

(Re)Constructing the Possibilities of Political Experience: Kant's Influence on Arendt's "Introduction *into* Politics"

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ABSTRACT: My paper argues that commentators of Hannah Arendt's political legacy, while undeniably aware of her critique of political modernity, fail to fully appreciate the way in which her analysis seeks to make genuine political experiences possible. Narrowly focusing on her critical remarks, interpreters have read her too simplistically as espousing political skepticism. My intent is two-fold: first, to claim her reasons for criticizing political modernity are significant; and, second, to show how her analysis, specifically of Kant, optimistically guides and informs all possibilities of genuine political experience that mark her ethical political works. Carefully examining (i) Arendt's posthumously published *The Promise of Politics* in relation to her remarks on Kant (specifically in *The Life of the Mind* and her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*) with a view towards developing her adoption of a Kantian-inspired "enlarged mentality," *societas* (human community), and imagination, I advance (iii) Arendt's formulation of the problem of prejudice and bias in moral political judgments and show how her (re)construction of politics sets out a program for resolution. This final section is my response to the charge that Arendt's political deconstruction spells the debilitating end and *impossibility* of politics in modernity. I maintain that Arendt's deconstruction of political modernity serves not to end politics but to begin its reconstruction. Following Jerome Kohn I argue that Arendt's "Introduction *into* Politics" spells not the demise of political activity but rather the initiated "leading into (*introducere*) genuine political experiences" – one that, because of the (re)constructive process itself, is cognizant of the *meaning* of political experiences and more fully aware of the dangerous prejudices and prejudgments one is capable of bring to such experiences.

“The time is out of joint; O cursed spite/
That ever I was born to set it right!”

Hamlet, William Shakespeare

Introduction

War, conflict, genocide, the smell of burning skin and hair, mass murder, gassing, machetes raised – *a gang-raped woman is devoured by stray dogs* – bludgeoning, glass explosions, gunshots, atomic missiles firing, terror, starvation, beatings, knives ripping into flesh, blood squirts, red-soaked innocence paints the earth, burning flags, marches to death – *a suicide bomb erupts* – screams run wild, torture, automatic machine guns pop, riots, revolt, religious persecution, public execution, silent deaths, deafening screams – *the sleeping baby awakes no more* – kidnappings, secrecy, famine, bodies carved out with disease – *weeping, weeping, weeping* – grandmothers cradled in prayer hope no more. Such violence emerges at the end of each new day, testifying that “the time” is, indeed, as Hamlet says “out of joint”! The question remains, however: *Who is responsible to set the world aright?* Hannah Arendt’s faith in the *promise* of politics may offer some poignant insights here.

In her notable work, *On Revolution*, originally published in 1963 several years after she had already presented and published her University of Chicago lectures as *The Human Condition* in 1958, Arendt revived her earlier ontological articulation of ‘natality’ to argue that violence may be necessary to bring about a ‘new beginning’ through revolution. Contrary to the traditional canon, Arendt’s novel account of the *promise* of revolution sets forth with the acknowledgement that violence, while perhaps a necessary fact of the human condition, remains apolitical – even anti-political – unless it can be justified to establish the *conditions* requisite for freedom. This may be one of the first clear indications of Arendt’s interest in securing the conditions of politics amongst diverse people. From there, however, she argues that if violence is incapable of justifying its means – that is, if violence is simply permitted to remain an end in itself – it cannot be political because it fails to aim towards the ideal of human freedom; contrarily, if violence is more than merely destructive, if it is employed as political power, then it may actually make possible “sheer togetherness” where persons can act “neither for or against” one another but *with* one another¹ and, thereby act in concert.² The main point is this. Violent acts that are *not* translated into political power threaten not merely what politics *is* but more importantly what politics *means*: freedom.³ Or so Arendt invites us to believe. Therefore, the distinction between what politics *is* and what it *means* is of central concern to this paper, then, because it underlies not just her development of the promise of politics but, more significantly, because it speaks to how her insights take shape and show the manner in which she deconstructs traditional ideological *prejudices* so as to (re)construct and make a ‘new beginning’ in politics possible.

In this paper I will develop this insight, along with Arendt's incorporation of it into her own methodology. I show how commentators, while undeniably aware of her critique of political modernity, have perhaps failed to fully appreciate the way in which Arendt's analysis seeks to make genuine political experiences possible. Narrow focus upon her critical remarks has led some commentators, I believe, to read her too simplistically as espousing political skepticism or pessimism. Such an interpretation cannot be easily maintained, however, if one first considers her work as an organic whole. Second, such readings blatantly ignore some very important motivations that indeed inspired Hannah Arendt's critical work. Thus, in these initial sections my intent is two-fold: first, to claim her reasons for criticizing political modernity are significant and suggest a deeper ideological commitment than mere skepticism; and, second, to show how her analysis, specifically of Kant, optimistically guides and informs all possibilities of genuine political experience that mark her ethical political works. In the final sections, I will carefully examine (i) Arendt's *Lectures of Kant's Political Philosophy*, in which she claims that Kant's political philosophy germinates in the *Critique of Judgment*, and (ii) developing her analysis of Kantian "enlarged mentality," *societas* (human community), and imagination, I advance (iii) Arendt's formulation of the problem of prejudice and bias in moral political judgments and show how her (re)construction of politics sets out a program for resolution. This final section (iii) is my response to the charge that Arendt's political deconstruction spells the debilitating end and impossibility of politics in modernity. Contrarily, Arendt's critique of modernity, I maintain, gestures towards an "Introduction into Politics." Her deconstruction of political modernity serves not to end politics but begin its re-construction. Such an introduction, as Professor Jerome Kohn has insightfully put it in his latest publication of Arendt's unpublished works, *The Promise of Politics* (2005), spells not the demise of political activity but rather the initiated "leading into (*intro-ducere*) genuine political experiences" – one that, because of the (re)constructive process itself, is cognizant of the *meaning* of political experiences and more fully aware of the dangerous prejudices and prejudgments one is capable of bring to such experiences.

I: Is Arendt's Politics "Anti-Modern" or "Modern"?

For some time a debate has persisted concerning how one is to define Arendt's political work. And, if current dissent is any indication whatsoever, one can likely expect this debate only to intensify. Since her sudden death over three decades ago scholars have challenged one another and disagreed passionately as to how best to interpret the political legacy she imparted to us. Arguably the most contentious question to frame this debate is this: Is Arendtian politics "anti-modern" or "modern"? In his essay 'Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique' scholar Dana Villa characterizes and summarizes the key proponents of this debate exceptionally well. In this section I make use of his analysis of the two foremost leading discussants of this debate, George Kateb and Seyla Benhabib, to argue why I agree that the question itself may be faulty and reveal deep-seated *prejudice*; and, further, I extend Villa's insight to further suggest how Arendt's essay on Socrates may point to the reason why she holds this view. Let's begin with an overview of the debate.

