# The Primacy of Narrative Agency: A Feminist Theory of the Self

*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

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**Attribution of Authorship and Statement of Originality**

I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged. I also declare that this thesis has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree. A version of Chapter 3 of this thesis will appear in a forthcoming volume of *Feminist Theory* as "The Primacy of Narrative Agency: Re-Reading Seyla Benhabib on Narrativity".

## Abstract

Current debates in feminist theory struggle to retain a robust concept of agency in light of the rejection of an independent and sovereign subject. The purpose of my project is to articulate a feminist concept of agency for a self that is relational and non-sovereign (i.e. one that does not equate agency with autonomy) and yet one that remains committed to a conception of the self as both powerful and unique. Narrative agency, which I understand as the capacity to say 'I' over time and in relation to others, meets the challenge of attending to both the inter-relational and the individually empowering aspects of action. The identity of the 'I' is a fleeting configuration of narratives that differs from moment to moment; but the capacity to say 'I' is constant. This definition of agency is able to account for the extent to which a subject may be constituted by power relations but is still invested in the subject's unlimited emancipatory potential. In other words, a subject, even at the most basic level, may not be free to choose the content of certain identity-determining narratives, such as gender narratives; however, she always has the capacity to confront and change those narratives.

My project draws on the work of Hannah Arendt to provide a feminist politics based on this account of narrative agency. Arendt's political theory is chiefly concerned with appearance: agency, for Arendt, involves appearing to another member of a plurality through speech or action. This basic schematic is relevant to the analysis of several key aspects of a feminist theory of narrative agency: especially identity, mutual recognition, solidarity, and judgment. For Arendt, identity is not reducible to a series of markers such as race or gender but is, instead, indefinite—composed of a mutable set of interests, or

narratives. A subject is constantly negotiating the articulation of these interests, and yet she appears to, and is recognised by, others as a unique being. Solidarity, by these lights, arises not through pre-determined similarities but, rather, interests actively held in common. Conversations about these shared interests allow individual agents to articulate and negotiate judgments and opinions. Bringing together these resources from Arendt and reading them alongside problems of contemporary feminism allows me to endorse mutual recognition, solidarity, and conversation as vital attributes of an emancipatory feminist politics.

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- Hannah Arendt

It's the people who love us or hate us—or both—who hold together the thousands of fragments we are made of.

- Elena Ferrante

# Introduction

In a popular 2009 talk, the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie relates two anecdotes that illustrate the error involved in reducing other human beings to 'a single story'. The first is an account of her childhood conception of Fide, a boy who worked for her family, as entirely defined by his poverty. All that she knew about Fide was that he was poor—her mother sent food home with him and used stories of his poverty to guilt her and her siblings into finishing their own dinners. And so when Adichie visited Fide's home and was shown a basket woven by Fide's brother, she was shocked that someone so disadvantaged was able to make something so beautiful. In the second story, Adichie attends college in the United States and is a shock to her roommate, who had expected an entirely incomprehensible 'African' rather than someone with Adichie's American taste in music and perfect English. Adichie perceived that this roommate had 'felt sorry for [her] even before she saw [her]', and that all she could see (at first) of Adichie was entirely defined by the story she knew of Africa—an exotic and deprived place.[1]

Both of these stories illustrate what happens when we fail to recognise that people are agents, where being an agent means both being constituted by an impossibly complex matrix of stories and having any number of stories of one's own to tell. Possibilities for recognising one another as agents are at the heart of this project: I am convinced that we must prioritise these in order to effect social change. So often we are blinded to the agency of others by an assumption that agency is equivalent to perfect freedom of choice or to the absence of coercion. We are prone to see people, as Kimberley Hutchings puts it, as 'choosers or losers' rather than as consistently beset *both* by the capacity to act and

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[1] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story", TED 2009.

a number of factors that compromise this capacity.[2] Adichie is on both sides of this dichotomy in the stories she tells—she presumes to be able to define Fide by a single story, and her roommate, years later, makes the same presumption. *Both* of these errors compromise her agency: in the first instance, she is limited in her capacity to tell the story of who Fide is and, in the second, she is unable to appear to her roommate as a human being with stories to tell.

This is not to say that being blind to the agency of another and being perceived by another as lacking agency are equivalent. Substituting a single story for the complex and heterogeneous stories that make up another person—failing to see another as an agent, in other words—is an exercise of power.[3] Adichie says that because of her roommate's prejudice, 'there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.'[4] To harbour this kind of defining narrative, even when one's intentions are benign, is to contribute to the systematic misrecognition of the subject of that narrative. The point is that each of us is guilty of misrecognition, no matter who we are. Fide,

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[2] Hutchings 2013, 14.

[3] Adichie elaborates on this point: 'It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is *nkali*. It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another". Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of *nkali*: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, *but to make it the definitive story of that person*. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly". Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story." Adichie 2009, emphasis added.

[4] Ibid.

surely, would have a story to tell about a person he imagined to be entirely defined by

some specific narrative and was then startled to recognise as a complex human being.

And each of us, though certainly some much more than others, is subjected to harmfully

reductive narratives. The work of maximizing agency, then, requires that we understand

that everyone is *both* embroiled in inescapable power relations *and* capable of moments

of recognition.[5]

Much of the work on agency in feminist theory is proceeding along these lines

(Allen 2008, Krause 2011, Madhok et al 2013). Feminists are interested in uncoupling

the notions of agency and autonomy so as to defend a definition of agency that is resilient

in the face of coercion, oppression, and systematic marginalisation. Thinking of agency

in this way (as the capacity for meaningful action rather than as unfettered individual

choice) takes into account structural inequality and injustice but does not see this

inequality or this injustice as an insurmountable obstacle to agency. When we dispense

with the idea that we are either free or unfree, either agents or victims, either 'choosers or

losers', then perhaps we can challenge the tendency to think of the poor, the global South,

people of colour, women and other marginalised groups as passive victims of coercion

and the rich, the global North, white men, and other dominant groups as composed of

self-legislating and wholly autonomous individuals. We are able to recognise, instead,

that agency is possible no matter how oppressed by or attached to subordinating relations

of power we are (and that recognising agency in others is possible no matter how

privileged we are). We are able to see other human beings as agents capable of

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[5] As Amy Allen writes, one way to understand Foucault's notion that there is no outside to power is that, immanent to relations of power, is 'the possibility that other kinds of social relations are possible and may, at times, be more salient as a feature of social-theoretical analysis than power relations are.' 2008, 178.

unpredictable action, instead of defining people by received narratives about what they are.  We are much more likely to strike up productive conversations with others when we see them this way because we will be open to what they have to say, rather than hearing what we expect to hear.  Agency, by these lights, is not equivalent to autonomous choice at all but is rather 'a mode of reflection…a way of taking responsibility for one's location in the world, a location that is not only or fully knowable by the subject.'[6]  The task of this thesis is to give an account of such a non-sovereign narrative model of agency.

*(Non-Sovereign) Agency*

At first glance, the phrase 'non-sovereign agency' seems an oxymoron.  Agency, as it is traditionally understood in philosophy, is the result of individual intention carried out as action through the exercise of the will.[7]  If this is true, how can a non-sovereign, heteronomous self be said to have agency?  This thesis rests on two claims—more compatible with one another than they may appear—that frame the answer to this question.  The first is the ontological claim that the 'individual' is *entirely constituted*

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[6] Madhok et al. 2013, 4.

[7] This definition of agency is taken for granted by a number of philosophers in moral philosophy and (liberal and normative) political philosophy.  Though there are, of course, disagreements about how to understand the concept of intention, about the extent to which the will may be constrained in action, over the role which 'character' plays in autonomy, and so on, most definitions of agency rest on the assumption that the will is sovereign (which is to say self-legislating).  This understanding of the will is the legacy of the Kantian model of autonomy, which is foundational for liberal political philosophy. Notable contemporary accounts of agency as an exercise of the sovereign will include Christine Korsgaard's (2009), Donald Davidson's (1980), and Harry Frankfurt's (1978). For an overview of understandings of autonomy in contemporary philosophy, and an interesting discussion of the role self-reflection plays in autonomy, see Christman (2009).

through relationships.[8]    The second is the practical-normative claim that the individual

has a narrative understanding of herself as an 'I' when she acts.  Understanding and

accepting these claims will require that I develop slightly unconventional definitions of

both autonomy and agency/action.

Feminists have long challenged the conventional philosophical definition of

autonomy as self-legislation by an independent will.[9]  Many of these feminists point out

that this notion of autonomy grew out of the traditionally masculine virtues of

independence and rationality and thus intrinsically marginalised women's experiences.

To right this wrong, feminists have argued for relational concepts of autonomy, agency,

and the self.[10]   They advocate a shift in the focus of political theory and social

organisation from the self-sufficient individual to the relationships that constitute an

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[8] I understand *self* to mean the ever-shifting socio-cultural construct that is identity.  In my view, the self is always comprised of narratives (is a narrative self).  By *individual*, I mean a unique self or subject.  The term individual is one that has the benefit of referring to a discrete subject position without being too much troubled by questions of subjection or subordination.  *Subject* I use both to mean the exerciser of narrative agency and as a word that captures the subordinating power relationships to which the self is necessarily subjected during the ongoing process of identity formation.  The narrative agent is always all of these other things too: a contingent narrative self, a unique being, an agent with power, and a subject of power.

[9] Not all feminist theorists want to challenge this definition of autonomy.  Indeed, there are many feminist theorists working *within* the liberal paradigm who accept the conventional view of autonomy as self-sovereignty (though they put forth other criticisms of liberalism's failure to improve the status of women).  See especially Nussbaum (1999), Okin (1999), and Phillips (2010).  On the other hand, feminist theorists are certainly not the only ones to have challenged this definition.  Calling into question liberalism's reliance on the idea of an individual with an independent capacity to govern herself is a hallmark of communitarianism, critical theory, poststructuralism, and an array of other contemporary areas of inquiry.

[10] For work that sets out to define autonomy as relational, see especially Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) and Nedelsky (2012).  For feminist conceptions of selfhood as essentially relational, see Benhbabib (1999) and Brison (2002).

individual.[11]  In this view, it is our relationships with others—partners, parents, employers, teachers, and so on—that form our beliefs, opinions, and judgments (these relationships also include structural relations of power, such as socially accepted beauty standards, which tend to be enforced through specific relations with others but are also transmitted through art, the media, and the law).  This does not mean that we are influenced by these relationships before, ultimately, becoming fully autonomous beings; it means, rather, that we are inescapably *constituted by and through* these relationships at all stages of our lives.

Shifting our understanding of the self as independent and in possession of a sovereign will to an understanding of the self as wholly constituted by her relationships with others does not require, it is important to note, that we throw out the notion of autonomy, which is both essential to the feminist goals of empowerment and self-actualisation and at the heart of feminist definitions of choice and consent.[12]  Neither does it mean that we must reject individual accountability, especially in the juridical sense.  It does mean, however, that we understand the goals of empowerment and self-actualisation as grounded in mutually recognitive relationships with others and that we enquire after collective responsibility for individual actions.

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[11] Nedelsky 2012, 2.

[12] There is disagreement within feminism about whether empowerment and self-actualization are appropriate goals.  Some feminists warn that to focus on these things is to implicitly endorse liberal and neoliberal values (Wilson 2013, Fraser 2013).  Others see the ideas of empowerment and self-awareness as mirages which obscure the fact that subordinating power relationships relentlessly structure our very understanding of what it means to be 'empowered', 'authentic', or 'self-aware' (Brown 1995, Butler 1997b).  I am sympathetic to both of these critiques but want to argue that we can productively understand empowerment as confidence in one's own capacity to introduce new meaning into the world and self-actualization as confidence that one will appear to others.  I touch on this discussion throughout the thesis, and I treat it at length in Chapters 1 and 6.

A relational theory of autonomy rejects the idea that independence is a necessary condition of autonomy; indeed, it sees independence (from the influence, need, or care of others) as an illusion.  Each of us is essentially dependent on others—for the fulfilment of our needs, for the way in which we understand ourselves, and as the source of what we care about.  Autonomy, then, is realised in moments of recognition.  These moments are always shifting—we find them in certain relationships some of the time and in other relationships may be denied them completely.  An increased sense of autonomy *depends* on recognition by others—as Jennifer Nedelsky puts it, '[w]e can engage in creative interaction with the relations that shape us, but we cannot simply determine who we are.'[13]  This tension between self-determination through the creation of meaning (which I will call 'making sense') and the oppressiveness of the norms that define us is one of the central concerns of a feminism grounded in narrative agency, and I will return to it many times over the course of this thesis.

If we understand relational autonomy to be the goal of human interaction (and as a potential way to identify a positive politics of recognition), then we can think of agency as the irreducible and constant individual capacity to achieve such a goal.  A relational self is, after all, still a *discrete* self, capable of thought, speech and action.  Discrete selves exist in a plurality of other selves, each self unique because it is made up of an unrepeatable configuration of narratives about what is important, what is normal, and so on.  In action, the self has in mind a concept of herself *as a self*.  When giving an account of something she has done, taking responsibility for an action, and articulating judgments

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[13] Nedelsky 2012, 8.

about what ought to be done, the acting subject has in her mind a practical sense of herself as an 'I'.

Moreover, each acting subject is a unique 'I', in that the perspective from which she speaks or acts is different from any other 'I's' unique perspective.  Each 'I' is constituted by its own unique configuration of relationships. Action involves 1) the appearance of the 'I' as unique and 2) the 'I' having confidence that she will appear to others as an 'I'.  I argue in this thesis that all action, because it involves making sense of the 'I', is narrative.  It consists of creating a narrative about what has happened, what is happening or what will happen.  Narrative can take a number of forms, as we shall see, but, practically speaking, narrative is the sense one makes of oneself as an 'I' in time and in relation to other 'I's'.

*Hannah Arendt: Identity, Communicability, Narrativity*

It is my aim in this thesis to tie this view of narrative agency to practical feminist political action as clearly as possible.  I attempt to suggest forms of political interaction that maximise agency, and I advocate practices essential to increasing agency, such as civic friendship (Benhabib 1995) and receptivity (Nedelsky 2011).  I turn to the political theory of Hannah Arendt for help defining these goals.[14]  The possibility of reading Arendt into

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[14] It is not my intention to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Arendt's work, and, as a result, there are a number of issues in Arendt scholarship glossed over in (or entirely absent from) my analysis.  Instead, I treat Arendt much the way she treated many of the thinkers from whom she extracted her own ideas—as a thinking partner.  Rather than looking for consistency across her work, I engage in deep reading of selected texts (*The Human Condition*, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) in order to extract from them concepts particularly useful for, and

feminist philosophy was a topic on the minds of many feminists during the heat of the

identity politics debates of the 1980s and 1990s.[15]  There is still much to be said on

reading Arendt for the insights she might have to offer a post-identity politics incarnation

of feminist theory, as many twenty-first century feminists have tried to do.[16]  Like those

feminists, I do not want to offer a feminist reading of Arendt or to seek out kernels of

feminist sympathy *in* Arendt but, instead, after Amy Allen, to 'cull from Arendt's work

[resources] that might then be put to use in a feminist critical theory of power designed to

illuminate the intersecting axes of domination of gender, race, class and sexuality' and,

further, 'to highlight the possibilities for individual and collective resistance to such

domination.'[17]

Arendt herself was unsympathetic to the 'woman question', and she was reluctant

to discuss herself in terms of gender, which she considered a private matter unfit for

discussion in the public sphere.  To her, the nascent women's movement represented the

infiltration of politics by social concerns.  Any movement based on 'natural facts' of

identity, such as gender or race, was for Arendt essentially *non*-political because it was

mired in necessity, rather than arising out of free speech and action.  I argue in this thesis,

however, along with other feminist interpreters of Arendt, that race, gender, class, and

other aspects of identity *are* relevant to Arendtian political action (are properly political,

in other words) because they are interests held in common between agents.  The struggle

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relevant to, feminist political theory.  Though there may be occasions in this thesis when
I use concepts from Arendt in ways that she might not have intended (indeed, in ways of
which she might not have approved), in mining her work for political resources, I have
tried to remain faithful to her own hermeneutical method of 'diving for pearls'.
[15] Honig et al, 1995.
[16] Benhabib (1990, 1993, 2000, 2010), Allen (1999, 2002, 2008b), Dietz (2003), Zerilli (2005), Borren (2013).
[17] Allen 1999, 98.

to articulate publicly judgments about harms against women, or poor women, or poor black women (and so on) *is* a political struggle, one that brings previously untheorised problems into the public sphere.

In spite of her ambivalence toward her own identity as a woman and her disavowal of gender politics, Arendt's work has appealed to contemporary feminist theory because of her conception of identity as dynamic and relational rather than as a predetermined category. Contemporary feminist concerns are intersectional, varied, and non-essentialist. Claims made on behalf of 'women' must include the recognition that a complex configuration of factors other than gender (race, class, religion, and so on) is always also at work. A key assumption of contemporary feminism, in other words, is that identity is never reducible to its markers, but is a mutable and socially constructed understanding of these factors. Arendt adds to an intersectional understanding of identity the idea that *who* an agent is always more than just the sum of *what* that agent is. Naming all of the markers of identity (race, class, profession, physical appearance, etc.) never gives a full account of identity; instead, the agent's unique identity emerges in action.

Action, or that which occurs between people in the public sphere, is what constitutes politics in Arendt's account. Many feminist readings of Arendt have put forth a world-centred account of politics as a realm in which radically new meaning emerges through spontaneous and unpredictable action.[18] In this view, Arendt is an important resource for theorising a politics that is not beholden to a strong notion of identity as static or unchanging. This thesis will argue that such an understanding of Arendt misses

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[18] Honig (1995), Zerilli (2005, 2009), Disch (1995).

two important things: first, it does not take seriously enough the importance of the

individual as the unique site of meaning creation and, second, it does not appreciate the

extent to which mutual recognition is necessary for sustaining political action.  I argue in

this thesis that the individual subject's understanding of herself as an 'I' is a precondition

for exercising political agency (articulating opinions in public, for instance).  I argue,

further, that entering into the sphere of action, or exercising one's political agency, is

only possible when one can reliably exercise what I will call one's *ontological* agency:

that is, the confidence that one will appear in the world and be recognised by others as a

unique being.[19]

In this thesis, I emphasise the importance of association and mutual recognition in

Arendt's thought, though I also incorporate feminist readings of Arendtian politics which

emphasise radical freedom into my account because such readings underscore the non-

sovereign nature of narrative agency.[20] Across Arendt's work, the theme at the heart of

all of her arguments seems to me to be the primary importance of collectively creating

and maintaining the world.  To the question 'Why are there people rather than just one

person?' Arendt would give the same answer she imagines Kant would give: 'so that they

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[19] Having the confidence *that one will appear* to others as a unique 'I' is not the same
thing as being able to see or to explain one's own appearance.  I will argue in Chapter 2
that each of us, in action, has a sense of oneself as an 'I' as a matter of practical
necessity; however, this 'I' is in every way constituted by relations with others and would
be meaningless apart from the presence of others.  Arendt writes in *The Human
Condition*: 'Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed
or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure…' 1958, 180.
[20] I will make clearer what I mean by mutual recognition over the course of the thesis.  In
short, it refers to the shared recognition between specific agents of the other's uniqueness
and unpredictability.

might talk to each other'.[21]  To her mind, the collaborative articulation of differences between unique human beings (the desire of each agent to participate in the common world) is the driving force of action, and of all politics.  And, further, the basic recognition of one another as unique agents capable of action forms the very world which makes possible both action and politics.

This thesis draws on Arendt's political theory to support both of the claims upon which my concept of non-sovereign narrative agency rests: the ontological claim that selves are entirely relational and the practical-normative claim that each individual is a unique site of meaning creation.[22]  I work with an interpretation of Arendtian politics built around non-sovereign agency, and with an interpretation of Arendt's concept of identity as a complex configuration of an indefinite number of narratives.  These two aspects of Arendt's thought form the foundation for a theory of identity that overcomes the pitfalls of identity politics.  Instead of understanding politics as organised around special interests, Arendt helps us to see politics as the constant, open-ended negotiation of interests in common between agents capable of expressing unexpected and unrepeatable points of view.  Recognition between these discrete agents enables the extraction from action more lasting meaning in the form of political judgments and other kinds of narratives.

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[21] Arendt 1989, 40.  In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt emphasises the importance of communicability and, by extension, communication (I will expand upon this point at length in Chapter 5).

[22] Meaning is arrived at collectively in action, as we shall see.  I will make a distinction throughout between *meaning* (which is arrived at collectively) and *making sense* (which is a capacity of the unique 'I' to have a sense of herself in time and with relation to other 'I's').

Throughout my discussion of feminist politics, I draw from Arendt's political theory a notion of what Seyla Benhabib has called *narrativity*, which is the basic mode of human understanding. Narrativity is, as Benhabib puts it, both 'the mode through which the self is individuated' and 'the mode through which acts are identified.'[23] Narrativity operates on two levels: 1) we have a narrative understanding of ourselves as 'I's' and 2) we have a narrative understanding of action. The meaning we take away from action, the articulation of opinions and beliefs that we make patent in judgment, and the world of shared interests which forms the context for action are all understandable because we are able to share stories about them. What happens between human beings in the present moment rises up and fades away. It is by piecing together stories about action that we are able to collaboratively make sense of the world. Through mutually recognitive conversation, it is possible to glean meaning from an endless variety of media, memory, and art and to configure this meaning as relevant to specific interests or as revelatory of specific harms. Across this thesis, narrativity refers to the everyday experience of making sense, whether of one's own practical identity, of one's memories, of other people's opinions, or of events of the distant past.

This thesis proceeds in two parts, each of which is comprised of three chapters. Part I situates my narrative model of agency within feminist and philosophical discussions of agency and identity. Part II lays out the political implications for this view of agency. In the first chapter, I argue that it is essential to preserve a definition of agency in feminist theory, no matter how subordinating systematic relations of power may be (and even

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[23] Benhabib 1992, 127.

though we are often deeply attached to these subordinating relations). Feminists having a sense of individual agency is a precondition for the kind of political action with which feminism is concerned, and yet, over the past thirty years, subjectivity debates have made it very difficult to posit a definition of individual agency at all. These debates can be roughly divided into two strands. The first, the so-called 'category of woman' debate, asks who makes claims on behalf of feminism. The second is concerned with the formation of the individual subject, and the power relations that are at work in that formation. Through a careful reading of the identity politics and subjectivity/subjection debates (starting with the 1995 discussion between Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser in *Feminist Contentions*), I endorse those feminists who stake out a middle ground between identity and non-identity and subjectivity and subjection and argue that the best model of agency for such a middle ground is a narrative model of agency.[24]

I canvass a more recent incarnation of the subjectivity/subjection problem through prolonged discussion of both Amy Allen (who presents a 'middle ground' theory of agency and subjection) and Linda Zerilli (who argues that we should focus on the world in which action emerges rather than on the agent). From Allen, I borrow the insight that moments of mutual recognition must be an essential goal of any feminist theory. From Zerilli, I take a definition of politics as an open-ended and constantly unfolding field of

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[24] Throughout, I use 'poststructuralism' to refer to those theories descended from psychoanalysis, Marxism, and existentialism down through Nietzsche and Freud to Foucault (who rejects many of the claims of these three approaches but is in dialogue with all of them). I use 'critical theory' to refer to the legacy of Kant, the Frankfurt School, and Habermas. This is something of an oversimplification of two complex and overlapping methodologies in contemporary continental philosophy, but I use these terms in the interest of being able to refer, though more general terminology, to the theories of Foucault, Butler, Habermas, and Benhabib so that I may compare them.

interaction in which unpredictable new meaning emerges.  Reading the two theorists together allows me to combine the goal of mutual recognition between unique agents with an understanding of freedom and agency as radically non-sovereign.  I conclude by defining narrative agency as follows: (1) it is primary to narrative content; (2) it is grounded in uniqueness;  (3) it is non-sovereign; (4) it is essentially communicative; (5) it is (theoretically) infinitely generative.

Chapter 2 shifts the discussion from agency to identity.  I examine the hefty body of literature on narrative and identity in the philosophy of personal identity.  It may seem methodologically unorthodox to 'mix' this literature with the work in feminist theory with which this thesis is concerned, but an interrogation of the assumptions and conclusions of a more conventional philosophical approach to personal identity (with a focus on its feminist incarnations) allows me to endorse a non-reductionist, practical view of narrative identity similar to the one defended by Catriona Mackenzie.  Such a view is invested in the idea that there exists over time a singular self who is responsible for her actions, who always has a concept of her self as an 'I', and who is capable of changing who she is.  However, I take issue with the thesis that a narrative theory of identity requires (a) a strong notion of narrative unity (especially in the form of continually held evaluative commitments) and (b) that we are able to construct coherent or complete narratives about our lives from a position somehow apart from our constitution by pre-existing narratives and norms.  I argue instead for a view of narrative identity that emphasises the generative capacity of the narrative agent who is embedded in and constituted through a web of narratives.  I argue that the benefit of a narrative theory of

identity is that it allows us to emphasise the potential for the unique but relational 'I' to create new narratives.

There are two challenges to a narrative theory of identity that come up in this chapter. The first is Galen Strawson's critique of the understanding of the self as narrative. For Strawson, the notion that we construct our identities through narrative is, at best, empirically false, and, at worst, untenably proscriptive. The second is the problematic reduction of identity to what I have called 'a single narrative', as so often happens in political discussions of identity. Against Strawson, I will argue that conceiving of identity as narrative does not unduly constrain the way we understand our experience and, moreover, does not require that we adhere to a strong notion that narrating our lives is an ethical practice. In the face of the tendency to reduce identity to a single narrative (to practice an overly reductive identity politics, in other words), I argue that identities are made up of an indescribably complex web of narratives, and that one's conception of one's self (one's practical identity) is constantly changing as one navigates this web.

