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ARENDTIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO LIBERAL POLITICAL THEORY

by

Sarah M. McGrath

B.S. Grand Valley State University, 2002

B.A. Grand Valley State University, 2003

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

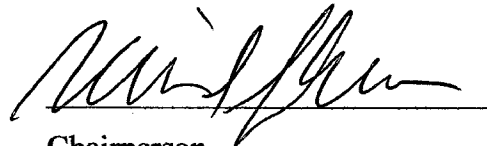
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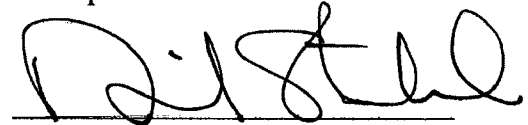
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Arendtian Contributions to Liberal Political Theory

Director: David Sherman 

The current project examines the relation of Hannah Arendt's theory of political action to the liberal theories of political consensus offered by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. It consists of three main arguments: that Arendt's theory of action *can* be brought into a productive tension with liberal theories of consensus, that something like Arendtian action is *necessary* to the liberal political model, and that action can *add* to liberal theories of consensus by offering a vibrant account of democracy. First, I argue that liberal consensus can be mediated by action, both because liberalism is able to accommodate the sort of contestatory political speech characteristic of action and because Arendt's theory of consensus, which informs and is informed by her concept of action, is quite similar to Habermas's theory of consensus. Second, I argue that action is necessary to the Habermasian version of liberalism because Habermas's theory requires the public expression of participants' differing viewpoints at the outset of political deliberation, and action is oriented toward achieving that expression. Finally, I argue that action can enrich the liberal model by offering a vibrant conception of democracy that emphasizes the public representation of individuals' political opinions.

Introduction	1
1. Liberalism and Pluralism	7
1.1 Pluralism: Historical Origins	8
1.2 The Problem of Pluralism and the Liberal Solution	11
1.3 Rawls's Distinctive Contribution	16
2. Arendt's Basic Distinctions	19
2.1 Arendt's Concept of Action	21
2.1.1 Natality	22
2.1.2 Intersubjectivity	23
2.2 Action and the <i>Vita Activa</i>	33
2.2.1 Work	34
2.2.2 Labor	38
2.2.2a Action and Labor	43
2.2.2b What is Action About?	44
2.2.2c Action and the Labor Movement	45
3. Arendt and Liberalism	49
3.1 Objections	50
3.1.1 Arendt's "Method:" Fragmentary Historiography	51
3.1.2 "Arendt Against Athens"	54
3.1.3 Pitkin	58
3.2 Rawls, Habermas and Arendt	68
3.2.1 Habermas and Rawlsian Liberalism	69
3.2.2 Judgment and "Enlarged Mentality"	72
3.2.3 Arendt and Habermas	77
3.2.4 Benhabib	79
3.2.5 Action and "Difference"	80
3.2.6 Markell: "Contesting Consensus"	84

4.	Action and Democracy	88
4.1	The Necessity of Action	89
4.2.1	Disclosure of the Individual in the Act	90
4.2.2	Action's Disclosure of Perspectives	92
4.3	Mediating Action and Consensus	96
4.4	Action and Democracy	102

## Introduction

I propose here to examine the following question: what benefits can Hannah Arendt's theory of action bring to contemporary theories of political liberalism? While liberalism is currently the dominant paradigm in contemporary American political philosophy, Arendt's theory of action is less visible and indeed, is generally deemed to be inconsistent with liberalism. In spite of this asymmetry, I believe Arendt's theory of action can make important contributions to liberal political theory. Taking John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas to represent the cutting edge of liberalism, my thesis consists of three main arguments: that Arendt's theory of action *can* be brought into a productive tension with their political theories, that something like Arendtian action is *necessary* to the liberal model of politics, and that action *adds* to liberal theory by offering a vibrant account of democracy.

Arendt's political theory has two major elements: her concept of action, which I discuss in Chapter Two, and her concept of judgment, which I discuss in Chapter Three. Arendt's political theory most closely resembles liberal political theory in her concept of judgment. With judgment, Arendt provides a theory of how to achieve an impartial consensus among political participants with contradictory viewpoints. Here, as Seyla Benhabib has noted,<sup>1</sup> Arendt seems to be addressing the modern problem also addressed by liberal political theory. Action, however, is different. Its aim is not achieving consensus among parties whose views conflict; rather, its goal is the public disclosure of the actors and their differing viewpoints. Because of its emphasis on the expression of differing viewpoints, the focus of action is public participation and citizen engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 190.



For this reason, Arendt is sometimes misidentified as a republican. However, her political theory manifests no commitment to a comprehensive worldview, as does classical republicanism. Her concern is instead to mediate the participatory, expressive position of the political actor with the conciliatory, consensus-oriented position that one adopts when judging. It is on the basis of Arendt's mediation of judgment and action that I argue her theory of action can complement liberal political theory. This is because judgment is quite similar to liberal consensus-formation, especially as theorized by Habermas. If judgment can be successfully mediated by action, then so can liberalism.

I think it is important to discuss Arendt's theory of action in the context of liberalism because of action's stress on the public representation of individual political opinions. For the same reason, I prefer Habermas's variant of liberalism to Rawls's; Habermas, like Arendt, is concerned with the public representation of individual viewpoints. However, Habermas stops prematurely and never fully adopts the position of the political actor. The "goal" of action is the disclosure or expression of the actors' differing viewpoints through contestatory political speech. In Habermas's model, individuals must understand the viewpoints of others in order to come to consensus, but this is only possible if these viewpoints are publicly disclosed. Here, Arendtian action is helpful because the contestatory speech that characterizes action is oriented toward precisely such disclosure.

Action's emphasis on public representation of differing views is also important because it offers a vibrant account of democracy. I think that the public representation of citizens' opinions is intrinsic to the meaning of democracy. The idea of democracy demands that individuals have a say in politics and that they be able to speak as

themselves. A vital account of democracy also requires the contestation of social norms. I think that the public expression and vigorous contestation found in a vibrant democracy are exactly what Arendt's account of action provides.

In Chapter One, I begin by examining the problematic that liberalism seeks to address. With the rise of modernity, politics could no longer be grounded, as the religious and philosophical search for the ultimate foundations of politics could not be publicly justified by an appeal to shared values. In other words, with the rise of modernity, society became pluralistic, and a "proliferation of worldviews" came to be the hallmark of the modern age. For liberals, the fact of pluralism presents a problem: how to reach those agreements necessary to get along in a common world, and thus share the benefits of social cooperation, when persons hold fundamentally different beliefs.

The Rawlsian solution to the problem presented by pluralism rests on the possibility of a "thin" political consensus. Individual groups within pluralistic society hold vastly different fundamental beliefs, which Rawls refers to as "comprehensive doctrines," and liberal political theory seeks a politics that can be affirmed by individuals with differing comprehensive doctrines, without itself endorsing any particular comprehensive doctrine. Rawls's political theory is "thin" or purely "political," insofar as it must not rely on any of the constituent groups' comprehensive notions of the good life, and thus can be assented to by all reasonable pluralists, irrespective of their particular "thick" conceptions of the good.

Given that pluralism is the specifically modern problem that liberalism seeks to address, if Arendt has anything to offer liberalism, it must be shown that she can offer a response that recognizes the modern situation. To anticipate my argument in Chapter

Three, I think that Arendt offers such a response with her theory of judgment. Arendt's account of judgment presents a theory of politics that is similar to the liberal account of politics, particularly Habermas's account. But what about her theory of *action*? Again to anticipate a bit, I argue in Chapter Four that action can be related to liberal theory in the same way it relates to Arendt's concept of judgment. In Arendt's work, action and judgment stand in a productive tension: while the task of judgment is to achieve consensus amid differing points of view, the task of action is to ensure the public representation of those viewpoints that is essential to their ultimate reconciliation. Because judgment is largely similar to the Habermasian variant of liberal consensus theory, action can also be mediated by liberal consensus theory in the same way that action and judgment are mediated in Arendt's political theory.

In Chapter Two, I present an overview of Arendt's philosophical architectonic, focusing especially on her theory of action, which represents the cornerstone of her political theory. Here, I will try to lay out in the most general terms what Arendt is doing. This is necessary given Arendt's unusual method for reading the philosophical tradition. I first explain her most basic distinction, between the active life and the contemplative life, and the tripartite distinctions endemic to each: the active life is comprised of labor, work and action, and the contemplative life is comprised of thinking, willing and judging. Second, I provide a more detailed description of action, since that is the primary focus here. Third, I focus on two relations within Arendt's primary distinctions that are important for understanding the criticisms of Arendt that I address in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three has three tasks: to address relevant criticisms of Arendt's work, to discuss how Arendt's concept of judgment relates to the project of liberalism, and to argue for liberalism's ability to accommodate Arendt's agonistic concept of action. I first discuss two major criticisms. The first criticism concerns Arendt's status as a modern thinker. It is sometimes argued that Arendt is nostalgic for pre-modern times, particularly the ancient Greek world; however, if this is the case, she cannot address the liberal problematic because she is not concerned with genuinely modern problems. The second criticism is leveled by Hanna Pitkin, who argues that Arendt problematically separates labor and action. In that case, action cannot address basic issues of social justice that liberals are concerned with, such as the economic condition of citizens. After addressing these criticisms, I discuss Arendt's theory of judgment and its relation to liberal political theory. I argue that judgment bears remarkable similarities to Habermas's theory of consensus, particularly with respect to the concept of "enlarged mentality." Drawing on an analysis by Patchen Markell, I conclude Chapter Three by arguing that Habermas's political theory is compatible with Arendt's concept of action because Habermasian political discourse can accommodate the sort of contestatory political speech characteristic of action.

In Chapter Four, I build on Markell's analysis. I argue, first, that "agonistic" political action is not only compatible with a Habermasian theory of consensus, but is necessary to it. The reconciliation of differing perspectives in Habermas's theory of consensus requires their public expression, and I argue that the contestatory speech characteristic of action is the best way to obtain such disclosure. Second, I argue that because action and judgment can be mediated in Arendt's political theory, then action can

also be mediated by liberal consensus theory. Third, I argue that the expressive or disclosive dimension of action enriches the conception of democracy provided by Rawls and Habermas because of its emphasis on the public representation of the viewpoints and identities of the individual actors. But, first, it is necessary to discuss liberalism and the distinctive way it addresses the modern problem of pluralism.

## 1. Liberalism and Pluralism

The central problem that liberalism seeks to address is pluralism. Modern society is pluralistic. That is, it is comprised of individuals and groups that hold varied and often opposed conceptions of the good. Conceptions of the good endemic to pluralistic society are called “comprehensive” because they are comprised of fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world and of humanity. Because modern society is pluralistic, we are presented with a problem. If different social groups hold different comprehensive views, how can the members of society find common ground to organize political institutions? Liberalism offers an answer to this question. Even if we hold divergent comprehensive beliefs, perhaps we can achieve a limited moral agreement on the basic structure of our society, such that individuals are free to pursue their differing conceptions of the good, while sharing the benefits of social cooperation. Liberals believe this is possible. If a moral agreement can be achieved so as to not depend on any particular comprehensive doctrine, then reasonable individuals can share a morally acceptable state and achieve the benefits of social cooperation. Such a state of affairs would leave individuals free to follow their own conceptions of the good, consistent with the requirements of the shared political morality. Society would not dictate beliefs but would impose the shared condition of fairness, and all reasonable individuals could deem such a society to be just.

In this chapter, I examine the liberal understanding of pluralism. I first examine the account of its historical origins. Second, I explain how liberals see pluralism as a problem. Third, I examine the liberal solution generally to the problem of pluralism. Finally, I discuss one of John Rawls’s distinctive twists to this solution, his “original position.”

## 1.1 Pluralism: Historical Origins

According to Rawls, three primary historical developments led to modern pluralism: modern science, the Reformation and the emergence of the modern state, with its characteristically centralized administration.<sup>2</sup> Because pluralism is a distinctive attribute of the modern age, it can be understood to contrast with the ancient and medieval periods that preceded it. Here, I will briefly outline the distinction Rawls makes between the three periods.

Moral philosophy in Ancient Greece was what Rawls refers to as a “civil religion.” That is, while the Greeks held beliefs about the gods, one’s obligations as a citizen of the state were most important. Citizens could more or less believe whatever they chose in private; what mattered was their public performance of their duties as citizens. As Rawls puts it, “As long as one participated in the expected way and recognized the proprieties, the details of what one believed were not of great importance. It was a matter of doing the done thing and being a trustworthy member of society, always ready to carry out one’s civic duties as a good citizen.”<sup>3</sup> The important thing to note is that, although Greek morality was civil rather than strictly religious, Greek society was in no sense pluralistic. Although one might quietly doubt the Athenian gods, the “civil religion” of the Greeks did not permit any alternative to what it held to be the “highest good:” the performance of one’s obligations to the state.<sup>4</sup> As such, the Greek conception of a “civil religion” is definitely a comprehensive notion of the good. What is distinctive about their conception of the good is that it is secular rather than religious. Thus, the relative unimportance of traditional religion was due not to a quasi-liberal ideal

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<sup>2</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xxii-xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

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

of toleration but rather to their preference of a secular, albeit also comprehensive, notion of the good.

The medieval situation was quite different. The most obvious difference regards religion. While the Greeks held to their secular “civil religion,” medieval Europe was Christian. Rawls notes five characteristics of medieval Christianity that the ancient Greek world lacked: it was authoritarian; it was a religion of salvation; it was doctrinal; it was a religion of priests who had the exclusive authority to dispense the means of salvation; and it was expansionist.<sup>5</sup> Given these features, the medieval world was also not pluralistic. Rawls makes it clear that, in the medieval world, “people were not in doubt about the nature of the highest good, or the basis of moral obligation in divine law. These things they thought they knew with the certainty of faith, as here their moral theology gave them complete guidance.”<sup>6</sup> Like the Greek world, medieval Christianity was based on a notion of the highest good, but for the Christians, this good was religious rather than secular.

With the Reformation, this picture began to change. A political problem arose when, with Luther, Christianity split. Christians were forced to ask how and even if a society could exist between people that hold different religious beliefs. In this way the problem of pluralism began to emerge. At first it was a matter of the possibility of religious toleration. Here, prospects were not bright: “When an authoritative, salvationist, and expansionist religion like medieval Christianity divides, this inevitably means the appearance within the same society of a rival authoritative and salvationist

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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



religion... Luther and Calvin were as dogmatic as the Roman Church had been.”<sup>7</sup> Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that many did not favor religious toleration. Those who did favor toleration often only did so because they recognized it as the only alternative to perpetual religious war.<sup>8</sup>

The Reformation began the decline of the search for ultimate foundations that characterizes the modern era. Modern science provided a non-religious account of the universe and human life, and the genesis of the centralized modern state made imperative the constitutional limitation of the power of monarchs. But, while these and other events played an important role in the birth of modernity, the proliferation of Protestant faiths is taken to be most significant to pluralism. As Rawls states, “yet despite the significance of other controversies and of principles addressed to settling them, the fact of religious division remains. For this reason, political liberalism assumes the fact of reasonable pluralism as a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines.”<sup>9</sup> Because of the variety of faiths found in the modern world, liberals take pluralism as a given, but that is not to say that religious differences are the only sorts of differences that pluralism encompasses.

Rawls often notes that liberalism, in addition to remaining neutral with respect to religion, also leaves aside metaphysics or “philosophy.” It is not only religious doctrines that are let alone, but all comprehensive doctrines. Richard Rorty explains Rawls’s position with respect to “philosophy” well. He says that, for Rawls, “philosophy” refers to claims concerning human nature.<sup>10</sup> Just as Rawls wants politics to be removed from

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xxiv.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History* (Cambridge Studies in Religion and American Public Life), ed. Merrill Peterson and Robert Vaughan, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2003), 263.

disputes concerning religion, he also wants politics to be detached from disputes over human nature. This makes sense given the historical development of pluralism:

“Intellectual historians commonly treat ‘the nature of the human subject’ as the topic that gradually replaced ‘God’ as European culture secularized itself. This has been the central topic of metaphysics and epistemology from the seventeenth century to the present, and, for better or for worse, metaphysics and epistemology have been taken to be the ‘core’ of philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> The splitting of Roman Catholicism and the proliferation of Protestant faiths paved the way for the proliferation of secular worldviews as well, and for these the nature of the human subject held a central place. In this way, the secularization of western culture led to a turn from the heavens “inward,” to the nature of the subject. Here, “philosophy” fared no better than religion. Just as religious believers disputed the nature of God and creation, secularists disputed the nature of the self. The result was a heightened sense of pluralism.

## 1.2 The Problem of Pluralism and the Liberal Solution

The fact of modern pluralism presents us with a problem: “How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?”<sup>12</sup> Because pluralism is an irrevocable contemporary fact, we cannot expect to return to a unified view of the highest good, at least not without coercion. As Rawls puts it, “The essential point is this: as a practical political matter no general moral conception can provide a publicly recognized basis for a conception of justice in a modern democratic state.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>12</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xxv.

<sup>13</sup> John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 4, (Summer 1985): 225.

Because of pluralism, the attempt to base society on a comprehensive doctrine could not gain the assent of all reasonable members of the state. This could only be accomplished via undemocratic means.<sup>14</sup> Because of this, liberals seek to find a political basis for social cooperation apart from individuals' comprehensive doctrines. Given the fact of pluralism, this requires that, "[a workable conception of political justice] must allow for a diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies."<sup>15</sup>

.One important thing to note is that, although pluralism is the "problem" that liberalism addresses, liberals such as Rawls are not looking to overcome or eliminate it. Pluralism also presents a distinctive possibility. Rawls notes that "to see reasonable pluralism as a disaster is to see the exercise of reason under the conditions of freedom itself as a disaster. Indeed the success of liberal constitutionalism came as a discovery of a new social possibility: the possibility of a reasonably harmonious and stable pluralist society."<sup>16</sup> So, even though liberalism treats pluralism as a problem with potentially dangerous consequences, pluralism need not be viewed in a negative light. It rather opens up the possibility for the distinctively modern understanding of freedom.

