

BETWEEN PERFORMANCE AND PARTICIPATION: THE TIME OF ACTION IN

HANNAH ARENDT

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: *Between Performance and Participation: The Time of Action in Hanna Arendt*

This thesis takes up the debate between the agonal and deliberative interpretations of Hannah Arendt's conception of political action. In it, I redeem the model of action as performance found in her descriptions of agonal politics and pull emphasis away from the deliberative model of communicative action on the basis of Arendt's ontology of temporality and her account of the witnessing and judging spectatorship that preserves the meaningfulness of human events against oblivion. I find the danger of this loss of meaning accounted for by the agonal model in the syncopated relationship between spectator and actor. The deliberative model of communicative action, however, collapses the roles of actor and spectator into the uniform role of participant and replaces experiential grounds of legitimacy with atemporal rational grounds. Communicative action is unable to account for the public realm as a space of endurance and skirts the ontological stakes of Arendt's agonal politics.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

There is a notable and deceptive distinction between the way that Hannah Arendt thematizes action in *the Human Condition*, on the one hand, and *On Revolution* and *Crises of the Republic*, on the other. The distinction – attributable to the difference between the ancient and modern historical anchors employed in each text – has invited those who critically dismiss Arendt’s account of action in the Greek polis to reclaim Arendt as a relevant political thinker in light of the value of her later work to a conception of deliberative democratic politics. The interpretations of Jürgen Habermas, Seyla Benhabib, and Maurizio d’Entrèves similarly rehearse the move of redeeming later Arendt by fitting her concepts of power, acting in concert, and her reading of Kant’s *sensus communis* into a model of deliberative politics. By trading the model of an agonal politics of performance, found in *the Human Condition*, for a deliberative politics of participation, these theorists lay claim to an egalitarian and tenably modern reading of Arendt. The upshot of such a move, however, is the loss of action as performance, or rather, a reduction of action as speech and deed (or speech-as-deed) to argumentative discourse, and the correlate collapse of the relationship between actor and spectator that is constitutive of the public realm as a space of revelatory appearance. The model of public action as participation in a discourse brackets the theatrical element to its detriment, and it is my contention that this move fails to grasp the ontological category of natality and the temporal role it plays at the basis of Arendt’s political thought. It is my further worry that it preserves, rather than mitigates, the modern disharmony between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, the “active life” and the “life of the mind.”

Arendt's ontology situates the human condition between the finitude of earthly existence and the infinite capacities for forgetting and beginning anew. The "fact" of natality – that is, the fact that the world is constantly disrupted by the coming into being of new and uninitiated human beings – is the common ground of both freedom and oblivion in Arendt's work. As freedom, natality is actualized in respect to two functions of action: the initiation of something new and unpredictable, and the disclosure of "who" one is. The opportunity for agency and self-disclosure thus often become the broad criteria of action in democratic theory drawn from Arendt. Habermas, Benhabib, and D'Entrèves, for example, each make the case for a politics of deliberative participation on the basis of these criteria. At the same time, however, natality's promise of new possibilities continually threatens the public realm with its own loss. For continuity and endurance, the common world of the public hinges on the particular – on the life of the mind of each individual member of a plurality to recollect, understand, and save what has come to pass from the wreckage of time. For it to endure, the public realm of action must prepare individuals to thing from within the temporal-historical gap they occupy during the course of their lifetime. Insofar as the deliberative model of discursive public space entails a realm of agency and recognition, it actualizes natality as a promise of freedom. It does not, however, account for the aspect of public life that safeguards against oblivion by preparing the individual for the task of thinking "in" time. That is, it lacks spectatorship.

My goal in the following paper is to develop from Arendt's concepts of natality, action, and thought an understanding of the public realm as the meeting place of the active life and the life of the mind. By responding directly to the deliberative readings of



Arendt, I hope to bring to light the importance of spectatorship to her characterization of action as performance, and highlight the particular dangers of communicative action's atemporal and rationalistic criteria for political praxis. The double bind of natality places a clear burden on the political actor and spectating judge to adhere to historical (i.e. experiential), and not rational, grounds of legitimacy. Arendt suggests that this burden has only become weightier since the modern age has propelled humankind into a world marked by unprecedented change and increasing momentum, on the one hand, and the failure of thought to grasp the meaning of new events, on the other. The possibility that we may be “forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do” is the informing dread behind Arendt's seminal exhumation, so to speak, of the *vita activa*.<sup>1</sup> The hope for a space of continuity as such lies in a balanced relationship between the previously opposed worlds of thought and action.

I begin with the agonal/deliberative divide and briefly emphasize aspects of this debate in Arendt literature, largely from the standpoint of D'Entrèves assessment in *the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*. His account is particularly fruitful because he operates from the position that the agonal and the deliberative models are irreducibly separate politics, grounded in two irreducibly separate conceptualizations of action: “expressive” and “communicative” action. He, Benhabib, and Habermas each adopt a deliberative politics, comprised of communicative action, in response to severe contentions with Arendt's appeal to antiquity in her account of expressive action. They defend a deliberative politics of participation as model of political legitimacy on the basis of unhindered, egalitarian, and reciprocal communication. A politics of performance,

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 3.

supported, for example, by Dana Villa and Paul Kottman, accounts for the legitimacy of public speech precisely because it is performative and not deliberational. They appeal to Arendt's ontology of appearance, which grasps action as a confirmation and a becoming. Action instantiates its own self-legitimizing structure of reference, by virtue of its appearance in the light of the public.

In the second section, I return to Arendt's recovery of the *vita activa* from its traditional subordination to philosophical contemplation in *the Human Condition*. I briefly discuss the role of the public realm and its relation to a worldly conceptualization of reality. From the perspective of the active life, being is appearing. It is not the contemplating eye of the mind, as with Plato's philosopher, but the physical eyes and ears of the witnessing public that lends the "feeling" of reality to the event. Arendt's recovery of the active life closes by hinting at a similar retrieval of an originary constellation of the life of the mind, unbound to its traditional characterization as eternal thought, and its modern formulation as the scientific method. The *vita contemplativa* proper can be understood in relation to *vita activa* proper as the form of judgment embodied in the figures of the spectator of the *theatrum mundi*. The public space of the *theatrum mundi*, however, constrains the thinking space of judgment. Where natality refers to the fact that the world must reckon with a "constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers" then in order for a public realm to sustain itself non-coercively, it must cultivate the faculty of judgment of each newcomer in such a way that allows each individual to bridge for themselves the space between past and future.<sup>2</sup> In this task, the difference between the disclosure of rationally determined facts and arguments, found in

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt, *the Human Condition*, 9.

the deliberational model, and the narrative disclosure of events and stories, found in the agonal model, is crucial.

Thus, I close by arguing that the capacity for the agonal and deliberative models to enact a narrative disclosure should be final criterion of each model's fidelity to Arendt's ontology. In the third section, I return to the agonal/deliberative debate and locate Arendt on the side of an agonal politics of performance. By collapsing the roles of actor and spectator into a uniformly shared role of participator or deliberator, the discursive public sphere of the deliberative model loses the *theatrum mundi* – and with it the disclosure of narrative – and reduces action to its beginning capacity, without offering an account of public memory. By maintaining the public sphere as a dramatic setting, dually constituted by the roles of actor and spectator, an agonal politics of performance opens the gap between past and future for a plurality and establishes a space of remembering and beginning. Without world-building disclosure, which grounds common sense in the *theatrum mundi*, rational deliberation risks rendering individuals impotent to find meaning in and reconcile themselves with the world around them. The deliberative model, in collapsing the roles of actor and spectator, hypostatizes narrative as rationally determined fact, and the loss of historical ground entailed therein renders the deliberative politics of participation indeed all-too-progressive.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AGONAL/DELIBERATIVE DIVIDE

Maurizio d'Entrèves, in *the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, attempts to draw from Arendt a model of active citizenship in which each citizen attains a measure of agency and political efficacy. His goal is to redeem Arendt from her critics and to highlight “her contribution to a theory of participatory democracy based on the principles of freedom, plurality, equality, and stability.”<sup>3</sup> To do so, he joins Arendt in the task of renewing a public sphere of political action, however with the caveat that political action in the modern era takes a different form from the model of ancient Greek praxis that Arendt espouses in *the Human Condition*. Those who infamously criticize Arendt for her turn to the Greek polis as the model of an originary political experience, d'Entrèves contends, fail to recognize the merits of Arendt's later conceptualizations of action, judgment, citizenship, and the public realm. The difference between the two “distinct and opposed” sets of concepts found in Arendt's earlier and later works proves crucial to d'Entrèves' argument.<sup>4</sup> He first distinguishes between two forms of action – “expressive” action and “communicative” action – and develops from each a model of public space and the role of citizen.

The expressive model of action names Arendt's account of action in the Greek polis. In the expressive model, d'Entrèves explains, “politics is viewed as an agonal encounter between actors who strive for recognition and glory.”<sup>5</sup> The expressive actor is Arendt's doer of great deeds and speaker of great words. The expressive model grounds

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<sup>3</sup> D'Entrèves, *the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, (London: Routledge, 1994), ix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

a conception of public space as a dramatic setting for the performance of word and deed and a conception of citizenship as competitive heroism, motivated by the desire for glory and immortal fame. Though d'Entrèves understands the polis to be a metaphor for a particular type of political experience, and I agree, it is worth recalling the external structures involved in Arendt's historical example of this type of action. The Greek polis sustained a public realm of pure praxis that excluded the activity of poesis (Arendt's notion of work), and the instrumental logic that follows from means-end activity of fabrication. In other words, the public of the polis was filtered of all economic concerns, all forms of craftsmanship (even the crafting of the laws), as well as any sort of instrumental or coercive restrictions on what form of action could take place. Those who entered the public realm had to be free from the burdens of the private realm, i.e. bodily labor, and thus women and slaves were excluded from participation.