In Chapter 3, I pursue the idea that narrative identity is constantly being shaped and reshaped by narrative agency. First, I ask how the narrative agent can create new meaning even in the face of deeply constituting and oppressive norms, especially gender norms. Second, I ask whether the narrative agent can 'make sense' when her speech and action are not recognised. I first make clearer the distinction between narrative agency and narrative identity through a reading of Seyla Benhabib's early work on narrativity (which is very much grounded in Arendt). Narrative agency is the constant capacity to introduce new meaning into the constellation of relationships into which the subject is

thrown.  Narrative identity is a subject's practical self-perception, which may be riddled with subordinating attachments, but which can always change.  The narrative agent is able to confront subordinating norms (again, I focus on gender norms) in a variety of ways; she is able to read their meaning differently at different times and in different contexts.  She may then choose to incorporate them differently into her story about who she is. However, confronting subordinating norms, and creating new meaning in the face of such norms, is much more difficult in the absence of a community that listens to and recognises one.  It is impossible without some recognition of the subject's speech and action.

At this point, I shift from a focus on the narrative self to an attempt to stake out a feminist politics built on a notion of narrative agency.  I take resources from the political theory of Hannah Arendt to flesh out such a politics.  Chapter 4 argues that Arendt's action-based politics is a productive alternative to identity politics for two reasons.  First, it is concerned with interests actively held in common, as opposed to the consideration of pre-existing categories of identity.  Second, Arendt conceives of identity as a unique configuration, which she calls *whoness*, which is always more than the sum of its parts. An individual, by this account is never reducible to a single story or set of stories about what she is (is never reducible, in other words, to political narratives).  Instead, identity is something that emerges in action such that who we are becomes apparent through what we do.  Identity in politics is thus a constantly shifting and shiftable construct, and the purpose of politics is to address interests and concerns contingently held in common.

After an examination of Arendt's thoughts on identity in politics, I look to her work for a political grounding for my narrative model of agency.  Through a reading of

*The Human Condition*, I argue that plurality, natality, and narrativity are conditions for narrative agency. Plurality, which is the condition of distinct and multiple perspectives, is a condition for narrative agency because it allows us to understand our own constant uniqueness as 'I's'. Natality, which is the initiative to insert oneself into plurality through action, is a condition for narrative agency because it confirms the irrepressibility of political action—a human being cannot resist the initiative to act. Finally, narrativity is the mode through which political action is experienced. It is the *content* of the sense the self makes, so we might say that it is both a condition for and a product of agency. When the 'I' makes sense of herself as an 'I', in other words, she expresses that 'sense' in narrative form—whether she is telling a story about her childhood or explaining a preference or taking responsibility for an action. The 'I' the self has in mind when she acts always has some content (and in this way narrativity is a condition for agency), but the 'I' also shifts her understanding of herself as an 'I' in and through action (and in this way narrativity is the product of agency). These three conditions for narrative agency, combined with our preliminary insights into Arendt's thoughts on identity, give us a compelling picture of agency, shared interest, and action in concert in feminist politics.

The concern of Chapter 5 is to examine judgment-making in an action based, association-centred feminist politics. I address the question of how a self without a fixed identity is able to make judgments. I consider how, in other words, does the narrative agent make 'legitimate' political and moral judgments, considering the fluidity of her normative commitments? The gendered norms and practices we confronted in Chapter 3 must be judged as harmful, unfair, and/or deleterious to feminism's goals of equality and empowerment for women. But what is the process by which we make and validate these

judgments? To address this problem, I offer a brief overview of Arendt's ideas about the importance of judgment to a post-metaphysical political theory and the phenomenology of judgment she extracts from a reading of Kant's *Third Critique*. I then look at some of the feminist appropriations of this part of Arendt's work, focusing especially on the importance Linda Zerilli grants judgment for the formation and continuation of communities and on Seyla Benhabib's insistence that we pay attention to the inherent moral content of judgment-making.

Zerilli sketches a very useful account of feminist judgment, one which prizes the narrative agent's capacity to create the unexpected. However, I argue that Benhabib, by her careful analysis of some of the seeming contradictions in Arendt's incomplete account, is better able to construct a productive feminist theory of judgment, one which prioritises democratic dialogue, mutual respect and narrative agency. Finally, I confirm the unique value of Arendtian judgment for feminist thought and argue that a theory of judgment which emphasises mutually respectful conversation between narrative agents is the most productive for feminist theory. To illustrate the essential connection between feeling respected and seen and being able to risk making judgments in public, I look at Susan Brison's account of her recovery after a violent sexual assault. Brison has been involved in the feminist project of defining the harm of rape through political judgments made in the arenas of philosophy and activism, but being able to make these political judgments has only been possible through Brison's reconstruction of the sense of herself as an 'I' through sustained recognition by others.

Chapter 6 is something of a coda to the rest of the thesis: what, I ask, might it mean to *lack* the capacity to make sense? I posit loneliness, as Arendt defines it in the

final chapters of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as the conceptual opposite of agency. Loneliness is the total loss of the common world, the state in which one is incapable of being an interlocutor through thought, speech or action, with others—is incapable of appearing to others as a unique 'I'. Though loneliness is realised in its most extreme form in the concentration camps, it is a problem that haunts all human interaction: the problem of incommunicability. It is often very difficult, especially for marginalised and traumatised subjects, to give an account of themselves; indeed, to make any sense of their lives at all. Through a reading of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, I argue that this difficulty is not insurmountable and re-emphasise my claim that narrative agency is a capacity, though sometimes a latent capacity, of every subject, no matter how deeply silenced or oppressed she is or may have been. I argue that appearance in the world and communicability are mutually sustaining. Exercising one's capacity for narrative agency within a community that recognises one can allow even the most marginalised and subordinated subject to act.

## Chapter One: The Stakes of the Agency Debate

The notorious 'subject question' in feminism has been interpreted in two conceptually distinct ways. On the one hand, it has been treated as a question about solidarity and identity: who are the 'women' who make claims on behalf of feminism? And if we find there exists no shared identity corresponding to the category of woman, then who is left to pursue the goals of feminism? On the other hand, it has been seen as a question of agency: What *empowers* (and disempowers) individual women? If we heed the convincing accounts given by Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and others of subject-formation through attachment to disciplinary relations of power, then what meaningful definition of agency can we say remains to the subject? Feminist theory has, at times, seemed to collapse under the weight of this double aporia. How might feminists get beyond it without getting so wrapped up in the terms of the question that they fail to effect the self and social transformations they have set out to inspire?

Some feminists have argued that feminism no longer *needs* to theorise through the lens of the second question, the question of individual agency. They think we ought to ask other questions, to better effect. Linda Zerilli, for example, has made a strong argument for shifting feminist theory from a subject-centred frame to a 'world-centred' frame, one that prioritises a radically open-ended set of 'practices of freedom' instead of attempting to define a static set of rules for making feminist claims. In this approach and others like it, the work of feminist politics arises around a contingently relevant claim made by a woman or group of women affected by a particular harm. As I discuss in this chapter (and in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5), this is a useful model for feminist

politics—taking, as it does, the view that the claims women make are particular claims, meaningful in a particular way and at a particular time, and subject to revision as other voices enter the conversation. It seems to me, however, that pursuing such a vision of plural feminist politics while attempting to jettison feminism's subject question have resulted in a potentially harmful de-emphasis on imagining possibilities for *individual* feminist agency. As I argued in the Introduction, it is essential that we continue to extend the way we imagine such possibilities so that all kinds of women in all kinds of circumstances are able to understand themselves and others as agents.

The goal of maximising agency is not an unproblematic one—often, as we shall see, emphasising individual emancipation or empowerment involves ignoring the systematic oppression of women and affirming the choices that only privileged women are in a position to make, such as whether to choose a career over children. Intersectional feminism has shown that, more often than not, the claims that are successfully voiced by women are those claims voiced by able-bodied, upper-middle class, well educated, cis-gender, heterosexual white women who conform to generally agreed upon standards of beauty.[25] Many feminists[26] have become rightly sceptical of feminisms that emphasise

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[25] Nira Yuval-Davis defines intersectionality as "a metaphorical term, aimed at evoking images of a road intersection, with an indeterminate or contested number of intersecting roads, depending on the various users of the terms and how many social divisions [which are theoretically infinite but may include race, class, religion, gender, etc.] are considered in the particular intersectional analysis" (2011, 8). The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, but has become a ubiquitous concern for any kind of social or political theory. I will touch on the importance of intersectional approaches to feminist politics (and claims made by women) over the course of this thesis, and in some detail in chapter 4. The work being done in philosophy departments on social epistemology (on, in other words, the indispensable importance of interrogating the social and cultural particularity of the knower in order to determine who can possess certain kinds of knowledge) is an important new methodological direction in feminist theory. See especially Fricker (2007), Haslanger (2012), Yuval-Davis (2011), and Medina (2012). I will engage with

the importance of individual, rather than collective, transformation in discussions of agency.[27] And yet, without a conviction that the individual's sense of her own agency (which I define as the capacity to make sense, rather than the capacity to make autonomous choices) is important, we end up with a feminist politics that can be both alienating for those women who struggle to articulate the specific harms they suffer and inadequate for revealing to women that parts of their own lives as women are harmful. Articulating these specific harms might not necessarily involve political resistance or the identification of broader feminist goals, but it always requires recognition.

Agency, then, is itself a relational concept. It is not an innate or transcendent capacity, exercisable by the self-governing subject; it is, rather, the capacity to appear to another within a plurality of subjects, each of whom is constituted by shared norms and narratives.[28] A non-sovereign concept of agency, one that is predicated on this kind of intersubjectivity, can still provide a strong sense of individual freedom and empowerment. Articulating a strong definition of agency in feminist political theory will allow us to address a series of interrelated problems in contemporary feminism, from the continued suffering in silence of so many women who do not have a sense of their own

the scholarship in this emerging field in a somewhat tangential way throughout the thesis, but I think that there is interesting future work to be done applying the theory of narrative agency I present in this thesis within the philosophical framework of socially determined epistemology.

[26] McNay (2000), Zerilli (2005), Mahmood (2005), Hemmings and Kabesh (2013).

[27] Saba Mahmood (2005) and Hemmings and Kabesh (2013) give an especially interesting account of the dangers of acquainting "agency" with "choice"—I will come back to this distinction at the end of this chapter and will continue to parse it in chapters 2 and 3.

[28] In this chapter, I am chiefly interested in introducing the idea that *agency* is relational (that agency always involves the capacity of a unique individual exercised within a plurality of other unique individuals). As I mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, I also endorse the feminist claim that autonomy is relational. See Nedelsky (1989, 2012) and Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000).

agency to the problematically reductive solidarity of identity politics (a solidarity often

based on the sharing of a single narrative). Much of the work in feminist theories of

agency has rightly prioritised belonging as a source of freedom[29], but it is important to

add to that work themes of *individual* emancipation and freedom within the context of

solidarity and belonging.

Thinking about the subject question in feminism, then, cannot be merely a project

of redefining the category 'woman'; it must ask after the individual agency and identity

of each woman. Sharon Krause, in a recent overview of current trajectories in feminist

political theory, highlights the move in contemporary feminism toward 'contesting the

old assumption that agency equals autonomy, and making room within agency for forms

of subjectivity and action that are non-sovereign but nevertheless potent.'[30] The two

most important questions I want to pose in this chapter arise out of this particular

iteration of the feminist conversation. They are: (1) what does it mean to have a non-

sovereign definition of agency? and (2) how can feminist theory emphasise individual

freedom and empowerment even as it calls into question the assumptions of liberal

individualism? I argue here for a concept of *narrative agency* that insists upon the

importance of uniqueness, freedom, and empowerment even though it sees agency as

intersubjective and non-sovereign. Following from this, I define agency as the capacity

to make sense, rather than the capacity to make autonomous choices.

I build a model for this narrative agency that stays with the problem of the

subject. First, I give an account of this problem as it was discussed in *Feminist*

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[29] Or has at least been interested in drawing out the connections between belonging and
freedom. See Zerilli (2005); hooks (2009); Allen (1999); Weir (2013).
[30] Krause 2011, 4.

*Contentions*, which remains perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the subject

question to date.  Then I turn to a contemporary re-reading of this debate by Amy Allen

and—through a consideration of her reframing of the question—arrive at a definition of a

subject who possesses narrative agency, defined as the capacity to make sense of herself

in a web of relationships.  But can this definition of agency hold up in the face of a

feminist theory that wants to dispense with the subject altogether?  I canvass Zerilli's

argument for leaving behind the subject question and find in her work some important

addenda to a definition of agency, namely a double emphasis on non-sovereignty and

freedom.  Ultimately, however, I find that Zerilli underestimates the importance of

conceiving of the subject as a unique individual who depends on recognition in order to

act.  Finally, I offer a definition of narrative agency as the capacity of a unique, situated,

non-sovereign subject to make sense of her self in the world.


1.1 Foundations of the Debate


The agency debate in third wave feminism was concerned with the problem of theorising

the subject, given that liberal conceptions of the subject as a purely autonomous being are

untenable and often harmful.[31]  Following Foucault, many poststructuralist theorists

argued that power is inherent in all relationships—between one person and another,

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[31] Whether feminism is still in its third wave or has entered its fourth is a matter of some
debate, but the third wave is generally defined as the immanent feminist critique of the
second wave's failure to take into account differences among women.  As important, I
would argue, to the shift from second to third wave thinking in feminism is the
acceptance of the insights into subordination by power relations theorised by
poststructuralist feminists.

between people and institutions, within the self, and so on.[32]  In this view, we can never

be completely aware of power at work in our relationships with others or within

ourselves.  Every relationship, even the relationship between the subject and her self, is a

political relationship, in that it is predicated on differentials of power.  Accounts of the

subject on the critical theory side of the debate, on the other hand, have their roots in the

rational and robustly autonomous subject of Habermasian communicative ethics.  This

view suggests that we may be able to identify and eliminate harmful asymmetries of

power at work within our relationships with others and within ourselves.

Foucault and Habermas agree that there exists no self that transcends society.[33]

The points of contention between them, argued out in many different ways and by a

diverse group of theorists over the last thirty or so years, arise around how to define

power and autonomy for the situated self.  The foundational arguments in the feminist

incarnation of this broader debate were first articulated more than twenty years ago in the

now canonical discussion between Judith Butler, Seyla Benhabib, Drucilla Cornell and

Nancy Fraser, published as *Feminist Contentions* (1995).  This debate took place within

the context of theorising the challenges that the indeterminacy of 'postmodernism' might

have posed for normative feminist claims against patriarchal power.  Though the

discussion in feminist political philosophy has long since moved away from the term

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[32] Foucault understands power as everywhere and in everyone.  A summary of his view:
'Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which
only functions in the form of a chain. It is never located here or there, never in anybody's
hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and
exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between
its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising
power.' 1980,89.
[33] The notion that selves, beliefs, norms, culture, and so on are socially constructed is a
central assumption of this thesis.

'postmodern', a revision of the original debate reveals that the positions set down therein by Butler, Benhabib, and Fraser are still relevant in their assessment of the subject, agency, and identity.[34]  The major legacy of this discussion is the insight that the concept of agency will always be compromised by subjection.  The notion of narrative agency I defend over the course of this thesis emerges especially from Benhabib's conception of a self able to make sense of herself as an 'I' over time and in relation to other 'I's'.  This notion of agency must relentlessly, constantly be tempered by the realisation that selves are inextricably embedded in relations of power.

Benhabib is chiefly concerned with contextualising the feminist conversation, so that we can understand one another within the confines of the various relationships that define us.  A subject, in this view, has agency because she is able to make sense of her position in a world of other subjects.  This sense-making capacity, as I argue in Chapter 3, is the constant across time, space, and changing cultural conditions.  In order to have meaningful conversations about theory, and about what feminism is and should be, we need to understand ourselves as sense-making agents.   In her opening essay, "Feminism and Postmodernism", Benhabib questions the implications of what Jane Flax identified as the three central theses of postmodernism—the Death of the Subject, the Death of History, and the Death of Metaphysics—for feminism.  Can we accept these theses, she asks, if we are to remain faithful to the feminist commitment to emancipation?

[34] Drucilla Cornell's contribution to the discussion falls within a psychoanalytic paradigm which depends on assumptions and a vocabulary different from those on either the critical theoretical (Benhabib) or poststructuralist (Butler) sides of the debate.  The productive disagreement I discuss here arises out of the central question about the extent to which political power relations compromise our agency disputed by Benhabib and Butler.  As a consequence, the discussion of agency in psychoanalytic feminism, though it has some overlap with Butler's work, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

According to Benhabib, these postulates are only useful if taken up in their 'weaker formulations', meaning that we must accept that the transcendent subject of pure reason, the metanarrative of historical progress, and the notion of an Archimedean point from which to view this progress are all illusions of Enlightenment philosophy.[35] However, Benhabib argues, we must not take the acceptance of these theses to mean that we can no longer posit any norms by which to exercise critique.

The question, rather, is how might we posit more self-conscious, relational, and contextual norms? For example, in her reformulation of the Death of the Subject thesis, which she reads as the death of the sovereign male subject, she argues that feminist critical theory must recognise the subject as 'situated', 'gendered', and 'heteronomously determined' but must avoid theorising a subject that is 'just another position in language/discourse'.[36] The subject is not an *a priori* formation, but each subject is capable of telling her own story and creating her own meaning. This process of meaning creation is the foundation of Benhabib's notion of narrativity, and it is the conceptual bedrock for my definition of narrative agency.[37] The subject always acts as both author of and character within her own story and has the capacity to make meaning by bringing together the narrative of her life, even as she recognises her situatedness as a character in her own narrative and in the narratives of others—and, by extension, her limited authorial control.[38]

Instead of metanarratives, then, we should concern ourselves with these small narratives, all of which necessarily involve the self in relation to others. They may be in

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[35] Benhabib et. al. 1995, 18.
[36] Ibid., 18.
[37] Benhabib 1992, 126.
[38] Benhabib et. al. 1995, 47.

conflict or contrast with others' narratives, and so they do not have access to any transcendent truth; nor can they be completely controlled by the subject. Benhabib argues that each subject, situated within a particular *episteme* with all of its specific norms and assumptions, can reflexively experience her self through the process of making sense of the world around her and her position within it.[39] It is within this *episteme*, then, that the subject conducts her critique—philosophy is carried out according to the 'knowledge-governing interests which mark and direct its activities.'[40] The subject of practical philosophy does not have to be concerned with metaphysical truth in order to confront the claims made by preferential and prejudicial norms and to make narrative sense of her life.

Further, if one were to accept too strong a version of the 'Death of Man' thesis, one could not address the transformative and emancipatory goals of feminism. Benhabib sees in Judith Butler's model of a subject who is nothing more than the norms which define her 'a complete debunking of selfhood, agency and autonomy.'[41] Conceiving the subject as having no identity other than that which she performs seems, to Benhabib, to be counter-productive for feminism. Isn't it already difficult enough for women to express themselves, to tell their stories, without conceiving of those stories as nothing more than performances? The theoretical move of 'reducing female agency to a "doing

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[39] I use the word *episteme* here as Foucault uses it: to refer to the historical conditions which make knowledge possible (Foucault 2002, 211). Benhabib herself plays with the tension between the classical notion of *episteme* as the justification of true belief and the Foucaultian, what she calls 'postmodern', understanding of an as the shifting ground of the knowable (1992, 203-241). All this to say, the concerns of a particular *episteme* are by no means exhaustively articulable; but it is important here to contextualise the goals of feminist critique within the framework of feminist critical theory.
[40] Ibid., 19.
[41] Ibid., 21.

without the doer"' relegates the subject to 'just another position in language.'[42] Rather than understanding the subject as totally constituted by speech acts, the important thing is to see in the subject a tendency to use language pragmatically, to make sense of the uniquely situated and embedded self rather than to think of the self as engaged in an interminable process of resignification.

Butler, on the other hand, sees Benhabib's assumption that the subject is capable of having access to her own story as counterproductive, even dangerous, because it prevents a sufficient interrogation into the possibility that the subject is *completely* constituted by power. We cannot simply situate the subject within the power structure, Butler argues: we must conceptualise the subject as *part* of that power structure, imbued with and embodying all of the mechanisms of power. However, in her response to Benhabib, "Contingent Foundations", Butler claims that she is not advocating the death of the subject altogether. On the contrary, she sees the subject as having agency in recognising power at work within herself. As Butler puts it: 'the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. For what is it that enables a purposive and significant reconfiguration of cultural and political relations, if not a relation that can be turned against itself, reworked, resisted?'[43] It is through an engagement with and a reorganisation of technologies of domination that the subject exercises her agency, rather than through the construction of a narrative about her experience.

For Butler, as for Foucault, political theory does not 'require a notion of the subject from the start'; rather, its task is 'to ask after the process of [the subject's]

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[42] Ibid., 22.
[43] Ibid., 46.

construction' and to consider how this construction, in turn, relates to political theory.[44]

In other words, the process of critique is responsible for the immanent interrogation of all

normative constructions. Indeed, Butler sees in Benhabib's concise refutation of all of

postmodernism with the confrontation of three theses a distressing oversimplification. To

group together a vast and heterogeneous field of theory under the term 'postmodernism'

and then to proceed to theorise the strengths and weaknesses of this 'artificially

constructed whole' is to enact a harmful normative dominance by enforcing these

arbitrary norms.[45]

 Power, according to Butler, is ubiquitous; it operates in both the 'conceptual

apparatus' that seeks to negotiate the terms of critique and in the 'subject position of the

critic'.[46] Any critique must start from a perspective which determines the pervasiveness

of power and must also concern itself with an examination of the authority granted within

the foundations of ubiquitous power. We must ask: Who or what is excluded by the pre-

existing norms? Who benefits from the preferences and prejudices implicit in these

norms? How can we stretch and re-interpret these norms to be more inclusive? For

Butler, answering these questions must be a perpetually discursive process, one which

involves resignification rather than the artificial assumption of normative legitimacy.

 So too, for Butler, must any discussion of agency and the subject grow out of this

process of admission, examination, and resignification. The subject cannot be seen to

exist outside of or apart from his or her social and discursive positions. The will of the

subject and her actions, will always depend on her constitution and subordination by a

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[44] Ibid., 37.
[45] Ibid., 51.
[46] Ibid., 47.

certain set of norms and commitments to those norms.  These subordinating

commitments, then, are a precondition for subjectivity: 'subjects who institute actions are

themselves instituted effects of prior actions, and...the horizon in which we act is there as

a constitutive possibility of our very capacity to act.'[47]  The conventional notion of

autonomy as reflexive critical capacity relies on the misguided belief that an individual

can have control over her own action in the world.  However, according to Butler, the

subject constituted by this ubiquitous structure of power is not necessarily determined by

it.  We can, she argues, interrogate possibilities for agency by asking after 'possibilities

of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of reconstituting the

legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other those processes of

regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes.'[48]

Agency, in Butler's account, involves a constant reworking of the foundations of

every relationship—of self to society as a whole, of self to other, of self to self—and an

unflinching interrogation of power at work in these relationships.  Agency is *resistance*,

in this view, rather than a capacity.  The self cannot hope to exist outside of or apart from

these relationships of power (to seek such universality is to fail to recognise that all

relationships of power are necessarily exclusionary and limiting).  The function of the

agent vis-à-vis these relationships and the norms they foster is, as Butler puts it, 'to

continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them

from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive

power.'[49]  The goal, then, is to knowingly re-inscribe these relationships and norms in

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[47] Ibid., 43.
[48] Ibid., 47.
[49] Ibid., 51.

ways that subvert or challenge them. These re-inscriptions may take the form of parody, of art, of text, of discursive theory—in short, of performance. Feminist concerns, Butler argues, can be more productively addressed by this subversion of pre-existing norms rather than through a somewhat naïve and necessarily exclusionary positing of feminist norms as universal or universalisable.[50]

The perspectives of Butler and Benhabib have seemed to many theorists to be polar opposites. On the one hand, Benhabib argues for the importance of protecting the presence of certain values—emancipation, agency, universality—in theorising the feminist subject. On the other hand, Butler argues against putting any such values beyond question. However, in her rebuttal to Butler and Benhabib, Nancy Fraser proposes that these two accounts of critique and the subject are bound by 'false antitheses' and that, with the right reformulations, the empirical insights proposed by poststructuralists may be integrated into the normative processes advocated by critical theorists. Both points of view offer important insights into critique, the subject, and agency.

Fraser argues that both Benhabib and Butler have posed too inflexible a distinction between poststructuralism and critical theory: Benhabib is reluctant to admit the possibility of a social criticism apart from philosophy, and Butler is unwilling to see the viability of Benhabib's ideas about communication, transformation and emancipation. These false antitheses compromise the force of each argument, and they present the

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[50] And yet, without communicative mutual recognition, it is hard to imagine how performance can effectively resist and challenge power. The peformative model of agency, I will argue, is only effective when underscored by a notion of agency that can explain *how* parody, art, and so on, are meaningful.

reader with the impression that feminists must choose between either Butler's or Benhabib's feminism—that there is no middle ground between the situated, normative work of critical theory on the one hand and the empirical interrogation of power on the other. For Fraser, this dichotomy is irrelevant and unnecessary. Benhabib's conception of a subject who subscribes to values such as emancipation is not negated by the poststructuralist insistence on leaving those very values ever-open to interpretation. By the same token, Butler's conception of a subject who is constituted by power does not take sufficiently into account the importance of liberation as an ideal. As Fraser puts it: 'Feminists *do* need to make normative judgments and to offer emancipatory alternatives...[they] need both deconstruction *and* reconstruction, destabiliation of meaning *and* projection of utopian hope.'[51] Fraser proposes, as a result of her reading, an enduring task for feminism: '[to] integrate the insights of critical theory with the insights of poststructuralism.'[52]

1.2 The Politics of Ourselves: Between Agency and Subjection

Different feminists have reworked the terms of this debate in different ways. Amy Allen, for one, takes Nancy Fraser's "False Antitheses" essay as the starting point for constructing her framework for subjectivity in *The Politics of Ourselves* (2008). Allen agrees with Fraser that there is a fertile middle ground to be explored between Butler and Benhabib. However, she reads Fraser as overly optimistic about the possibility of using poststructuralist insights in order to carry out critical theory. For Allen, the terms of the

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[51] Ibid., 71. I will return to the importance of making judgments in feminism in Chapter 5.
[52] Ibid., 73.

