinely heard and everyone’s actions are recognized as worthy. Concretely, this could look like a push for an abundance of communities with robust civic discourse opportunities that encourage everyone’s involvement, or the pursuit of legislation that expands and simplifies the voting process. Indubitably, these are noble endeavors. Yet, like most critiques of utopian visions of a political world, there is no guarantee that it will come about—the same can be said of Arendtian political action. Yes, it is a worthy cause to fight for everyone’s “right to have rights,” or the opportunity to engage with other people in meaningful ways that aim to benefit society; however, the critique of such an ideal approach is that it is all too


49 By arguing that political action is ideal in this text, I do not mean to assert that Arendt was unaware of the uncertainty of action and its consequences. To do so would ignore her assessment of the irreversibility and unpredictability of action. See HC 236-247 for more on how forgiveness and promise-making help to mediate the irreversibility and unpredictability of action.

50 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 296.
easy to become frustrated with or dismissive of because it lacks normative guidelines for how to bring about such a world.

Another way to look at how political action in *The Human Condition* is ideal is to examine Arendt’s model for the concept. In the larger context of the book, she argues that proper political action is missing from the modern world and we need to reintroduce it. According to Arendt, we ought to model our concept of political action on the Ancient Greek and Roman model of how citizens acted and spoke in the *polis*.\(^{51}\) Though she has critiques of the *polis* model, and is aware of some of its downfalls, Arendt claims that in order to prioritize political action we ought to return to antiquity. Though I do not think she means historical antiquity—the ancient Greek and Roman model she takes up is fictionalized to improve, or at the very least, point out, its limitations. This fictionalized account cherry-picks the benefits of the *polis* model, such as embracing a community space where men spend their time discussing and debating politics, while leaving out the warmongering rhetoric of expansion and defense. She does claim that she wants to avoid the use of rhetoric and violent persuasion which she acknowledges was an active part of late antiquity *polis* life, but instead wants us to recall “the specifically human way of answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done” in the city-state that day.\(^{52}\) In this initial characterization of the model that Arendt wants us to embrace in order to revive political action, we see a fictionalized and idealized *polis* that points to a utopian vision—one that is not fully reflective of its historical example nor one that easily and readily transfer over to the real world.

\(^{51}\) It is worth noting Arendt’s use of the *polis* instead of the *agora* which at first seems to make more sense—why refer to a city when you can refer to the meeting place within a city? I think that is because the *agora* includes a marketplace which is the space of work. Arendt laments the rise of the marketplace in the public realm because it takes over a space she thinks should be reserved for action.

\(^{52}\) HC, 26.
Insightfully, she makes it clear that she is aware of how exclusionary, and therefore further ideal, the *polis* model is: “The Greeks, whose city-state was the most individualistic and least conformable body politic known to us, were quite aware of the fact that the *polis*, with its emphasis on action and speech, could survive only if the number of citizens remained restricted.” She even goes on to include a footnote that states that Xenophon exaggeratingly, but poignantly, stated that in a Spartan marketplace of 4000 people, maybe 60 citizens would be present. In using the ancient *polis* model, Arendt notes how only a few citizens would have been able to participate; yet, she does not go so far as to introduce solutions to these problems. The brief acknowledgement to how the *polis* model excludes women, slaves, and even poorer citizens who don’t have the ability to take time out of their workday to be politically active additionally points to the idealized, utopian nature of the setting of political action.

In addition to its exclusionary nature, the *polis* model is too generalized—a common limitation of ideal theory. Take for example when Arendt describes political life in the *polis*: “To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence.” Here she is stating that political existence consists of debate and dialogue with one’s peers in an environment free from extortion and other forms of violence. But mere debate and dialogue seems to paint an idyllic picture of political action in which everyone is getting along, and waiting their turn patiently to be heard. This is far from the reality of many political debates or discussions. The picture closer to reality is, I think, Jacques Louis David’s *Tennis Court Oath* which depicts the chaotic motion of competing conversations and sidelined impassioned

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53 HC, 43.

54 HC, 32n22.

55 HC, 26.
pleas being made all the while the oath to join the fight against the monarchy by French revolutionaries is being read. Instead, Arendt gives us an all too generalized picture of nondescript actors listening and speaking patiently with one another. David’s painting better reflects the kind of disorderly nature of political action than Arendt’s idealized and overly generalized account does.

Much of the chapter on action in *The Human Condition* aims to claim that all political philosophy and politics have ignored and defied, since ancient Greece and Rome, the human condition of political action; therefore, she claims, we must return to the ideal scenario that allowed for political action. Because most political leaders since antiquity have been attempting to rule in the public realm instead of cultivating a space for political action, she says that “the commonplace notion already to be found in Plato and Aristotle that every political community consists of those who rule and those who are ruled...rests on a suspicion of action rather than on a contempt for men, and arose from the earnest desire to find a substitute for action rather than from any irresponsible or tyrannical will to power.”56 In other words, in the ruler-ruled relationship, there is no room, Arendt tells us, for political action—the ruler commands and the ruled follow out those commands. For Plato and Aristotle, Arendt claims that they did not want political action to interfere with the unambiguous relationship between rulers and the ruled. While this situation can be interpreted as “tyrannical will to power,” Arendt points out that Plato and Aristotle, instead, desired an efficient political order. Yet, not all rulers during and after their time were as noble as they would have desired. In this sense, political action has been largely lost since antiquity and replaced by political leaders who desire power over their populations. The suspicion of action has made its way through the modern era and according to Arendt has pushed the possibility for its revival out of the way. Instead of working with the current situation that includes a suspicion of action, Arendt claims we

56 HC, 222.
need to remodel our political existence—a move that appeals to a utopian vision of purely respectful and engaged political debate.

Mills on Ideal Theory

I now turn to Charles Mills and his theory on the dangers of ideal theory in order to examine political action’s ideological potential. In his article, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideological,” Mills argues that ideal theory runs the risk of being ideological and, therefore, dangerous to found one’s political theory on if the interests of all inhabitants in the political realm are to be taken seriously. He argues that ideal theory is most conducive to those in power—largely this consists of white males, as well as white females. In the article, Mills argues that ideal theory “is really an ideology, a distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population—middle-to-upper class white males—who are hugely over-represented in the professional philosophical population.”57 For Mills, political philosophers that continue to use ideal theory, such as Arendt, do so out of self-interest and at the cost of people of color and other minorities. Additionally, the continued, unexamined use of Arendt’s idealized conception of political action by the “over-represented” in philosophy—white men, and to a slightly lesser degree, white women—simply reifies the exclusionary nature of the concept. In other words, if we continue to claim that Arendt’s concept of political action, as it is described in The Human Condition, is unproblematically useful then we also run the risk of excluding individuals from historically minoritized groups from political action.

57 Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” Hypatia 20, no. 3 (2005), 172.
More concretely, Mills claims that ideal theory creates some or all of the following: (1) “An idealized social ontology;”\(^{58}\) (2) “Idealized capacities;”\(^{59}\) (3) “Silence on oppression;”\(^{60}\) (4) “Ideal social institutions;”\(^{61}\) (5) “An idealized cognitive sphere;”\(^{62}\) and (6) “Strict compliance.”\(^{63}\) In (1), the use of ideal theory distances the theorist from social and cultural conditions of experience such as power dynamics found in “structural dominance, exploitation, coercion, oppression.”\(^{64}\) Doing so reinforces relations of superiority and inferiority, in addition to the development of social hierarchies. In this sense, Arendtian political action is promoted as a way to effectively engage with other people in public; yet, we are given no indication that Arendt has accounted for the vast number of people who would not be able to participate in political action—women who, out of necessity, stay at home to care for children, undocumented immigrants, those who must spend their time working out of economic necessity and have no additional time to spend as political actors, the incarcerated, etc. Arendt is aware of how few people are able to participate in the polis-inspired model of political action but she does not offer a solution to this problem. Instead, her normative account of political action aims for the utopian vision of a fictionalized Greek-revival and in turn ignores the systemic power dynamics at play that restrains a large number of people from participating.

\(^{58}\) Mills, 168.

\(^{59}\) Mills, 168.

\(^{60}\) Mills, 168.

\(^{61}\) Mills, 169.

\(^{62}\) Mills, 169.

\(^{63}\) Mills, 169.

\(^{64}\) Mills, 168.
Similarly, the “idealized capacities” aspect of Mills’ argument claims that ideal theory asserts individuals are capable of utopian feats—this does not need to go so far as to claim that moral agents can achieve world peace, but something like universal consensus on political issues would apply. He points out that these purported capabilities or achievements are not realistic for the most privileged elite and, obviously, even less so for those who experience oppression or domination in society. The idealized capacities we can see in political action first speaks to those privileged elite—those who have time and energy at their disposal to engage in organized debates with others or participate in marches or other forms of activism. Even with the time available, the privileged elite, according to Mills, would still be set up to fail—they are not going to reach a consensus in a debate because that is not realistic. For those who experience systems of domination or oppression, for instance an undocumented immigrant, might not even have the opportunity to speak on their experience in a debate concerning immigration reform; and if they do, their testimony could easily be discounted. In advocating for a vision of political action that claims it is fundamental to the human condition of living in relation with other humans—“Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter”\(^{65}\)—makes it seem as though, naturally, all are capable of speaking and acting in public wherein they are heard and seen in a genuine way. Epistemic injustices are too much a part of daily life for those in historically marginalized groups to be as readily capable of political action as Arendt purports.\(^{66}\)

\(^{65}\) HC, 7.

\(^{66}\) See Kristie Dotson’s for more on the abundant epistemic injustices against minoritized individuals. In particular, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011), 236-257, addresses the many different forms of epistemic injustice against oppressed individuals. Dotson’s “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression,” *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014), 115-138, also addresses the prevalence of epistemic injustices against individuals from historically minoritized through the classification of three orders of epistemic oppression—all of which she argues are “reducible to historical formations” (134) based on social and political power dynamics. Additionally, Cynthia Townley, “Trust and the Curse of Cassandra (An Exploration of the Value of Trust),” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 10, no. 2 (2003), 105-111, uses the mythology of Cassandra, who was given the gift of prophecy though her credibility was stripped by Apollo, to exemplify the status of historically minoritized individuals who are consistently not believed.
Mills’ claim that ideal theory encourages “silence on oppression” is closely related to the previous “idealized capacities.” In choosing to use ideal theory, the result is that systems and experiences of oppression are disregarded. Take for instance the father of liberal democratic ideal theory—John Rawls and his *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls’s original position strips away the individual’s identity and historical circumstances in order to develop the principle of justice. But, as many have argued, removing individual particularities might get all rational persons to agree to the principles but it does not guarantee that those principles will then appropriately serve minoritized individuals once the veil of ignorance is lifted. That is to say, aiming for idealized principles inherently ignores or erases histories of oppression and therein likely does not account for the continued existence of oppression. Interestingly, as noted above, Arendt does acknowledge that the *polis* model of political action is rooted in a slave-based economy where only a few would be able to participate in speech and action; yet, she never addresses how to overcome the problem of small numbers of political actors. In this text, she does not give a voice to those who, out of necessity, might not be able to be political actors. In so doing, she silences the oppression that they experience and mutes them from speaking out against that oppression. In this sense, systemic oppression is ignored, and if we continue to encourage Arendtian political action, we too run the risk of reproducing the same conditions.

Next, the “ideal social institutions” aspect of ideal theory goes hand in hand with “an idealized cognitive sphere.” By the first, Mills references institutions such as the family or legal

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systems. These become idealized which result in a failure to see how these social institutions actually 
do or could work. Similarly, the “idealized cognitive sphere” results in individual, cognitive 
insensitivities to how oppression operates. In other words, women, people of color, or the poor, 
under an ideal theory, are not thought of as oppressed, so social institutions and individuals don’t 
respond to or react in light of the actual oppression. Take for instance how the medical-health 
system does not recognize that Black mothers are dying at higher rates than white mothers in 
hospitals. Under ideal theory, when the claim is made that the medical-health system in a highly 
developed nation such as the U.S. should have a low-maternal death rate, that claim ignores the real 
data which demonstrates Black mothers are treated irresponsibly by health professionals. This lack 
of knowledge operates both at the institutional level in addition to the individual level. Arendtian 
political action in its ideal state affects participation in social institutions because action is reserved 
for those who are able to participate in the public realm—largely white, male citizens. The way that 
political action is thought of does not account for those who are excluded from political action 
because of factors such as systemic oppression.

In *The Human Condition*, political action is conceived of as requiring “strict compliance” with 
the idealized framework of the *polis* model. I think the best way to see this is through Arendt’s strict 
adherence to the private-public-social divide. It is only in the public realm that political action can 
occur. Only through the idealized division of spheres can political action take place.

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70 See previous footnote. The report calls for hospitals to follow the “same protocols and policies” for all patients, as opposed to acknowledging the extra attention needed to address the racial disparity in healthcare.

71 Benhabib, in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, makes the argument that private action is possible. See the chapter, “Arendt’s biography of Rahel Varnhagen,” where Benhabib argues that Varnhagen’s Berlin salon constitutes private action.
With the features of ideal theory laid out, Mills asks us to question how we were ever able to achieve the goals, in his case, of ethical action if we are appealing to a clearly biased approach. In the same way, it is relevant to ask how effective Arendtian political action is when it is presented in an ideal form. I think that from the relatively privileged position that Arendt experienced when she wrote *The Human Condition*, it is plausible and helpful to consider that her academic and economic success might have desensitized her to the oversights in utilizing such an idealized account of political action.

Charles Mills and Arendtian Political Action

Given Mills’s critiques of ideal theory, I next address how Arendt’s use of ideal theory undermines aspects of political action including the web of human relations, plurality, and natality.

**Web of Human Relations**

In its ideal state, the web of human relations is reflective of the inextricable connection completely unique humans, with varying and competing interests and desires, have with one another. However, this picture of interpersonal human relationships glosses over systems of oppression and provides a fictionalized account of what Mills calls the social ontology by ignoring or suppressing the existence of power dynamics. The web of human relations, one could argue, implicitly accounts for systems of oppression that might affect individuals because Arendt makes clear that those who present themselves in the public realm are all unique individuals. Unique individuals are bound to have differing experience of oppression and power dynamics. However, recognition of the banal—that we are all unique—is not enough to counteract oppression. If Arendt wants her concept of the web of human relations to truly capture the diversity, yet connectedness, of the human experience, then she needs to account for the fact that the web, in fact, extends into the private and social realms of existence.
To return to the spiderweb analogy, some threads are also stronger than others which, in turn, are more capable of producing the outcomes those individuals are personally invested in. The connections we have as humans are constituted by our particular identity—race, gender, religion, economic status, etc. This is an unavoidable feature of human relationships, and by glossing over it, Arendt overlooks how power dynamics and systems of oppression affect people’s ability to be political actors. In this reading, Arendt’s web is reflective of the generalized white male citizen’s experience of interacting with others politically. This moves beyond Arendt’s initial use of the polis-model in that the web image itself caters to those already in power.

**Plurality**

According to Arendt, the conditions of political action are plurality and natality. Plurality, or as Arendt characterizes it, “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world...is specifically the condition—not the conditio sine qua non, but the conditio per quam—of all political life.”\(^{72}\) It is no small matter that plurality and natality are the conditions that cause all political life. Yet, the manner in which Arendt discusses these two conditions is ideal, and according to Mills, runs the risk of being ideological in that it mainly caters to those who do not experience oppression or domination—wealthy, white, straight, cis-gendered, currently able-bodied men. I now turn to these two causal conditions of political life, assess their ideal nature, and assert their ideological implications.

Arendt states that plurality “is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”\(^{73}\) Arendt’s understanding of plurality appears to merely reference the multitudinous

\(^{72}\) HC, 7.

\(^{73}\) HC, 8.
populations on earth. It does not appear to equate the concept of diversity which is more inclusive of diverse populations of people who have varied experiences. Instead, plurality is the abstracted, ideal way to understand the human condition of action. In a way, it is a snowflake approach to humanity—all humans are unique just like snowflakes. However, this approach ignores pervasive conditions of inequality and discrimination. It is harmful to start with overarching claims of equality, which are, unfortunately, blatantly false in reality. If we start with the assumption that all humans are equal—which in an idealized, theoretical sense we do want—but do not go on to add in protections to ensure the equal treatment, reception, or recognition of all humans then it is a futile, doomed starting point. Arendt’s concept of plurality in this text is that futile starting point. I think that for political action to be truly capable for all humans, Arendt’s concept of plurality needs to recognize the diversity of experiences based on factors such as race and gender.

As Michael Omi explains in his article, “Rethinking the Language of Race and Racism,” there is a prevalent “common sense” about race and racism that I think Arendt herself was unconsciously entertaining in The Human Condition. Omi, writing in the early 2000s, states that there are a few themes prevalent in this new “common sense,” all of which misunderstand how race functions. One theme of this racial “common sense” that relates to Arendt, is the prevailing idea that we need to get beyond race because continuing to fixate on it further divides people. He states that “race is seen as a smokescreen or an apparition that detracts our collective attention from the ‘real’ issues,” when in fact, the opposite is true. Instead, claiming that a cultural fixation on race is

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74 It is helpful to note that in The Human Condition Arendt does not discuss protections against inequality, though she does in On Revolution and The Origins of Totalitarianism.


76 Omi, 162.
harmful is itself a “smokescreen.” Conversations about how race functions, at an individual and societal level, is instrumental in unifying people. In terms of Arendt’s concept of plurality, I think she is calling for a more unified humanity that, even though everyone is unique, shares this call for unification that Omi warns against. If Arendt wants people to come together and learn how to be politically active again, instead of embracing this desire to leave the earth, she needs to account for racial diversity, not simply gloss over it.

Arendt’s further description of plurality is that it “has the twofold character of equality and distinction.” Though it is implausible that Arendt would have intended to communicate this, I find it interesting to draw a connection between the phrase “equality and distinction” and “separate but equal.” Plurality, according to Arendt, accounts for the equal footing that humans share by virtue of being human and the unique accidents and qualities that we all have. These are what bring about political action. If we were all the same—lacking distinction—there would be no need for political action because we would not need to share our interests or desires nor would we need to act to set ourselves apart from one another. Yet, the idea of distinction seems to only reference the fact that we are all unique—certainly, a fact about our human existence that ought to be recognized—and not that particular categories of uniqueness, like race and gender, affects the perception of equality. In other words, the idea of distinction does not account for diversity. More importantly, it is necessary to distinguish between recognizing someone’s uniqueness from recognizing the systems of domination and oppression they are subject to on a daily basis.

77 HC, 175. See also Peg Birmingham’s discussion on Augustine’s influence on Arendt’s two-fold nature of plurality in Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 76-83. She argues that Arendt understood the act of creation according to the Christian tradition to account for both men and women. Men stand in for universality while women parallel singularity. Plurality, then, recognizes both the universalizing aspect that unites all humans but also accounts for the unique nature of individuals.

78 Arendt writes, “If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.” (HC, 175-176.)
Take for instance when Arendt states that “Human distinctness is not the same as otherness.” In order for political action to be more inclusive, it ought to additionally account for otherness. She goes on to define “otherness” as something shared with all existence and all things, whereas “distinctness” is reserved for living beings. In other words, she designates “distinctness” as a characteristic of being (animal, insect, human, etc.) while “otherness” can refer to chairs and cities and nationalities. She goes on to state that through speech and action “men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct” which can be made sense of given her introductory worries about the rise of the social realm and with it, conformism. Arendt opens *The Human Condition* by expressing concern about the rise in social conformity that is interested in appropriate behavior. Political action, and its ability to reveal one’s distinctness is about fighting social conformity. It is not concerned with embracing multiculturalism and racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

**Natality**

After studying under Martin Heidegger, Arendt was well aware of his claim to understand human existence as rooted in the anticipation of death. Instead of aligning herself with Heidegger on this point, Arendt develops her own ontology on the basis of birth. Arendt argues that human existence is marked by birth, and as a condition of this birth, humans are political beings. Explaining her perspective on the reality that all humans are born and how that fact relates to the human activity of acting, she writes, “of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.” As

79 *HC*, 176.

80 *HC*, 176.

81 *HC*, 9.
soon as a human being is born they are instantly capable of acting in the world which designates them as a political agent according to Arendt. Natality, the condition of being born, is the definition of human existence for Arendt because at the moment of birth, a human being is capable of acting in the world. This act of being born and the political are inseparable “since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.”

The political being is one that acts through speech and action, which means that these activities coincide with birth.

Though Mills’s critique of ideal theory is largely directed at ethics and moral action, I think that his claim about the harm of idealized capacities applies to Arendtian political action as well. In ideal theory, if one’s capacities are idealized—they are thought capable of more than they actually are—not only are those people doomed to fall short of their purported capability, but Mills claims “they end up disabled in crucial aspects.” Within the context of natality and its relation to political action, if we assume everyone—because everyone has been born—is capable of political action, we ignore the circumstances, such as citizenship requirements or various forms of discrimination, that impede certain groups of people from participating. Additionally, we then do not build into our account of political action ways to include those who might experience discrimination. In this sense, we can see how an idealized account of a condition of political action—one where everyone is capable of participating because they were born—caters to those in the powerful minority.

Take for instance the case of Crystal Mason, a Black woman who was sentenced to five years in prison in March of 2018 for casting a provisional ballot for the 2016 presidential election while on probation. Texas, the state Ms. Mason resides in, prohibits ex-felons from voting. Ms. Mason was

82 HC, 9.
83 Mills, 168.
unaware of the law restricting her from casting a ballot and the provisional ballot she attempted to cast was not counted. Yet, Judge Ruben Gonzalez sentenced her to five years in prison. In a *New York Times* interview, Ms. Mason said, “I showed my kids that no matter what you can get out and get your life in order...But sometimes, regardless of whatever your past is, you are still going to be beat up for it.”

Ms. Mason’s case has garnered national attention, particularly since Terri Lynn Rote, a white woman from Iowa, was sentenced to only two months of probation after admitting she intentionally voted for Donald Trump twice in the 2016 election. This case provides real details on how natality does not appropriately account for forms of discrimination, like institutional racism. Ms. Mason’s race, in addition to discrimination that comes along with misdemeanors and felonies, played an active role in her sentence, unlike the case of Ms. Rote. The failure to protect against discrimination which impedes one’s ability to participate politically is an unfortunate oversight in Arendt’s theory. It is an oversight due to the ideal nature of political action in *The Human Condition* which overlooks conditions of inequality and discrimination.

Arendt’s idealized theorization of political action diminishes its applicability. By promoting ideal aspirations for political action, her narrow account of the concept impedes many people from participating. While her ideal approach is valuable because it affords us worthwhile goals, it is unrealistic to think many would be able to participate in active political lives like those she argues for. In Mills’ words, “the best way to bring about the ideal is by recognizing the nonideal, and that

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by assuming the ideal or the near-ideal, one is only guaranteeing the perpetuation of the nonideal.\textsuperscript{86} Arendtian political action aims to be accessible by everyone, by virtue of their birth into this world, but as this section has pointed out, she falls short of that goal. If she wants to “bring about the ideal” scenario wherein all can be political actors, then it is necessary to account for the nonideal—such as experiences of oppression and discrimination. In the following and final section of this chapter I elaborate on how the ideal nature of political action in \textit{The Human Condition} has implications beyond Arendtian thought.

\textbf{Part III: Implications of Ideal Political Action}

The ideal nature of political action in \textit{The Human Condition} has ramifications beyond Arendt’s thought. Most significantly, the way she constructs political action erases racial difference, is exclusionary in that it largely applies to those who experience privilege, and it does not guard against epistemic injustice. Though these ramifications have been mentioned throughout the previous section, I now explain how political action plays an active role in each.

\textbf{Erasure of Racial Difference}

Plurality, which I have previously argued is not the same things as diversity in Arendt’s thought, ignores racial difference and encourages a whitewashing of political actors. A whitewashed public realm then largely serves white male citizens who are able to speak and act, reveal their identity to others, and shape political decisions. When others are left out of the public realm, their voices, identity, and concerns, which can be tied up with their racial and gendered identities, do not affect public affairs. Recall that Arendt’s inspiration for ideal political actors comes from the male citizens who come to the ancient \textit{polis} to speak and act—the concept, as it is described in \textit{The Human Condition}, does not have room to include noncitizens, or slaves, or women, or laborers. And even

\textsuperscript{86} Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” 182.
though Arendt is aware that only a small number of people in the ancient model were able to participate as political actors, she does not overtly accept how problematic her model is in its capacity to erase racial difference. She, instead, appeals to natality—the fact that we are all born and therefore capable of acting—to claim that all have the capacity to be political actors. The capacity exists, yet there are no protections in place to guarantee that all can actually participate politically. Put differently, there is no mechanism in Arendt’s thought to move the ideal version of political action into the real world. Arendt herself is critical of how few people are political actors when she wrote *The Human Condition*, but she argues this is the result of economic concerns that ought to be confined to the private realm overtaking the public realm where action occurs. Her concern is not with systems of oppression and discrimination that impede political action for people of color or minority populations.