Liberalism seeks to provide a theory of how political consensus can be achieved in a way that is worldview-neutral. In order to accomplish this, liberalism must separate comprehensive doctrines from political concerns. Comprehensive doctrines concern individuals' fundamental beliefs. My comprehensive doctrine may be theistic, or it may

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<sup>14</sup> "Given the profound differences in belief and conceptions of the good at least since the Reformation, we must recognize that, just as on questions of religious and moral doctrine, public agreement on the basic questions of philosophy cannot be obtained without the state's infringement of basic liberties. Philosophy as a search for truth about an independent metaphysical and moral order cannot, I believe, provide a workable and shared basis for a political conception of justice in democratic society." Ibid., 230.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>16</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xxiv-xxv.

be a humanistic life dedicated to helping others, or it may be a life spent in the pursuit of selfish interests. The important point is that my worldview is comprehensive and is informed by my conception of the good life, whatever that may be. Political matters differ significantly from these sorts of comprehensive views.

Although such thick conceptions of the good differ, reasonable individuals can affirm *political* principles, because these political principles respect the interests of reasonable pluralists, regardless of particular notions of the good. Although, citizens can hold different beliefs concerning the nature of the good, these beliefs are considered non-public. That is, while they may be deeply held and essential to a life fully lived, they cannot serve as the basis for society given the fact of pluralism. In contrast, political principles must be public; they must be acceptable to *all* reasonable individuals, and so they must also be unbiased and neutral with respect to comprehensive worldviews.

Because political agreements must be impartial with respect to comprehensive doctrines, they must be what Rawls refers to as “thin.” Publicly justifiable agreements cannot partake of the comprehensive quality of individuals’ doctrines of the good. Instead, in coming to political agreements, individuals must abstract from the particulars of their comprehensive doctrine in order to reach a core set of principles on which all reasonable individuals can agree. Particular conceptions of the good are referred to as “thick” because of the comprehensive quality of fundamental beliefs. In contrast, moral conceptions are referred to as “thin” because of their political character. Moral principles are “thin” insofar as they can reasonably demand the assent of all reasonable pluralists, irrespective of their differing conceptions of the good. In this context “thin” refers not only to citizens’ differing conceptions of the good, but also to beliefs

concerning human nature. Just as liberalism leaves aside comprehensive notions of the good, it also leaves the job of describing human nature to those comprehensive views. Like other aspects of one's comprehensive doctrine, ideas about what it means to be a human being differ among individuals under the conditions of pluralism.

In addition to being thin, political agreements in pluralistic society are *practical* agreements on Rawls's account. Liberal political agreements do not make "deep" claims. Instead, they are pragmatic, and questions concerning their truth are left aside.

Thus, the aim of justice as fairness as a political conception is practical, and not metaphysical or epistemological. That is, it presents itself not as a conception of justice that is true, but one that can serve as a basis of informed and willing political agreement between citizens viewed as free and equal persons. This agreement when securely founded in public political and social attitudes sustains the goods of all persons and associations within a just democratic regime. To secure this agreement we try, so far as we can, to avoid disputed philosophical, as well as disputed moral and religious, questions. We do this not because these questions are unimportant or regarded with indifference, but because we think them too important and recognize that there is no way to resolve them politically. The only alternative to a principle of toleration is the autocratic use of state power. Thus, justice as fairness deliberately stays on the surface, philosophically speaking.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, liberal public agreements do not seek after any sort of "grounding" or "foundation." The search for answers to foundational questions is rather left to the various comprehensive doctrines.

Rawls makes it clear in his later writings that he is not trying to supply a foundation for politics but is rather relying on a particular historical tradition. Liberal views of politics rely only on the particular historical tradition of constitutional democracy. Liberalism draws its ideas from this specific, contingent political culture:

We look, then, to our public political culture itself, including its main institutions and the historical traditions of their interpretation, as the shared and implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles. The hope is that these ideas and principles

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 230.

can be formulated clearly enough to be combined into a conception of political justice congenial to our most firmly held convictions, at all levels of generality, on due reflection.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of relying on some particular comprehensive view, political agreements are “grounded” only in the public political culture of the modern democratic state. Rawls restated this position after his earlier work, including *A Theory of Justice*, had been criticized for supposedly relying on a metaphysical view of the self.<sup>19</sup> Rawls has since clarified his position, which Rorty clearly points out:

Rawls’s writings subsequent to *A Theory of Justice* have helped us realize that we were misinterpreting his book, that we were overemphasizing the Kantian and underemphasizing the Hegelian and Deweyan elements. These writings make more explicit than did his book Rawls’s metaphysical doctrine that ‘what justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent to and given to us, but its congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realization that, *given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life*, it is the most reasonable doctrine *for us*.<sup>20</sup>

Rawls’s theory is therefore practical rather than metaphysical. He is not seeking any kind of foundation. His understanding of politics is therefore unlike that of the ancients, who sought to ground politics in a monolithic civil religion, or that of medieval thinkers, who looked to a transcendent ahistorical God for a political foundation, or even that of early modern thinkers, who would ground politics in a conception of human nature. Rawls merely looks to the culture and traditions of *our* public life. This shared public basis is what makes a political doctrine reasonable *for us*.

Along with the historical emergence of pluralism, society underwent secularization, as the concern with God was gradually replaced by a concern with the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Here, quoting Rawls (italics added by Rorty). Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History* (Cambridge Studies in Religion and American Public Life), ed. Merrill Peterson and Robert Vaughan, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2003), 265.

nature of the self. But Rawls's work is not an instance of this latter concern. Instead of looking to the nature of the human subject, Rawls looks to "us" and the traditions of "our public life." He is not concerned with the self, but with the "we:"

When [Rawls] says that 'we should not attempt to give form to our life by first looking to the good independently defined,' he is not basing this 'should' on a claim about the nature of the self. 'Should' is not to be glossed by 'because of the intrinsic nature of morality' or 'because a capacity for choice is the essence of personhood,' but by something like 'because *we* – we modern inheritors of the traditions of religious tolerance and constitutional government – put liberty ahead of perfection.'<sup>21</sup>

This "we" is practical, it is not based on an ethical community, and it does not presuppose a notion of human nature; it is not oriented inward to the subject's interiority, but rather outward at the world common to a plurality of individuals. It is both practical and public.

### 1.3 Rawls's Distinctive Contribution

In concluding this first chapter, I would like to say a little bit more about one aspect of Rawls's solution to the problem presented by pluralism, his "original position." As I mentioned above, in order for political agreements in a pluralistic society to be political rather than comprehensive, they must be thin. Rawls offers us a device of representation, the "original position," to help us understand how comprehensive views are restricted from political play and how political agreements can be impartial with respect to comprehensive views:

The difficulty is this: we must find some point of view, removed from and not distorted by the particular features and circumstances of the all-encompassing framework, from which a fair agreement between free and equal persons can be reached. The original position, with the feature I have called 'the veil of ignorance' is this point of view. And the reason why the original position must abstract from and not be affected by the contingencies of the social world is that the conditions for a fair agreement on the principles of political justice between free and equal persons must eliminate the bargaining advantages which inevitably

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 265.

arise within background institutions of any society as the result of cumulative social, historical, and natural tendencies.<sup>22</sup>

With the original position, Rawls hopes to provide us with a representation of the conditions necessary for a liberal political consensus to be reached under conditions of pluralism. The task of the participants in the original position is to come to consensus on the basic principles of justice. In order that they can accomplish this task without biasing the results in favor of any of their comprehensive views, the participants' knowledge of themselves and of the world is at first restricted. They are placed behind what Rawls refers to as a "veil of ignorance." They are not provided with information about their economic standing, their age, sex or race, or any other details that may provide them with clues as to their positions in society. In this way, participants are freed from the particularities that could bias their agreements. Rawls's hope is that the original position will provide us with a model of the conditions under which a reasonable consensus might be obtained by free and equal individuals.

Here, it is important to note that the original position is just a model, what Rawls calls a "representational device." It is not intended to depict real political participants but to model the conditions necessary for achieving a reasonable consensus under conditions of pluralism.

[The original position] models what we regard as fair conditions under which the representatives of free and equal persons are to specify the terms of social cooperation in the case of the basic structure of society, and since it also models what, for this case, we regard as acceptable restrictions on reasons available to the parties for favoring one agreement rather than another, the conception of justice the parties would adopt identifies the conception we regard—*here and now*—as fair and supported by the best reasons.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 4, (Summer 1985): 236.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-238.



Because it is merely a representational device, the original position does not carry any metaphysical connotations. It does not imply a theory of human nature. Thus, although political participants as modeled in the original position are detached from their particular qualities and circumstances, this does not mean that real political participants have an abstract nature. It is rather because real political participants possess all sorts of particular interests and features that a model such as the original position is necessary in the first place. In real politics, political actors are not themselves “thinned down” in order to arrive at the abstract sorts of agreements that pluralistic society necessitates; it is rather the case that the original position is useful because it models the conditions for “thin” agreements between “thick,” that is, *real* human beings.

## 2. Arendt's Basic Distinctions

This chapter offers an introduction to the concepts discussed in *The Human Condition*, which are important to my analysis in Chapter Three. Here, I have two aims. My first aim is to give a general overview of Arendt's concept of action. This is necessary because action is the central concern of the current project, and it is, therefore, important to be clear on Arendt's understanding of it, especially given the complexities of interpreting Arendt's texts. My second aim is to discuss two of Arendt's other concepts, work and labor, in preparation for Chapter Three, which begins by addressing criticisms of Arendt that focus on these concepts.

The basic distinction around which all of Arendt's concepts revolve is her distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Each of these harbors within it a further tripartite distinction: the active life is comprised of labor, work and action, and the contemplative life is comprised of thinking, willing and judging.<sup>1</sup> All of Arendt's other distinctions in some way relate to this six-part categorization. Here, I am primarily concerned with the active life, and action, in particular, because action's stress on the public representation of individual opinion can provide liberal political theory with a more vibrant account of democracy. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to discuss how action relates to the other components of the active life, labor and work, in order to understand pertinent criticisms of Arendt, which are discussed at the beginning of Chapter Three. The bulk of Chapter Three will then focus on the contemplative life, and judging, in particular, which bears strong similarities to variants of contemporary liberalism and evidences action's compatibility with the modern liberal project.

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt's discussion of labor, work and action forms the core of *The Human Condition*. Thinking, willing and judging are covered in the collection posthumously published as *The Life of the Mind*. Taken together, these two works form the backbone of the rest of Arendt's writings.

Any discussion of the active life, and, in particular, action's relation to work and labor, must begin by sorting through the large number of misinterpretations found in the scholarly literature.<sup>2</sup> For this purpose, Margaret Canovan's book, *Hannah Arendt*, is particularly helpful. Canovan wrote her book because, as she puts it, "there is one oddity in [Arendt's] current standing... which is that in spite of the attention her writings have attracted, they have been little understood. The critical literature contains an unusually high proportion of attacks on positions that, arguably, she did not in fact hold."<sup>3</sup> So, first, before we can see how Arendt's notion of politics relates to liberal political theory, the first difficulty is to get an accurate picture of what Arendt is up to. Here, I rely on Canovan's excellent analysis of *The Human Condition*, particularly in my discussion of work and labor, as well as directly examine some of the particularly significant passages from Arendt's text.

Another difficulty in dealing with the concept of the active life has to do with the nature of Arendt's work itself. Her style is unashamedly essayistic, and often seems to be rather non-systematic. But in fact nothing could be further from the case. Arendt often commented that politics is the art of making distinctions, and so it is not surprising that her texts offer dense webs of distinctions, many if not most of which are extremely unusual. However, each of these stands in a very specific relation to the others. Because of this, Arendt's thought, although unusual, is also highly systematic. Canovan calls this Arendt's "unsystematic system-building."<sup>4</sup> Because of this unfamiliar approach, particular points made by Arendt often only make sense in the context of her larger

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete discussion of the complexities of interpreting Arendt's texts see: Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

project.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in interpreting her work, everything depends on correctly situating her particular distinctions within her overarching system. This is additionally complicated by her habit of using everyday concepts in specialized senses without giving her readers any warning. Here I will try to clear up as much as possible Arendt's terminology and the interrelations between her concepts before delving into a discussion of the rather complicated relationship between her understanding of politics and liberalism in Chapter Three. But, first, it is important to discuss action itself.

## 2.1 Arendt's Concept of Action

In Arendt's schema, action is synonymous with politics. If something is properly "political" for Arendt, it is a matter of action. So, in order to determine whether or not Arendt's notion of politics is compatible with liberalism, we have to first look at action, and my aim is simply to give a general overview of this concept. The main feature of action is "natality," which refers to action's concern with new and different viewpoints. Natality is important to action because action essentially consists in bringing new and different ideas to the political table. A second important feature of action is its intersubjective character. For Arendt, politics is a matter of human relationships; it goes on between people and, so, is intersubjectively constituted. In order to get a sense of what action is about, it is therefore important to understand the sort of human relationships that characterize it. There are four main characteristics of these relationships: they are public, communicative, disclosive and non-instrumental. In the following section, I discuss these characteristics of action in greater detail.

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<sup>5</sup> "The trains of thought she herself spun linked themselves together as if of their own accord into an orderly spider web of concepts, held together by threads that were none the weaker for being hard to see. As with Hegel, this means that one cannot understand one part of her thought unless one is aware of its connections with all the rest." Ibid., 6.

### 2.1.1 Natality

Arendt defines action in the following way: “To act, in its most general sense means to take an initiative, to begin... to set something into motion.”<sup>6</sup> When Arendt says that action is a matter of beginning or taking initiative, she is referring to the human ability to start something new that was previously unanticipated. When something new is begun, we call it an event, and so action is comprised of such events. Human beings, in contradistinction to other forms of life on earth, have a history, and this history is composed of events that unfold over time. These events are striking for Arendt because, as historic, they are never fully foreseen and often come as a surprise. On this point she says, “It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and all origins.”<sup>7</sup> For Arendt, events are not moments in the continuum of a smooth historical progression. The new does not emerge fluidly from the old, but instead occurs abruptly, disrupting the flow. On this view, the future is not necessarily contained in the seeds of the present, because events are, rather, like fissures in the progression of history.

Arendt often refers to action’s character of unexpectedness, which we might call its “eventfulness,” as “natality.” Insofar as we act, we are natal. That is, we have the capacity to begin things anew. Because of its natal character, action lends a certain degree of uncertainty to human affairs. As long as action is possible, statistical projections and other prognostications are always potentially wrong. As Arendt points out,

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1958), 177.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical probability, which for all practical everyday purposes amount to certainty; the new therefore always comes in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform the infinitely improbable.<sup>8</sup>

Because of action's natality, the future is never entirely certain. Human affairs are generally unpredictable and open, and human beings are able to perform "miracles;" that is, they are able to do the unanticipated, acting against all odds. Thus, because Arendt understands action in terms of natality, she does not consider politics to be scientific. For Arendt, then, "political science" is a contradiction in terms. Science relies on the reliable prediction of events, but what makes action distinctive is its unpredictability.

### 2.1.2 Intersubjectivity

In addition to being characterized by natality, action is also fundamentally intersubjective. For Arendt, this means first that action goes on "between men directly, without the intermediary, stabilizing, and solidifying influence of things."<sup>9</sup> Here, Arendt is referring to the fact that action is concerned with a special kind of human interrelation. As human, we are first related to one another by our physical things, both by the objects we produce as human beings and by the fact of our own embodiment, *and* we are related to one another directly, without the aid of the world of objects. For example, the inhabitants of a city are related by its architecture and infrastructure. I can truthfully say "I'll meet you downtown in ten minutes" only because there is a road I can traverse in that span of time. Arendt's point is that the physical objects human beings create serve as a basis for a shared world, in the most basic sense of a shared physical space created by us. But, apart from this sort of relatedness, Arendt also argues that human beings can

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 182.

also stand in relation to one another *apart from* the physical world of objects; that is, we are related intersubjectively. This relatedness occurs, as I shall discuss in more detail shortly, through discourse. We stand in relation to one another not only because of our things but *also because of our words*. It is in this second sense that action serves to relate human beings to one another. Arendt somewhat poetically calls action's intersubjective aspect the "web of human relationships:"

The physical worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the 'web' of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.<sup>10</sup>

Although, as we shall see, Arendt argues that action is most often concerned with the world of objects produced by human fabrication, which she sometimes refers to as the "human artifice," or the interests associated with those objects, it is the intersubjective quality of action, which both labor and work lack, that makes action distinctive.

Because action is intersubjective, it is also public. This means first that action must be displayed; it must be visible. Along with the doer there must also be others to witness the act. It is necessary for action to be public because, in order for an act to have any effects, it must be seen and remembered. If some deed is not seen, it cannot be remembered, and if it cannot be remembered, it cannot enter into history. Arendt is insistent on this point because the actuality of the events that make for action is fragile and particularly susceptible to distortion. The "reality" of an action, whether or not we can testify to its occurrence, is always "established by witnesses and depends on

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 183.

testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about.”<sup>11</sup> Arendt’s point is that, while, say, a mathematical or scientific theorem or fact may be forgotten, it can always at least potentially be rediscovered. The angles of the triangle equal 180 degrees whether we take notice or not, because although this fact could be covered up or covered over, it cannot be destroyed. Historical facts, on the other hand, can be lied away and/or lost forever. If an historical event is forgotten, if the books are burned and the players dead, who is to say what happened? The events generated in action therefore depend on remembrance for their “reality.” Because of the dependence of action on human remembrance, deeds must first be public in the most basic sense of being sheerly visible.

Because action can have no lasting effect without people to witness it, action requires what Arendt sometimes calls the “space of appearances.” This is simply another name for the public realm. Arendt gives it this name because she believes that a public “space of appearances” can exist informally prior to its being formally instituted as a public forum. So, whenever people come together, the public realm is potentially there, and whenever deeds are enacted publicly, they occur in the “space of appearances.”<sup>12</sup> The upshot is that the “phenomenal” quality of action, its public visibility, is necessary for action because it creates the conditions for remembrance that sustain the “reality” of events and which are the conditions for the possibility of human history.