Butler-Benhabib debate must be reformulated in order to successfully theorise the middle

ground between the two: in other words, it is important to incorporate *both* ways of

thinking about subjectivity. Allen provides the basic methodology for this thesis: a

concrete theoretical framework based on close comparative reading.  The task for

feminist political theory, therefore, is not just to integrate the 'explanatory-diagnostic'

insights of poststructuralism with the 'anticipatory-utopian' process of critical theory;

rather feminist theory must *re-conceptualise the central insights at the foundation of the*

*development of this debate.*[53]  The anticipatory-utopian aspects of poststructuralism must

be drawn out and expanded upon: Is there room in poststructuralism for moments of

recognition?  For feminist ideals of emancipation and mutual recognition?  By the same

token, critical theory must be re-examined and re-evaluated where it retains a rationalist

reliance on claims to transcend context or an overly optimistic account of autonomy vis-

à-vis relationships of power.  For Allen, this project of re-reading and re-formulating is a

question of looking at the work of Foucault and Habermas, as well as that of Butler and

Benhabib.  As Allen puts it:

> Some modifications in each of these perspectives will be necessary: for instance,
> some room for an account of intersubjectivity will have to be found—or created—
> in Butler and Foucault; conversely, strong Habermasian claims about the status of

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[53] Allen's agency-subjection framework is based on the idea that feminist theory must be
both 'explanatory-diagnostic' and 'anticipatory-utopian' in its aims.  Allen 2008, 3.  The
distinction between these twin tasks is originally made by Benhabib: '…the historically
known gender-sex systems have contributed to the oppression and exploitation of
women. The task of feminist critical theory is to uncover this fact, and to develop a
theory that is emancipatory and reflective, and which can aid women in their struggles to
overcome oppression and exploitation. Feminist theory can contribute to this task in two
ways: by developing an *explanatory-diagnostic* analysis of women's oppression across
history, culture and societies, and by articulating an *anticipatory-utopian* critique of the
norms and values of our current society and culture, such as to project new modes of
togetherness, of relating to ourselves and to nature in the future.' Benhabib 1992, 152,
emphasis added.

his idealizations and the possibility of the context transcendence of validity claims will have to be attenuated.[54]

Thus Allen reads Foucault, Butler, Habermas, and Benhabib and reinterprets the work of each with the others in mind.  This feminist theoretical methodology is marked by two things: 1) an expanded and generous reading of both poststructuralist and critical theoretical perspectives on agency and 2) a constant awareness of both the reality of subjection and possibilities for agency.

To develop such an integration, Allen argues, *contra* Fraser, that it is not sufficient to use poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity to understand the limits of the autonomy of Habermas' subject of critical theory.  Instead, she attempts to mine the work of Foucault and Butler for the ideas of mutual recognition and reflexivity—to actually look through their work in the interest of finding those moments when mutual recognition and reflexivity are implied.  She then rigorously interrogates and reworks the versions of subjectivity put forth by Habermas and Benhabib in order to ensure each theory fully accounts for the extent of the subject's inability to transcend subordinating power structures.  Importantly, Allen argues that this task of reinterpretation looks different with regard to Habermas and Benhabib than it does with regard to Foucault and Butler.  Whereas Allen looks at poststructuralism with the intention of identifying moments of implicit mutual recognition, she looks at critical theory with the intention of assessing whether or not explicitly identified moments of mutual recognition are reliant on an overly-robust definition of autonomy.

The stated goal of Allen's project is 'to develop a framework that does justice to both aspects of the politics of ourselves: a framework that theorizes subjection without

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[54] Allen 2008, 8.

sacrificing the possibility of autonomy and that theorizes autonomy without denying the reality of subjection.'[55] The purpose of developing such a framework is, ultimately, to cultivate possibilities for 'critical self-constitution and progressive social transformation'.[56] She painstakingly reworks the theories of Foucault, Butler, Habermas, and Benhabib with the purpose of keeping both aspects of this framework, subjection and agency, in mind at all times. Foucault provides Allen with the conception of power as ubiquitous in society and in the subject. The subject's passionate attachment to subordinating power relationships even when they have been rationally demystified is drawn out in Butler's analysis of psychic attachment. In Foucault and in Butler, however, Allen argues for an expanded concept of the social, one which would be able to account for mutual recognition and to recognise positive resignification. Habermas, whose work often draws on the primacy of mutual recognition, must be reminded that power is at work in even the most intimate of relationships and that claims of 'positive' resignification must always be recognised as contextual and contingent.

However, Benhabib's radically contextualised critical theory, combined with her notion of agency as narrative capacity, seems to meet the challenges posed by Allen's framework. For Benhabib, it is not enough to say that critique is situated and contextual. The critic must also admit that the claims made by critique are themselves contingent and in no way transcendent, and she must be able to recognise that the norms she posits for the sake of theory arise out of the concerns of her particular *episteme*. In her final chapter, Allen explicitly relies on Benhabib's framework to support the normative claims she has made over the course of her book:

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[55] Allen 2008, 172-173.
[56] Ibid., 177.

It is a mistake to assume that our only options are either to hold on to the dangerous illusion of genuine context transcendence...or to accept a radically contextualist form of relativism. Instead, as Benhabib has shown, we can only rely on the normative ideals of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity in making normative judgments while at the same time acknowledging that these are ideals that are rooted in the context of late Western modernity.[57]

In order to argue that critical reflection and social change are possible and desirable in the face of ubiquitous power, Allen has had to make claims about the desirability of certain norms: namely, emancipation and mutual recognition. It is Benhabib's contextualised critical theory that allows Allen to make these (admittedly contingent) validity claims.

Allen thus admits that Benhabib's model of critical theory fulfils her framework for a critique in that it is 'capable of an empirically grounded critical diagnosis of the central crisis tendencies and social pathologies of the present' even as it 'charts paths for future transformation'.[58] However, Allen is reluctant to allow that Benhabib's conception of the subject is equally suited to this framework because she finds that it does not sufficiently take into account the severity of the influence subordinating gender norms on the process of individuation. I discuss this difference between Allen and Benhabib in detail in Chapter 3, but note here that narrative agency stands up to this critique. Narrative is antiessentialist in that it does not require the subject to make any evaluative commitments, contingent in that it depends on the situatedness of the subject within a particular historical and cultural context, and fragile in that it is subject to the limitations of the subordinating claims made on the subject. The deeply ingrained system of subordinating gender norms into which all humans are born will, as Allen argues and as Benhabib would agree, limit the subject's capacity for autonomy vis-à-vis these

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[57] Ibid., 180.
[58] Ibid., 3.

norms; it will not, however, compromise the subject's narrative capacity. The subject will make sense of herself as an 'I' in the world whether or not she accepts or questions the claims of stereotypical gender norms, when she is able to recognise them at all.

In her chapter on Judith Butler, Allen points out that the performative model of agency cannot account for mutual recognition or positive resignification. Collective social movements *must* posit these two values in order to cultivate progressive social change. As she puts it, social movements must 'acknowledge mutual recognition as an ethical ideal and understand[ing] it as a permanent—though temporally fleeting—possibility in human relationships.'[59] Collective action must also create 'conceptual and normative resources on which individuals can draw in their own attempts at critical resistances.'[60] Such normative resources are a hallmark of Benhabib's interactive universalism, in which she argues that meaningful community arises out of 'common action, engagement and debate in the civic and public realms of democratic society'.[61] Plurality and collective political action are indispensable heuristics for feminism, according to Benhabib. Furthermore, she conceives of collective identity in just the way Allen suggests. Group narratives depend on the interplay of similarity and difference, on 'the fluidity of the boundaries between the self and others.'[62] Relationships within collective social movements can never be free from the silencing that accompanies asymmetries of power and negation, but they are, by their very nature, implicitly dependent on moments of mutual recognition.

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[59] Allen 2008, 95.
[60] Ibid., 183.
[61] Benhabib 1992, 11.
[62] Benhabib 1999, 351.

Narrative agency may also occur to the creation of art, which Allen argues is a possible site for social and self transformation: 'narratives embedded in literary fiction and autobiography can generate new cultural understandings of concepts such as democracy, equality, the good life, and the public sphere.'[63] Narrative agency is the capacity to make meaningful the ways in which we interact with one another precisely because it can generate such new understandings. The resignification of norms carried out by the performative model of agency always creates a 'surfeit of meaning, creativity, and spontaneity'.[64] Narrative can address and account for this positive resignification. Benhabib discusses the work of author Toni Morrison as an example of narrative art which has effected and is still effecting social change. She writes: 'It is thanks to Toni Morrison's tremendous contributions in giving voice to Black Americans, and African-American women in particular, that we have learned something about the variability of "narratives and codes" across groups and cultures and genders.'[65] Art has the potential to address social concerns and affecting social transformation in just the way Allen suggests.

Thinking of the subject as simultaneously informed by subjection and agency is a difficult endeavour, one which does require a broad, cross-theoretical understanding of both power and agency. The feminist theorist does, indeed, have a responsibility both to analyse carefully the reality of subordination, even as she looks toward possibilities for transforming subordinating power structures. The first task involves admitting that there is no outside to power and that the subordinating structures that define us are a

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[63] Allen 2008, 184.
[64] Benhabib 1999, 341.
[65] Ibid., 344-345.

precondition for identity.  But this ubiquitous subordination does not preclude possibilities for agency.  Though power is at work in every relationship, it is, as Allen points out, not the *only* thing that constitutes every relationship; so we must 'think of mutual recognition and normative reciprocity not as static end states but as moments *within* such relationships.'[66] Positing these fleeting moments of mutual recognition as possible sites for transformation seems to me a very productive way to conceptualise the ever-changing task of the feminist theorist.

1.3 Escaping the Subject-Centered Frame?

Drawing on Benhabib and Allen, I think of agency as the ever-present *capacity* for recognition and reciprocity: in short, as the capacity for making sense between ourselves. Agency is the subject's potential to create new meaning in the space between herself and other subjects.  There are several possible challenges to such a conception of agency, but the most salient seems still to be: does this conception of the subject allow for a plurality of feminisms?  Or does theorising the subject, any subject—even as an ever-shifting formation, totally dependent on the web of relations into which she is born—necessarily commit us to a limited and exclusionary notion of feminist freedom? Does imagining a subject who is the site of recognition and reciprocity come too close to positing an unproblematic autonomy?  In other words, does a theoretical framework that keeps in mind both subjugation and agency carry with it a hidden, and potentially harmful, reliance on a subject wrongfully construed as sovereign?

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[66] Allen 2008, 179, emphasis in original.

In *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2005), Linda Zerilli offers a compelling argument that *any* conception of the feminist subject succumbs to these problems because such a conception forces us to theorise from within an intrinsically paradoxical 'subject-centred' frame (any discussion of the subject leads to an unanswerable question about the balance of subjectivity and subjection). There has never, she argues, been a coherent or easily definable subject of feminism; rather, the essence of the feminist subject has always been collective and, moreover, fraught. The legacy of feminism 'was divided from the start, wracked by differences over the causes or form of oppression, disputes over the meaning of liberation, and competing understandings of what democratic ideas like freedom and equality…should even look like.'[67] Radically democratic movements are always marked by this kind of uncertainty because they are invested in creating something new and cannot predetermine what they will create. Like democracy, feminism is plagued by the paradox of its founding: it had to declare its subject (its identity as a women's movement) when it first declared its political aims. To make claims on behalf of women is to count oneself as a member of the feminist fold, and this move, like the move to include everyone within democracy, is always exclusionary in practice.

Theories of the subject cannot help but be influenced by Enlightenment ideals of freedom of the will and, therefore, conflate the autonomous capacity to understand and control our actions (which Zerilli calls, after Arendt, the 'I-will') and the freedom to act (the 'I-can'). As long as we keep trying to define a subject, she argues, we keep re-inscribing a 'dangerous fantasy of sovereignty' because we implicitly endorse the

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[67] Zerilli 2005, 2.

Enlightenment ideal of the Subject of pure reason.[68]  Instead, we should try to cultivate a

political freedom focused on acting and doing in the world by shifting our inquiry from a

subject-centred to a world-centred way of thinking about feminist politics.  Where Allen

wants to give a revised account of the subject of feminism and of subject formation itself,

Zerilli wants to do away completely with both variations of the subject problem.

Feminist theory is haunted by the ghost of autonomy as sovereignty when it takes

on the subject question, for a discussion of 'subjectivity' is always either about

reinterpreting autonomy so that it is available to the less-than-sovereign subject or

revealing the extent to which power relations compromise sovereignty of the will and

make autonomy impossible.  This confusion of freedom with sovereignty is a conceptual

inevitability, Zerilli argues, so long as we frame questions about agency and autonomy as

subject questions.  Theories in the latter camp are still immersed in discussions of the

subject; they just theorise subject formation in subjectivity's 'negative space'.  So,

feminism remains 'ambivalently beholden to the terms of the subject question'.[69]

However, Zerilli's emphasis on action in the political, though intended to move us

away from theories of the subject, may actually help us better articulate what happens in

those moments of mutual recognition and normative reciprocity Allen finds room for in

her framework for subjectivity.  In other words, we can start to isolate and imagine

moments of narrative agency by taking into account Zerilli's new model of

communicative political action, one that does not reinscribe overly demanding validity

claims.  Zerilli would almost certainly object to my reading of her as a theorist of

narrative agency, but I think she can be (quite productively) read this way for several

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[68] Ibid., 9.
[69] Ibid.,12.

reasons: first, she makes the important distinction between the capacity to act and the capacity to exert control over one's actions (though, in the process, she problematically jettisons the concept of individual agency); second, she gives us a very compelling definition of feminist freedom through action in the world; third, she emphasises the essential intersubjectivity of action; and, finally, she endorses the practice of reclaiming and retelling feminist narratives, which, I will argue, is itself an exercise of narrative agency.[70]

The danger of conflating autonomy and agency, as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, is a very important consideration when developing a definition of feminist agency because the autonomous subject of western philosophy, as many feminists in the second and third wave have shown, has always been implicitly (and often explicitly) masculine.[71] Autonomy has traditionally been associated with the exercise of the will (which Kant tells us is a law unto itself) of this sovereign male subject, whose 'death' was debated in the first section of this chapter. The exercise of sovereign free will has depended, as de Beauvoir famously showed us, on the submission of others, especially women.[72] Dethroned though this sovereign subject has been by feminist and other kinds of theories (psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, critical, and political, to name a few) discussions of autonomy often still presuppose the subject's capacity to freely and critically reflect upon and, through the use of reason, make judgments about, the world. Feminists who have lamented this untenable assumption of the individual subject's

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[70] I also engage with Zerilli's vision of feminist politics through a discussion of her work on judgment in Chapter 5.

[71] Feminists who have argued that the conventional autonomous subject is male include de Beauvoir (2011), Lloyd (1993a), Gatens (1991), LeDoueff (1991).

[72] De Beauvoir (2011)

freedom of the will, from de Beauvoir to Butler, have argued that women cannot claim

this sovereign subjectivity and still unproblematically identify as women.[73]  And yet,

women must confront the fact that they are women, and so they are caught in a cycle of

unfreedom; their gender gets in the way of their sovereignty.[74]

The tendency to read feminism through a subject-centred lens has arisen,

according to Zerilli, out of a confusion of political freedom, which is the condition of

democratic uncertainty, and philosophical freedom, which is bound up in the canonical

definition of freedom as sovereignty of the will.  Non-sovereignty of the will is only

compatible with freedom when we think of freedom as arising out of action.  This

definition of freedom, which Zerilli borrows from Arendt's notion that 'there…exist[s] a

freedom which is not an attribute of the will but an accessory of doing and acting'[75] is the

proper one for feminism because feminism (like many other strands of political theory) is

concerned with the ongoing creation of radically new ways of thinking about the world:

> The theory appropriate to politics…is itself a doing not a knowing to guide doing
> from a place outside it.  Such theory would turn on the ability to form critical
> judgments from within the ordinary, that is, on the reflective ability to relate
> particulars to each other in unexpected (not necessary or logical) ways by creating
> new forms for organizing our experience.  Above all, such a theory could not be
> given in advance of experience, including of course our political praxis, for it
> emerges out of our activity itself.[76]

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[73] '…the masculine fantasy of sovereignty…turns on women's submission, it nonetheless
inclined toward a conception of freedom that either sets the individual woman against
"all her sex" (that is, the exceptional woman who escapes or denies the social condition
of her gender) or requires a woman's full identification with "her sex" (that is, an
antipolitical kinship relationship in the form of an all-powerful sisterhood that obliterates
particularity and with it plurality).  In both cases, freedom is articulated as sovereignty,
be it an "I" against all the other or an "I" multiplied and extended into an omnipotent
"we".'  Zerilli on de Beauvoir, 2005, 10.
[74] Women may 'confront' gender in any number of ways, but confront it they must.
[75] Arendt 2006c, 165.
[76] Zerilli 2005, 64.

So far, so good.  I applaud Zerilli's emphasis on freedom in action, rather than freedom

of the will because it reflects the commitment (which I share) to the idea of the subject as

non-sovereign.  Much better to think of agency as the initiation of action in the world

than to think of it as an exercise of control over action or as the institution of a static rule,

law, or normative judgment.  Strangely (or, perhaps, predictably since she expunged from

her theory of freedom all of the terms of the subject question, including agency), Zerilli

cannot see that the capacity to 'form critical judgments from within the ordinary' might

constitute, in itself, a compelling definition of agency.

Zerilli is right to say that feminists have so thoroughly accounted for subject

formation by and through relations of power (whether the subject in question is the 'I' of

the individual or the 'we' that speaks for women) that they have 'tended to lose sight of

freedom as a political problem of the "I-can".'[77]  She is wrong, however, in thinking that

redefining freedom as a political problem allows us to shrug off the subject-centered

frame.  Moreover, her move to conceptualise political freedom outside of the subject

question compromises the potential for individual emancipation which arises out of

acting politically in the first place.  She explicitly denies that the question she poses is

one of agency:

> Ambivalently beholden to the terms of the subject question, however, [feminist theorists of subjectivity] remain tied to a conception of politics that makes agency the condition of any political existence whatsoever.  Accordingly, the political formation of the "we" in a feminist practice of freedom seems wholly contingent upon the subject's capacity for agency, thus forever returning the subject to the vicious circle in which it plays out the drama of its subjection.  Rather than rush to solve the problem of agency, however, let us pause and ask why we think that agency is the paramount problem for feminism after identity problems.[78]

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[77] Ibid., 11.
[78] Ibid., 12.

But the political freedom Zerilli invites us to pursue here *is* grounded in agency—the *capacity* to act politically (in the context of a plurality of other actors) is an indispensible aspect of, and, indeed, a precondition for, action.  Rather than throwing out the subject question, we ought to reframe it along these lines: enquiring after the subject (as Allen and Benhabib have argued) requires that we first identify some capacity of the subject and not that we identify the subject herself.  We must establish a subject's agency before we can say anything about political action.[79]

Shifting our thinking from a concern with means-ends politics to an interest in open-ended, action-based politics, as Zerilli suggests we do, helps with this reframing. The question of agency in feminist philosophy ought to be a question of what we do when we act politically, and not whether or not we can determine, through political claims-making, a static set of rules about how politics can help us achieve our goals. Politics must, instead, remain open-ended and must shift its focus depending on the new ideas introduced into the political sphere by acting and speaking agents.  Political participation, when it involves the kind of reciprocity and recognition we set as our ideal in section 2, is an end in itself.  Zerilli rightly endorses a view politics as action between members of a plurality, a view which she gets directly from Hannah Arendt.  I will have much more to say on reading feminist theories of agency through Arendt's conceptual vocabulary in the Chapter 4, but, for now, suffice it to say that the insights into political freedom Zerilli offers through her reading of Arendt are important because they emphasise the *necessarily intersubjective* nature of all political action.  Freedom, which for Arendt involves both the initiative (and she does insist that it is an initiative, albeit an

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[79] I will come back to the relationship between agency and identity in Chapter 3.

irresistible one) of inserting oneself into the world and *being recognised* by others in the world.[80]  Decentring freedom in this way automatically defuses the 'dangerous fantasy of sovereignty' that looms over our discussions of the subject.

Unfortunately, Zerilli does not recognise that the initiative to act in the world, to insert oneself into a plurality, is a matter of exercising agency: 'Foregrounded in Arendt's account of action is something less about the *subject* (for example, its stability/instability or its capacity/noncapacity for agency) than about the *world* (for example, its contingency) into which the subject is arbitrarily thrown and into which it acts.'[81]  It is true that Arendt does not recognise the necessity of defining the subject's identity; however, she puts much more emphasis than Zerilli suggests on the importance of the uniqueness of the subject's disclosure, which she calls whoness.  It is only because the subject is *unique* that her action is able to introduce new meaning into the world.  Zerilli seems to read the subject's *initiative* toward action as purely arbitrary, almost accidental when it is, in fact, the action itself, and the results of that action, which Arendt sees as arbitrary and unpredictable.[82]  The initiative to act is always there, is ultimately irresistible, and the product of the complex and constantly changing factors—belief, desire, predisposition, and so on—that make up a unique individual's place in the world.  Action is particular to the set of circumstances in which it takes place, but agency is

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[80] Arendt 1958, 176.
[81] Zerilli 2005, 14, emphasis in original.
[82] 'If we look upon freedom with the eyes of the tradition, identifying freedom with sovereignty, the simultaneous presence of freedom and non-sovereignty, of being able to begin something new and of not being able to control or even foretell its consequences, seems almost to force us to the conclusion that human existence is absurd.  In view of human reality and its phenomenal evidence, it is indeed as spurious to deny human freedom to act because the actor never remains the master of his acts as it is to maintain that human sovereignty is possible because of the incontestable fact of human freedom.' Arendt 1958, 235.

constant capacity across circumstances. Though it is constant, it is also dynamic—and inexhaustible—the capacity to insert oneself into the world again and again in an endless variety of ways. Put another way, agency is not the capacity of a doer with a set identity who makes a sovereign decision to impose her will on the world; it is, rather, the capacity of a situated, non-sovereign, variously identified subject to appear as a unique being in the world. Action may be, in Arendt's words 'frighteningly arbitrary' because it sets in motion a multitude of other actions beyond the agent's control, but each action springs from a singular agent. Zerilli emphasises radical freedom. She writes: 'the ability to form critical judgments from within the ordinary, that is, on the reflective ability to relate particulars to each other in unexpected (not necessary or logical) ways by creating new forms for organizing our experience'. The agent may always be engaged, then, in coming up with something new. Zerilli calls action in politics—that is, action for its own sake and not as a means to an end—the practice of freedom.[83]

Some very important correctives to feminist theories of the subject have come out in this close reading of Zerilli's work on freedom. Reconceiving freedom and agency as non-sovereign concepts allows us to imagine a decentred politics in which each individual member of a plurality has, again and again, something unique to add to political conversation. This image enriches Allen's framework of subjectivity, in which the subject is always contingently capable of communicating with other subjects. The dangers of subjection may be amerliorated when we concern ourselves not with the ends of politics, but with the intersubjective give-and-take which actually constitutes politics—and with the newly thinkable that arises out of moments of mutual recognition

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[83] Zerilli 2005, 64.

and reciprocity.  If we remember, at all times, that the world of politics is contingent and

constantly renewing itself, then we can think of agency as the capacity to participate, to

insert one's unique perspective, into this ongoing conversation.

The agency aporia in feminism remains an urgent problem.  It is still the case that

feminist politics both needs to assert that there is a subject of feminism who can make

claims about her experiences as a woman and to recognise that, as Zerilli rightly puts it,

'…it seems as if the paradox of subject-formation is installed as a vicious circle of

agency at the heart of politics.' And because we are caught in this vicious circle and have

no clear concept of agency, it is 'hard to see how politics could ever be a truly

transformative practice that might create something new, forms of life that would be

more freedom enabling.'[84]  If our goal is (and it should be) to cultivate the freedom-

enabling and transformative aspects of politics, then we *must* have a way to talk about the

capacity of individual women to participate in, and to feel an essential part of, that

politics.   Combining insights offered by feminists who have been involved in the agency

debates of the last thirty years, however, *can* result in a powerful definition of agency,

one that might even be capable of increasing the emancipatory potential feminist theory

has long struggled to deliver.

I charge my concept of narrative agency with this very task of increasing

feminism's emancipatory potential.  The agency debate has already gone a long way

toward clearing the ground for this concept. Out of the vicious circle of agency, stories,

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[84] Ibid., 12.

rather than fully autonomous subjects, emerge. They emerge because individuals—always uniquely situated amongst, and in conversation with other individuals—tell them.

Narrative agency is the capacity to make sense of oneself as an 'I' over time and with relation to other 'I's'. The concept of narrative agency I have begun to defend in this chapter and develop over the course of this thesis is marked by five basic characteristics: (1) it is primary to narrative content; (2) it is grounded in uniqueness; (3) it is non-sovereign; (4) it is essentially communicative; (5) it is (theoretically) infinitely generative. I explore each of these characteristics in detail throughout the thesis, but it is important to make clear what I mean by each.

First, narrative agency is the constant and irreducible capacity of an individual to 'make sense'.[85] What 'sense' she makes is unpredictable and fluid. In Chapter 2, I argue that an agent always has a sense of who she is when she is acting—she always has, in other words, a practical narrative identity. This practical narrative identity, whatever it may be, first depends on the capacity to make sense of oneself as an 'I' at all.

Second, that the capacity of narrative agency is grounded in uniqueness means that the sense that each individual within a plurality makes of his or her experience is *unique to that individual*. No two human beings occupy the same place in the world—the same position in the web of stories that make up human existence.