One key player of this debate, who has advanced a compelling reading of Arendt's take on the 'modern crisis,' is George Kateb. In Kateb's 1984 book *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* the argument given is that Arendt's "homesickness" for ancient Greek politics and culture is central to her defense of action and its importance in securing 'public space'. Elsewhere, in his essay on 'Political Action: Its Nature and Advantages,' Kateb similarly seeks to develop her theoretical "nostalgia" for the Greeks. In this work Kateb traces out Arendt's indebtedness to Aristotle and pays significant attention to the way in which both Arendt and Aristotle held "the virtues" (especially courage) are "requisite for authentic politics and not tools or means" (Kateb, 2000:137). The upshot is this. Kateb reads Arendt's main philosophical work, *The Human Condition*, as central to all her subsequent political thought. Kateb points out that we must not *forget* that motivated Arendt: the Holocaust. This is a point I very much agree with. For, without a doubt, the fact that she witnessed the wake of World War I and experienced the terror and persecution as a German Jew during World War II, clearly Arendt was not only motivated to investigate the sources of Stalinist and Nazi forms of totalitarianism as others have attested; moreover, she was pressed to answer whether politics bore any redemptive value at all. Noting this, Kateb suggests that there are indeed two contributions Arendt's politics; one is her original account in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,⁴ the other her commitment to the "excellence of politics: its greatness and the place of individual excellence in it (*HC*, p. 49)."⁵ Again, here I agree with Kateb on both accounts. What I wonder, nevertheless, is whether enough has been said in the literature about how these two (seemingly distinct) commitments relate.

The other key player is Seyla Benhabib. By contrast, Benhabib's 1996 publication *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* claims to offer a "rereading of Arendt's political philosophy in the light of newly gained insights into the historical and cultural context of her work" (Benhabib, 1996: xxiv) in order to demonstrate her politically "reluctant modernism". First and foremost Benhabib sought to "de-centre" the "standard and widespread reading" that situated Arendt's *The Human Condition* at the heart of her political thought. The standard readings of Arendt, or so Benhabib maintained, all hold *HC* to be "the definitive expression of Arendt's political philosophy at the center"; moreover, in using this text as centrally important, Arendt is then read as "a political philosopher of nostalgia, an antimodernist lover of the Greek polis" (Benhabib, 1996: xxiv; my emphasis). Contrary to this "standard" interpretation, Benhabib argued that Arendt took her inspiration less from the Greeks and more so from "German 'Existenz philosophy' of the 1920's, and in particular the thought of Martin Heidegger" and his modern rereading of Aristotle (Benhabib, 1996: xxiv). On Villa's reading, what is really at stake here is the "more or less explicit endorsement of the criterion of universalizability," offering the following summation of Benhabib's work: "[Benhabib's] 'modernism' of Hannah Arendt, then, is manifest in her Kantian theory of political judgment, a theory that completes her previous thought on action by providing a set of 'moral foundations' surprisingly reminiscent of Habermas's discourse ethics" (Villa, 2001: 288).

According to Villa, one should be skeptical of Benhabib's reading. Comparing Benhabib to Kateb, Villa finds the latter reading more capable of conveying the ambition of Arendt's project and confirming the centrality of action. Kateb's interpretation of Arendt's anti-modernism, then, is better, on Villa's account, because the latter view,

unlike the former, better situates her theory of action which provides “a source of meaning – a justification of existence” that reveals Arendt’s attempt to reconcile humanity with the world, that aims to make us “at home *in* the world” (Villa, 2001: 288; my emphasis). Nevertheless, of *both* readings Villa claims neither Benhabib, nor Kateb is “innocent”, writing: “Each is offered for reasons that are largely strategic: they are weapons in an interpretative battle” (Villa, 2001: 288). What is at issue, as Villa goes on to say, is whether Arendt is politically “one of us” or “one of them”. Put differently, the issue is whether she advances a politically-favorable reading of democracy, individualism and autonomy of universal rights, or, whether her political critique expresses a fundamentally ‘anti-modern’ view, suspicious of the liberal program and its plethora of political promises. I think Villa may be right about this. In reviewing the current literature on Arendt’s politics there seems to be a strong tendency to want to define or categorize her work by situating it squarely within a specific, definitive tradition. So I agree with Villa that the very debate may be questionable on the grounds that it does play out as an “interpretative battle” that is “largely strategic” and, therefore, perhaps also *violent*. Nonetheless, I disagree with what he says next: “Those sympathetic to Arendt (Habermasians, communitarians, and participatory democrats) will be attracted to Benhabib’s account; those who are hostile, to Kateb’s liberal critique” (Villa, 2001: 289). For my part, despite the violence each reading imposes on Arendt’s work, I still think both interpretations gain genuine insights into Arendt’s political thought. However, my position is to say that it is perhaps only when we conjoin these two contrasting interpretations together and present Arendt’s politics as (de)constructing antimodernism/modernism that it begins to become apparent that Arendt is (de)constructing prejudices inherent to both.

II: Imagine: Arendt’s (De)Construction of the Tradition

For a moment, let us imagine that Arendt is neither espousing “anti-modernism” nor “modernism”. On my own reading of Benhabib which includes not just the aforementioned work cited but also her more recent essay, ‘Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Hannah Arendt’s Thought,’ Benhabib does just this. In this essay I take her to be less intent to simply follow Habermas’s reading of Arendt’s indebtedness to Heidegger *per se* and much more interested in returning to the ancient Greeks (and here we could add, Romans) *and* the modern interest in “conditions” via Kant to articulate the phenomenological realm of publicity, or, what Villa calls the active “space of appearances” (Villa, 2001: 290). My sense is that Benhabib’s interpretation resides much less with the modern tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger than one might at first expect. Contra Villa, I contend her interest to lie more so in the philosophic source of this critical tradition: the work of Immanuel Kant. Before returning to the aforementioned interpretative question, let’s consider whose methodology is better and why.

I think Benhabib’s reading is more methodologically sound, given Arendt’s style and philosophic approach. Following Margaret Canovan, Benhabib reads Arendt’s work ought as an ‘organic whole’. Here, Benhabib’s goal is not to show the importance of *The Human Condition* but to show how other of her works, like the biography of *Rahel* and *The Life of the Mind* reveal political ideas about friendship and ontology. More

specifically, Benhabib shows in exploring such relations some very good reasons to suppose the gulf between Aristotle and Kant may not pose deep a rift as other interpreters have keenly held. Furthermore, by attempting to unify divergent texts, Benhabib's implicit analysis turns out to be far less "modernist" than her initial writings would suggest. Her latest essay on Arendt, for example, attests to this, as her exploration into the phenomenological foundations of Arendt's work through an analysis of *both* Kant and Aristotle.