The second sense in which action is public also relates to action’s intersubjectivity. In this second sense, action is public insofar as it depends on human togetherness. This is, first, because, on Arendt’s view, action cannot occur solely through the effort of a single individual: “[action] is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 238.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1958), 199.



be deprived of the capacity to act.”<sup>13</sup> Action is never the property of this or that person. Instead, it occurs “between” individuals. That is, it is only possible when individuals gather together. In Arendt’s words, there is an “original interdependence” of action: “the dependence of the beginner and leader upon others for help and the dependence of his followers upon him for an occasion themselves to act.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, action is completely reliant on human beings coming together and doing so in a particular sort of way.

The sort of togetherness characteristic of action is distinctive. It is a matter of what Arendt calls “human plurality,” which she roughly defines as “the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.”<sup>15</sup> The plurality characteristic of action is paradoxical because, although action is never an individual concern, since it can only occur among a group of people gathered together, the individuals gathered together in action come together in such a way as to manifest the unique identity of each individual. This is paradoxical because, although action is completely dependent upon human togetherness, human beings are also maximally individuated from one another when they act because action manifests the *uniqueness* of each individual.

Here it is important to note that “plurality” for Arendt is not identical to “pluralism” for liberals. In a pluralistic society, individuals are able to express worldviews that are fundamentally at odds. This is a distinctively modern phenomenon because, although individuals in different societies around the globe may have held different worldviews prior to the Reformation, within any single society, individuals’ views were largely similar. In contrast, Arendt’s concept of “plurality” points to the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 176.

basic fact that individuals are able to hold unique views, and insofar as “plurality” characterizes action, it refers to the public expression of those unique viewpoints. As a basic human capacity, “plurality” certainly existed prior to the modern age, since differing views did exist, although there was not much divergence within a single society. Indeed, Arendt contends that action was virtually nonexistent in the medieval period, when European society was immersed in the “private” concerns of religion,<sup>16</sup> and that even in Ancient Greece, the ability to take into account different points of view was seriously truncated.<sup>17</sup> It would seem, then, that the modern age, because of its pluralistic nature, holds a possibility for the public manifestation of human plurality in action that was largely absent in prior ages.

In addition to “plurality,” Arendt talks about the togetherness characteristic of action in terms of “equality” and “distinction,” which she uses in specialized senses:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate identical needs and wants would be enough.<sup>18</sup>

Action is a matter of “equality” first in this basic sense: that, in action, human beings are able to understand the position of one another. If we were not “equal” to one another in

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<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 35.

<sup>17</sup> “By putting the sharing of words and deeds at the core of its existence as a political community the Greek city-state acknowledged that there cannot be a common world without a plurality of perspectives. But that acknowledgement was not broad enough to include the perspectives of enemies or even of foreigners... This means, in Arendt’s words, that for the Greeks “law could not in any way constitute a bridge between nations, nor within the same nation, a bridge between a political community and another one.” Jacques Taminiaux, “Athens and Rome” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Villa, Dana, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), 165.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

some basic way, there would be no basis even for our ability to communicate. But Arendt also uses the term “equality” in a second, more complex way.

In addition to understanding equality as basic to any human intercourse, she also characterizes the equality characteristic of action in contradistinction to the hierarchy entailed in “rule.” “Rule” here generally refers to any hierarchical relation of domination. In action, we are equal because we neither rule over others nor are ruled by them. In other words, entering into the kind of togetherness that characterizes action is tantamount to leaving behind all hierarchies of domination and subordination, which arguably characterize much of human affairs. Arendt views the equality of action and the hierarchy of rule as being so utterly antithetical that she derisively equates attempts to substitute rule for action, as in tyranny or monarchy, with the attempt to “escape from politics altogether.”<sup>19</sup> Entering into the public realm requires a renunciation of domination, both in the sense of abdicating one’s control over others and in the sense of escaping from the control of others.

The second characteristic of the togetherness characteristic of action, “distinction,” is best discussed in terms of action’s disclosive and communicative aspects. Because action is intersubjective, and so goes on between individuals, it is also *communicative*; it occurs in the mode of discourse. Arendt declares that, “speechless action would no longer be action.”<sup>20</sup> Just as action cannot occur in isolation, it cannot occur in silence. So, in order to count as action, a deed needs speech. Further, speech is not necessary to action simply as a medium for action. It is communication itself that makes for action: “No other human performance requires speech to the same extent as

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 178.

action. In all other performances speech plays a subordinate role, as a means of communication or a mere accompaniment to something that could also be achieved in silence.”<sup>21</sup> Other activities can be accompanied by speech, but on Arendt’s view, speech is not integral to them, as it is to action.

Speech is so important to action because speech is the way in which we are able to distinguish ourselves as human. It makes for the “distinction” that is characteristic of action’s plurality. Arendt says in her characteristically paradoxical way, “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, each human being is a unique individual. In addition to being a member of some group, for example, “American,” “middle-class,” “male,” people are also unique. According to Arendt, “speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct.”<sup>23</sup> Here Arendt is referring to what she sometimes calls the “revelatory” quality of action, which refers to the fact that the distinction characteristic of action “reveals” or discloses the identities of the actors to others. On her view, only through action can we disclose who we are and reveal our unique identities. Further, we are able to distinguish ourselves and reveal our identities by our actions only because action occurs in the mode of speech.

Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 176.

accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, because action is communicative, it is also disclosive, and what action discloses are the unique identities of the individual actors.

To me, this disclosiveness is the most fascinating aspect of action. Not only are deeds disclosed in action, but also, through action, individual actors are able to show themselves in all their uniqueness and with all their idiosyncrasies. Action discloses “who” someone is rather than “what” someone is.<sup>25</sup> As an actor, I am not only an instance of some collective. I am not only a woman, Jewish, a sojourner of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, a poor college student or even a human being. I am, in addition to these, myself. I have a distinctive voice that is reducible to that of no other individual or group. Of course, the fact that I am, say, female has in part “made” me who I am, but it does not follow from this fact that I am only the sum of the adjectives attributable to me. I am these, but I am also something more besides. Arendt contends that it is precisely this “more” that is disclosed through speech and action:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything he says and does.<sup>26</sup>

Related to action’s disclosiveness, its “revelatory” character, is its aversion to instrumentality. Anything instrumental involves a means/end relation. The prime example of instrumentality for Arendt is the process of fabrication. When one builds a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 178-179.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

house, the felling of the trees and the use of the tools to transform the wood into walls are simply means to the end of the finished construction. Such processes of fabrication are always concerned with means, and the finished product is the end toward which the processes are directed. Arendt is adamant that action is unlike fabrication; it is never concerned with means and ends. At the center of this argument is her claim that we can neither “make” events or “make” human beings, ourselves or others, as though they were things:

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal the agent, but this agent is not an author or producer...although history owes its existence to men, it is still obviously not “made” by them.<sup>27</sup>

On Arendt’s view, trying to treat human beings or human history in terms of means and ends, as though it were so much “material” to be worked upon, amounts to an attempt to destroy the potential for action. In other words, instrumentality depoliticizes politics. Such attempts to construe politics in instrumental terms inevitably leads to a “degradation of politics into a means for something else.”<sup>28</sup>

The reason action cannot be instrumental is that action is communicative. This is because disclosiveness is essential to action, and action is only able to disclose the agent in the act because it is communicative. But, when speech becomes instrumentalized, so Arendt argues, this disclosure becomes impossible. Instrumentalized speech is no longer communicative speech, and so can no longer serve as a vehicle for action:

Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. It is indeed no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object. This happens whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for of against other

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 184-5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 230.

people, as for instance in modern warfare where men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against the enemy. In these instances, which of course have always existed, speech indeed becomes “mere talk,” simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or dazzle everybody with propaganda; here words reveal nothing, disclosure comes only from the end itself, and this achievement, like all other achievements, cannot disclose the ‘who,’ the unique and distinct identity of the agent.<sup>29</sup>

Insofar as speech becomes instrumentalized, action can no longer be disclosive. And, insofar as action is not disclosive, it cannot be properly called action.

Action’s non-instrumentality is closely connected with what Arendt refers to as the “boundlessness” of action. Instrumental processes, such as fabrication, have a definite beginning and a definite end.<sup>30</sup> They begin with the formation of the idea in the mind of the maker and end with the finished product. Action, Arendt argues, is quite different. It has a definite beginning in the deed itself, but it has no end; it is “boundless.” When one acts, the action is sent out into the “web of human relationships” setting off strings of unforeseeable reactions and consequences. Because of this curious quality of action, Arendt says that, “the process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end.”<sup>31</sup> Arendt’s reason for this view relies on the contrast between instrumental fabrication and non-instrumental action. Unlike the products of fabrication, the “products” of action cannot be destroyed. Human beings can destroy any of the things they have made, but they cannot undo what they have *done*. We cannot take back our actions the way we can our productions, and so action is irreversible.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 233.

It is important to be clear on exactly what Arendt is and is not attacking when she attacks notions of politics modeled after “fabrication.” What Arendt is attacking are explicitly anti-democratic forms of government, such as monarchy and tyranny,<sup>32</sup> and, more generally, all political situations that are closed off to change, particularly to the new insights brought by succeeding generations. Because they close off the continuing possibility of political action for some number of citizens, these too are anti-democratic, although less obviously so than monarchy or tyranny. What Arendt is not attacking is the idea that politics is concerned with public infrastructures, both physical and institutional, or the idea that in politics we plan for the future. When Arendt says that politics should not resemble fabrication, she is not saying that public institutions are not “constructed,” but, first, that institutions are founded through agreements between a plurality of citizens rather than built in accordance with the singular idea of a ruler, and, second, that public institutions should remain open to change by succeeding generations, who may be faced with issues and concerns that we cannot foresee. Because of this, Arendt’s attack on instrumental politics is not aimed at something like Rawls’s attempt to find “instruments” for consensus-building. It is rather aimed at tyrannical power and despotism monopolizing politics at the expense of the people’s power.

Now that I have given a rough sketch of the basic features of action, I turn to an examination of the other components of the active life: labor and work, as well as discuss how Arendt views them as standing in relation to action.

## 2.2 Action and the *Vita Activa*

Action stands in a close relationship to work and labor, the other concepts that comprise the *vita activa*, and here it is necessary to examine these relationships. The

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 221.



discussion of the action-work relationship is necessary in order to understand how action differs from the Greek understanding, while the discussion of the action-labor relationship is necessary in order to understand Hanna Pitkin's criticisms of Arendt. Both of these issues will be addressed in Chapter Three.

### 2.2.1 Work

Arendt distinguishes action from both work and labor. The basic difference between work and labor is that, while work is oriented toward a finished product, labor is endless and repetitive, so that nothing comes of it. I will discuss labor in the next section. What is important here is that work is the process of fabrication. Insofar as a human being performs work, Arendt calls him or her *homo faber*. Through their work, human beings "fabricate the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice."<sup>33</sup> Work produces physical, human-made objects. The products of work are characterized by two primary features that are particularly significant here: they are *durable* and they are made to be *used*.

First, the objects fabricated in working are generally durable. Because of this, Arendt even calls work a process of "reification:"

Fabrication, the work of *homo faber*, consists in reification. Solidity, inherent in all, even the most fragile, things, comes from the material worked upon, but this material itself is not simply given and there, like the fruits of field and trees which we may gather or leave alone without changing the household of nature. Material is already a product of human hands which have removed it from its natural location, either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which must be destroyed in order to provide wood, or interrupting one of nature's slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone or marble torn out of the womb of the earth.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 139.

The products of work are not made and then immediately destroyed. Instead, because of their durability, they linger awhile. The durability of the objects produced by the activity of working lends the human artifice stability. Because the products of work are durable, the human artifice is generally long-lived, and human beings tend to inhabit a world of things inherited from previous generations. It is not uncommon for products to outlive their makers. The Egyptian pyramids have existed for millennia, and even my house has withstood a century. As a result of this stability, the world of objects produced by human beings always bears the marks of previous generations.

Second, in addition to their durability, the objects fabricated in working are made to be *used* by human beings. Arendt distinguishes the *use* of objects produced by work from *consumption*. Objects produced through work are made to be used by us without being used up or consumed. Because the human artifice is made of objects that are not destroyed by their use, it is able to endure in time. So, for example, the apple, which I literally consume when I “use” it, is not a product of work. Only those objects that are durable and therefore stable comprise the human artifice and thereby constitute what Arendt refers to as “the world.”

The product of work, the human artifice, is an important part of what Arendt refers to as “the world.” Arendt identifies the world generally with the public realm. The world has two major components: what Arendt refers to as the “human artifice,” the sum total of the products of human fabrication, *and* other sorts of human “constructions,” which are less visible, such as nations and laws.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the products of fabrication, these come about through action rather than work. Here, however, I am

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<sup>35</sup> I will discuss this second component of the “world” in Chapter Three.

concerned with the first of these, the human artifice, which comes about through work.

Margaret Canovan describes Arendt's understanding of the world in this way:

It is something artificial and durable produced by transforming natural material into an environment that can outlast individual human lives. It includes things such as artifacts, cultivated land and the products of organization, such as political institutions. Part of what Arendt has in mind is the kind of thing that archeologists find when they excavate vanished civilizations: the pyramids, the temples, the houses and roads, the terraced hillsides, the pottery, the statues in which a world of forgotten people survives.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, we can equate the human artifice with the architecture and infrastructure of a place as well as those durable physical constructions of a smaller scale.

As I briefly mentioned in the context of action, work is always instrumental. It is concerned with using the materials as means to achieve the end of the finished product: “the process of making is itself entirely determined by the categories of means and end. The fabricated thing is an end product.”<sup>37</sup> Because it is instrumental, work has a definite beginning and a definite end. It begins with the maker's idea and ends when the product is completed. Also, as I mentioned in the context of my discussion of action, work differs from action insofar as action, although it has a beginning in the act itself, has no end and is “boundless.”

Action and work evidence a number of interesting relations. First, work is a condition for continued action. Action requires a physical space in which individuals can participate politically. Without a visible “space of appearances,” action is not possible. Work provides physical spaces that subtend the acting together of human beings. For example, a constitution can be written without a physical “house” of lawmakers, but if an emerging nation is to last, physical public spaces quickly become necessary. While it is

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<sup>36</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 108.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 143.

possible for action to take place apart from the physical spaces created by work, such physical spaces preserve the continued possibility of action.

Second, work provides one of the major concerns of action. While work provides the literal setting for action, and so supports action from “below,” Arendt argues that most often action is *about* the world, part of which is produced by the activity of work;<sup>38</sup> so, although work supports action, action turns back toward the world of things created by work.

Finally and most importantly, although work and action “help” one another, work by providing the space for action, action by making work’s product its concern, *work is no substitute for action*. On her view, because work is instrumental, it cannot take the place of action, which is intersubjective and communicative rather than instrumental.

Thus, Arendt notes:

It has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents. The remarkable monotony of the proposed solutions throughout our recorded history testifies to the elemental simplicity of the matter. Generally speaking, they always amount to seeking shelter from action’s calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end. This attempt to replace acting with making is manifest in the whole body of argument against “democracy,” which, the more consistently and better reasoned it is, will turn into an argument against the essentials of politics<sup>39</sup>

On Arendt’s view, history cannot be “made,” and while political participants act, they are not the authors of their actions. However, Arendt argues, there has always been a great temptation to substitute making for acting. Because of action’s tendency to cut across boundaries, human affairs tend to be unstable. It is tempting to substitute making

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 220.

for acting because, in the process of fabrication, the maker controls the process from beginning to end. This aspect of control is often seen as desirable to counter the tenuous character of human affairs. But, it is just this sort of substitution of “making” for “acting” in order to “escape” the tenuousness of politics that Arendt finds problematic. On her view, it is tantamount to a destruction of politics altogether.

### 2.2.2 Labor

As mentioned above, Arendt distinguishes between work and labor. What she intends to indicate by this is the distinction between work’s world-building character and labor’s connection with the endless processes of nature. This connection between labor and natural, biological, bodily processes forms the focus of Arendt’s discussion of labor in *The Human Condition*.

Canovan identifies the following as labor’s primary characteristics: labor is natural, cyclic, arduous, necessary, fertile and private.<sup>40</sup> Here, I will focus on those characteristics most pertinent to my analysis: labor’s naturalness, its cyclic character and its privateness. First, labor is a central way that human beings relate to the processes of nature. Labor is natural because, by laboring, we are able to procure the necessities for *life*. Here, Arendt is following Marx, who frequently makes the same connection between labor and nature, stating that labor is “man’s metabolism with nature.”<sup>41</sup> Because we are living things, we must consume in order to survive, and the activity of laboring first sustains our ability to consume:

This cycle [of biological life] needs to be sustained through consumption, and the activity which provides the means of consumption is laboring... laboring and

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 123.

<sup>41</sup> Here, quoting Marx: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 98.

consuming follow each other so closely that they almost constitute one and the same movement, which is hardly ended when it must be started all over again.<sup>42</sup>

Labor, as natural, contrasts with work, which Arendt sometimes refers to as unnatural or artificial.<sup>43</sup> While, in labor we enter into a “metabolism with nature” in order to provide for life’s necessities, in work we build up a durable world that shelters us from the natural processes of life, which are marked by growth and decay. The products of work are durable, and this durability that characterizes the human artifice stands over and against the processes of nature and labor. In contrast to the lasting character of the products of work, Arendt argues that the “products” of labor are short lived, eaten up by the processes of consumption. Canovan’s example is dishwashing.<sup>44</sup> After my meal, I wash the dishes, but I do so only in preparation for the next meal. The product, “clean dishes,” only endures until I dine again, a span dictated by my biology, my hunger. In this way, “the ‘work’ done by labor upon its material is only the preparation for its eventual destruction.”<sup>45</sup> On an Arendtian view, it is almost as though the dishes were never really clean because their cleanliness was “made” only to be dirtied again; it is always and almost immediately “consumed” in accordance with nature’s demands on my body.