But, third, by the same token, each individual is constantly and inextricably embroiled in this web of stories and will, as a result, make sense of his or her life using

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[85] It is worth keeping in mind that sense-making itself, like the idea of autonomy, has traditionally been the province of men. Women have had to make sense of themselves in relation to men and using the language of men in order to be recognised by men. Communicability between women is thus an essential aspect of increasing women's agency. I explore this idea in Chapter 5.

the norms, language, expectations, imaginations, etc. of other people.  The capacity to make sense of one's life is *non-sovereign*, in that individuals are constituted by and through relationships with others and in that sense-making does not (and cannot) involve an individual removing herself from the world in order to tell a story about that world.

Fourth, within the plurality of sense-makers intersubjectively forming stories that make sense about the world, there must be a consensus about what 'makes sense'.  This kind of mutual agreement does not occur every time an individual comes up with a narrative about the world, but it must take place sometimes in order for the individual to experience sense at all—to understand that she *appears to others* as a unique individual capable of sense-making.  More than that, the capacity to make sense of the world is essentially relational, in that the narrative agent assumes that he or she will be recognised and understood by another.  There is always, in other words, an imagined conversation partner in even the most rudimentary exercise of narrative agency.  Mutual recognition between narrative agents is what sustains the world.

This leads us to the fifth and final characteristic of narrative agency: its *infinite generativity*.  Unique individuals within the world will always be able to make new stories about it.  The continued exercise of narrative agency (that is, the continued creation of new stories) is possible for every agent in every set of circumstances (though, as we shall see in Chapter 6, there might be a possible exception to this universality in the concentration camps).

I explore the implications of this concept narrative agency using a feminist theoretical framework which is informed by a number of diverse philosophical influences.  This thesis sets an ambitious methodological agenda in order to argue as

robustly as possible for the importance of agency. It takes seriously poststructuralism's

insights about the nature of power and attachment to power. It practices the close textual

analysis of critical theory. It uses analytic philosophy's method of conceptual analysis to

isolate and define the concepts of narrative and personal identity. And, finally, it uses the

political philosophy of Hannah Arendt to imagine an emancipatory and empowering

feminist politics. The subjectivity debates of the last quarter century have given us an

intimidatingly vast set of insights, some of which seem hopelessly to conflict with one

another. Rather than be overwhelmed by these different strands of theory, we can, to use

Moira Gatens' metaphor, immerse ourselves in the rewarding task of stitching together a

patchwork quilt of theory.[86] Each feminist theorist's quilt will look slightly different, for

each feminist theorist is sure to read other feminists differently. This too is an exercise of

narrative agency; feminist theory itself involves particular, situated, unique subjects

making meaningful statements about what feminism is and what it should be. It is

concerned with making sense of the in-between: between subjection and autonomy,

between equality and difference, between identity and freedom.

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[86] Gatens 1991, 1.

## Chapter Two: Narrative Identity

The last chapter touched on the concepts of agency, subjectivity, autonomy, power, and freedom; notably lacking, however, was a discussion of identity. The problem of identity—of what 'identity' is—will be the concern of this chapter. Philosophical approaches to identity vary so greatly that such a treatment requires that we tease apart a rather intimidating cluster of questions. Philosophers of personal identity have asked: Is identity simply the continuity of consciousness across time? Which attributes of identity, if any, remain static over time? Which attributes shift? Is identity something that can be defined from a third personal perspective, or is a first personal perspective also required? Feminist theory, as we saw in Chapter 1, adds other questions to these, such as: To what extent do relations of power constitute identity? To what extent is the reproduction of these relations of power necessary for life within the specific set of norms and values into which an individual is born? And to what extent can an individual challenge or shift this web of norms and values? In short, feminist theory asks whether identity is a prison, a source of empowerment, or, perhaps, alternatively one and then the other.

Some of the concerns of this chapter have already been mentioned—such as what it means to define identity through *identification with* something (identification with the category of 'woman', for example). I argue that, while identification with a particular group is part of political action, identity itself is an open-ended, relational, and complex social construct which can be changed through the exercise of narrative agency. In Chapter 3, I will turn to questions about the extent to which agency allows us to change

our identities, but in the present chapter I address the difficulties inherent in defining personal identity in the first place.

It may, at first glance, seem counterintuitive to include a review of the philosophy of personal identity literature in a thesis on feminist theory, but I want to expand the scope of this work to include the philosophy of personal identity for a couple of reasons. First, it will enhance our understanding of identity and of narrative by adding some insights gained through the conceptual analysis of both terms. Second, it will provide grounds for exploration of more conventional philosophical theories of identity and will, by extension, allow us to see how these theories are compromised by their failure to take seriously enough the challenges to self-sovereignty put forth in this thesis. The narrative identity I will argue for here is inherently relational and involves the constantly shifting constellation of beliefs, desires, emotions, and attachments. However, a relational-narrative account of identity need not abandon the idea that we can have a unified sense of self. Each of us is uniquely situated in the world, and each of us has a set of experiences that distinguishes him or her from anyone else in the world. Having an identity at all, I argue, depends on a self's recognition that she is a unique self acting in the world.

In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the literature on personal identity and endorse a non-reductionist, practical, narrative account of personal identity. This account is *non-reductionist* because it maintains that the same unique self exists over the course of a lifetime and that this self cannot be reduced to a particular experience or set of experiences. My account is *practical* because it posits a self that always has some idea of that it is a self. And it is *narrative* because it posits a self that is constituted by stories

about who she is (these may be as simple as the basic recognition of oneself as an 'I' or as complex as overarching autobiographical accounts of one's life).  I then point to some of the problems such a narrative theory poses for the feminist model of agency introduced in Chapter 1.  I engage with, and ultimately reject, two criticisms of this narrative model.  The first, made by Galen Strawson, argues that a narrative model of identity attaches inappropriately high ethical demands to narrative identity formation (the ethical narrativity thesis).  The second argues that narrative imposes a harmful subjection to prevailing norms in identity formation.

I argue that a narrative theory of identity need not presuppose a strong version of the ethical narrativity thesis—it should, rather, locate the non-reductionist aspect of narrative identity in *uniqueness* rather than in overall narrative unity or in an idea of the soul or of a transcendent *cogito*.  The self is, instead, situated within, and constituted by, a web of relationships.  She is not, in other words, reducible to any one aspect of her identity or any one mode of experience.  She is, instead, marked by a uniqueness that arises out of her being born into the world different from any other human being who has ever been born into the world or will ever be born into the world.  Narrative unity, understood as the subject's strong attachment to herself as a particular person with particular beliefs, opinions, commitments, etc., is arguably a worthy ethical goal, but it is not a necessary condition for narrative identity.  I argue, further, that the narratives that constitute a self's understanding are, indeed, subordinating, as we saw in Chapter 1.  They are, however, constantly changing, constantly changeable, and can even, under some circumstances, be empowering.  I argue that the narrative self is inescapably embedded in a web of narratives that defines her but that she is able, by making sense of

these narratives, able to create newly meaningful narrative configurations. She is able to both rearrange the narratives that define her to create a new idea of who she is and able to recognise this creative capacity in others.

## 2.1 A Narrative Theory of Personal Identity

The problem of personal identity is notoriously complex. It does not consist of a single philosophical dilemma but, rather, consists of the kinds of questions posed above: questions of reidentification, characterisation, consciousness, and experience. The articulation of these questions in the personal identity literature often begins with a reading of Locke's treatment of personal identity, which is generally agreed to be the first philosophical account of identity as the continuity of self-consciousness[87] and which was concerned with the problems of *persistence* (how do we identify a person as 'the same' even when she has undergone drastic changes?), *evidence* (how do we know that this person is the same as the person who was in her place yesterday?), and *personhood* (what is the difference between persons and non-persons?).[88] All three of these categories of question are tied to the general concern of reidentification—how can we tell, in other words, that person X at time slice 1 ($t_1$) is the same as person Y at time slice 2 ($t_2$)?

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[87] There is, of course, a huge and diverse body of work devoted to reading Locke on personal identity. I begin with him because he seems to be the nexus of work in the philosophy of personal identity (in all of its contemporary incarnations), but there is no need to reproduce his argument in full here. For in-depth readings of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, see Ayers (1991), Strawson (2011), and Uzgalis (2007).

[88] This parsing of Locke is borrowed from Eric Olson (2007) who adds several other questions to this cluster, including 'What are we?' (What material are we made of? What parts do we have?) and 'What do our personal pronouns refer to?' (What is the metaphysical status of the 'we'? Are human beings asking questions of personal identity the only kind of questioning we?).

There are three general categories of answers to the reidentification question: biological continuity theories, psychological continuity theories, and narrative theories of identity, which tend to shift the question of reidentification to one of *characterisation*—I will come back to this point in a moment. Philosophical debates on the nature of personal identity often focus on the question of whether bodily continuity or psychological continuity gives us a better way to account for continuous personal identity over time. Theorists on the former side of the debate consider existence of the same brain and body (where both refer to organic matter) to be sufficient grounds for continuous identity[89]; while those arguing the latter see psychological attributes such as memory, recognition, beliefs, desires, opinions, and character traits as being the appropriate factors for determining continuous personal identity.[90]

Theorists who argue that biological criteria are appropriate for positing continuity between X and Y often take issue with the notion that personhood is the primary marker of personal identity. That is, they are sceptical of the privileging of personhood (generally defined by the possession of rational and moral agency) over other ways of materially existing: as an infant, say, or a foetus, or a body in a permanent vegetative state. Since each of 'us' exists in some state other than personhood at some point in our lives, personhood cannot be our essence. We are more properly understood to be biological organisms, or, as some biological continuity theorists put it, human animals.

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[89] Notable biological continuity accounts include Olson (1997), De Grazia (2005), and Wiggins (1980).

[90] The psychological continuity thesis is articulated in a number of different ways by a diverse group of theorists, including David Lewis (1983), Sydney Shoemaker (1984), and Derek Parfit (1984). I do not treat each of these theories in detail here, but the important thing to note is that psychological continuity theorists, however they argue, believe that psychological attributes, rather than biological substance, account for the sameness of identity over time.

Thus, the necessary and sufficient criterion for X at $t_1$ to be the same as Y at $t_2$ is continuity of organic matter. Often the biological criterion is, empirically, the method of identification that we favour: Individual Y's DNA might be used to confirm her sameness with individual X, who committed the crime; the police officer who pulls a woman over confirms that she is, indeed, the same individual pictured in her photo ID; the body of a deceased loved one is identifiable *as* that loved one. The positing of a biological criterion for reidentification has its problems, however. Consider, for example, what has come to be called the transplant intuition: if my consciousness (with my memories, my opinions, my beliefs, etc.) is transplanted from my body into something else (another body, a disembodied mind, a robot), then it is very difficult to imagine that 'I' am not wherever my consciousness has ended up.

The psychological continuity thesis goes further toward accounting for the strong psychological component of reidentification, which is to say that X has enough psychologically in common with Y to support the claim that X is the same as Y. Different psychological continuity theorists explain this reidentification in different ways.[91] Often they make use of thought experiments which present some variation of the transplant intuition and ask after the extent to which shared memory, belief, self-interest, and so on can constitute a sufficient condition for declaring that X at $t_1$ is the same as Y

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[91] There are many interesting considerations that go into the articulation of a psychological continuity theory of identity such as the question of numerical identity (can there only exist one person who has the identity of X at $t_1$ and Y at $t_2$?); the notion that identities exist not just over time, but also in space (sometimes called four dimensionalism); and the notion that personal identity is not a relevant factor for reidentification (there is a series of overlapping psychological factors between X and Y, but there is no convincing reason to say that these continuous psychological factors amount to an *identity*, understood as a 'self'). I will touch on a few of these differences, but a full articulation of them is beyond scope of this thesis. For a helpful overview of the literature on the psychological continuity thesis, see Schechtman (1996).

at $t_2$.[92]  Generally, the project of psychological continuity theorists takes reidentification

as its goal and uses the shared content of X's and Y's memories, beliefs, desires as

*evidence* that X and Y are the same person at different points in time.  In other words,

psychological continuity theorists are concerned with proving that X and Y are the same

person, rather than with a qualitative analysis of the content of an individual's beliefs,

desires, memories, character traits, and so on.  Put another way: psychological continuity

theorists posit the sameness of psychological criteria as evidence for continued identity

(indeed, they often think of identity in terms of the continuation of psychological

attributes)[93], but they do not always enquire after what seems to *matter* about these

psychological attributes.[94]

Traditionally, philosophers of personal identity have treated questions of

reidentification as metaphysical questions about identity: that is, they have been

concerned with the necessary and sufficient conditions under which person X at $t_1$ can be

said to be the same as person Y at $t_2$.  Since at least the 1970s, however, there has been an

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[92] Derek Parfit offers a succinct articulation of the psychological continuity thesis:
'The Psychological Criterion: (1) There is psychological continuity if and only if there
are overlapping chains of strong connectedness.  X today is one and the same person as Y
at some past time if and only if (2) X is psychologically continuous with Y, (3) this
continuity has the right kind of cause, and (4) there does not exist a different person who
is psychologically continuous with Y. (5) Personal identity over time just consists in the
holding of facts like (2) to (4).' 1984, 206.
[93] Tamar Gendler (2010) argues that many of the thought experiments used by both body
and psychological continuity theorists are (often bizarrely) out of touch with our common
understandings about personhood and identity. These thought experiments demand that
we suspend most of our ordinary associations with the concept of a person in order to
identify the most 'essential' aspects of personhood.  For Gendler, this methodology only
confuses the already complex concept of personhood.  How, she asks, can we be sure that
certain criteria for judging the concept of personhood are more valid than others?  And
what important practical aspects of personhood are lost in the standard contemporary
reduction of personhood to a specific set of criteria?
[94] This is Marya Schechtman's argument; I will return to it in a moment.

increasing trend in the literature among both biological and psychological continuity

theorists to consider questions of personal identity from a *practical*, rather than (or

sometimes along with) a metaphysical, point of view.[95]  That is, theorists have pointed

out that the chief concern of any theory of personal identity is (and must be) about the

practical and ethical necessity for reidentification.  Without a way to assert that person X

is the same as person Y we cannot ensure that person Y is responsible for person X's

actions: we cannot say, for example, that the person on trial is the same person who

committed the crime.  We cannot explain, furthermore, the feeling of moral responsibility

that person Y has when contemplating person X's actions (or vice versa): we cannot

understand why Y feels guilt for X's wrongs or that X wants to take care that Y is healthy

and happy by making good decisions in the present.  The question of personhood,

similarly, has urgent ethical applications for the consideration of moral quandaries such

as animal rights, euthanasia, and abortion: when can we say that X or Y is properly a

person?  And should/does personhood make a difference as to how person X or Y should

be treated?

      Catriona Mackenzie (2008) argues that the assumptions made by metaphysical

accounts of personal identity cannot completely account for the nature of identity.[96]

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[95] Notable examples of this trend include Frankfurt (1988a), Korsgaard (1989),
Schechtman (1996) and Mackenzie (2008).  The connection between personal identity
and personal responsibility goes back much further than this work on practical identity.
Indeed, Locke himself thought of identity as a 'forensic' term (Locke 1995, 50) and
Thomas Reid wrote that 'Identity…is the foundation of all rights and obligations, and of
accountableness, and the notion of it is fixed and precise' (Reid 1785, 321).  Theorists of
practical identity have been concerned to respond to the tendency in twentieth century
Anglo-American philosophy of divorcing theories of personal identity from practical and
ethical concerns.
[96] There are, of course, practical theories of identity that are not narrative.  Many
psychological continuity theorists (most notably Parfit, 1984) are concerned with the

Moreover, she argues that metaphysical approaches contain other problematic

assumptions, for instance that a 'person' consists of a specific set of attributes and that a

person's identity can be assessed over time without reference to the first-personal

perspective.  A notion of personal identity as practical and narrative helps address the

problems with making such assumptions.

One way to address the problems posed by the focus on metaphysical problems

over practical concerns in conventional approaches to personal identity is to shift the

questions we ask about personal identity from questions of reidentification to questions of

characterisation—to ask why certain characteristics matter, rather than only asking

whether they are carried over across time.  Marya Schechtman (1996, 2014) advocates

such a shift in her critique of contemporary theories of identity.  She argues that both

bodily and psychological continuity theorists pursue a definition of quantifiable identity

(that is, both are concerned with the question: is person X the *same* person as person Y?).

These theorists are, Schechtman argues, always also concerned with qualitative questions

of characterisation, whether they discuss this concern or not.  They are interested, in other

words, in the following question: 'what are the *criteria* by which we can judge sameness

in a person?'[97]  For most theorists of personal identity, a person is judged to be either the

same or not the same; however, neither bodily nor psychological continuity theorists can

account for *degrees* of sameness, though they often make use of a discussion of such

qualitative differences.  The logical relation between one version of a person and another

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ethical, prudential, and legal aspects of reidentification.  It is, however, fair to say that the
bulk of the literature on personal identity in the Anglo-American tradition has been
chiefly concerned with a metaphysical approach to reidentification.  This point is made
by Mackenzie (2008) and West (2008), among others.
[97] Schechtman 1996, 73.

is enough to justify the distinction of personal identity for the bodily continuity theorists; the psychological relation, in the case of psychological continuity theorists. This is a significant problem, since the person at $t_2$ will always be demonstrably different from the person at $t_1$. Furthermore, the important practical questions which arise out of theories of identity (moral responsibility, self-interested concern, survival and compensation, are the four categories of practical question Schechtman names) cannot be addressed within the mode of reidentification alone.[98]

An emphasis on numerical identity within theories of bodily continuity is, in fact, a question about reidentification; in other words, the biological criteria which allow us to answer 'yes' or 'no' to the question 'Is this the same person?' are useful and meaningful determinants. The psychological continuity theorist, on the other hand, must be after a totally different mode of identification: she must ask *how* this person can be the same as that person and must also wonder how these two versions of the self are different. Another way to put this point is to note that, for the psychological continuity theorist, the term 'person' is a descriptive way of identifying continuity but not a concept that can refer to the whole of an individual life. Many (if not most) prominent theories of personal identity assume that the psychological unity relation is one that establishes commonality between person X at $t_1$ and person Y at $t_2$, who are causally and quantifiably (through the articulation of psychological criteria in common) connected but who do not add up to a complete or unified person. By this way of thinking, we can give a complete third-personal account of an individual without reference to that individual as a (whole) person. This way of thinking about identity as a series of connected stages is a

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[98] Ibid., 2.

*reductionist* view of personal identity.  Many reductionists argue that the only alternative to imagining that an identity consists of discrete stages is the *a priori* acceptance of some spiritual substance, whether that substance is conceived as a Cartesian *cogito* or as a soul.[99] But theorists like Mackenzie argue for a *non-reductionist* theory of identity, which shows the limits of the dichotomy between discrete person time slices on the one hand and an unchanging metaphysical spiritual substance on the other in favour of a *practical* understanding of the person as a whole.[100]  On this understanding the unifying aspect of selfhood is uniqueness.  The 'I' who has a sense of herself in action is different from any other 'I' who has every lived or will ever live, even though she will change over the course of her life.  This is not, then, a metaphysical non-reductionism (this uniqueness does not transcend consciousness) but it is practical non-reductionism (the 'I' is a constant aspect of lived experience).

In summary: bodily continuity theorists offer a compelling account of reidentification (which is practically important), but they miss important intuitions about what psychological mechanisms unite an identity (how do memories, beliefs, and desires account for the sameness of identity over time?).  Psychological continuity theorists, on the other hand, are concerned with these memories, beliefs, and desires only as epistemological criteria for establishing sameness and, as a result, are often unable to account adequately for the basic importance of numerical identity (the person Y used to be is not simply *like* X; she *is* X).  Shifting the focus from questions of reidentification to

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[99] Parfit (1984), Shoemaker (1984).  Parfit calls the acceptance that there exists such a spiritual substance the 'further fact view'.

[100] I am persuaded by Catriona Mackenzie's definition of practical non-reductionism. She writes, 'Reductionist theories of personal identity that attempt to analyse the continuity of identity in non-personal terms…fail to account for what persons essentially are.' Mackenzie 2008, 6-7.

characterisation allows us to ask after the everyday identity of a person. What character

traits go into making a particular person *who she is*? What is it, in other words, that

allows us to say a father with dementia is 'no longer himself' or that gives meaning to a

teenager's utterance that she is 'just trying to find herself'?

A *narrative* theory of identity has the advantage of being able both to address the

practical concerns of a theory of personal identity and to address the characterisation

question. Like psychological continuity theories, narrative theories of identity are

extremely diverse. Indeed, some narrative theories of identity[101] do not address questions

of characterisation at all; rather, they use a narrative framework as another

epistemological tool for establishing continuity.[102] Broadly speaking, however, a

narrative view of identity seeks to explain *why* and *how* an experience, action, or

psychological criterion is properly attributable to a certain *person*.[103] Without thinking in

terms of the whole person, we miss the 'target of all the many practical questions and

concerns that are associated with personal identity.'[104] It is personal identity as a whole,

in other words, that is the subject of ethical and practical concerns about identity. When

we try someone for murder, we are concerned not only with making sure that we have

correctly reidentified the person on trial as the person who committed the murder (though

this is, of course, immensely important) but also with the complex psychological

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[101] Mink (1970), Dennett (1992).

[102] Hannah Meretoja (2014) points out that those theorists who think of narrative as a primarily epistemological tool subscribe to hidden ontological commitments. In other words, thinking of narrative as 'just' a cognitive function that imposes meaning or structure on lived experience presupposes that lived experience is essentially anti-narrative.

[103] MacIntyre (2007), Taylor (1989), Schechtman (1996), DeGrazia (2005), Mackenzie (2008), Davenport (2012). I examine the work that the concept of narrativity does in/for Hannah Arendt in Chapter 4.

[104] Schechtman 2014, 6.

characterisation of the murderer.  Her motives (Did she act in a jealous rage? Was the victim blackmailing her?), her mental stability (Does she have a history of mental illness or violent behaviour?), her prudential interests (Was she acting in self-defence? to protect a child?) all come to bear on the practical consideration of the extent to which she can be held accountable for her crime.  These judgments about her character are impossible to make without thinking seriously about *who* she is and (about how we can properly attribute certain characteristics to her as a person).[105]

Proper attribution of characteristics often involves asking after the 'true' or 'unified' character of the person in question: it calls into question the relationship between the characteristics themselves and the person's identity.[106]  What is it, we might ask, that makes this character trait or that belief properly a part of this or that person?[107] The answer to these questions requires a narrative understanding of the person in question.  It requires that we say that this character trait and that belief are a part of the larger story of his life.  More than this, it requires that we imagine that the person in question is *himself* able to understand such psychological attributes as properly a part of his own life or who he is.  Events do not just happen to him in a causally related stream;

[105] Wollheim (1984) gives an especially strong argument for privileging the characterisation question. He argues that all of the characteristics and dispositions that make up a self can *only* make sense within the context of the self as a whole.  For him, the person continually constitutes her own identity through the complex process of living in the world.

[106] Benhabib poses the characterisation: '[quoting Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*] "Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same." What is the meaning of this sameness of the self?  Through what sets of characteristics or activities, patterns of consciousness or behavior, do we say of someone that she is "the same"?  In philosophical language, how is the identity of the self that remains self-same to be thought of?' 1999, 343.

[107] The most influential treatment of this question of proper attributability of characteristics and identity is probably Harry Frankfurt's (1988).

rather, he is actively involved in the creation of a unified notion of who he is.[108]  A

person's self-conception is narrative in that it involves the capacity to interpret

experience for him or herself and to endow it with meaning within the context of her or

his own life.[109]


2.2 Narrative as Practical and Normative


Reductionist theories of identity, as we have seen, tend to frame the question of identity

in terms of the problem of continuity.  They are interested in the logical or psychological

connectedness between distinct stages of personhood.  Therefore, they are interested in a

third-personal (or non-personal) definition of identity, one that has no need of first-

personal accounts.  The individual characteristics of a person within this view are only

important because they constitute data for the determination of logical/psychological

unity.  Attributing characteristics, thoughts, desires, etc. to a person *qua* person only

muddies the waters, according to reductionists.

        Practically speaking, however, this kind of characterisation, or attribution of

characteristics to a particular person, happens all the time both third personally ('That

comment is so typical of James') and first personally ('I am not the type of person who

breaks promises').  First personal judgments of characterisation are, indeed, intrinsic to

everyday life.  Practically speaking, the events of a life matter to an agent and are

meaningful to an agent because they are incorporated into the already existing web of

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[108] MacIntyre (2007), Taylor (1989), Schechtman (1996).

[109] This not mean that a person can ever give a full or complete account of him or her self.  Nor does it mean that the person is able to step outside of experience to give an account of her self.

narratives into which the agent is thrown (for this reason 'practical' and 'narrative' are

often used as virtually interchangeable ways of thinking about the ethical relation

between self and identity, or personhood).[110] Thus, a practical theory of identity *must*

include a first-personal perspective.  Indeed, a useful definition of personhood is self-

constitution, or the capacity to think of oneself as an 'I'.[111]

To flesh out the notion that identity is both practical and narrative, I will follow

the work of Christine Korsgaard (1996) and Catriona Mackenzie (2008).  Korsgaard

defines practical identity as 'a description under which you value yourself, a description

under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth

undertaking.'[112]  Mackenzie points out that this normative, everyday idea of the self

involves both 'discovery', in the sense that there are features of the self that arise out of

circumstances beyond one's control and 'construction', in the sense that a self is able to

reflect upon and shape her own identity.[113]  Practical identity always involves the

interplay of these two processes, and, though it constitutes a normative force for us, it

does not require that we have a fixed, static notion of our character.  The idea here is that

the circumstances in which we make judgments of characterisation about ourselves are

constantly changing and that those judgments themselves will change over time.  What is

constant, however, is that we exercise our capacity to make such judgments.  As

Mackenzie puts it '…what is not contingent is that we are governed by some conception

of our practical identities.  Practical identity is…*both a precondition for and a product of*

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[110] Korsgaard 1996, 102; Davenport 2012, 14; Taylor 1989, 49-50; MacIntyre 2007, 217.
[111] Benhabib (1992, 1999), Ricoeur (1991), Baker (2000), Korsgaard (1996), Schechtman (1996), Mackenzie (2008), Atkins (2008), Wollheim (1984).
[112] Korsgaard 1996a, 101.
[113] Mackenzie 2008, 9.