Where the hero of the expressive model engages in a personal struggle for recognition, the communicative model of action consists in a public realm of mutuality and solidarity. D'Entrèves turns to the account of modern political action that Arendt offers in *On Revolution* and *Crises of the Republic* for a model of politics that guarantees the same freedom of the Greek polis without the loss of the practical or the rule of competitive struggle for recognition. The modern examples cited by Arendt in these later works depict action as a form of resistance and contestation, as the "acting in concert" of a plurality that brings power and legitimacy to their collective standpoint. From the expressive to the communicative model, the competitive struggle for recognition of one's identity is traded for a "mode of human togetherness" in which each participant is

automatically recognized as a fellow citizen.<sup>6</sup> Where the expressive model excludes the practical logic of lawmaking from the realm of political activities, the communicative model promises a practical element – goal setting and strategic action – on the basis of mutually derived legitimacy.

Other critics of Arendt’s use of the Greek model are George Kateb and Jürgen Habermas. On the tension between Arendt’s earlier and later works, Kateb remarks that “politics as the will to heroic greatness, to glory, politics as agon, remains with her as when she speaks of modern revolutions, but she makes room for the more modest, almost nameless politics of the councils or civil disobedience.”<sup>7</sup> He thus adopts a rigid conception of Arendt’s political theory, assuming it to be analogous to the model of the Greek polis, with some concession to institutions of direct democracy in her later writings. He paints Arendt as an elitist by mistaking the Greek separation of the political realm of freedom and the private realm of bodily toil for a disdain for the latter on Arendt’s behalf.<sup>8</sup> He also infamously condemns the purity of the public realm of the Greek model, in its exclusion of instrumentality and economic concerns, for resulting in a model of politics in which the only content of political deliberation can be politics itself.<sup>9</sup> The crux of his criticism, however, is the charge of political amoralism. As a realm of opinion and perspective, the pure public realm has no way of acknowledging absolute

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>7</sup> George Kateb. *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*. (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2. Re: “*The deficiency of Most of Life’s Activities*” Certainly Arendt’s conception of political freedom would preclude a moral condemnation of those whose lives revolve around private “existentially inadequate” (6) activities, especially in modern “dark” times, in which access to a realm of political freedom is limited to but a handful of people.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 21.

moral standards. He recalls that, according to Arendt, feelings of pity, love, and compassion belong to the private realm and would then be incapable of grounding behavior in the public realm.<sup>10</sup> Kateb finds occasion for worry and trepidation in the absence of a strong normativity in Arendt's theory.

While Kateb condemns the Greek model for a lack of normative grounds, Habermas takes issue with its rigidity. Also interpreting Arendt on the basis of her account of the Greek model alone, Habermas speculates that the definitive separation of praxis and poesis is an antiquated thought. He valorizes her conception of political power, which he defines as "the ability to agree upon a common course of action in unconstrained communication."<sup>11</sup> For Habermas, Arendt's contribution of this category to a theory of political legitimacy is enormous. At the same time, he charges Arendt's adherence to the ancient separation of action and production with three pitfalls: "(a) she screens all strategic elements, as force, out of politics; (b) she removes politics from its relations to the economic and social environment in which it is embedded through the administrative system; and (c) she is unable to grasp structural violence."<sup>12</sup> By remaining bound to a classic model, Arendt's own political theory is drastically limited. Her equation of strategic and instrumental power leaves her with an untenable model of the public realm. Habermas corrects this limitation by introducing a strategic element to praxis and power. Though power – i.e. legitimacy – can only be generated by the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>11</sup> "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power" in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, edited by Hinchman and Hinchman, 211-230. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 213.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 216.

concerted action of a plurality, strategically enforced institutions and practices are necessary in order to acquire, maintain, and employ positions of power.<sup>13</sup>

Habermas makes one further stipulation in his interpretation of Arendt. When she refers to power as the ground of legitimacy of concerted action, she does so on the basis of common sense, the fact that all involved share in a common reality and share a common conviction. Arendt's conception of the *sensus communis* springs from her appreciation of Kant's theory of reflective judgment, which does not assume laws of reason, but names the task of finding the rule that fits contingent particulars. Arendt's theory, Habermas claims, further suffers from an "antiquated concept of theoretical knowledge" that "keeps Arendt from comprehending the process of reaching agreement about practical questions as rational discourse."<sup>14</sup> Linda Zerilli summarizes Habermas's contention fairly. She asserts that he "more or less accuses Arendt of aestheticizing politics, that is, of identifying this [public] realm with opinions that cannot be subjected to rational process of validation any more than we can validate judgments of taste."<sup>15</sup> Arendt's understanding of theoretical knowledge removes the possibility of self-evidence and restricts public discourse to the realm of opinion; rendering concerted action as the instantiation of mere shared opinion. Habermas contends, however, that common convictions can be founded cognitively, through rationalized deliberative process, and that a commonly shared opinion can traverse into the realm of recognized facts upon

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Zerilli. "We Feel Our Freedom: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt." *Political Theory* 33.2 (2005), 159.



rational deliberation and agreement.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the category of Arendt that is most valorized by Habermas, power, takes a drastically different form in his own theory of communicative action. Power becomes the capacity to agree on the basis of rational deliberation. It is a source of legitimacy, not because of the sheer number of people who are in common agreement, as Arendt claims, but because of the rational basis for the claims at hand.

According to d'Entrèves, neither Kateb nor Habermas would have held the same criticisms of Arendt had they bifurcated her conceptualization of action. He defends Arendt's moral considerations against Kateb by, first, acknowledging that Kateb's presupposition of absolute normative standards is incompatible with Arendt's existentialism and, second, by suggesting that a deliberative conception of the public realm, as a discursive space of communicative action, promises the possibility of a public coming to rational agreement about a set of universally upheld norms. His defense of Arendt against Habermas, on the other hand, is implied in his own appropriation of Habermas's reading of Arendt. Where Habermas finds Arendt to be stuck in antiquity, d'Entrèves reads her modern accounts as an altogether different model of action, which Habermas himself recognizes but does not attribute to Arendt originally. Thus, the communicative model of action, for d'Entrèves, captures Arendt's account of deliberative and participatory politics. While the expressive model depicts a domain of "noble deeds," the communicative model suggests a realm of speech alone. Drawing on Habermas's interpretation of Arendt, d'Entrèves envisions a "collective process of

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<sup>16</sup> Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power", 323.

deliberation and decision-making that rests on equality and solidarity.”<sup>17</sup> In the communicative model, a plurality of participants engage in limitless discourse to the end of attaining mutual recognition and consensus about needs and goals.

For d’Entrèves, the expressive and communicative models are irreducible to the point of allowing interpretive negotiation between agonal and deliberative political models, between a politics of performance and a politics of participation. Since his specific interpretive investment lies in forming a conception of “Arendtian citizenship” or civic engagement that promotes the capacity for agency and identity-formation, d’Entrèves adopts the communicative model and rejects the expressive. He champions the model of collective action and the discursive politics of participation on the basis of the fitness of discourse to answer the question collective identity and cultivate effective political involvement from all citizens. He suggests that “a collective identity under modern conditions can arise out of a process of public argumentation and debate in which competing ideals of identity and political legitimacy are articulated, contested, and refined.”<sup>18</sup>

In *the Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Seyla Benhabib performs an interpretive gesture similar to d’Entrèves’s division of expressive and communicative action. Benhabib also endeavors to emphasize Arendt’s contribution to political theory. She does so by separating out Arendt’s philosophical contribution. Her stated goal is to “decenter the place of the *Human Condition*” in Arendt’s corpus.<sup>19</sup> She recognizes the

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<sup>17</sup> D’Entrèves, *the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Seyla Benhabib. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), xxxix

text as an important philosophical text in which Arendt finds herself in dialogue with Marx and Heidegger. In it, Benhabib finds a strong account of equality as the equality-in-difference that constitutes plural togetherness. She suggests, however, that Arendt does not offer a normative, but an anthropological account, which leaves her analysis of the human condition in politically ambivalent territory. Arendt takes up a *quaestio facti* and not a *quaestio juris* and fails to “examine the philosophical step that would lead from a description of the *equality* of the *human condition* to the *equality that comes from moral and political recognition*.”<sup>20</sup> It does not, however, provide a prescriptive model of an ideal politics. Public space thus takes the form of a socio-political correlate of the more fundamental and phenomenological human condition of becoming actual within a space of appearance.<sup>21</sup>

Benhabib acknowledges her debt to Habermas when she draws from Arendt’s conception of common sense (the *sensus communis*) a correlate “procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm.”<sup>22</sup> With Habermas and Kateb, Benhabib is critical of the Greek model for requiring an untenable separation of the public, economic, and private realms, as well as the normative lacuna present in the form itself.<sup>23</sup> With d’Entrèves, she turns to Habermas for a solution based in communicative action. She distinguishes between expressive and communicative action, however, by rejecting the expressive as an essentialist form of action, and supporting the “narrative”

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., xlv.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 193-8.

structure of communicative action that does not reveal, but constructs identities and relationships.