Similarly, the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist organization, and their famous 1977 statement addresses the pervasive erasure of racialized and gendered identities in the Civil Rights Movement and the predominantly white Feminist Movement. Their critiques of the erasure of racial difference help to contextualize Arendt’s overgeneralized account of political action. As the Combahee River Collective statement makes clear, racial identity matters in political action. They state that “There have always been Black women activists...who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique.”  

87 The unique experiences of oppression and domination that the Combahee River Collective speak of is the kind of unique plurality for which Arendtian political action needs to make space. The way that Arendt describes plurality, a collection of equal

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and distinct people, is not reflective of power relations in reality. Arendt erases the racial differences that are inherent in distinction, and therefore erases conditions which impede groups of people from political action. The Collective states that they are “committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneous factors in oppression.”[88] Because of its ideal nature, political action overlooks these interlocking experiences of oppression and in turn overlooks how ineffective the concept is in practice.

Instead, what Arendt’s plurality needs is a nonideal recognition of racial difference. In this sense, plurality could anticipate and acknowledge the discrimination and oppression that most people of color experience. Because identity is revealed through political action, according to Arendt, it is imperative that a vast diversity of people are able to participate so that the public realm mirrors the diverse needs and desires of different people. If political action is limited to elite, white men, then not only are political concerns debated and decided by and for those people, but those people are known and remembered because of their public presence. The continued dominance of white and male ideals perpetuates itself through political action unless safeguards are established to acknowledge the political needs and desires of others.

In order to further explore what a nonideal approach to plurality might look like I turn to decolonial feminist philosopher, María Lugones. Lugones, in “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” encourages a different kind of “plurality” than Arendt’s.[89] Lugones’s sense of plurality is individual—in that each individual can be plural in their identification—as well as collective. Considering Arendt’s account of plurality alongside Lugones is helpful because it further

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addresses how Arendt’s ideal version falls short. Arguing within a feminist context, Lugones encourages a “plurality in and among women” that is brought about by love.\textsuperscript{90} Though the concept is not a reference to Arendt’s concept of plurality, Lugones’ addition of love opens up space, that Arendt misses, for individual differences. In an individual sense, Lugones is speaking from a personal perspective as an Argentinian woman residing in the United States, experiencing varied levels of comfort depending on who she is speaking with—friends and family from Argentina she is comfortable being playful around, as opposed to coworkers in the United States with whom she is not comfortable being playful. She deems the two realms of experience “worlds” which she finds herself traveling between. The two “worlds” that she describes point to the idea of an individual plurality—“I am suggesting that I can understand my confusion about whether I am or am not playful by saying that I am both and that I am different persons in different ‘worlds.’”\textsuperscript{91} Her individual plurality speaks to varied experiences that people have when they inhabit different parts of the world. If one of these worlds impedes free expression such as playfulness, then love is needed to support the individual.

Additionally, in terms of collective plurality, Lugones’s encourages “world”-traveling “because by traveling to their ‘world’ we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes.”\textsuperscript{92} The plurality of a multitude of other people’s lived experiences can only be understood if one is willing to “travel” to that person’s world. Though some Arendt scholars would argue that her concept of the enlarged mentality aims to do just that, it is at least clear that Arendt did not account for the fact that people’s ability to be political actors can change based on location, power

\textsuperscript{90} Lugones, 3.

\textsuperscript{91} Lugones, 14.

\textsuperscript{92} Lugones, 17. Italics in original.
dynamics, and systems of oppression. Arendt’s concept of plurality benefits from Lugones’ sense of plurality which addresses people’s and groups of people’s diverse experiences.

Privilege

As explained above, the polis-based model for political action is problematic because it only applied to Greek or Roman citizens. In this sense, the model privileges those already in position of power and authority. However, as Arendt scholar Dana Villa makes clear, Arendt was well aware of the fact that the ancient model was exclusive and flawed. But, Arendt does little more than reference the exclusive nature of political action. Instead, her focus shifts to what allows for political action to arise—plurality and natality. After exploring how Arendt’s theorization of plurality produces an erasure of racial difference, I now turn to how natality reinforces exclusivity beyond the polis model through white privilege.

As previously discussed, the idea of natality is what allows us to be political actors because the act of birth imbues us with “the capacity of beginning something anew.” According to Arendt’s logic, since we are all born, we possess the capacity to be political actors. Logically and theoretically, this follows. However, it is an ideal approach which overlooks lived experiences which contend with oppression and marginalization. In reality, the fact of one’s birth, whether due to race, gender, or disability status, often plays a significant role in one’s ability to act. It is reasonable to assume that Arendt understands natality from a normative perspective, because as a stateless and rightless person herself at one point in her life, she knew the ability to freely act is not guaranteed. Yet, even as a

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93 Villa in the introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt writes, “Arendt is hardly expressing approval for the way the Greeks structured their private realm. Rather, she is underlining the difference between the political sphere (the sphere of a man-made civic equality and freedom) and the economic or household realm (the sphere of hierarchy, necessity, and coercion)” (10). While the differentiation between the political and economic sphere resides in the Greek model, my point is that neither Arendt nor Villa recognize the harmful effects of basing political action on model that is so exclusionary.

94 HC, 9.
normative statement—that by virtue of the fact that we all were born, we all ought to be capable of political action—the lived experiences of historically minoritized individuals are often testaments to the difficulty of achieving this normative goal.

In order to further contextualize my assessment of natality, I turn to philosopher George Yancy. In his introductory article to a special volume of the Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal focusing on race and racialization in the history of philosophy, Yancy writes about his lived experience as a Black philosopher. The following quote, communicates his experience in the field: “As a Black philosopher, I write about race from a lived position, from a site of racialized Erlebnis, one that is not about experiential generalities, but concrete particularities. It is not an exercise in a species of philosophical abstraction that is able to bracket out how the topic of race impacts my everyday existence, my embodied existence, my being in-the-world.”95 Yancy’s approach to writing about race is nonideal. He states that he does not abstract away from the particularities of his everyday life as a Black, male philosopher. His existence is entwined with his racialized experience. In this sense, it follows that Yancy’s lived experience is not abstractable or generalizable to the point where his race is negligible. To do so would “bracket out” his personal experience of race.

At the time Arendt wrote The Human Condition she was a United States-based scholar and professor experiencing economic security and academic recognition. While she certainly experienced persecution as a Jew in Europe and likely experienced antisemitism while living in the United States, she did not experience the same racial discrimination that Yancy does as a Black male philosopher. In turn, her limited personal experience and minimal interest in how race can impede political involvement in the United States affected her ability to propose an account of political action that

considers real impediments to political action. Put differently, Arendt’s relative privilege made her insensitive to the lived experience of race and how that can negatively affect one’s ability to be a political actor within a U.S. context. Yancy communicates that his race affects everything from riding an elevator with white women, to his teaching assignments, to fielding virulent emails that were the backlash of a news radio appearance. Though Arendt certainly faced persecution and narrowly escaped death because of her race, her experience of being raced was largely diminished once she arrived in the United States. In this sense, her position of privilege and resistance to understanding more about the diversity of racialized experiences in the United States impeded a nonideal approach to political action. Instead, The Human Condition generalizes race and abstracts from the lived experiences Yancy bears witness to.

Yancy goes on to emphasize that his race is always a factor in his ability to exist freely. In Arendtian terms, an accidental quality of his birth—that he was born a Black baby in the United States—did not allow for his free and equal access to be a political actor. Without a doubt, Yancy is an effective and powerful political actor in his capacity as a well published scholar, activist, and professor; however, the crucial point is that his birth, his natality did not automatically afford him access to political action. Instead, he writes that his “Black body is situated within history, a history that is racially oppressive and violent. It is part of a larger social integument, a social skin, that has

96 Yancy, 10. Yancy explains that when white women join him in an elevator they react by clutching their purses or moving as far away as possible from him. He uses this example to demonstrate the frequency by which others stereotypically assume he, as a Black man, is violent and dangerous.

97 Yancy, 8. Yancy points out that many assume he only teaches philosophy of race because he is Black. In fact, while Yancy focuses on philosophy of race, he also works in critical whiteness studies, phenomenology, philosophy of religion, and African-American philosophy.

98 Yancy, 12. Also see Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly About Racism in America (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) for Yancy’s response to the death threats he received from writing “Dear White America” in the New York Times in 2015. In “Dear White America,” Yancy asks his white readers to imagine having Black children in order to sympathize with historically marginalized parents. He wrote Backlash to engage with and understand the vitriolic responses he got to the article.
claimed my body to be ontologically problematic, inferior, ersatz, hypersexual, sexually deranged, violent, lacking imagination, animalistic, and human-like if not simply unhuman.”

Unlike white bodies, Yancy’s skin significantly affects his ability to not only act, but exist safely. There is nothing in the concept of natality and its connection to political action that accounts for the lived experience of oppression and domination. Natality abstracts away from the lived experience of people and largely caters to those whose race is, wrongly, considered invisible—white folks.

Epistemic Injustice

Speech is the main manifestation of political action, according to Arendt. She even states that “many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech.” In this final section of the chapter I turn to Miranda Fricker and José Medina’s work on epistemic injustice to further problematize Arendt’s ideal account of political action in *The Human Condition*.

Miranda Fricker’s article “Epistemic Injustice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowing,” a precursor to her 2007 book *Epistemic Injustice*, focuses on the testimony of oppressed or marginalized individuals which she argues are frequently dismissed or derided. Her overall project is to merge virtue theory with practices of epistemic justice. In other words, Fricker argues that by consciously reflecting on why we decide to believe someone’s testimony, we can develop virtuous habits of listening that protect against prejudice. She writes that “an epistemic climate in which some people suffer systematic testimonial injustice must be regarded as seriously defective both

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100 HC, 178.

epistemically and ethically.” To combat epistemic injustice Fricker proposes what she calls a “Reflexive Critical Openness” which aims to encourage individuals to examine and grapple with their own prejudice in order to adjust their reaction to speakers they might otherwise hold biases against.

The virtue of reflexive critical openness is developed like any other Aristotelian virtue—through intentional habituation. Fricker’s approach to developing epistemic justice is another necessary consideration when taking up Arendt’s idealized understanding of those who can speak in the public realm as political actors. Combating epistemic injustices which impede others from being heard in the public realm can help to expand the number of possible political actors in a way that pays close attention to nonideal systems of oppression and marginalization. The virtue Fricker argues we ought to develop aims to, first, be reflexive, or critically reflective of how bias and prejudice might impede us from believing another person’s statements or claims. We also ought to develop what Fricker calls a “testimonial sensibility” through the virtue of critical openness. Fricker claims that everyone has a testimonial sensibility, or the ability to judge another person’s claims. But the ability to judge is affected by social constructions such as race, gender, and ability. Fricker advocates for an intentional development of this sensibility that critically engages with personal biases. In this sense, she claims we ought to be critical of our biases and open to changing our perceptions in order to develop a virtuous testimonial sensibility that fairly engages with other people’s statements. Put together, the virtue of reflexive critical openness aims to develop a testimonial sensibility that reacts to the critical engagement of our own biases when listening to and deciding to believe other people’s claims.


103 Fricker, 161.
Fricker’s reflexive critical openness can help to combat epistemic injustice in Arendt’s public realm. First, it is important to recognize the prevalence of epistemic injustices which diminish political actors from being heard. While Arendt would claim that political action does not necessitate being heard because the attempt alone is what constitutes action, it is worth considering the limitations to continued political action if epistemic injustices are not intentionally combated. Consider someone experiencing homelessness who attends a townhall meeting to share their experiences and testify to their needs. If this person’s testimony is not fairly considered in accordance with the virtue of reflexive critical openness, it is unlikely they will return to advocate for their needs. For those whose testimony or political speech is often disregarded, not only is their speech disregarded but the likelihood of continuing to speak is diminished. This once again establishes a community of political actors that does not represent diverse experiences and political needs. Instead, those who are already listened to continue to act and speak in the public realm. Those privileged elites then shape the political environment and their needs and desires are met through political action.

In José Medina’s book, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, he also investigates the way in which minoritized groups of people are not listened to. He introduces the claim that personal testimonies of oppression can counter how oppressed persons are considered within the confines of their society and government. Medina’s scholarship intentionally operates at the nonideal level. Testimony, for Medina, involve “exchanges…in which communicators participate as knower s and possible epistemic benefits can be obtained.”

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104 It is worth noting that social conditions already discourage political involvement for those from historically marginalized communities or experiences such as those experiencing homelessness.

such a way that the information they convey will be recognized as coming from an epistemically credible source is what testimony aims to do. Yet, when the vast majority of people who hear the testimony do not believe it comes from an epistemically credible source, Medina claims that “epistemic friction” needs to occur in order to jolt those people into recognizing the credibility. Medina writes that “the external epistemic resistances one encounters can be positive insofar as they offer beneficial epistemic friction, forcing one to be self-critical, to compare and contrast one’s beliefs, to meet justificatory demands, to recognize cognitive gaps, and so on.” In general, Medina refers to epistemic friction as a kind of epistemic resistance, which is to say an act of resistance that forces someone to think about what they know or do not know. In terms of racial oppression, epistemic friction functions to resist false, misleading or stereotypical conceptions and ideas about particular races or ethnicities. Epistemic friction is an act of epistemic resistance that serves the purpose of educating and informing others that the held conception of a race in question is in fact false, or misleading, or stereotypical. As Medina notes, beneficial epistemic friction is what aids in critical thinking and open-mindedness about individuals and groups of people. He goes on to note that not all epistemic friction is good. Instead, there is a kind of epistemic friction that perpetuates closed-minded and hateful conceptions of others.

When a racial group is consistently oppressed, and in Medina’s terms, consistently seen as epistemically deficient, that affects the group’s self-knowledge. If a group is not able to form and affirm their own self-knowledge; and instead, a dominant group defines the oppressed group, then

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106 Medina, 50.


108 See Medina, Chapter 2, section 2, “The Vice of Avoiding Epistemic Friction, Hermeneutical Justice, and the Problem of ‘Meta-Blindness.’”
we no longer have a working resistance-based democracy. In turn, oppressed groups of people will have little recourse to speak and be heard in their political and social system.

Arendt does account for the fact that as soon as an action occurs or a speech is finished, the reception and result is out of the agent’s control. Of course, this is an unavoidable fact about any action. However, my concern is that some might not have the opportunity to speak in a meaningful way wherein their words are genuinely listened to and they are afforded epistemic justice. This appears to be a predecessor to political action, not necessarily the aftermath. By this I mean that when one’s words are judged as incapable of meaning before even being spoken aloud, speech in the Arendtian sense is hardly a possibility because the speaker is not conceived of as an equal in the public realm. Once again, the detrimental effect that prejudice has produced in marginalized speakers further discourages involvement in an Arendtian public realm where speech and action are perceived as possibilities only for privileged white folks.

In this chapter I provided an overview of Arendtian political action as it is commonly understood and interpreted. I then argued that political action, as it is theorized in *The Human Condition*, is ideal and utopian in that it overgeneralizes and excludes historically minoritized populations. The exclusive and generalized account discourages minoritized populations from engaging in political action while also encouraging privileged whites to participate. In line with the antiracist methodology of this dissertation, the final section of the present chapter turned to the implications of this account of political action and utilized philosophers from historically marginalized backgrounds to propose alternatives to Arendt’s idealized theory.

*The Human Condition* is often the primary text consulted and taught when examining Arendtian political action. In this chapter I have argued that relying solely or primarily on this text to understand the concept diminishes the effectiveness of political action. In particular, Arendt argues against the increasing desire to leave the earth by invoking a new understanding of how we actively
ought to exist in the world with an emphasis on political action. By acting more, we are less susceptible to behavior which uncritically conforms to societal norms and expectations. And, in theory, when more people who act, the result is a more vibrant and productive political sphere which better reflects the diverse collection of individuals in a community. However, Arendt’s reliance on an idealized and utopian *polis*-model and overgeneralized account of plurality and natality limits the number and variety of people who are able to participate in political action, therefore diminishing the possibility of wide-ranging applicability. Put differently, the version of political action presented in *The Human Condition* is self-limiting—it caters largely to privileged elites and does recognize the limitations to political action by historically minoritized individuals.

While *The Human Condition* is limited by its ideal approach to political action, there are other texts worth examining for their nonideal approach to the concept. The subsequent chapter turns to Arendt’s second dissertation, *Rahel Varnhagen: Life of a Jewish Woman* to argue that Rahel can act as a beneficial supplement to *The Human Condition*. This often overlooked biography, which is philosophical in nature, largely operates at the nonideal level and promotes similar arguments about political action. In turning to Rahel I argue that we ought to read this text alongside of *The Human Condition* to develop more of a multi-dimensional rendering of political action that better recognizes racial identities, experiences of privilege, and epistemic injustices.
CHAPTER THREE
RAHEL VARNHAGEN AND NONIDEAL POLITICAL ACTION

The exclusionary nature of ideal political action found in *The Human Condition* leaves much to be desired. As the previous chapter argues, Arendt’s theorization of the concept in *The Human Condition* inadequately addresses privilege, racial difference, and individual testimony. In order to construct a multidimensional account of political action I argue it is necessary to turn to Arendt’s early biography on Rahel Varnhagen. Doing so substitutes the missing pieces from *The Human Condition* on privilege, race, and testimony and results in a more developed account of political action from a nonideal perspective. The genre of biography naturally lends itself to nonideal theory because it is reporting on the specific, lived experiences of an individual. Additionally, turning to *Rahel Varnhagen: Life of a Jewish Woman* (henceforth, *Rahel*) makes possible a more detailed, multidimensional rendering of political action because it is understood as an early account of the concept. Put differently, Arendt’s early theorization of political action in *Rahel* is a nonideal account of political action which supplements the later, more robust theorization presented in *The Human Condition*.

This chapter aims to argue two related main points. First, while *Rahel* is an early and often overlooked text, I argue it is an immensely valuable account of political action because it is a nonideal counterpart to the ideal iteration we receive in *The Human Condition*. Within the parameters of the 3D rendering analogy, *Rahel* adds another angle from which to view and subsequently understand political action. While others have made the argument that *Rahel* is an early theorization
of Arendt’s political philosophy, I want to add a further distinction to these scholarly conversations by claiming that Rabel is a nonideal, as well as early, theorization of political action. The nonideal nature of the philosophical biography is important to recognize because it acts as a foil to the ideal nature of The Human Condition. In this sense, I am arguing that The Human Condition and Rabel’s theorization of political action ought to be read and understood together because they complement one another. My second point builds on the first in arguing that the nonideal account of political action theorized in Rabel exemplifies real social and political impediments to Arendtian political action. In order to develop an account of political action that is more responsive to these impediments, I argue that we can turn to Rabel which recognizes and embraces racial difference, promotes a self-awareness of privilege, and values testimony from marginalized individuals. Consequently, Rabel, at one level acts as a foil to The Human Condition by emphasizing the heightened contrast between nonideal and ideal theory. And, it is also a testament to the specific impediments to political action which aids in my multi-dimensional rendering of the concept.

Due to the unorthodox nature of Rabel Varnhagen, it is necessary to start with a chronological summary of her life, as presented by Arendt. In the biography, Arendt does provide a semi-linear account of Rahel’s life from early childhood through life until death. But she briefly begins with her

1 See Carolina Armenteros, “Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, and the Beginnings of Political Philosophy,” The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 8 (1998), who claims Rabel contains embryonic or proto-theorization of political action. Similar claims are made in Seyla Benhabib’s chapter, “Arendt’s Biography of Rahel Varnhagen” in The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt; Dagmar Barnouw’s chapter “Society, Parvenu, and Pariah” in Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); and Richard J. Bernstein’s chapter, “The Conscious Pariah as Rebel and Independent Thinker” in Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). Additionally, Julia Kristeva, in Hannah Arendt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), argues Arendt’s use of Rahel is as “an individual or an event that stimulates the imagination” (49-50). Kristeva contrasts this interpretation of Rabel against my own that the biography acts as a case study or specific example of social and political issues concerning Jewish assimilation and exceptionalism. Liliane Weissberg’s introduction “Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, and the Writing of (Auto)biography” in Rabel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess, The First Complete Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) claims Rahel acted as an example of Arendt’s political philosophy. Margaret Canovan in Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought claims Rabel is deeply political in that it aims to critique how and why Rahel and so many of her contemporaries could be so “unpolitical” or so uninterested in collective action (9).
deathbed confession, jumps back and forth from other times in her life, and often veers away from biographical narrative into philosophizing on identity, discrimination, and Jewish history—to name only a few digressions. It is also helpful to start with a chronological account because Arendt’s biography is not strictly a biography, and as such is difficult, at times, to follow. Some claim Rahel is a mix of biography and autobiography while others claim it is existential philosophy under the guise of biography.² I claim, in the second part of this chapter, that this text is an example of Modernist biography akin to the biographies and autobiographies of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, crafted intentionally through narrative choices meant to illicit emotional reactions from readers so they can feel the pain, confusion, and exclusion that Rahel herself felt. I also claim it is a philosophical biography meant to communicate Arendt’s early thoughts on concepts such as political action. This second section ultimately aims to analyze Arendt’s philosophical and literary moves as they relate to the medium of biography. In the final section of the chapter, I outline my analysis of Arendt’s attention to racial and gendered difference, her awareness of Rahel’s privilege, and her awareness of the epistemic injustices Rahel was subject to. This final section pieces together an account of real impediments to political action, as exemplified through Rahel’s experience.

Part I: The Life of Rahel Varnhagen

*Rahel Varnhagen: Life of a Jewish Woman* is Arendt’s *Habilitationsschrift*—her second dissertation, a requirement in Germany to teach. Because Arendt was forced to flee Germany, then France, in

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² Liliane Weissberg in “Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, and the Writing of (Auto)biography” claims Arendt’s biography was also meant to tell her own, autobiographical story of personal heartbreak and public attempts at securing political protections as German Jew. Martine Leibovic, in “Arendt’s *Rahel Varnhagen*: A New Kind of Narration in the Impasses of German-Jewish Assimilation and *Existenzphilosophie*,” *Social Research* 74, no. 3 (2007), argues that Arendt is marking out her own existential philosophy, distinct from Jasper’s and Heidegger’s, in telling Rahel’s life. Seyla Benhabib (2000) also explores Jasper’s existentialism in Arendt’s biography and claims that “Jewishness” [in the biography] permits a certain kind of existential condition.” (9) Benhabib additionally agrees with Weissberg when she writes, “In telling Rahel’s story, Hannah Arendt was bearing testimony to a political and spiritual transformation that she herself was undergoing.” (10)
order to arrive in New York in 1941 via Lisbon, *Rahel* was published in 1957 after *The Origins of Totalitarianism*’s first edition publication and only months prior to the publication of *The Human Condition*. Arendt notes, however, in the preface to *Rahel* that she completed all but the final two chapters in 1931 when she fled Germany. The final two chapters were written roughly five years later while living as a stateless refugee in France. While the publication dates of all three texts occur in the same decade, *Rahel* was drafted more than two decades prior.

In what follows, I reconstruct a chronological account of important and relevant events in Rahel Varnhagen’s—née Levin—life, as told by Arendt. As previously mentioned, in the next section of this chapter I expand on Arendt’s narrative decisions which cast a heavily edited shadow on the life of Rahel. Put more bluntly, Arendt’s account of Rahel is well curated to fit her philosophical arguments but this sacrifices clarity when it comes to understanding the details of her life. Given the winding and ambiguous nature of how Arendt tells Rahel’s story, it is helpful to reconstruct—from what Arendt gives us—her life’s accomplishments, heartaches, and confessions. The next section will turn to other biographies of Rahel and criticism of Arendt’s version to further situate the philosophical argument lurking just below the surface in *Rahel*. For the present, however, I extract details of her early life, her years spent as a locally famous Berlin *salonnière*, her search for a husband, the effect of Napoléon’s invasion of Berlin and Prussia’s war against his forces, and the circumstances surrounding her death.

Born in 1771, Rahel’s life was fraught, from the very beginning. As Arendt crassly tells us, Rahel was “[n]ot rich, not cultivated and not beautiful—that meant that she was entirely without weapons with which to begin the great struggle for recognition in society, for social existence, for a morsel of happiness, for security and an established position in the bourgeois world.”³ Born into a

successful mercantile Jewish family, Rahel’s desire from a very early age was to escape the confines of her Jewish existence in late 18th, early 19th century Prussia, and be accepted in the larger German society.