*agency.*'[114]  Identity, in other words, always plays a role in action.  Whenever I do

something, I have a basic idea of myself—the self who is carrying out the act.

Practical identity also necessarily involves a conception of the self in and over

time.  We must always navigate the relationship between past, present and future versions

of ourselves.  This relationship involves taking responsibility for past actions and acting

in the interest of one's future wellbeing.  It also involves the incorporation of memory

into one's sense of self.  Weaving together an identity out of temporally different first-

personal perspectives is thus an innately narrative process.[115]  Korsgaard argues that

identity is a cumulative, lived self-understanding, the result of what she calls self-

constitution.  She argues that the reductionist model of identity is only convincing in the

analysis of a self in the context of a specific experience or within a specific time slice.

The picture of a self over time that arises out of this model is, therefore, a self with a

series of discrete experiences connected by some logical unity.  But, Korsgaard argues,

reductionist versions of identity, even when they purport to address only the question of

reidentification, are often 'preceded by an essentially *moral* assumption—the assumption

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[114] Mackenzie 2008, 11, emphasis added.  Another way to put this point (to which I
return in Chapters 5 and 6) is that practical identity and narrative agency are mutually
reinforcing.  The more we act in the world, the more we have an idea of who we are as
agents.  I come back to this idea in Chapter 6.

[115] Lynne Rudder Baker's (2000) view of personal identity argues for the irreducibility of
the first person perspective along these lines.  She argues that articulation of the first-
personal perspective is a precondition for personhood.  There are, she claims, both weak
and strong first-person phenomena: the former are experiences of the self as
consciousness' 'point of origin' (all sentient creatures experience this first-personal
phenomenon), the latter require an awareness of a point of view distinct from all others
and the recognition of the capacity for private thought.  A related point for Baker is that
we, as humans, are necessarily embodied but are not reducible to our bodies.  Human
beings are more than just their biological constitution: they are clusters of ideas that
amount to identity.  Distinct persons emerge from the human bodies in which they are
situated.  Humans are inseparable from their bodies, only identifiable in and through their
bodies, but not completely reducible to their bodies.

that life is a series of experiences, and so that a person is first and foremost a locus of experiences.'[116]  When reductionist theorists of identity talk about 'person time slices' in other words, they are still interested in the notion of 'personhood' as a normative concept, rather than just a descriptive one.  It is in these person time slices that reductionists locate accountability and agency, but the notions of accountability and agency do not make sense without a broader practical understanding of the self in the context of her world.

Moreover, the notion that person time slices are the location for any kind of identifiable psychological criteria implicitly relies on some idea that first personal perspectives are sources of knowledge about the self.  Mackenzie articulates this point:

> Although we can take up a theoretical standpoint from which we regard ourselves from the outside, as merely natural phenomena whose behaviour can be explained and predicted in causal terms, in order to live a life we must, as a matter of practical necessity, view ourselves from the inside, or from a first-personal perspective.  From this practical, first-personal standpoint we cannot view ourselves as bundles of experiences.  Rather, to live a life we must view ourselves as agents, capable of choice, deliberation, and practical reason.[117]

It is *essentially impractical*, in other words, to conceive of a human existence not governed by a first-personal standpoint.  The individual self as the locus for experience is the touchstone for living in the world.  Whether or not the existence of this self

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[116] Korsgaard 1989, 131, emphasis in original.  Assuming that the self is the subject of experience (rather than incidental to experience which just happens) is a moral assumption for Korsgaard because it posits the subject of experience as the creator of meaning about experience.  It locates moral agency, in other words, in the subject of experience (the person).  Korsgaard sees the person as fully autonomous, while I think of the person as both a locus for moral agency and fully constituted by relationships with others.  Certainly, there is much more work to be done in explaining the implications of a theory of relational autonomy for an account of practical identity, but it seems to me that it is not problematic to retain both the idea that it is the individual that makes moral judgments and the idea that the individual is constituted by her relationships with others.  I come back to the idea of the moral agency in individual experience in Chapter 5.
[117] Mackenzie 2008, 8.

transcends necessity is a separate question, and one that does not change the practical existence of the first personal narrative notion of a self.

For Korsgaard, metaphysics is irrelevant to the everyday construction of a first-personal perspective. A self constructs an identity as a matter of course, for basic practical reasons. When I think of taking responsibility for an action, of convincing another of my point of view, etc., I inevitably have an idea of myself as a self. I must make choices and take action in accordance with some first-personal identity, and the capacity to make such choices Korsgaard calls 'authorial' agency. For Korsgaard, then, the metaphysical unity of past, present and future selves is far less important than the conception in the present moment of oneself as an agent.

So, according to a practical narrative understanding of identity, a person is never only a series of discrete, disconnected events.[118] Indeed, a life is formed through a person's continuous exercise of her narrative capacities (which include, but are not limited to, discovery, memory, and critical interpretation). Identity formation always employs narrative reasoning, and identity will always, practically speaking, be organised according to a narrative structure. Mackenzie describes the necessity of narrative that arises out of the first personal perspective this way:

> Even if what makes us persons is the capacity for a first-personal perspective, our temporally extended first personal experience is often of change, fragmentation, contingency. Narrative self-interpretation is a response to this experience of change and fragmentation. Narrative identifies and forges patterns of coherence and psychological intelligibility within our lives, connecting our first personal perspectives to our history, actions, emotions, desires, beliefs, character traits, and so on.[119]

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[118] Mackenzie 2008, 11.
[119] Ibid., 12.

These 'patterns of coherence and psychological intelligibility' are ever-changing, but they are always in play in the formation (however fleeting) of practical identity. Shifts in circumstance and perspective, the acquisition of knowledge, undergoing trauma, changes in relationships to others—all of these things and many more may change one's sense of one's own identity. Mackenzie is at pains to make the point that this change/shift in identity is itself narrative in nature, and so, the continued exercise of narrative self-understanding leads, over time, to a relatively stable sense of identity. She writes: 'The self conception constituted through the process of narrative self-interpretation—in the form of character or a set of relatively stable and integrated traits, habits, dispositions, and emotional attitudes—thus has a degree of permanence and coherence.'[120] Mackenzie is still making a practical argument here, and not a strongly normative one. She does not say that the exercise of narrative agency *should* result in a coherent narrative identity, only that exercise of narrative agency cumulatively, over time, *does* result in a relatively stable narrative identity.

This picture of narrative identity is not unproblematic. Critics of narrative theories of identity do not think that an empirical-practical theory of narrative identity can be separated so distinctly from its ethical-normative implications. Surely there is embedded in the former an ethics—namely the idea that those of us who craft more complete and thoughtful narratives are somehow 'better' people than those of us who do not.[121] Narrative theories, furthermore, since they see the individual as self-constituting

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[120] Mackenzie 2008, 12; Ricouer (1992); Schechtman (1996); Velleman (2006); and Benhabib (1999).
[121] Crafting 'better' narratives and being a better person for it might be understood in different ways—by a Kantian like Korsgaard, as an exercise of more complete autonomy

may be seen to overestimate a person's capacity for autonomous self reflection, or to be overly reliant on the notion that reason can make sense of, and organise, emotion.[122] Moreover, narratives can be reductive and limiting. They artificially shape our understanding of experience into a conventional beginning-middle-end narrative structure. They weigh us down with expectations and make us blind to alternative ways of being in the world.

The problem of narrative as an ethical practice is a complex one. The narrative practices of discovery, construction, interpretation, reflection, re-interpretation, and so on that arise out of interaction with the normative claims of personhood are constitutive of the narrative self. Continued self-examination and continued articulation of how one understands oneself and the community of others in which one lives might be understood as a distinctly ethical practice, in which one attempts to be ever more oneself and ever closer to others through narrative practice.[123] In other words, the narrative self is both a social construct, in that it depends upon the modes of personhood acceptable to a certain group of people at a certain time, and a moral construct, in that it takes as its guide the moral order of these modes of personhood.

Narrative self-constitution need not be understood as an autonomous process (though certainly there are some theorists of narrative identity—Korsgaard, for one— who endorse a strongly individualist notion of autonomy); on the contrary, narrative self-construction should be understood as an innately relational process. Making narrative

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or by a virtue ethicist like Alasdair MacIntyre, as an achievement of unity of character (MacIntyre), etc.
[122] Butler (2005).
[123] Stanley Cavell's moral perfectionism envisions ethical practice as narrative in precisely this way. See especially *Cities of Words*, 2005.

sense of one's own experience involves rearranging the web of narratives in which one is inextricably embedded and, indeed, by which one is constituted. The practical narrative identity I have in mind when I act is not something I have invented myself—it is the synthesis of how I imagine other people see me, how they might see what I am doing, what I think someone in my position ought to do, and so on.[124] Moreover, narrative is not simply a rational capacity; nor are we always aware of every aspect of the narratives we construct about ourselves. Narrative involves 'imagination, affect, emotions, memories and practical skills as well as rationality.'[125] A narrative about the importance of one's national identity might prevent one from having an idea of oneself as cosmopolitan. A narrative about the importance of having children might be so deeply a part of one's idea of oneself that one cannot imagine a life without children. Constructing a narrative identity does not depend on the use of a certain faculty; it is, rather, something that we do all the time—whether we are dispassionate or enraged, thinking of the past or thinking of the future, giving an account of our actions before the law or writing an autobiography.

Narrative identity might refer to self reflection in all kinds of different moments, in 'patterns of action, attention, or emotional response, in bodily dispositions and habits, in moral commitments, or in one's personal relationships.'[126] As agents in any of these kinds of moments, we have some sense of who we are and of who other people see when they look at us. The construction of a notion of oneself in and around moments of action

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[124] As I have argued, autonomy is always relational in this way. Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) and Brison (2002) also argue for a relational understanding of autonomy *alongside a narrative concept of identity*.
[125] Mackenzie 2008, 12.
[126] Mackenzie 2008, 12.

is *always* narrative.  We may (and surely do) create narratives that extend beyond the moment of action, which recur again and again over the course of our lives as meaning-makers, but what I argue here is 1) when we act we always have a sense of ourselves and 2) that sense of self *must* be narrative.

Self-constitution is not just relational—it is also political.  And, as such, narratives are unavoidably affected by relations of power.  We self-identify with already existing narratives about what it means to be a woman, or a black woman, or a poor white man; and these narratives shape and limit our own practical identities. However subordinating narratives may be, though, they always have the potential to be creatively reconfigured.  The construction of narratives always takes place intersubjectively, in conversation with other 'I's'.  First-personal narratives are only intelligible in the context of other selves, who are also involved in the process of narrative self-interpretation. Mackenzie writes: 'What this means is that to be intelligible to ourselves our narrative self-interpretations must be capable of being made intelligible to others; they must make sense with reference both to the social norms of personhood and to the narratives of one's life that others would tell.'[127]  In other words, we must make sense of who we are according to the agreed upon norms which guide both ourselves and those around us. This explains why agency and claims to personhood are diminished when the norms of personhood are contradicted (as in the case of the mentally ill, for instance).  But it also explains why agency increases where selves are part of communities that recognise them.

This brings me to an important issue in the literature on narrative identity: what constitutes a 'narrative'?  A narrative need be no more than a *contextualised unit of*

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[127] Mackenzie 2008, 15.  See also Schechtman 1996, 114-30 and Benhabib 1992, 1-12.

*sense.*[128]  Narratives may be as simple as 'I did that' or 'I am this way' or 'This is how things work'.  Narrative identity should not be understood to refer to a single narrative that gives an account of an individual's entire life, though, of course, individuals do produce such narratives.  As we shall see in Chapter 4, a holistic narrative can only be supplied by others, and may only emerge after the subject of the narrative is no longer involved in action.

Episodes of a human life are never so straightforward or neatly structured as the plot of a novel or a play; and therefore to use 'narrative' as a model for self-awareness/self-constitution is to ascribe far more coherence and intelligibility to a human life than what is there.[129] The self is not in the author's position to shape the story as she pleases, and equating the structure of personal narratives with those of literary narrative leads to a dangerous over-emphasis on authorial control.  Though narrative need not follow a predetermined structure—narrative, as it applies to self-constitution is not the same thing as literary narrative—I think this criticism has some bite.

Narratives can be fleeting moments in which the individual makes sense of herself in the world (as in the utterance 'I did that.'); they can also be, and of course often are, longer stories told for a purpose. Susan Brison's work, to which I will return in Chapter 5, is concerned with this kind of narrative.  She talks about the importance of narrating traumatic events in order to move beyond them—and to (re)make sense of a self

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[128] There are theorists of narrative identity who want to define narrative much more narrowly than this.   Carrol (2001), for instance, thinks that narratives must be stories about causally connected events told in chronological order; Velleman (2006) and Goldie (2003) view narratives as definable through the emotional resonance they have with an audience.

[129] Butler (2005) makes this criticism, as we shall see in the next section, and so does McNay (2003), as we will see in the next chapter.

that has been undone by trauma.  Narrative identity, in this view, involves the therapeutic restructuring of experience into a story that makes sense.  This process of creating therapeutic narratives drives home the point that narratives need not be merely concerned with recounting facts and need not follow a pre-determined structure (beginning-middle-end).  Indeed, Brison distinguishes between 'living to tell', in which the subject must produce a factually correct, politically communicable narrative about a traumatic event in order to enlist the aid of police, lawyers, juries, medical examiners, and advocacy groups, and 'telling to live', in which the subject makes sense of what happened to her in conversation with a caring other so as to re-affirm herself as an agent in the world.[130] The former mode of telling is, interestingly, far less connected to the subject's sense of her own identity (indeed, constructing official narratives such as these can be profoundly alienating).  The latter mode of telling is far less concerned with facts and norms, but is far more empowering.  By this account, narratives are not accounts of facts—they need not even be objectively true.  They are 'true' insofar as they make sense to others.

2.3 Critiques of Narrative Identity

I turn now to a more extended engagement with what I see as the more concerning critiques of a narrative theory of identity raised above.  Narrative identity, it should by now be clear, is always both practical (it involves identification of an individual in the world for a practical purpose, such as giving an account of personal responsibility) and normative (in that it involves asking *what kind of person* would carry out this or that act).

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[130] Brison 2002, 103.

The normative and ethical aspects of a narrative concept of identity present a problem for the feminist framework (which situates the subject between agency and subjection) that I introduced in Chapter 1 for at least two reasons. First, a narrative theory of identity is, arguably, committed to a notion of the good life as a life with a strong sense of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls 'narrative unity'—a sense, in other words, that one's life is more ethical the better able one is to tell a coherent story about it. Galen Strawson, who has published an array of articles against narrative theories of identity, argues that such theories subscribe to an 'ethical narrativity thesis', a notion that subjects somehow become "better" through telling coherent stories about their lives. But how can we square the notion of an ever-more stable subject of narrative with the necessarily subordinating and essentially relational subjectivity described in Chapter 1? It seems to me that, by rejecting a strong version of the ethical narrativity thesis, we can understand narrative identity not as the product of continuous, unified, static self-reflection but as, rather, an individual's understanding of herself as a unique individual within time and with relation to others.[131]

The second worrying problem with a narrative theory of identity is that the narratives that constitute our self-conception are narratives that we have inherited from others. We form narratives about our selves, our lives, and our relationships largely through repurposing the dominant normative conventions that surround us. The stories we tell about ourselves, in other words, are very likely to be stories that are based on other people's ideas of what is good, what is right, and what is normal. Moreover,

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[131] We must accept a minimal version of the ethical narrativity thesis because the questions of characterization we ask about ourselves are ethical questions. Having a practical sense of one's own identity will often involve asking oneself what kind of person one is.

political and social interactions often reflect the reduction of complex individuals to single identity narratives. These broad narratives limit our agency both by cutting off our creative capacity for telling new stories and by keeping us from seeing others as capable of adding unpredictable new meaning to the world because we see those others as totally defined by already existing narratives (the 'welfare queen', the 'immigrant who is stealing jobs', etc.). If this is true, then how can we challenge these dominant narratives? How can we create newly meaningful ideas about who we are, and how can we recognise the capacity for unpredictable meaning-making in others?

I will come back to this problem again in Chapter 3, where I argue that narrative agency gives us the constant potential for shifting these dominant narratives, but in this section, I will address both of these aspects of narrative's normative baggage—the idea that narrative unity is a hallmark of 'good character' and the idea that narrative identity involves the reproduction of, and adherence to, broader socio-political norms/narratives. My task here is to counter some prevailing criticisms of narrative as overly or thickly normative.

## 2.3.1 The Ethical Narrativity Thesis

Many theorists of narrative identity consider narrative practice to be innately ethical.[132] Telling a story about oneself, about the kind of person one is, involves thinking about what kind of person one wants to be. Moreover, thinking of oneself as a person who has existed in the past and will exist in the future requires that one be accountable for one's

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[132] Most notably Charles Taylor (1989) and Alasdair MacIntyre (2007), but see also Schechtman (1996, 2014) and Davenport (2012).

choices, beliefs, commitments, etc.  Galen Strawson provides perhaps the most extensive

and the most well-known critique of the notion that narrative is an ethical practice.

Reading Strawson is particularly instructive here because his critique of the ethical

narrativity thesis sets the stage for some of the qualifications feminist theory has placed

on the notion of autonomous self-constitution.  Strawson identifies what has already been

flagged as a pertinent problem in the philosophy of personal identity literature: the

assumption that one can be the author of one's own story.  Briefly rehearsing and

responding to his arguments against narrative should make clear that while narrative

does, indeed, carry with it some minimal ethical commitments, a narrative theory of

identity need not subscribe to the notion that each of us should be able to tell a consistent,

holistic story about who she is.  Instead, as I have argued, narrative identity can be

productively understood as the unique individual's self-understanding in relation to

others and over time.  This self-understanding can change from moment to moment, is

always at least substantially determined by broader social identity narratives, but it is

empirically narrative, in that it always consists of a first-personal understanding of the

unique self acting in the world, and ethically narrative in that this self-understanding

involves making moral judgments about how one is or will be perceived.[133]

Strawson differentiates between the empirical claim of narrative theorists—that

we, in fact, experience our lives as narrative—and the normative claim that a well-

developed narrative is essential to the good life, 'to a true or full personhood'.[134]  It is

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[133] I will return to the importance of making everyday moral judgments in Chapter 5.
But it is important to emphasise here that making moral judgments about how one will be
perceived is not equivalent to the pursuit of a good life or of a unified narrative about
one's life.
[134] Strawson 2004, 428.

possible, he argues, to accept one of these theses without accepting the other (and that it is also possible to accept both or neither). Strawson's own position is counter to both the empirical and ethical theses—to insist upon narrative, he argues, is both empirically misguided because not everyone perceives of her life narratively and ethically harmful because it equates telling a story about oneself with being a good person.

At issue for Strawson is, primarily, the tendency to conceive of the 'self' as its own separate entity—to think of the self from a distance as an entity with different 'persistence conditions' to the whole human being.[135] Self-perception is, he grants, an inevitable part of human existence; however, he distinguishes two types of self-experience: Diachronic and Episodic. The former, which is the narrative outlook, he defines as maintaining a sense that one is the same person having different experiences over time, all of which ultimately add up to a narrative of one's life. The latter is a position from which one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future. In other words, one's sense of one's own identity is confined to the time and space of action.

So, for Strawson, these are the two ways that it is possible to experience oneself in time (though, he admits, there are moments when the Episodic relates to a memory or a Diachronic feels a non-narrative fragmentation and admits further that a person's 'time-style' may vary over the course of her life). They are, Strawson argues, 'temporal temperaments', written into our DNA, and beyond our control.[136] It seems to him that the Episodics are unfairly judged by the Diachronics as deficient—morally and emotionally, even spiritually—because they do not feel a connection with their past and

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[135] Ibid., 430.
[136] Ibid., 431.

future selves.  Episodics are, however, fully imbued with the lessons of the past,

Strawson argues, because they are products of past practice, of the lessons learned

through a lifetime's ethical development.

Strawson offers his own experience as insight into the Episodic way of life,

saying that he has 'absolutely no sense of [his] life as a narrative with form, or indeed as

a narrative without form.  Absolutely none.'[137]  He is also, he claims, without the

Diachronic's 'special' interest in his own past or future, though he is aware that he *has* a

past and a future.  He puts this claim to work on two levels: on the one hand, he says, he

is simply not that interested in his past or future, on the other, he argues, he does not

experience himself as the same *self* as the Galen Strawson of the past of future, even

though he knows he is the same human being.  But what can he mean by this?  The

'inner-mental presence' which Strawson labels 'I*' is the self that exists in the present.

He has memories of himself in the past, an idea of himself in the future, but he does not

think of these past or future events as happening to himself, that is, the 'I*' that is posing

the question in the present moment.

First-personal memories, with all of their sensory and emotional data, are not,

Strawson argues, events that happened to the Episodic 'I*':

> For me this is a plain fact of experience.  I'm well aware that my past is mine in
> so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there's a sense in which it has
> special relevance to me* now, including special emotional and moral relevance.
> At the same time I have no sense that I* was there in the past, and think it is
> obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact.[138]

It seems to me, in spite of Strawson's best efforts, that this Episodic has a distinctly

narrative experience of the world. Strawson, by his own admission, is concerned with

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[137] Ibid., 433.
[138] Ibid., 434.

events in the past and the future that have direct bearing on him\*.  The Episodic 'I', then, is aware of his or her own uniqueness, and engages in the practice of 'telling a story' about herself from a unique position in the world.  The Episodic may not consider herself 'the same person' as she was in the past or will be in the future (whether or not this is a 'metaphysical fact' is, as I have argued, irrelevant for practical identity formation), but she still incorporates those versions of herself into her understanding of the moment at hand.  More than that, she is able to act ethically because she has 'past practice' of acting ethically in similar situations.  The Episodic, then, would appear to exercise narrative agency in just the way I have defined it in that she makes sense of herself in the world through situating herself in relation to other 'I's' over time.

To be fair to Strawson, it is not this kind of in-the-moment meaning-making that bothers him—indeed, he concedes that self-perception during experience is empirically a part of human consciousness.[139]  He is, rather, particularly unsettled by the tendency to take one's life as a whole and fit it into a single narrative, and, in doing so, to apply to it an ethical character.  Strawson argues that narrative theorists of identity, including MacIntyre, Schechtman, and Taylor, are convinced of the necessity of narrativity (defined here as the normative commitment to a narrative version of identity) because they can think of no other ethical paradigm.  Narrativity as the dominant paradigm is harmful, both psychologically and ethically, for, Strawson claims, 'the best lives almost never involve this kind of self-telling.'[140]  *Why*, Strawson wants to know, should we care

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[139] Even if he thinks this self-perception does not, empirically, extend beyond the time slice of experience.
[140] Ibid., 437.

about what we have 'made' of our lives?  He is living *his* life, and the kind of summary thinking he sees as called for by narrativity has no place in this living.

A person can be Diachronic without being beholden to this grandiose notion of narrative, Strawson goes on to say, in that she can naturally experience herself as 'something existing as the past and future without any particular sense of [her] life as constituting a narrative.'[141]  Here again, this seems to me to refer to an essentially narrative point of view, one which is, indeed, very close to Seyla Benhabib's definition of a narrative self who does nothing more than make sense of herself in time and with relation to others, which I will describe in depth in Chapter 3.  It becomes clear at this point that Strawson does not take issue so much with this sense of self over time and with relation to others as he does with the conception of this sense of self *as narrative* in nature.  As he puts it, 'the distinctive claim of the defenders of the psychological Narrativity thesis is that for a life to be a narrative in the required sense it must be lived Narratively.'[142]  This version of narrativity, for Strawson, dictates that some sort of 'unifying of form-finding construction' be imposed upon one's self-understanding.[143]  In other words, Narrative goes above and beyond the simple Diachronic sensibility; it demands a specific construction or attitude, which he names the 'form-finding tendency' [where a *tendency* is different from a *sensibility*].

Strawson has to separate the Diachronic from the Narrative in order to forgive those people who subscribe to the former view their innate disposition when it comes to self-understanding (because this, in turn, allows him to rely upon his innately Episodic

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[141] Ibid., 439.
[142] Ibid., 440.
[143] Ibid., 440.

self-understanding).  He insists that 'one can be Diachronic without actively conceiving

of one's life…as some sort of ethico-historical-characterological developmental unity.'[144]

Strawson goes on to argue that form-finding is only a minimally sufficient tendency in

narrativity—it is more often than not, he says, accompanied by a 'story-telling tendency',

which, in its more benign form 'involves the ability to detect—not invent—

developmental coherencies in the manifold of one's life', but is lamentably accompanied

much of the time by its twin tendency, revision.[145]  Narrativity, because of its injunction

to 'engage unconsciously in invention, fiction of some sort', leads to blatant falsification

of the details of one's life.[146]  This falsification may begin honestly enough, Strawson

argues, but it always leads to incorrect, corrupt accounts of actual events.  Revision,

defined thus, is the province of the narrative thinker alone, according to Strawson.  He

argues that there is a precision involved in recall unaffected by emotion.  Revision, as a

sister-tendency to story-telling, muddies the waters of memory unnecessarily.