Work is different. The products made by working are made to be used rather than to be consumed. Architecture provides excellent examples. Main Hall is used everyday by the students and faculty of the University of Montana, but it is never used up. It is not consumed in the process of its use. Of course the products of work eventually show wear given enough time, and so require a sort of labor in the form of maintenance, repair or

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 123.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 100.

restoration. But Arendt warns against therefore understanding the difference between work and use, on the one hand, and labor and consumption, on the other hand, as a difference of degree rather than of kind:

If one construes, for instance, the nature of use objects in terms of wearing apparel, he will be tempted to conclude that use is nothing but consumption at a slower pace. Against this stands what we mentioned before, that destruction, though unavoidable, is incidental to use but inherent in consumption. What distinguishes the most flimsy pair of shoes from mere consumer goods is that they do not spoil if I do not wear them, that they have an independence of their own, however modest, which enables them to survive even for a considerable time the changing moods of their owner.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, when considering the “products” of labor, consumption is primary. They are, in effect, made to be destroyed. In contrast, any destruction by the wearing down or wearing out of the products of work is secondary to their use. So, although the products of work may get “consumed,” their function is independent of their consumption. With respect to the products of work, however, consumption *is* their function.

Because the products of labor are consumed almost immediately, labor must be continually repeated. It is cyclic. We labor to consume, and consume only to labor again. Here, again, Arendt is drawing from Marx, who “indicated clearly that he was ‘speaking physiologically’ and that labor and consumption are but two stages of the ever-recurring cycle of biological life.”<sup>47</sup> Arendt goes on to say that Marx’s doctrine of “productive consumption” came out of this insight that labor and consumption are two moments in a continuous natural cycle. What is important for our purposes is that, because labor is a cyclic process, it has neither beginning nor end.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 96.

This stands in contrast to action, which has a definite beginning, in the act itself, but has no end, and with work, which has both a definite beginning, when the object to be constructed is first envisioned in the “mind’s eye” of the fabricator, and a definite end, the finished product.<sup>49</sup> Because work has a definite beginning and end, it need not be repeated as is the case with labor, in which “the products themselves, on the other hand, immediately become means again, means of subsistence and reproduction of labor power.”<sup>50</sup>

In addition to being natural and cyclic, labor is also private. Arendt argues that this is because, in labor, “[man] is alone with his body, facing the naked necessity of keeping himself alive.”<sup>51</sup> Here, laboring is a private concern because it is connected with having a living body, and, because the needs of the body are specific to each individual organism, fulfilling those needs is first a matter of individual concern. Canovan puts it this way: “since labouring is a matter of supplying the necessities of life, it forces each man to concentrate on his own bodily needs rather than being concerned with the common world and with the interactions with plural individuals.”<sup>52</sup> I cannot participate in public affairs, for instance, if I am starving. And when I am hungry, Arendt might argue, I am acutely aware that it is *I* who am hungry. In this way, the immediate needs of the body individualize us. But this “individuality” is peculiar. When “I” am starving, the “I” refers not to me as a unique and irreplaceable human being, but to me as an instance of an animal species, driven by its biological needs. When I labor to fulfill those needs, I am likewise acting as an instance of that species. I may very well labor

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 124.



alongside others; this is perhaps the way most labor is now performed, but, Arendt argues, such laboring-together only “exists in the multiplication of specimens which are fundamentally all alike because they are what they are as mere living organisms.”<sup>53</sup> My hunger and the labor through which I satisfy it do not display *who* I am, a unique person, but merely that I am a singular organism, an instance of a biological species. So, although in labor we are “individualized” by the needs of our bodies, Arendt would argue that we are also cut off from our relatedness to others; our individuality is never really displayed.

An interesting and somewhat odd conclusion follows from this rather unusual account of labor given by Arendt. Although labor “individualizes” human beings in the way just described, it also paradoxically connects human beings with one another as members of a species group. This is what occurs when we commonly find human beings laboring alongside one another in groups.

It is indeed in the nature of laboring to bring men together in the form of a labor gang where any number of individuals ‘labor together as though they were one’ and in this sense togetherness may permeate laboring even more intimately than any other activity.<sup>54</sup>

And again, “the biological rhythm of labor unites the group of laborers to the point that each may feel that he is no longer an individual but actually one with all others.”<sup>55</sup> On Arendt’s view, in laboring, we are united perhaps most intimately, but in such a way as to hide our uniqueness. In this way, the united-ness of the laborers is the antithesis of the togetherness found in action. In action, individuals are equal, but are also distinct, and action gathers people together in order to maximally display this distinctiveness. In

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<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 212.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

contrast, the united-ness of laborers belies such distinction: “This ‘collective nature of labor,’ far from establishing a recognizable, identifiable reality for each member of the labor gang, requires on the contrary the actual loss of all awareness of individuality and identity.”<sup>56</sup> For this reason, Arendt argues that “the sociability arising out of those activities which spring from the human body’s metabolism with nature rest not on equality but on sameness”<sup>57</sup>

### 2.2.2a Action and Labor

Now that I have provided a sketch of both action and labor, I want to examine how they relate to one another. This task is important because some of the strongest criticisms of Arendt focus on her treatment of labor and its exclusion from the public realm. If labor is private and if Arendt has driven a wedge between public and private spheres as some argue, can action, which is purely public, pertain to labor at all? If not, what does this mean for politics, since much of what contemporary politics revolves around are economic concerns? I will treat these issues in more detail in Chapter Three, when I examine the positions of Arendt’s critics. Here I would simply like to highlight two of Arendt’s insights that are pertinent to the relation between action and labor as Arendt understands it.

The first concerns the “topic” of action, what Arendt understands action to be “about.” One particularly significant criticism, raised by Hanna Pitkin, which I will address in more detail in Chapter Three, is that action is not about anything at all because it is self-referential. In order to understand this criticism, it is first necessary to examine what Arendt thinks action *is* about. A second, often repeated criticism of Arendt is that,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

even if action is about something, it cannot be about labor. Here, I would like to examine how Arendt understands this relation, which she discusses in the chapter on the labor movement in the action section of *The Human Condition*.

### 2.2.2b What is Action About?

According to Arendt, action is most often about the “world,” understood in her specialized sense. First, it concerns the “human artifice,” the sum total of the products of human fabrication. Second, it concerns non-physical human “constructions,” which are less visible, such as nations and laws, which come about through action.<sup>58</sup> Here, Arendt states her position most clearly:

Action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively ‘objective,’ concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lie between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and can therefore bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent.<sup>59</sup>

Action concerns first the physical structure of the world, for example, the layout of the borders between cities and states and of the infrastructure connecting them. In other words, the arrangement of our things and our public spaces is a political concern for Arendt. But action also concerns the nonphysical things that lie “between” human beings; these are “the affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together,”<sup>60</sup> which amount to “the products of organization, such as political

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<sup>58</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 108.

<sup>59</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 182.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

institutions.”<sup>61</sup> So, in addition to the products of fabrication that stand between us, action concerns laws and constitutions, which do so as well. This is because, as public, they regulate our intercourse with one another and so are a collective concern.

Given Arendt’s basic position, that action is most commonly about the world, we can conclude that action is not concerned with labor, for, on Arendt’s view, labor is “worldless.”<sup>62</sup> It is not simply non-political but even *anti-political*.<sup>63</sup> In labor, “man is neither together with the world nor with other people, but alone with his body, facing the naked necessity of keeping himself alive.”<sup>64</sup> Because, when one is engaged in labor, one is “alone with his body,” it is impossible on Arendt’s view for the laborer to enter into the sort of human relatedness characteristic of action. It does not matter whether the laborers are literally alone or alongside one another in a “gang;” insofar as they are engaged in the process of laboring, they cannot partake of “worldly” activities. They cannot, for example, build the human artifice, for labor has no product. Nor can they organize political institutions, for they relate to one another in a singular way, in terms of identical biological needs and desires, rather than in the multifarious ways necessary for political organization.

### 2.2.2c Action and the Labor Movement

Because Arendt views labor as a purely private concern and action as a purely public concern, and because she maintains that action is about the world, while labor is “worldless,” it is hard to see how there could be any connection between action and labor at all in her work. It is somewhat surprising, then, that a chapter on the labor movement

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<sup>61</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 108.

<sup>62</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 115.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

appears in the section dedicated to action in *The Human Condition*. Here, Arendt even praises the working class: “From the revolutions of 1848 to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the European working class, by virtue of being the only organized and hence leading section of the people, has written one of the most glorious and probably the most promising chapter in recent history.”<sup>65</sup> And again, “when the labor movement appeared on the public scene, it was the only organization in which men acted and spoke qua men—and not qua members of society.”<sup>66</sup> The point is that, although Arendt certainly wants to draw a clear boundary between labor and action, their interrelation is more complicated than it at first seems to be.

Indeed, Arendt’s analysis of the relation between labor and action turns on the distinction she makes between the labor movement and the trade unions from the revolutions of 1848 to the Hungarian revolution of 1956.<sup>67</sup> The trade unions represented labor at its worst, acting as a pseudo-political force to achieve anti-political, purely economic ends. The labor movement presented a different case. Although populated by laborers, the labor movement involved individuals thinking and acting on their own apart from party ideology. Their demands were political as well as economic.

There are two features of the trade unions that are particularly significant here. First, on Arendt’s view, the trade unions purported to speak for the “working class,” to represent laborers as a singular group. With the trade unions, it was not individuals thinking and acting for themselves, but parties, programs, and ideologies leading the workers.<sup>68</sup> The changes demanded by the trade unions were therefore never political

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

insofar as they treated their members solely in terms of their laboring, that is, not as individuals but as mere members of a homogenous class governed by their identity as laborers.

Second, their demands were purely economic. The decisive point is that, what matters for laborers as laborers is the “extent to which the labor and consumption process is permitted to function smoothly and easily.”<sup>69</sup> Here, the primary concern is easing the burden of labor, not a transformation of one’s condition. The point was not to change the political conditions under which human beings came to be treated like oxen, but rather merely to lighten the ox’s load. The trade unions sought only quantitative change in social or economic status, not a political change that would oppose the “injustices and hypocrisies” inflicted on laborers.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to the trade unions, with the labor movement, individuals were able to act, *in spite of the fact that they were laborers*. There are two reasons for this, which highlight the contrast between the trade unions and the labor movement. On Arendt’s view, there were “decisive moments when during the process of a revolution it suddenly turned out that these people, if not led by official party programs and ideologies, had their own ideas about the possibilities of democratic government under modern conditions.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, in the labor movement individuals were able to think and act for themselves, rather than just follow along with official party dogma.

Second, they demanded political rather than simply economic change. “For this political and revolutionary role of the labor movement... it is decisive that the economic activity of its members was incidental and that its force of attraction was never restricted

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 216.

to the ranks of the working class.”<sup>72</sup> The members of the labor movement wanted more than just easier work for more pay and more convenient ways to consume; they wanted to eliminate the injustices that kept workers in a position of subservience and they wanted access to the public realm, not as a labor force, but as individuals. On Arendt’s view, they did not want a more comfortable and easier type of degradation but wanted their degradation to end.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 219.

### 3. Arendt and Liberalism

Now that we have examined the basic elements of Arendt's political philosophy and how these elements interrelate, we are in a position to see Arendt's distinctive contribution to the project of liberalism. Arendt scholarship today presents a very interesting scene. This is because no one seems to agree on exactly what Arendt is doing. There are three major schools of thought that are significant here. Both communitarians and liberals claim Arendt as their own. The communitarians, led by Ronald Beiner, claim that Arendt, with her concept of the "world," is arguing for a common world based on a notion of ethical community. In contrast, liberals, including Habermas, Maurizio D'Entreves, Onora O'Neill and Seyla Benhabib, find Arendt's later work to be very similar to that of Habermas.<sup>1</sup> The liberal reading of Arendt is especially evident when we consider her work focusing on her concept of "judgment." Judgment serves to regulate and tame the political exchanges evident in her earlier account of action presented in *The Human Condition*. The third major reading of Arendt is given by Dana Villa, who argues, contra both Beiner and Benhabib, for a poststructuralist reading of Arendt.

Apart from this general attempt to categorize Arendt's thinking, there is an assortment of noteworthy criticisms of her work. First is the longstanding and still rather widely held view that Arendt is nostalgically seeking to revivify some conception of the Greek *polis*. A second significant criticism is leveled by Hanna Pitkin, who focuses her critique on Arendt's distinction between labor and action developed in *The Human Condition*. Because Arendt thinks labor and action need to be distinguished, Pitkin

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky, ed., *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), xiv.



argues that Arendtian politics (action) cannot be *about* economic affairs (labor). She therefore argues that Arendt's conception of politics is ultimately an empty concept because political life is fundamentally concerned with economic activities.

Here, my purpose is to address these two criticisms, which I take to be the most important criticisms of her work both generally and for the purposes of this project, and to argue for a liberal reading of Arendt. Understanding the liberal strains in Arendt's writings also necessitates a brief discussion of Habermas's work and how it fits into the project of liberalism due to the fact that it is not straightforwardly Rawlsian. This is necessary because Arendt's work intersects with the project of liberalism through Habermas's work, which bears striking and perhaps surprising similarities to that of Arendt.

### 3.1 Objections

Here, I would like to discuss two interrelated objections to the claim that Arendt's work can be reconciled with liberalism. The first is the common objection that Arendtian action presents either an Aristotelian conception of *praxis* or a conception of action that is modeled after public life in the Greek *polis*. The second claim, made by Hanna Pitkin, is that Arendt's separation of labor and action is not tenable under modern conditions because it entails a strict separation of economic affairs, which are considered private, and political affairs, which are considered public.

The assertion that Arendt's concept of action is fundamentally Aristotelian is an old claim, which I think has been well-refuted in the existing literature. What Arendt admires in the Aristotelian conception is the distinction between *praxis* (action) and *poiēsis* (fabrication). Although Arendt likes the Aristotelian distinction, she does not

think Aristotle lives up to it; one reason she invokes the *praxis/poiēsis* distinction is in order to criticize Aristotle's particular deployment of it. Nor does Arendt champion action as it was practiced in the *polis*; on the contrary, she blames the downfall of the city-state on the Greeks' concept of action. I think the second objection, that Arendt too sharply divides political concerns from economic concerns, has more merit, but I think it still does not condemn Arendt's account of action to being hopelessly premodern. Pitkin raises an important concern: if Arendt separates political from economic affairs, she then runs the risk of excluding important issues of justice from political consideration. In that case, there is a danger that the plight of the working classes and the poor could be construed as "apolitical" and therefore not worthy of public debate. However, I do not think this conclusion is inevitable. Here, Benhabib again is helpful, as is Martin Levin. Levin points out that Arendt carefully distinguishes the laboring classes from the activity of "labour," a term which she uses in a special sense, and, while Arendt seeks to exclude "labour" from politics, she does not want to exclude the laboring classes from public participation. Tracking Levin's analysis, Benhabib argues that Arendt's distinction between "politics" (action) and "economics" (labor) does not hearken back to ancient Athens but rather captures an important modern distinction between self-interest and generalizable public interests.

### 3.1.1 Arendt's "Method:" Fragmentary Historiography

The general claim that Arendt is nostalgic for an earlier time, whose ways of thinking she wants to renew or recover, I think is straightforwardly false. The ubiquity and persistence of this claim, however, deserves serious consideration. Arendt *does* appropriate concepts from the Greeks as well as from medieval and early modern

thinkers and deploys them in unusual and often surprising ways. Part of Arendt's charm lies in the way she takes old philosophical distinctions and recuts them along different lines. This is Arendt's "method:" appropriating bits and pieces of the conceptual legacy of the philosophical tradition and redeploying them in wholly and often shockingly new ways. This technique, which is not very methodological in that it is not excessively systematic, is what is commonly mistaken for nostalgia. Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature rejecting the "nostalgic" reading of Arendt's work and an increasing interest in understanding Arendt's "method" as a technique of fragmentary historiography influenced by her close friend, Walter Benjamin.

Annabel Herzog is one commentator who notes the affinity between Benjaminian and Arendtian treatments of the past.<sup>2</sup> Both Arendt and Benjamin understood the past as fragmented and sought a way to learn from the past. In Arendt's essay, *Walter Benjamin*, she quotes these lines from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies,  
Of his bones are coral made,  
Those are pearls that were his eyes.  
Nothing of him doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
The Tempest, Act I, Scene 2

Arendt then gives the following description of Benjamin's "method:"

And [Benjamin's] thinking, fed by the present, works with the 'thought fragments' it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same

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<sup>2</sup> Annabel Herzog, "Illuminating Inheritance: Benjamin's Influence on Arendt's Political Storytelling," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 26, no. 5 (2000): 1-27.

time a process of crystallization, that in the depths of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things ‘suffer a sea-change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living.<sup>3</sup>

What is significant here is that Benjamin did not seek to “resuscitate” the past “the way it was” in order to “contribute to the renewal of extinct ages” but rather to discover “the rich and the strange” in the past, those things which, although they were the products of the past, speak to the present in new ways. Arendt makes it evident that she considers her own work on the model of Benjamin’s “pearl diving” when, quoting the same lines of Shakespeare, she indicates that this method is the “basic assumption” of her thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Herzog points out that,

Acknowledging that her own ‘method’ is to deal with the fragments of the past, after their ‘sea change’, Arendt contends, like Benjamin, that past and present intermingle in the shock of crystallization, and that the essence of historical writing consists in recounting this shock. Jerome Kohn comments that in this way ‘the old is made new in the fragmentary recovery of the past; it is not the tradition that is recovered, but a *present* past.’<sup>5</sup>

It is Arendt’s unusual method, her “pearl diving,” that is sometimes mistaken for nostalgia. Sure enough, Arendt employs distinctions also used by the Greeks: public and private; household and *polis*; labor, work and action, but her deployment of these concepts would have been quite foreign to them. They are instead intended to appropriate the past in a way that can provide insight into the questions and problems of the present.

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<sup>3</sup> Here quoting Arendt. *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Thinking,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 212.

<sup>5</sup> Annabel Herzog, “Illuminating Inheritance: Benjamin’s Influence on Arendt’s Political Storytelling,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 26, no. 5 (2000): 7.

### 3.1.2 “Arendt Against Athens”

One of the most common claims made about Arendt concerns her supposed Aristotelianism and celebration of the Greek *polis*. The view that Arendt was a devotee of Aristotle or was nostalgic for the time of the *polis* is one of the earliest and most prevalent interpretations of her work. It is also one of the most widely disputed. A large and still growing number of arguments against Arendt’s nostalgia for Aristotle and the *polis* have been raised in response to the early charges of “Graecomania.”<sup>6</sup>

Because of the similarities between Arendt’s distinction between labor, work and action in *The Human Condition* and the Greek distinctions between *praxis* and *poiēsis*, on the one hand, and the *polis* and *oikia* or household, on the other, many interpreters of Arendt, both friends and critics, came to view Arendt as a celebrator of the ancient Greek world. For our purposes, such an interpretation presents a problem: insofar as Arendt’s political theory is hearkening back to ancient Athens, Arendt cannot be understood as a genuinely modern thinker.