Rahel wrote letters to express her philosophical insights and lamentations about what she claims was a cloistered and suffocating existence as a Jewish woman at the time. Many of her letters, the main source of Arendt’s investigation into her life, expressed her desire to be heard and known by others. In order to accomplish this feat, Rahel recognized from an early age that she needed to leave the religious, political, and social world of the German Jews. Writing to her childhood friend, David Veit, she boasted of her individuality and lamented over how her Jewishness held her back from recognition in German society when she wrote the following: “I have a strange fancy: it is as if some supramundane being, just as I was thrust into this world, plunged these words with a dagger into my heart: ‘Yes, have you the faculty of eternally thinking. But I add one thing more: be a Jewess!’ And now my life is a slow bleeding to death….I can, if you will derive every evil, every misfortune, every vexation from that.” Rahel thought herself fully capable of intellectually contributing to society; yet, German, and European, discrimination against Jews and women stifled her ability to exist as anyone but a marginalized Jewish woman.

Rahel’s desire to contribute to society was grounded in her belief that if people were able to learn about her, about her uniqueness, then they would befriend her and welcome her into their social circles. If this were to happen, Rahel would be free to exist outside of her insolated Jewish community and make new friends, attend social events, and learn about the wider world. Arendt tells

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4 For Arendt, political action is concerned with speaking and acting in the public realm. It is no coincidence that Rahel was negatively affected by being silenced and removed from the rest of German society. I expand on this further in Part III of this chapter.

5 *Rahel*, 7.
us Rahel pleaded with Veit to share her letters with others outside of the Jewish community. She felt that her particular situation, existing as a marginalized individual with invigorating thoughts to share and a voracious desire to learn, marked her as unique. While Rahel certainly was unique, her marginalized existence was not—a fact Arendt subtly indicates when she writes, “[t]he world and people were so boundless, and whatever happened to her seemed so little directed toward her in particular, that discretion was incomprehensible to her.”

Arendt synthesizes the tension between Rahel’s desire to be seen as an individual and her fraught understanding that because the world was so large, no one would take the time to take offense at her Jewish identity. Put differently, Rahel did not, at this early point in her life nor at any point hereafter, recognize the systemic nature of racism and discrimination because she thought her uniqueness exempted her from hatred, if only people could know her personally. She excoriated Veit, asking “‘[w]hy won’t you show anyone a whole letter of mine?’” and went on to insist that “‘[i]f only I could throw myself open to people as a cupboard is opened’” for then “‘[t]hey would certainly be content, and as soon as they saw, would understand.’” Rahel’s desire to be widely known and read marked only the beginning of her troubled, early years.

At the age of 19, Rahel’s father died, leaving her younger brother Markus in charge of the family’s gemstone business and financial affairs. Arendt tells us that after her father’s death, “the sons took over his business, settled a lifetime allowance upon the mother, and determined to marry off the two sisters as soon as possible.” Rahel’s younger sister, Rose was eventually married in 1801, but her brothers Markus, Ludwig, and Moritz were unsuccessful in arranging or encouraging a

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6 Rahel, 19.
7 Rahel, 19.
8 Rahel, 5.
marriage for Rahel. Arendt tells us she was dependent on her mother’s allowance, and after her
mother’s death in 1809, entirely reliant on her brothers’ charitable whims. While her father’s
business was successful, after his death she was entirely financially dependent on her tepid family
members’ generosity.

Despite Rahel’s difficult early years, she succeeded in entering German society through the
success of her salon. From 1790 until Napoléon’s invasion of Prussia in 1806, Rahel welcomed a
diverse cross-section of society into the attic of the apartment she shared with her mother on
Jägerstrasse in Berlin. Salon culture in Berlin centered around tea and conversation, and opened up the
opportunity for Jewish women to access the larger German society. Visiting one’s salon was an
opportunity to converse, gossip, debate, socialize, and nurture friendships.

Though Arendt characterizes Rahel as “not cultivated,” she was certainly intelligent. Due to
both Rahel’s intellect and charisma, as well as the lingering sentiment of the Enlightenment—that all
people are capable of reason—coupled with a short-lived Berlin trend that fetishized Jews as exotic
and enticing persons, her salon was quite popular. Arendt tells us that in addition to a brief
encounter with Goethe, her salon included “almost all the important intellectuals of Berlin...the
Humboldt brothers, Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Gentz, [Friedrich] Schleiermacher, Prince Louis
Ferdinand of Prussia and his mistress Pauline Wiesel, the classical philologist Friedrich August Wolf,
Jean Paul, Brentano, the Tieck brothers, Chamisso, Fouqué, etc.”9 Though graced by the presence of
such influential people, Rahel’s salon did not allow for societal acceptance outside of her attic.
Additionally, her days as a salonnière were numbered. As soon as Napoléon invaded Berlin, Rahel’s
salon attendants fled abroad, scattering her friends and extinguishing their daily visits.

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9 Rahel, 229.
Napoléon’s invasion of Berlin disrupted more than Rahel’s successful salon. In addition to losing her flock of interested visitors, Rahel’s finances were restricted while the French military forces occupied Berlin, disrupting commerce. Her brothers’ allowances varied, becoming solely dependent on a volatile business. Arendt reports that Rahel’s “bare living was always secure, but after 1807 its standard had dropped below the level of her associates” or peers. With the entrance of a new political and military power in Berlin, only rich and well-connected Germans continued to operate salons. Rahel, who had already moved out of her apartment on Jägerstrasse shortly before her mother’s death, was forced to move to a smaller apartment which was not conducive for visitors. All the while, her ravenous desire for social acceptance and a venue for public interaction went unsatiated.

Rahel believed her most reliable opportunity for full entrance into German social society was through marriage. She was convinced of this early on in her life though she was desperate for a non-Jewish partner by the time the French invasion disrupted daily life in Berlin. Arendt observes that for a Jewish woman during Rahel’s lifetime, the one way to achieve social recognition was through marriage and conversion to Christianity through baptism. Rahel experienced two heartbreaking, failed engagements—both outlined in extensive detail by Arendt—before finally marrying August Varnhagen, a German soldier and eventual diplomat, at the age of 43. In marrying Varnhagen, she changed her name to Antonie Friederike. While Rahel had long sought for a romantic partner, Arendt tells us Rahel was not secretive about the functional nature of her marriage. Arendt maintains that Rahel “had persuaded neither herself nor him that she loved him.” Instead, Rahel’s

10 Rahel, 178.
11 Rahel, 230.
12 Rahel, 182.
marriage to Varnhagen provided stability and social connections. She knew he was ardently devoted
to her, and his prospects, and hers by proxy, of becoming “someone,” of being recognized in and
accepted by society, were steadily increasing because of his growing influence as a German diplomat.

Through her marriage to Varnhagen and his subsequent success in the German army, Rahel
was finally able to enter society as Antonie Friederike Varnhagen. She quickly realized, however, that
many in Berlin still recognized her as a Jewish woman and refused to greet or speak with her. It is
only abroad that those who knew nothing of her ancestry treated her with respect in society.
Because of this, Arendt tells us that Rahel began to doubt why she ever wished to cast aside her
Jewish identity. She sent Varnhagen to track down her old friend from her Berlin salon, Pauline
Wiesel, whom, after Varnhagen found her, she began to write to regularly. Through her letters,
Rahel expressed regret over her lifelong wish to be accepted by society at the cost of her identity,
and on her deathbed declared, “The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which
was the misery and misfortune of my life—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account
now wish to have missed.”

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Part II: Arendt’s Curation of the Life of Rahel Varnhagen

Arendt, however, did not straightforwardly tell the biographical story of Rahel as
summarized above. Instead, her book is interested in affecting an empathetic understanding of
Rahel’s plight—a plight shared by most German Jews at the time. The affective dimension of the
biography derives its strength and effectiveness through the winding narrative meant to inform the
reader of the larger social, political, and religious conditions for German Jews at the time. The
winding narrative is also meant to affect feelings of frustration, impatience, and uncertainty at the
seemingly endless impediments to social and political recognition by peers and governments as well

13 Rahel, 3.
as at the overwhelming pressure to convert to Christianity in order to move beyond the isolated Jewish community. In addition to the affective dimension, Arendt’s biography unconventionally argues that we ought to accept our innate qualities, characteristics, and identities by exploring how a specific, marginalized individual existed in the world. In a letter about Rahel Varnhagen to Karl Jaspers, her advisor for her first dissertation on St. Augustine and love as well as the Rahel biography, Arendt writes, “[w]hat this all really adds up to fate, being exposed, what life means—I can’t really say in the abstract (and I realize that in trying to write about it here). Perhaps all I can try to do is illustrate it with examples, and that is precisely why I want to write a biography.” Arendt felt too constrained by the abstract nature of philosophical analysis and so turned to biography to tell the story of what it means to be vulnerable because of one’s identity and how to best overcome adversity related to that vulnerability.

Arendt’s book on Rahel’s life has been the source of lively debate even though it is often overlooked within the corpus. I aim to clarify and improve upon the claim that Rahel Varnhagen is exemplary of Arendt’s political philosophy by analyzing how Arendt chooses to tell Rahel’s story. I examine Arendt’s editorial and narrative decisions which reveal a heavy-handed manipulation of Rahel’s letters and circumstances in order to best serve Arendt’s purposes—arguing for the acceptance of one’s “given” or innate identity and perseverance in the face of overwhelming social and political distain. I also turn to some brief considerations on the nature of biography—a far from static genre. The experimental nature of Arendt’s biography which infuses philosophical analysis of identity with one individual’s life story was not uncommon for the time. I end this part of the chapter by turning to famed biographer Hermione Lee’s assessment of the genre and analysis of

biographies written in the Modern era to demonstrate that Arendt’s narrative and editorial choices were not as uncommon as one might initially think.

How Arendt told Rahel’s story:

Arendt’s editorial and narrative choices

In the following section I explain how Arendt chose to tell Rahel’s story, focusing on editorial and narrative decisions. The well-curated story is less a true depiction of Rahel’s life than the backdrop for Arendt’s philosophical and political arguments about Jewish identity and the Jewish question. Because the biography is more philosophical than straightforward, many scholars have sought to understand why Arendt chose to pursue a biographical project for her Habilitationsschrift instead of a more traditional dissertation, similar to her first one on St. Augustine’s theory of love. While there are individual nuances amongst all, it is helpful to designate two main camps. The first includes those who claim Arendt wrote Rahel in response to her recent separation from her previous advisor, Martin Heidegger, with whom she had a years-long affair. The second camp includes those who are uninterested in examining Rahel through the lens of the Heidegger-Arendt affair. I fall into the latter camp because, even though I am certain the terminated affair affected Arendt, I am not persuaded that this aspect of her personal life ought to be viewed as a

15 Notably, Weissberg (1997) claims Arendt’s (auto)biography “tries to provide healing for history” but it also acts as a balm for Arendt herself (17-18). Additionally, Norma Claire Moruzzi’s Speaking Through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) argues that narrating Rahel’s life provided a channel for Arendt to grieve and heal from her secret affair with Heidegger. She also claims that telling Rahel’s story provided Arendt the opportunity to covertly share her secret affair with Heidegger vicariously through Rahel’s many romantic endeavors and heartaches. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s biography Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) asserts Rahel is Arendt’s best friend because Rahel “was most deeply able to understand” Arendt’s heartache when Heidegger made it clear he would not leave his wife and children for Arendt (56).

16 While Heidegger’s philosophical influence on Arendt is often found valuable, their secret affair does not factor into notable analyses of Rahel Varnhagen. These include Benhabib (2000), Kristeva (2001), and Bernstein (1996).
valuable or generative entry into understanding Arendt’s arguments in the biography. In fact, I am not interested in why Arendt wrote *Rahel*, but how she wrote it.

As someone who resisted the title of philosopher, it is no surprise that Arendt was cautious of philosophy’s ability to articulate suffering, vulnerability, and the importance of accepting one’s identity. In a short essay titled “Action and the Pursuit of Happiness” Arendt reveals her theory of storytelling. She believes that “no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say.”\(^{17}\) In *Rahel Varnhagen* Arendt sets out to do more than merely report on the experiences of Rahel’s life, but she uses those experiences to ground what she wants to say about political action and identity. And while she does go on, in *The Human Condition*, to more elaborately abstract her ideas about political action and identity, I argue that we have access to a unique mix of the “incident and story” of Rahel and the less concrete theories on social and political constraints against German Jews in *Rahel Varnhagen*. This is all to say, Arendt has a developed account of storytelling and we ought to pay attention to it, particularly how she tells Rahel’s story, in order to better understand her more abstract political theories.

Arendt’s approach to telling Rahel’s story is more interested in cultivating an argument and affecting political involvement than historically uncovering the life, experiences, and death of the person. According to political scientist and Arendt scholar, Lisa Disch, Arendt “believed philosophy inadequate to inspire resistance in times of political crises.”\(^{18}\) Additionally, Disch goes on to claim

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that for Arendt, stories can “position its audience to think from within [a story’s] dilemma.”

Situating her narrative within Rahel’s life, Arendt aims to share Rahel’s story while also sharing her own, and droves of other European Jews’ search for a welcoming place in the world. In this sense, the dilemma Arendt strove to “think from within” is rooted in the Jewish question—an amorphous question about Jewish religious, social, and political existence in an increasingly antisemitic world. While there is not room here to expand on the Jewish question and Arendt’s more pointed arguments surrounding it, it is necessary to note that her biography on Rahel is an early theorization of political action, a theory that she goes on to apply practically in the 1930s and 1940s through her involvement with Zionism, and which she more abstractly theorizes in *The Human Condition*. Given this trajectory, Arendt’s work in *Rahel* ought to be recognized as an early theory of political action proposed through the medium of biography.

With a more developed account of Arendt’s use of storytelling laid out, it is now possible to move on to the specifics of how she tells Rahel’s story. In the preface, Arendt tells us she sought “to narrate Rahel’s life as she herself might have told it.” Stepping into Rahel’s life, Arendt intends to share Rahel’s story as a kindred spirit and fellow German Jew because, at the time, it was largely unknown. But Arendt’s approach and method are more skewed than a simple retelling of Rahel’s life. In part, choosing to narrate Rahel’s life, as she would have, ignores the scores of letters Rahel left behind in which she meant to inform others of her life, her philosophical musings, and her literary assessments. Rahel’s plea to her childhood friend David Veit to share her letters was not

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19 Disch, 110.

20 The next chapter, Chapter Four, directly addresses the Jewish question and Arendt’s political proposals aimed at ameliorating antisemitism.

21 See note 1 of this chapter.

22 *Rahel*, xv.
abandoned at any point in her life. She wrote copious letters over her lifetime to friends, family, and recent acquaintances. In this sense, Rahel did tell her story. But Arendt’s story is more than Rahel’s life and struggles. It is the story of Central European antisemitism and German Jewish assimilation and exceptionalism from a 20th century perspective which was well aware of the increasing threat of Hitler’s destructive power. Rahel’s life serves as the “nutshell” for the larger, more complex Jewish question.

Arendt’s method behind telling Rahel’s story is also unorthodox. Instead of setting out to tell Rahel’s story, Arendt intentionally tells a well-curated version of Rahel’s story which better fits her argument about assimilation and exceptionalism. This argument boils down to accepting one’s given qualities—an argument further developed in the first chapter of The Human Condition. In telling Rahel’s story, Arendt explains the historical conditions of Rahel’s milieu. Compared to poorer, Eastern European Jews, German Jews were significantly wealthier thanks in part to the prevalence of Enlightenment ideals concerning the universal nature of reason. Arendt tells us that “[e]very Berlin Jew felt like a Grand Sultan compared in contrast to his poor, backward co-religionist” and because of this comparison, “he drew his consciousness of being an exception.”

The slightly more welcoming environment for German Jews did not prevent them from experiencing other forms of discrimination based on their Jewish identity and religion. Yet, Arendt’s point is that the improved circumstances encouraged German Jews to further assimilate into Gentile society, erasing their Jewishness, or to embrace their Jewishness only in so far as it made them an exception. Exceptional Jews were allowed to retain their Jewish identity, but they were required to be exceptional in both senses of the word—extraordinary and excluded or at least removed from the larger Jewish community. Arendt refers to these exceptional or assimilated Jews as parvenus and she argues that

23 Rahel, 216.
the individualized nature of German Jewish exceptionalism precludes collective, political action for all Jews. By attempting to gain social favor and political protections on an individual basis, the Jewish people as a whole would never gain emancipation.

Instead, Arendt advocates for what she calls a conscious pariah existence for Jews. Instead of atomized assimilation or exceptionalism, which relies on masses of unassimilated or unexceptional Jews to compare oneself to, conscious pariahs intentionally embrace their outcast status. This argument is best exemplified by Arendt’s start to the biography which begins with Rahel’s death. On her deathbed, Arendt’s opening lines quote Rahel as saying “‘the thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wish to have missed.’” Much of the biography charts Rahel’s desire to erase her Jewish identity in order to move more freely in German society. While her salon was successful, it was her main and at times only social opportunity and it required others to come to her. Yet, Arendt is guilty of only communicating that which benefits her argument for accepting one’s identity. According to Heidi Thomann Tewarson, a German literature scholar who wrote Rahel Varnhagen: The Life and Work of a German Jewish Intellectual, Arendt conveniently left out what immediately follows, according to August Varnhagen’s records: “‘Dear August, my heart is refreshed in its inmost depths. I have thought of Jesus and cried over his passion; I have felt—for the first time so felt it—that he is my brother. And Mary, how did she suffer! She saw her beloved son suffer but did not succumb; she stood at the cross! That I could not have done; I would not have been that strong. May God forgive me, I confess how weak I am.’” August Varnhagen’s notes record a significant acceptance of

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24 Ravel, 3.

Christianity’s influence on Rahel. She sympathizes with the Jewish Mary’s suffering in life and strongly associates with Jesus’s sacrifice. The complex relationship with Christianity as a converted Jew is clear in the quote which complicates Arendt’s argument concerning Rahel’s acceptance of her Jewish identity.

Arendt’s choice to exclude Rahel’s full deathbed confession is in tension with her harsh criticism of August Varnhagen’s editorial decisions. In the preface, Arendt does not mince words, claiming that his “mutilations are frequent.”

She goes on to clarify that “[h]e made wholesale corrections, expunged essential portions and coded personal names in such a manner that the reader was deliberately led astray.” While Arendt does not code names or make wholesale corrections, she does expunge essential portions—the most blatant is the deathbed confessional. And, the effect of Arendt’s exclusion is similar to August’s. The deliberate edits to Rahel’s letters, according to Arendt, were intended “to make Rahel’s associations and circle of friends appear less Jewish and more aristocratic, and to show Rahel herself in a more conventional light, one more in keeping with the times.” Though different in substance—August, purportedly, wanted to paint Rahel in a more conventional light whereas Arendt wants to draw out Rahel’s Jewish identity for the purposes of her argument about German Jewish identity—both August and Arendt’s edits aim to craft a specific portrait. As an example, consider profile portraits which are drawn from a specific side—left or right. August’s approach to preserving his wife’s life took one perspective while Arendt’s took another.

quotation in which Rahel, shortly before her death, admitted to her Jewish origins, but embraced her new Christian faith” (15).

26 Rahel, xiv.

27 Rahel, xiv-xv.

28 Rahel, xv.
Arendt’s frustration with August’s edits has been the topic of some debate. It is commonly accepted that August Varnhagen did edit, at times heavily, his wife’s correspondence but it is unclear to what degree he did that on his own. In the introduction to *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess First Complete Edition*, editor Liliane Weissburg takes Arendt’s side claiming that Varnhagen mutilated Rahel’s letters. Yet, Weissburg admits the possibility that Rahel herself was involved in the editing and preservation process of her writing. Little else is said to expand on Rahel’s editorial involvement or the implications of her involvement for Arendt’s critiques. German cultural historian, Dagmar Barnouw in *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* insists that “Rahel, of course, might not have minded, might even have desired such careful editing” of her letters by August. And according to Tewarson, Arendt’s contempt for Rahel’s husband is unfounded and also mimics largely antisemitic and misogynist historians’ conclusion of Varnhagen. Those historians demonized August for supporting a dominant and Jewish wife. Tewarson is right to point out that August “was able to rise above the conventions of his time by admitting his wife’s superiority and serving her as a loyal friend and partner.” Far from common at the time, August’s devotion to Rahel and to preserving and publishing her writing took priority in his life. Arendt’s criticism of August fails to acknowledge his devotion and Rahel’s probable involvement in the editing process. Her frustration, I claim, stems from the different stories she and August, and by extension possibly Rahel, want to tell. Arendt is focused on the German Jewish story of assimilation, exceptionalism, and eventual conscious pariahdom where Rahel embraced her Jewish identity. August, on the other hand, wanted Rahel’s life story to be more accessible to those Rahel wished to be socially connected with—German and other German Jewish social elites.

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29 *Rahel*, 43.

30 *Rahel*, 12.
Another editorial choice of Arendt’s worth examining for its selective nature is her decision to tell Rahel’s story, largely through her failed love affairs, engagements, and eventual loveless marriage. While Arendt’s decision to focus on this aspect of Rahel’s life is often tied to her recently ended secret affair with Heidegger, there is also a clear connection between Rahel’s relationships and her misguided search for social acceptance. Instead of analyzing Arendt’s focus for its personal connection, it is important to recognize the political philosophy at work in her decision to focus on Rahel’s affairs. According to Norma Claire Moruzzi in *Speaking Through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity*, Arendt’s decision to focus on her love affairs is rooted in her need to heal from her relationship with Heidegger. Her particular form of healing, according to Moruzzi takes the form of telling her own story of love lost through the “mask” of Rahel. Moruzzi laments that “[i]nstead of the salon hostess, the woman who lived her life through passionate friendships, Arendt’s Rahel is a woman who lives her life through a series of futile, unhappy love affairs.”

Interestingly, Arendt does include information about Rahel’s years as a salon hostess and her friendships as they were cultivated through the salon and letter writing. Moruzzi takes issue with Arendt’s emphasis on this aspect of Rahel’s life and argues that Arendt’s decision to write the biography in this way diminishes the vibrant social life Rahel actually experienced.

Yet, focusing on Rahel’s love life serves a deeper purpose, even if Arendt is too heavy-handed in her editorial decisions. Rahel’s story serves as the backdrop for Arendt’s argument concerning accepting one’s given qualities and the social and political struggles associated with German Jewish identity. By focusing on Rahel’s failed love affairs and eventual loveless marriage, Arendt leads her readers through the heartbreaking details of Rahel’s attempts to evade her Jewish

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31 See note 15 of this chapter for more.

32 Moruzzi, 53.
identity. With each failed engagement, we feel the tedium of Rahel starting her life over. We experience alongside Rahel her pain and frustration in thinking she’s ill-fated to succeed in what she wants most—to be accepted in a society which shuns and marginalizes Jews. Her desire to succeed was so strong that she entered into a loveless marriage, despite having searched for decades for someone to both love and offer entrance into German society. Arendt’s decision to place emphasis on Rahel’s love life is emotive—how better to persuade someone of the frustrations and difficulties of pursuing the life of a parvenue than to do so through the personal story of one who only on her deathbed confesses that her pursuit was in bad faith? If Arendt were to focus more on her “passionate friendships” her argument for the conscious pariah would be less effective.

Arendt’s editorial decisions, particularly her selective quotes taken out of context, alongside her underlying argument about Jewish existence, assimilation, and exclusion at the turn of 18th century Prussia leaves us with a biography closer to fiction than fact. But the point is that her editorial decisions allow her to make the argument she does, even though it is exemplified by a fictionalized version of Rahel. While Tewarson claims that Arendt’s concentration on “Rahel’s Jewishness…created a rather one-dimensional portrait of this very complex and self-aware woman,” I disagree, only because Arendt’s portrait of Rahel serves the purpose of advancing her arguments about the multi-dimensional impediments to Jewish acceptance in German society and the difficulties of embracing the conscious pariah existence. These impediments and difficulties are multi-dimensional because they engage with religious demands and expectations, language barriers for non-German speaking Jews living in Germany, varied social interactions which are influenced by quickly changing public sentiment toward Jews, and political protections for Jews who existed as

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33 Disch and Moruzzi both agree with this assessment and Disch’s characterization of Arendtian storytelling (though it never engages with the intentionally curated story of Rahel) is a better conduit for marginalized voices than philosophy or political theory.
stateless refugees in their generational homeland. Rahel experienced every one of these impediments and difficulties, and she was not alone. Arendt’s point in fixating on Rahel’s Jewishness serves a distinct purpose, even though she heavily edits aspects of Rahel’s life. She aims to tell the story of German-Jews attempting to gain social acceptance and political protections.

Arendt is clear that she never intended “to write a book about Rahel.”