In *the Human Condition* and throughout her works, Arendt laments the loss of a public space for action. D'Entrèves, Habermas, and Benhabib interpret the loss as the loss of sites of participation and recognition, recoverable in a discursively constituted public realm, in which all present are participants in political process. All three rely on the juxtaposition of a form of communicative action, as agreement-oriented collective and unconstrained deliberation, to expressive action, as the agonal struggle for self-distinction. They employ concepts of identity, agency, efficacy, and legitimacy as measures of the worthwhile political model. To their staunch and high appraisal of the communicative model, Dana Villa offers a dissonant appreciation of the agonal model on the basis of the worldliness experienced by the political actor in each model. At stake in Arendt's concept of action is not a measure of efficacy or equal participation, but a way of being in the world.

Villa voices a direct response to d'Entrèves and Benhabib in his discussion of "Theatricality and the Public Realm" in his *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*. He concedes the difference between action as the performance of word and deed and action as deliberation and "acting in concert"; however, he urges the two theorists to not dismiss the relevance of the agonal model. He contends that Arendt's conception of action and public space in *the Human Condition* places an emphasis on a theatrical dimension of performance that has "much to teach us about the nature of a healthy public sphere and

the reasons for its contemporary decline.”<sup>24</sup> For Villa, the model of the Greek polis forms an “instructive lesson” about the modern worldlessness.<sup>25</sup>

Contra d’Entrèves, Villa argues for an understanding of performance in the public realm as a theatrical appearing, as the assumption of the mask of a public persona. Such appearing certainly remains a disclosure of who one “inexchangeably” is, though it does not “express” the actor’s personal private identity.<sup>26</sup> The assumption of a public identity is the specific achievement of performing word and deed in the polis. This is largely due to the primacy of appearance that foregrounds the perspectival of the public realm. The different eyes and ears of those spectating give action a feeling of reality, in two respects. The event of the performance itself is a common object, to be grasped from every possible standpoint. Further, because the actor cannot know what he is doing in the spontaneous moment of action, the event becomes an object of reflection and judgment after it has come to completion. As one emerging into the space of appearances, the actor’s disclosure of his identity is simultaneously its constitution. The performance model of action, grasped by Villa as constitutive of identity and not expressive, becomes remarkably similar to Benhabib’s conception of narrative action. For Benhabib, however, narrative action is institutionally, and not phenomenologically, constructive of identities and relationships.

Villa locates Arendt’s strongest depersonalization of action in her appreciation of Montesquieu’s notion of principled action. Arendt asserts that action in public is always inspired by a principle exhibited within the action itself. The actor who begins from a

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<sup>24</sup> Dana Villa. *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999), 130.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt, *the Human Condition*, 41.

commonly shared principle leaves unexpressed those mundane aspects of identity that are related to private prepolitical experiences. Individuality and differentiation are achieved in the public realm through the appearance of rare and extraordinary acts. The public mask is simultaneously a disclosure of a unique identity, and a vehicle for confirming a common value or judgment on the part of the public spectatorship. In the Greek polis, the struggle for recognition and glory is bound up with the desire to achieve greatness and appear as its exemplar. The theatrical elements of performance and spectatorship constitute the phenomenal worldliness of the public as a sphere of reality and endurance. This theatricality, Villa argues, constitutes the public realm as a *theatrum mundi*, a world-stage, enabled by convention and custom.

D'Entrèves, Benhabib, and Habermas claim to join Arendt in the task of recovering praxis; however their discursive model offers a much narrower range of experiences than the originary public realm they claim to recover.<sup>27</sup> The notion of a *theatrum mundi* is lost on a model of sheer deliberation. Between a politics of participation and a politics of performance, only the latter captures the phenomenal and fundamental correlation of reality and appearance, of acting as a form of disclosure. Communicative deliberation performs the same function as agonal performance – that is, it discloses and confirms a shared reality – however, without the basis of appearance. Where the agonal model appeals to the irreducible standpoints of a plural spectatorship, and equates disclosure with public differentiation, communicative action appeals to moments of agreement and mutual recognition of validity claims. Action as performance arises by virtue of the theatrical spatiality of the public realm as a space of appearance. Action as communication adheres in a speech-pattern of contestation and agreement.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 152.

All of the above interpretations have in common the imperative to recover a lost experience of political action and a dwindled form of public freedom. At the heart of the loss of action, for Arendt, is the loss of the primacy of appearance at the beginning of the western philosophical tradition. The traditional subordination of ‘doing’ to ‘thinking’ is reversed, however, by the modern scientific and mechanistic worldviews, which locate knowledge, not in the quiet contemplation of the mind, but in the measurable effects of fabricated natural processes. In the following section, I revisit Arendt’s account of the traditional hierarchy of doing and thinking in terms of both turns in order to envision the consequences of each for a project of recovery. I challenge the way in which the communicative model of action equates the initiatory capacity of action with Arendt’s conception of the freedom to begin. I argue that Arendt conceives of action’s beginning capacity in coinciding two senses. As initiation, action has an unpredictable process-starting potential. By acting into nature or into a public, one originates a new chain of occurrences. The “event” of inventive fabrication that introduces new technologies into the world shares in this same process-beginning potential. As performative disclosure, however, action begins in the sense of introducing or contributing something new and self-evident into the world. This usually occurs in the form of a story, which can become an object inspiring or a testament informing future action. In the performance model, action as beginning can be analogous to a continuation or amendment of a foundational event. The difference between these two conceptions of action becomes crucial when considering the memorial function of the public realm and temporal correlation between thinking and doing.

## CHAPTER III

### NATALITY AND THE TEMPORALITY OF ACTION

The entirety of Arendt's political thought can be grasped as an effort to recover originary and lost forms of political practice. Benhabib attributes to Arendt a "reluctant" modernism in light of her methodological privileging of origins. She does not accuse Arendt of nostalgia, however. Arendt engages a practice of storytelling that entails a redemptive recovery of the past, as well as a theoretical move. She traces originary political structures by narrating their displacement or loss. This recovery is more performative than prescriptive. Her work is an exercise in memory, Benhabib claims, "in the sense of a creative act of rethinking which sets free the lost potentials of the past."<sup>28</sup> However, she recovers more than lost potentials. Arendt's project is not bent toward reviving a concept of praxis in a modern context. Her storytelling is, at its base, a critical and ontological endeavor. The thread of tradition that she traces back to political theory's Platonic heritage is the grounding condition of contemporary political theory and practice. By tracing the traditional displacement of action, she is able to grasp praxis in its foundational and inaugural appearance. The origins she uncovers are ontologically foundational in a primordial sense. It is not temporal distance that separates ancient Greek practice from modern politics, but rather its ontological horizon. Arendt reconceptualizes the public space of the polis around the most elemental aspects of the human condition: plurality and natality.

By recollecting the story of Homeric Greece and Periclean Athens, Arendt is thus able to craft a corrective to the traditional opposition of acting and contemplating – to the

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<sup>28</sup> Seyla Benhabib. "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of the Narrative." In *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, edited by Hinchman and Hinchman. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 190.



fact that the task of understanding worldly activities has been taken up almost exclusively by professional thinkers, with little taste for the life spent in the mundane and imperfect materiality of the *bios politikos*. Arendt's narrative of ancient Greek life uncovers and preserves an originary conception of the active life, the *vita activa* proper, without subordination to or dominance over the realm of thought. Arendt seeks to restore to "those activities concerning the common public realm that comes into being whenever men live together" a "dignity of their own."<sup>29</sup>

The simple fact of "living together" is the ground of the political as such. The human condition of plurality finds expression in Arendt's assertion that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" and gives way to a notion of equality premised on the fact that "nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live."<sup>30</sup> Plurality is the condition of the equality-in-difference that arises in a public realm. Human being in the plural is grounded in the fundamental condition of natality, by the "constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers."<sup>31</sup> Plurality is thus not merely a condition of difference, but of constitutive fluidity. The "fact" of natality promises an unending pathos of novelty and distinctness in all human activities. As ontological claims, natality and plurality are both grounding conditions and potential capacities of human being. They fundamentally constitute the human condition, but only become "actualized" in the political dimension of the *vita activa*.

Arendt's *vita activa* refers to a phenomenologically derived typology of worldly activities: work, action, and labor. Quite literally, these activities comprise "what we are

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<sup>29</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Promise of Politics*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 82.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7-8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

doing” – Arendt’s proposed subject in *the Human Condition*.<sup>32</sup> Each adheres in the world of other people, while the *vita contemplativa* – as thinking, willing, and judging – describes those activities that take place in the individual mind and thus necessitate some level of withdrawal from the world of others. Action holds the privileged place in Arendt’s political thought because, unlike work and labor, action adheres, unmediated, between people. As speech and deed, action leaves no objective trace, though it alone has a process-beginning potential. To act and to begin are analogous concepts in Arendt’s thought. Work, as *poesis*, refers to the fabrication process of *homo faber*. Work concludes in the production of a durable worldly artifact and, as such, is the condition of the objectivity of the world. Labor refers to man’s metabolism with the earth. It is the cyclical motion needed for the sustenance of life and, unlike work, leaves behind no worldly artifacts.

Arendt refers to the human “condition” in an effort to distinguish her originary form of political thought from traditional theory, which prescribes political models on the basis of hypostatized conceptions of human nature. Rather than conjecturing a vision of natural man, in the fashion of enlightenment theory, Arendt describes a fluid and contingent dimension of political engagement that arises out of the conditions under which human beings interact with one another and dwell together on earth. What human activities condition, and in turn are conditioned by, is the world: “Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition.”<sup>33</sup> At the heart of Arendt’s ontology is the image of the world as an “in-between” that sustains a realm of shared meaning. Human beings are both “of” and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 9.

“in” the world. The world connects and disconnects people; it houses the human species on earth in a field of enduring relevance and meaning. Arendt’s idiosyncratic understanding of the world as an “in-between” sets her thought apart from even the most decentered intersubjective accounts of plurality.