Although the Greek reading of Arendt became prevalent early on, the numbers of those who resist such a reading have been mounting. Jacques Taminiaux, for example, argues against those who would ascribe a “Graecomania” to Arendt, saying: “the Athenian *polis* does not have in her political thought the status of a paradigm.”<sup>7</sup> Another example is provided by Dana Villa, who comments that,

[Aristotelian readings of Arendt] inevitably domesticate what is, in fact, the most radical rethinking of political action undertaken by a theorist in this century. As Nietzsche reminds us in *The Gay Science*, ‘seeing things as similar and making

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Jacques Taminiaux, “Athens and Rome,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), 165; Roy Tsao, “Arendt Against Athens,” *Political Theory*, vol. 30, no. 1. (Feb., 2002): 97-123.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Taminiaux, “Athens and Rome,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), 165.

things the same is the sign of weak eyes.’ Arendt’s appropriators—her “friends”—are guilty of such hermeneutical myopia when they assert the primacy of the Aristotelian heritage in her work.<sup>8</sup>

These relatively recent reinterpretations of Arendt’s work, which reject her nostalgia for Athens and her Aristotelianism, also have implications for understanding her as a modern thinker. Roy Tsao points out that “[Arendt’s] critique of modern society is both more subtle, and also a good deal more compelling, than a complaint that we fail to live up to some dated Hellenic ideal.”<sup>9</sup>

Tsao and Taminioux make two particularly strong arguments for a non-Greek reading of Arendt. First, both argue that Arendt’s theory of action does not reflect the conception of *praxis* held by the Greek philosophers, as Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of *praxis* differ from Arendtian action in that they are modeled after the instrumental processes inherent in “work.” Second, Arendt’s theory of action does not reflect the nature of action as it was practiced by the citizens of the Athenian *polis*. According to Arendt, Athenian politics was based on an overly agonistic “performative” model of action, which brought about the eventual downfall of the city-state, and although Arendtian action has a competitive cast, it is tempered by a cooperative spirit that is absent in the Athenian model. I shall briefly look at these arguments in turn.

On Arendt’s view, the Aristotelian model of action is problematic because it conflates work and action and, as a result, understands action in terms of the instrumental process inherent in “work.” When action is modeled after work, the political institutions are constructed in accordance with the singular idea of the ruler, just as the material upon which the craftsman works is made to conform to the idea of the finished product held in

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<sup>8</sup> Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton, 1996), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Roy Tsao, “Arendt Against Athens,” *Political Theory*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Feb. 2002): 97-123.

his mind's eye. This instrumentalizes action insofar as the ruler treats politics as his "material." This is problematic for Arendt because, for her, politics signifies a "web of human relationships"; genuinely political acts and institutions emerge from agreements between individuals with differing wills and intentions rather than from the dictates of a singular idea. She derides the idea that we might "'make' something in the realm of human affairs—'make' institutions and laws, for instance, as we make tables and chairs" because it implies that it is "possible to treat men as one treats other 'material.'"<sup>10</sup> Arendt thinks the "fabrication" model of action accurately describes politics under conditions of monarchy or tyranny,<sup>11</sup> but it does not capture the democratic spirit of action. Indeed, Arendt argues that the rationality inherent in fabrication "wreaks havoc" when it enters the political scene.<sup>12</sup>

Those critics that look to the Greek *polis* rather than the Greek philosophers identify Arendt's theory of action with the Greeks' "performative" model. The "performative" conception of action refers to the notion that the significance of a political act inheres in its performance, hence the emphasis that, for the Greeks, was placed on the honor and glory that attaches to one's deeds. If the act's significance inheres in the performance itself, *praxis* comes to be valued in accordance with its spontaneity and so is measured by the standard of the greatness or glory of its spontaneous performance.

But in what sense is this Arendt's conception? Both Tsao and Taminiaux argue that Arendt's comments concerning the performative character of Greek *praxis* are in fact more critical than otherwise, and they point to two ways in which the *praxis* found in the *polis* differs from action. First, the Greek conception of action is insular, for it sought to

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 188.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-222.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

preserve the actors' deeds unchanged, and so ensure their "immortal fame." To this end, the law of the *polis* was supposed to function much like the city wall, providing an "organized remembrance" of the actors, not only protecting their memory from change but also their deeds and ensuring their permanent glory.<sup>13</sup> However, such "organized remembrance" runs counter to Arendt's conception of action. As discussed in Chapter Two, Arendtian action, which is characterized by "natality," strongly emphasizes novelty. To act means to take initiative, to begin anew by bringing fresh perspectives to the table, and thus action, for Arendt, seeks not to protect the purity of action from incursion by others, but rather to increase the opportunities for a plurality of individuals to engage in action.

Second, as Tsao and Taminiaux point out, Arendt attributes the eventual decline of the Greek city-state to the overly agonistic character of performative action.<sup>14</sup> According to Arendt, the agonism of Athenian politics became destructive and brought about the eventual downfall of the city-state.

In this agonal spirit, which eventually was to bring the Greek city states to ruin because it made alliances well nigh impossible and poisoned the domestic life of the citizens with envy and mutual hatred (envy was the national vice of ancient Greece), the commonweal was constantly threatened. Because the commonness of the political world was constituted only by the walls of the city and the boundaries of its laws, it was not seen or experienced in the relationships between the citizens.<sup>15</sup>

Because the Greeks saw law as a "wall" to protect their unchanging legacy, they could not understand law as a relationship to others, particularly to non-Greeks. According to Arendt, the drive to protect the Greek legacy by insulating it from change from both

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<sup>13</sup> Here, quoting Arendt: Roy Tsao, "Arendt Against Athens," *Political Theory*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Feb. 2002): 113. (Italics added by Tsao).

<sup>14</sup> Roy Tsao, "Arendt Against Athens," *Political Theory*, vol. 30, no. 1. (Feb. 2002): 115.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Politics and Philosophy," *Social Research*, vol. 57, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 82.



without and within fueled the demise of the city-state because Athens never fully developed a concept of politics that could extend beyond the walls of the city through alliance and compact. Arendt thought this was a fatal flaw of the Greek conception of action.

### 3.1.3 Pitkin

The second and I think more significant objection to Arendt's modernism is raised by Hanna Pitkin, who argues that Arendt's distinction between labor, work and action entails a strong separation of economic life, which is the concern of labor, and political life, which is the concern of action. Such a separation is seen as untenable given modern conditions. Pitkin further argues that a politics stripped of economic considerations is vacuous; she asks, "what is it that [Arendt's citizens] talk about together, in that endless palaver in the *agora*?"<sup>16</sup>

While Arendt does want to distinguish economic and political concerns, I ultimately think that she does not separate labor and action as strongly as Pitkin believes. I think this is testified to most clearly in Arendt's less known writings, particularly her biography *Rahel Varhagen*. Labor's complex relation to action is also discussed in *The Human Condition*, where the example of *action* Arendt gives is in fact the *labor* movement.<sup>17</sup> The primary concern driving Arendt's distinction between labor and action seems to be ensuring that politics does not become a tool to serve one's private economic self-interest, which is precisely what must happen if political agreements are to achieve any measure of impartiality. That said, there are a number of ways one might work with Arendt's distinction between action and labor, and this is true even if one agrees with

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<sup>16</sup> Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Aug. 1981): 336.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 215.

Pitkin's basic claim, that Arendt distinguishes economic and political life too strongly. Here, I would like to examine reactions to Pitkin's criticisms of Arendt by Martin Levin, Dana Villa and Seyla Benhabib. I also would like to ask, in reading Pitkin's critique of Arendt, what should a reader sympathetic to Arendt's work come away with? One thing in particular stands out: Pitkin's compassion for the underprivileged (i.e. women, the poor and the working class), which is the driving force behind her critical reading of Arendt.

One of Pitkin's primary concerns with Arendt's distinction between labor and action has to do with the repercussions it would stand to have for laborers. Pitkin argues that, if economic concerns are distinguished from political concerns, those who are more closely associated with economic functions, the "concerns of the body," would be denied a voice in politics:

Thus it seems for Arendt, because political action cannot solve economic problems, and because misery can become active only in destructive ways, it is best for the poor and the laborers to be kept out of the public sphere. Like women, they belong in the household, with the concerns of the body.<sup>18</sup>

If politics cannot address the concerns of women and the poor, Pitkin reasons that politics would be left to a masculinist elite:

Arendt's citizens begin to resemble posturing little boys clamoring for attention ("Look at me! I'm the greatest!" "No, look at me!") and wanting to be reassured that they are brave, valuable, even real. (No wonder they feel unreal: they have left their bodies behind in the private realm.) Though Arendt was female, there is a lot of *machismo* in her vision. Unable to face their mortality and physical vulnerability, the men she describes strive endlessly to be superhuman, and, realizing that they cannot achieve that goal, require endless reassurance from the others in their anxious delusion.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Aug. 1981): 335.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

I cannot here go into the debate among feminists concerning Arendt's work. I would, however, like to address Pitkin's assertion that distinguishing political and economic concerns entails relegating those individuals more closely associated with economic functions (women, laborers and the poor) to the private sphere. Here, Martin Levin's insightful comments are helpful.

Levin points out, contra Pitkin, that Arendt's discussion of labor pertains to the activity of "labouring" rather than the class of laborers. "Arendt is quite explicit on this point. *Animal laborans* does not refer to a sociologically defined class. Our society of labourers 'did not come about through the emancipation of the labouring classes but by the emancipation of the labouring activity itself, which preceded by centuries the political emancipation of labourers.'<sup>20</sup> Arendt's term *animal laborans*, then, does not refer to the working class or any class for that matter; instead "her indictment of *animal laborans* is the indictment of an activity, a way of life, even of a relationship to the world, but not of a social class."<sup>21</sup> Again, as Levin points out, Arendt makes the distinction between her term *animal laborans* and the social class of workers explicit:

When Arendt refers to labourers, she does not mean Marxian proletarians who are defined by their relationship to the means of production. Arendt explicitly disclaims that every member of the labourers' society must actually be a labourer in the sociological sense, "but only that all members consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and the lives of their families," When Arendt inveighs against the labourers' or consumers' society, she is not pointing her philosophical finger at the labouring masses but at all classes in society.

It is thus the critique of "labouring," understood as the activity of those who "consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families" rather than a criticism of laborers as such that Arendt is concerned with. This insight

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Levin, "On Animal Laborans and Homo Politicus in Hannah Arendt: A Note," *Political Theory*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Nov. 1979): 524.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 523.

takes away much of the force of Pitkin's claim that Arendt believes "it is best for the poor and the laborers to be kept out of the public sphere. Like women, they belong in the household, with the concerns of the body."<sup>22</sup> Once laborers and "laboring" are distinguished, there is no basis for the claim that Arendt forbids laborers from political participation. By the same token, it no longer seems paradoxical that Arendt specifically refers to the labor movement as an exemplary case of *action* in *The Human Condition*.

Dana Villa addresses Pitkin's second claim, that, if action cannot concern economic life, it lacks content. Villa concurs with Pitkin that Arendt sharply distinguishes action and labor, but, unlike Pitkin, Villa finds this admirable. His concern is instead the charge of vacuity. Villa contends that this charge can be resolved,

...if we look to the examples Arendt gives of exemplary political speech. These examples—the speeches of Athenian democracy, the debates attending the founding of the American republic, the deliberations of revolutionary councils, certain acts of civil disobedience—all revolve around the creation and preservation of the public sphere. Genuinely political speech concerns itself with "the creation of the conditions that make [politics] possible or with the preservation of such conditions." This is the sense in which politics is or can be the content of politics. For the Greeks, such speech typically concerned the defense of the *polis* and its distinctive way of life against its neighbors, as in Pericles' Funeral Oration. For moderns, political speech has centered on the creation and maintenance of an institutional arrangement or framework of laws that serves to articulate and protect the public realm. It has centered, in other words, on the creation of a *constitution*.<sup>23</sup>

On Villa's view, although action is self-referential, this does not mean that it is vacuous. Action is self-referential in that it is "about" itself, but it does not follow from this that action is "empty." Even on Villa's reading, action concerns much of what we consider to be the normal affairs of politics such as the establishment and preservation of laws and the constitution, which are created by citizens and under which they live. It is in this

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<sup>22</sup> Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Aug. 1981): 335.

<sup>23</sup> Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: the Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 37.

way that Arendt's discussions of the *founding* of political bodies are particularly significant:

The act of founding a body politic and the debates and deliberation that precede the founding are evidences of exemplary political speech precisely because they concern the "creation of conditions"—for example, the guarantee of rights, the distinction between public and private, the institutionalization of popular participation—that transform political action into a relatively permanent way of being together. A space for action may "come into being whenever men are together in the manner or speech and action, and therefore predate and precede all formal constitution of the political realm," but it fails to become a "house where freedom can dwell" until this constitution takes place. The speech of revolutionary councils—of the French *sociétés populaires*, the soviets, the German workers' and soldiers' councils of 1918—is exemplary because this kind of speech *enacted* a new constitution of power, a people's constitution, so to speak.<sup>24</sup>

Although the act of founding a body politic provides the model case, it by no means is the only outlet for action. Action also concerns the maintenance of the opportunity for action: "It would, of course, be self-defeating to hypostatize the moment of founding as *the* manifestation of genuinely political speech. The understanding outlined above [Arendt's] demands that action be a continuing possibility."<sup>25</sup> This is why action concerns both the foundation and the maintenance of political institutions; as it is frequently put today, the constitution must be understood as a *project* of the citizens.

Another response to Pitkin's concerns is given by Seyla Benhabib. Benhabib argues that Arendt's distinction between public and private, with its resultant severing of labor from action, is not as clear as it first seems. This is especially true when one does not focus so exclusively on *The Human Condition* and considers some of Arendt's lesser-known works, especially her biography, *Rahel Varhagen*. In *Rahel Varhagen* Arendt provides detailed discussions of the salons of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which Benhabib

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

argues are a sort of “female ‘public sphere’” that are characterized by a “fluidity of lines” and so can be “both public and private, both shared and intimate.”<sup>26</sup>

What Benhabib has discovered in *Rahel Varhagen* is an interesting and important tension in Arendt’s philosophy. On the one hand, by distinguishing action and labor, Arendt seem to desire a politics cleansed of “social” and economic considerations, and thus cannot hope to adequately address modern political concerns, which are often if not predominantly socioeconomic (this is Pitkin’s criticism). On the other hand, Arendt recognized that the line she has drawn between economic and political concerns is more tentative than she at first lets on. It is because of this tension that Benhabib considers Arendt to be a “reluctant” modernist. Benhabib’s reading is useful because it serves to problematize the assumption that Arendt cleanly severs economic from political concerns. Given the complexities Arendt’s position presents us with, Benhabib’s solution is to try to discover what in Arendt’s work is valuable to us as modern thinkers.

This approach is evident in Benhabib’s reading of Arendt’s discussion of the labor movement in *The Human Condition*. Here, Benhabib seems to be following Levin’s distinction when she points out that Arendt distinguishes between “the working class as a *economic client and/or interest group*, on the one hand, and the working class as a *political actor*, on the other. She is full of sympathy with the latter’s struggles, while the former, as inevitable as it is, she thinks is not of political consequence as such.”<sup>27</sup> In Levin’s terms, the working class as an “economic client/interest group” refers to the activity of “labouring” appearing on the public scene, while the working class as a “political actor” refers to the laboring *class* engaged in political activity. What Benhabib

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<sup>26</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

points out and what is important to recognize is that it is consistent with Arendt's view that laborers can engage in political action and that they can do so by taking economic concerns as well as questions of justice as the subject of discussion:

It is... her distinction between the economic and political struggles of the working class that is important. Arendt does not deny that in their struggle to unmask the hypocrisy of class society, the working classes give voice to economic demands and to questions of social justice. But they do so from a standpoint that can constitute a "new public space with new political standards."

This is the crucial point. The constitution of a public space always involves a claim to the generalizability of the demands, needs, and interests for which one is fighting. In struggling for the eight-hour working day, or against child labor, or for universal health insurance, one is also struggling for justice, for interests that we as a political community have in common... Whichever class or social group enters the public realm, and no matter how class or group specific its demands may be in their genesis, the process of public-political struggle transforms the *attitude of narrow self-interest into a more broadly shared public or common interest*. This, I think, is the fundamental distinction between the "social-cum-economic" and "political" realms for Hannah Arendt. Engaging in politics does not mean abandoning economic or social issues; it means fighting for them in the name of principles, interests and values that have a generalizable basis, and that concern us as a collectivity. The political for Arendt involves the transformation of the partial and limited perspective of each class, group, or individual into a broader vision of the "enlarged mentality."

On this reading, if the "political" is understood in terms of the generalizability of interests, Arendt's distinction between the political and the economic seems much more plausible. It does not preclude *speech about economic concerns*, yet it does protect politics from becoming a tool to serve narrow economic self-interest. In Benhabib's words, this would counter, "the bourgeoisie's imperialistic ventures and the ambition of this class to transform the state into a joint-stock company solely protecting its interests,"<sup>28</sup> while at the same time, not denying a political voice to the economically oppressed. Moreover, this interpretation gives us leeway to understand Arendt in a way that does justice to our concerns as modern advocates of democracy. Here, what is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 140.

properly “political” is what has a claim to generalizability; the “economic” refers us instead to rational, yet private self-interest. Benhabib concludes by pointing out how such an interpretation of Arendt’s project also harmonizes well with Pitkin’s vision of politics:

Drawing out the implications of Pitkin’s perspicacious observations, we can conclude that the “political” for Arendt need not define a given and predetermined set of issues, nor refer only to specific institutions. Rather, what constitutes the political is a certain quality of the life of speech and action, of talking and acting in common with others who are one’s equals. This quality is characterized by the willingness to give reasons in public, to entertain others’ points of view and interests, even when they contradict one’s own, and by the attempt to transform the dictates of self-interest into a common public goal.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of my largely critical stance with respect to Pitkin’s criticisms of Arendt, I do think one of her criticisms is right on the mark: namely, her criticism that Arendt lacks compassion for the underprivileged (i.e. women, the poor and the working class). What seems to me to be the driving concern behind Pitkin’s critique is a concern for those who have been historically denied political power (i.e. women, the poor and the working class), and, in contrast to Pitkin, Arendt seems cold and uncaring. Her written voice lacks the outrage we feel when confronted with the injustices of history, and her matter-of-fact tone can come off as unsympathetic.