But the question still at hand is this. Is Hannah Arendt's political theory modernist or an anti-modernist? At least in her original formulation, Benhabib interprets her politics as reluctantly "modernist" (Benhabib, 1996). On the other hand, following Kateb's reading of Arendt's sentimental attachments and intellectual preoccupation with the Greeks, Arendt's politics is not only critical of modernity: it is indeed "anti-modern". On Villa's evaluation Kateb's argument is superior to Benhabib's. He states that his skepticism of Benhabib's reading arises mostly because he finds her account not be as "accurate" as Kateb's (Villa, 2001: 288). Kateb's project, says Villa, "conveys something of the ambition of Arendt's project" which is more than simply Benhabib's own "theory of democratic deliberation" in Arendtian dress (Villa, 2001: 288). I think Villa is unfair on this point. I do not agree with his reading that Benhabib is simply offering an interpretation of Arendtian "democratic deliberation". As I've argued, I think Benhabib is advancing Arendt's phenomenological articulation of the conditions of politics which is neither 'modernist' nor 'antimodernist,' though it does point to the spot that Kant and Aristotle relate: on the value of *logos*, on the meaningfulness of communicative deliberation. But showing this in Arendt's work, while key, proves to be anything but simplistic. On this point, however, Villa does get something very right. He writes,

I want to look more closely at what is at issue in the debate about whether Arendt is a 'modernist' or an 'antimodernist'. It is my contention that this debate is poorly framed; that Benhabib and Kateb impose, *quite violently*, a conception of critique foreign to Arendt; and that the resulting characterizations *obscure* more than they *reveal* (Villa, 2001: 289; my emphasis).

What Villa sets out to explain in this essay, then, is the point I think Benhabib's eventually does reach; namely, that if one reads Arendt's critique of modernity as skeptical or politically pessimistic, or, if one is to interpret her work as constituting a "paradigm of rejectionist critique," then the real subtlety of project will be completely missed. For, if we follow Villa's interpretation,

A less obvious but no less important explanation is that this critique moves on explicitly *ontological* terrain. This, of course, should come as no surprise: Arendt's rethinking of freedom as a mode of being and her disclosive conception of political action signal a theoretical perspective explicitly attend to the ontological dimensions of politics. This attunement is manifest throughout her consideration of modernity, the focus of which is the decline of an authentically public reality. For Arendt, the modern age witnesses 'the destruction of the common world' (Villa, 2001: 290; my emphasis).⁶

I agree with Villa's assessment. Further, I have attempted to show why I think Benhabib's methodological commitment to read Arendt's work as an "organic whole" leads to her later exploration into Arendt's phenomenological foundations in Aristotle and Kant. This approach, despite any Habermasian commitment, may actually bring her read closer to Villa's and, most importantly, reveal a fundamental insight into Arendt's politics. This is because Benhabib's examination of the conditions of politics throughout various historical time periods in Arendt's work starts to unravel the prejudice, the assumption, that antimodernism and modernism should be read at odds with one another. Therefore, in attempting to unify Arendt's work, Benhabib begins to see ways in which Arendt's politics sought to unify politics by offering an *ontological* articulation of the conditions of politics – what it *was*, *is* and *could be*. Benhabib expresses her finding this way:

Arendt's attempt to bring together the Aristotelian concern with particulars in practical matter with a principled, universalist moral standpoint [like Kant's] is not simply confusing but contains an insight very much worth developing. Arendt's incomplete doctrine of judgment, by weakening the opposition between contextual judgment and a universalist morality, could help us see through some false fronts in contemporary moral and political theory (Benhabib, 2001: 186).

As "confusing" as Arendt's attempt may be, there may indeed be an "insight very much worth developing." In the following sections, my goal is to make some progress by following this insight. My hope is to show that whatever this insight may amount to, it must begin by dismantling the preponderance of "truth" that has overshadowed moral political questions of "meaning" – an insight very much attributable to Kant. But, first, let's examine Arendt's essay 'Socrates' to get to the root of Arendt's (de)construction.

III: The Example of Socrates: Neither 'Modernist' nor 'Anti-Modernist'

One exemplification Arendt's insight to bring together an Aristotelian concern with particulars in "practical matters" with a "principled, universalist" standpoint arises in her essay on 'Socrates'. Yet, in reading this essay one quickly realizes that Arendt is neither advancing an 'anti-modernist' nor 'modernist' political tale. Rather, her interest is to (de)construct how Socrates' life has falsely been misused to erect and maintain the "truth" paradigms central to both. Unlike prevailing interpretations of Socrates, however, Arendt's interest lies with the (existential) man, Socrates, and his friend, Plato. Here she is interested in the divisions between politics and philosophy and her main goal is to reclaim the moral political meaning of Socrates' life *and* his death. In this case, Arendt's rereading of the ancient Greeks – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – does not set out to offer a 'theory' disseminating the *truth* as it pertains to their lives or their legacies. Rather, Arendt stands anew; her words take witness to testify to the *meaning* of their words and deeds; and her act of giving her own logos, taking her own account to narrate how this prejudice has intellectually saturated an entire historical tradition.

As it pertains to the life of Socrates, I think Arendt's narration aspires to *touch* not only the particular and concrete existence of Socrates but also to conflict with, and

testify to, the dominate interpretation of its principle. The lesson of Socrates' death has been *willfully* lost, according to Arendt. Like the life of Jesus, Socrates' life impressed upon followers particular "truths" about his meaning. Not only was his life sacrificed to dissuade others from the philosophical way of life but, according to Arendt, so too was the meaning of his existence sacrificed once Plato determined to expunge all moral political significance from it. This is important for two reasons. First, along Arendtian lines, Socrates death inspired Plato's 'tyranny of truth' and the subsequent prejudice favoring *truth*, in contradistinction to *meaning*, ever since. Here, Arendt squarely faults Plato. Second, by purging the meaning of Socrates' life, Plato sacrificed him a second time.

Plato, she argues, expunged the moral political meaning of Socrates' life in order to erect his 'tyranny of truth'. Thus, his metaphysical work sought to disenfranchise philosophers and the philosophical way of life as far away as possible from public sphere of politics that is held in common. Aristotle, Arendt tells us, further persuaded an entire tradition that it was the Socratic principle of non-contradiction – that is the Socratic measure of truth – that ought to be considered most praiseworthy, speaking to the excellence of his moral political character. And here Arendt may, indeed, be right: the principle of non-contradiction – that Socrates was in agreement with and *only* with himself – may indeed be his most celebrated legacy. Contra Plato and Aristotle, Arendt develops her own reading of the moral political lesson of Socrates. She writes:

Socrates seems to have believed that the political function of the philosopher was to help establish this kind of common world, built on the understanding of friendship, in which no rulership is needed.

For this purpose Socrates relied on two insights, the one contained in the word of the Delphic Apollo, *gnothi sauton*, "know thyself," and the other related by Plato (and echoed in Aristotle): "It is better to be in disagreement with the whole world than, being one, to be in disagreement with myself." The latter is the key sentence for the Socratic conviction that virtue can be taught (Arendt, 2005: 18)

Standing apart from the traditional cannon that has sought to collapse these Socrates insights, Arendt aspired to show that Socrates philosophical *practice* was not at all as *theory*-laden as either Plato or Aristotle have held. In short: Socrates did not seek to advance *theory* at all. According to Arendt, Socrates understood that it was the life held in common – the public space of the polis – that was truly meaningful and ought to be held dear. She writes:

In the Socratic understanding, the Delphic "know thyself" meant: only through knowing what appears to me – only to me, and therefore remaining forever related to my own concrete existence – can I ever understand truth. Absolute truth, which would be the same for all men and therefore unrelated, independent of each man's existence, cannot exist for mortals. For mortals the important thing is to make *doxa truthful*, to see in every *doxa* truth and to speak in such a way that the truth of one's opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others. On this level, the Socratic

“I know that I do not know” means no more than: I know that I do not have the truth for everybody; I cannot know the other fellow’s truth except by asking him and thereby learning his *doxa*, which reveals itself to him in distinction from all others (Arendt, 2005: 19; my emphasis).