> He writes (and it is worth quoting him at length on this point):

> Many have proposed that we are all without exception incorrigible self-fabulists, 'unreliable narrators' of our own lives, and some who hold this view claim greater honesty of outlook for themselves, and see pride, self-blindness, and so on in those who deny it.  But other research makes it pretty clear that this is not true. It's not true of everyone.  We have here another deep dimension of human psychological difference.  Some people are fabulists all the way down.  In others, autobiographical memory is fundamentally non-distorting, whatever automatic processes of remoulding and recasting it may invariably involve.[147]

So, for Strawson, privileging narrative is so important because it blinds us to the 'truth'

of our lives, which is ever-unfolding in the present moment.  Surely he is correct in

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[144] Ibid., 441.
[145] Ibid., 443.
[146] Ibid., 443.
[147] Ibid., 444.

pointing out that we have a tendency to construct narratives that obscure the 'truth' about what might have happened, but to suggest that this criticism is an indictment of narrative itself is wrong-headed. Indeed, his concern with accuracy reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of what narrative is. The identities we construct for ourselves are constantly shifting. Even the most unified, 'authentic' narrative involves contradiction, confusion, and, indubitably, revision. Strawson is mistaken to insist that there is a single 'truth of [one's] being'; such a notion of truth carries with it a far more normative view of action than the ethical narrativity thesis Strawson sets out to debunk.[148] Strawson assumes that each of us *should* arrive at a self-understanding unmediated by memory or revision. To rewrite or restructure our self-understanding over time is to introduce inaccuracy into that self-understanding. He seems to suggest that we can do the work required for self-understanding by ourselves, rather than in communication with others. But this is impossible within the web of relations into which we are thrown. We are taxed with the perennial task of making sense of ourselves in relation to this web of relations, but we do not carry out this sense-making autonomously.

Furthermore, the 'revisions' which Strawson finds objectionable constitute precisely the kind of action that gives us a sense of who we are. Revisions and retellings and reimaginings are *communicative actions*. They may help us clarify a sense of who we are (though this sense of self is always contingent rather than 'true'), or they may obscure it. Identity formation is extremely messy, and it involves endless conversation. Strawson utterly fails to grasp the extent to which we are constituted by and through *one*

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[148] 'The implication is plain: the more you recall, retell, narrative yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the *truth of your being*.' Strawson 2004, 447, emphasis added.

*another's* narratives. It is communicability within the web of narratives into which we are thrown which makes our narratives meaningful. Identity is a socially constructed fact, and the collective understanding of who 'we' are and what we know is made up of a matrix of such socially constructed facts.[149] Surely these socially constructed facts can accurately be called 'narratives', and their 'truth' is a product of collaborative revision.

In sum, both of Strawson's major problems with narrative miss the point that narrative is, as Seyla Benhabib puts it, the *mode* of action.[150] His insistence that narrative pushes a strong narrative unity as the only path to the good life does not recognise the complex and varied possibilities for narrating oneself; indeed, all of the modes of self-examination that Strawson diagnoses as non-narrative or less narrative are still narrative. Similarly, his argument that autobiographical revision makes narrative harmful to the 'truth' assumes that there is some other way to arrive at the truth than through shared, collaborative understanding about how to articulate the truth. And yet, Strawson's critique brings into relief the essential fluidity of selfhood in a way that he does not intend. Strawson's conception of authentic selfhood is one in which the self, without the troublesome interference of affect, memory, or communication, emerges again and again in the present moment. But the narrative self, even in its most basic form, is constituted by and through memories, emotions, moral judgments, expectations, power relations, and so on.

However, Strawson's critique does present us with some of worthwhile qualifications of a theory of narrative identity. First, we must accept a weak version of

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[149] See John Searle (1995) for an extended account of the social construction of facts.
[150] This is Benhabib on Arendt's view of narrativity in *Situating the Self* (1992, 127), which I mentioned in the Introduction and to which I will return in Chapter 4.

the ethical narrativity thesis. The process of narrative identity formation *is* ethical in that it is concerned with the wellbeing of the 'I' over time and because it involves posing and answering questions about what kind of person the 'I' is. Further, the narrative construction of practical identity does involve making sense of who we are, where 'making sense' does not mean soberly considering the facts and rearranging them accurately, dispassionately, or completely. These messy stories may certainly be harmful in such a way that our everyday, practical adoption of a narrative identity disadvantages us in a number of ways.[151] Finally, Strawson is right that narrative identity should not be understood as the articulation of a static narrative that encompasses the whole of one's life. To imagine that such a narrative could exist is to miss the actual work that narrative does—which is to construct meaning in all possible contexts and in unpredictable ways.

## 2.3.2 Identity Narratives and Identity Politics

The narrative model of identity I have defended thus far, in which the self is constantly involved in the dual processes of discovery (finding oneself already embedded within webs of interlocution) and construction (having in mind or articulating a narrative about who one is), must be understood within the confines of relations of power discussed in Chapter 1. Practical narrative identity is totally determined by and through relationships, many of these subordinating relationships of power. Moreover, not only is narrative identity practical and normative; it is also *political*. Identity is a public construct—we appear to others as possessing specific identities. Political identities such as race, gender,

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[151] Indeed, even the most basic practical self-conception may be riddled with deep subordination by power relationships.

and class are inevitably a part of how other people see us and how we see ourselves.[152]

These visible attributes of identity are not neutral, however; they are infused with cultural

meaning.  To have in mind an idea of myself (a narrative identity) which includes the

facts that I am white, middle-class, academic, female, and so on involves taking into

account political narratives about these attributes—what white people are like, what

academics are like, etc.  And any combination of these things gives rise, again, to more

specific socio-cultural narratives about white female philosophers, about middle-class

white 'girls', and so on.

Political connection—that is, solidarity in political action—often depends on

identification with others through either taking on specific identity narratives or

recognising the claim being made by others who share a certain narrative identity.[153]  In

order to add my voice to the other voices claiming trans rights or queer rights or black

rights or victims' rights, I must think of myself in terms of the narrative identity in

question or have in mind (and be sympathetic to) a narrative identity for the group in

question.  For the purpose of political action, my identity is reducible to the collective

narrative identity.  The *problem* with political identity (or identity politics, as we more

commonly call it), then, is that it reduces complex narrative agents to identities defined

by a single narrative (even when political narratives are intersectional they are often

reductive in this way).

A generally accepted narrative becomes a norm.  Indeed, the terms 'norm' and

'narrative' are often used interchangeably.  That we are constituted by such identity

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[152] See Alcoff (2006).

[153] I shift focus to a primarily political understanding of action in the second part of the thesis, but I also subscribe, throughout, to the notion that *all action* is political, in that it takes place between people and involves differentials of power.

narratives is unavoidable and beyond our control.  We come into the world with a variety

of identity markers that make us intelligible to others, and, we are usually unable to

escape these markers.  When we do escape the markers we are born with (by transitioning

from one gender to another, say) we must trade them for other markers.  In other words,

we can never escape identity narratives completely.  Each of us is trapped in a 'paradox'

of identity—we are intelligible to others only through the embodiment of narratives that

limit us.[154]

This narrative constitution affects not only the way other people see us but also

the way we see ourselves.  That is to say that political narratives shape our everyday,

practical narrative identities.  The idea of ourselves that we have in mind when we act is

coloured by all sorts of inherited narratives—from 'ladies don't interrupt' to 'men in my

family don't go to college'—many of which we would probably like to disown.  But

disowning them is difficult for a number of reasons: because, as mentioned, embodying

them makes us intelligible to others, because we might not even realise that we are

beholden to them, and, importantly, because disowning certain inherited narrative

identities might compromise our ability to belong to a community.

Allison Weir (2013) very clearly and instructively traces the paradox of being

subordinated by, but being unable to disown, identity narratives.  She argues that the

resolution of this paradox lies in pursuing *both* some version of the ethical narrative

identity maligned by Strawson and a relentless interrogation of the extent to which we are

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[154] Though, importantly, social and political narratives can also enable us.  Allison Weir
writes: 'My capacity to criticize dominant social constructions of myself will depend to a
large extent on my capacity to access alternative interpretations.  Those alternative
interpretations frame alternative identities…*resistant* identities.  And my capacity to
access these alternative interpretations will depend to a large extent on my *identifications
with* those alternative, resistant identities.' Weir 2013, 27, emphasis in original.

subordinated by identity narratives. Categorisation, classification, what Arendt calls *whatness*, are always part of our self-understanding; but also part of our self-understanding is the same question of characterisation posed in the first section of this chapter: 'who am I?' The answer to this question 'is precisely not limited by a category…because it focuses on questions of existential meaning.'[155] Answering this question does not mean that we tap into a self that is authentic or complete or anything other than socially constituted; it means, instead, that we try to understand ourselves— how we are constituted, how we might be able to change, and how we are unique. The latter task—radical self-questioning—involves the exploration of, and the identification with, narratives of resistance. I return to the potential for self and social transformation through the identification with narratives of resistance in my discussion of Arendt and identity politics in Chapter 4.

This tension between identifying with and questioning identity narratives arises in the construction of practical identity all the time, especially in times of transition. Think, for instance, of a young Qatari man coming out as gay—he might still identify with various aspects of being Qatari but also be empowered by the identification with queer narratives. Or imagine a woman who has moved to Paris from a rural town in the American South—she might be torn between imagining herself as a provincial Southerner and as a cosmopolitan city-dweller. Similar conflicts surely arise in each of us innumerable times over the course of our lives. A hallmark of narrative identity formation is that it changes as our lives change: as we encounter new points of view, form new relationships, and internalise new narratives.

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[155] Weir 2013, 24.

The narrative self, then, appears to be caught between the temptation to cultivate her connection to identity narratives in order to deepen her sense of belonging and the urge to escape identity narratives in order to discover who she might be without them: and yet selves are always involved in *both* of these practices.  Both of these ways of relating to narrative play a part in the construction of practical narrative identity.  One's sense of self, in action, may be closely aligned with a narrative that gives one a sense of belonging, or it may be derived from a fierce rejection of a certain narrative.  It is also possible to be both beholden to a particularly trenchant identity narrative *and* committed to challenging that narrative.  This dynamic is often at work, for example, in women who both want to abolish the narrative that one must be thin in order to be attractive and have internalised the narrative that their attractiveness depends on being thin.

Being caught in the paradox of narrative identity does not mean that we lack the agency to change our identities.  We are agents both because we are responsible for interrogating the norms that constitute us and because we are capable of shifting those norms through communication. As Judith Butler argues, even a subject that is entirely constituted by and subordinated to pre-existing normative relations of power is responsible for her actions.  'I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me,' she writes, but this, 'in no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself.'[156] We must, however, be constantly critical of the accounts of ourselves that we do give. We must ask after things we can never fully know; such as the configuration of norms that existed when we came into the world, and that has defined and limited our

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[156] Butler 2005, 82.

understanding all our lives.  Is a certain behaviour the legacy of an early trauma?  Is a certain belief or opinion the reproduction of a parental prejudice?

We should also add to this posture of questioning in the face of dominant narratives a shift in our understanding away from the oversimplification of identity through dominant narratives.  We should, instead, recognise that, though each of us is constituted by a complex intersection of political narratives, each of us is also *more* than the sum of our political narratives.  Each of us has a unique identity, articulable from a specific place in the world, and we are not reducible to any one slice of time or aspect of consciousness.  Through our own first-personal experience of the intersection of narratives that contributes to our self-understanding, we can recognise that each other experiences his or her own unique experience of intersecting narratives.  When we understand that everyone is uniquely situated in this way, we can open up 'practices that risk the difficult work of connection through conflict, openness, and change.'[157]

The purpose of this chapter has been to defend a non-reductionist, practical, narrative account of identity.  I have shown that a narrative theory is preferable to biological and psychological theories of personal identity because it accounts for the practical self conception the 'I' has during action and because it is concerned with the question of characterisation (what makes a person who she is?) as well as the question of reidentification (how do we know that X is the same as Y?).  Further, a narrative theory of identity takes into account the first-personal, practical self-conception of individual identity.  This practical self-conception, I have further argued, is always narrative in that

[157] Weir 2013, 3.

it involves both making sense of oneself as an 'I' (exercising one's narrative agency) and giving a narrative account of oneself (where this narrative account will be made up primarily of pre-existing narratives).  The narrative account one gives of oneself will differ over the course of one's lifetime: indeed, it will differ from moment to moment. The stories one tells about who one is are purely contingent; they depend on the circumstances, the audience, and the purpose of the telling.

Some narrative theorists of identity, such as Schechtman and Korsgaard, overestimate the extent to which the individual is able to autonomously construct a narrative about who she is.  Others, like MacIntyre and Taylor, overemphasise the connection between practical narrative identity (the sense of oneself as a self) and ethical narrative unity (the notion that one becomes a better self through the cumulative articulation of one's ethical commitments.  The view of narrative identity I defend here, on the other hand understands the unique individual's understanding of herself as an 'I' as innately relational—the 'I' itself is constituted by and through the narratives of others. Further, this view of narrative identity does not equate narrative practice with ethical enrichment.  Indeed, many (if not most) of the narratives through which we understand ourselves are narratives we inherit from others.  The sense of self we have in mind when we act, therefore, may be rigidly informed by political narratives and may prove difficult to change.  In the next chapter, I will explore the power of narrative agency, which is the capacity to make sense of ourselves as unique beings in the world, to change these narratives, no matter how deeply they seem to structure our narrative identities.

# Chapter 3: The Primacy of Narrative Agency

Narrative identity, as we have seen, is complex and dynamics.  To be overly sanguine about possibilities for changing narrative identity, however, is to fail to appreciate the many obstacles to agency posed by systematic marginalisation and subjugation.  On the other hand, as I argued in Chapter 1, there is a danger that comes from placing too much emphasis on the constitution of a subject by and through what I referred to in the last chapter as political narratives.  Conceiving of a subject as completely constituted by power relations does not allow us to account for the surfeit of meaning that arises out of human interactions.  Each individual (within a plurality of other individuals) always has the capacity to create new meaning.  This constant, irreducible capacity is narrative agency.

In this chapter, I develop a concept of narrative agency that does the work of articulating both an individual's constant, enduring capacity for meaning making and the limitations to agency posed by the subject's constitution through norms by re-reading and re-shaping Seyla Benhabib's work the narrative self.  Benhabib, as we have seen, is interested in giving an account of a subject capable of creating new meaning—with an emphasis on the *capacity* to create rather than on the meaning created.  Attempts to create new meaning do not always work—in fact, they often fail—but the possibility of something new arising out of action remains.  This may seem, *prima facie*, a somewhat arcane distinction, but I hope to show that prioritising this capacity for meaning-making in a theory of feminist agency opens up all kinds of possibilities for creative action—and, ultimately, for progressive feminist politics.

It is important to differentiate between narrative agency and narrative identity. The first is the *capacity* to say 'I' over time and with relation to others. The second refers to the shifting constellation of narratives which make up a particular individual's reflexive self-understanding (practical identity). Conceiving of narrative agency as primary to narrative identity is an important theoretical move because it allows us to account for the endless permutations of narrative identity—its contingency and its complexity—1) without having to commit ourselves to the notion that narrative identity is fixed, 2) without imagining that the individual can tell a complete or accurate story about who she is, and 3) without having to endorse the idea that the construction of coherent stories about ourselves makes us better people. Instead, as we have seen, the narrative self is engaged in embedded, contextual sense-making. The self is always changing. She is not sovereign: she cannot transcend power relationships, social context, or time. Nor can she consistently exercise critical capacity in the same way over the course of her lifetime. But she can change power structures from within through the collective interplay of narratives: we can recognise, rearrange, and reframe norms through action.

In this chapter, I argue that shifting narratives in this way depends first and foremost on a robust notion of narrative agency. I start by developing a clearer picture of what I mean by narrative agency, a concept which I will animate through Benhabib's work on narrativity (1992, 1999). Then I will engage with two critiques of Benhabib's narrative model in order to illustrate some of its theoretical and practical limitations. In the first, Amy Allen argues that Benhabib is able to tout the importance of narrative agency only by downplaying the fundamentally subordinating nature of gender norms on

individual identity formation.  The second is Lois McNay's concern that Benhabib's

conception of narrative is predicated upon the assumption that experience is essentially

communicable within relationships which are themselves somehow innately reflexive.

Both McNay and Allen gesture toward a 'rationalist residue' in Benhabib's theory.[158] I

will argue that the model of narrative agency I draw out from Benhabib stands up under

the scrutiny of these two critiques.  What we are left with is a model of narrative agency

which is irreducible, inherently relational, and essential for the generation of new

narratives within a plurality.


3.1 Narrative Agency and Narrative Identity


In her early work, Benhabib outlines a concept of narrative agency within a post-

metaphysical critical theoretical framework, one in which normative criteria may be

posited only when the validity of those normative criteria are left ever-open to

interpretation and debate. [159]  For Benhabib, this contextualised version of critical

theory—at which she arrives through a rigorous deconstruction and reframing of

Habermasian communicative ethics—is preferable to other epistemological methods

because it can furnish (provisional) norms capable of influencing various disciplines,

thereby making the most immediate difference in terms of promoting mutual recognition

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[158] I borrow the phrase 'rationalist residue' from Amy Allen .

[159] *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (1986), Benhabib's weighty examination of critical theory and Habermasian communicative ethics, gives a detailed account of the contextualisation of critique.  Benhabib extends this revised methodology to include other arenas of contemporary ethics and political philosophy in *Situating the Self* (1992).  I do not provide a comprehensive review of Benhabib's methodology of critique here, but refer to her broader theoretical framework only insofar as it is relevant to a discussion of narrative agency.

and social justice, even as it admits that these are context-dependent goals, based on the concerns of a particular *episteme*. A normative restructuring that seems emancipatory today might just as easily seem repressive or exclusionary tomorrow. In other words, the theorist can only work within the intellectual parameters already set for contemporary critique, even as she reflects critically upon the formation of those parameters.

Within the framework of this contextualised critique, I want to draw out three aspects of my concept of narrative agency. First, narrative agency is *primary*: it precedes narrative content (narrative identity) in the sense that the former is both necessary for the creation and implies the continued existence of the latter. The subject's capacity to say 'I am female' depends on her capacity to say 'I'; that is, a subject's capacity to makes sense of herself as a unique being is a precondition for identity formation.[160] Second, narrative agency is *relational*: I can only meaningfully distinguish myself as an 'I' in relation to others, and these others are a) also narrative agents who are unique sites of meaning creation and b) conversation partners who determine the kind of meaning I will make about myself. Third, narrative agency is *generative*. An agent's uniqueness allows her to create meaning from a point of view that is hers and hers alone. New norms (which are articulated and reproduced through narratives) arise out of the exercise of narrative agency by each individual member of a plurality. These collectively constructed norms are immanent, changeable, and they may be harmful as often as they may be emancipatory.

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[160] We can imagine that human beings without this basic narrative agency—such as the insane, the infirm, and very young infants—are unable to develop a coherent sense of practical identity as well.

The first claim, that narrative agency is primary, is perhaps the easiest to unpack.

Each individual has the capacity to construct meaningful narratives about who she is with

relation to others. Narrative agency, conceived as such, does not posit a static subject

who possesses, over a lifetime, an unchanging or completely articulable identity. On the

contrary, the subject is not an *a priori* formation, wholly definable, but an irreducible site

of meaning creation. An individual will make sense of her own identity by exercising her

narrative agency, but she can never give a 'complete' account of her self because her

identity depends upon the changing narratives of others in and over time. Indeed,

narrative agency does not assume a fixed ontological subject who pre-exists discourse.

Narrative agency does not imply any other intention or motivation than to 'make sense',

so the narrative agent need not have any moral commitments or well-informed opinions.

Narrative as *capacity*, the capacity to make meaningful one's situation within a web of

other narratives, is a precondition for the existence of any narrative content.

Creating meaningful narratives, then, is always a relational activity, carried out

within a group of individuals, each of whom is unique by virtue of a particular,

unrepeatable perspective. Each individual is 'the same, that is, human,' as Hannah

Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, 'in such a way that nobody is ever the same as

anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.'[161] Benhabib's concept of narrativity is

built upon this Arendtian notion of plurality, in which the self is never 'withdrawn from

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[161] Arendt 1958, 8. As we shall see in the second part of this thesis, there is much to be said about Arendt's influence on contemporary feminism and, especially, on the importance of her concepts of natality, plurality, and storytelling for Benhabib's theory of narrativity. There are also some interesting links between my own definition of narrative agency and Arendt's concept of natality. Both emphasise the unique individual's *potential* (sometimes realised and sometimes unattained) to introduce new meaning into the world.

the world' but is always a 'self in the human community, an acting [and] interacting self.'[162]  Within the human community are formed protean, context-dependent relationships which constitute the parameters of the self in the same way that collectively agreed upon norms establish the parameters of critique.  Both norms and narratives are arrived at collectively, through social interaction; by the same token, these norms and narratives can only be confronted, resisted, and changed through interaction.

Narrative agency refers to the subject's capacity to construct a meaningful narrative, and not to the actual content of that narrative.  The narrative *agent* need not subscribe to a particular morality or be governed by a particular set of normative criteria.  Benhabib makes this point against Charles Taylor's framework for self-reflection, which subscribes to a strong version of the ethical narrativity thesis, as we saw in the last chapter.  Taylor's self is definable by her evaluative or moral commitments.  Identity, as he puts it, 'is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose.'[163]  The subject possesses a sense of agency, in this view, *by knowing where she stands* with regard to certain evaluative commitments.  Furthermore, for Taylor, these evaluative commitments are only meaningful within the context of 'webs of interlocution.'  That is, identity depends not only upon what one stands for but also upon the person to whom or with whom one is speaking.[164]

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[162] Benhabib 1992, 127
[163] Taylor 1989, 27.
[164] Ibid., 36.

These webs of interlocution are indeed the setting for identity formation. At birth, we are thrown into a network of other people's narratives, and we 'become who we are by learning to be a conversation partner in these narratives.'[165] While this process of collaborative individuation might entail making lasting evaluative commitments, it is entirely possible to have agency (in the form of the capacity to construct meaningful narratives or to 'make sense') without having a set of values or an innate moral integrity. Taylor's tendency to conflate agency with moral commitment is, Benhabib argues, a confusion of levels of analysis. It is important to 'think of the continuity of the self in time not through a commitment to a specific set of evaluative goods but through the *capacity* to take and adopt an attitude toward those goods.'[166] In other words, the subject's capacity for agency must not be confused with narratives about what a self *ought* to think or do—narrative capacity must not be conflated with narrative content. As Benhabib puts it: 'it is not what the story is about that matters but, rather, one's ability to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and others.'[167]

The narrative agent, conceived as conversation partner within a web of interlocution, is not reducible to any one answer to the question, 'who am I?': she is changeable and context-dependent, but also irrepressible—for the narrative agent will *always* try to make sense, even out of nonsense, no matter how varied, fragmented or overwhelming such nonsense may be. The subject's capacity to make sense is the constant which allows for a coherent sense of self to develop over time. Moreover, if the process of making sense of the self over time is conceived as inherently relational, then

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[165] Benhabib 1999, 344.
[166] Ibid., 364, emphasis added.
[167] Ibid., 347.

the subject is never solely responsible for her own story. Indeed, she must always fit her story in with and alongside the stories of others. 'Narratives,' Benhabib writes, 'cannot have closure precisely because they are always aspects of the narratives of others; the sense that I create for myself is always immersed in a fragile "web of stories" that I as well as others spin.'[168] 'Making sense' paves the way for mutual recognition: I include you in my story as you include me in yours. Parts of your story resonate with me, as parts of my story resonate with you.

It is precisely this intersubjective give-and-take which lends narrative agency its heuristic strength, for '[f]urthering one's capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within a solidaristic community that sustains one's identity through listening to one, and allowing one to listen to others, with respect.'[169] For Benhabib, narrative agency and communicability are 'two sides of the same coin.'[170] Stories are produced culturally, as well as individually, and individual stories have no meaning unless they are shared:

> Only if somebody else is able to understand the meaning of our words as well as the whatness of our deeds can the identity of the self be said to be revealed. Action and speech, therefore, are essentially interaction. They take place between humans. Narrativity, or the immersion of action in a web of human relationships, is the mode through which the self is individuated and acts are identified.[171]

Narrative agency thus fosters an appropriate model of narrative identity whether it applies to individual or collective identity. The impetus toward making sense of oneself in relation to the world and over time drives identity formation for both the individual and the group.

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[168] Ibid., 347.
[169] Ibid., 350.
[170] Benhabib 2007, 15.
[171] Benhabib 1992, 127.

Conceptualising the creation of meaning through communicative action represents an important point of tension between Benhabib's narrative model of agency and other prominent feminist definitions of agency, especially those inspired by Judith Butler's performative model.[172]  For Butler, speech is an action that reiterates a norm or set of norms.  Reiteration and subsequent resignification, in this model, constitute a linguistic transformation, a speech act.  The result of this transformation is a new linguistic configuration, one which may subversively rearrange the terms of discourse in such a way that the subject is able to express her agency.  Benhabib argues that this conceptualisation of language in action does not go far enough because it cannot account for the 'surfeit of meaning, creativity, and spontaneity' that arises out of communicative interaction.[173]  As she puts it, these 'speech acts are not only iterations but also innovations and reinterpretations.'[174]  In other words, resignification and reinterpretation create some new meaning *apart* from the norms or sets of norms that they reproduce.[175]

This 'something more' language arises out of the mutual recognition (between unique and unrepeatable individual perspectives) involved in the sharing of narratives. Breaking apart and reconfiguring norms of discourse, as the performative model does, cannot fully explain the experience of participating in or appreciating these performances

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[172] I introduce this model in Chapter 1.

[173] Benhabib 1999, 341.

[174] Benhabib 1999, 339.