As both a grounding condition and a potentiality capacity, activity in the worldly in-between entails both “worldliness” and “worldlessness” – and, in the modern era, each coheres in a state of world-alienation. Arendt’s account of ancient Greece uncovers the world “between” and “of” other people as the lost *raison d’être* of politics as such. The model of action as performance is rooted in the world as the abode and sustaining ground of human relationships, in their contingency and frailty. The condition of worldliness is natality. The biological moment of birth marks the arrival of a newcomer into the world of others and the introduction of a unique set of relationships and significations to the common world of experience. Worldlessness, Arendt explains, refers to the continual loss of the world entailed in the events of death and forgetting. The condition of worldlessness is mortality.

The connection between worldliness and public space is articulated by Arendt when she defines the public realm according to two phenomenal aspects. The first gives the world a feeling of reality: the eyes and the ears of every person, who sees and hears all action performed. The second is “the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.”<sup>34</sup> These two aspects are not mutually exclusive: the presence of spectators gives the objective world its commonality, while, in turn, the objectivity of the world gives durability to the realm of spectatorship. By qualifying the public as a space of appearance, Arendt is able to distinguish between

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 52.

the world as a passive materiality, and the world as a medium of human interaction, illuminated by human spectatorship, which sustains the meaning of human interactions precisely because of its capacity to endure beyond the length of one mortal lifetime.

The immortality of the world is the basis for Arendt's 'weak' epistemological link between appearance and reality. Arendt's account of the public realm demonstrates a deep appreciation of the real as shared and confirmed experience. In the *Human Condition*, she notes the difference between trust in the reality of one's own life and trust in the reality of the world itself. While the former hinges on the intensity of immediate private sensation, the latter relies on the "permanence and durability of the world."<sup>35</sup> The work of *homo faber* is essential to the durability of the world in its materiality. In so far as the public refers to "the world itself" it consists of a world of durable objects that houses human beings in a realm of stability. The "feeling" of reality, however, arises in conjunction with the act of bearing collective witness, giving the quality of commonness to the durable. What is real is what is born common witness to, with common sense acting as the measure of the reality of the world. Public action does not merely disclose meaning, but it establishes it as real by making it common. Through publicly witnessed speech and deed, actors "make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow."<sup>36</sup> This "actualization" of what is otherwise passive is the instantiation of reality.

At stake in the Greek model is the survival of individual legacy beyond one's inevitable death. Being seen and heard by a common audience allows one's actions and words some initial endurance in the memory of all present. After biological death,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 208.

immortality is made possible by historians and storytellers. The full essence of one's identity, then, is not merely the brief insights expressed in public action, but it is what "can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story."<sup>37</sup> Thus, "the urge toward self-disclosure...became the prototype of action for Greek antiquity and influenced, in the form of the so-called agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one's self in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics in city states."<sup>38</sup> Paradoxically, it is in "the most futile and intangible of human activities" that one engages in the agonal struggle for legacy that is the Greek polis.

The agonist's competitive struggle for glory and fame is at its base an expression of a shared attitude toward the fleeting and partial nature of human endeavors. This attitude and the common "will to lend immortality to greatness" have their origins not in the polis, but in the legacy of Homeric impartiality that inspired polis life at its height and waned as speech replaced deed as the dominant form of public action.<sup>39</sup> Coeval with the agonist attitude is the historiographer's sense of a "distinction between the mortality of men and the immortality of nature."<sup>40</sup> Arendt notes that this attitude springs from a world in which the absolute perishability of all human institutions and endeavors incited a very real concern with immortality. Today's scientific worldview has ceased to worry about the immortality of acts and events, and rather concerns itself with the immortality of the species as a whole. The mimetic transformation of otherwise fleeting occurrences into written history elevates human action the greatness and permanence of nature. Action is

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>39</sup> Arendt, *the Promise of Politics*, 188.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Arendt. *Between Past and Future*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 43.

the subject matter of history because of its extraordinariness. Events that stand apart from the eternal recurrence of daily life, that interrupt the cycle of necessity, are the subject matter of history precisely because of their futility.

The will to immortal fame with which d'Entrèves characterizes his “expressive” model of action is thus consistent with Homeric Greece, while the communicative model seems to take its cue from Periclean Athens. In the polis, Homeric impartiality became a form of perspectival objectivity. The unanimous understanding of greatness that underpins the work of the Homeric historiographer gives way to the understanding that an event can be seen from an infinite number of viewpoints. Arendt explains that the public of the polis consisted to a large extent of “incessant talk” between citizens.<sup>41</sup>

“In a sheer inexhaustible flow of arguments, as the Sophists presented them to the citizenry of Athens, the Greek learned to exchange his own viewpoint, his own “opinion” ... with those of his fellow citizens. Greeks learned to ... look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects.”<sup>42</sup>

In the polis, Arendt suggests, the potential greatness of action, as word and deed, and the freedom to act and begin something new transformed into a value of mere speech, and a conception of freedom as the freedom of opinion. Action’s capacity to begin, the freedom of spontaneity, is possible in the polis without the help of a poet or historian by virtue of the public plurality of actors.

The freedom of movement, Arendt explains, is “the substance and meaning of all things political.”<sup>43</sup> In the stories of Homeric kings, the freedom of movement is the freedom to go out and begin something new. Arendt suggests that the exchange of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *the Promise of Politics*, 129.

opinion in the polis exhibits a freedom of “mental movement.”<sup>44</sup> Its corresponding political attitude is the enlarged mentality, by which one removes their subjective conditions and relate to the presence and equality of others. The enlarged mentality here corresponds to the revelatory capacity of speech. Freedom is not the end goal of politics, Arendt explains, but is the meaning of the political as such. The space of freedom is analogous with the space of polis. Its function is revelatory: “Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides.”<sup>45</sup> Freedom is thus, above all, a world-building capacity.

The speech that constitutes the discursive realm of communicative action, however, is not action in the form of speech, but action coordinated by speech. Despite its resemblance to opinion exchange in the polis, the deliberative model engages speech in the task of agreement, which limits action, but does not constitute it. Arendt refers to the enlarged mentality of polis life in order to depict the notion that the feeling of objectivity is congruent with the presence of an irreducible and infinite multiplicity of perspectives from which to see. In the polis, action is productive of an ever-changing web of human relationships. In the communicative model of action, however, the enlarged mentality is considered a “procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement” and thus becomes a method of producing objectivity.<sup>46</sup> In his developed *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas explains that “communicative action designates a type

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 128-9.

<sup>46</sup> Benhabib, *the Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 189.

of interaction that is *coordinated through* speech acts and does *not coincide with them*.<sup>47</sup>

An important distinction arises from the reduction of speech from action to action coordination: action's beginning capacity ceases to be coincident with its revelatory capacity. In this disjunction, action retains a teleological quality.

It is not action but spectatorship that defines the public realm of performance. In fact, Arendt explains, the space of appearance itself must be established and secured before a realm of action can come into being.<sup>48</sup> The desire for sheer exposure at the hope of attaining immortal fame, Arendt suggests, is the defining characteristic of the political actor of ancient Greece. The public space of the polis consists of no more than an "organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."<sup>49</sup> Arendt continues, "To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance."<sup>50</sup> The primacy of appearance in the Greek model suggests that Arendt conceives of the public realm as a type of *theatrum mundi*, a world-stage, instantiated by the presence of a witnessing and remembering spectatorship. In the *Human Condition*, Arendt remarks that "the theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transported into art."<sup>51</sup> The affinity between the theatre and the public realm springs from the fact that action, in each case, arises between people and is bound to the sphere of human relationships. Theatre is the only art that requires the

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<sup>47</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press. 1984), 101.

<sup>48</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 194.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.



presence of more than one person. In the *theatrum mundi*, the walls of the polis are analogous to the proscenium arch of a modern theatre space, which carves out and signifies a place for the passage and disclosure of being. The presence of the arch calls to witness the spectatorship that reaffirms and actualizes the otherwise “passive” comings and goings of the scene.

As Paul Kottman asserts in his *Politics of the Scene*, the image of the world-stage invokes an ontological claim that informs the constitution of the polis as a space of appearance. What specifically appears are scenes, which Kottman defines as “any particular horizon of human interaction, inaugurated by the words and deeds of someone or some group, here and now, with the result that a singular relationship or web of relationships is brought into being, sustained, or altered among those in the scene.”<sup>52</sup> Occurring in a “here and now,” action as performance discloses an arrangement of particularities, brought into a contingent relationship. Kottman appeals to Arendt’s claim that the specific “productivity” of action is its impact on the web of human relationships.<sup>53</sup> In the *theatrum mundi*, appearance, actualization, and the freedom to begin are phenomenologically bound in action’s alteration of the web of relationships. The “second birth” that signals emergence into the public realm and discloses “who” one is is analogous with the capacity to begin and introduce something new.<sup>54</sup>

The form of beginning at play in the *theatrum mundi* is not teleological, but augmentative. One introduces themselves to the world, altering the web of relationships, and submits their story to realm of worldly things to be judged and remembered. In a

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Kottman. *A Politics of the Scene*. (Stanford University Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 181.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-7.

short review of Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* (which poetizes the final twenty-four hours of Virgil's life), Arendt remarks that life's activity consummates in a story to be told and retold, reflected on, and finally understood. From the perspective of natality, death is not a fate to be feared, but an "achievement" to be anticipated.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the moment of action obtains its futurity not from anxiety toward the oblivion of the "not yet," but from the expectation of future reflection on the present moment after it has been "no longer." Kottman attributes to the scene a futurity in the form of an "anticipatory temporality."<sup>56</sup> The scene inaugurates relationships in the "here and now" of the present, though it is oriented "toward a future testimony among witnesses from the "original" scene."<sup>57</sup> The futurity of action is thus given immediate expression in the person of the spectator. Public action in the *theatrum mundi* is not incidentally performed before a plurality of witnesses, but intentionally performed with the promise of being sealed in the memory of the on-looking spectators. Only after the moment of the performance does the spectator (and no transcendent) reciprocate with thoughtful appraisal.