Since one cannot know how the world appears to another and since mortality limits the ability to gain such absolute certainty, one bears an existential choice: to affirm mortal existence and affirm political plurality by engaging *with* others to thereby make one’s own self-knowledge more *honest*, or, to deny one’s mortal existence by seeking *absolute truth* – not *with* others merely in agreement with one’s self (Arendt, 2005: 19). The standard reading of Socrates is, of course, of the story of a philosopher who would rather be in “disagreement with the whole world” rather than to live “in disagreement with himself” (*Gorgias*, 482c). Arendt’s implicit point is to ask: Is this not cowardly? Does this not negate one’s responsibility to the “whole world”? Did Socrates, the man who challenged fellow-citizens in the *agora*, not aim to do just the very opposite; namely, to engage with others so as to make opinions more honest?

Hence, in following Arendt’s rereading of Socrates I have set out the preliminary framework of her (de)construction of the ‘tyranny of truth.’ Moreover, I’ve attempted to give credibility to Benhabib’s implicit claim that Arendt’s work presents a subsequent denial of metaphysical pursuits beyond the *ontological* appearance itself. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that Socrates plays a key role in Arendt’s interpretation of the tradition of political philosophy that continued even in the work of Kant. In her *Lectures on Kant*, she says of Kant’s philosophy that it repeats this old adage that seeks to separate politics and philosophy, writing

...these words [*Omnes homine beati esse volunt* (All men desire happiness)] are repeated many times by Kant, though usually as sides – the greatest misfortune that can befall a man is self-contempt. “The loss of self-approval [*Selbstbilligung*]”, he writes in a letter to Mendelssohn (April 8, 1766), “would be the greatest evil that could ever happen to me,” not loss of the esteem in which he was held by another person. (Think of Socrates’ statement “It would be better for me to be at odds with the multitudes than, being one, out of harmony with myself.” Hence, the highest goal of the individual in this life is worthiness of a felicity that is unattainable on this earth. Compared to this ultimate concern, all other goals and aims that men may pursue in this life – including, of course, the in any case dubious progress of the species, which nature works out behind our backs – are marginal affairs (Arendt, 1982: 20-21).

What is problematic about both the antimodernist account and the modernist account, along Arendtian lines, is the ideological justification for one’s *irresponsibility to others* – that is, both deny the world that is held in common. Put differently, her critique aims to dismantle the tower of truth that overshadows – indeed, obliterates – the world by devaluing the space that is shared *with* others in common.

To summarize the debate, then, Arendt is neither espousing “antimodern,” nor “modern” political theory; and, indeed, the debate is “poorly framed.” Nevertheless, what I wanted to highlight more clearly, what I think other commentators have largely neglected, is the fact that the debate is poor not simply because it does some violence to Arendt’s text – that may be inevitable – but more so because it seems to overlook Arendt’s dismantling of its prevailing prejudice. Thus, in the first half of this paper my aim has been to show Arendt conviction that the entire tradition canon that remains far too fixated on *truth* and far less interested in *meaning*. In the remaining half of the paper, I want to look at how her (de)constructs betrays this truth/anti-truth prejudice by explicitly rejecting *theory* so as to (re)construct *anew* the meaningfulness of political *presence*⁷. For this task, I turn to Kant and his influence on her development of judgment and, particularly, upon her essay “Introduction *into* Politics”.

IV: Kant’s Influence on Arendt

One of the most significant political insights of Arendt is rarely discussed in the literature. Even in an interpretation like Benhabib’s that aspires to conceptually conjoin *The Human Condition* to *The Life of the Mind* Arendt’s vindication of meaning over truth is neglected. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, this distinction reveals most clearly her prevailing allegiance to Kant. Second, it plays such a key role in her (re)construction of politics. In this section, I look at Kant’s influence on Arendt briefly. My aim is not to offer a comprehensive or definitive articulation of Kant’s vast influence on Arendt’s politics; more simply, I examine her adoption of Kant’s rejection of traditional metaphysics. Jerome Kohn has made much of the fact that Arendt relied heavily on Kant, as has Ronald Beiner (1982). For the sake of brevity, I will not rehearse all their accounts here and specifically look only at Kohn’s account of Arendt’s adoption of a Kantian-inspired method.

Kohn points out Arendt’s appraisal that Kant’s crippling of “metaphysical truth” had touched upon something very right; namely, his rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. Kohn expresses Arendt’s adoption of Kant’s insight well, stating

What she calls the *aequatio intellectus et rei* – that truth *is* reality, that the concept of a thing *is* the thing, that essence and existence are the same – for her had been refuted by Kant’s revelation of “the antinomy inherent in the structure of reason...and by his analysis of synthetic propositions”. For Arendt, Kant had crippled the minds pursuit of metaphysical truth “beyond” the particular meanings of appearances, or, as she puts it, “the unity of thought and Being.” Moreover, she had seen the consistency as well as the correspondence theory of truth politically perverted in the totalitarian attempt to fabricate both reality and its truth at the price of human plurality (Kohn, 2005: xxi)

Kohn’s point appears to reiterate the claim I had made earlier regarding Arendt’s testimony of Socrates; namely, the exorbitant cost of “truth” is cashed out in the currency of “human plurality”, thereby leaving us morally-politically bankrupt.

Moreover, what is lost is the political need to get together, to empower, through discourse and discussion of that which appears: *the* condition of politics is plurality. The rejection of plurality also arouse, says Arendt, with the Cartesian solution to “move the Archimedean point into man himself”.⁸ So, it is not simply that Arendt is (de)constructing the tradition; she is attempting to (re)construct the meaning of plurality.

Yet, one should not be misled into believing that Arendt blindly followed Kant in order to pursue this goal. Contrarily, it is perhaps better to say that Kant’s insights into the conditions of appearances complemented many of her own quite well. However, just as quick as she was to point out in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* how Kant got his own political theory wrong, so too is she unrelenting her assessment that his own views were nevertheless prejudiced by the tradition. Kant had been misled. His fault can be seen clearly in his erroneous claim that the need of reason is inspired by the “quest for truth”. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt explains Kant’s fundamental error – and perhaps her best philosophic insight – in the following way, writing

Hence, the distinguishing of the two faculties, reason and intellect, coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning, in the first category, and cognition, in the second. Kant, though he had insisted on this distinction, was still so strongly bound by the enormous weight of the tradition of metaphysics that he held fast to its traditional subject matter, that is, to those topics which could be *proved* to be unknowable, and while he justified reasons’ need to think beyond the limits of what can be known, he remained unaware of the fact that man’s need to reflect encompasses nearly everything that happens to him, things he knows as well as things he can never know. He remained less than fully aware of the extent to which he had liberated reason, the ability to think, by justifying it in terms of the ultimate questions. He stated defensively that he had “found it necessary to deny *knowledge*...to make room for *faith*,” but he had not made room for faith; he had made room for thought, and he had not “denied knowledge” but separated knowledge from thinking (Arendt, 1977: 14).