Rahel is, instead, an act of Arendtian political action. Arendt makes it clear she is telling the story of Rahel and that of all German Jews. She sees herself as their Homer, ensuring their words and deeds are recorded and remembered. This is only possible, according to Arendt, because both Rahel and German Jews no longer exist. Rahel died in 1833 and according to Arendt, since the Holocaust, “the history of the German Jews has come to an end.”

By writing and sharing the story of Rahel and all German Jews, Arendt is acting politically—speaking publicly to preserve the life story of her people who she sees as radically altered, no longer the same after the Holocaust. By telling Rahel’s story, she is able to resist competing narratives that demean the testimonial value of marginalized voices such as Rahel’s and her own.

Biography as a genre is not always strictly tied to fact, a claim famed biographer Hermione Lee and her most recent subject, screenwriter and playwright Tom Stoppard agree on. In Biography: A Short Introduction Lee’s first rule for biographical writing states that it ought, but need not, be true. She quickly qualifies this rule, by claiming that over the course of centuries of biographical writing the genre has defied such neat guidelines. She admits that “biography is a form of narrative, not just a presentation of facts.”

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34 Rahel, xv.

35 Rahel, xvii.

century), Lee goes on to claim that biographers such as Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein felt that “facts needed to be manipulated.” For both Modernists, facts alone cannot provide emotional, intimate, and affective portraits of the lives examined. Details need to be adjusted, ignored, or overemphasized. Because of these exact alterations, Tom Stoppard is well known for his distaste for the genre. Despite decades of open hostility toward biography, Stoppard only recently asked Hermione Lee to write his life story. In a review of the biography, New York Times literary critic Charles McGrath notes that “[i]n his play “Indian Ink,” a character calls biography ‘the worst possible excuse for getting people wrong’ and in “The Invention of Love,” Stoppard has Oscar Wilde describe biography as ‘the mesh through which our real life escapes.’” Stoppard’s concern is that the genre’s subjective nature often results in manipulated portraits, straying too far from the person’s likeness.

Yet, Arendt’s desire to write a book about German Jews, through the life-story of Rahel necessitates the exact manipulation Woolf and Stein embrace and which Stoppard despises. Rahel is an effective conduit for the larger story Arendt wishes to share, but it is not perfect. Arendt’s edits, in turn, act to promote her historical documentation of German Jewish assimilation and exceptionalism, and theorization of political action. However, Arendt’s edits and manipulations have


important ramifications. The following section outlines the precariousness of Arendt’s biographical method.

**Part III: Nonideal Manifestations**

How Arendt tells Rahel’s story—a heavily edited, intentionally curated biography which serves the purpose of exemplifying Arendt’s underlying philosophical argument about given qualities and pursuing a conscious pariah existence—is crucial to providing a fuller, nonideal account of the limitations of political action. However, more exists in *Rahel* that can add to our multi-dimensional picture of Arendtian political action. In the following, final section of this chapter, I examine Arendt’s awareness of racial difference, criticism of Rahel’s privilege, and advocacy for marginalized voices and their influence on Arendt’s early theorization of political action. In *The Human Condition*, attention to the lived experiences of racism and racial difference, social and political privilege, and epistemic injustice is missing, yet robust accounts of these experiences are found in *Rahel*. These experiences depict, assess, and judge the nonideal implications of Arendtian political action, namely the impediments to political action. In order to render a multi-dimensional account of political action, it is necessary to investigate these experiences not only because they are nonideal but also because they depict the fragility of Arendtian political action. If racial discrimination, ignorance of privilege, and epistemic injustice inhibit an individual from political action, then the number of individuals who could become political actors is restricted to an elite few. Examining closely the moments when Arendt is aware of the impediments to political action allows us to develop an account of political action that anticipates and accounts for discrimination.

Additionally, there are clear parallels between Arendt and Rahel worth elaborating on. Political action, for Arendt, reveals one’s identity. In *Rahel*, we witness two layers of revelation—Rahel’s and Arendt’s. As the former half of this chapter has outlined, Rahel’s identity is revealed to us through Arendt’s narrative. In the following sections, I examine how Arendt’s narrative and
editorial decisions which pay attention to race and identity, privilege, and epistemic injustice reveal a more attentive and therefore effective version of political action.

Each of the following three sections in Part III examine one of these discriminatory experiences. I first look to Arendt’s awareness of racial difference and discrimination as they affect Rahel’s ability to be seen and heard in German social circles. Then, I examine Arendt’s deeply critical analysis of Rahel’s privileges. Rahel is largely ignorant of her relative privilege and Arendt harshly critiques her insufficient self-awareness. I end by examining instances where Arendt is aware of how epistemic injustice hinders political action.

Awareness of Racial Difference

In this section I argue that Arendt is well aware of racial differences and their connection to marginalization and oppression. In other words, she is attentive to the varied experiences of Jews in Prussia in the 18th and 19th centuries.40 I begin by arguing that this text, unlike The Human Condition, operates at the nonideal level—paying close attention to the lived experiences of Rahel, Rahel’s Jewish family and friends, and her non-Jewish friends, and the historical conditions of life in Prussia. Additionally, I argue that Arendt’s critique of Jewish assimilation, which is addressed throughout the entire course of the book, demonstrates her recognition of the importance of racial differences. In other words, because Arendt is deeply critical of assimilation, there is room to interpret Arendt as embracing racial differences.

It is helpful to begin this section with Arendt’s awareness of the nonideal, as opposed to ideal nature of Rahel. In the first chapter Arendt explains Rahel’s reluctance to embrace her Jewish

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40 Arendt’s main concern with the Jewish question was political—see Ch. 4 for more on Arendt’s narrow interest. Yet, it is well worth noting that in Rahel’s time the Jewish question revolved around social assimilation, political protections, cultural and religious practices, and racial identity. Jewish racial identity at the time was largely believed to be biological, as opposed to the more commonly accepted understanding of race today, that it is socially constructed.
identity which she was more intent on covering up. Arendt is fiercely critical of Rahel’s desire to lie about her existence as a Jewish woman. In Weissberg’s introduction to the first complete edition of *Rahel*, she quotes correspondence between Arendt and German journalist Günter Gaus as saying “‘To be Jewish belongs to the irrefutable conditions of my life, and I have never tried to change any such fact, not even in my childhood.’” Arendt’s dedication to her Jewish identity, what Arendt calls her unique, given qualities, stands in sharp contrast to Rahel’s desire to reinvent herself as someone society would accept. In relation to one another, Arendt has the benefit of hindsight, assessing Rahel’s life a century later. Rahel was not afforded that opportunity. But from Arendt’s privileged perspective, she is able to critique Rahel’s assimilationist aspirations.

Critical of Rahel’s desire to rewrite her identity, Arendt analogizes Rahel’s fantasy-filed journey with Quixote. In a cryptic passage, Arendt writes,

As long as Don Quixote continues to ride forth to conjure a possible, imagined, illusory world out of the real one, he is only a fool, and perhaps a happy fool, perhaps even a noble fool when he undertakes to conjure up within the real world a definite ideal. But if without a definite ideal, without aiming at a definite imaginary revision of the world, he attempts only to transform himself into some sort of empty possibility which he might be, he becomes merely a ‘foolish dreamer,’ and an opportunist one in addition, who is seeking to destroy his existence for the sake of certain advantages.  

As mentioned above, this is a strange passage following a section of the first chapter where Arendt is explaining how Rahel, being Jewish, felt the need to lie about her identity in order to gain the favor of those in society. Here Arendt is communicating the senselessness and impracticality of ideal theory. Like Quixote, those who aim for imaginary, ideal constructions of the world and how it works are fools, destined to spend their lives seeking out false realities. According to Arendt, if one has a “definite ideal,” a well-thought out, well planned ideal, then they are still a fool, albeit a noble

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41 Weissberg, 26.

one. Yet, she cautions against what Rahel was attempting, which was to rewrite her history and identity. Those who attempt to do this are only searching to climb the social ladder in her estimate—an individual solution which necessitates masses of less fortunate Jews remain marginalized. In all, Arendt here appears to critique an ideal approach to understanding the world and enacting change—a radically different approach than the one she takes in her later works, *The Human Condition* in particular.

In tandem with Arendt’s outright critique of the ideal approach and method in the previous passage, her historically-rooted text engages nonideally with Rahel’s world. We can make sense of this by looking at one of Arendt’s main arguments in *Rahel*—those who are not accepted by others, socially or politically, ought to become what she calls “conscious pariahs,” as opposed to parvenues or mere pariahs. As previously mentioned, the conscious pariah lives their life in full, conscious, acceptance of their outsider position, refusing to renounce their identity in order to fit in or curry favor. In contrast, the mere or unconscious pariah remains on the outskirts of society, upholding the status quo. On the other hand, the parvenue casts aside or lies about their identity in order to be acceptable. Rahel, according to Arendt, was a parvenue for much of her life because she sought to hide and deny her Jewish identity. In order to demonstrate the perils of parvenue existence, Arendt engages with the specifics of Rahel’s biography, her diary and correspondences, the Prussian state during the 18th and 19th centuries, and the salon culture of Berlin at the turn of the 19th century. The nonideal nature of these investigations truly aims to persuade us of the dangers of the parvenue, and the values of the conscious pariah in such a way that pays close attention to how race operates in Rahel’s endeavors.

Another of Arendt’s main arguments is that the wholesale approach to emancipation for European Jews in the 18th and 19th centuries—assimilation—was harmful to the Jewish people for it embraced the erasure of their identity and denial of their history. Arendt characterizes assimilation
as a lie to oneself and one’s racial identity. Narrowing her critique of assimilation in *Rahel* largely to German Jews, she writes, “The German-speaking Jews and their history are an altogether unique phenomenon; nothing comparable to it is to be found even in the other areas of Jewish assimilation.”\(^{43}\) Notably, she is privileging the German Jewish experience—which was generally understood to be the most privileged, elite group of Jews compared to other European Jews—but she is also engaging with it at the nonideal level. Privileging the German Jewish experience in this situation speaks to Arendt’s positionality—her own identity as a German Jew who was forced to flee Germany in the midst of Hitler’s rise to power because she refused to attempt assimilation by denying her identity. In this sense, Rahel’s failed attempts and ultimate dissatisfaction with assimilation bear witness to the struggle for social and political protections for German Jews.

More specifically, Rahel struggled with what Arendt claims “was the greatest error that Rahel shared with her contemporaries,”\(^{44}\) which was to create a persona which often cast aside their given identity in order to thrive in society. Arendt claims that European Jews during this time period did not consider Jewish emancipation *en masse*. Instead, individual, exceptional Jews, were able to “overcome” their Jewish identity either through wealth, intellect, or connections. Arendt provides an interesting analysis of this phenomenon, proving that her attention to the particular social and political conditions Rahel experienced ought to be understood and communicated in order to make a compelling argument for social acceptance. By engaging at this nonideal level, Arendt is able to address, and critique, Rahel’s concerns about social acceptance in a way that acknowledges the discrimination and lack of political protections that Rahel faced while also disparaging her from denying her Jewish identity. Even though Arendt is critical of Rahel’s desire to recreate herself,

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\(^{43}\) *Rahel*, xvii.

\(^{44}\) *Rahel*, xvi.
Rahel is exemplary of political action because, as Arendt tells us, “All that remained for her to do was to become a ‘mouthpiece’ for experience, to verbalize whatever happened.”

Her Berlin salon allowed her to speak and act with others that did not otherwise exist for Jewish women. Even though the salons were private, they existed as a microcosm of the public realm, allowing individuals to speak and be heard. According to Arendt in *The Human Condition* political action entails speaking and acting so that those words and actions can reveal one’s identity to those in attendance. Certainly, Rahel’s letters and diary entries also act this way to reveal herself to others.

Arendt’s characterization of Rahel’s salon additionally demonstrates her awareness of the need for social and political recognition, regardless of race or stature. She describes it as “a socially neutral place where all classes met and where it was taken for granted that each person would be an individual.”

Political action requires individualism because as an unique person, one can speak and act and therefore reveal their particular self to others. The degree to which Rahel’s friends and salon participants embraced each other’s individual differences was certainly a product of the time—Arendt claims that it was due to a particular point in Berlin’s history that Jews, princes, social elites, and intellectuals would gather, unhindered by their race, ethnicity, religion, or social standing. Yet, the swift dissolution of Rahel’s friends and salon with Napoleon’s armies’ arrival in Berlin was evidence of the tenuousness and disingenuousness of their relationship. The short-lived acceptance of individuals in Berlin revealed that accepting historically minoritized individuals was merely in fashion at the time, it was not a genuine awareness and respect for other racial, ethnic, religious, or socio-economic groups. Even through the successful years of her salon, Arendt tells us that “Rahel

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45 *Rahel*, xvi.

46 *Rahel*, 38.
was distrustful, because there was no place in the world for her, and she considered hope foolish.”

The salon’s ability to provide Rahel a stage to speak and act proved inadequate. Her Berlin friends’ feeble attempt at providing social acceptance forced her to fervently peruse marriage. Marriage, however, entailed a sweeping denial of her Jewish identity—something she did not have to commit to as a salonnière.

From a very young age, Arendt tells us that Rahel pursued marriage as a means to escape her Jewishness. Then, through adulthood Rahel devoted all her efforts to being socially recognized through marriage. Arendt says that “She gave herself to love as though she were nothing but a creature of nature, and she hoped since she had been ‘pushed out of the world by birth, by ill luck not admitted to it,’ to be able to circumvent ill luck and birth through love.” As previously discussed, Rahel only succeeded in marrying August Varnhagen in the latter half of her life. And yet, quickly after her attempts at overcoming her Jewish identity were realized did she begin to renounce her previous desire for social acceptance at the cost of her identity.

At times Arendt changes gears from providing an account of the specifics of Rahel’s life and instead critiquing the larger social conditions of her time. In one such moment, Arendt critiques what she says is an Enlightenment era desire to be lost in pure thought. She claims that Rahel sought escape in that theoretical world of thought when she wrote the following:

The individual who has been liberated by reason is always running head-on into a world, a society, whose past in the shape of ‘prejudices’ has a great deal of power; he is forced to learn that past reality is also a reality. Although being born a Jewess might seem to Rahel a mere reference to something out of the remote past, and although she may have entirely eradicated the fact from her thinking, it remained a nasty present reality as a prejudice in the minds of others.

47 Rabbel, 43.
48 Rabbel, 90.
49 Rabbel, 10.
For Arendt, the Enlightenment produced the mentality that “reason” is all one needs to become accepted and Rahel certainly felt this way. But because Rahel was so wrapped up in the Enlightenment ideal, she failed to understand that her Jewish identity would not be enough to gain her social acceptance. Instead, she would, consistently throughout her life, be reminded that her Jewish identity is what barred her from most of society.

Privilege

While Arendt’s characterization and analysis of Rahel’s particular circumstances as a Jewish woman are concerned with Rahel and her interactions with the larger Prussian society, the following analysis of privilege turns in on Rahel herself. In other words, this section aims to focus on Arendt’s criticisms of Rahel individually, and German Jews in general. Arendt’s main critique is against assimilation because, as has been previously mentioned, a main argument that Arendt is making in this book is that to become a parvenue—someone who assimilates into the larger society and culture at the cost of their own—is to live a life of denial and lies. Furthermore, the denial and lies remove people like Rahel from the realities of oppression and marginalization. In other words, taking on the parvenue existence is a distancing strategy which overlooks the social and political conditions which force people like Rahel to disavow their Jewish identity in the first place. Similarly, to stay a pariah—an outcast, an outsider—is to never confront the social and political circumstances that perpetuate marginalization and oppression. Instead, Arendt argues that outsiders ought to be conscious pariahs, individuals who are aware of their status, who refuse to deny or erase their racial identity in order to gain political rights or social recognition. The conscious pariah’s fight for political protections is grounded in their minoritized position. This section will first turn to Arendt’s critique of Rahel and her fellow German Jews who pursued assimilation as parvenues, as well as Arendt’s critique of Rahel for her inability to see beyond her own, individual struggle for social acceptance and political rights.
Arendt’s analysis of Jewish emancipation in the 18th and 19th centuries in Central Europe contends that individuals vied for social acceptance, which also happened to come with political protections. There was not a movement for mass emancipation for all Jews. According to Arendt, “A political struggle for equal rights might have taken the place of the personal struggle…. Jews did not want to be emancipated as a whole; all they wanted was to escape from Jewishness, as individuals if possible.”50 Rahel exemplifies this approach by exhausting all her resources to marry a Christian and in turn erase her past identity. In fact, the thought did not even occur to Rahel until the last few years of her life that her struggles as a Jew were shared by all Jews, and therefore all Jews ought to be emancipated.

In addition to generalizing the Jewish approach to assimilation in the 18th and 19th centuries, Arendt does helpfully narrow her focus, and critique, to Berlin Jews. She states that “The Berlin Jews considered themselves exceptions. And just as every anti-Semite knew his personal exceptional Jew in Berlin, so every Berlin Jew knew at least two eastern Jews in comparison with whom he felt himself to be an exception.”51 Though descriptive in nature, this assessment of Berlin Jews is certainly critical of the privilege they experienced compared to other European Jews—a privilege that afforded a higher quality of life in terms of economic advantages as well as human rights. Here it is quite clear that Arendt is aware of the privilege Berlin Jews (and German Jews in general) experienced. Her awareness and critique is operating as a nonideal analysis of privilege which addresses the intergroup discrimination that she claims was a common feature of German Jewish self-perception. This discrimination is rooted in a social construction of race—that where,

50 Rahel, 7.
51 Rahel, 85.
nationally, one is located affects their privileged and exceptional status. Additionally, exceptionalism in this instance is a form of internalized racism that consciously or unconsciously supports the idea of a racial hierarchy. Not only does this perspective elevate and isolate the exceptional German Jews who were supposedly lucky enough to assimilate, but it ignores the masses of European Jews who have to continue to exist in poverty and without social and political protections in order for those exceptions to succeed. Though Arendt’s recognition of the privileged Germans, and specifically Berlin Jews is obvious, it is necessary to keep in mind that her later texts come close to totally ignoring the existence of privilege among the white American population compared to people of color. So, although she appears to keenly understand the relationship between privileged, elite groups of people (which she herself is a member of when writing Rahel) and the oppressed, marginalized ones that are seen to exist in contradistinction, that insight becomes lost along the way.

Rahel’s Path to Assimilation

Rahel’s dying words, “The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wish to have missed,” reflect her lifelong struggle with her Jewish identity. She insatiably desired acceptance by the larger, non-Jewish society for the individual person she was, and thought her plight was particular to her. After spending the first three quarters of her life failing to accomplish this goal, she married Varnhagen, was baptized and finally accepted as the wife of Varnhagen in some social circles. It was not until her last few years of life that she began to understand that the lack of human rights she experienced were not particular to her—it was shared by all Jewish people. In the following section, I discuss Arendt’s, at times harsh, critique of Rahel’s insensitivity to the larger, political fight for human rights that Rahel overlooked for much of her life.

52 *Rahel*, 3.
I argue that Arendt’s analysis of Rahel’s insensitivity and self-centeredness is evidence of Arendt’s understanding of how privilege operates in relation to marginalized populations—it perpetuates systems of oppression by incentivizing individuals to rise socially or politically at the cost of others. Put differently, Rahel’s desire for social acceptance at the cost of her Jewish identity harms other less privileged Jews who are not able or willing to disregard their Jewish identity. Doing so reinforces internalized racism and its hierarchical conception of race.

Rahel believed that if she were able to meet a multitude of people, mostly through her salon, she would be remembered. To be remembered is a hallmark of exceptionalism. Arendt states that Rahel “believed herself superior to, beyond the game of life, and shielded herself against being dead by contact with many people.”\textsuperscript{53} If people knew of her, and spoke of her, and brought others to visit her salon, then she had the potential to exist after death through her legacy. This same idea about great words and deeds being recorded and remembered are an aspect of action for Arendt.\textsuperscript{54} It even plays into Arendt’s theory that only the exceptional, those whose lives are recorded and remembered, have truly acted. However, even though Arendt goes on, in \textit{The Human Condition}, to elevate exceptional actors, she is critical of Rahel’s mentality—that she is superior, that she is more than the circumstances she was born into.

Rahel’s desire to be remembered grew—she felt an overwhelming need to speak and be heard and in turn, be differentiated from other Jews. Arendt keenly understands that Rahel’s ability to act outside the confines of her salon were nonexistent and mournfully tells us that “With each passing day, as the past receded further into the past, her need for speaking grew….she could not go on like this, merely mutely insisting upon what had been in the past and mutely waiting until death at

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Rahel}, 58.

\textsuperscript{54} See the previous chapter for more on the revelatory nature of political action.
last carried her away.” Facilitating the salon, though not experiencing social acceptance outside of her garret room on Jägerstrasse, was not enough for Rahel. She knew the salon would not last and yearned for more than a private attic room for friends to visit and debate the literature or news of the day. While Arendt shares with us the very private struggle that restricted Rahel’s ability to act and speak, we are also privy to the exceptional nature of Rahel’s desire. She aimed to be viewed as an exceptional Jew who was worthy of German society’s acceptance and remembrance.

Yet, as we already know, Rahel sought to, and was in a privileged enough position to succeed in, marrying in order to gain social favor. In her attempt to change herself, to rewrite her history through marriage, Arendt argues that Rahel’s decision is to live a lie. She tells us that “Full of illusions about the possibilities of the outer world, she imagined that disguises, camouflage, changes of name could exert a tremendous transforming power.” In turn, Rahel was baptized and changed her name to Friederike Robert in 1814. However, it’s important to pause and take stock of Arendt’s awareness of Rahel’s privileged position as a woman who had enough money, a charismatic personality, and social location that allowed for her and a small number of similar Jews to erase their identity through marriage. Arendt characterizes this path as illusory and false because she is claiming that Rahel’s identity as a Jewish woman cannot really be changed. Baptism and name changes could not transform Rahel so that she was no longer a Jew. This interpretation indicates that Arendt understands Rahel’s Jewishness to be unchangeable—a given fact of her birth. In this sense, race is defined biologically by Arendt, not socially. Yet, Arendt humanizes Rahel’s desire to “become one human being among others” simply through a Christian marriage. Even the humanization carries

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55 Rahel, 58-59.

56 Rahel, 120.

57 Rahel, 120.
judgement—Arendt still is reproachful of Rahel’s desire to gain social and political advantages through the denial of her Jewish identity and history.

During the Napoleonic wars, anti-Semitism rose and German Jews lost considerable social standing according to Arendt. In 1806, after Napoleon initially defeated the Prussian army, Arendt writes that “Only now, in a time of breakdown did Rahel realize that her life also was subject to general political conditions.” Arendt’s characterization of Rahel here shows a sheltered, naive, and ignorant individual who, although miserable for being rejected by society, was able to live most of her life in a comfortable attic apartment, paid for by her brothers. She was fortunate enough to have the leisure to run a popular Berlin salon. It was not until Berlin’s future as a German city was at stake that she began to realize her relative comfort was at the mercy of social trends and political factions. When Jews once again became scapegoats during this time, Rahel started to understand how her identity personally and as a racial Jew ought to have political protections to avoid volatile social perceptions.

However, Arendt makes it clear that Rahel was not quick to understand that her struggles as a Jew were minimal compared to less fortunate Jews in Europe. During the Napoleonic battles, Rahel was able to escape to Prague. It was there that she became more patriotic in her appreciation for being German but also began to understand that her struggles in Germany were shared with other Jews. In Prague she realized that Germany “had never of its own accord granted her—as a Jew—the most elementary, most important and minimum concession: equal human rights.”

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58 Rahel, 121.

59 For more on how race affects national identity, see Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), particularly Chapter 7, “Whiteness of a Different Color.” Additionally, Guinier and Torres address what they call “the racial bribe,” or the erasure of racial identity for social and political mobility in the United States.

60 Rahel, 164.
might have wanted to be recognized socially, but her inability to accomplish that goal was a direct result of political constraints.

Arendt’s most harsh criticisms surround Rahel’s inability to recognize her own privilege. Specifically, she focuses on Rahel’s ignorance of the larger, political desire for human rights that Jews needed. Instead, Rahel only fixated on social acceptance—a concern Arendt articulates in *The Human Condition* when she claims the social realm overshadows the political. She tells us that “The world and reality had, for Rahel, always been represented by society.”61 This statement speaks to why Rahel yearned for social acceptance, and why, because of Rahel’s tunnel vision, society is spoken of largely, as opposed to political issues or questions. She goes on to state that financial security was Rahel’s only real concern. Economic matters exist in the social realm, for Arendt, hence this is why Rahel’s desire is considered a social matter.