Arendt's introduction of action as both a confirmation and a beginning leaves the distinction between word and deed deceptively ambiguous. Though she initially introduces action as "word and deed," she uses action to refer to deed, and speech to refer to word, in reference to action's ontological ground. In this brief analytic of action, the capacity for action as deed to begin actualizes the human condition of natality, with each new beginning echoing the first beginning that each of us are at the moment of our birth. Speech, on the other hand, is the actualization of the human condition of plurality,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>56</sup> Kottman, *A Politics of the Scene*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

differentiating individuals in their unique identity. With this distinction, Arendt suggests that speech is a revelation and action is a beginning. She adds, somewhat mysteriously, that “many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech” and that “speechless action would no longer be action.”<sup>58</sup> This understanding of action bound to the essence of the human condition captures action in an originary form, as the Greek *archein*, which means both to begin and to lead.<sup>59</sup> As the actualization of natality and plurality, action reveals the interdependence between the individual and others. The politician as a beginner is dependent on the reception of others to acknowledge, carry out, or dispute his actions. The fact of plurality leaves all beginning spontaneous and unpredictable.

By Arendt’s account, freedom is the originary *meaning* of politics. The *reason* for politics, however, the answer to the existential question of plurality and natality, is the preservation of the world as a realm of continuity. While she understands freedom in terms of acting and appearing in the political realm, her entire political thought aims to “preserve worldliness at all costs.”<sup>60</sup> For the same reason that action’s spontaneity and unpredictability ground human freedom, they also render the world in continual need of renewal.

The moment a person acts into a public space, his action ceases to be his own and becomes a chain of consequences, resonating in the mutual reciprocity of the action of others. This is the temporal distinction between action and work, and consequently why Arendt calls courage to venture unto the public realm the political virtue *par excellence*.

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<sup>58</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 178.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>60</sup> Villa, *Politics Philosophy, Terror*, 146.

The craftsman must have some idea, if not a rigid blueprint, of his finished product before he begins production. At the end of the production process, the artifact introduced into the world, though new and certainly a potential beginning, is the result of a past projection and the end point of a process that is predictable. Action, on the other hand, is wholly unpredictable. It begins a process that is out of the hands of the individual actor the moment it comes into being. The meaning or significance of an action cannot be grasped, then, by the actor himself. Arendt explains that “action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants.”<sup>61</sup> The unpredictability of action demands that the constitution of the public realm must in some way take a conservative shape.

The Greek model of public space as an immortal realm of memory, Arendt explains, is one “solution” to this frailty.<sup>62</sup> The dominant solution, however, takes the form of the elimination of action altogether. The Platonic devaluation of the *vita activa*, and correlate substitution of action for fabrication, inspired the Roman political model and became definitive for the western tradition of political theory until the modern age. It is not until the modern age, however, that the loss of a public space for action is realized in the form of pervasive world-alienation, characterized as a “twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self.”<sup>63</sup> The first flight is primarily entailed in the scientific worldview that adopts the universal standpoint as its own, and the second is characteristic of life in modern mass-society. However, both flights herald

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<sup>61</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 192.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

a constitutive loss at the heart of the modern world, which a recovery of action as such only begins to mitigate. The “atrophy of the space of appearance and the withering of common sense” signifies the simultaneous loss of world and reality.<sup>64</sup> In other words, it is not the imbalance between acting and fabricating in the *vita activa* that constitutes the loss of the political, but the separation of doing and thinking that was confirmed by the modern age’s reversal of the traditional order. As a facet of perception and Arendt’s term for thinking within a plurality from the position of a disinterested and critical judge, common sense is the mental faculty that ensures the commonality of the world and the reality of worldly appearances.

The attempt to recover action as the capacity to self-disclose and to initiate something new is certainly worthwhile in the context of the traditional substitution of making for acting. However, the hierarchical inversion of action and fabrication in the *vita activa* is not the only culprit in the “case” of the loss of the public-political realm. Arendt’s account in the *Human Condition* of this reversal within the *vita activa* is bookended by the ancient origin and modern loss of its traditional constellation. The traditional hierarchy between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* is rendered meaningless in the modern era, which is consummated in another turn, both between and within the active life and the life of the mind. The modern replacement of contemplating with fabricating, in the form of the science experiment, reverses the hierarchy between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. The dominance of scientific reason over common understanding eliminates the role of common sense as a faculty of judgment altogether. A close examination of this aspect of the modern turn reveals the deeper stakes of any attempt to recover a space of political action.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 208.

What has been lost is not merely action as self-disclosure and beginning, nor is the modern state of world alienation limited to individual entrapment in a social realm of invisibility or distorted disclosure. What has been lost is the faith in appearances that grounds the reality of the public realm as a *theatrum mundi*, and with it the role of contemplation as passive beholding has succumbed to the constant movement of the process of the scientific experiment. The quietness and tranquility of contemplation that was traditionally guarded by the metaphysical hierarchy ceases to have any place at all within the modern arrangement that equates thought with hypothesis, and requires experimental “acting into nature” for the confirmation of knowledge. The result is the displacement of the objective world with a set of natural and historical processes of increasing momentum and the loss of a temporal balance that is only sustainable through a reciprocal relationship between doing and thinking. The liberatory aim of recovering public action finds the context of its struggle in the larger and more fundamental modern loss of this relationship.

The *Human Condition*, Arendt’s phenomenological prolegomena to a political theory proper, is a response, though not a solution, to the capacities of the modern scientific and mechanistic world views. The modern world, which commenced with the development and use of the atom bomb, has become a world of unprecedented possibility in which the unthinkable limits of technological progress are actualized on a daily basis. Where speech is bound to the particulars of experience, the mathematical limits of the scientific imagination overleap the ability of an individual mind to comprehend the meaning of its effects. In response to the notion that, by landing on the moon, mankind has escaped its enslavement to the earth, Arendt warns that “we, who are earth-bound

creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do.”<sup>65</sup> The human artifice currently risks overrunning and wrecking its original conditions of possibility as the human capacity for action now overwhelms and silences our capacities for speech and understanding. This crisis is facilitated by a predominant state of thoughtlessness, which Arendt describes as “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths,” which have become trivial and empty.”<sup>66</sup> She thus endeavors, in *the Human Condition*, to “think what we are doing” without slipping into the rhetorical language of global narratives, metaphysical fallacies, tropes, or clichés. By abandoning such outside appeal, Arendt aims to “thoughtfully” consider the originary activities that condition – i.e. ground, limit, and potentiate – the human experience.

The *vita activa*, as Arendt conceives of it, refers to those originary activities of the human condition. Work, action, and labor, are “permanent” capacities, “which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed.”<sup>67</sup> The term can be traced back, however, to Aristotle’s *bios politikos* as the life devoted to public-political matters, in which the *vita activa* may as well have been analogous to praxis, the only free way of life available to human beings. Work and labor, even when taken up voluntarily, are both bound, in some way, to material need. The completely free life was a life of action, for its complete emancipation from necessity. It is the activity that alone

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 6.

sustained the *bios politikos* and the “Greek understanding of polis life,” which, Arendt reminds us, “denoted a very special and freely chosen form of political organization.”<sup>68</sup>

This originary understanding of the *vita activa* is lost to the philosophical tradition after the polis, at which point it loses its specifically political character, as it denotes worldly engagement in general. Rather than work and labor adhering in opposition to the freedom of action, action becomes bound up with the necessity of all earthly activities. Work, labor, and action become the *vita activa* in opposition, and subordination, to the *vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life of the philosopher. Here, the *vita activa* is represented by the movement and unquiet evaded in the stillness and tranquility of the *vita contemplativa*. The *vita activa* thus inherits its particular traditional meaning from the “primacy of contemplation over acting.”<sup>69</sup> The *Human Condition* can be understood as Arendt’s attempt to grasp a constellation of the *vita activa* that is free from the metaphysical hierarchy implied by both the tradition and its critics:

“My contention is simply that the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself and that, appearances notwithstanding, this condition has not been changed essentially by the modern break with the tradition and the eventual reversal of its hierarchical order in Marx and Nietzsche.”<sup>70</sup>

Work, action, and labor comprise the still intact conceptual framework of the *vita activa*, which remains constant even after philosophy has been turned “upside down.”

When appealing to Arendt’s conception of action as a lost form of political practice, which is the premise of both the communication and performance models of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 17.



action – it is crucial to recall her aim to reclaim the *vita activa* from its traditional subordination. Through the traditional lens, the *raison d’etre* of polis life becomes insignificant. The public realm was the Greek answer to human mortality and the cyclical futility of particular human affairs. As a realm of witness and remembrance, public space preserves the most futile and intangible of human activities from inevitable oblivion. Philosophical contemplation, modeled by the philosopher who turns from the dark cave of worldly affairs in Plato’s *Republic*, is bound up in an experience of the eternal. The priority of the ideal realm of the mind eliminates the need for the lesser notion of striving for worldly immortality, though it “originally had been the spring and center of the *vita activa*.”<sup>71</sup> With the *vita activa* and the *bios politikos* demoted to the role of “handmaidens” to contemplation, the worldly vitality of action and appearance in the public realm is historically lost to experience. Arendt thus introduces the *Human Condition* with the birth of the tradition. Appropriately, she closes with its end.