[175] Allison Weir offers a concise summary of the performative model's inability to account for the surfeit of meaning in language: 'What's lost here [in the performative model of agency] is any recognition of the perspectives of the participants in these performances, and hence, any meaningful differentiation among unreflective, deliberate, dogmatic, defensive, anxious, ironic, playful, and parodic performances of gender, and any understanding of the ways in which these interact and conflict in specific performances and particular subjects.  What's lost then, is any meaningful concept of agency, and any meaningful concept of subversion.' Weir 1996, 127.

which create moments of humour, irony, pathos, etc.  This creation of shared meaning

cannot be explained by performance alone.  'The narrative model,' as Benhabib puts it

'has the virtue of accounting for that "surfeit of meaning, creativity and spontaneity" that

is said to accompany iteration in the performativity model as well but whose mechanisms

cannot actually be explained by performativity.'[176]   The meaning generated by the

sharing of narratives, in other words, amounts to more than the sum of its parts.  An

individual, by this account of narrative agency, is always able to tell some kind of story

about how she is situated in the world into which she is thrown.[177] Even if the content of

that story is rife with contradiction or belies a commitment to subordinating attachments,

the capacity to tell a story about oneself remains and, with it, the capacity to change that

story as circumstances, beliefs, and normative commitments change.


## 3.2 The Gender Objection


As mentioned, some feminist theorists are concerned that a narrative model remains

overly indebted to a rationalist conception of autonomy, one which presupposes the

possibility of critical self-awareness from a place beyond the confines of power

relations.[178]  Amy Allen offers one such critique.  She argues that Benhabib's conception

of narrativity retains an implicit reliance upon a subject with robust autonomy in the form

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[176] Benhabib 1999, 341.

[177] *Almost* always.  In the third section of this chapter, and again in Chapter 6, I will discuss the challenges posed to this basic capacity for narrative by trauma, mental illness, and other physical and psychological impairments.

[178] The idea of such an autonomous 'authentic' core self has been explicitly rejected by many feminist theorists, including (but certainly not limited to) Benhabib (1995), Butler (1997b), Benjamin (1998), Brown (1995), Zerilli (2005), Heyes (2007), Allen (2008), and Krause (2013), Weir (1996).

of critical reflexivity.  According to Allen, Benhabib posits the existence of an 'ungendered core self' capable of 'making sense' of subordinating gender relationships before becoming gendered.  To choose how to relate a narrative about gender, a self must first have the autobiographical capacity necessary to 'make sense' at all, but an individual does not gain such a capacity, Allen reasons, until that individual is *already* gendered. Recall, however, that narrative agency, conceived as an individual's capacity to make sense out of nonsense, does not need to posit the extent to which an individual can gain reflective distance from her situatedness within society.  An individual will make sense of the gender norms into which she is thrown, but the way she will make sense of those norms can be neither predicted nor guaranteed. As we have seen, the individual's capacity to form a narrative in the first place constitutes her agency, regardless of the content of that narrative.

Allen's broader goal (discussed at length in Chapter 1) is to find a framework for feminist subjectivity which allows for the possibilities of agency and mutual recognition in the face of power 'in all its depth and complexity.'[179] Thus, her aim in looking at the narrative model of agency is to determine whether it falls victim to an unsupportable rationalism in the face of ubiquitous power relationships.  She finds that the narrative model does not take sufficiently into account the severity of the influence of subordinating gender norms on the process of individuation.

Allen argues that the 'I' who 'chooses' her narratives is always already gendered. But even the gendered 'I' has the *capacity* to make choices, and the content of those choices is secondary to this capacity.  As we undergo the process of socialisation, we are

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[179] Allen 2008, 2.

introduced to the claims of culture, many of which are uncomfortably subordinating and marked by unequal distributions of power. These claims constitute narrative identity, but, in themselves, they do not account for every aspect of narrative identity. The capacity to form and reform attachments to these claims first depends on the role of the individual as narrative agent.

It is this differentiation between the capacity to say 'I' and the content of the choices that 'I' make, however, of which Allen is sceptical. In her view, the capacity to say 'I' is preceded and thus at least partially determined by gender identification. As she puts it: 'If the roots of gender identity lie deeper than those of the narrative ability that Benhabib views as the source of spontaneity, creativity, and agency, then interrelated assumptions about gender difference and gender dominance are so basic to our sense of ourselves that they are likely to be extremely resistant to critique and to change.'[180] For Allen, Benhabib posits a universal narrative agency at the expense of recognising the gendered constructs which shape even the child's first exercise of this narrative agency. But does the reality of gender subordination, even at the earliest stages of individuation, compromise our definition of narrative agency as the irrepressible capacity to make sense over time and in relation to others? And does this concept of narrative agency really carry with it a harmfully rationalist endorsement of autonomy vis-à-vis gender norms?

In the model of narrative identity detailed above, gender identification, like all other narrative content, depends upon the capacity to say 'I'. Narrative agency (capacity) and narrative identity (content) are inextricably bound together. To conceive of narrative agency as primary is not to suggest that the self exists in some fixed state apart from the

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[180] Ibid., 170.

narrative formation of life-stories. The narrative self is the site of making sense and, as such, is fragile and always in flux. Benhabib does not argue for a static individual who may step outside of her position in the world and ask: How ought 'I' to confront this or that norm? Narrative agency, as we have seen, is the capacity to make sense of one's position *within* a web of narratives and not the capacity to get outside of this web in order to choose whether or not to accept its terms. Furthermore, the narrative agent is not the master of her own narratives. Her access to meaning-making is always mediated not only by external norms and other stories but also by the very early unconscious internalisation of these norms.

Allen refers to several studies which suggest that gender identity forms before a child develops either autobiographical memory or the narrative capacity through which to share information about herself. By age two, it seems, children have 'mastered the concept of gender difference', but they do not begin to develop the capacity for autobiographical memory until the age of three or four. Autobiographical memory is different from episodic memory in that it gives the subject a sense of self over time, rather than just an ability to recall past events. Because research suggests that autobiographical memory is developed 'through social interactions with adult caregivers' and because those adult caregivers tend to 'interact with infants and young children in ways that correspond to gender stereotypes', Allen concludes that 'autobiography is deeply gendered as well'.[181] To support this claim, she cites a study which concluded that little boys' and little girls' narratives 'tend to be different in both their content and,

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[181] Ibid., 167.

perhaps more significantly, their structure'.[182]  Researchers found that little boys tended

to relate memories that were shorter and more self-involved, whereas little girls tended to

give more elaborate and relational accounts of past experiences.

Based on this empirical evidence, Allen claims that individuation, as well as

socialisation, is a fundamentally gendered process.  She argues that 'gender structures not

only the substantive content of our very narratives but also our very narrative capacities,

thus, our narrative selves as well.'[183]  According to Allen, Benhabib does not take

seriously enough the extent to which gender dominance is at work on this foundational

level and thus gives 'an overly optimistic account of what is required in order to exercise

autonomy with respect to gender narratives'.[184]  But this criticism misses the mark for a

few important reasons.

First, Allen gives dubious privilege to the systematic dominance of gender

relations over the systematic dominance of *other* systematic relations of power, such as

race, class and level of education.  Autobiographical understanding is formed chiefly

through social interaction (what Benhabib calls learning to become a conversation

partner) with caretakers, but there is nothing to suggest that gender stereotypes are more

influential in forming this understanding than these other important factors.[185] Many of

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[182] Ibid., 167.
[183] Ibid., 168.
[184] Ibid., 164.  Allen also writes 'the very language that we use to articulate our critique
of gender subordination is relentlessly structured by the same' (171).  The extent to
which language is *itself* gendered would certainly be an interesting matter for discussion,
though it seems to me that a concept of language as gendered shapes narrative identity
but does not compromise narrative agency.
[185] In her recent book *Delusions of Gender* (2010), Cordelia Fine offers some remarkably
compelling evidence that gender is a salient feature in identity development from day
one.  Her project is to reveal various fallacies in neurological accounts of sex difference,
but we need not engage on the level of her (extremely well-made) argument against

the experiments to which Allen refers examine the autobiographical narratives of white,

middle-class American children.[186]  Surely, the development of autobiographical

capacity is different in children of other cultures or other classes; thus Allen's singling

out of gender over other developmental factors seems to give us only part of the story.

The confrontation with norms, *whatever these norms may be*, is an integral feature of the

process of identity formation: the capacity to confront these norms remains constant.

And so, it does not matter all that much whether the 'I' who creates narrative

meaning is already gendered—what matters is the capacity to make sense of oneself as a

unique 'I' at all.  From birth, the narrative agent interacts with the (often contradictory)

claims made by gender norms over the course of a lifetime.  These gender norms

themselves are fluid and multi-layered, not homogenous.  They mean different things to

different people at different times and in different cultural contexts.  Thus, a subject

might very easily be 'gendered' in that she is constituted by and embedded in the web of

gender norms into which she has been born, but this does not mean that she cannot

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neurosexism in order to draw on her empirical accounts of a culture obsessed with
inscribing and re-inscribing gendered norms.  Fine summarises study after study into the
imposition of normative gender identity on children from infancy, on children's
surprisingly early mastery of their own gender identities, and their tendency to self-
socialise along gender lines.  However, there are (at least) two problems with drawing
from this empirical evidence the conclusion that gender is *always* a salient component of
the exercise of narrative agency, both of them implicit in Fine's work.  The first, an issue
not discussed by Allen, is the demonstrably contingent importance of gender norms in
various activities studied by social scientists, neurologists, and psychologists.  Many of
the studies Fine cites in the earlier part of her book suggest that the salience of gender in
a given task (like taking a math test) is contingent upon whether or not the subject is
'primed' with gender salience.  A large part of her argument depends on the claim that
we can change both our minds and our brains through our behaviour.  The second is the
lack of intersectional concern in most of the investigations of gender salience Fine
canvasses; almost all of the studies she cites are, like the studies Allen cites, comprised of
white, middle-class, well-educated subjects.
[186] Buckner and Fivush 1998, 407.

challenge and transform, with varying degrees of success, the norms with which she is confronted.  Knowing that an individual is gendered, even down to her most basic conception of herself, does not *lessen* the individual's capacity for narrative agency. Benhabib writes:

> We always have options in telling a life story that makes sense to us.  These options are not ahistorical; they are culturally and historically specific and inflected by the master narrative of the family structure and gender roles into which each individual is thrown.  Nonetheless, just as the grammatical rules of language, once acquired, do not exhaust our capacity to build an infinite number of well-formed sentences in a language, so socialisation and accumulation processes do not determine the life story of any unique individual or his or her capacity to initiate new actions and new sentences in conversation.[187]

Presumably Allen would not deny that there exists this kind of wiggle room when it comes to the ways in which we confront gender norms; but she insists that the salience of gender norms from early infancy limits the options the narrative agent has.[188]  What she misses is the grounding of narrative agency in *uniqueness*.  The unique individual makes sense of who she is, and of how she is gendered, from a perspective enormously influenced by the world into which she is thrown; and yet, a perspective that is wholly her own and, therefore, new.

And lastly, against Allen, we can say that a notion of gender subordination, even one that is deeply entrenched at the psychic level, does not compromise our concept of narrative agency. Narrative agency does not mean that a self can always identify or isolate, and then choose whether and how to take up as narrative, subordinating gender norms.  On the contrary, Benhabib concedes, after Freud, that the ego is not the master in its own house. She takes seriously psychoanalytic insights into the phenomenon of

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[187] Benhabib 1999, 345.
[188] As Moira Gatens puts it: 'Allen…seems to flirt with…the existence of a gendered core self.' Gatens 2014, 43.

subjection.  As she puts it: 'Every story we tell of ourselves will also contain another of

which we may not even be aware; and, in ways that are usually very obscure to us, we are

determined by these subtexts and memories in our unconscious.'[189]  This unavoidable

subjection does not preclude narrative agency.  The individual tries to form a coherent

identity for herself by relating to others, but she may never fully know what psychic

forces at work within herself influence the course of this interaction.[190]

The deeply ingrained system of subordinating gender norms into which all

humans are born will limit the individual's capacity for autonomy vis-à-vis these norms;

it will not, however, compromise the individual's narrative agency.  The agent will make

sense of herself within society whether she accepts or rejects the claims of stereotypical

gender norms, when she is able to recognise them at all. The narrative agent is, indeed,

constituted by a host of subordinating relationships; and yet, she is not totally determined

by them.  While these relationships of power, many of them gendered or gender-based

relationships, often limit a subject's ability to recognise power at work in and on herself,

they do not completely determine the stories a subject will tell about herself. Narrative

agency, therefore, is, very simply, the capacity of a constituted subject to make sense.

This narrative model does not propose a core self that transcends the subordinating

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[189] Benhabib 1999, 349.

[190] But how does the subject know whether or not she has recognised the extent to which
gender norms are at work in determining her narrative identity at any given time?  And
how can we cultivate a desire for self-transformation if an attachment to subordination
structures our psyche at the most intimate level? Benhabib allows for the possibility that
subordinating relationships of power are at work even at an unconscious level, but she
cannot explain why or how we become attached to this intimate psychic subjection.  It is
at this point that we might want to use the theoretical framework from Chapter 1: to
mediate Benhabib's model with Butler's theory of attachment to subordination (1997b) in
order to enrich our understanding of the limitations imposed upon the subject.

claims made by systems of gender dominance, and so there is nothing in it that prevents a gendered subject from exercising narrative agency. 'Gendered' identity, as it plays out in the open field of choice and circumstance, is as complex and varied as identity itself.

3.3 The Communicability Objection

I argue above that narrative agency is essentially relational in that it arises out of conversations within webs of interlocution. Within a radically contextualised critique, there exist no static or quasi-transcendental rules which govern conversation in action; however, if we take seriously Benhabib's notion of the creation of shared meaning through shared narratives within a plurality, then we might reasonably conceive of narrativity as a sort of engine for social change. Together, we are able to make and re-make meaningful statements about who we are. The problem then becomes how to identify whether or not such change is for the better: how to identify, in other words, moments of 'positive' mutual recognition and to distinguish those moments from harmful patterns of systematic subordination, miscommunication, and misrecognition.

The second major criticism of the narrative model of agency within feminist theory is the concern that privileging the notions of narrative and recognition may lead us to ignore the problematics of subordination in favour of a satisfying, but imagined, narrative coherence. Lois McNay (2003, 2008) makes this argument directly against Benhabib. McNay does admit that a narrative model of agency is more conducive to theorising intersubjectivity and creativity than other models put forth by feminist theorists. She sees much heuristic potential in the narrative model of agency—a subject

with the constant capacity for sense-making seems to her pragmatically preferable to the

disconnected, serialised, and fractured subject of postmodernity because it emphasises

'the temporal and intersubjective aspects of subjectivity and agency.'[191]  However,

McNay is sceptical of Benhabib's work on narrativity for a few reasons.  First, she thinks

it insupportably relies on the inherent communicability of narratives. Second, she

suggests that much of Benhabib's theory of narrativity is still haunted by the untenably

rationalist assumptions of the Habermasian communicative ethics that Benhabib has

worked so meticulously to contextualise.  And third, she points out that narrative, focused

as it is upon relationships between individuals, struggles to address systematic

domination on a broader social scale.

McNay argues, then, that narratives are not inherently communicable and, further,

that the assumption that 'making sense' is an essential human capacity keeps us from

appreciating 'the blocks, both psychic and social, to the formation of a coherent sense of

self'.[192]  She equates the notion that narratives are inherently communicable to

Habermas' reliance on the context transcendence of certain kinds of communication.

Benhabib, according to McNay, tends to disassociate narrative from the factors which

might prevent the construction of narratives in the same way that Habermas tends to

disassociate communication from inherently subordinating forms of power.  In both

cases, there is an overly ambitious attempt to theorise identity in terms of

unproblematically equal and 'authentic' communication.  However, where Habermasian

communicative ethics depends on the use of rhetorical rather than poetic language—in

other words, the acceptance of another person's point of view on predetermined terms—

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[191] McNay 2003, 7.
[192] Ibid., 7.

the process of sharing narratives is anything but rhetorical. The Habermasian project of communicative ethics and the Benhabibian notion of narrativity are thus fundamentally incompatible, according to McNay. Benhabib, by both copying Habermas' assumption of universal communicability and simultaneously throwing out Habermas' criteria for validity when it comes to sharing meaning, wants to have her cake and eat it too.

McNay argues that intersubjectivity and interpersonal interaction, within Benhabib's schema of narrative identity formation, can never function according to universal rules of engagement because the commitments, identifications, and perceived truths of the narrative agent are ever-shifting. Thus, relationships between the individual and the other, the individual and her self, the individual and certain social norms, may never be definitively judged subordinating or mutually recognitive; and, as a result, identifying situations in which mutual recognition or positive re-signification are certain to occur becomes nearly impossible. Moreover, the process of telling stories is not always helpful; McNay argues that it can also be disruptive, mythologising, or reifying. According to McNay, Benhabib is blind to this problem of systematic inequality because she implicitly relies on 'Habermas's model of a communicatively symmetrical intersubjectivity', a reliance which 'results in the deployment of a syncretic and over-generalized idea of narrative identity'.[193]

For McNay, one result of this implicit methodological reliance is Benhabib's assumption that all experience can lend itself to narrative. Such an assumption grants a disproportionate authority to stories about the self and promotes an insupportable primacy of the said, a linguistic monism that does not sufficiently take into account the

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[193] Ibid., 2.

myriad aspects of selfhood that are difficult, if not impossible, to put into narrative form. In other words, McNay thinks that Benhabib copies the Habermasian 'assumption of the unproblematic transmissibility of inner nature.'[194]  She argues that Benhabib is overly ambitious in her judgment that the self is always capable of constructing a narrative identity.

Indeed, McNay claims that Benhabib posits an irreconcilable difference between the fragmented self and the coherent self and in doing so 'avoids addressing important issues, such as the nature of the boundary between the sayable and the unsayable, or of the passage of experience from a pre-discursive to a discursive level.'[195]  The problem here is not that Benhabib posits a core self; rather, it is that she presupposes an essential relationship between the experiences that constitute a self and the process of making sense of those experiences.  Experience, according to McNay, is not so universally translatable.  Many experiences, such as the everyday episodic experiences of eating lunch or riding the bus are so mundane that they 'resist incorporation into a meaningful account of the self.'[196]  Conversely, experiences of rape or abuse are often so traumatic that an individual will disassociate from them completely and have no way of rendering them meaningful at all.

Benhabib, by this account, also privileges narrative accounts of lived experience to the extent that she sees them as unquestionably authentic.  McNay sees this privileging as a kind of fetishizing of meaning—she refers to Benhabib's problematic preoccupation

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[194] Ibid., 10.
[195] Ibid., 9.
[196] Ibid., 9.

with narrative's 'normative redemptive force'.[197]  Privileging the stories we tell about ourselves is harmful because the '[N]arration of identity may involve the reification as much as a clarification of the self'.[198]  When we rely on someone else's memory or someone else's perception, we often tell ourselves stories about who we are in order to fit in with the agreed upon notion of who we ought to be.  The telling and retelling of such codified narratives can 'create crevasses, ruptures, emptiness and deep wells of non-being'.[199]  An individual trying to make sense of a traumatic event, for example, might tell a story in which she identifies herself as victim, where the telling of that story results in a reified, alienating narrative identity of victimhood.

Finally, McNay is concerned with the now-familiar tendency in critical theory to reduce systematically subordinating power relationships to identity politics.  Gender issues, especially, are far too often conceived of in terms of identity or recognition rather than as systematically maintained forms of oppression.  McNay argues that the narrative model suffers from this oversight because of its emphasis on immediate interpersonal interaction instead of trends of subordination on a broader scale.  A narrative subject might be able to identify or confront the subordinating norms with which she comes into direct contact, but, at the same time, be unable to theorise a 'public' or 'impersonal' undercurrent of oppression.  In the context of gender, for example, an individual might, because her personal experience of, say, excelling as a woman in a male-dominated field, incorporate into her life story a narrative of widespread and growing gender equality while failing to recognise the ways in which gender is still responsible for various

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[197] Ibid., 2.
[198] Ibid., 11.
[199] Ibid., 10.

(quasi)permanent asymmetries of power within society as a whole.  McNay is concerned that the 'understanding of gender in terms of narrative identity and mutual recognition obscures the systemic levels at which gender inequalities are perpetuated and thereby renders them invisible'.[200]  Emphasising the importance of these overarching objective asymmetries of gender subordination is clearly an indispensable task of feminist theory.

McNay's critique requires that we elaborate upon the relational and generative aspects of narrative agency.  First, McNay's charge that a narrative theory is overly optimistic about the communicability of experience demands a review of what 'narrative' is and what it is not.[201]  Recall that narrative need not follow a predetermined structure: narrative, when it applies to self-constitution, is not the same thing as literary narrative. It does not need to follow the arc of beginning-middle-end, does not need to be coherent, and is not completely under the agent's control.  Narrative identity, furthermore, might take any number of forms: 'patterns of action, attention, or emotional response, in bodily dispositions and habits, in moral commitments, or in one's personal relationships'.[202] The narratives that emerge in narrative identity formation, as we have seen, are contingent and unpredictable.  Their existence does not (and cannot) depend upon a fixed system of communication.  A narrative theory allows that experiences which resist conventional narrative structure, such as 'fragmentation and collage, the senselessness of being next-to-each-other in space in time' are just as authentic as more straightforward life-stories because they express a 'material and lived reality'—these experiences are still

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[200] Ibid., 14.
[201] Defining narrative is currently a major preoccupation in a variety of disciplines.  I gave an overview of the literature on narrative identity and the meaning of narrative within the philosophy of personal identity in Chapter 2.  For an excellent overview of the broader 'narrative turn' in contemporary philosophical methodology, see Meretoja 2014.
[202] Mackenzie 2008, 1.

classifiable as narratives in that they involve exercising the capacity of narrative agency, or 'making sense'.[203]  The construction of narrative content is an open-ended process of remembering and retelling within a web of other narratives.

Furthermore, the conversations which constitute this web almost always take place on unequal ground.  Certain aspects of selfhood, especially the effects of trauma and abuse, may elude narrative awareness.  But we can extend Freud's metaphor of the ego who is not the master of his own house even further: the self may be imagined as a crowded household in which all of the petty bickering of a 'family brawl' is apt to be acted out.[204]  No relationship, whether intrasubjective or intersubjective, is free from confusion, contrast, or argument; and, of course, there is no possibility of extricating oneself from the web of relationships into which one is born.  Some conversations are mutually beneficial, but conversations often fail.  Importantly, individuals and collectivities continue to weave identities for themselves out of the web of interlocution into which they are thrown, *regardless of how repressive or subordinating relationships within the web may be*.  McNay reads Benhabib's insistence on the resilience of narrative agency as a reliance on the inherent communicability of 'narratives', but we should, instead, understand the resilience of narrative agency as the certainty that some narratives will be communicable, some of the time.

Within a theory of narrativity there is room for the idea that narrative is repressive and exclusionary, but there is also, simultaneously, room for the idea that narratives can be productively communicable. The process of creating narratives is indeterminate, marked not by the construction of any specific narrative, but by the uniqueness of each

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[203] Benhabib 1999, 345.
[204] Ibid., 349.

narrative agent. Inherent in the formation of each narrative is the potential generation of a new meaning, unique by virtue of its unrepeatable perspective. McNay gestures toward a problematic privileging of 'meaning' in this formulation of narrative construction, but a theory of narrativity does not have any intractable attachments to what constitutes 'sense'. Rather than read a theory of narrative agency as emphasising meaning itself, it is more profitable to read such a theory as interested primarily in the *capacity* to formulate and reformulate meaning. It is precisely this open-endedness, this unpredictability, which is foundational for the formation of narratives within a plurality.[205] The individual child's construction of narrative content—of what it means to be a little girl instead of a little boy, for instance—is essentially relational. Her idea of what 'makes sense', though unique, is informed by, and limited to, collectively decided upon, and ever-shifting, ideas of 'sense'.

Embedded in this landscape of relational identity and collectively decided upon norms, is the individual's capacity to confront and change these norms through the articulation of new narratives. Recall Benhabib argues that '[F]urthering one's capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within a solidaristic community that sustains one's identity through listening to one, and allowing one to listen to others, with respect.'[206] An individual's speech and action have no meaning unless that speech and action are recognised by others (and it is in this sense that all action is interaction). The meaning they *do* have once recognised is fragile and dependent upon a specific

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[205] Benhabib writes: 'we have to explain how every human infant can become the initiator of a unique life-story, of a meaningful tale—which certainly is only meaningful if we know the cultural codes under which it is constructed—but which we cannot predict even if we know these cultural codes' 1992, 218.
[206] Benhabib 1999, 350.

constellation of collectively constructed narratives and norms.  As circumstances change, so too does the construction of narrative and normative meaning.  These changes can occur for the better, under the aegis of respectful mutual recognition.

The reification of certain narratives alluded to by McNay can thus be challenged and changed under the correct conditions.  The rape victim who feels she cannot escape the narrative of victimhood always has the potential to confront and reconfigure this narrative within a solidaristic community, however small.  The generation of new meaning through such a supportive and mutually respectful conversation (or, more likely, series of conversations) will be extraordinarily difficult.  The point, however, is that the *potential* for transformative mutual recognition is always there, no matter how unlikely.  Because narrative agency is a constant capacity, narrative identity never refers to a static subject who is the same over time.  It always refers to an open and unfinished process full of potential but, as of yet, unrealised meaning.