Throughout her four decades, Rahel continued to be ignorant of the common plight of those marginalized by society. Arendt writes that “She had never been able to fit her private ill luck into a scheme of general social relationships; she had never ventured into criticism of the society, or even to solidarity with those who for other reasons were likewise excluded from the ranks of the privileged.”62 She could not see past her own pain to realize that thousands of others, Jews and other marginalized groups of people, experienced similar, difficult lives. Here Arendt is communicating the importance in looking past one’s own trying, oppressive existence in order to see others who share similarly distressed lives.63

61 *Rahel*, 177.


63 See also Guinier and Torres, Chapter 1: “Political Race and Magical Realism,” for more on what they call political race—a reimagining of race that accounts for those who are minoritized and left out of social and political collaborations, not only a collaboration between those who identity as certain races and ethnicities. While Arendt is not explicitly advocating for political race, her idea here is that Rahel, for most of her life, conceived of her racialized identity in hierarchical relation to less privileged Jews. The “conceptual project” of political race for Guinier and Torres acts to
Arendt makes it clear that Rahel’s desire for social assimilation inherently meant assimilation to antisemitism. When Rahel and August Varnhagen returned to Berlin after Napoleon’s forces were pushed out, Rahel was once again the subject of discrimination. Arendt claims that, “One had to pay for becoming a parvenu by abandoning truth, and this Rahel was not prepared to do.” It is only at the very end of Rahel’s life that she reaches out to her old friend Pauline to express her burgeoning realization that having to lie about who she was had not been nor would it be worthwhile. In addition to the self-deception, Arendt hammers home the point that buying into assimilation meant perpetuating antisemitism. The Jewish parvenues saw themselves as exceptions, allowed to exist with freedom and some rights, because they constituted a few special cases. The remaining Jewish population needed to stay subjugated in order for the few to flourish.

Though Rahel’s reversal in the last few years of her life certainly marks an improved appreciation of her Jewish identity, it still falls short of an awareness of how her relative privilege operated in German social circles and abroad when surrounded by people who only knew her husband and not her Jewish heritage. Arendt is, at times, ruthless in her critique of Rahel’s ignorance; however, Arendt intends to tell not merely Rahel’s story, but how privileged women like Rahel affected many more minoritized German Jews.

Epistemic Injustice

Arendt’s nonideal approach to telling Rahel’s story uncovers key impediments to political action. Some of these impediments come at the hands of Rahel herself while others are a product of the social and political restrictions against Jews. In this final section I outline epistemic injustices,

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disrupt such hierarchical notions of race which pit those who identity as different races and those in differing privileged situations within races against one another.

64 Rahel, 204.
with the help of José Medina and Miranda Fricker, that I claim Arendt marks out as impediments to political action. The key distinction is Arendt’s explicit articulation of Rahel’s struggles to be seen and heard in social and political contexts because of her Jewish identity. As argued in the previous chapter, Arendt, in *The Human Condition* overlooks the impediments to political action in a way that undermines its efficacy. However, in *Rahel* I argue that Arendt keenly points out Rahel’s struggle to be a political actor, providing us a more detailed, multidimensional picture of political action.

Arendt shows us that from an early age Rahel was frustrated not only that few were interested in hearing about her life, interests, and desires, but also that she was so radically cut off from the bustle of activities in Berlin. As a young child Rahel was “Excluded from society, deprived of any normal social intercourse, she had a tremendous hunger for people, was greedy for every smallest event, tensely awaited every utterance.”65 She desperately wanted to experience a welcoming community that allowed her to experience debate and dialogue, even simple friendship. Rahel was not entirely without friends, however. She wished to have the freedom to meet anyone she wished, however, not only those in Berlin’s Jewish quarter.

Arendt tells us that “No one…was more candid than she; no one wanted more to be known.”66 Recall Rahel’s plea to her childhood David Veit, demanding to know why he wouldn’t share her letters with his friends and acquaintances. Rahel’s naivete about the world’s prejudices was evident in her exchange with Veit. She believed that if the world took the chance to see her as a valuable, unique individual then they would understand her. But her Jewish identity barred her from many opportunities to express her thoughts and desires, and in turn reveal the kind of person she was, with others. Put differently, Rahel’s desire to be a political actor, one who could speak and be

65 *Rahel*, 17.

heard and in turn be revealed to others, was impeded by predominant, racist conceptions of Jews. Practically speaking, segregation and discrimination during Rahel’s time largely inhibited Jews from even being in a position to be political actors outside of cloistered communities.

I claim that the epistemic injustice at play in this example can best be described by José Medina’s classification of epistemic vices and virtues, as explained in *Epistemologies of Resistance*. Taking Miranda Fricker’s work at the intersection of epistemology and virtue ethics a step further, Medina examines epistemic injustice through the lens of virtues and vices. Epistemic virtues, according to Medina, include “humility, curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness” while epistemic vices include arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness. Epistemic laziness, or the “socially produced and carefully orchestrated lack of curiosity,” is vicious because it involves actively ignoring easily accessible information about certain groups of people. In Rahel’s case, she was right to acknowledge that all it ought to take is a few hours with her to convince others that she was worthy of friendship, social interactions, and political protections. But the German milieu outright denied her this opportunity, out of epistemic laziness. Through Rahel’s example, it is clear that a successful account of political action necessitates protections against epistemic laziness. The virtuous counterpart to epistemic laziness is curiosity and diligence, which in Rahel’s context could look like a willingness to listen to people from different social locations in order to learn about their desires and needs. Framed in this way, political action ought to prompt epistemic curiosity and diligence in order to be effective.


68 Medina, 42.

69 Medina, 33.
In attempting to gain social favor in Gentile society, Rahel often found herself immediately underestimated and overlooked. Arendt writes that “Rahel was being opposed by the world, society’s prejudices, and not any individual, not any individual’s particular will.”

Even though Rahel was certainly ignored by many individuals, Arendt is pointing out the collective European rejection of Jews and its effect on Rahel. But I claim that Arendt is also articulating Medina’s vice of epistemic closed-mindedness. Medina explains that epistemic closed-mindedness acts as a defense strategy because it “involves the lack of openness to a whole range (no matter how broad or narrow) of experiences and viewpoints that can destabilize (or create trouble for) one’s own perspective.”

The collective prejudices in Rahel’s time perpetuated the unfair stereotyping of Jews as unworthy of social and political protections. By actively avoiding engagement with Jews who might prove wrong commonly held antisemitic beliefs, Rahel’s contemporaries engaged in epistemic closed-mindedness. The wholesale opposition that Arendt tells us Rahel experienced indicates, I believe, a need to counteract epistemic closed-mindedness because it perpetually ignores the testimonies of those who differ from the dominant group in society. Medina suggests that epistemic open-mindedness ought to result in what he calls “kaleidoscopic consciousness” or the openness to the manifold and ever-changing perspectives of people from different social locations than one’s own. In Rahel’s experience, this would involve a socially collective change in attitude toward Jews so that they could be conceived of as political actors.

Yet, as Arendt makes clear, social and political custom segregated most Jews in Prussia. This separation resulted in what Arendt says when she writes, “suffering unseen, without either witnesses

70 Rahel, 44.

71 Medina, 35.
or spectators was the ultimate in nonacting." Secluded and excluded, Rahel, like many of her coreligionists, was stripped of her ability to act. She had no audience to witness her suffering and so her isolation precluded any opportunity for political action. It is only through Arendt’s retelling of Rahel that her voice is given a proper space to be heard and remembered. In this sense, Arendt is providing Rahel the opportunity, *postmortem*, to be heard and seen—something she was rarely afforded during her life because of the epistemic laziness and closed-mindedness of her contemporaries.

Rahel, however, did experience a brief period of success when it came to being heard and seen in her salon. The era in which Rahel successfully ran her salon was particularly welcoming to Jews and Jewish salons. Giving further context for this era, Arendt writes, “The Jewish salons in Berlin provided a social area outside of society, and Rahel’s garret room in its turn stood outside the conventions and customs of even the Jewish salons. The exceptional Berlin Jews, in their pursuit of culture and wealth, had good luck for three decades.” Yet, Rahel’s small taste of social acceptance was confined to her attic salon, and only for a brief period of time. She was at the whims of her visitors who were her only chance at convincing those with more power and influence that she was worthy of social acceptance.

But as Arendt alludes, the vibrant Jewish salon culture was short-lived. She writes, “A harmless forerunner of a far more critical development, a wave of anti-Semitism spread through the Prussian provinces right at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was propagated and represented by Grattenauer’s pamphlet *Against the Jews.*” The pamphlet’s antisemitism was unique at the time because it attacked the popular Jewish salons. According to historian and Jewish

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72 Rahel, 47.
73 Rahel, 57.
Studies scholar Deborah Hertz in *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, the pamphlet’s “antisemitism was a reaction to the new and rapid social success of the salon women” as opposed to “earlier antisemites, who had mostly argued that Jews could be accepted into society if they would cease to believe and behave in a Jewish way.” Grattenauer actively argued against any assimilation of Jews and in making this argument disparaged against the female Jewish *salonnières* who he saw as assimilationists *par excellence*. Grattenauer’s pamphlet quickly limited Rahel’s social interactions, which were already confined to her salon.

Those in power or more prestigious social positions latched on to Grattenauer’s pamphlet, arrogantly using it to blame Jews for any problems. There was swift public support of its views which, did not question the virulently antisemitic claims it made. In this sense, Grattenauer’s pamphlet and its popularity align with Medina’s final epistemic vice—arrogance. He characterizes this vice in its most common form as “letting one’s perspective go unchecked [which] results in an unavoidable, mundane accumulation of oversights, errors, biased stereotypes, and distortions.”

German social circles, including Rahel’s, accepted and internalized Grattenauer’s unchecked sense of superiority—or arrogance—over Jews, and Jewish women in particular. Medina’s virtue aimed at ameliorating epistemic arrogance is epistemic humility or “attentiveness to one’s cognitive limitations and deficits.” The lack of evidence and extremely polemic nature of Grattenauer’s pamphlet ought to have signified it baseless assertions, but because actively listening to the varied, lived experiences of Jews in Germany was not commonplace, German epistemic arrogance perpetuated antisemitic sentiment, effectively shuttering most Jewish salons.

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75 Medina, 32.

76 Medina, 43.
In this time of rising antisemitism, Arendt claims that “What remained, even in the most favorable situation, was the necessity ‘of having always to show who one is; that is why it is so repulsive to be a Jewess!’ The necessary legitimation kept her from devoting herself directly to the world and to present circumstances.” Arendt’s use of Rahel’s own words in this quote do not reflect Arendt’s repulsion—Arendt is merely sharing Rahel’s disgust. Instead, Arendt’s use of Rahel’s words here show how counterproductive her self-hate was. Rahel saw her Jewishness, and its segregating effect, as repulsive; and, that repulsion kept her from political action aimed at ameliorating her and other Jews’ circumstances.

Rahel’s self-repulsion was an act of resistance against societal norms which necessitated she hide or deny her Jewish identity. After unpacking his account of epistemic vices and virtues in *Epistemologies of Resistance*, Medina examines how political resistance or what he calls epistemic friction operates in two different ways. His resistance model functions at the nonideal level of political philosophy because it pays attention to when groups or populations are resisting, in both senses of fighting and holding one’s ground against, political or societal systems. For example, Medina looks at oppression that is rooted in and perpetuated by racism, such as in Rahel’s case. There are those who resist being racially oppressed, but there are also those who resist listening to or taking seriously accounts of racial oppression. Medina values the former resistance in politics because it is what has the power to avoid a complacent democracy, especially complacent democracies that perpetuate oppression. The latter kind of resistance, a sort of negative resistance, acts as an indication of the

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77 Rahel, 85.

perpetuation of oppression. In turn, positive resistance-based models have the capacity, in Medina’s account, to make society better by actively fighting racist institutions.

I claim that Rahel, through her self-deprecation, perpetuated a negative resistance that in turn perpetuated the oppressive environment towards Jews. She stood her ground, never giving up the hope that society would eventually accept her. But she did so by attempting to become an “exceptional Jew” which meant her efforts further marginalized less privileged Jews. Arendt, however, in her critique of Rahel is enacting a positive resistance that aims to actively push against the racist stereotyping of Jews.

This chapter examines Rahel’s story and the story of German Jewish assimilation, the manner in which Arendt told those stories, and the implications of how Arendt told them. In a letter to Karl Jaspers about *Rahel* from 1952 Arendt writes, “You are absolutely right when you say this book ‘can make one feel that if a person is a Jew he cannot really live his life to the full.’ And that is the central point.”79 Additionally, in the preface to *Rahel*, Arendt tells us that “What interested me solely was to narrate the story of Rahel’s life as she herself might have told it.”80 Not only is it a nonideal approach to enter into the life and storytelling of Rahel herself, but in so doing Arendt herself is acting out political action while asking her readers to experience Rahel’s tumultuous life. By giving a voice to one she thought was ignored—one in which she heard her own worries and laments—Arendt is entering a public space and making room for Rahel’s story. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt characterizes action as that which reveals one’s identity, and hopefully preserves it for future generations. In sharing Rahel’s life story, Arendt is preserving her identity, and all the tribulations that came with being Jewish in the 18th and 19th centuries, in order to caution against


80 *Rahel*, xv.
Rahel’s mistakes and argue for a public realm where those who are marginalized can come to share their experiences and narratives.

Arendt’s focus on Rahel’s life story naturally situates this text in a nonideal context. She uses Rahel’s struggle for self and social acceptance as the “nutshell” to her larger concern for and arguments about Jewish assimilation and marginalization. These arguments are an earlier version of Arendt’s arguments made in *The Human Condition* for the acceptance of given qualities and the necessity of action. And because of the nonideal nature of this text, I argue that *Rahel* provides a helpful, nonideal version of political action that ought to be read in tandem with the ideal version found in *The Human Condition*. As the previous chapter argues, *The Human Condition*’s ideal version of political action does not account for the how real individuals, existing within real power dynamics, subject to social and political whims, can become political actors. Rahel’s life story is a testament to the struggle to act and be recognized in the public realm. But, Arendt’s biography of Rahel also provides a demonstration of how difficult it is to access the ideal version of political action. Discrimination and epistemic injustices from outside forces, in addition to Rahel’s insensitivity to her own privilege, affect her ability to act.

In the following chapter, I turn to a collection of Arendt’s texts from the 1930s and 1940s which put into practice her nonideal version of political action outlined in *Rahel*. These texts, I claim, serve as Arendt’s practicum—her practical application of political action in her own life. Not only do these texts exemplify political action but they also provide insight into Arendt’s prejudices. Understanding her prejudices in these early texts aids in developing my multi-dimensional account of political action because it recognizes aspects of her arguments concerning political action which fail to transfer from the ideal account into the real world.
CHAPTER FOUR
ARENDT’S EXEMPLIFICATION OF POLITICAL ACTION

This chapter turns to a collection of Arendt’s largely unpublished texts on Jewish identity, culture, religion, and most importantly for this dissertation, politics from the 1930s and 1940s. I argue that in these underappreciated texts Arendt exemplifies her theory of political action, in largely unproblematic ways—as compared to the ideal and exclusive version of political action found in The Human Condition. But instead of embracing these helpful exemplifications in order to replace Arendt’s more problematic account of political action, I urge caution. Similar to the previous chapter, I argue that the exemplified version of political action found in her texts from the 1930s and 1940s ought to be considered in conjunction with the nonideal version found in Rahel as well as the ideal version found in The Human Condition. Put differently, I argue for a more nuanced reading of political action in her underappreciated texts from this era which recognizes how Arendtian political action is, at times, helpful while also paying attention to where Arendt is Eurocentric, myopic concerning race, and willfully ignorant. Interpreting political action as multi-dimensional makes visible when Arendt undermines her own project in such a way that it affects the integrity of her philosophy of political action. Her prejudices and oversights, which I turn to in the third part of the chapter, support my argument that a single version of Arendtian political action is inherently flawed because it caters predominantly to white, Western Europeans.

In what immediately follows I introduce the collection of texts from the 1930s and 1940s which I claim are exemplifications of nonideal political action. In this first part I provide an overview of the relevant literature and briefly revisit my methodology. In Part II, I outline my
argument for interpreting these texts as examples of political action. I make the argument that what we find in this collection of texts are examples of Arendt exemplifying political action. I focus on four examples: her arguments for a Jewish army during World War II; her involvement with and eventual distance from Zionism; and, a letter condemning Tnuat Haherut, an Israeli political party that encouraged attacks on their Arab neighbors, that she wrote and which was co-signed by Albert Einstein, Sidney Hook, and Seymour Melman. Each of these examples unpack aspects of Arendtian political action, particularly, in unproblematic ways.

In Part III, I conclude by reassessing Arendt’s texts from the 1930s and 1940s and assert that they are, at times, Eurocentric, myopic, and epistemically ignorant. The third part of this chapter is a proactive attempt to engage critically with a variety of perspectives on Arendt—perspectives that take seriously her anti-Black racism, so that we can develop a more detailed, multi-dimensional rendering of her theory on political action. Just because these texts contain a number of helpful examples of Arendtian political action does not mean that we ought to sweep under the rug her weaknesses and epistemic flaws—that would provide us only a partial, one-dimensional rendering of her thought. This part of the chapter argues that we ought to hold in tension the valuable and problematic aspects of Arendt’s thought in order to develop a multi-dimensional rendering—one of remarkable Jewish political action, and one of tunnel vision affected by prejudice. If we recognize and appreciate this tension, we move beyond a diagnostic analysis of Arendt that merely states she is racist. Instead, through standpoint theory we piece together the diverse perspectives that allow us to acknowledge her oversights—of her Eurocentrism, her myopic conception of race, and her epistemic ignorance—in hopes of not repeating them. To focus only on one of these stories is to perpetuate “the danger of a single story” outlined in Chapter 1—a story that, in this case, values the white philosopher over those she overlooks.
Part I: Overview of Arendt’s “Jewish Writings”

The texts from the 1930s and 1940s that I consider in this chapter are found in *The Jewish Writings*, an edited collection of Arendt’s texts that engages with many aspects of Jewishness—culture, identity, religion, politics, etc. It was published in 2007, thirty-two years after her death, by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman. A handful of the texts found in *The Jewish Writings* were previously unpublished or obscure, though there are a few well known essays including “We Refugees” and “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition.” Much of the collection is concerned with Jewish politics and Jewish political action. Structurally, the collection is organized by decade, starting in the 1930s and moving through the 1960s.

Despite the inclusion of some well-read and often referenced texts, such as the two mentioned above, *The Jewish Writings* contains many short and obscure writings that are infrequently taken up, if at all, in Arendt scholarship. To a degree this is justifiable—the collection aims to include all texts that engage with the Jewish question, in all imaginable formulations. The result is that many short articles or essays are repetitive; and, at nearly five hundred pages, it is understandable that this collection of texts is often overlooked.

Chronologically, the majority of texts included in *The Jewish Writings* were written after Rahel Varnhagen and before *The Human Condition*, with the exception of those included from the 1960s—*The Human Condition* was published in 1958. In this chapter, I do not consider material included from the 1960s which is centered around the Eichmann trial and controversy. There are many analyses of Arendt’s interpretation of and aftermath from her coverage of the Eichmann trial and there is not enough space to adequately address this saga here. More importantly, I have made the decision to

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1 For an overview of Arendt’s trial coverage see Young-Bruel’s biography *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, chapter 8. On page 348 she notes that immediate reception of her report, originally published in *The New Yorker* drew the ire of many, including the Council of Jews from Germany and the Anti-Defamation League who referred to “Arendt’s defamatory conception of ‘Jewish participation in the Nazi holocaust.’” See also, Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall*
exclude, with one small exception, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Arendt’s subsequent responses concerning that book from this chapter. Though they contain exemplifications of Arendtian political action, there are too many outliers because of the book’s notoriety that mire a clear analysis of the concept. To put it more bluntly, that is the work of another project.

Given the chronological placement of Arendt’s texts from the 1930s and 1940s, between *Rahel* and *The Human Condition*, particularly in light of the exclusion of *Eichmann*, I want to emphasize that I am not attempting to make a historically dependent argument that claims *The Human Condition* is necessarily a product of the development of Arendtian political action over time. Instead, it is helpful to conceive of *Rahel* as an early theory of political action and by the time Arendt is writing what would be collected in *The Jewish Writings* she has moved from that early theory into the real, nonideal world. I argue that these early texts consist of Arendt’s application and exemplification of political action as a theory first developed in *Rahel*. At this time of her life, Arendt was not only writing about political action, she was acting it out. The next time we encounter an explicit account of political action is in *The Human Condition* wherein she moves back to theorizing it. With this in mind, I argue we ought to think of her texts from the 1930s and 1940s as Arendt’s practicum—her time in the field practicing her theory of political action before she moves on to further develop that theory in *The Human Condition*.

The Value of Arendt’s Early Writings

his 1996 book *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, forcefully argues that the key to understanding Arendt lies in understanding her engagement with “the Jewish Question.”² For him, the Jewish question necessarily needs to grapple with Jewishness through Judaism—a concern Arendt herself never tackled. Though I agree with Bernstein that we cannot fully understand Arendt on say, for my purposes here, politics or political action without understanding Jewish politics and Jewish political action, I do not agree that Arendt needed to engage with Judaism. As he points out, for Arendt, the Jewish question is a social and political one, not religious. While Bernstein takes issues with that, I do not.

Similar to Bernstein, the trustee of Arendt’s literary trust and editor of *The Jewish Writings*, Jerome Kohn argues in the preface that it is impossible to understand the Arendt of *The Human Condition* or *The Origins of Totalitarianism* without starting with her Jewish writings. His lengthy and detailed preface outlines five phases of Arendt’s Jewish experience that begins with her “initial interest in the story of German Jewry,” moving through “political awakenings” and developments, and ending in “the experience of the rejection, entirely unwarranted, of a Jew by her own people” in the wake of the Eichmann trial.³ Kohn summarizes his, his co-editor Ron H. Feldman, and Bernstein’s appreciation of Arendt’s Jewish writings when he writes, “her experience as a Jew, is literally the foundation of her thought: it supports her thinking even when she is not thinking about Jews or Jewish questions.”⁴

It is possible to entertain the counterargument that Arendt’s texts in question were largely unpublished and therefore cannot be taken as seriously as the texts Arendt chose to publish, or even

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⁴ JW, xxviii.
that these texts constitute a biographical as opposed to philosophical context with which to understand Arendt. To a degree, Bernstein, Kohn, and Feldman are making more biographical than philosophic arguments. However, in this chapter I am interested in reading these texts as exemplars of Arendtian political action. In all dense, philosophical analysis, examples are heartily welcomed to unpack the concepts at hand. I argue that what we find in these texts from the 1930s and 1940s is a collection of helpful examples that unpack Arendtian political action. When we come across examples in philosophy, we value and pay close attention to them—the same ought to apply to those found throughout her articles and essays from the 1930s and 1940s.

**Toward a Multi-Dimensional Reading of Nonideal Political Action**

What further sets this chapter apart from Bernstein, Kohn, and Feldman is the lens through which I examine the examples in her texts from the 1930s and 1940s. To understand that lens, we must return to Kathryn Sophia Belle and her 2014 book *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*. Belle’s book forcefully argues that Arendt’s private-public-social divide is rooted in her anti-Black racism; yet, the rejection of Belle’s book by some Arendt scholars, Roger Berkowitz in particular, has been emphatic. As explained in Chapter 1, Berkowitz, the current director of The Hannah Arendt Center at Bard, wrote a scathing review of *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, accusing Belle of textually unfounded arguments against Arendt.

In an attempt to cultivate a multi-dimensional interpretation of Arendtian political action, in this chapter it is necessary to recognize how Arendt’s Eurocentric prejudices affect her understanding of the concept. In the following part, I provide an account of the nonideal exemplification of political action in Arendt’s early Jewish-centric texts. Yet, in the final part of this chapter I acknowledge Arendt’s Eurocentrism and how it negatively affects her account of political action to the point of undermining her mission to have more people involved with politics.
Part II: Examples of Political Action

Arguments for a Jewish Army

From October 1941 through November 1942, Arendt wrote a handful of articles for Aufbau, a German-American newspaper, about the need for a Jewish Army. She passionately argues for Jewish representation in the fight against those who sought to exterminate the Jewish people. Logistically, the battalion would consist of Palestinian Jews—a representation of specifically Jewish action, as opposed to those Jewish soldiers who served in British or American battalions. One of Arendt’s reasons is that the Jews were “the first European nation on whom Hitler declared war.”

Being the first is of little philosophical concern, though she takes seriously this historical fact.