The Platonic turn of *theoria* away from *praxis* is succeeded in the modern era by two further transformations of the constellation. The condition of these modern turns is the state of world alienation, which, Arendt explains, was solidified in the seventeenth century by three events. First, the discovery of the new world effectively shrunk the vast expanse of geography surrounding the human abode and made it possible for man to segment and take hold of his dwelling place definitively.<sup>72</sup> Distance has since yielded to speed in a radical way, rendering the spatiality of the world meaningless. Second, the Protestant Reformation and the correlate growth of capitalization set in motion cycling processes of accumulation and expropriation that dispossessed a growing laboring class

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 250.

of private property, which is the material marker of man's location in the human abode and safeguard of his intimate familial sphere from the realm of the social as a family writ large, so to speak. Third, the invention of the telescope – the simple “addition of a new implement to man's already large arsenal of tools” – had perhaps the most astounding effect of the three. By peering into the heavens themselves, Galileo was able to confirm Copernicus and, more drastically, seal the new locus of the Archimedian point in the human perspective itself. Arendt remarks, “The modern astrophysical world view, which began with Galileo, and its challenge to the adequacy of the senses to reveal reality, have left us a universe of whose qualities we know no more than the way they affect our measuring instruments.”<sup>73</sup> By gaining the universal vantage point, we lose the distance between ourselves and the world.

World alienation is, perhaps ironically, solidified in a reversal of the hierarchical order between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, with the active role of the scientist displacing the contemplative role of the philosopher. The telescope, and the consequent ability to shift the human perspective from the terrestrial to that of the heavens, gave expression to the subjectivism of world-alienated philosophy and the Cartesian doubt that replaced traditional wonder during the turn. The scientific method of confirming knowledge through experiment does not redeem faith in appearances, but confirms the philosopher's doubt. The experiment produces appearances that conform to the human standpoint and do not reveal the world, but confirm or reject the original

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 261.

hypothesis of the scientist. That “man can at least [and only] know what he makes himself,” Arendt asserts, is the accepted attitude of the modern age.<sup>74</sup>

Within the now dominant *vita activa*, fabrication rises to the position occupied by contemplation, as the “making” of reality in the experiment. The mechanistic worldview of *homo faber* dominates as the “being” that used to appear to the mind’s eye now lies hidden in the form of natural processes. Thus, processes, “and not ideas, the models and shapes of things to be, become the guide for the making and fabricating activities of *homo faber* in the modern age.”<sup>75</sup> In the process of the experiment, however, the logic of fabrication loses its *telos* and its principle of utility, since the material outcome of an experiment is incidental to the goal of confirming knowledge. In the final modern transformation of the *vita activa*, *homo faber* concedes his victory to *animal laborans*.

Though Arendt’s endeavor to “think what we are doing” famously excludes the theme of thinking itself, she closes the *Human Condition* with a mysterious but pointed remark about thought, which has largely disappeared from the modern era. She suggests that thought is the prerogative of the many, not the few, and its possibility is contingent on the actualization of plurality in a state of political freedom. She speculates that this fact “is not irrelevant for the future of man...”

“For if no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*, it might be well that thinking as such would surpass them all.”<sup>76</sup>

Arendt’s suggestion that the realm of thought may, in fact, be more active than the active life itself, points to an understanding of the *vita contemplativa* free of its traditional

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 325.

fetters. This remark suggests that thought is no tranquil state, nor is it an excess to worldly life. Like work, action, and labor, the articulations of thought suggest a necessary motion that sustains human being. Arendt also warns here that the modern displacement of contemplation does not eliminate the realm of thought, but converts it to the form of acting into nature. More broadly, this passage points to the possibility that what holds true for the *vita activa* holds true for the *vita contemplativa*. That is, those capacities of thought that are contingent to the human condition – which she only later thematizes as thinking, willing, and judging – are likewise permanent and imply a similarly concealed originary balance. If action and contemplation “correspond to two altogether different central human concerns,” as she initially suspects they do, then perhaps action needs confinement to its domain of political freedom in order to release thought back its proper realm of the imagination. The modern transgression of contemplation into the territory of the *vita activa* reveals horrific danger concealed in most vulnerable of human capacities.<sup>77</sup> Science and technology have advanced, in a brief expanse of time, to the point of being able to end all life on the face of the planet. Such an abasement *homo faber*'s utilitarian ethic is possible only under conditions in which thinking and doing are decisively incongruent.

While the *Human Condition* is Arendt's recovery of an original thematization of the *vita activa*, in *Between Past and Future* and in *Life of the Mind*, Arendt pursues the task of thinking through the *vita contemplativa* without presuming its traditional or modern shape. Her emphasis in each text is temporal: thought is the space in which we navigate the gap between past and future. The *vita contemplativa* in its traditional form is philosophical *theoria*, the contemplation of eternal truths. As *theoria*, it is completely

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 324.

unconcerned with worldly affairs. However, as Arendt articulates at the end of the *Human Condition*, the modern iteration of the life of the mind ceases to be “of the mind” after the dominance of scientific experimentation. Her account is bleak. In the modern era, the philosopher is dispossessed of his *theoria*. The world-adhering play of scientific thought, which acts into nature and fabricates natural processes, introduces into the world a radical amount of change at an unprecedented momentum. In very plain terms: we are unable to “think what we are doing” because we are “doing” faster than we can possibly think.

The decisive end of the Platonic tradition came when the horrific novelty of twentieth century totalitarian terror not only rendered traditional concepts explanatorily useless, but exploded them altogether. The growing condition of thoughtlessness springs from the double predicament of modern thought: that the philosophical tradition bestows no categories that aid in understanding the novelty of world events and that the growing dominance of math and science not only took on a transgressive form of action, but they have obscured all other modes of thought with their one. This is the “parting company” of thought and reality that renders reality “opaque for the light of thought.”<sup>78</sup>

Decades before thematizing the *vita contemplativa* as thinking, willing, and judging, Arendt appeals to the activity of understanding, which mimics the role that judgment plays in her later work. She defines understanding as “an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.”<sup>79</sup> Understanding produces no results, but reconciles a person to the fact of having been born into the world a stranger. The

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<sup>78</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Hannah Arendt. *Essays in Understanding*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 308.

modern collapse of contemplation of things eternal and the understanding of worldly particulars into scientific knowledge could not do away with the need of understanding to find meaning in the world and reconcile with natality. The scientific reduction of events to “results” and the substitution of logicity for common sense confirm the displacement of aesthetic judgment by mathematical thought. Arendt remarks that mathematical laws are the only form of “common” sense left.

Arendt calls on Kafka’s “He” (in at least three texts) to illuminate the burden of crisis on the task of understanding. The parable depicts the struggle to situate oneself historically and temporally in the aftermath of an inconceivable crisis. In it, a man is positioned on a road between two antagonists, one blocking the road ahead, and the other blocking the road behind. He battles with each of them and employs each in his fight against the other. The man’s dream, Kafka imagines, is to “jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.”<sup>80</sup>

On the one hand, this story depicts the kind of thoughtlessness that results from the crisis of the mind in the moment after action has “run its course” and there remain no tangible guideposts to aid a reflective understanding of the event.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, the story presents the temporal crisis that always already informs the task of understanding. The task presented to the life of the mind, according to Arendt, is the task of bridging the gap between past and future. Observed from the human “terrestrial” vantage point – to borrow the language of the *Human Condition* – the flow of time is not a continuous succession. Time is an abyssal gap in which mankind stands and “keeps in

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<sup>80</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

existence” by virtue of his aggressive position.<sup>82</sup> The dream of stepping out and occupying the position of umpire represents the theoretical standpoint of the metaphysician, or the universal Archimedian point occupied by modern science. Arendt remarks, however, that Kafka’s parable misses the deflective role of interference in the fighting match. “Thinking space” is Arendt’s early term for the deflection within the initial antagonism that is inevitably caused by mankind’s original insertion between the two forces. It is the condition of temporal being, that human beings break up the flow of forces so that time is no linearity at all, but rather a rift, produced by the diagonal force of thought.

Arendt’s account offers a glimpse of the way in which the common world hinges on each of its individual members for endurance. Thinking space is not merely a site of antagonism, but it is that precious realm “into which the trains of thought, of remembrance and anticipation, save whatever they touch from the ruin of historical and biographical time.”<sup>83</sup> Thinking space is ineffable and personal. It lasts for each the length of his lifetime and cannot be shared with others without metaphorical mediation. It is the withdrawal from worldly activities that allows for reconciliation with them. Thus “each new generation, indeed every human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.”<sup>84</sup> For Arendt, each human being, born already uninitiated into the world of other people, is presented with the task of “settling down in this gap between past and future” – of dwelling in thinking space in order to situate himself in the historical moment from the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 13

vantage point of an observer of the forces of past and future. She takes up her own historical vantage point in *Between Past and Future*, asserting that her main goal in writing each essay is to concern herself with how to move in the gap between past and future.

Peg Birmingham draws a thorough account of the temporality of natality from Arendt's repeated use of the Kafka parable. The image of the man caught between two antagonists, for Birmingham, "describes the condition of thought that has always existed."<sup>85</sup> The traditional dominance of *theoria*, as philosophical contemplation, has obscured this originary condition of the mind, its relation to the "fact" of natality, and the contingency it bestows on all worldly occurrences. The parable lends itself to a conceptualization of natality as the principle of a common humanity. We are, through and through, beginners.