Like Socrates’ friend, Plato, who undermined the meaning of his life in pursuit of “truth” and later Aristotle who deemed the lesson of his life to reside in the principle of non-contradiction, Kant’s adoption of the traditional problem of skepticism led him not towards “faith” as he contended but explicitly away from meaning. As Arendt explains,

The reason neither Kant nor his successors ever paid much attention to thinking as an activity and even less to the experiences of the thinking ego is that, all distinctions notwithstanding, they were demanding the kind of results and applying the kind of criteria for certainty and evidence that are the results and the criteria of cognition. But if it is true that thinking and reason are justified in transcending the limitations of cognition and the intellect – justified by Kant on the ground that the matters they deal with, though unknowable, are of the greatest existential interest to man – then the assumption must be that thinking and reason are not concerned with what the intellect is concerned with. To anticipate, and put

it in a nutshell: *The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same* (Arendt, 1977: 15).

V: Arendt's Insight into Truth & Meaning

By examining the conditions of politics throughout various historical time periods Arendt offers an *ontological* articulation of the conditions of politics – what it *was*, *is* and *could be*. But make no mistake: Arendt is not asking “what is politics?” Rather, she is explicitly challenging the prejudice that underlies such a question on the grounds that such attempts aim to “universalize” the human condition. As she puts it in the outset of “Introduction *into* Politics”,

Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but *men* are a human, early product, the product of human nature. Because philosophy and theology are always concerned with *man*, because all their pronouncements would be correct if there were only one or two men or only identical men, they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: what is politics (Arendt, 2005: 93).

Arendt goes on to explain that a significant part of the problems lies in the way that philosophers and theologians have framed politics. She writes:

What is remarkable among all great thinkers is the difference in rank between their political philosophies and the rest of their works – even in Plato. Their politics never reaches the same depth. This lack of depth is nothing but a failure to sense the depths which politics is anchored.

Politics deals with coexistence and associations of *different* men (Arendt, 2005: 93).

Accordingly, Arendt points to two “good reasons” that help explain why philosophers have failed to offer a foundation from which politics can “take shape”. She writes:

(1) The first is the assumption that there is something political *in* man that belongs to his essence. This is simply not so, *man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships (Arendt, 2005: 95).

(2) The second is the monotheistic concept of God in whose likeness man is said to have been created. On that basis, there can, of course, only be man, while men come a more or less successful repetition of the same (Arendt, 2005: 95).

The point is this. Politics is not “outside of man” any more than it is inside her or him; politics manifests in-between and amongst human relationships. Thus, the condition of politics arises “between men” and manifests political meaningfulness through “words and deeds.” Second, given the great prejudice of monotheistic religions that there is only one,

representation of divinity, as expressed by the deities of God, G-d, Allah, Buddah, etc. the politics bias has sought not to pluralize representation but rather to singularize one political voice. Such an approach runs contrarily to Arendt's political project in a few important ways. By proceeding this way, the value of discursive deliberation is undermined. Further, it gives priority to the view that there is something "in" humans that is political and, therefore, universalizable rather than acknowledging that it is the human *condition* that is universal to us all. Lastly, such a program betrays the aesthetic sentiment of Dante's that *diverse voci fanno dolci note* (Diverse voices make sweet harmony)⁹ – a sentiment that surely fueled Arendt's political spirit.

Arendt proceeds to articulate an original and compelling account as to why "genuine" experience of the present seems so politically "impossible": "Man cannot live without prejudices..." (Arendt, 2005: 99-100). For, as Arendt explains it, "the power and danger of prejudices lies in the fact that something of the past is always hidden within them." (Arendt, 2005: 101). Thus, her point is that there is not that there has been a "loss of standards" in the modern world. Quite to the contrary, the modern or post-modern declaration of any such loss of standards sometimes characterized by the "nihilism inherent in our age, as a devaluation of values, a sort of twilight of the gods, a catastrophe in the worlds's moral order" as well as the flip side of the same coin that would suggest a re-evaluation of values equally contain a fatal flaw: the assumption that human beings can only render judgments if, and only if, they possess standards is simply not so. More to the point, this assumption conceals an ideological danger. If the faculty of judgment is reducible to nothing more than one's "ability to assign individual cases to their correct and proper process within the general principles which are applicable to them and about which everyone is in agreement" (Arendt, 2005: 103), the real moral political danger is the resulting implication that people may literally be able to think – that is, to judge – without some predetermined value or standard. Furthermore a sincere lack of faith is revealed concerning *the power to act*. If one's faculty of judgment is rendered "inadequate for making original judgments" (104), then how can one *respond* – that is set the world aright – in dark times?

The purpose of politics, its meaningfulness, then, resides with the *spontaneous* power of action. In short, instead of asking "what is politics" Arendt asks "what is the *meaning* of politics". Her answer, quite simply put, is this: "the meaning of politics is *freedom*" (Arendt, 2005: 108; my emphasis). But, "what exactly is 'freedom'?" one might ask. This is not the right sort of question. The more interesting and important question, along Arendtian lines, asks: What is the *meaning* of freedom? In the next section, I pursue this point. Suffice to say, however, that at the very least from this section two points should be clear. First, freedom, like politics, is purposive insofar as it is because humans are free that they are capable to 'begin anew.' Second, given Arendt's rejection of the notion that politics is "in" man, as opposed to conditioned "between" them, and, given her reluctance to embrace a monotheistic paradigm for political representation, it becomes more evident that what we are free to do is "bear witness"; and this, thinks Arendt, shows how we embody political representation "every day" (Arendt, 2005: 191).

VI: What is the *Meaning* of Politics?

In the last section I showed how Arendt incorporates the distinction that became apparent through her analysis of Kant between truth and meaning into her 'Introduction into Politics.' This distinction, when interpreted alongside her *Lectures* on Kant, reveal a key insight into politics; namely, the importance of aesthetic representation in politics speaks about human *ontology* more generally: *the* condition of politics is plurality (Kohn, 2005: x). The meaning of politics is freedom, according to Arendt; and she is steadfastly committed not only to think or *theorize* about political events but convicted to stress rather emphatically why *response* and, therefore, collective *responsibility* is politically promising insofar as it makes possible 'empowerment'. In the words of Arendt: "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...the freedom to interact in speech with many others and experience the diversity that the world always is in its totality – most certainly was and is not the end purpose of politics...something that can be achieved by political means. It is rather the substance and meaning of all things political. In this sense, politics and freedom are identical" (Arendt, 2005: xxx-xxx).