Arendt’s repeated calls for and arguments concerning a Jewish Army are excellent examples of her nonideal version of political action. Her calls for a Jewish Army are themselves exemplifications of political action—speaking and acting in public, though our focus here is on speaking—while her justification is representative of the concept. In other words, her speaking out, through writing in Aufbau, serves as an impeccable example of political action. In addition to the exemplification of speech that we find in her calls for a Jewish Army, we can turn to the justifications she gives for her call to action—these justifications further unpack what political action looks like in nonideal situations and how Arendt is thinking through—maybe unconsciously or unintentionally—the implications of those situations. Let us turn to some specifics to explain what I mean when I say her justifications for a Jewish Army are representative of political action.

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5 JW, 136.

6 Arendtian political action, as it is explicitly explicated in The Human Condition, consists of speech and action in the public realm which has the power to reveal one’s identity to the world. Scholars have debated how best to interpret this concept. See Chapter 2 for more concerning these debates.
In December of 1941, Arendt refers to the “Washington Conference of the ‘Committee for a Jewish Army’” and their deliberations regarding the creation of a Jewish Army. Though the conference was productive, Arendt warns that “There is always a danger whenever Jewish politics first lets its demands be certified by non-Jewish circles, and hardly a single Jew spoke at this conference.” Though Arendt certainly gets herself into hot water—rightfully so—for not following her own advice when writing “On Violence” and “Reflections on Little Rock,” she takes a clear stance regarding speaking for oneself and the problems of speaking for others here. Setting the productivity of the meeting aside, Arendt is criticizing the conference’s method because it assumed Jewish voices did not need to be heard in order to make a decision on their ability to form a Jewish Army—those at the conference were capable of deciding for them. There is an undercurrent of superiority in the conference’s proceedings, even though, as Arendt notes, it was a productive one.

As one half of political action, speaking—and in this case, speaking for oneself—is certainly important to Arendt’s thought. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt tells us that speaking, more often than action, is the manifestation of political action. Arendt’s argument for a Jewish Army is an excellent example of such political speech.

In terms of her justification, Arendt makes it abundantly clear in her *Aufbau* articles that when it comes to the need for a Jewish Army, Jews are the ones who ought to have a visible presence and audible voice in the decision-making process. The importance of speaking and acting—the two main aspects of political action—for oneself is a recurrent theme in Arendt’s texts from the 1930s and 1940s, and one which I argue acts to justify the particular political need for an army. Who better to communicate the political needs of the Jewish people, than the Jewish people?

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7 JW, 144.

8 HC, 178-179.
This point is both an obvious and frequently disregarded phenomenon. Speaking for oneself or one’s people in this example asserts epistemic sovereignty of their experiences, needs, and desires. In other words, the Jewish people are best suited to address their own problems and propose their own solutions. Assuming otherwise denies the “sovereignty,” as I’ve called it above, or the capability of the Jewish people to speak for themselves. The harmful assumption that marginalized groups are not capable of speaking for themselves asserts power dynamics—those who are marginalized are kept marginalized because they are not given the opportunity to speak for themselves. Despite its obviousness, the political need for representation, for the ability to literally fight for oneself, is one proposed solution to the stateless status of many Jews at the time. Though the prospect of a Jewish Army did not guarantee national identity or political sovereignty—secondary, though meaningful, concerns for Arendt at this time—it did offer the opportunity for action against one’s enemies.

To further contextualize the justification for a Jewish Army, I want to put into conversation “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” by Linda Martín Alcoff, with Arendt. Doing so allows us to uncover some of the philosophic underpinnings in Arendt’s call for a Jewish Army—something that she does not go on to explicitly theorize but which I think is important to postulate here. In her article, Alcoff explores the varied implications of speaking about and for others. She makes it clear that there is no universal answer for when it is appropriate, or not, to speak for others; instead, we ought to be aware of our “social location” before deciding to speak. For Alcoff, one’s “social location” is connected to their social identity. She tells us that a speaker’s “location…has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech.” 9 In other words, Alcoff makes it abundantly clear that one’s speaking for others is more complex than a social nicety or a well-intentioned act—it has epistemic import.

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because it affects the perceived reliability of the speaker. Put differently, one’s identity plays an active role in how their speech—the knowledge they verbally share—is understood. Depending on the person, their speech could be believed or denied because of their social identity. In Arendt’s scenario, her Jewish identity affords her the epistemic authority to speak. She also believes that her social identity as a Jewish woman lends credibility— authorizes her, to use Alcoff’s language—to speak on behalf of other Jews. The well-intentioned, non-Jewish people at the Washington conference did not have the same authority because of their social identity. Though Arendt does not speculate that those who spoke on behalf of a Jewish Army at the conference derailed their proposal, that is an active possibility.

However, the possibility of derailment is exactly why Arendt is alarmed that no Jewish voices spoke at the conference. Because no Jewish perspectives were included in the conference’s deliberations on a Jewish Army, Jewish interests could easily have been misinterpreted or disauthorized. Additionally, the preponderance of non-Jewish voices deciding the fate of a Jewish Army perpetuates the false and harmful narrative that Jews are not able to make important, political decisions for themselves. Arendt states she is grateful for any conversations surrounding the argument for a Jewish Army; however, her main critique is that this act of speaking for the Jewish people is questionably informed and motivated. The main concern is that those who did speak at the conference were—by virtue of their social identity and necessarily by virtue of a vested interest in Jewish political affairs—authorized to speak on behalf of Jews.

The questionable aspects of speaking for others can be tied to reinforcing systems of oppression and imperialism, according to Alcoff. In terms of privileged people speaking for less privileged people, Alcoff tells us it “has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing
the oppression of the group spoken for.”\(^{10}\) Arendt took the conference attendees call to action as well-intentioned; however, as previously mentioned, it perpetuated a harmful victim-narrative of Jews being unable to speak for themselves. Her serious critique of others speaking for Jews is also tied up with the political nature of speech for Arendt. This too, Alcoff agrees with when she writes that “Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle.”\(^{11}\)

The political nature of the call for a Jewish Army is undeniable for Arendt—it is tied up with the need for civil and human rights and protections for Jewish people all over the world, but especially those displaced and decimated by Nazi Germany and its allies. The call for a Jewish Army is both symbolic of the need for a Jewish homeland but also literal in its desire to actively fight in the war. One of Arendt’s articles in *Aufbau* is even aptly titled, “The Jewish Army—The Beginning of Jewish Politics?” The political need for the Jewish people to be afforded the epistemic authority to speak is tied up with the importance of political representation—something the Jewish people were time and again denied.

So, why is it important to recognize Arendt’s argument for a Jewish Army as an example of political action, and speech as political action in particular? As I argue in Chapter 2, Arendt’s examples of speech in *The Human Condition* are idealized and exclusive in nature. In her argument for a Jewish Army, we have an unproblematic example of her acting out political action through speech. This example illustrates that speech, especially speech that is carried out on behalf of a group of people, is contentious, dangerous, and politically charged. Not only is Arendt concerned about making her own voice heard, she is concerned about the implications of others speaking for the

\(^{10}\) Alcoff, 7.

\(^{11}\) Alcoff, 15.
Jewish people at such a crucial point in their history. Her fight for a Jewish Army is an example of nonideal political action, which is quite different than the ideal version of political action found in *The Human Condition*. It is necessary to recognize that these versions of Arendtian political action are fundamentally different because, I argue, we must value the multi-dimensional model of political action, not just the one-dimensional story of the concept we receive in *The Human Condition*.

Zionism

In her early texts, Arendt’s discussion of and involvement with the Zionist movement is exemplary of political action. Over the course of her life, Arendt’s involvement with the Zionist organizations was limited. Growing up in Germany, in a secular Jewish household, fostered an ambivalence toward the movement. Richard Bernstein, author of *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, claims that she grew up indifferent to the movement because she first and foremost thought of herself as German.\(^\text{12}\) It was not until a few years into her university studies that she became interested in Zionism. Bernstein says that in 1926 she attended a lecture by Kurt Blumenfeld, a Zionist political organizer who was, at the time, involved in the Zionist Federation of Germany, and would go on to serve in the World Zionist Organization. Though Arendt was not wholesale converted to the movement, Blumenfeld became a lifelong friend of hers who helped shape her understanding and critiques of Zionism.

In the first example I turn to, we see Arendt ardently encouraging young people to participate in Youth Aliyah,\(^\text{13}\) an organization she was involved with which brought young European Jews to Palestine starting in 1933. Here we see a vigorously involved Arendt, writing about the hope

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\(^{12}\) See Bernstein’s Chapter 1 “The Conscious Pariah as Rebel and Independent Thinker,” particularly pages 14-16 for more on Arendt’s German-Jewish upbringing.

\(^{13}\) *Aliyah*, Hebrew for “ascent,” refers to the act of travelling to the Jewish homeland, Israel.
young Jews could experience through Aliyah. Understandably, Arendt’s own precarious position during the war and her successful escapes from Nazi forces twice—once while still in Germany and once when interned at Gurs—caused her to be less involved until she was settled in the United States. According to Bernstein, Arendt worked with Judah Magnes, the founder of the Ihud (Unity) party in the 1940s. He writes:

Initially Arendt was critical of Magnes’ pro-British leanings, although she approved of Ihud as a reaction against outworn Zionist slogans and policies. But she herself was coming very close to the binational policies advocated by Magnes. For a brief period, after breaking out of hostilities in Palestine that led to the founding of the State of Israel, she worked closely with Magnes and his support group in America. This is one of the brief periods in Arendt’s life in which she engaged in direct political action—as a member of the loyal opposition.

Prior to Arendt’s involvement with Ihud, she was sharply critical of revisionist Zionist organizations which she saw as ignoring, or at times, violently opposing, Palestinian Arabs in the region. Revisionist Zionism aims to maximize Jewish occupation in and around the state of Israel. Then, when Judah Magnes, passed away in 1948 she lost hope for the Ihud party and Bernstein quotes her as stating, “There are other people who are primarily interested in doing something. I am not. I can very well live without doing anything. But I cannot live without trying at least to understand whatever happens.”

Arendt’s time as a political actor was short-lived and relegated to Zionism, and here we see her resignation from action after Magnes’ death. The arc of her own political action started with ambivalence, moved through skepticism and cautionary involvement, and ended in a

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14 Gurs, a village in southwest France, was the site of a Nazi internment camp.

15 JW, 110.


17 Bernstein, 122.
retreat to theory.\textsuperscript{18} Though this section will not further dwell on the importance of this arc, it is helpful to keep in mind her eventual move toward theory, and away from direct action, in \textit{The Human Condition}. Within this in mind, I turn to a few specific instances in her texts from the 1930s and 1940s that exemplify political action, both through Arendt’s own acts but also through her arguments with and against Zionism.

As mentioned above, the first example is of a young Arendt and her involvement with Youth Aliyah while she sought refuge in France. In the article, “Some Young People Are Going Home,” which was originally published in \textit{Le Journal Juif} in June of 1935, Arendt addresses the experiences of Jewish refugee children. She poses their experience as a problem that needs solutions—these children have lost stable homes, basic necessities, personal possessions, and often “are exploited by their parents” when need requires they work to help support the family.\textsuperscript{19} Her proposed solution is partnership with Youth Aliyah, a Jewish organization operating out of France at the time that provided paperwork and resources to children and young adults so they could both visit and resettle in Palestine. Arendt’s argument here is for the immigration of Jewish youth to Palestine because “Several weeks of preparatory camp, with work and study, games and singing, reading and free discussion on all the issues they are interested in, restores their freedom and their joy….This joy, this dignity, and this youth will be converted into strength and this strength will rebuild the country.”\textsuperscript{20} At this point in her life, Arendt is the most involved with Zionist efforts that she ever would be, and her dedicated vigor is palpable in the above quote. Here we have an example of Arendt enacting political action through her writing by encouraging young Jewish people to join

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{18} This is not to say that Arendt withdrew from active life completely, but that after this moment she made a deliberate decision to focus more on understanding political action than enacting it.

\textsuperscript{19} JW, 34.

\textsuperscript{20} JW, 37.
\end{footnotes}
Youth Aliyah and experience Eretz Israel as a homeland. According to numerous scholars, Arendtian political action ought to be thought of as including storytelling, which is exactly what she does in this article.²¹

Arendt tells the story of a teenager visiting the Youth Aliyah office with his father and how after coming back the next day alone, commits to participating. Arendt tells us that “Once everything is ready, he informs his parents, and two weeks later he is in the camp, where he begins to solve the Jewish question in a practical way by learning agriculture.”²² Keeping in mind that Arendt conceives of the Jewish question as solely a political concern, her story of the young teenager tells us that Arendt sees the agricultural, and otherwise, development of areas in Palestine as a solution to the Jewish political need for a homeland. As we will see shortly, her support of a Jewish homeland as a means to provide political protections and human rights was ardent; however, Arendt, outside of her time with Youth Aliyah, was cautious about the implications of creating a Jewish state in the then predominantly Arab populated, British Mandated Palestine. Her support can certainly be read as naïve—the idealized fervor of a solution to the myriad issues plaguing European Jews. However, I think that it is important to note her involvement with Youth Aliyah is a direct expression of her concept of political action.

Additionally, what she points out as benefits of participation in Youth Aliyah directly tie to political action. As stated in the quote, her argument for joining Youth Aliyah is to participate in

²¹ See Lisa J. Disch, “More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt,” Political Theory 21, no. 4 (1993); Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, “Hannah Arendt’s Storytelling,” Social Research 44, no. 1 (1977); and Michael Jackson, The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt, 2nd edition (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013). In Jackson’s preface to the second edition he writes, “Arendt’s dialectical view that storytelling is a mode of purposeful action (praxis) that simultaneously discloses our subjective uniqueness and our intersubjective connectedness to others, as well as the environmental forces to which we are all subject.” (13) Additionally, see Chapter 3, Part II of the present dissertation for more on Arendt’s storytelling.

²² JW, 36.
political action through collectively coming together to debate, discuss, hear from others, and physically build up the land for habitation through agricultural initiatives. The work being done in Palestine through the organization is political action because of its collective nature, its dedication to fostering public discussions, in addition to its commitment to cultivating a physical space for other people to come together to build the country. The collective nature of the organization and the active deliberations that occurred among the participants coincides with the idea that “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”23 Political action, in other words, is possible because we exist among other humans. The act of purposefully coming together to build a new home is political for Arendt. Additionally, as the first chapter explains, people coming together to “start anew” is another hallmark of political action.24 Through the organization, Jewish visitors and immigrants joined forces in Palestine to physically work the land and construct new buildings in order to initiate a new life for themselves and their family. Although the article acts as a sort of advertisement for Youth Aliyah, it functions well as an example of political action because it is nonideal and therefore rooted in the lived experiences of European Jews experiencing homelessness and statelessness. These lived experiences of those who participated in and advocated for Youth Aliyah provide a concrete, affective understanding of the importance of political action—the real need for a Jewish homeland that allowed for economic self-sufficiency and political protection.

Her time with Youth Aliyah was short-lived, though. And, as mentioned above, after Magnes’ death, she largely withdrew from being an overt political actor. Before moving on to her critiques of the actualization of Zionism, it is necessary to examine her understanding of the movement as operating at a theoretical level. Doing so demonstrates that Arendt conceives of


24 HC, 5.
Zionism as particularly Jewish political action which is a point that is often lost in the fray of her Zionist critiques. In other words, the fact that Arendt herself posits that the Zionist movement qualifies as political action affords us the opportunity to examine how, in her later theorized account of the concept, the political movement for a Jewish homeland is a nonideal, and therefore a helpful and less problematic example worth investigating.

In the 1946 essay “The Jewish State: Fifty Years After, Where Have Herzel's Politics Lead?” Arendt strongly stakes the claim that, historically, there have only been two instances of Jewish political action. She writes, “During the twenty centuries of their Diaspora the Jews have made only two attempts to change their conditions by direct political action.”25 She goes on to name the two: the 17th century Shabbetai Tzavi messianic movement and Zionism. The first Arendt describes as a “mystic-political movement for the salvation of Jewry” which started with a self-proclaimed messiah but ended in his demise.26 Arendt marks the failed-messianic moment of the movement as the end of “the period in which religion alone could provide the Jews with a firm framework within which to satisfy their political, spiritual, and everyday needs.”27 More importantly, she claims that the only other Jewish political action is Zionism. In the context of the article, Arendt is reviewing and critiquing the eventual founder of the World Zionist Organization, Theodor Herzl’s Zionist pamphlet “The Jewish State,” hence her title. Putting aside her critiques for now, her classification of Zionism as political action exemplifies a crucial aspect of the concept. As discussed in Chapter 1, political action is revelatory—speech or action in the public realm reveals one’s identity to the world, and therefore allows them to be remembered. Zionism, as political action, is speech and action

25 JW, 377.
26 JW, 377.
27 JW, 378.
intended to disclose, not only a group of people to the world, but to posit their necessary political existence for their continued survival.

Arendt’s ensuing critiques of Herzl or the revisionist Zionists have little to do with the idea of Zionism itself because that is purely the act of revealing oneself, speaking for oneself, and acting for oneself as Jews for the continuation of the Jewish people. Her critique of Herzl is rooted in his claim that the need for a Jewish return to Palestine was directly caused by the rise of antisemitism throughout Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, and that the creation of a Jewish state would necessarily remove the problem of antisemitism.28 Arendt understood the Zionist movement to be a possibility for political representation, and civil and human rights protections, not merely a reaction to antisemitism. According to Arendt, Herzl saw Zionism as a response to the problem wherein “A people without a country would have to escape to a country without a people.”29 Arendt is quick to point out Herzl’s oversight of the Palestinians already living in the area.

Arendt often makes the argument for a bi-national, council system in Palestine which aimed to actively take into account the inhabitants of the area alongside the need for a Jewish homeland. She is not against the idea of a Jewish return to the promised land, but she, particularly in the essay “To Save the Jewish Homeland,” fights against the narrative that she claims Palestinian and American Jews largely held which, at the time, was that “Arab and Jewish claims are irreconcilable and only a military decision can settle the issue.”30 Her main critiques of Zionism and what crafts her understanding as a member of the “loyal opposition,” I argue, are informed by ideal theory. She sees

28 Arendt argues that Herzl “identified the Jewish question in all its aspects and connections with the fact of antisemitism, which both conceived of as the natural reaction of all peoples, always and everywhere, to the very existence of Jews.” (JW, 380)

29 JW, 382.

30 JW, 391.
Zionism, particularly Revisionist Zionism, as ignoring the real social, political, and religious factors at play in British Mandated Palestine. Under ideal theory, it is acceptable to ignore these factors; however, Arendt is quick to point out the danger inherent which connects back to the perceived notion that only war is a viable solution. By conceiving of a homeland as only Jewish, as opposed to a homeland that accounts for cohabitation with Arab populations, it is logical that the only way to pursue this end is by overpowering the Arab population and surrounding countries. Because Arendt is aware that this is the Revisionist approach, I contend that Arendt’s criticism of the purported need for war are leveled against the idealized, and therefore problematic, nature of the movement. This is important because it demonstrates that Arendt is aware of ideal theory—even if not explicitly—and its harms in inhibiting political action. By ignoring the needs and desires of the Arab people living in Palestine at the time, Revisionists saw war as the only solution to procuring the land. The resort to war demonstrates a move away from approaches such as deliberation and cooperation which are not only more responsive to nonideal social, political, and religious factors but also more reflective of political action. Recognizing that Arendt is critical of ideal theory acts as further support for my overarching argument for this chapter—that we should turn to these early texts in tandem with *The Human Condition*. This is an important shift to make when reading and teaching Arendt because it is necessary to develop a multi-dimensional picture of political action.

Arendt’s Critique of Zionist Idealism

Throughout these texts from the 1930s and 1940s, there are a plethora of examples of Arendt criticizing Zionism for its idealism. I briefly examine three moments when Arendt critiques ideal, elitist, and exclusionary aspects of Zionism. For the first, I turn to a previously unpublished essay from approximately 1938-39 titled “Antisemitism.” This text is actually referred to as a chapter

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31 Take for instance, Rawl’s veil of ignorance which purposely asks us to remove political, social, and religious considerations in order to establish a just society.
by Arendt, but if she wrote more, the editors note that they did not survive.\textsuperscript{32} In this text she is articulating her disagreement with the argument that Zionists such as Herzl have taken up. The argument claims that Zionism is the direct result of antisemitism which introduces a necessary causation narrative that Arendt heartily dismisses. The causation narrative states that the need for a Jewish homeland is the direct result of antisemitism and only through the establishment of a Jewish state will antisemitism be able to be eradicated. Instead, she, as she does at greater length a decade later in \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}, historically analyzes the connection between assimilation and Zionism while treating the long history of antisemitism as a phenomenon unto its own and not a necessary contributing factor in the demand for a Jewish homeland.

In “Antisemitism,” Arendt claims the modern development of antisemitism was influenced by Medieval ghost stories which portrayed Jews as vampires, Christian narratives from the Crusades on that purported Jesus’ death was the Jews’ fault, and stories that cast Jews as usurers.\textsuperscript{33} More immediately important in this text is Arendt’s criticism of the ideal nature of the movement in general. Not only does she claim that “Zionists are incapable of representing Jewish interests on a global scale,” but that they also ignore the immediate needs of European Jews given Hitler’s dictatorship and increasing pogroms at the time of her writing.\textsuperscript{34} The Zionists that Arendt is critical of she refers to as “The Don Quixotes, who on the basis of pure ideals and pure moral protest believed they were protesting and acting with benevolence, have become practitioners of realpolitik, blind devotees of temporary power relationships.”\textsuperscript{35} The literary reference to the satiric novel by

\textsuperscript{32} See JW 111 for the editors’ note.

\textsuperscript{33} See JW, 65-70, to read more about Arendt’s historical analysis of antisemitism, including Germany’s use and distortion of that history.

\textsuperscript{34} JW, 56-57.

\textsuperscript{35} JW, 57.
Miguel de Cervantes alludes to the impractical and overly idealized approaches Arendt believes powerful Zionists practice—except for when push comes to shove and they, according to Arendt, are willing to negotiate with their enemies who make it clear their preference to harm the Jewish people. By ignoring the immediate danger that European Jews were during World War II, Arendt sees Zionism as overgeneralizing and universalizing the needs of all Jewish people—a hallmark of ideal theory. Arendt is a proponent of a council system in Palestine—a system that inherently distrusted an overarching power structure that would harmfully speak for masses of diverse Jews, hence her strong stance against what she saw as quixotic Zionists.

In addition to claims of idealism, Arendt frequently addresses an elitist strand in Zionism. This, in addition to claims of harmful universalization of Jewish needs and desires, is worth noting because, as I argue in Chapter 2, Arendt herself falls into the trap of universalizing political action in such a way that promotes elitism. In “Zionism Reconsidered” from 1944, Arendt is critical of Zionism’s dismissal of the political strongholds Jews have established from Leningrad to New York, not just in Palestine. Hand in hand with this constructed narrative, is the claim that a Zionist return to Palestine ought to be for the elite Jewish people—it is too small an area to welcome all the world’s Jewish population. Arendt notes that at the time of her writing, this is, thankfully, a diminishing narrative. However, it is not the only time that Arendt questions how elite or exceptional individuals benefit at the cost of the Jewish masses. In the current article, she writes, “Zionists used to argue that ‘only the remnant will return,’ the best, the only ones worth saving; let us establish ourselves as the elites of the Jewish people.”36 However, it is a constant refrain of Arendt’s to acknowledge the historical theme of the “exceptional” Jew. From Rahel Varnhagen through The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt points out how individual acceptance is in tension with

36 JW, 362.
Jewish emancipation en masse. In an *Aufbau* article from the same year, Arendt responds to the idea, perpetuated by what she refers to as Jewish nationalists, of the Jewish people as “the salt of the earth” or a superior people, as “nonsense.” Here, however, Arendt acknowledges that there are Zionists that work against the “salt of the earth” narrative by organizing Palestine as a country for all Jews. In all, Arendt pays keen attention to and ardently fights against those who sought to establish Palestine as a Jewish homeland fit only for the wealthy and powerful elite.

The final idealized aspect of Zionism that Arendt is intent on disabusing is the exclusion of Palestine’s Arab inhabitants in their narrative of nation-building. This form of idealization ignores the social, political, and religious implications of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine where the Arab population also has historical ties to the land. To return to “Zionism Reconsidered,” Arendt calls out the ignorance of Zionists who “had not the slightest suspicion of any national conflict with the present inhabitants of the promised land; they did not even stop to think of the very existence of the Arabs.” The exclusionary nature of idealism is readily present in those who ignored or thoughtlessly disregarded those who already occupied Palestine. Arendt notes that the result of such exclusion is truly to the detriment of Zionists:

> “Thus the social revolutionary Jewish national movement, which started half a century ago with ideals so lofty that it overlooked the particular realities of the Near East and the general wickedness of the world, has ended—as do most such movements—with the unequivocal support not only of national but chauvinistic claims—not against the foes of the Jewish people but against its possible friends and present neighbors.”