Although Arendt displays little compassion, there is a reason for this: she thinks that the immediacy of compassion destroys what she calls the “worldly space” among people. Markell points out that, on Arendt’s view, compassion, “effaces the plurality of those distinctive *personae* and perspectives that constitute the political world.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, Arendt thinks compassion collapses the different viewpoints that make up a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>30</sup> Patchen Markell, “Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 381.



democratic polity into a homogenous mob-like perspective. Moreover, as Markell points out, Arendt thinks that such compassion necessarily leads to political violence:

Compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world," Arendt writes, and when it replies to suffering, compassion "will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for [*sic*] swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence."<sup>31</sup>

Although I can understand Arendt's concern on this point, I do not think we must agree with her position that compassion displayed in public necessarily leads to either a homogeneity of perspective or to political violence. I think the outrage Pitkin evidences in the face of the gross injustices that have been historically perpetrated against the politically powerless is well-placed. It seems to me that its impetus is to spur on action geared toward remedying social injustices rather than collapsing the "worldly space" that preserves individual's distinct perspectives. The feminist movement is a case in point; here, the role of emotions has garnered significant theoretical attention and emotion is typically seen as a legitimate, though traditionally undervalued, means of expression, but this fact has hardly collapsed the differences of opinion that exist among feminists. Indeed, I can think of no other group that is so divergent in its views, yet still falls under a single rubric. While I can see what motivates Arendt's perhaps overly cool tone, I can see no reason that we need adopt it ourselves.

I think the thrust of Pitkin's critique of Arendt is that justice demands both ensuring the ability to satisfy economic needs and the protection of political liberties, as difficult as this may be. As such, economic concerns *are* political. Here I think Pitkin is right; I just do not think Arendt would disagree with Pitkin. Arendt very well knows that

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<sup>31</sup> Here quoting Arendt. *Ibid.*, 381.

political action is often impossible given conditions of gross economic injustice. This is in part why she deems economic concerns to be “pre-political.” Economic concerns, the “concerns of the body,” present a greater and more immediate urgency (i.e. I cannot spend my time attending rallies for free speech if I am starving—I must eat first); in this sense the necessities of life literally must precede politics. Yet, although the satisfaction of economic needs is necessary for the pursuit of “politics,” economic justice is not sufficient to ensure the preservation of political liberties. This is because economic and political concerns can conflict in troubling ways (i.e. a tyranny might supply the people with their needs and wants more effectively than a democracy); in such scenarios people may be forced to choose between alleviating suffering or fulfilling their material desires and protecting basic political freedoms. I think both Pitkin and Arendt clearly realize the difficulty of such positions, and I admire Pitkin’s obstinacy. Pitkin demands in no uncertain terms that justice requires both the satisfaction of economic necessities as well as political liberties. I cannot effectively engage in political action if my most basic needs have not been met, and political liberties cannot be enjoyed if I have no means to satisfy economic needs.

Arendt recognizes this tension, and she deals with it by trying to strike a balance between economic needs and political action. While she thinks we should not be wholly driven by economic necessity (for then we would live the life of slaves, as “poverty forces the free man to act like a slave”<sup>32</sup>), she does not advocate attempts to wholly transcend our needs. The Greeks attempted to do this by forcing slaves to labor for them,<sup>33</sup> and more recent theories have invoked the utopian hope that technology will be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 84.

able to wholly free humanity from the burden of labor through automation.<sup>34</sup> Arendt rejects such attempts because, although they seek to eliminate labor, they do not eliminate the consumption that remains related to the laboring process,<sup>35</sup> which Arendt finds equally problematic. For this reason, although Arendt recognizes the necessity of some measure of economic well being, she also would not advocate policies that would seek to eliminate the burden of labor from the human condition, such as the total automation of production. As a result, we are left with a somewhat ambiguous picture of where Arendt stands. It seems to be the case that political solutions to economic problems are acceptable as remedies for gross injustices, such as the injustice of enforced poverty; however, on Arendt's account it is not the role of politics to provide for individual prosperity or the accumulation of wealth, for these have the potential to unleash dangerous consumptive forces, at least in the absence of political checks.

### 3.2 Rawls, Habermas and Arendt

In order to address the ways in which Arendt's political theory intersects with liberalism, it is necessary to examine Habermas's work. Habermas's project is a part of the "family" of liberalism, concerned as it is with achieving political consensus in a pluralist society. He does however take a different approach to achieving that consensus than does John Rawls. It is important to examine Habermas's work in the context of the current discussion of Arendt because her treatment of political consensus, which comes late in her career, bears remarkable similarities to Habermas's. Because of these similarities, the way in which Arendt's thought relates to Rawlsian liberalism is also very similar to the way Habermas's thought does. An examination of Habermas's work has a

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

further advantage: whereas Habermas has spent his career fleshing out his thoughts concerning political consensus, Arendt came to the same considerations only late in her life. While her early political theory focused on her exposition of action as a political category, her later work presents a turn toward the consideration of how the spectrum of political views raised in action could be adjudicated. The result was Arendt's unfinished work on "judgment," to which Habermas is indebted for his theory of political consensus.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2.1 Habermas and Rawlsian Liberalism

Before I turn to a discussion of Habermas's similarities to Arendt, I would like to discuss how the positions of Habermas and Rawls differ. This is necessary because Arendt's work is at variance with Rawls in the same general way. My main concern is Habermas's critique of Rawls's "original position." Both Rawls and Habermas agree that achieving an impartial political consensus requires, in some sense, that political participants be able to transcend personal interests or comprehensive beliefs, which concern notions of the good or human nature, but they disagree on what this involves. Rawls thinks the best way to achieve impartial consensus is given by the model of the original position, in which participants are placed behind a "veil of ignorance." Because they are not provided with information that may give them clues as to their positions in society, participants are freed at the outset from any particularities that could bias their agreements.

Habermas finds the model of the original position problematic. He argues that restricting the information available to the participants at the outset of deliberation may

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<sup>36</sup> Ronald Beiner, and Jennifer Nedelsky, ed., *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), xiv.

inadvertently distort the neutrality of their agreements. There are a number of reasons for this.<sup>37</sup> Here, I would like to focus on one of them, which I think is particularly pertinent to the current discussion of Arendt. One reason Habermas finds the original position problematic is due to the initial constraint made by the veil of ignorance upon the different perspectives of the political participants. He argues that, as a result of his reliance on the original position, Rawls must accept a “double burden of proof:”

The veil of ignorance must extend to all particular viewpoints and interests that could impair an impartial judgment; at the same time, it may extend *only* to such normative matters as can be disqualified without further ado as candidates for the common good to be accepted by free and equal citizens... we must construct the original position already with knowledge, and even foresight, of all the normative contents that could potentially nourish the shared self-understanding of free and equal citizens in the future. In other words, the theoretician himself would have to shoulder the burden of anticipating at least parts of the information of which he previously relieved the parties in the original position!<sup>38</sup>

Habermas’s point is that, in order for the theorist to require something like a veil of ignorance, he or she would have to know in advance what information was politically relevant and what must be excluded from consideration. While this is troubling in its own right, for the theorist cannot be assumed to have some sort of privileged perspective, it also generates two related dangers: that some element of a comprehensive doctrine might not be screened out by the model of the original position and erroneously enter into political play, or that some element that is politically significant might be prematurely disqualified from political consideration. Because of this weakness, the veil of ignorance may not be capable of fully screening out individual biases. Therefore, Habermas argues the original position may not be able to “guarantee the impartiality of judgment.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCII, no. 3 (March 1995): 110.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Instead of a view restricted by a veil of ignorance, Habermas champions what he refers to as an “enlargement” of discourse.<sup>40</sup> In this “enlarged” perspective, all information is available up front. Unlike the original position, no information is bracketed at the outset. Instead, each participant is asked to imagine him or herself in the place of every other participant. Habermas argues that, when participants are able to freely discuss their individual viewpoints and how these differ, they will then be able to come to agreement. As Habermas puts it, the goal is to find that overlap so that participants can see how what is “in the equal interest of each” coincides with what is “equally good for all,” where “good” is understood to mean “right.”<sup>41</sup> Habermas describes this as an “enlargement” of perspective:

Discourse ethics... views the moral point of view as embodied in an intersubjective practice of argumentation which enjoins those involved to an idealizing *enlargement* of their interpretive perspectives... Under the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and noncoercive rational discourse among free and equal participants, everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else, and thus project herself into the understandings of self and world of all others; from this interlocking of perspectives there emerges an ideally extended we-perspective from which all can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the basis of their shared practice; and this should include mutual criticism of the appropriateness of the languages in terms of which situations and needs are interpreted. In the course of *successively* undertaken abstractions, the core of generalizable interests can emerge step by step.<sup>42</sup>

Habermas refers to this enlargement of perspective as the “we-perspective,” the “moral point of view” and “enlarged mentality.”<sup>43</sup> It constitutes the perspective from which

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>41</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCII, no. 3 (March 1995): 117; Jürgen Habermas, “A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality,” *The Inclusion of the Other* (Cambridge: MIT, 1998): 29.

<sup>42</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCII, no. 3 (March 1995): 117.

<sup>43</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality,” *The Inclusion of the Other* (Cambridge: MIT, 1998): 32.

participants are able to make impartial political judgments,<sup>44</sup> which is reached not by bracketing information up front but rather through “successively undertaken abstractions” which reveal a core of generalizable moral interests.

Habermas’s goal is the same as Rawls’s: to find a perspective from which impartial political judgments can be achieved, but his way of doing so differs. Whereas Rawls prefers to bracket the information available to the participants at the outset, in Habermas’s model, although all information is permitted at the outset, the procedure of discourse ultimately screens out what is not, politically, a basis for agreement. Habermas finds his own model preferable because the theorist is not required to anticipate what to include or exclude from political consideration. Instead, what is politically admissible is determined solely by the *procedure* of consensus-formation, which precludes the possibility that politically relevant information may be inadvertently excluded. Habermas argues that his model is, therefore, better able to ensure the impartiality of agreements. This difference between Rawls and Habermas is significant for the current discussion because Arendt’s approach to consensus is very much like Habermas’s.

### 3.2.2 Judgment and “Enlarged Mentality”

Although the literature addressing Arendt’s contributions to political theory has largely focused on her earlier work, which takes as its subject the distinctions endemic to the *vita activa* (labor, work and action), there is new and significant interest in her later work, in which she discusses the distinctions of the *vita contemplativa* (thinking, willing and judging). In particular, much of the growing body of literature concerning Arendt’s later writings focuses on her discussions of judgment, and it is here that her political

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<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “‘Reasonable versus True,’ or the Morality of Worldviews,” *The Inclusion of the Other* (Cambridge: MIT, 1998): 84.

theory can be seen to have an affinity with liberal political theory, especially that of Habermas.

Here, it is important to note that Arendt's considerations on judgment came at the end of her life and are not systematic or complete. At the time of her death, Arendt was working on her three-volume work, now published as *The Life of the Mind*, which was to provide her exposition of the contemplative life. Together with *The Human Condition*, which deals with the active life, these two works serve as the framework for her thought more generally. Each was to be comprised of three elements: *The Human Condition* took as its subject labor, work and action, and *The Life of the Mind* was to take as its subject thinking, willing and judging. Arendt completed the volumes on thinking and willing, but had only just begun the volume on judging when she unexpectedly passed away. What we know of her work on judging is drawn from her lecture notes on "Kant's political philosophy," which use Kant's *The Critique of Judgment* as her main text, and from a handful of references found in her essays collected as *Between Past and Future*. Her Kant notes have been edited and published in stand-alone form and also have been abridged and added as an appendix to "thinking" and "willing," published together as *The Life of the Mind*.

Arendt has thus left us with a sketch, but that it is a significant and telling one is testified to by the fact that it has received much attention, particularly by those who wish to understand Arendt's work in the context of liberalism. This is because Arendt's political theory intersects liberal political theory in her concept of judgment, which can most readily be seen by comparing her considerations on judgment to Habermas's discussions of consensus-formation. These bear striking similarities, especially in their



discussions of “enlarged mentality,” which both Arendt and Habermas borrow from Kant.

Arendt discusses a number of things that characterize judgment. First is judgment’s “representative” character. When one judges a given issue, one makes use of representations. What gets represented are the viewpoints others may take on the given issue. Here, Arendt says that, “Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent, that is, I represent them.”<sup>45</sup> For example, if I am to judge whether or not abortion should be legal, the first thing I must do, in order for my judgment to be potentially valid, is to consider the different perspectives others might take with respect to the issue. Suppose I conclude that abortion ought to be legal, the validity of this conclusion rests in part upon my consideration of the reasons others might give for opposing the legality of this action. In order to judge fairly, I must try to understand the views of others, and I accomplish this understanding by representing those views to myself, by trying to understand the concerns of those who might hold such views.

Because judging is representative, it works via our capacity for imagination. In order to represent to myself the views of another, I imagine what it would be like to be in another’s position. It is “by force of imagination” that one can make the views of others present to oneself.<sup>46</sup> Here, Arendt cautions us to distinguish the imagination employed in representative thinking from empathy. Imagination differs from empathy in that, with representation, there is a “distance” imposed between the one judging and the

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<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 241.

<sup>46</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Judging,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 257.

perspectives of others that are being represented. In other words, when one judges, one tries to understand the views of others but does not identify with them or temporarily adopt them as one's own. The person judging does not shed his or her own perspective in favor of another's but rather reaches out with understanding alone:

This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority, but of being and thinking in my own identity where I actually am not.<sup>47</sup>

The representative thinking that characterizes judging makes possible what Arendt, following Kant, calls "enlarged mentality." By representing other's viewpoints to myself through an exertion of my imagination, an individual can expand or "enlarge" his or her perspective to take into consideration the viewpoints of others. According to Arendt, this is an "enlarged" way of thinking because it "knows how to transcend its individual limitations."<sup>48</sup> In other words, in judging one is able to think beyond one's own immediate interests, and can thereby arrive at a point of view that captures a more general interest. Arendt puts it this way:

The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while pondering a given issue and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (It is this capacity for "enlarged mentality" that enables men to judge; as such, it was discovered by Kant—in the first part of his *Critique of Judgment*—who, however, did not recognize the political and moral implications of his discovery). The very process of opinion-formation is determined by those in whose places somebody thinks and uses his own mind, and the only condition for this exertion of imagination is disinterestedness, the liberation from one's own private interests... the very quality of an opinion as of a judgment depends on its degree of impartiality.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 241.

<sup>48</sup> Here, quoting Arendt: Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 189.

<sup>49</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 241.

In other words, by entering into an “enlarged mentality” with others, by taking their views into consideration by imagining oneself in their place, it is possible to achieve an impartial perspective. Judgment therefore requires that one temporarily leave behind one’s own immediate self-interest in order to come to the “enlarged” perspective, a perspective that constitutes a general, public interest.<sup>50</sup>

One judges, and thus enters into an “enlarged mentality,” in order to come to agreement with others. The goal of judging is to arrive at a consensus. On Arendt’s view, in judging we consider the multiple and different perspectives of others, not only to understand how they differ from our own point of view, but also to find an overlap of interests with respect to which we can come to agreement. Here she says that,

The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others... From this potential agreement judgment derives its specific validity. This means, on the one hand, that such judgment must liberate itself from “subjective private conditions,” that is from the idiosyncrasies which naturally determine the outlook of each individual in his privacy and are legitimate as long as they are only privately held opinions but which are not fit to enter the market place, and lack all validity in the public realm.<sup>51</sup>

Because it rests on agreement with others, judgment has a public quality. Judgment is not a matter of “subjective private conditions,” one’s personal interests or idiosyncrasies, but rather of a common basis for public consensus. Judging, as a way of coming to an impartial point of view concerning generalizable interests, is only possible if the viewpoints of different individuals are available for consideration: “Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection... [By] force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves potentially in a space which is

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<sup>50</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Judging,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 258.

<sup>51</sup> Here, quoting Arendt: Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 189.

public, open to all sides.”<sup>52</sup> This public quality of judgment is necessary in order to arrive at a core of generalizable interests because it is only through coming to understand the perspectives of others, and the reasons they give for holding their views, that one can understand the partiality of his or her own perspective:

The thinking process which is active in judging is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds its way always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement...And this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgment knows how to transcend its individual limitations, cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence of others “in whose place” it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all.<sup>53</sup>

Judgment’s public quality, which is crucially important to judgment’s ability to reach a generalizable point of view, is in turn ensured by communication. The viewpoints of others are only available for one’s consideration because of discourse. I can only come to know and understand your outlook on a particular issue if you tell me about it, if you explain your perspective and your reasons for holding it. And I can only go beyond the biases of my own perspective if I can come to understand the perspectives of others. It is by *discussing* our different points of view that we can understand the limitation of our own interests and thereby be in a position to make impartial judgments.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.2.3 Arendt and Habermas

The account of judgment Arendt gives is similar to Habermas’s conception of consensus-formation in three respects that are particularly significant here: first, both Arendt and Habermas argue that political discourse involves taking the perspective of

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<sup>52</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Judging,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 257.

<sup>53</sup> Here, quoting Arendt: Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 189.

<sup>54</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Judging,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 262.

others and thereby entering into an “enlargement” of perspective; second, both argue that this “enlarged” perspective constitutes an impartial point of view; third, for both Arendt and Habermas this impartial political point of view is morally valid.