Thus, recalling the debate concerning the 'modern crisis,' what is important to note is how Arendt's observations of the political conditions of *reality* motivated *both* her (de)construction of the historical bias of the tyranny of truth *and* inspired her (re)construction of its political possibilities. Such a method, if understood only in (de)constructive currency, would remain blind and deaf to the ways in which Arendt had hoped to transform politics by dismantling its fundamental prejudices – a point that Kohn has always maintained.¹⁰ Given common worldliness, and, given our inter-subjective relations Arendt's politics had no other choice but to make a break with tradition since the world that is held in common (Kant's *societas*) and relational-ontology are equally denied. Such a break was not inspired however by skepticism; rather, it was the *reality* of the times that had thoroughly persuaded her that the question 'what is politics' had to be (re)constituted as 'what is the meaning of the political'. Introducing Arendt's papers during her exile in *Essays in Understanding*, Kohn puts it this way:

Arendt believed that political thought in the twentieth century had to break with its own tradition in as radical a sense as the systematic mass murder enacted by totalitarian regimes broke with the traditional understanding of political action. Her anticipation of evil as "the fundamental question" to be faced in the postwar world explains her recognition of the need for peoples to be reconciled and for a new beginning to be made. Evil had become manifest as the inversion of the age-old foundation of Western morality – Thou shalt not kill – and was less abstractly understood as the "monstrousness," and "inhumanity" of the creation of "absolutely innocent" victims to demonstrate the motion of the so-called laws of nature and history" (Kohn, 1994: xxvi-xxvii).

The evil and horror of totalitarian domination, along with the stories of violence and human degradation and utter hopelessness, may not have been enough to motivate Arendt's work, however. Perhaps, it was something more subtle that motivated this

“break”, something Margaret Canovan makes exceptionally well: namely, that that it is not simply the danger of totalitarian murderers that ought to inspire a sense of danger and fear. More importantly, it was Arendt’s acknowledgement of the self-perception of “superhuman” abilities in persons who trusted in their own ability to embodying the superior “laws of Nature and History”¹¹ and thereby “abandon themselves”.¹² In this sense, it was more likely “the meaning of evil”, as Richard Bernstein has noted, that required of her that rethink and, subsequently, depart from the tradition.¹³

Given the overwhelming weight of this alien sort of evil, Arendt had no choice *but* to alienate her own thought from all other traditional categories. This point is reiterated by Kohn who explains,

[S]he had no choice but think apart from traditional categories – *ohne Geländer* (“without banisters”), as she used to say – if she were to succeed in bringing to light an evil that was unknown and could not have been known within the tradition; and she had no choice but to exercise her faculty of imagination if she were to reexperience the hidden elements that finally, and suddenly, had coalesced and precipitated an explosion whose end, had it not been stopped, would have been the destruction of human plurality and the human world. For all its novelty, the horror of totalitarian domination was not “imported from the moon,” as she put it more than once in the 1950’s (Kohn, 2005: xiii).¹⁴

Since totalitarianism was enacted and, therefore, willed by human beings in whom the belief of their own superiority and superfluous powers inspired great evil, it is perhaps not surprising that Arendt turned her attention to the human condition – that is, to what people think and do. Furthermore, since it was not “imported from the moon”, it probably made no sense to Arendt to deliberately prioritize theory, to philosophize about the grandeur and salvation of the *vita contemplativa* (‘the life of contemplation’). Instead and quite to the contrary, Arendt did just the opposite: she sought to deconstruct the *vita contemplativa* and (re)construct the social, human community of *vita activa* (‘the life of action’). More appropriately, Arendt’s concern with respect to addressing ‘what politics means’ is to point out political hope. Unlike the narratives of salvation that have prevailed in both theological and philosophic texts alike, Arendtian politics is hopeful not because it demands *salvation* but because it (re)constructs and, therefore, confirms the dignity and *value* of worldly life – a theme Arendt repeats often but one that even plays a significant role in her supposedly less politically promising and more skeptical works, *The Human Condition*.¹⁵

VII: What is the Meaning of Politics for *Our* World?

That modernity grew out of, and embraced, the prejudicial evaluation of ‘truth’ in contradistinction to ‘meaning’ is what Arendt hopes to (de)construct throughout various works: *Between Past and Future*, *The Human Condition*, *The Life of the Mind* and, most recently, in her posthumously published work, *The Promise of Politics*. In this paper I have aimed to show how this (de)construction appears in several different ways and emerges as part of her various treatments of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Kant. Next, I

aimed to show how this conceptual commitment complements her (re)construction of *the condition of politics* in terms of natality, intersubjectivity, and plurality. By articulating political existence along Kantian lines, Arendt's politics turns to the phenomenological and embodied condition of speech and action, so as to render bring the meaningfulness of *this world, this political reality, this social community* into focus.

In keeping with this reading, in his introduction of *The Promise of Politics* Kohn retraces the thought processes of Hannah Arendt and invites us to think about what it meant to Arendt to 'witness' such a politically dark time in human history. He writes:

Let us imagine a time when traditional standards of judgment, such as moral commandments issued from the mouth of God, or ethical principles derived from immutable natural law, or practical maxims that have passed the test of universal reason, no longer correspond to reality. In such a time people would see traditional standards, even without denying their rectitude, as useless in prescribing what they are called upon to do in the actual circumstances of their lives.¹⁶ Under totalitarian rule, as we know, people betrayed their families and killed their neighbors, not only in obedience to the dictates of their masters, but also in accordance with ideological laws governing the inevitable "progress" of society. We may rightly say that these people acted without judgment, but the point is that in the light of the necessity of those higher laws of movement the very standards of family devotion and neighborly love appear as prejudices and prejudgments. Arendt came to understand that all rules – for good or evil, and regardless of their source – which purport to govern human action from without are apolitical and even anti-political. The depth of her appreciation of politics can be glimpsed in her contention that the only standards of judgment with any degree of dependability are in no sense handed down from above but emerge from human plurality, *the condition of politics*. Political judgment is not a matter of knowledge, pseudoknowledge, or speculative thought. It does not eliminate risk but affirms human freedom and the world that free people share with one another. Or rather, it establishes the *reality* of human freedom in a common world (Kohn, 2005: x-xi).

Following Kohn's reading, it becomes evident that it is perhaps only in the absence of "traditional standards of judgment," through the disappearance of "all rules – for good or evil, regardless of their source", that a political theory like Arendt's could emerge. For, amongst other important contributions, the most important insight his analysis directs us to is Arendt's "contention that the only standards of judgment with any degree of dependability are in no sense handed down from above but emerge from human plurality, *the condition of politics*" (Kohn, 2005: x). This is worth pursuing at greater length.

Imagine, if you will, the world that Kohn describes, a world that appears to have lost all sense of moral political standards and all substantive value, a time that is indeed "out of joint". Can we, who are so distant from this dark world, truly imagine the political horror of which they speak? If so, from what standpoint can this 'imagination' take place? Can you even imagine a time when we may betray our most loved lover, the best

of all our friends, in order to survive just one more day? If so, from which perspective should we stand? Can anyone ever know? *What absolute horror it must have been to see one's children a final time, knowing that the charcoal they were shoveling that morning would, later that afternoon, become the charred black smoke that disintegrated their tiny bodies – bodies that had grown in your own womb – now billowing ominously against the scenic countryside...* How can the mind truly imagine what means to have experienced this? Can there even be political 'promise' in dark times like these? It is at this juncture that the difference between truth and meaning becomes resolutely clear: stories, while without an ability to monopolize on 'truth,' matter.