The parable also lends itself to an account of the natal temporality of the present. All action is the introduction of something new, even when it appeals to or even repeats a past act. Arendt identifies thinking space as a diagonal force that springs from the antagonistic meeting of past and future forces. The diagonal line of thought, for Birmingham, represents a "deflected" force that joins the past and future only by disrupting their common flow. The antagonistic struggle is contingent on our interfering presence: "the past is an anteriority that constantly introduces an aberration or a difference into the future through this deflective or disjunctive present."<sup>86</sup> The past bears on the present as a force, as a foreign anteriority. It is recoverable to the present, as

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<sup>85</sup> Peg Birmingham. *Hanna Arendt and Human Rights*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 17.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



Benjamin states, only through a process citation and translation. Action in the present does not spring from the past but from the abyssal rupture between past and future. The deflected origin of action means that action may appeal to an origin, but it itself has none. Action that conserves meaning and values still has its roots in the condition of natality: “The process of reinscription and revision – the insertion or intervention of something that takes on new meaning – occurs in the temporal break of the deflected present.”<sup>87</sup>

Where Birmingham grasps the “process of reinscription and revision” of an abstract anterior past, Anne O’Byrne conceptualizes the temporality of natality in terms of syncopation. The intervention of the past that occurs in the temporality of the deflected present is the moment of recovery of origins that discloses the meaning of an action. Syncopated temporality refers to the “mode of being in time that can grasp itself only belatedly, and only in the context of an anteriority we have to struggle to understand.”<sup>88</sup> The present is deflected because of the endless need for negotiation and reconciliation with the past events, which come to fruition and obtain meaningfulness only after they are no longer. Implied in the spontaneity of new beginnings is their retroactive emergence as beginnings. Action “turns out to have been” a beginning. O’Byrne binds the deflected origin to the bodily moment of one’s birth. The initial emergence into the world in the event of one’s own birth is their first beginning. But it remains “a moment irretrievably lost” to experience.<sup>89</sup> We do not remember our own

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>88</sup> Anne E. O’Byrne. *Natality and Finitude*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 95.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 104.

births. We are always already with others before we can grasp ourselves as finite creatures.<sup>90</sup>

The syncopated temporality of natality suggests a conception of understanding that recovers the present in relation to the past and thus bridges the temporal rupture without evading it. By appealing to the belated completion of action's disclosure, O'Byrne depicts the rupture of the present in necessary relation to the structure of action. For the same reason that Kottman conceives of the action of the scene as an anticipatory event, performed with an awareness of future audience, O'Byrne establishes action's belatedness in relation to the deflected "thinking space" of the present. Syncopated temporality adheres in the relationship between actor and spectator. It drafts the moment of understanding in terms of the beat between acts that allows for awareness of what one is doing. In the modern world, without the aid of tradition, we experience our thrownness into the temporal rupture compulsorily.

It is vital to note that Arendt uses the term "tradition" in two respects. Throughout Arendt's corpus, tradition plays a sort of tyrannous role; it bridges the gap between past and future compulsorily, enabling thoughtlessness by emancipating individuals from needing to occupy the thinking space between past and future. The tradition most referenced by Arendt is the Platonic tradition that began when the *bios politikos* was subordinated to the *vita contemplativa*, destining political action to limited and reduced appearance in the dominant discourse. In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, however, the term is analogous to "testament" in the sense of Rene Char's 1946 aphorism, "*Notre heritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament.*" Our inheritance was left to us by no testament. Arendt credits the philosophical tradition with covering over

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 106.

originary political beginnings, equating it with a fundamental loss. Tradition plays the opposite role in the Char aphorism. The realm of freedom that sprang up during the French Résistance disappeared after the end of the war precisely because no tradition was put in place to guide memory and save the treasure of public freedom for future generations:

Without testament or, to resolve the metaphor, without tradition – which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is – there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it.

Tradition provides a framework that is integral to the task of thinking between past and future. Without guideposts for remembering, the events of the world are lost to oblivion.

Tradition as testament is an act of remembering that ties the activity of thought to a particular scene of worldly experience. Here, the position of the spectator remains impartial, though it is not removed from the action. Spectatorship is a particular kind of action that affirms the passing of the scene “not by the semantic content of their discourse but rather by their reciprocal confirmation of one another’s eyes through the act of speaking.”<sup>91</sup> The revelatory capacity of the scene adheres spatially in the moment of appearance. Action performed in the *theatrum mundi* achieves balanced syncopation with the reflection of the spectatorship. Its revelatory capacity adheres immediately. Action in the modern age, as the “exclusive prerogative of the scientists,” is no longer performed into the medium of a plurality of witnesses. The scientist who acts into nature does so without spectatorship, without revelation, and thus widens the gap between being and knowing sustained in the temporality of natality. The communicative model of action misses the phenomenal experience of shared spectatorship as an integral step to the

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<sup>91</sup> Kottman, *A Politics of the Scene*, 160.

flow of public dialogue. Discourse, for Arendt, occurs in response to events that beg us to understand them.

Natality and mortality, worldliness and worldlessness, come hand in hand. Arendt's epilogue to her "Introduction into Politics" reflects on natality's existential determination of the human condition, which, without a stable public-political realm is a desert. The world is a desert, Arendt explains, not because it is inherently meaningless, but because it depends on the most frail and futile of man's activities for meaningful endurance. For continuity, the world needs beginners to continually renew its role as the human abode on earth. Tradition can become a means of escaping life in the desert; however, if tradition is not taken up as testament, from the standpoint of a witness of the past as well as that of a beginner, the virtue of endurance is lost, and action loses its capacity for renewal and its esteemed role in the *vita activa*: "Only those who can endure the passion of living under desert conditions can be trusted to summon up in themselves the courage that lies at the root of action, of becoming an active being."<sup>92</sup> Because the world is "a human artifice whose potential immortality is always subject to the mortality of those who build it and the natality of those who come to live in it," it relies on human action to sustain it in the mode of beginning.<sup>93</sup> This is different from grasping action's freedom in accordance with its capacity to introduce novelty into the world. In Arendt's picture of the desert world, action's role is quite conservative.

Arendt closes her meditation on the desert with a revision of the fundamental existential question articulated by Heidegger, "Why is there anything at all and not rather

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<sup>92</sup> Arendt, *the Promise of Politics*, 202.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

nothing?” She asks, “Why is there anybody at all and not rather nobody?”<sup>94</sup> This is the precisely non-nihilistic question, she explains, that arises from objective conditions of nihilism, from a world in which politics has lost its *raison d'être*. While Arendt does not endeavor an explicit answer to this question, one can read her entire corpus as a working toward the answer. In short, the reason why there is anybody at all, and not rather nobody, is the endurance of the world. The first fact of human being is plural being – that “men and not man inhabit the earth” – sustained by and sustaining of the world. The meaning of politics is freedom; its *raison d'être* is the world, and the plurality who comprise and sustain it.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 204.

## CHAPTER IV

### COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND TEMPORALITY

The Greek model of the public space of appearances, centered on the task of preserving the world through memory and witness, cannot be more relevant in an age that has lost the capacity to “think” what it is doing. The syncopated temporality of natality, as the gap between action and understanding, requires the public realm to be a space of appearance and disclosure. The deliberative model’s restriction of action to the coordination of individual ends, however, troubles the notion of the public as a realm of continuity. The participants in the discursive public realm are deliberators, not spectators, who negotiate aims and interests. Habermas, D’Entrèves, and Benhabib each invoke Arendt’s appropriation of the *sensus communis* as a procedure for obtaining agreement among participants about the course of action. By treating the *sensus communis* as a bridge between theory and action, they fail to recognize the need to reconcile with the past, and evade the temporality of natality at play in all action.

The “enlarged mentality” that Arendt evokes in her illustration of perspectival objectivity in the polis suggests a different arch to task of judgment from the syncopated reconciliation with the past of the lone spectator. She later develops the concept in terms of Kant’s *sensus communis*, which makes potential agreement with others the condition of judgment. To enlarge one’s thought is to disregard self-interest and to put oneself “in the place of any other man.”<sup>95</sup> Arendt invokes the *sensus communis* to illustrate the general standpoint of the spectator as a world-spectator, rather than a subject. One adopts an enlarged mentality in order to take up a standpoint from which to judge. Arendt

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<sup>95</sup> Hannah Arendt. *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 43.

explains that, though for Kant the faculty of judgment is the “middleman” between theory and practice, the condition of enlarged mentality cannot prescribe actions: “it is a viewpoint from which to look upon, to watch, to form judgments, or, as Kant himself says, to reflect on human affairs. It does not tell one how to act.”<sup>96</sup> The *sensus communis* refers to the factor of publicity that is required for critical thinking – that is, for reflective engagement with the past.

D’Entrèves acknowledges the reflective position of the spectator, but denies its political relevance. The moment of understanding, in which one reconciles themselves to the past, he contends, is “a component of the life of the mind, the faculty through which the privileged spectators can recover meaning from the past and reconcile us to what happened.”<sup>97</sup> The *sensus communis*, on the other hand, is “a feature of political life as such” that directs the action of individuals in the public realm. In the model of communicative action, the *sensus communis* does not refer to an abstract general standpoint. Rather, it is taken up as a procedure for determining the validity of opinion and the legitimacy of action. By gearing public exchange toward the end goal of agreement, the communicative model shifts the plurality of standpoints to a uniform understanding, built on recognition and contestation of individual viewpoints.