In both cases, one must detach transcend one’s own idiosyncratic interests in order to arrive at a perspective that is not simply determined by one’s own particular worldview. Habermas points out that such an enlargement of perspective is able to uncover a “core of generalizable interests.” In other words, if one is able to “liberate” oneself from “one’s own private interests,” one is then in a position to see what is in the interest of all concerned. What is distinctive about Habermas and Arendt’s approach to achieving this impartial perspective is that it requires all information to be available up front. In order to imagine myself in others’ places, I must know about them and their particular situation in the world. On this view, it is only by understanding the idiosyncratic perspectives of the flesh and blood participants in political discussion that one can free oneself from one’s own idiosyncrasies and thereby achieve the desired impartiality. This stands in contrast to Rawls, who argues that an impartial political perspective requires the bracketing of information at the outset by a veil of ignorance.

For both Habermas and Arendt, an impartial political perspective must also be moral. As Seyla Benhabib points out, “[Arendt] repeatedly emphasized that judgment was a faculty of “telling right from wrong” and not just the beautiful from the ugly [as in Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment].”<sup>55</sup> It is also important to note that the morality entailed in both Habermas’s and Arendt’s conceptions is a political morality. A number of commentators on Arendt have pointed this out. For example, Maurizio D’Entreves

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 188. Also, page 174: “in approaching the problem of judgment, Arendt was primarily interested in the interrelationships of thinking and judging as moral faculties. She was concerned with judgment as the faculty of “telling right from wrong.”

notes that, “Arendt does not conceive of politics... as a way to integrate individuals around a single and transcendent conception of the good.”<sup>56</sup> And Benhabib argues that Arendt’s “belated reflections on Kant’s doctrine of judgment reveal” the extent to which Arendt “was and remained a moral universalist and modernist.”<sup>57</sup>

### 3.2.4 Benhabib

A number of thinkers have found the similarities in Habermas’s and Arendt’s accounts of “enlarged mentality” remarkable. At the forefront is Seyla Benhabib, who examines Arendt’s unusual appropriation of Kant’s concept of aesthetic judgment. As Arendt herself points out, Kant would not have approved her use of his idea of enlarged mentality, which he discusses as an aesthetic faculty in his *Critique of Judgment*, as a way to understand political judgments, which are not simply a matter of aesthetic taste but also a matter of politics and morality. Contra Kant, Arendt understood judgment as a way to achieve *political* consensus. As Benhabib points out, “in Kant’s conception of reflective judgment, restricted by Kant himself—erroneously in Arendt’s eyes—to the aesthetic realm alone, Arendt discovered a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm.”<sup>58</sup> Understanding Arendt’s appropriation of Kant makes the connection between Arendt and Habermas explicit. What Arendt found in Kant’s concept of judgment, when she discovered a “procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm,” were the seeds of what would become Habermas’s theory of communicative action.

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<sup>56</sup> Maurizio D’Entreves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 185.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

Benhabib makes it clear that “the complexity of [Arendt and Habermas’s] interchange and the magnitude of his intellectual debt to her have not been given their due.”<sup>59</sup> According to Benhabib, Habermas owes two of his major ideas to Arendt: the concept of the public space that he employs in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and his understanding of political action as communicative. On this point Benhabib says, “Arendt’s discovery of the linguistic structure of human action, in my opinion, gave one of the principle impetuses to Habermas’s subsequent theory of communicative action. Arendt’s concept of the public space is the second and equally important conceptual legacy that she imparted to Habermas.”<sup>60</sup> In response to the criticism that she reads Arendt too strongly as a Habermasian, a claim made, for example, by Dana Villa, Benhabib replies:

Thus to the charge that I may have been reading Arendt as if she were a Habermasian, my answer would simply be that for many years now, my concern has been rather the converse, namely to show the respects in which Habermas is an Arendtian. Not only the recovery of the public world under conditions of modernity, but the very understanding of political power as flowing “from the action in concert” of equals, united through their deliberative pursuit of the common good, testify to the Arendtian traces in Habermas’s work.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.2.5 Action and “Difference”

Benhabib presents a reading of Arendt’s work that stresses its Habermasian features, the focus of which is the relation between Arendt’s concept of judgment and Habermas’s theory of communicative action. But what about *action*? Those who reject Benhabib’s reading of Arendt’s work emphasize Arendt’s earlier contributions, especially the exposition of action given in *The Human Condition*. In contradistinction to judgment, action occurs in the mode of debate and hence seems to encourage the differentiation of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., xii.

political subjects rather than their agreement. It is concerned with the disclosure of individuals' differing opinions, while judgment is concerned with achieving consensus. Which aspect of Arendt's corpus one chooses to highlight is telling. Those like Benhabib who are sympathetic to Habermas's project focus on judgment. Others, such as Dana Villa and Iris Marion Young, who are averse to a Habermasian reading of Arendt, focus on action and underemphasize judgment (Villa) or reinterpret judgment in terms of action (Young).

This tension can be seen in the debate between Benhabib and Young. Benhabib points out that Arendt's concept of judgment requires political participants to imagine themselves in the place of others. As Arendt puts it, "the capacity to judge is a specifically political ability in exactly the sense denoted by Kant, namely, the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present."<sup>62</sup> Benhabib refers to Arendt's political "imagination," in which one envisions oneself in the place of another, as "symmetrical reciprocity," whose key feature is a reversibility of perspectives: "Universality enjoins us to reverse perspectives among members of a moral community and judge them from the point of view of other(s). Such reversibility is essential to the ties of reciprocity that bind communities together. All communicative action entails symmetry and reciprocity of normative expectations among group members."<sup>63</sup>

In contrast to Benhabib, Young argues that Arendt's model involves an "asymmetrical reciprocity," which does not involve a reversibility of perspective:

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<sup>62</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 221.

<sup>63</sup> Here, quoting Benhabib: Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought," *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 342.



A communicative theory of moral respect should distinguish between taking the perspective of other people into account, on the one hand, and imaginatively taking their positions, on the other hand. Through dialog people sometimes understand each other across difference without reversing perspectives or identifying with each other. The distinctive and asymmetrical positioning of people discussing moral or political issues, finally, forms the best basis for understanding why dialog with others produces what Arendt, following Kant, calls the “enlarged thought” that moves people from their merely subjective understanding of issues to a moral, objective judgment.<sup>64</sup>

Young rejects Benhabib’s reading of Arendt because it does not give due credit to differences among individuals. On her view, Benhabib presents an interpretation of Arendt’s concept of judgment in which individuals are seen as “substitutable” for one another. Young’s “asymmetrical” model is intended to provide a greater respect for differences among individuals. However, in suggesting this model, Young interprets Arendt’s concept of judgment, which is characterized by “taking the standpoint of others,” in terms of a feature of *action*, “plurality”:

The idea of taking the standpoint of all the others presumes the possibility of an identification between us all, that we can represent others to ourselves in the sense that we can be substitutable for one another. As I discussed in criticizing the claim that moral respect involves symmetry, this assumption of reversibility tends to collapse the difference between subjects. As an interpretation of enlarged thought, it fails thus to emphasize the *plurality* of perspectives that Arendt found constitutive of publicity.<sup>65</sup>

This more agonistic feature of politics is, however, a characteristic of *action* rather than judgment. Young, by interpreting *judgment* in terms of plurality, in my view erroneously collapses the distinction between action and judgment.

While both Young and Villa criticize a Habermasian reading of Arendt for not sufficiently respecting the “difference” inherent in the plural character of action, Villa further criticizes the Habermasian reading of Arendt for not accommodating the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 359.

agonistic, persuasive character of action. In this vein, he argues for a poststructuralist reading of Arendt:

Until recently, Hannah Arendt's theory of political action has been colonized almost exclusively by champions of a dialogical, consensus-based model of politics. Habermas provides perhaps the best example of a "consensus" reading of Arendt, a reading which stresses her distinction between action and speech, on the one hand, and work, labor and instrumentality, on the other. For Habermas and many others, Arendt's theory of action starkly underlines the difference between a politics of dialogue, persuasion, and agreement and a politics of interest, strategy and efficiency. Arendt's primary contribution to political theory, it is claimed, is her rescue of the intersubjective essence of political action—action as "acting together, acting in concert"—from the oblivion threatened by the technocratic usurpation of the practical.

The belated reception of Arendt's work in France has begun to call this reading into question. The influence of Arendt on such theorists as Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jean-Francois Lyotard (to name but a few) is unmistakable. Their work has helped draw attention to a less dialog-centered Arendt. For example, Lyotard's work on the gap between political and cognitive judgment refers us to the "pagan" Arendt, the Arendt which is highly skeptical of a rationalized, theory-driven politics. His polemical critique of consensus-oriented politics (in *The Postmodern Condition*) refers us to Arendt's own fierce commitment to plurality and difference as *essential* conditions of political action. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, departing from the Arendtian themes of the withdrawal of the political in the modern age, have underlined the tension between an agonistic politics open to alterity and a rational, dialogical politics that subsumes it. They remind us that Arendt's primary project is to deconstruct the tradition's teleological model of action, a model that is still at work in the Habermasian model of communicative action.<sup>66</sup>

These anti-Habermasian readings of Arendt do not pose a serious threat to the Habermasian reading of Arendt that Benhabib offers. That Arendt's concept of action accommodates difference, debate and "agonism" is clear enough, but there is nothing here that is antithetical to a Habermasian reading of Arendt. In my view, such challenges are part and parcel of a vibrant conception of democracy. This, I would argue, is what Habermas has in mind when he writes: "Communicative reason is of course a rocking

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<sup>66</sup> Dana Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory*, vol. 20, no. 2 (May 1992): 275.

hull—but it does not go under in the sea of contingencies, even if shuddering in high seas is the only mode in which it ‘copes’ with these contingencies.”<sup>67</sup>

### 3.2.6 Markell: “Contesting Consensus”

Patchen Markell, in a direct response to Dana Villa’s criticisms of a Habermasian reading of Arendt, makes an excellent argument for why the agonism of Arendtian action is both compatible with and necessary to a Habermasian theory of consensus. Markell argues that Villa presents us with a dichotomy:

Villa implies that we are faced with a choice between, on the one hand, a consensus-oriented account of the public sphere which allows us to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate institutions only at the cost of “repress[ing]” the “spontaneity, initiation, and difference that characterize agonistic speech,” and, on the other hand, a theorization of agonistic subjectivity which brackets questions of legitimacy and abandons the goal of consensus but which thereby manages to “keep plurality, debate, and difference alive rather than seeking to shut them down via a formalistic decision procedure.”<sup>68</sup>

As Villa sees it, there are only two possible readings of Arendt: a “consensus” reading of Arendt, in which “difference” is destroyed, and an agonistic reading, which favors the plurality characteristic of action. Markell argues that this is a false dichotomy. On his view, Habermas’s idea of consensus does not present us with a model that shuts down differences of opinion; rather, Habermas’s model accounts for and even requires “plurality, debate and difference.” Because Habermas’s conception of politics is not allergic to contestatory political speech, Markell argues that it is able to mesh well with Arendt’s account of action, even if action is interpreted agonistically.

The existence of a vigorous public sphere characterized by agonistic political action is among the very conditions of the possibility of democratic legitimacy. Habermas and Arendt’s differences thus constitute a productive tension rather

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<sup>67</sup> Here, quoting Habermas: Patchen Markell, “Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 377.

<sup>68</sup> Here, quoting Villa: Patchen Markell, “Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 378.

than a silent incompatibility. Agonistic political action depends upon the existence of relatively stable and secure spheres in which it can thrive, but those spheres, to remain properly democratic and political, demand the very sort of contestatory political action which threatens their stability. The delicate negotiation of these intertwined imperatives is among the tasks that belong not to theory but to the *agon* of plural politics itself.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to arguing that Arendtian action and Habermasian consensus-formation are not at odds, Markell also argues that agonistic debate is *necessary* to the vibrant conception of democracy that Habermas seeks:

The foregoing discussion has tried to show that Habermas's idea of an "orientation toward consensus" is consistent with agonistic and contestatory political speech and action. To bring this essay to a close, I want to make a stronger claim: that on Habermas's account of discursive democracy, a legitimate democratic system is not only compatible with agonistic action but actually *requires* it.<sup>70</sup>

Here, Markell's claim rests on two features of communicative action: the *reflexivity* of discourse and the *fallibilistic* nature of validity.<sup>71</sup> The fallibilism of validity consists in the fact that any political consensus reached through discourse is always subject to revision. It is always possible that new arguments may come to light, so that the validity of a seemingly settled agreement is never entirely sure. This fallibilism has important ramifications for how we understand the role of agonistic political speech: if political consensus is understood to always be fallible, it must therefore remain "always open to further contestation."<sup>72</sup> This conclusion is reinforced by the second feature of communicative action, the reflexivity of discourse, which "consists in the self-critical nature of communication."<sup>73</sup> Habermas describes his model of communication as "guided by the idealizing supposition that no argument is in principle immune to critical

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 392

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

evaluation in argumentation.”<sup>74</sup> Markell interprets this as meaning that “nothing is immune to contestation in the public sphere.”<sup>75</sup> Benhabib also agrees that, “In the game of democracy...the rules of the game no less than their interpretation and even the position of the umpire are essentially contestable.”<sup>76</sup>

But these considerations do not yet make clear why Markell thinks that agonistic action is not only compatible with Habermas’s theory but also *necessary* to it. Here, Markell distinguishes two ways fallibilism and reflexivity can play out politically: we can understand the fallibilism of validity and the reflexivity of discourse to be politically operative in principle, or understand them to be operative as a sociological fact. We can see how these differ as we can imagine scenarios in which political agreements are in principle open to contestation but are never actually contested. Markell points out that, on Habermas’s account, such cases cannot be considered fully democratic. In other words, the actual presence of contestation is necessary to distinguish a genuinely democratic public sphere. Here Markell raises the important question:

But what are the corresponding characteristics by which one could distinguish a democratic public sphere in which validity claims are treated as merely fallible and in which no claims are in principle exempt from contestation from a public sphere in which the results of deliberation, once achieved, are taken to be fixed and unchallengeable and in which certain presuppositions are insulated from the scrutiny of critical discussion?<sup>77</sup>

According to both Markell and Habermas, the only way to accurately tell the difference is the actual existence of contestatory political speech. Markell argues that actual contestation is needed as evidence that democracy is indeed operative because “structural

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<sup>74</sup> Here, quoting Habermas: Patchen Markell, “Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 392.

<sup>75</sup> Patchen Markell, “Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 392.

<sup>76</sup> Here, quoting Benhabib. *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>77</sup> Patchen Markell, “Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 392.

forms of social coercion and discipline can discourage participation in public discussion, insulate existing arrangements from criticism, and restrict the public agenda.”<sup>78</sup> Only the presence of actual disagreement and debate are sufficient indicators of fallibilism and reflexivity: “The only satisfactory evidence that a democratic public sphere does operate according to the principles of reflexivity and fallibilism is the *actual occurrence* of critical and contestatory speech and action in which the *provisionality* of validity claims is made manifest.” Ultimately, on Markell’s view, an agonistic account of action is necessary to a Habermasian account of politics because only it can provide the litmus test for democratic legitimacy. I am inclined to agree with Markell’s assertion that debate and contestation are fundamental to a rich conception of democracy. In the following chapter I discuss how this is the case and how the public representation of individual opinion in action makes for just such a conception.

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<sup>78</sup> Patchen Markell, “Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 393.

#### 4. Action and Democracy

In Chapter Three, I discussed Markell's view that Habermas's conception of liberal democracy requires the presence of conflicting viewpoints as an indicator of its success. This general position seems to me to be correct: agonistic political speech is not only compatible with a Habermasian account of consensus but is necessary to it. Markell provides us with one way of illustrating why this is the case. In this chapter I would like to expand on this theme. First, building on Markell's analysis, I will explain why I think action is necessary to a Habermasian conception of consensus. Second, I will show how action enriches the conception of politics offered by liberalism by providing a forum for the public representation of individual opinion. Third, I will discuss the relation of action and judgment in Arendt's political philosophy, since judgment mediates action's relation to the contemporary liberal project. I conclude by discussing how I think action helps to provide a vibrant account of democracy.

One of the major roles Arendtian action plays is to disclose the distinctive perspectives individual actors bring to the table. I think such disclosure is crucially necessary to the account of politics given by Habermas because, in order to imagine oneself in the place of others and so engage in an "enlarged" mentality with them, the relevant positions taken by each actor must be made explicit. Action is tailored to just such disclosure. I also think that action enriches the conception of democracy provided by Rawls and Habermas because of its emphasis on the public representation of the viewpoints and identities of the individual actors. I think that democracy requires such representation, and that action, because it focuses on presenting, clarifying and distinguishing *differences* of opinion, is the best way to help ensure the account of

democracy articulated by Habermas. On this view, the public representation of individuals' *differing* perspectives is as much a part of a rich conception of democracy as is political consensus.

#### 4.1 The Necessity of Action

In Chapter Three I traced Markell's argument that "the existence of a vigorous public sphere characterized by agonistic political action is among the very conditions of the possibility of democratic legitimacy."<sup>1</sup> Markell argued that this is the case because only the presence of actual vigorous contestation can serve as the litmus test for the existence of a democratic public sphere. I agree with Markell: politics in which everything is in principle open to dispute but is never actually disputed cannot be properly called democratic. Contestation is a requirement of democracy. But this is not the only reason that Arendt's theory of action is necessary to a Habermasian theory of consensus. I think we can see another way that action is necessary by thinking through Habermas's critique of Rawls.

Habermas argues that the impartiality of political consensus requires all information to be available at the outset of political deliberation, in order that nothing politically inconsequential is included and nothing politically relevant is excluded from deliberation. I argue that if he is correct in this assertion, then something like Arendtian action may indeed be necessary to his theory. This is because the information that must be made available at the outset of discourse consists of the differing views of political participants, and the function of action is to clarify and make explicit exactly these sorts

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<sup>1</sup> Patchen Markell, "Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere," *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997): 379.



of differences. Because of this, I can see no better means than action for ensuring that all views are fully represented.

By my lights, something like action must precede the process of consensus-formation in order that all information be available to participants at the outset of political deliberation and so ensure the impartiality of political judgment. If I can only obtain an impartial perspective by considering the views of others, views which differ from my own, these views must be made explicit. Action, which is tailored to making the distinction between differing views manifest, serves precisely this function.

In this way action helps make impartial politics possible, but that is not its only function. Action also provides a distinctive forum for the public representation of individual views. Here I agree with Benhabib, who argues that the public representation of differing views is intrinsic to the meaning of democracy.<sup>2</sup> This representation is possible because of action's disclosive character. Action, which is focused on the disclosure of the different perspectives of individual political actors, creates a scenario in which all views can gain public representation.