At this point, a story might prove appropriate. In his introduction to *The Promise of Politics*, Kohn shares with us a story about his beloved professor, Dr. Hannah Arendt – one that indeed matters and is relevant here. Recalling his experience, from the viewpoint of being her student in a graduate seminar, he writes,

What is crucial for Arendt is that the specific meaning of an event that happened in the past remains potentially alive in the reproductive imagination. When that meaning, however much it may offend our moral sense, is reproduced in a story and experienced vicariously, it reclaims the depth of the world. Sharing vicarious experiences in this manner may be the most efficacious way of becoming reconciled to the past's presence in the world, and preventing our estrangement from historical reality. That Arendt intended her stories of the past to be heard by others was brought home to me in her seminar on "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century." Though given in 1968, almost a decade after the latest writings in this volume, her emphasis on experiences in the plural situates the seminar in the company of earlier writings. The first words she addressed to her students were "No theories; forget all theories." What she did *not* mean, she immediately added, was for us to "stop thinking," for "thought and theory are not the same." She told us that thinking about that event *is* remembering it, that 'otherwise, it is forgotten,' and that such forgetting jeopardizes the meaningfulness of *our* world"¹⁷ (Kohn, 2005: xxii).

Two points are worth noting. It is in exercising our freedom through speaking and engaging with others that objectivity and visibility – Kant's 'enlarged mentality' – emerge. Second, it is the substance of this exchange that is meaningful; namely, because through our interaction in speech with one another, we reconfirm the dignity of ourselves; in our remembering of an event, we preserve a sense of 'collective memory' that will remind us in the future what makes this world so precious and meaningful.

Let us continue to think about why else stories might matter to Arendt. Kohn continues his account by explaining how the seminar unfolded. He writes: "She wanted us to remember some of the major political events – wars, revolutions, and the disasters that accompanied them – of the twentieth century in their succession" (xxii), and goes on to cite some of the major events that occupied their class discussions: WWI, the Russian and Chinese revolutions, WWII, the emergence of the concentration camps, and atomic bombs that destroyed two Japanese cities (xxii). Kohn's recounting of his own

experiences as a participant in these lectures is significant. It is important for two reasons. First, it is a reminder of Arendt's key philosophical problem: *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. Second, it is suggestive of something Arendt herself seems to have held dear: the political import and meaningfulness of the witness. Therefore, what one must keep in mind is that Arendt's appreciation of narrative emerges not as some form of political pessimism but, more precisely, as a kind of *political hope for the future*.¹⁸

VIII: Arendt's Hope: The Promise of Politics

To better appreciate her point and in keeping with Kohn's reminder to us not to "stop thinking" but to "forget theory," I will now turn to the powerful narrative of Elie Wiesel and quote a length passage from his Nobel Peace Prize novel, *Night*. In this slim, but powerful, work Wiesel narrates for us from memory his experience of Auschwitz and its significance for *our* world today. He writes:

I remember that night, the most horrendous of my life:

"...Eliezer, my son, come here...I want to tell you something...Only to you...Come, don't leave me alone...Eliezer..."

I heard his voice, grasped the meaning of his words and the tragic dimension of the moment, yet I did not move.

It had been his last wish to have me next to him in his agony, at the moment when his soul was tearing itself from his lacerated body – yet I did not let him have his wish.

I was afraid.

Afraid of the blows.

That was why I remained deaf to his cries.

Instead of sacrificing my miserable life and rushing to his side, taking his hand, reassuring him, showing him that he was not abandoned, that I was near him, that I felt his sorrow, instead of all that, I remained flat on my back, asking God to make my father stop calling my name, to make him stop crying. So afraid was I to incur the wrath of the SS.

In fact, my father was no longer conscious.

Yet his plaintive, harrowing voice went on piercing the silence and calling me, nobody but me.

"Well?" The SS had flown into a rage and was striking my father on the head: "Be quiet, old man! Be quiet!"

My father no longer felt the club's blows; I did. And yet I did not react. I let the SS beat my father, I left him alone in the clutches of death. Worse: I was angry with him for having been noisy, for having cried, for provoking the wrath of the SS.

"Eliezer! Elizer! Come, don't leave me alone..."

His voice had reached me from so far away, from so close. But I had not moved.

I shall never forgive myself.

Nor shall I ever forgive the world for having pushed me against the wall, for having turned me into a stranger, for having awakened in me the basest, most primitive instincts.

His last word had been my name. A summons. And I had not responded (Wiesel, 2006: xi-xii).

This story, the fateful and final night shared between Eliezer and his father, matters because human dignity – *life* – matters. Regardless of whether one accepts or rejects the past, such narratives remain meaningful because in the preservation of the past lies the power of a politics of memory to emerge, to begin anew, and be preserved for the future. Whether such a politic will bring to bear any import for how politics unfolds in the future, Wiesel and Arendt appear unsure.¹⁹ But this may not be the point. For, to insist upon *progress* is to make suppositions that Arendt's work would not allow. Rather, the point is to bear witness, *to* relate one's experiences *for* and *with* others. To illuminate such a relation is not, however, to simply espouse political 'communitarianism'; rather, to bear witness is to respond *autonomously*, *with* and amongst others. Most importantly, stories politically matter not just because of the capacity to preserve collective meaning to memory; but, the telling of the story itself as a moral political witness implies a particular *act* and political position of taking accountability [*logos*]²⁰ – a sentiment Wiesel articulates in the following way:

For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead *and* for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.

Sometimes I am asked if I know "the response to Auschwitz"; I answer that not only do I not know it, but that I don't even know if a tragedy of this magnitude has a response. What I do know is that there is "response" in responsibility. When we speak of this era of evil and darkness, so close and yet so distant, "responsibility" is the key word.

The witness has forced himself to testify. For the youth of today, for the children who will be born tomorrow. He does not want his past to become their future (xi).

To conclude: Kohn's account forces us to remember what Arendt's critique of modernity was motivated by: the events of the twentieth century. In this section, I've shown that it is precisely because she took the events of her time seriously that Arendt was able fully appreciate the political power of memory. Contrary to the prevailing tradition, the political writings of Arendt take anchorage *in* human life. Arendt, like Wiesel, realizes that one can never undo what has been done in the past; and both seem to have faith in fact that, despite mortal limitations, human beings indeed have the capability to respond and, further, that this exemplifies human *responsibility* – not just to the *past* or *present* but, as with violence that may be required in revolution, set towards securing human dignity for the children who will be born in the *future*.

The point is this. If we read Arendt's critique of modernity simply as a devaluation of reason and rationality, then it is altogether too possible that we may overlook how her concerns over theory actually translate into her development of a politics of memory and a moral political account of responsibility. "The task, the end purpose, of politics," as Arendt says, no matter how complex the situation and irrespective of how dark the time may be, must always be "to safeguard life in the broadest sense" (Arendt, 2005: 115). Such a politic is not about what is *true*, it is *meaningful* and what matters most, above all else; and, to this Arendt answers: *life*.

Endnotes

¹ George Kateb explains this point well in his essay, “Political Action: Its Nature and its Advantages” stating: “for Arendt, violence is not political at all; much less is it the means that defines politics, as with Weber; and, equally important, she says, in one formulation, that great effects of political action come about “where people are with others and neither for nor against them – that is in sheer human togetherness” (HC, 180)” (2000, 133).