Arendt’s criticisms here are of an ideal theory, particularly the ideal theory taken up by Revisionist Zionists—one which overlooks the current conditions of the world in which decisions are actually

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37 JW, 226.
38 JW, 349.
39 JW, 351.
being made. By ignoring the Arab inhabitants of Palestine, Arendt claims that the Revisionist Zionists have lost the possibility of building an alliance with those in the area, and instead of making more friends, have gained more enemies.

Though there are certainly underdeveloped aspects of Arendt’s criticisms of and alternatives to the creation of the state of Israel, her firm grasp on the shortcomings of working at the ideal level demonstrate that these texts serve as a less problematic account of political action. For instance, she is overly optimistic about a council system—given her summarization of Revisionist Zionism’s own approaches, there was little large-scale support for this political approach which would have been necessary for its success. Regardless, Arendt is aware of how ideal—universalizing and elitist—Zionism was. As a loyal objector, she is still invested in a political solution for Jewish “homelessness;” however, she is dedicated to a solution which accounted for the Arab population living in Palestine. Her awareness of the particular social, political, and religious factors at play in Palestine demonstrate that she is exemplifying and theorizing political action nonideally.

Letter

In another critique of Revisionist Zionism, Arendt drafted an open letter speaking out against Menachem Begin and the Israeli Freedom Party or the Trumat Haherut, which is now referred to as the Herut Party, in 1948. According to Jerome Kohn, the letter was drafted by Arendt and signed by 27 other people including physicist Albert Einstein, pragmatist Sidney Hook, and economist Seymour Melman. It was published in the New York Times on December 4, 1948. The letter itself is a scathing uncovering of the Freedom Party’s history which they claim is fascist and

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40 The Herut merged to form the current Likud Party, of which former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the leader.
akin to Nazi totalitarianism. According to the letter, before it became the Freedom Party, it was the
*Irgun Zvai Leumi* party which they call “a terrorist, right-wing, chauvinist organization in Palestine.”41

The authors penned the letter after Begin and the Freedom Party visited the United States
and were largely welcomed. They claim their purpose in writing is to let people in the United States
know Begin’s history of terrorism and fascist tactics. Their rationale for disseminating this
information publicly was tied to the Freedom Party’s dedication to obfuscation—they claimed
through their writing to desire “freedom, democracy, and anti-imperialism” yet the letter claims their
actions tell a different story.42 In typical Arendt fashion, the letter chooses to tell a story—the story
of the Deir Yassin massacre. Deir Yassin was an Arab occupied village which, according to the
letter, actively avoided military involvement with British, Arab, and Jewish paramilitary forces.
Despite their neutrality, “On April 9 *The New York Times* reported that terrorist bands attacked this
peaceful village, which was not a military objective in the fighting, killed most of its inhabitants—
240 men, women, and children—and kept a few of them alive to parade as captives through the
streets of Jerusalem.”43 Arendt and the co-signers claimed that the massacre “exemplifies the
character and the actions of the Freedom Party.”44

In addition to the massacre, those who made up the Freedom Party were said to also attack
Jews who disagreed or protested their tactics; “Teachers were beaten up for speaking against them,
adults were shot for not letting their children join them. By gangster methods, beatings, window-
smashing, and widespread robberies, the terrorists intimidated the population and exacted a heavy

41 JW, 417.
42 JW, 417.
43 JW, 418.
44 JW, 418.
The letter ends by arguing that the actions of the party members while involved with the \textit{Irgun Zvai Lenmi} Party are at direct odds with their current mission and self-representation. They claim it is a blatant façade to cover up their fascist actions in the past and imperialist desires to continue the expansion of Jewish occupation—a façade which the public must know and understand so as not to be duped by their present machinations.

This letter, I argue, is another excellent example of Arendtian nonideal political action. Not only is it representative of Arendt, alongside others, speaking out against what they see as injustice and obfuscation, but it demonstrates her idea of acting in concert. As mentioned above, the decision to tell the story of the Deir Yassin massacre was both deliberate and effective. The massacre certainly acted as a catalyst for the letter and telling the story of this act of terrorism reveals to the world the previous actions and ethics of the Freedom Party. Storytelling is its own kind of revelation within Arendt’s work—as political action it reveals to the world who Begin and his party members are. Additionally, Arendt makes it clear in HC that true, non-totalitarian power exists when words and deeds align. I find it to be no small coincidence that in \textit{The Human Condition}, Arendt takes serious issue with those who use their political speech to hide their devious actions which is exactly what the letter aims to make public.

In \textit{The Human Condition}, she argues that “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, \textit{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.”\footnote{HC, 200, emphasis added.} The letter’s main claim is that Begin and the Freedom Party are spinning a new tale that ignores and erases their violent past actions, and that people ought to know

\footnote{JW, 418.}

\footnote{HC, 200, emphasis added.}
this. And in coming together with the 27 other co-signers, Arendt is demonstrating that her understanding of power is not about violence or force, but that it is the act of acting in concert with others for political purposes. When speaking of power in political action, Arendt references David and Goliath, though she notes this story is only somewhat helpful—the story of David and Goliath is allegorically helpful but not fully applicable. When fighting one-on-one in a mismatched battle, she says “strength decides” the outcome. But when the idea of a smaller group of people working closely together attempts to take on a giant organization, the odds are in favor of the Davids of the world. I find it a missed opportunity that Arendt chose not to tell the story of her letter and the massacre at Deir Yassin instead of a partially helpful allegory of David and Goliath to demonstrate her concept of power in acting together. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s use of David perpetuates the narrative that political action is reserved for the great men of history who will be remembered well past their deaths. If she had used this letter to exemplify the idea of acting in concert with others, I think she would have avoided an elitist approach to political action.

**Part III: The Effects of Arendt’s Eurocentrism**

The previous section is devoted to searching for generative examples of political action in Arendt’s writings from the 1930s and 1940s—yet, as I have made clear from the start, that is only part of the story. Locating examples of political action in these texts allows us to piece together a more complete picture—one which is more akin to a multi-dimensional rendering of the concept—than what we have access to if we limit ourselves to *The Human Condition* where it is explicitly theorized. Once again, the goal of this dissertation is to provide a multi-dimensional account of political action. In these early texts, we are given a nonideal account of the concept which exemplifies how Arendt saw herself and others acting as political actors. However, if we take

47 In *HC*, Arendt writes that “power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (200).
seriously, Kathryn Sophia Belle’s critiques of Arendt in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* and the tradition of Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, we must not stop here. Doing so would hinder our ability to render a multi-dimensional account of political action because it would entail ignoring some of Arendt’s shortcomings in this collection of texts. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to bringing to the surface the Eurocentric, myopic, and willfully ignorant tendencies of Arendt in these texts which is made possible by my utilization of the previously mentioned genuine inclusivity approach.

Keeping in mind my methodology, in this chapter I claim that Arendt’s writings in these early texts reflect her particular standpoint as a European, Jewish woman—one which produces, at times, Eurocentric, myopic, and willfully ignorant renderings of political action. At this stage, these criticisms are minor compared to those which will be discussed in the subsequent chapter; however, my point is not to create a hierarchy of Arendt’s texts, listed from least problematic to most. Instead, in this chapter, I aim to advocate for the value found in Arendt’s nonideal account of political action while, at the same time, prompting awareness of its weaknesses which are informed by a genuinely inclusive reading of Belle and her argument concerning Arendt’s anti-Black racism. According to genuine inclusivity I move forward in claiming that Belle’s argument has bearing on Arendt’s texts from the 1930s and 1940s, even though she does not often reference these texts in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question.*

Eurocentrism

It makes sense that Arendt is and should be speaking from her experience as a central European Jewish woman while not speaking for Far Eastern Russian or North African or even American Jews. My main concern in this section is with the concept of Eurocentrism, which I

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48 Belle engages with Arendt’s “The Jew as Pariah” which is included in *The Jewish Writings*, though that is the only one.
understand as operating in two senses. In the first sense, Eurocentrism accepts Europe, particularly Western and Central Europe, as the primary site of knowledge and power, setting Europe on a pedestal of superiority over and against other peoples. At the same time, Eurocentrism also functions as exclusion. In this sense, Europe is conceived of as preeminent in such a way that ignores and erases the possibility for non-Europeans to be perceived as equal to their counterpart, to the point of not being able to even conceive of the other as equal.49 These senses work hand-in-hand, often at the same time despite their contradictory assumptions. Eurocentrism as superiority must acknowledge the existence and presumed inferiority of other peoples in order to elevate themselves, whereas Eurocentrism as exclusion not only actively excludes others which requires the acknowledgement of them, but, more importantly, it results in the ignorance of those others. In this sense, Eurocentrism operates as a kind of Orwellian doublethink where there must be knowledge of the other in order to exclude them, yet what happens in this exclusion is the willful ignorance of the other. Eurocentrism as superiority is an ontology—a way of being—while Eurocentrism as exclusion is epistemic—an active ignoring of those who are categorized as “other.”50

The dual senses of Eurocentrism above, I argue, are found in Arendt’s essays and articles from the 1930s and 1940s, specifically in the argument for a Jewish Army. In this example, it is clear that Arendt envisioned this army as a fellow European force, fighting alongside other European armies. In her review of The Jewish Writings, “I merely belong to them,” Judith Butler also contends that Arendt’s vision of a Jewish Army was Eurocentric: “In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Arendt thought that the Jews might become a nation among nations, part of a federated Europe; she

49 This second element of Eurocentrism should sound familiar—it is from the same pedestal of superiority that Rollins’ employers failed to acknowledge her presence.

50 For more at the intersection of Eurocentrism and epistemic injustice see Linda Martín Alcoff, “Philosophy and Philosophical Practice: Eurocentrism as an Epistemology of Ignorance,” in The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice, eds. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus (London: Routledge, 2017), 397-408.
imagined that all the European nations that were struggling against Fascism could ally with one another, and that the Jews might have their own army that would fight against Fascism alongside other European armies.”

Though Butler does not spell it out in her review, I believe an underlying critique here is that Arendt’s logic and argumentation for a Jewish army operates within a strict binary wherein the “good” Europeans could come together to fight the fascists and that this binary leaves little room for imagination. What I mean by that is that within this logic, Arendt is unable to imagine a Jewish army as anything other than a European entity instead of a transnational or cosmopolitan force. Additionally, this logic entails the idea that the Jewish people ought to be able to form their own army and join the “good” or “true” Europeans. But this logic refuses to recognize those who do not fit within the binaries provided, that of “good” Europeans and “bad” ones, effectively leaving out non-European Jews.

In a sweeping review of Arendt’s texts from the 1930s and 1940s, Butler states that “her views throughout this early period are emphatically Eurocentric.” Butler goes on to initially quote Arendt as writing, “We enter this war as a European people,” before explaining that “she insisted [this claim] in December 1941, skewing the history of Judaism by marginalizing the Sephardim and Mizrachim (mentioned as ‘Oriental Jews’ in Eichmann).”

The exclusionary and superior nature of Arendt’s politics is not limited to her arguments for a Jewish Army. And as Butler points out it was both prevalent in the ‘30s and ‘40s, but also throughout much of her writings in the ‘60s and ‘70s such as “On Violence” and “On Civil Disobedience,” and “Reflections on Little Rock.”


52 Sephardi or Sephardic Jews have historical and cultural ties to what is now Spain and Portugal, and to a lesser degree North Africa. Sepharad translates to “Hispania” from Hebrew. In Hebrew, the plural of Sephardi is Sephardim. Mizrachim, the plural of Mizrahi, are Middle Eastern and North African Jews, some of which emigrated to Eastern Europe. Mizrach in Hebrew is “East.” At times through her early texts, Arendt refers to Mizrahi Jews in German as Ostrjuden, or “Eastern Jews.”
So why does this matter? In the first half of the chapter, I unpack how important Arendt’s arguments for the Jewish Army are because they act as an exemplary example of political action—particularly speech. However, if we proceed with this example as helpful, and maybe even more helpful than the ones she gives us in *The Human Condition*, without recognizing her Eurocentrism, we are only telling one part of the story. Arendt’s example of speech as political action here is still quite limiting because she is speaking for all Jews who wish to fight their enemies, but she is only imagining that fight as being undertaken by Europeans which leaves out North African and even East Russian Jews. She does not give us room to imagine a Jewish Army as a truly multi-national or non-national organization. And this undermines her own project, not only because she perpetuates a dangerous nationalism which she goes on to argue against in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but also because she is so adamant that if attacked as a Jew, one must fight back as a Jew. But all Jews were threatened and attacked by Hitler’s rise to power and final solution. And, organizing a Jewish Army that conceptually ignored non-central European Jews is only an example of diminished political action—a Eurocentric political action. This image of a Jewish Army both elevates European Jews and overlooks non-European Jews, exemplifying both superior and exclusionary senses of Eurocentrism.

**Myopia**

Myopia or the analogy of losing the forest for the trees is a charge often lodged at Arendt, and one which I claim plays a role in her understanding of how race functions. In the context of

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her early texts, many of which were written while still living in Europe, myopia or near-sightedness in Arendt’s work refers to her narrow perspective on political action which is the result of privileging central Europe in her thought. Such myopia itself results in, as the first half of this chapter demonstrates, an excellent exemplification of political action but also a one-dimensional account of the concept. For instance, despite all her insights on assimilation and antisemitism, Arendt’s understanding of race blurs her ability to see how race functions differently, depending on the social context. At times, Arendt’s understanding of race appears to be rooted in biological determinism, the largely debunked theory that race is fundamentally tied to one’s genomes, as opposed to the more commonly accepted belief that race is socially constructed. The myopic nature of this assumption about race results in a continued Eurocentric approach to political action—one which is minimal in these early texts but which snowballs in later texts such as “On Violence” and “Reflections on Little Rock.” Under biological determinism, or the idea that race is determined by biology, claims are made about one’s aptitude and characteristics which are naturally tied to their racial identity. This claim about race overlooks the way that power dynamics actively affect race and perpetuate oppression. While I do not think that Arendt understands race as biologically determined in terms of eugenics, I do contend that her understanding fails to properly account for the social and political factors that shape racial identities. In this section I turn to Arendt’s self-assessment of her Jewish identity to argue that her myopic understating of race, once again, undermines the potential of political action by narrowing the field of possible actors.

54 While I argue that Arendt appears to understand race as biologically constructed in Ravel and some of her texts from the 1930s and 1940s, it is clear her thinking shifts, as demonstrated in The Origins of Totalitarianism (OT). See Chapter Six, “Race-Thinking Before Racism” in OT wherein she argues that totalitarian tactics promoted eugenicist-based understandings of race as biological. Once it was widely accepted that a group of people were understood to be biologically inferior, the solution to their inferiority was to eradicate them. This section of OT was originally written in 1944 and published in The Review of Politics. While it is clear in this text that Arendt is aware of the dangers of a biologically-based understanding of race, she does not repudiate it; instead, she repudiates the manipulation of what she sees as given qualities such as race or gender.
Though most of my analysis in Part 1 is concerned with Arendt’s Jewish texts in the 1930s and 1940s, I turn to her exchange, from 1963, with Gershom Scholem concerning the negative reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The two were “well acquainted” according to the editors, and Scholem wrote Arendt to discuss his frustrations with her analysis of the Eichmann trial, particularly claiming that she has “no love of the Jewish people.” It is in this text that Arendt expounds on her self-assessment of what it means to be Jewish: “To be a Jew belongs for me to the indisputable facts of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been *given* and not made; for what is *physei* and not *nomō*.” The first sentence quoted commits to a conception of race which is indisputable and immutable, which works against the social construction theory of race. Yet, it is in the second sentence that it becomes clearer that Arendt conceives of race as biologically determined when she refers to her Jewishness as an accident, a fact of the physical world (*physei*) and not the regulated world of laws and social customs (*nomō*). As Butler points out in her review, “Being a woman and being a Jew are both referred to as *physei* and, as such, naturally constituted rather than part of any cultural order. But Arendt’s answer hardly settles the question of whether such categories are given or made.” I agree that in her letter to Scholem, Arendt’s statement about her gratitude for what is *given* is not explicitly linked to the previous sentence where she claims her Jewishness is indisputable. However, I think that her approach to assimilation, as explained above, are sufficient to support the claim that Arendt’s understanding of race is at times rooted in biological determinism, not social construction.

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56 JW, 466.
How race functions in society, particularly when it is understood as biologically determined, severely limits the possibility for all to partake in Arendtian political action. A biological approach to race states race as a fact much like Arendt understands her own identity, which does not take into account the social and cultural factors that affect individuals. We can see this play out at the hands of Arendt herself in her wrongheaded analysis of Black college and university students in “On Violence.” Arendt’s anti-Black racism plays an active part in her misunderstanding of Black students in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s when she claims, “the majority of them were admitted without academic qualifications.” In conceiving of Black college and university students as unqualified, Arendt implicitly asserts that these students were academically inferior to the white students already in attendance; yet, they were admitted merely based on their race. Additionally implicit here is the claim that Black students, according to Arendt, are naturally inferior academics. In other words, if we think of Arendt as ascribing to biological determinism, it leads to the conclusion that she believed that Black students were unqualified and unprepared, naturally. Her persistent argument that race is just a matter of fact, purely a natural occurrence, makes her insensitive to the social construction of race and how Black students at the time were being demonized for their campus protests and uprisings while white students who also participated in protests and activism were viewed as heroic political actors.

Willful Ignorance

In this final section I turn to a few examples of Arendt’s naivety and willful ignorance. Willful ignorance, according to Linda Alcoff in “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types,” can be understood in three main ways, none of which are mutually exclusive. The first, and the one which I will take up here, is founded in Lorraine Code’s work on one’s social position. The other two, which

I will not take up are founded on Sandra Harding’s idea of group identity and Charles Mills’ work on systemic factors. In Code’s work, Alcoff summarizes her understanding of ignorance as following “from the general fact of our situatedness as knowers.”58 In other words, our social identity and interactions with others affects what we can know. Additionally, our ability to gain knowledge is most often reliant on judgements which are informed by personal experience.59 This is all to say, this section will investigate the willful ignorance of Hannah Arendt in JW and how it is affected by her personal experiences.

Without a doubt, the articles and essays from the 1930s and 1940s largely constitute Arendt’s early writings before her major philosophical works such as *The Human Condition* and her final, unfinished book *The Life of the Mind*. My contention here is not to point out a few hypocritical moments of Arendt’s in order to cast aside her insights into Arab-Jewish cooperation, speaking for oneself as a Jew, and the importance of standing up to genocide, which are the three examples we will turn to. Instead, I aim to demonstrate how important it is to be genuinely inclusive of historically minoritized people’s criticisms of thinkers like Arendt so that we can take note of how she fails to recognize that her experience as a persecuted person produces a situated understanding of oppression and marginalization. But that experience is particular to her “situatedness” and does not transfer seamlessly to other people’s experiences of oppression and domination. What I mean by that is, in these examples Arendt offers advice to others that she does not go on to take later herself in her more contentious writings, specifically “On Violence,” much to her detriment.

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59 Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance,” 41-42.
Of course, there exists the concern that Arendt also should have realized her own experiences do not transfer over to Black Americans, but that is the subject of another project.\(^6^0\) In the instances to follow, I believe Arendt’s willfully ignorant moments are a result of her Eurocentrism—she did not conceive of how cross-cultural collaboration, conceptions of epistemic justice, and activism could also be enacted by Black Americans and in turn she once again narrows the possibilities for political action. In particular, Arendt’s Eurocentrism situates her understanding of cross-cultural collaboration, epistemic injustice, and activism within the context of central Europe, not North America. While she provides excellent examples of these in her own context, she is mired by her Eurocentrism and therefore hindered from fully understanding how the same concepts are at play in the United States. As I go on to demonstrate, political action is diminished here because she does not allow the same opportunities to Black Americans to be political actors that she exemplifies and promotes.

To begin, in the 1948 essay “About ‘Collaboration’” Arendt argues that Jewish collaboration with Palestinian Arabs is absolutely necessary in the newly created state of Israel. In responding to a critic, she writes, “The central question in this controversy is really the question whether one wants or does not want to collaborate.”\(^6^1\) Though Arendt does not provide details on how to collaborate with Palestinian Arabs, she makes her point clear—it is imperative to recognize one’s immediate neighbors, particularly if their citizen status and safety in the state is currently very much at risk. Inherent to this approach is the claim that we ought to acknowledge the real, nonideal context of the situation in order to allow all parties a chance to collaborate.\(^6^2\) This example lines up well with

\(^{60}\) To a large degree, this is what Belle aims to unpack in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*. See chapters 3, 6, and 7 for Belle’s analysis concerning Arendt’s hypocritical judgements against Black Americans.

\(^{61}\) JW, 415.

\(^{62}\) It is worth noting that this essay was written against the backdrop of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.
Arendt’s failure to collaborate or even consult with Black American activists during the Civil Rights Movement. In Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” she dismisses offers to discuss her misguided argument that Black Americans ought to be concerned more with mixed-race marriage laws instead of school desegregation. Instead, her harsh condemnation of school desegregation as argued in “Reflections” was solely informed by her own perspective. Even after she received significant pushback for the article and personally responded to Ralph Ellison’s criticism of it—he offered an olive branch and she merely waved at it instead of accepting an active offer of collaboration—she publicly doubled down on her argument that desegregation put children at risk so that their parents could climb the social ladder. Ellison’s olive branch was a clear opportunity to collaborate cross-culturally as he openly offered the opportunity to share his social and political experiences—experiences she was ignorant of—with her, yet she ultimately dismissed the opportunity.

In her exchange with Ellison she made it clear she misunderstood how race functioned in the American South which could be interpreted as attempted collaboration; however, publicly, she never admitted to her mistake and she did not continue her conversation with Ellison. She disregarded a valuable opportunity to understand the “situatedness” of someone who had the experience to better judge the circumstances surrounding school desegregation which would have ameliorated some of her willful ignorance. In part, this disregard connects back to the pervasiveness of Eurocentrism and the dismissal of purportedly inferior ways of viewing the world. Admittedly, the circumstances of collaboration between warring nations and between individuals over civil rights issues are very different. Yet, the two speak to instances of missed opportunities to cross-culturally collaborate.

63 In Ralph Ellison’s response to Arendt’s RLL, he writes that she “has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people.” Her rigid central European “situatedness” impeded her from hearing Ellison’s arguments against her, to her detriment. His response is reprinted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 2nd ed., page 316.
Arendt’s missed opportunity to collaborate with Ellison when she previously advocated for it highlights the kinds of opportunities that Arendt understood to be worthy of political action. Once again, the two examples are very different. However, the fact that Arendt recognized the value in Arab-Jewish collaboration—which is collaboration on a massive scale—but did not recognize the value in continued collaboration which could have been literally public speech between herself and one other person helps to substantiate my claim that Arendtian political action is more often than not promoted as grandiose speech and action which is carried out by the Achilles or Alexander Hamilton’s of the world. Though I think Ellison ought to be considered alongside these heroic and brilliant political actors of history, it is clear Arendt did not see her interaction as comparable. I do not presume to know if Arendt considered interactions such as this one with Ellison as political action; however, I think a case can be made that it is and that she missed the chance to learn from Ellison’s perspective on desegregation that is informed by his particular lived experiences as a Black man in the United States. With the knowledge of Ellison’s lived experience, Arendt would have been less willfully ignorant of the political concerns of Black Americans at the time. By overlooking the collaboration potential between her and Ellison, Arendt proves that when it comes to speech and action, she is hindered by her own ignorance.

For the second example, I return to Arendt’s arguments concerning speaking for others. In the previously unpublished text “The Minority Question” from the summer of 1940 Arendt argues against speaking for all Jews. Referring to a conference concerning peace initiatives in Palestine that occurred two decades prior, she claims that the parties in attendance “acted and spoke without actually being rooted in the Jewish people.”64 What she means by this is that those in attendance made up two factions—Zionists who she claimed were mostly interested in colonization and

64 JW, 125.
Eastern European Jews who she claims were “inert and lacking all initiative”—and those two factions did not have the interests of all Jews in mind when deliberating the Jewish question and Palestine’s role in its solution.65

Certainly, her assessment of Eastern European Jews is bigoted, further reinforcing my claim of her Eurocentrism. Additionally, we once again witness Arendt arguing against speaking for others. Yet, this time it is important to note the willful ignorance and cognitive dissonance in its relation to Arendt speaking for the parents of students in desegregated schools. Without a doubt, Arendt was not rooted in, or even familiar with, Black life in the American South, let alone the experiences of Black parents. Regardless, she forcefully took a stand and spoke out against desegregation. In preliminary remarks to “Reflections on Little Rock,” she made it clear she was unaware of much racism in the South stating that the thought of travelling to witness racist laws and cultural norms was too much for her to bear given her own experience with Nazi Germany.66 It is understandable, though regrettable, that trauma held her back from learning more about race in America but it is not a valid excuse when, despite her lack of knowledge, she continued to speak on behalf of Black Americans. Once again, her “situatedness” affected her ability to rely on Black Americans’ knowledge production of their own political circumstances concerning desegregation and marriage laws. This instance of willful ignorance further appears to define political action as speech as enacted by white Americans, not Black Americans. If it was inclusive of Black Americans, it is a real possibility that Arendt would have amended “Reflections” to account for the backlash she experienced. Instead, Arendt asserts herself as the kind of person able to participate in speech and action concerning the lives of Black Americans.