#### 4.2.1 Disclosure of the Individual in the Act

One way that Arendt's theory strongly reserves a public role for individual opinion concerns the disclosure of the individual in the act. As disclosive, action makes manifest two things: the distinctive *views* held by the actors and the *identities* of the actors themselves. For Arendt, political ideas are unmistakably the ideas of concrete individuals. Action discloses not only the actor's views on political matters, but who the actors are as well. Action thus entails a recognition that political ideas, no matter how

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<sup>2</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 210.

universally applicable or generally accepted, come from individual human beings in their particularity.

This disclosure is distinctive because it concerns less the revealing of the person's "qualities" (such as race, sex, class, or religious affiliation, for example), than the unique identities of the individual actors themselves. What action discloses therefore might be called the actor's "personality." Here, Arendt says:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything he says and does.<sup>3</sup>

I think Arendt is correct to analogize the individuals' identity to the voice and body, because, although my body may be correctly described as tall or short, light or dark, and my voice tenor, soprano or baritone, none of these characteristics capture the unique sound of my speaking or the carriage of my head, my smile or gait. Action, by disclosing the "who" of the actors, seeks to disclose the actor's *unique* identity, their "personality" rather than their group affiliations. Of course, one's race or sex in part makes up one's identity, but Arendt's point is that no one is wholly reducible to these shared traits.

In emphasizing the disclosure of the agent, Arendt is giving us an account that I think does justice to a rich notion of politics. Arendt is unique in that she not only accounts for generalizable principles with her theory of judgment, but also reserves a space for the public representation of the actors and their views with her theory of action. When we come to consensus on a political issue, what is institutionalized is the principle that is agreed upon, but oftentimes what are remembered most clearly are the words and

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1958), 179.

deeds of the actors. For example, the civil rights movement in the United States led to the institutionalization of principles of political equality, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but what is remembered is more than just the text of such principles, essential though they are; it is rather the words and actions that preceded the institutionalization of the principles and the people who spoke and acted. We remember Rosa Park's action; we remember the words of Martin Luther King Jr. This is why I think Arendt's conception of action offers an enriched conception of politics: it seeks to recognize not just the generalizable political principles, but also the actors' unique contributions to politics. While we *all* can and should assent to the principle of racial equality, *only* King could have given the speech he gave at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. His eloquence, his tone, even his religious allusions, gave his words a unique character distinctive unto itself. And the excellence of his words gives us cause to remember them. *But*, what we give our collective assent to, what we institutionalize, are not the idiosyncrasies of the person or the eloquence of his views, but the principle, which is rightly shorn of these. Arendt's political theory is interesting because she wants to do justice to both the generalizable principles (with her theory of judgment) and the political pursuit undertaken by concrete human beings manifesting themselves publicly (with her theory of action). What Arendt seeks to give credit to is the fact that the principles to which we eventually give our assent do not first arise in purified form but rather come clothed by the complex perspectives of flesh and blood people.

#### 4.2.2 Action's Disclosure of Perspectives

The second thing that action discloses, in addition to the identities of the actors, are the actors' views themselves. In action the distinctive perspective of each actor is

brought into public view. This disclosure occurs through the actor's communication with others. Action is only disclosive because it is communicative; according to Arendt, one is only able to bring to light his or her unique perspective through speaking with others.<sup>4</sup> Because action can only occur in communication with others, action brings people into relation to one another; human togetherness is therefore a basic requirement for action. But at the same time, by disclosing their distinctive perspectives, what action manifests are the *differences* in the actors' views. Action, by delineating the plurality of viewpoints held by different individuals, exposes how those perspectives conflict with one another. In other words, action functions to make explicit the disagreements latent in society. Action accomplishes this through its competitive or "agonistic" dimension. Action's "goal" is *distinction*; through speech and action the actors seek to distinguish themselves and their views from those of others.<sup>5</sup> This competitive spirit is geared toward making the contrast between differing perspectives evident.

Action differs from Habermas's conception as well as Arendt's theory of judgment, in which communication is always oriented toward agreement, because in action communication is explicitly oriented toward the *distinction* of differing perspectives. In this vein, it is important to understand that Arendt thinks it is necessary to consider action separately from judgment and consensus-formation. In order to judge viewpoints that are at odds, it is crucially important to get clear on where our interests and those of others lie in the first place. In other words, if uncovering a generalizable point of view means understanding how our views intersect, we must also first understand how they diverge. This step is necessary in order to make explicit the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 176.

different viewpoints of others so that one may in turn judge them and eventually come to consensus.

Because action functions to make disagreements explicit, it is often labeled “agonistic.” In action the actors do not first seek to come to agreement with one another but to distinguish their views from those held by others. Because of this, action has a competitive flavor. In action, the actors measure their opinions against the opinions of others. This places the actors, who all try to make the best case for their ways of seeing a given issue, in a competitive posture with respect to one another. Action is particularly amenable to disclosing differing viewpoints because of this competitive character; in action one can most readily distinguish one’s views from those of others because the goal of competition is contrast.

Here, it is important to keep in mind that there are different sorts of competition and to understand which sort of competition Arendt has in mind when discussing action. Arendt explicitly distinguishes action and politics from the sort of competition inherent in war and violence. For Arendt, these activities are “apolitical” in the sense that the sort of competition that characterizes them, whose goal is victory at all costs and/or the domination of the defeated, is not the same as the competition characteristic of politics.<sup>6</sup> Action is instead characterized by what might be called “friendly” competition, a competition among those who recognize one another as equals, the goal of which is not to vanquish one’s opponent but to present one’s own case as best one can:

[Arendt] thus recognizes a certain vying-with, an “agonal spirit,” in all political activity. This does not mean, of course, that where Habermas finds harmony

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970), 51.

Arendt discovers nothing but antagonism; rather, we should when reading Arendt think of Blake's "opposition is true friendship."<sup>7</sup>

The competitive spirit characteristic of action is essentially non-violent; its goal is not domination but disclosure. As such, action usually takes the form of debate. The goal is to "win," but "winning" here means disclosing one's unique perspective and convincing others of its importance rather than destroying one's opponent. Arendt makes it very clear that "to be political" means that everything is decided "through words and persuasion and not through force and violence."<sup>8</sup>

The idea is to create a situation in which actors can give their best showing. This sort of non-violent competition, which is characteristic of action, is familiar from everyday experience. It is generally the case that we perform best when we must measure up to our peers. Athletes play their best games or make their fastest times not in solitary practice or casual play but in competition with their equals. Of course, politics is no game, but in political discussion too, we seldom craft the best arguments when talking with like-minded others; it is rather when we argue our case with those in disagreement with us that we articulate our position most clearly and make the best case for it.

It is the clarificatory power of competition that most concerns me. I think that it is because action has a competitive dimension that it is able to make different perspectives clear and reserve a place for the expression of each distinctive viewpoint. This is because I can present my position most clearly when I must contrast it with the views of others. But the sort of competition is also very important: the goal is not to "vanquish" one's opponent, to make his views seem irrelevant or to shame him out the

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<sup>7</sup> David Luban, "Habermas on Arendt on Power," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 6 (Spring 1979): 86-87.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Press 1958), 26.

public sphere, but to make one's own case the best one possibly can. Competition does not hinder this, but rather fosters it. In this way, action makes for the clear presentation of the multiplicity of views that different people bring to any given political issue. I argue that it is only then that we can start to find where our common ground lies, or, in Arendtian terms, only then can we begin to judge.

#### 4.3 Mediating Action and Consensus

Given action's disclosive or agonistic character, I think it is important to ask whether action, by seeking to widen the public role of the individual political actor, does not thereby also threaten the impartiality of political consensus. I believe that action so construed does not threaten the impartiality of consensus and, even more strongly, that the idea of democracy requires such a widening of the public role for the individual as provided by Arendt's theory of action. I also think it is important to reconsider the relation between Rawls and Habermas's work. Although I think Habermas is correct to move beyond Rawls's original position, there are tradeoffs associated with this move. In particular, Rawls is able to provide a commitment to non-negotiable principles such as rights, whereas, for Habermas, everything is subject to the procedure of discourse and is therefore contestable. For this reason, Rawls is also able to secure consensus more easily than Habermas. Indeed, on Habermas's account, there are situations in which a political consensus may not be achieved even though the pragmatic presuppositions of Habermasian discourse are met.

But first it is necessary to examine the relationship between action and judgment in Arendt's theory. In Chapter Three, I showed how Arendt's account of judgment jibes nicely with the picture of politics given by Habermas's version of liberalism. But how

precisely does action fit it? If judgment can be likened to liberal consensus theory, the question of the relation of action to liberalism can also be formulated as a question of the relation between Arendt's account of action and her later account of judgment.

Fortunately, Arendt deals with this relationship explicitly in the context of her Kant lectures. Her basic assertion is that judgment and action stand in a productive tension; action serves to ensure that new and different political opinions, which Arendt thinks will inevitably arise with the succession of generations, will receive a fair hearing, while judgment serves as a check on action, ensuring that the new and different does not degenerate into the biased, immoral or politically untenable.

In the context of her Kant lectures, Arendt discusses the relation of acting and judging in terms of the difference between actors and spectators. Arendt, following Kant, notes that insofar as we judge, we assume the role of spectators rather than actors. I judge by going through the different perspectives of others, considering each of their different views, and then try to achieve an impartial stance with respect to them. As Arendt points out, this is only possible insofar as I am a spectator of others' positions. Of course, the actor/spectator distinction is not watertight; it is not the case that there are some people who are only actors and some who are only spectators. Every actor is also a spectator, and every spectator a potential actor.<sup>9</sup> What is important is that, insofar as we judge, we must assume the role of the spectator at least temporarily.

After making the connection between judging and spectating explicit, Arendt points out that there is something like a conflict between action and judgment. Action is what we might call "creative" or disclosive; its role is to bring to light the differing perspectives of the individual actors. In contrast, judgment is concerned with arriving at

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<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Judging," in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 262.



consensus. Because action is concerned with the new and different, it tends to break through accepted standards.<sup>10</sup> This is because, in presenting a multiplicity of different views, it exposes the contrast between the actors' views and the current norm. In a way, judgment does the opposite of action; it applies existing standards to the new views offered up by action. In judging we look at all the possible takes on an issue, and try to see how the views presented by the actors fit. In this way judgment holds the perspectives presented by each actor up to other available standards against which it may be judged. These standards include those presented by other actors and the currently established standards of a society, but it also may include the standards of other societies, and the standards held by peoples of the past.

Judgment can thus perform a regulatory function with respect to action. It can tame action's creative, disclosive or "agonistic" character by placing a burden of proof on the actors. The spectators, by judging, are in effect asking the actors: what can you offer us that we can affirm more than those standards we already live by? Why do you think your vision of what is right is superior to these others? What reason have we to adopt your opinion?

Arendt discusses this tension between action and judgment in the context of her discussion of Kant's third *Critique*. For Kant, the relevant distinction is between the artist or genius, who in his creative capacity resembles the actor, and the critic, who judges the work of art by applying the standards of taste.<sup>11</sup> Kant notes that: "Taste, like the judgment in general is the discipline (or training) of genius; it clips its wings... gives

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178.

<sup>11</sup> Although Arendt makes the actor/artist analogy explicitly, these are not identical (actors are not political "artists"). Arendt considers the production of works of art to be a special instance of fabrication and therefore to be non-political.

guidance, brings clearness and order... into the thoughts [of genius], it makes the ideas susceptible to being permanently and generally assented to, and capable of being followed by others.”<sup>12</sup> Arendt highlights this discussion of Kant’s because she sees a similar relationship between action and judgment. Action, as concerned with novelty, tends to break through accepted standards, to present new and different views. But, without any sort of check on action, the new could just as well be terrible as it could be good. The role of judgment is to provide a check on action, to ensure that new political ideas are subjected to existing standards, particularly moral ones.

In the end, what makes this possible and what links the actor and spectator is communicability. The talent of the actors lies in their ability to make their perspectives generally communicable. In order to make their views heard and potentially accepted by others, the actors must make them understandable. An actor may have excellent ideas, but his talent is wasted if he cannot elicit understanding from those he seeks to convince. Therefore, he must also be able to make his position generally communicable. This requires *judgment* on the part of the actor. He must, in effect, act as a spectator with respect to himself. He must take the idiosyncratic particularity of his own view and find that within it which others might assent to, presenting his views in such a way that others might see what they have in common with it. As Arendt rather reconditely puts it:

The condition sine qua non for the existence of beautiful objects is communicability; the judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators and not by the actors or the makers. And this critic and spectator sits in every actor and fabricator; without this critical, judging faculty the doer or maker could be so isolated from the spectator that he would not even be perceived.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Here, quoting Kant: Hannah Arendt, “Judging,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 262.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Judging,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 262.

An important consequence of this is that empty rhetoric has no place in action. The actor may be presenting his particular view, but in order for the actor to effectively communicate this view with the spectators, including the spectator within himself, there must always be a generalizable element in his position. If not, his action is ultimately “incommunicable;” it loses its disclosive quality and therefore does not qualify as action by Arendt’s standards. “Action” that has no communicable element is merely instrumental (as in empty rhetoric), and so is not really action:

Whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for or against other people, as for instance in modern warfare, where men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against the enemy... speech becomes “mere talk,” simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda; here, words reveal nothing.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, if language becomes instrumentalized, if it amounts to empty rhetoric or “propaganda,” it no longer has any communicative element and can no longer count as action. Action admits of rhetoric—indeed, insofar as action discloses the particularities of the actors and their unique views, rhetoric is common in action—but, at the same time, in order to qualify as action, there must be some generalizable “meat” behind the rhetorical flourish. If this is not the case, language becomes instrumentalized, and, as instrumental activity definitively is not action, “speech becomes ‘mere talk’” and “words reveal nothing.”

Arendt’s account of the relation of action and judgment is both insightful and limited. I think it is limited insofar as her discussion of the actor/spectator distinction is awkward and overly complex for its purpose, which is to show how action is not simply empty rhetoric but must also already contain a generalizable element. At the same time, I

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 180.

think her account is useful insofar as it shows how judgment and action stand in a productive tension and how judgment can function as a check on action. Moreover, it shows how the position of the participant, who acts, and the position of the spectator, who judges, need to inform one another. Given the similarities between Habermas's theory and Arendt's account of judgment, if judgment can stand in tension with action then so can Habermas's discourse ethics.

It is, however, important to note that Habermas's work does not stand in unproblematically for liberalism as a whole. There are tradeoffs in the move from Rawls's theory of consensus to Habermas's. Two things in particular stand out: on Habermas's account, both the ability to get political consensus and the rules that provide stability to liberal politics are not as well grounded. Rawls's "thin" principles are problematic for Habermas because they act as background rules, which are not the result of discourse. This is a problem because, in Habermas's model, everything must be left open to contestation. The "thinness" of Rawls's principles is also problematic from Habermas's perspective insofar as they exclude concepts of the good life.<sup>15</sup> These differences present both advantages and disadvantages. For example, if everything is subject to discourse, as in Habermas's model, the safety net of Rawls's non-negotiable principles is removed. This danger can be easily seen in the case of rights. For Rawls, rights are non-negotiable, but for Habermas, everything can be submitted to the procedure of discourse. Of course, Habermas thinks that something very much like liberal rights would emerge from discourse, but the point is that, in his model, even rights are not immune from contestation. Because his "thin" principles are non-negotiable,

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example: Jürgen Habermas, "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State," in *Multiculturalism*, Amy Gutmann, ed. (Princeton: Princeton, 1994), 113.

Rawls can guarantee the preservation of liberties such as rights more surely than can Habermas. Rawls's model can also secure consensus more readily than can Habermas. This is because it is possible for the conditions of Habermas's discourse situation to be met, but that consensus not be achieved. For Rawls, it is easier; because of the "thinness" of his principles, a successful consensus is more likely. In the final analysis, however, I believe that Habermas's account is worth the risks, for it does greater justice to the principles of democracy itself.

#### 4.4 Action and Democracy

It seems to me that democracy requires the public representation of individuals' different perspectives. The very idea of democracy seems to entail the notion that individuals can have a say in politics and that they can speak as themselves. But this becomes difficult given conditions of pluralism—how could it be possible for a multitude of different people to seek public expression for their differing views while still being able to agree upon a shared conception of public morality?

But perhaps this is a false conflict. Benhabib is in agreement with my claim that democracy requires that the divergent views of different individuals receive public representation:

The free public sphere in a democratic polity must allow equal access to all groups within civil society to re-present themselves in public. In entering the public, every new social, cultural, political group presents its point of view to the others, or it re-presents itself to the others, in the sense of refashioning itself as a presence in the public. This process of self-representation and articulation in public is still the only means through which the civic imagination can be cultivated. The process of articulating good reasons in public forces one to think from the standpoint of all others to whom one is trying to make one's point of view plausible and cogent, and to whom one is trying to tell one's own story. The ability of individuals and groups to take the standpoint of others into account, to reverse perspectives and see the world from their point of view, is a crucial virtue in a civic polity, certainly one that becomes most necessary and most fragile

under conditions of cultural diversity and social opacity. The public sphere is like the pupil in the eye of the body politic; when its vision is murky, cloudy or hindered, the sense of direction of the polity is also impaired.<sup>16</sup>

On Benhabib's view, the public representation of differing views is intrinsic to the meaning of democracy. But, on her account, this does not threaten political consensus; indeed, given conditions of pluralism, it is even more necessary. Benhabib takes the position that, given the fact of pluralism, the public representation of different views is important so that people can understand those who are different from themselves but with whom they must live, and so that people have a chance explain their perspectives to others who may disagree with them. This position seems to me to be correct. A rich conception of democracy requires just this sort of public expression. I would also add, with Markell, that a vital account of democracy requires that social norms be contested, and I think that the public expression of vigorously contested viewpoints found in a healthy democracy are exactly what Arendt's account of action provides. In this way, I think that action, with its focus on presenting, clarifying and distinguishing differences of opinion, is the best way to help ensure a rich account of democracy in which individuality has a public, political role and in which we can come to consensus on generalizable principles.

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<sup>16</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 210.