² Here, Arendt’s arguments reiterate her earlier arguments unifying violence to natality, and natality to the promise of political action, in her University of Chicago lectures later published as *The Human Condition* in 1958. Specifically, on page 26 she writes: “Only sheer violence is mute, and for this reason violence alone can never be great”.

³ For an excellent account of Arendt’s philosophy of natality as a capacity for beginning and its relation to revolution and democracy, see Leah Bradshaw’s work *Thinking and Acting: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (1989). In chapter two, ‘Acting in the Realm of Appearances,’ Bradshaw offers a direct treatment of these themes, stating: “*On Revolution*, arguably Arendt’s most popular book, defends revolutions as ‘the only political events which confront us direct and inevitably with the problem of beginning’ [OR, 21]. The glorious aspect of revolution, for Arendt, was its close bond with ‘natality,’ its effort to make a radically free, new beginning in human association. But her idea of revolution has little in common with other contemporary notions in that she did not view revolution, in the best sense, as any kind of fight against oppression or liberation from exploitation. For her, revolutions are legitimate only if they approximate the ideal of human equals for the sheer enjoyment of freedom. For this end Arendt was willing to pay the price of a violent beginning [OR, 79]. Revolutions, then, are defined as follows: ‘Only when change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politics, where the liberation from oppression aims at last at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution’ [OR, 35].”

Bradshaw goes on to explain how Arendt “wrote passionately” about the *promise* of *Modern revolutions* – particularly the French and American Revolutions – to revive the *Ancient polis* and “furnish a new ‘agora’ for the disclosure of the ‘who’” (1989, 52) and cites Arendt’s account of the failure of the former over the latter to show why the French Revolution has become a “classic case of a potential revolution that forfeited its ‘new beginning’ in the fight against poverty and misery” (1989, 52). Bradshaw continues: “When attention was shifted from creating a new space for freedom to liberating the many for their collective misery, the opportunity to fashion new institutions and channels for the exchange of opinions was lost: ‘The Revolution, when it turned from the foundation of freedom to the liberation of man from suffering, broke down the barriers of endurance and liberated, as it were, the devastating forces of misfortune and misery instead’ [OR, 111, 112]. There are echoes here of Arendt’s distinctions among labor, work, and action. It is as though she were saying that once the concerns of the downtrodden and poor, in short the masses, are allowed to dominate the political realm, the potential for true action is sacrificed. In contrast to what Arendt regarded as a legitimate plurality – a plenitude of voices expressing many informed and diverse opinions – the masses are ill-equipped for public action or ‘plurality’ among them....” (1989, 52-53).

⁴ Kateb also attributes this to her experiences of WWII, writing: “Totalitarianism pressed on her with such force that she had to respond to and try to be theoretically adequate to those great horrors” (2000, 130).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ C.f. Arendt, Hannah. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 59-61, 257. Villa goes on to say: It is this decidedly ontological slant that distinguishes her account of the “instrumentalization of the political” from parallel accounts (e.g. Habermas’s) that depart from the Weberian concept of rationalization (Villa, 2001: 290). Due to brevity, I simply cannot discuss whether Arendt’s account distinguishes her project from that of Habermas’s theory of communication. For, in my

humble opinion, such an issue requires much further interest and attention before any conclusive determinations can be made.

⁷ In this respect, the gulf between theory and practice or thought and action comes to the fore not simply in Arendt's work but also as a reflection of the political experiences that most influenced her life. Citing a passage in which Arendt claimed that "behind every theory there are incidents and stories that 'contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say'," Leah Bradshaw claims that "In light of this remark one might say that the most important 'incident' behind Arendt's theory is the twentieth-century experience of totalitarianism," adding: "She commented on more than one occasion that the experience of living in, and fleeing from, Nazi Germany was the formative experience of her life" (1989, 39).

⁸ Arendt, Hannah (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 284.

⁹ Dante, *Paradiso* 6.124

¹⁰ To put it simply, in "Evil and Plurality: Hannah Arendt's Way to *The Life of the Mind*, Kohn writes "Hannah Arendt was interested in what people *do* and the *ways their doing affect the world*, for better or worse" (Kohn, 1994: 145; my italics for emphasis).

¹¹ Canovan, Margaret (1992) *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 24, n.30.

¹² This theme, in particular Canovan's insights concerning the centrality of Arendt's *OT*, are both discussed at length in Richard Bernstein's essay treating her evolving conception of evil. Specifically, Bernstein discusses at length how Arendt's analysis of the concentration camps led her to focus most explicitly on the phenomenon of superfluousness and explicates the radical nature of totalitarian domination of evil. See: Bernstein, Richard. (1996) 'Did Hannah Arendt Change her Mind? : From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil' in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, eds. Larry May and Jerome Kohn. Cambridge: MIT Press: 127 – 146.

¹³ *Ibid*: 127.

¹⁴ Kohn cites the following work here: H. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 310, 404.

¹⁵ As Bradshaw puts it, "After her opening comments in *The Human Condition*, directed at the debilitating effects that philosophy and society have on politics, Arendt turned to what she thought was the real root of the problem in the Western tradition: the glorification of work in earlier polities and, worse, the emphasis on labour in modern ones. Just as she regarded labour as an activity inferior to work, and both of them as inferior to action, so too she regarded modern conception for politics as inferior to ancient one, and both of them as inferior to what politics *could be*" (Bradshaw, 1989: 13).

¹⁶ Here, Kohn offers the following editorial notation: "This matter is discussed at length in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in H. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003).

¹⁷ In his introduction to *The Promise of Politics* editor J. Kohn adds the following notation to this section, stating: "I am drawing from Arendt's outline of this seminar, which is in the Library of Congress as well as my own notes" (xxii). When I recently visited the Hannah Arendt's Library of Congress at the New School in New York City, I too was able to verify Kohn's claims concerning the importance Arendt placed on political memory, plurality, and collective meaning. Like Kohn, I think Arendt's remarks are indeed significant and should be read more closely in relation to her critical comments concerning theory and practice.

¹⁸ Here I am thinking especially of Arendt's historical account of politics in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and critique of Marxism in *The Human Condition* (1958) as attempts to inform this view that political memory may prove invaluable for the meaning and preservation of politics.

¹⁹ Elie Wiesel's expresses this concern in the following passage:

“And now, scarcely ten years after Buchenwald, I realize that the world forgets quickly...The past seems to have been erased, related to oblivion.

Today, there are anti-Semites in Germany, France, and even the United States who tell the world that the “story” of six million assassinated Jews is nothing but a hoax, and many people, not knowing any better, may well believe them, if not today then tomorrow or the day after...

I am not so naïve as to believe that this slim volume will change the course of history or shake the conscience of the world.

Books no longer have the power they once did.

Those who kept silent yesterday will remain silent tomorrow” (2006, xii-xiii).

²⁰ On this point, I think a philosophically important and historically conceptual lineage between Socrates, Aristotle and Kant emerges in Arendt's thought. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss the complex relationship in the thought of Arendt here; however, suffice to say, I think that a much more robust account of ‘communication’ is at work, lending a good deal more credibility to the Benhabib's Habermasian-inspired reading than Villa permits.

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