In *the Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas develops the deliberative procedure in detail. Communicative action, he explains, presupposes a conception of language

“as a medium of uncurtailed communication whereby speakers and hearers, out of the context of their preinterpreted lifeworld, refer simultaneously to things in

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>97</sup> D’Entrèves, *the Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, 103

the objective, social, and subjective worlds in order to negotiate common definitions of the situation.”<sup>98</sup>

Through persuasive deliberation, participants in the discursive public realm appeal to the force of validity behind their claims. Through unimpaired communication, with the practical aim toward mutual understanding assumed throughout, individuals define and order the objective, social, and subjective worlds. In coming to mutual understanding, participants can “coordinate their actions” and “pursue their particular aims.”<sup>99</sup>

Teleologically structured action is thus implied in Habermas’s theory. Communicative action is not action as such, but a process for coordinating action with respect to the varied perspectives of the entire group.

Communicative action is grounded in a formal pragmatics that begins with pure types of “linguistically mediated interaction,” or speech acts. The rational ground of communicative action finds expression in respect to these forms, each contestable according to a corresponding form of validity. Constative speech acts are oriented to reaching understanding about the objective world. The validity of a constative speech act follows from the truth of its propositions. Normatively regulated speech acts are oriented toward reaching understanding about the “social world” of interpersonal relationships. They appeal to a sense of rightness for validity. Dramaturgical action – performative (expressive) speech acts – are oriented toward reaching understanding about the actor’s subjective world. The measure of validity for these acts is sincerity.

By delimiting each distinct ground of validity, Habermas is able to develop a formal theory of intersubjectively constituted legitimation. Communicative action as

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<sup>98</sup> Habermas, *the Theory of Communicative Action*, 95

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.



action coordinated by understanding, agreement, and mutual recognition of validity claims produces a ground of legitimacy contingent to the reason of each participant. By appealing to immediate and intersubjective grounds, as opposed to transcendent religious precepts, philosophic dogma, or a theory of contractual consent, the theory of communicative action, as Thomas McCarthy notes in his introduction, conceptualizes a realm of rationality that promises an “emancipatory effect on traditional habits of thought.”<sup>100</sup> This emancipation, however, is a double-edged sword. By appealing to rational grounds, however, the Habermasian model of communicative action distances itself from experience the moment it makes room for action.

The *sensus communis* of the *theatrum mundi*, however, is immediately bound to experience. Common sense is not merely a procedure for attaining agreement, but it is the “sixth sense” that binds the other five senses together. The critical position of the disinterested judge hinges on the initial capacity of common sense as a faculty of perception. It does not follow thought, as d’Entrèves suggests, but enables it by opening the individual to a world of particulars. Understanding common sense as a faculty of perception, i.e. disclosure, brings to light the affinity between seeing and thinking and the original relation between the activity of *theoria* and the position the *theatai* – spectators of the theatre.

Common sense is the faculty of thought and vision that exposes the individual to the ontological horizon of the scene. It grounds the reflective judgment that is “capable of arriving at its own norms and principles rather than acquiescing in what is given by the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., xvii.

prevailing historical reality.”<sup>101</sup> Public action owes its self-legitimizing function to the common sense of the witnessing spectator. As María Pía Lara points out, for both Kant and Arendt, judgment is entailed in the processes of appearing and perceiving. It is not instantiated through communication, as the deliberative model suggests, but it is presupposed in the notion of communicability as such.<sup>102</sup> What becomes communicable, by virtue of common sense, is an interpretive understanding, formed by one’s reflective judgment. It is not a determinant or *a priori* judgment, but an account or narrative of a scene. From the critical standpoint of the spectator-as-judge, “we understand that things have happened in the way a story describes them.”<sup>103</sup> By binding critical thinking and world disclosure and by making scenes attestable (and not contestable), the *sensus communis* is the condition of speech’s revelatory capacity.

Brought into the context of Arendt’s theory of action, the model of communicative rationality appeals to action’s capacity for freedom, albeit within a disparate ontological framework than the performance model. The *theatrum mundi* houses action as both a beginning and a disclosure of “who” one is in the horizon of the scene and the context of the spatial disclosure before spectatorship. In this case, action as a beginning can be thought of as a contribution to the fleeting realm of events, which is then taken up by others who, in retrospect, ascertain its meaning and significance. In the model of communicative action, however, action is construed as a teleological beginning. It does not act into a medium of other people, but rather depends on the unanimous approval for permission to begin. In intersubjective communication, the identity of who

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<sup>101</sup> Peg Birmingham, “Hannah Arendt: The Spectator’s Vision,” 36.

<sup>102</sup> María Pía Lara, “Reflective Judgment as World Disclosure,” 88.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

one is, and the identity of the world, at that, is not disclosed phenomenologically, but is rationally agreed and decided upon.

Villa contends that the pragmatic aim of agreement defeats the constitution of the public as a plurality. To this, Benhabib remarks that they both agree that political debate is an ends-constitutive process. This, after all, is the defining characteristic of the freedom of action and the instrumentality of work, which does not constitute its end, but rather disappears into it. She rejects Villa's claim, however, that the goal of politics is not consensus. Villa argues that the ethos of agreement, in fact, instrumentalizes action, to which Benhabib contends that Villa misunderstands Habermas and the status of communicative validity. In deliberation, the other is treated as an end-in-themselves, which eliminates the possibility of instrumentalization in communicative discourse.<sup>104</sup>

The divergence of these two scholars on the role of communicative action reveals their difference, and not agreement, about the notion of action as an ends-constitutive process. Villa's understanding of the theatricality of appearance suggests that he allies with Arendt when she locates the particular "productivity" of action in the instantiation and confirmation of a web of human relationships.<sup>105</sup> By Villa's reading, action constitutes its own end, while Benhabib's, and Habermas's, Kantianism suggests that ends constitute action. Whether or not Benhabib is correct in her claim that Villa simply misinterprets communicative action theory, Villa's wariness of evoking the *sensus communis* as a bridge between discourse and action is well-founded.

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<sup>104</sup> Benhabib, *the Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xviii.

<sup>105</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 181.

*Concluding Remarks:*

Reconsideration of the model of communicative action from the perspectives of the *theatrum mundi* and natality's syncopated temporality leaves me with three contentions about the temporality of action in the structure of deliberation:

First, the elevation of common sense from a weak epistemology to a strong epistemology removes action from its syncopated relationship with thought. The enlarged mentality as a condition of impartial spectatorship supports the formation of judgments that are reflectively bound to experience. By taking inspiration from the event of action, the spectator-as-judge develops opinions in narrative structure, insofar as they appeal to relationships and principles disclosed by scenes. The communicative model elevates the enlarged mentality to a strong notion of perspectivalty as the determiner of objectivity, and transforms Kant's condition of "potential" agreement with others into a hard condition for the validity of judgments. Furthermore, it gives agreement a rational basis by appealing to three grounds of validity: factual truth, normative rightness, and the sincerity of the speaker. This model renders every standpoint contestable, defeating the phenomenological structure of disclosure in the first place. More importantly, this model detaches the judgment that grounds action from the worldly experience of the spectator. Each moment of agreement is a rational refounding that conceals its contingent historical grounds. In such a structure, there is no room for the syncopated relationship between thinking and doing, as the temporal abyss of natality is sustained irreparably.

Second, the communicative model collapses the performer-spectator relationship into a uniform group of participants. The substance of participation is neither acting nor spectating, but deliberation about the limits of action: communicative action serves a

coordinative function. By failing to acknowledge the space of appearance in which the performer-spectator relationship adheres, the communicative model sustains the modern loss of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* in their “proper” senses. The modern turn from thinking to doing, which leaves action the sole prerogative of the scientist, dispossesses action of its spatial constitution and thought of its temporal constitution. The reciprocal balance between doing and thinking can only find recovery in the spatial-temporal horizon of the scene, that is, in the *theatrum mundi*.

Third, the communicative action model defines freedom according to the strictly initiatory capacity of action, and it elevates freedom from its role as the meaning of politics to the goal of politics. The futurity of action in the communicative model is not anticipatory, as in the agonal model, but projective. Communicative action coordinates teleological action and remains bound to the Kantian logic of construing the subject as an end-in-himself. However, if public space is to support the redemptive task of thinking space, then it must also be an opening between past and future, i.e. a space of memory. Performance, in its affinity to dramatic mimesis, is the form of active memory that recovers the past in a narrative and preserves it from ruin. Rational deliberation cannot recover the narrative structure of the scene, though it might recall facts and evidence in the defense of a legitimacy claim.

The work of theorists of participatory politics who champion the communicative model of action hinges for success on two fundamental notions: that the loss of public space as a space for action is constitutive of modern world alienation, and that restoration of action to the modern typology will restore commonality and worldliness to our political being. However, the participatory guarantee of a simulacrum of identity

constitution and effective agency is empty without the dramatic sphere of performance. It is crucial to recognize the temporal condition of world-alienation, which is not the mere loss of action, but the alienation of action from thought, and the loss of a bridge between past and future. The difference between the coordinative function of communicative participation and the disclosive function of performance is the difference between teleological action as a brand new beginning and action that both sustains and is substantive of the world. The ontological horizon of the space of appearance, the *theatrum mundi*, establishes the syncopated relationship between thinking and doing that grounds action in the world by realizing its meaning in the life of the mind. “For at the center of politics lies concern for the world, not for man.”<sup>106</sup>

If the modern loss of action were analogous to the loss of the capacity to begin, the communicative model of action would more than suffice as a recuperative project. There is a more fundamental loss at stake, however, which Arendt refers to explicitly and performatively – that is, the loss of the reciprocal and syncopated relationship between thinking and doing that founds the public realm as a place of endurance and continuation. In an age of unprecedented innovation at an ungraspable momentum, the need to recover the capacities to witness and remember, to give testament and judge, has grown terribly urgent.

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<sup>106</sup> Arendt, *the Promise of Politics*, 106.

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