65 JW, 125.

The last example of Arendt’s willful ignorance turns to her reporting of the Holocaust. In an Aufbau article from June of 1942, Arendt writes about Joseph Goebbels’s public announcements concerning Jewish extermination and concentration camps, and the inherent danger for all peoples in the wake of Hitler’s Third Reich. She writes, “If I were not a Jew, but belonged to some other European people, my hair would stand on end in fear the moment a single hair on the head of a Jew was touched.”

In this quote she puts herself into the position of a non-Jewish European, someone who she thinks ought to be appalled by the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Yet, implicitly her own frustration is rooted in the non-Jewish Europeans’ ambivalence. Her response is purposely hyperbolic in order to exact public outcry and action against the horrors of the Holocaust.

Yet, take note of the Eurocentrism in her thought experiment—certainly an Algerian or Indian would understand, and maybe even more so as a colonized subject, that totalitarian power is far reaching and worth fighting against even if they do not experience an immediate threat. Additionally, her reaction is uncannily similar in “A Reply to Critics,” her rebuttal to criticism of “Reflections,” where she asks herself, “what would I do if I were a Negro mother?”

In this thought experiment, Arendt adopts the perspective of a Black mother to advance her own argument against desegregation. She sees school desegregation as a fight being waged by children for their parents benefit, hence her wrongheaded claim that if she were a Black mother, she would not put her children in danger by sending them to desegregated schools. At face value, the question is an

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67 JW, 163.

68 Hannah Arendt, “A Reply to Critics,” Dissent 6, no. 2, Spring 1959. Her longer response is even more appalling in its ignorance and presumed superior epistemological standpoint, particularly as someone who did not experience motherhood: “My first question was: what would I do if I were a Negro mother? The answer: under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted. Psychologically, the situation of being unwanted (a typically social predicament) is more difficult to bear than outright persecution (a political predicament) because personal pride is involved. By pride, I do not mean anything like being “proud of being a Negro,” or a Jew, or a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, etc., but that untaught and natural feeling of identity with whatever we happen to be by the accident of birth.” Emphasis added.
attempt at empathy. However, underneath that weak attempt at empathy, Arendt assumes an omniscient, or at least more informed, position of knowledge over Black parents’, just as she does in the first thought experiment. In this instance, the presumed “rational” mind of the political actor ought to act and think and speak like her. She is still assuming the position of the knower, even in her response to numerous critics who tell her she is wrong. Additionally, she did not experience motherhood, let alone Black motherhood. To speak as though she could assume what Black mothers ought to do is harmfully ignorant.

I think Arendt’s oversight of her own ignorance and hypocrisy functions as a red flag—we ought to pay attention to what she is proposing in the examples provided above and examine if her ignorant claims and actions reveal a weakness in her arguments or overarching theory of political action. In other words, these examples provide the opportunity to examine and reassess Arendt’s prejudices in order to understand how they affect other aspects of her thought. To little surprise, I do think that these examples point to a weakness in Arendt’s thought that ultimately undermines political action because they show us that her conception of who a political actor is is narrowly constructed, and it, in these examples, does not include Black Americans. In turn, the idea of political action appears to be informed by Arendt’s narrow sense of who can be a political actor—those who act and speak and think like her. In turn, her account of political action is diminished by her Eurocentrism, myopia, and willful ignorance.

Examining these early texts through the lens of genuine inclusivity allows us to see the darker underside of political action as Arendt enacted it. Certainly, as Part I has demonstrated, these essays and articles contain excellent examples of political action that ought to supplement our readings of other philosophical texts, such as Rahel Varnhagen and *The Human Condition*. Yet, that is only one side of the story which aims to elevate Arendt above her Eurocentric, myopic, and ignorant moments. It is worth noting that Arendt is human, and as such fallible. We ought not hold our
philosophers to impossible standards of perfection, omniscience, and humility. But when faced with Arendt’s problems, we should also not brush aside her shortcomings, but instead take advantage of the opportunities they offer. Arendt’s shortcomings in these texts and their connection to her later writings about the Civil Rights Movement and school desegregation offer us the opportunity to examine some of the first and only times Arendt enacted political action and how they shaped her theorization of it. Her Eurocentrism found in her early writings appears to not have dissipated which informs her understanding of who actually is speaking and acting, and what that looks like. Her apparent biological determinism and instances of her willful ignorance informs a, most likely, unconscious anti-Black racism which she demonstrates through her inability to recognize Civil Rights advances as instances of political action. It is necessary to move forward with both sides of the story here in order to more deeply understand Arendtian political action, in all its flaws and assets.
CONCLUSION
TOWARD AN ANTIRACIST READING OF ARENDT

What constitutes political action within Hannah Arendt’s thought is largely, if not entirely, informed by her explanation of the concept in *The Human Condition*. Put differently, interpretation of Arendtian political action relies heavily on *The Human Condition* alone, infrequently relying on other texts to explicate the concept. There is good reason for this—about one-third of the book is dedicated to explicating the realm of action in the *vita activa* or the active life according to Arendt. However, the concept is presented and promoted as a utopian ideal worth striving for. From a nonideal point of view, Arendt’s mode of explicating political action in this text undermines the universal or wide-ranging applicability of Arendtian political action. Additionally, Kathryn Sophia Belle argues in her 2014 book *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* that Arendt’s framework in *The Human Condition* harmfully separates private, public, and social realms of life. Accordingly, she argues that this framework has anti-Black racist implications that transfer to her notorious interpretation of desegregation and the advent of Black Studies courses at colleges and universities. In short, Belle forcefully and persuasively argues for recognition of the anti-Black racist elements present in the previously uncontentious *The Human Condition*.

Given these shortcomings and following Belle’s lead, I argue for a reconceptualization of Arendtian political action that relies on more than *The Human Condition* to establish a clear understanding of the concept as it exists in her texts. I argue that a monolithic understanding of political action which solely relies on *The Human Condition* allows for a narrow and ineffectual account of the concept. Taking up the analogy of one-dimensional blueprints, I claim that using *The
Human Condition alone only provides one perspective on and version of political action. We ought, instead, to aim for a multi-dimensional perspective of political action much like an architectural rendering software such as AutoCAD provides, or renders, a three-dimensional view of a building. In order to achieve such a view, we need to turn to other texts which inadvertently explicate and demonstrate political action, as well as incorporate minoritized perspectives on Arendt and political action. With a three-dimensional rendering of political action, we are better prepared to follow what I claim are different versions of political action—one tied to The Human Condition which is idealized and exclusive and the other which is nonideal and in turn more inclusive.

I begin the dissertation with a chapter on my methodology which is rooted in antiracism and Standpoint Theory, particularly Black Feminist Standpoint theory. This first chapter further explicates Belle’s germinal argument and the future research she makes possible because of Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question. I utilize antiracist research methods from the social sciences in order to argue for the prevalence of white supremacy in philosophy and the need to combat this prevalence. In order to do so, I turn to Black Feminist Standpoint Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory to intentionally incorporate the philosophical perspectives of women of color, white women, and people of color. The majority of my supplementary sources are from historically minoritized scholars. This approach is an intentional decision aimed at developing a multi-dimensional view of Arendtian political action.

Chapter 2 begins with The Human Condition’s explanation of political action which I argue is ideal and therefore ideological following Charles Mills’s work on ideal theory. I examine Arendt’s inspiration for an ideal political realm where action successfully occurs—a fictionalized ancient Greek and Roman polis. This fictionalization does not appropriately recognize that only a select few are able to participate in political action. Additionally, I interpret Arendt’s concepts of the web of
human relations, plurality, and natality as operating at the ideal level. This interpretation highlights
the exclusive nature of political action—it is not easily practiced by those from historically
marginalized populations. I end this chapter by turning to the Combahee River Collective Statement,
María Lugones, George Yancy, Miranda Fricker, and José Medina to indicate limitations and
possible solutions to Arendtian political action in *The Human Condition*. In particular, I examine
moments when Arendt ignores race and racial differences, privilege, and protections against
epistemic injustices.

After establishing the harmful repercussions of an account of political action solely derived
from *The Human Condition*, I turn to Arendt’s second dissertation, *Rahel Varnhagen* in Chapter 3. This
text is often overlooked for its fluctuation between biography and autobiography, yet I argue it is a
valuable text to examine how political action operates, largely through Arendt’s well-curated
narrative of Rahel’s life. In this text we are able to initially develop an account of political action that
is nonideal in nature and therefore more inclusive. As a bookend to the previous chapter, I examine
how this underappreciated text is more successful at recognizing race and racial differences,
privilege, and the prevalence of epistemic injustices aimed at those from minoritized groups.

Chapter 4 turn to essays and articles Arendt wrote in the 1930s and 1940s that explicitly
engage with Jewish politics in order to argue for a more developed, second version of nonideal
political action. I argue that this version is more robust than what Arendt presents in *Rahel Varnhagen*
because her theory is informed by her personal activism and lived experiences as a German-Jewish
woman. Though this developed account of nonideal action is more inclusive than the one promoted
in *The Human Condition*, I argue in this chapter that it is still problematic because it is mired by
Eurocentrism.
In the following section I dwell on the significance of this dissertation and the contribution it makes to the relevant scholarship. I focus on examining how a single, one-dimensional account of political action readily allows for the anti-Black racism prevalent in Arendt’s later writings in *On Violence* and “Reflections on Little Rock.” Here I reiterate my argument that a more nuanced, nonideal version of Arendtian political action as developed through Rahel Varnhagen and essays in *The Jewish Writings* better achieves Arendt’s concerns and desires marked out in *The Human Condition*—it is lamentable that action has been in decline since late antiquity and it is necessary to revive humanity’s interest and involvement in political action.

**Interpretation**

Arendt's problematic and racist arguments made in “Reflections on Little Rock” and *On Violence* are well known. In this section I briefly turn to these two texts to demonstrate that her idealized political action prevents her from recognizing a nonideal version of political action as it exists in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Student Movement of the 1960s. In examining these two texts I aim to underscore how important it is for Arendt scholars and everyday readers of Arendt to note the two versions of political action that this dissertation has attempted to outline. In identifying the ideal version of political action at work in these two texts I point out the harms enacted through the generalized and exclusive nature of her theory. I also point out how a nonideal version of political action ought to have been more inclusive of Black American activism.

“Reflections on Little Rock”

As explained in Chapter 4, Arendt argues in “Reflections on Little Rock” that desegregation is a social issue, not a political one. Ideal political action, for Arendt, abides by the strict division of the private, public, and social realms. This means that no issue of economic or cultural concern belongs in the public or political realm. While Arendt is wrong to designate desegregation a social
concern as opposed to a political one—she argues that Black parents put their children on the front lines of their own social advances by placing them in desegregating schools—under her ideal account of political action, no social issue belongs in the political sphere. From this perspective, within the framework of *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s argument is consistent. However, the ideal approach ignores the specifics of the situation and denies the possibility of political action in this instance. A young adult such as Elizabeth Eckford who bravely attempted to enter Central High School in Little Rock in the face of a vitriolic white Southern mob whose participants heckled, spat, and threatened violence clearly acted politically. She was not interested in economic gain, but instead was acting in line with her constitutional right to public education.

If we turn to Arendt’s nonideal account of political action to understand issues concerning the Civil Rights Movement in the American south, it becomes clear that we ought to interpret desegregation and Eckford’s journey differently. Of course, Arendt did not explicitly theorize and apply this nonideal account of political action later in her life. However, her assessment of action in the case of Rahel and Jewish politics provides us better tools to understand how we ought to conceive of political action so that it is more inclusive. For instance, as I argued in Chapter 3, Arendt’s biography of Rahel Varnhagen implicitly argues for the recognition of racial differences, the awareness of privilege, and safeguards against epistemic injustices. In the context of desegregation and Arendt’s arguments against it, we ought to acknowledge how race functions in this situation. Similar to Rahel, students like Eckford and her family desired the freedom to choose where to receive their education. According to Arendt, Rahel desired the ability to exist freely outside of her brothers’ financial control as well as outside the social and political constraints against Jews in Prussia at the time. In this sense, Rahel ardently wished her race did not affect her ability to exist freely—so much so that she wished to erase her Jewish identity. As an aside, it’s important to
note that not all Black students desired integration.\textsuperscript{1} For those who did choose to integrate into white schools, Ralph Ellison characterizes the decision as one rife with “inner tensions created by his racial situation.”\textsuperscript{2} From a nonideal perspective, desegregation and the struggles associated with it are inherently about racial discrimination. Recognizing it as an example of political action and not merely an attempt at social improvement, acknowledges the lived experiences of racial discrimination—something Arendt bore witness to in writing \textit{Rahel Varnhagen}.

Additionally, Arendt was keen to point out Rahel’s privilege, yet did not apply the same critical eye inward. In her correspondence with Ellison concerning the diversity of lived experiences of Black Americans and the racial power dynamics involved in desegregation, Arendt admits to Ellison that his frustration with her misunderstanding was “so entirely right, that I now see that I simply didn’t understand the complexities of the situation.”\textsuperscript{3} Kathryn Belle notes that while Arendt admitted her misunderstanding in private to Ellison, she did not publicly retract her claims made in “Reflections on Little Rock.” I do not intend to attack Arendt as a person here, but I do intend to point out how her privileged position as a successful and famous scholar impeded her from publicly admitting to her wrongheaded assessment of desegregation. Working from the nonideal version of political action I have interpreted from \textit{Rahel Varnhagen} and her underappreciated texts from the 1930s and 1940s, we can develop an account of political action that is mindful of how privilege and power dynamics affect one’s ability to speak for others. More specifically, this approach warns

\textsuperscript{1} See footnote 14 in Chapter 1 for more on bell hooks’s personal story of desegregation and the harms it caused her by removing her from a nurturing learning environment in an all-Black school.


\textsuperscript{3} Belle, 6.
against speaking for others from different social locations and advocates for a humble approach to criticism coming from individuals from historically minoritized populations.

The final aspect of an improved Arendtian nonideal political action concerns epistemic injustice. *Rahel Varnhagen* and many texts from the 1930s and 1940s address harms against Jews whose concerns and desires were ignored. A nonideal account of the concept ought to be mindful of epistemic injustices against individuals that deny their attempts at political action, namely through speech. In “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt’s insistence that desegregation is a social, and not political, issue already denies the political action of those like Eckford. Additionally, Arendt’s fight for Jewish representation and self-advocacy in World War II ought to parallel our understanding of desegregation. Just as she claims Jews ought to fight for their own survival and represent their own interests, Black Americans ought to be afforded the same opportunities. In speaking for the interests of a diverse population, which she was not a member, she impeded Black Americans from acting and speaking on behalf of their own political interests.

“On Violence”

In addition to her contentious comments made in “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt’s essay *On Violence* makes unmistakably anti-Black racist claims. Mirroring her earlier concern for technological advancement and the desire to leave the earth in *The Human Condition*, Arendt revisits how such advancement plays an active role in the rise of violence. Writing in the late 1960s, she sees the current generation of college-age students as fearful of any possible future after having grown up in a post-atomic world. She focuses her investigation into violence on the student movements and riots occurring at the time of her writing. She draws a stark contrast between white “highly moral” movements and Black student movements that were “clearly silly and outrageous.”

In footnotes

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4 OV, 121.
Arendt does not mince words when denouncing the Black student movements and what she deems their desire to “lower academic standards.”\footnote{OV, 120.} One particular footnote expresses outrage at the call for new and more inclusive classes, stating they are a mask for what she thinks is the real problem—lack of ability and effort. She claims that what is “even more frightening is the all too likely prospect that, in about five or ten years, this ‘education’ in Swahili…, African literature, and other nonexistent subjects will be interpreted as another trap of the white man to prevent Negros from acquiring an adequate education.”\footnote{OV, 192 n.viii.} Here it is difficult to ignore Arendt’s arrogance, racism, and Eurocentrism. She holds an idealized understanding of what a proper college education ought to entail, and with no evidence or reference to entrance exams, assumes Black students need remedial training in math and writing as opposed to “Swahili” (what better way to learn more about your native language than to learn another!) and “African literature” (what better way to become a better writer than to read literature!).

This text is the most explicit example of Arendt’s racism when it comes to Black student learning and Africana studies. She is unaware of the possibility of what she considers literature coming out of any African state or diaspora, dubious of the merits of Swahili as a language, and critically judgmental of “soul courses” that might teach African or African American history, culture, or politics.\footnote{OV, 191.} In stark contrast to Arendt’s criticism of Black students and Black studies, she embraces and encourages the white student movements fighting against the Vietnam war occurring concurrently.
Arendt clearly demonstrates an anti-Black racism and preference for white educational norms in this text. She vilifies and denies the political action of Black students, calling it “nonpolitical action.” The violence that accompanies the Black Power movement and Black student movements, according to Arendt, delegitimizes their actions as political. She claims that the introduction of violence strips the movement of its relationship to speech and action in the way she argues political action exists. As a result Arendt claims,

Serious violence entered the scene only with the appearance of the Black Power movement on the campuses. Negro students, the majority of them admitted without academic qualifications, regarded and organized themselves as an interest group, the representatives of the black community. Their interest was to lower academic standards. They were more cautious than the white rebels, but it was clear from the beginning...that violence with them was not a matter of theory and rhetoric.9

This passage articulates Arendt’s two-fold analysis—she appears to analyze the strategic development of community-based action and introduction of violence well, but she then wrongly judges that strategy and disregards the organization as political. Additionally, Arendt cites that she fears for the future of the university and its (white) standards because she argues that violence is effective—administrators will bow to the pressure to introduce Africana studies and she thinks this will be the end of the university’s integrity.

Arendt’s assessment of university integrity appears to stem in part from her involvement with elite, research-focused institutions. In this sense, her understanding of a successfully rigorous education is rooted in a white ideal of education that leaves no room for alternatives. This idealized perception of education negatively affects her understanding of nonwhite students. While Arendt also disregarded Black political action as action in “Reflections on Little Rock” by claiming

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8 OV, 118 n.22.
9 OV, 120.
desegregation is a social concern, here she claims Black activism on college campuses is not political. The implication is that it is social, but she does not even dignify the movement by considering its social value. Her distain for the Black student movement is palpable.

If we return to Arendt’s arguments for a Jewish Army, we can see how her nonideal account of political action can appropriately recognize the Black student movement’s merits and intentions. As explained in the previous chapter, in the 1940s Arendt argues for a Jewish Army to join the Allied powers in World War II. She is not interested in Jewish men merely joining the Allied armies. Her argument is, instead, to allow Jews to fight specifically as Jews in a clearly designated Jewish Army. Arendt’s argument occurs at the nonideal level because it recognizes how race and religion ought to be acknowledged. Similarly, the Black student movement paralleled the Civil Rights Revolutionary Action Movement. Ahmad claims that “from black working class struggles for national democratic rights, black youth, especially in the South, began to relate to the [Civil Rights] movement. Many were determined not to ‘wait’ for freedom.” Instead, Black students advocated for their political rights and for improvements to their own education that included diverse representation on campus. A college education based on white norms was not enough. They advocated for an education that reflected their own history and culture. Put in Arendt’s terms, Black students fought as Black students for Black representation in the classroom through increased admission rates and a variety of Black studies courses. A nonideal approach to the Black Student Movement recognizes the parallels between Arendt’s call for a Jewish Army and the call for diverse, equitable, and inclusive educational environments.

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11 Ahmad, 3.
Limitations

The nonideal account of Arendtian political action developed in this dissertation, however, was not intentionally theorized by Arendt. She did not knowingly advocate from a nonideal point of view. Nor is it clear that she intentionally developed an ideal account of the concept in *The Human Condition*. The previous section indicates how I interpret the nonideal account of Arendtian political action to function when faced with her most racist arguments. With that being said, one of the limitations of this dissertation is my imposed framework of interpretation. I use the ideal-nonideal distinction in Arendt’s texts to work toward a multi-dimensional account of political action. Yet, Arendt herself did not purposefully operate at these levels in different texts. My use of the framework serves to interpret Arendt’s account of political action, not argue that she ought to have recognized this framework. As a result, I believe that understanding when Arendt is theorizing at the nonideal and ideal levels helps to identify moments when political action is inclusive or exclusive of individuals from historically minoritized demographics.

Additionally, an argument can be made that Arendt’s theorization of political action in her early works such as *Rahel Varnhagen* and her writings from the 1930s and 1940s are immature and underdeveloped. Under this argument, it is untenable to consider earlier conceptions of political action alongside her intentional development of the concept in *The Human Condition*. While I do not profess to know Arendt’s rationale for moving toward an ideal theorization of political action later on in her life, I do claim that the earlier version is valuable, even if it is underdeveloped. The arc of this dissertation aims to make sense of Arendt’s racist assessment of the desegregation and the Black student movement. If we are to only rely on *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s assessment is interpreted as contradictory to political action—she merely failed to apply the concept to both white and Black individuals. And while I think this is true, this dissertation aims to understand the contradiction, not
merely name it. In returning to her earlier texts and interpreting a nonideal account of political action, I have advanced a version of the concept that can and ought to apply to nonideal situations. In other words, Arendt ought to have applied the nonideal version of political action to the nonideal debates concerning desegregation and diversification efforts on college campuses. Instead, she applied the ideal version to the nonideal events.

A final limitation of this dissertation is its scope. I have closely examined *The Human Condition*, *Rahel Varnhagen*, and a selection of her essays and newspaper articles from the 1930s and 1940s. Yet, there are many more texts worth investigating. In particular, Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* are two books which are rooted in historical events—the origins, rise, and continued threat of totalitarianism and the trial of Adolf Eichmann. These two texts appear to operate at the nonideal level by virtue of their subject matter, yet, similar to *The Human Condition*, there are still ideal aspects of political action at play worth investigating.

**Possibilities for Future Research**

My final limitation noted above is a natural transition into future research using the ideal-nonideal framework in Arendt’s work. In order to further develop a theory of ideal Arendtian political action and its shortcomings, I plan to turn to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Because these texts concern historical circumstances I intend to examine if and how Arendt idealizes political action when examining nonideal situations. Turning to these two texts would further strengthen my interpretation of an idealized version of political action in *The Human Condition*.

This dissertation has also opened up new possibilities to advance the scholarship at the intersection of Arendt studies and Critical Philosophy of Race. In particular, expansion of my attempt at an antiracist reading of Arendt can and ought to include aspects of her thought beyond
political action. Possibilities include investigations into ideal and nonideal aspects of Arendt’s thought on collective responsibility and freedom, as well as her assessment of the history of philosophy.

A final consideration for future research can turn to Arendt’s *vita contemplativa*. This dissertation focuses narrowly on action within the *vita activa*, or active life. Yet, Arendt’s philosophy of thinking, willing, and judgement are ripe for an antiracist reading. As a next project, I intend to turn to Arendt’s theory of judgment and its appropriation in feminist theories of universalism. While Linda Zerilli claims Hannah Arendt’s theory of judgement promotes a universalist, as opposed to relativist, feminism, I intend to develop an alternative account by juxtaposing Arendt’s Kantian-influenced account of judgement with the decolonial feminist work of Serene Khader, María Lugones, Mariana Ortega, and Linda Martín Alcoff. Similar to the present dissertation, this project is indebted to Kathryn Sophia Belle’s final chapter in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* which examines Arendt’s theory of judgement. Not intending to be a comprehensive account of the racism inherent to Arendt’s theory of judgement, Belle’s chapter instead opens up new lines of research at the intersection of Arendtian judgment and philosophy of race. To further scholarship at this intersection and continue developing an antiracist reading of Arendt, I intend to incorporate decolonial feminist theory in order to avoid privileging white, female perspectives. Similar to this dissertation, this next project aims to further develop tools to better understand the white-dominated field of Continental philosophy.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Dr. Katherine Brichacek was born and raised in the Chicago suburbs. She received her PhD in Philosophy from Loyola University Chicago in 2021. Previously, she completed her Master of Arts degree in the Humanities from the University of Chicago in 2011, as well as her Bachelor of Arts degree from DePaul University in 2006. She has taught philosophy and humanities courses at Harold Washington College and Loyola University Chicago. Dr. Brichacek has been appointed a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Cook Family Writing Program at Northwestern University, starting Fall of 2021.