Feminist politics, to be truly powerful, must recognise the importance of belonging to and being recognised within, such a community.  The collective capacity to identify and resist oppression first depends on the capacity of discrete, individual agents to communicate meaning to one another.  The narrative identities of nations, cultures, and other groups are also 'woven out of tales and fragments belonging both to oneself and to others'.[207]  Collectivities, at their best, may derive a coherent sense of who they are

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[207] Ibid., 351.  But do these 'tales and fragments' consist of language alone?  It seems that the communicative action Benhabib writes about is, for the most part, based in language.  She does address the problem of privileging language over other forms of communication in *Situating the Self*: 'If communication is not understood narrowly and exclusively as language but if body gestures, behavior, facial expressions, mimics and sounds are also viewed as non-linguistic but linguistically articulable modes of communication, then the "ideal communication community" extends well beyond the

through this dynamic of generative mutual recognition.  By these lights, we can pursue a politics that does not define itself according to static or pre-existing identity narratives; in other words, we can endorse a communicative politics that is concerned with the interests (contingently) held in common by complex narrative selves.  Such a politics does not insist on permanent categories of oppression, but is defined by, as Marieke Borren puts it, 'spontaneous emergence, associative action, revolutionary pathos…the very urgent sense that something new and empowering is happening, and…a short-lived existence'.[208] Many different feminist politics seem to share these characteristics.  This is not to say that there is no common thread connecting one feminist politics to the next; rather, feminist politics spring up differently for different collectives, depending on which issues or problems are pressing for those collectives.  Each politics is feminist because it addresses a 'particular *worldly* issue that affects women differently from men', but each collective deals with or acts out this issue on its own terms and is, importantly, made up of a plurality of unique individuals concerned with the issue in question but whose identities are not fully defined by this issue.[209]

Similarly, the collective identity of the Occupy movement, to take a particularly relevant example, has not been definable in terms of its mission statement or its demographics; rather, it is a historically situated and contingent confluence of many narratives.  Its transformative potential depends upon the collaborative construction of its own identity by discrete, individual actors.  Diverse individuals within the movement have confronted and resisted deeply entrenched systematic oppression through a series of

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adult person capable of full speech and accountable action.'  See Benhabib 1992, 58-59fn.
[208] Borren 2013, 207.
[209] Ibid., 207.

actual conversations.  The collective agency of the Occupy movement depends on these

'dynamic and open-ended conversations' rather than on 'collective identity as a

product'.[210]  A plurality of real, unique, individual agents with diverse points of view is

the source of the capacity of the movement itself to create new narratives, which may or

may not be sufficient to effect lasting political change.  Overturning systematic

oppression over a specific period of time, and according to a set of static normative

commitments, applicable to everyone everywhere, has not been the point.  Indeed, the

possibility of general consensus among the social movement and everyone else (the state,

the banks, those inherently unsympathetic to the movement for any number of reasons) is

an unnecessary, and often harmful, illusion.  '[I]t is less significant,' Benhabib writes,

'that "we" discover "the" general interest, but more significant that collective decisions

be reached through procedures which are radically open and fair to all.'[211]  This view of

solidarity—as the mutually recognitive collective pursuit of an interest held in

common—seems to me a very productive way of framing confrontations with what

McNay refers to as systematically maintained forms of oppression.

A more challenging example to consider here might be the Black Lives Matter

movement in America, since its participants are more weighed down by the systematic

oppression with which McNay is concerned.  Part of what activists in the movement are

trying to do is to point out that 'blackness' is an inescapable identity marker, one that

puts black people in danger.  And, indeed, insisting that unjust treatment in the hands of

the police is a problem which affects black people specifically is especially important in

the face of the rejoinder that 'all lives matter'.  The discrete individuals who make up the

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[210] Kavada 2015, 875.
[211] Benhabib 1992, 9.

Black Lives Matter movement, then, are organised around revealing the systematic subordination and discrimination faced by black people in America. In the second part of the thesis, I employ Hannah Arendt's thoughts on identity and politics, which both recognise the need to respond to an attack on a specific aspect of one's identity by claiming that identity. I also describe a model of politics that is concerned with making communicable specific harms and injustices through collective action. In this model of politics, interests held in common lead to associations which bolster individual members' political agency—which give them the confidence, in other words, to make claims and voice judgments based on their experience.

Thinking of agency in the way I have described it here, as the irreducible capacity at the heart of identity formation, allows us to posit an idea of a self who is always capable of change. An agent might incorporate the claims of subordinating gender norms into even her most basic idea of herself, and yet she remains capable, through the creation of new meaning from a unique point of view, of shifting those norms in surprising ways. An agent might harbour the seemingly inarticulate harm caused by deep trauma, and yet she remains capable, through continual attempts at conversation with people who respect her, of changing the extent to which that trauma defines her. Recognising this capacity to make sense of oneself through time and in relation to others as *primary* does not mean that we should expect people to tell coherent, authoritative stories about who they are; it means, rather, that we should be prepared for unexpected stories to emerge from each individual, no matter who he or she is and no matter what we may think we know about him or her.

Feminist theorists can, as Allen suggests, encourage positive self and social transformation by 'acknowledging recognition as an ethical ideal and understanding it as a permanent—though temporally fleeting—possibility of human relationships.'[212] There is no way to transcend completely the subordinating power structures we, as feminists, seek to change, but ubiquitous subordination does not compromise narrative agency. On the contrary, it is only by positing narrative agency as a *constant* that we are able to argue that the possibilities of mutual recognition and autonomy are permanent. Further, the identification of this irreducible capacity as a constant does not mean that we should endorse an individualistic feminist politics; on the contrary, the notion that agency is the unique individual's capacity to make meaning is *inescapably* relational. The transformative and generative potential of identity (whether collective or individual) first depends upon the capacity of each human being to make sense of herself as an 'I' within a web of other 'I's'.

Mutual recognition and reflexivity are plausible normative aims of an admittedly contextualised feminist critical theory. These aims are inherent in narrative practice—by virtue of narrative agency I understand myself in time and in relation to others; and through this understanding of myself I come to recognise the same narrative agency in others. Equally inherent in narrative identity, however, are the problems of subjection and misrecognition—some narratives will always be reductive, harmful, alienating, and misrepresentative. Tracing possible pathways for positive social transformation thus involves attending to moments, however transitory, when new meaning is created within a plurality of unique selves. In the second half of this thesis, I turn to the work Hannah

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[212] Allen 2008, 95.

Arendt to help articulate a feminist political theory grounded in cultivating and enhancing

these pathways.

## Chapter Four: Feminist Resources in Hannah Arendt

Up to now, this thesis has been concerned with questions about subjectivity, agency, autonomy, and identity. My chief focus of inquiry, in other words has been the individual (unique) self. I have given an account of a non-sovereign, narrative, and relational understanding of the self through a discussion of feminist theories of agency and subjection (Chapter 1), an examination of work in the philosophy of personal identity on the nature of narrative identity (Chapter 2), and an endorsement of a narrative model of agency (Chapter 3). In the second part of this thesis, I turn to the field of action—the political. I explore a political theory of feminist politics built on a narrative model of agency. The political theory of Hannah Arendt forms the scaffolding for this feminist politics. There are, in Arendt, profound resources for understanding how a politics based on narrative agency can and should work. Arendt gives us excellent conceptual tools for explaining the significance of many of the aspects of narrative agency I have highlighted so far: uniqueness, non-sovereignty, communication and communicability, and, of course, action and agency.

Arendt's concept of the political, with its emphasis on action, gives us an opportunity to pursue the emancipatory goals of feminism without getting our boots stuck in the persistent quagmire of identity politics. This quagmire often arises out of conceiving of identities in terms of *what* they are—thinking of them, in other words, as combinations of political narratives. In Arendt's work, by contrast, 'identity' might be defined as a complex disclosure of a unique individual in a public space. Arendt's conceptual framework, in other words, allows us to shift the focus of politics from *what we are* to *what we are doing*. This politics of action is only possible if certain conditions

are met.  There must be a *plurality* of actors, each of which is able to repeatedly offer

unique meaning through *natality*, the individual's continued appearance in the common

world.  What's more, the meaning that arises out of action, and that allows us to articulate

shared concerns, interests, and judgments, is experienced through *narrativity*.  These

three aspects of action (plurality, natality, and narrativity) are conditions for the

individual agent to understand herself as an 'I' in time and with relation to other unique

'I's'.  In this chapter, I take from Arendt 1) a definition of political identity that does not

reduce agents to a single set of narratives, 2) an account of plurality, natality, and

narrativity as conditions for agency, and 3) a sketch of a feminist politics of association

based on a narrative agency.


4.1 Arendt and Identity Politics


Many feminist theorists have been drawn to Arendt in recent years because she offers an

unusually expansive set of options in the face of the problematic identity questions with

which I have been concerned in this thesis.[213]  On the one hand, feminists must discuss

collective identities in order to make claims on behalf of this or that group of people; and

yet, on the other hand, these identity designations are always exclusionary and reductive.

We can read Arendt as giving us a way *beyond* the terms of this debate by insisting on the

constant tension, in her work, between identity and non-identity.[214]  Moving beyond the

terms of the identity/non-identity debate involves finding a way to come up with 'non-

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[213] Allen (1999), Cavarero (2000, 2015), Benhabib (1992, 1993), Zerilli (2005, 2009), Borren (2013), Honig (1995, Dietz (2002), and others.

[214] Amy Allen (1999) proposes the 'identity/non-identity' reading of Arendt for feminist politics.

repressive, non-exclusionary conceptions of group identity'.[215]  Conceptions of group

identity, as we have seen, usually rest upon political narratives of gender, race, sexuality

and so on.  These pre-assigned collective narrative identities are necessarily exclusionary

because they refer to fixed categories, which in turn lend themselves to limited

definitions.  The category of woman, for example, forces those of us who make use of it

to fit the bill of what we think of when we think of woman.  To identify as woman both

forces women to downplay their differences (sharing the identity 'woman' does not

guarantee that those identifying as women have anything else in common) and excludes

women who may not fit the generally agreed upon criteria for womanhood (trans women,

for instance, who do not have female identity but who identify as women, would be left

out of the category 'woman' if having a specific anatomy were a part of the generally

accepted narrative of what a woman is).

On the other hand, a conception of identity as entirely performative—as 'acting

out' identity narratives without affirming them—makes it very difficult to explain why

we might be so invested in political narratives or how identifying with political narratives

can provide us with a deep sense of solidarity or with feelings of empowerment.  When a

trans woman identifies with the category 'woman', for instance, she is declaring that part

of her identity important or salient.  Sharing that identity with others might give her a

feeling of belonging with those others and being able to apply the political narrative

about what a woman is becomes a positive resource for her narrative self-conception.

She is able to affirm an identity in common with other women.  This is an affirmation of

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[215] Allen 1999, 106.

solidarity understood as the shared sense of identification with a certain political narrative that arises during action.

This definition of solidarity emphasises the similarities that arise *out of* uniting for a common cause, rather than the similarities that move people to act in the service of a common cause. The trans woman feels that she shares her womanhood *in common* with other women.[216] She is not reducible to the category of woman (there are many other narratives that make up her narrative self-understanding), nor do the political narratives about what women are pre-determine how she will act, but she claims the identity of woman in order to make communicable political concerns pertaining to her womanhood—whether she can legally use a women's restroom, for example. The resolution of this political concern is made possible by general recognition of the legitimacy of the transwoman's identification with the category of woman. The general consensus about the political narrative of womanhood shifts as more and more people recognise similar claims. This model of action differs from conventional politics based around identity narratives because it does not insist on the pre-political content of an identity narrative. It does not, in other words, 'police' the boundaries of the category of woman, but, rather, involves an organic alignment of interests held in common in order to

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[216] This is a complicated, but trenchant, example because the identity of the transwoman as a woman is contested. The struggle to be able to claim an identity—imagine a woman struggling to claim the identity of CEO or a man trying to claim the identity of primary caretaker—is an important political struggle. Arendt herself, it is important to remember (and I will return to this in a moment) would not consider these struggles to make public what is private as legitimate political action. Aspects of private life (under which heading Arendt would put gender identity), are not matters for public discourse, and, consequently, cannot be subjects of action. Throughout this thesis, however, I follow Seyla Benhabib's lead in 'reading Arendt against Arendt' on this point. Social justice, especially feminist social justice, is committed to bringing any systematic injustice into public discourse, no matter how 'personal' this injustice may seem at first glance.

shift the public understanding.  Identity is relevant to this picture—the claim to the shared identity narrative of womanhood is essential for understanding the injustice of being excluded from this narrative.  But it is also fluid—the category of 'woman' is not essential or static or able to be defined prior to political action.

In addition to the shifting of, and consensus about, political narratives as a result of action (recognition through solidarity), the model of feminist politics I want to fashion from Arendtian political theory requires an investment in the *interpersonal* recognition of specific claims made by unique individuals (recognition through agency).  This is not to say that we need to know personally, or intimately, every other who shares our concerns (with whom we act in concert); it is to say, rather, that we understand those others as unique configurations of a number of intersecting narratives.  We recognise, in other words, that human beings inhabit a condition of plurality, wherein there are as many discrete points of view as there are discrete persons.

Arendt's insistence on plurality is very helpful for understanding the universally radical difference between subjects.  Political action would not be possible in a human community defined by sameness.  Action in concert brings about a solidarity that is defined by the recognition of uniqueness, rather than by the resolution of various perspectives into a single narrative.  Arendt writes: 'the unitedness of many into one is basically antipolitical; it is the very opposite of the togetherness prevailing in political…communities.'[217]  If we shared an essential sameness then we should not need politics at all because we could understand and anticipate one another's needs without discussing them.  The kind of sameness we do share, according to Arendt, is just the

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[217] Arendt 1958, 214-215.

sameness that comes with being human.[218]  The essential similarity between humans is *uniqueness*.  This condition of distinct uniqueness lends itself to collective action because interaction lends itself to commonality, to the formulation of shared goals and the articulation of shared needs.  There is in Arendt's politics a constant back-and-forth between distinction (shared uniqueness) and equality (sharing the space in which to voice concerns).

Amy Allen endorses such a reading of Arendt for feminist politics.  She illustrates the Arendtian paradigm of (non-)identity politics with an example: Arendt's own political engagement with questions of Jewish identity.  When Arendt was awarded the Lessing Prize in Hamburg in 1968, she gave an address in which she remarked that when one is attacked as a Jew, one must respond as a Jew:

> …the basically simple principle in question here is one that is particularly hard to understand in times of defamation and persecution: the principle that one can resist only in terms of the identity that is under attack.  Those who reject such identifications on the part of a hostile world may feel wonderfully superior to the world, but their superiority is then truly no longer of this world; it is the superiority of a more or less well-equipped cloud-cuckoo-land.[219]

For Arendt, the only way to respond to an attack on one's identity was to *affirm* that identity.  To respond to attacks on one's Jewishness with an appeal to universal humanity (as in, 'we are all humans—Jewishness is irrelevant') is to ignore the political reality that Jews are subject to systematic discrimination and oppression.  Identifying as Jew under these circumstances does not imply static or essential sameness with others who identify as Jews; rather, it is a statement of a political fact.  The category of Jewishness becomes

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[218] We are the same 'in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.' Ibid., 8.

[219] Arendt 1968, 18.

the most important aspect of one's personal identity if one is attacked as a Jew[220]; but in other circumstances, the category of Jewishness is unstable, with no fixed meaning. Identification with a collective identity, therefore, facilitates resistance to systems of discrimination, oppression or domination. Solidarity arises out of sustained identification with political narratives, even though such narratives can be reductive.

To say that Jewishness is an unstable category and a political fact, however, is not to say that Jewishness is nothing more than a momentary posture. Jewishness, like womanhood, is unstable because it might mean something radically different to one person than it does to another; indeed, it will mean something radically different to the same person at different times over the course of her or his life. It is political because it involves a public disclosure of Jewishness—an appearance to others as Jewish. But it is also a consistently meaningful category which may contribute to identity formation in a number of ways over time. To answer as Jew is not merely an iteration of some arbitrary fact; rather, it is to speak from the point of view of one aspect of an enormously complex personal identity. And, recall, that each of us is unique—the facts that add up to our distinct identities, which, again, Arendt refers to as our whoness, are so varied as to be infinite and therefore unlistable. We can stack up fact upon fact about *what* a person is without ever arriving at a complete description of *who* she is.

4.2 Conditions for Narrative Agency

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[220] 'Rather, I was only acknowledging a political fact through which my being a member of this group outweighed all other questions of personal identity or rather had decided them in favor of anonymity, of namelessness.' Arendt 1968, 18.

The space of action is not guaranteed to us. A key theme in Arendt's work is that the constant exchange of ideas, opinions, and judgments between humans sustains the public sphere, where we appear to one another as unique individuals. Narrative agency (the capacity of an individual to 'make sense' of herself as an 'I'), therefore, depends on the existence of the world in which the 'I' is sure to appear. In the following, I argue that action is predicated on the conditions of plurality, natality, and narrativity; the practical narrative understanding of oneself as an 'I' depends on these things, in other words. By the same token, these three aspects of action in Arendt reveal the extent to which the 'I' is constituted relationally; Arendt's account of action confirms the relational personal ontology proposed in the first half of this thesis.

## 4.2.1 Plurality

The paradox of plurality—the sameness-in-difference Arendt insists is a basic condition of human action—enables us to make claims based on collective identity without being reduced to or oppressed by static accounts of collective identity. In this section, I will expand upon Arendt's account of action and on Arendt's account of plurality as a condition of action as she lays it out in *The Human Condition*. There is no guarantee, for Arendt, that humans will preserve the conditions for action. As we shall see in Chapter 6, which examines possible conditions for the eradication of agency, human life descended in the concentration camps into something less-than-human; there was no world in the camps: no meaning and no action. The danger of such world-poverty is, as Arendt is writing *The Human Condition*, still very much in her mind. The crisis of World War II

has passed, but the dangers of technology run amok, made luridly manifest in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are looming larger than ever as the world settled into its Cold War.  There was, moreover, the intractable international dilemma of protecting and enforcing human rights, a problem which Arendt gives an in-depth treatment in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.  And, finally, Arendt laments the rise of 'the social', which she defined as the infiltration of the public sphere and which she associated with the undifferentiated and thoughtless sentiment of the masses.

Arendt is thus concerned about the *loss* of politics, a loss she sees as having already begun.  The stakes are, for her, very high.  Between individuals in Nazi Germany, the conditions for politics disappear completely.  Individuals are not able to recognise concerns they hold in common, are not able to articulate their differences productively, and are not able to come to meaningful agreement about what matters to them.  Furthermore, in the advancement of science, Arendt sees tendencies in public discourse away from meaning and into abstraction—as in the invention of a mathematical language which cannot be translated into human speech or the preoccupation with making new things (bombs, spaceships) without pausing to reflect upon, and converse about, their meaning.  The world, which we construct through our shared understanding, cannot exist without this reflection and conversation.  Truths (be they mathematical, philosophical, or religious) may exist beyond the realm of the articulable, Arendt tells us, but it is only in speaking to one another and collaboratively creating meaning between themselves that humans can have a world.  As Arendt puts it, 'whatever men do or know or experience

can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about.'[221]  Making sense between

ourselves is the product of action.[222]

Action, along with labour and work, are the three activities of human life; and all

three of these are necessary to sustain the public sphere, where action takes place.

Labour arises out of necessity.  It involves the endless repetition of the tasks necessary

for survival.  The cycle of labour doesn't produce anything that lasts; the effort of labour

expends itself in labouring and must begin anew as soon as the task at hand is finished.

Arendt extends these tasks beyond common conceptions of labour—planting and sowing

fields, scouring pots and pans, caring for children and the elderly—to the modern

drudgery of cubicle life, which, she insists is lived even by 'presidents, kings…prime

ministers… [and] intellectuals' who think of what they do not as work but as 'making a

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[221] Arendt 1958, 4.

[222] I am chiefly concerned in this chapter with the conditions for agency and thus with Arendt's discussion of the human condition of action.  It is also important to introduce the conditions of labour and work as well because all three aspects of the human condition are necessary to sustain the world.  Arendt says that humans have always, since the beginning of time, sought freedom from the necessity of labour.  This has caused some to label her an elitist (Kelz 2016) since an overwhelming number of human beings in the Global South and among the poor of every country have very little time that could be properly identified as free from necessity.  I think such a critique is important to keep in mind, but it seems to me that it may also be elitist to suggest that those human beings whose lives are spent mostly in labour do not engage in meaningful political action through various forms of community organisation.  Better to endorse the normative claim that people should have time to engage in politics—that is, they *should* be able to spend time discussing between themselves the things that matter to them.  Another interesting (though unrelated) question about the relationship between labour, work, and action is where to fit anti-political directions in political theory. Might mankind now be seeking freedom from action?  Could we conceptualise political philosophy that emphasises withdrawal from the public sphere (Hardt and Negri, 2005) or anarchic mysticism (Critchley, 2009) or decreation of the self (Kearney, 2011) as a search for freedom *from* action?

living'.[223]  People in these exalted positions, who are liberated by modern convenience

from the back-breaking labour of days gone by, do not make use of this freedom from

necessity because they view their offices *in terms of necessity* and not as contexts for

creating the material world (which is built through work) or creating new meaning about

the world (which happens during action).  Arendt's primary injunction is that we all must

'think what we are doing' in order to preserve the freedom that arises out of meaningful

political interaction.[224]

The condition for labour is simply being alive (each of us must labour to stay

alive), but work involves the creation of something tangible and enduring.  Work is the

human activity that creates a *world* of non-natural (artificial) things, things which often

outlive the humans who make them.  Work liberates labour from its futility by creating

this stable and durable world full of tools and artefacts.  Artists, craftspeople,

intellectuals—anyone who produces a concrete object—performs the activity of work.

These concrete objects amount to more than just their uses; they are imbued with

meaning as things.  This meaning, which arises out of a thing having a place in the world

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[223] Arendt 1958, 5.  If intellectuals and artists (who ought to be involved in the activity of
work) and politicians (who ought to be involved in action) can be said, in fact, to be
trapped in necessity, carrying out the drudgery of fruitless labour, can we not perhaps say
that there are those who practice activities previously seen as the province of labour *in
such a way as to turn them into action*?   Might we, for example, re-imagine carers,
farmers, and waste managers as ethics of care feminists, slow food advocates, and
environmental activists?  In other words, as champions of action?

[224] Arendt 1958, 5.  Arendt broadly distinguishes between human action (the *vita activa*)
and human thought (the *vita contemplativa*). The nature of thinking, and the distinction
between thinking and acting, are important leitmotifs throughout Arendt's work (a major
preoccupation, of course in her latter work *The Life of the Mind*, but see also her lecture
series at Notre Dame "The Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution",
especially "Philosophy and Politics"). Thinking is, in many ways, the very highest human
activity.  It occurs prior to speech and action, and so it is a pre-political activity but an
incredibly important one because the meaning we create in action arises out of the care
taken when we think.

rather than just being a means to a further end, gives the thing a kind of dignity.[225]  The

world that work creates is the context for action.

Action is the activity that goes on directly between human beings, unmediated by

the natural world or by artificial things.  If life itself is the condition for labour, and

worldliness is the condition for work, then *plurality* is the basic condition for action.

Because there exist multiple, discrete human beings, there is necessarily interaction

between them.  This point is at once obvious and profound.  Of course, plurality is the

foundation of all things political, for what is politics if not the activity of creating

meaning between people?  But in drawing our attention also to the *distinction* inherent in

plurality, Arendt shows us that politics is contingent on its having unique practitioners.

Action, as we have seen, would be unnecessary if it weren't for the irreproducible

difference between each individual.  If we were many, but a homogenous many, then we

would have no need for the creation of meaning through speech and action.  We would

understand one another intuitively because we would have the same thoughts, dreams,

and desires.  It is only because we are, each of us, unique, that we are able to act. *All*

*action* (and because only action is properly political, all politics) arises out of shared

uniqueness.

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[225] Arendt herself points out that all three human activities are 'somehow related to politics' 1958, 7.  There is much to say on the importance of work for/in action and also the importance of *thought* in work.  Particularly interesting to our discussion on Arendt and agency is the relationship between thought and the creation of works of art: 'Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency, as exchange transforms the naked greed of desire and usage transforms the desperate longing of needs—until they all are fit to enter the world and to be transformed into things, to become reified.  In each instance, a human capacity which by its very nature is world-open and communicative transcends and releases into the world a passionate intensity from its imprisonment within the self.' 1959, 168.

Since action always concerns what goes on directly between human beings (the shared being or *inter esse* of human beings), unmediated by the natural world or material things, action is always, in a very important sense, *interaction*. Plurality is, therefore, constitutive of the political or public sphere. Existence in spheres other than the public—in the private sphere, for example, and in what Arendt calls the social—need not be defined in terms of plurality. Plurality is not guaranteed by human existence, even though it is a natural condition of human existence. Plurality can be collapsed into sameness when the arena for action disappears. It is only in the public sphere that we are able to act in such a way that we appear to others in our uniqueness.

So, for Arendt, action cannot take place outside of the public sphere. Contemplation, childbirth, art-making, field-plowing, shop-keeping: none of these things necessarily involves action. They are human activities with no intrinsically political content. However, the moment we act by inserting ourselves into the political sphere (and such an insertion is, Arendt will argue, ultimately unavoidable), we confirm the distinction-cum-equality of plurality. To act in the world is to embody one's distinction *from* others and to have this distinction perceived *by* others. In other words, plurality is the immediate context for action. Action requires both participation and recognition. Appearing in public in this way also demands that we be *seen* by those others in the public sphere.

As a resource for feminist theory, plurality shows us that participation and recognition in the public sphere can provide both solidarity and empowerment. Action in plurality may involve the alliance of one's own interests with the interests of others. These interests can be brought forth from the realms of the private or the social into the

space of public appearance; in other words, they can *become* political. Participation with

other members of a plurality and recognition by those other members as unique in the

public sphere add up to an elusive goal, however. Often, misrecognition or lack of

recognition get in the way of an agent's successfully appearing in a public space; get in

the way, in other words, of that agent participating in politics. Take the example of

Jewishness introduced above. A person perceived only as Jew has no choice but to

respond as Jew; lack of recognition artificially reduces the person to one aspect of her

identity. This reduction in identity obscures the person's unique whoness, and it reduces

the person's agency. She is still able to participate in the public sphere, but she is limited

in this action because her uniqueness is not fully recognised.

A free public space emerges when action in concert gives rise to both

participation and appearance in all participants of a particular plurality. Such public

spaces cannot be predetermined or expected—indeed, the power of plurality is that it can

create public spaces whenever and wherever its constituents act in concert. Recall that

plurality is a condition of action because human beings would not need to speak or act if

each did not represent a unique perspective.[226] Seyla Benhabib describes the process this

way:

> It is not a space in any topographical or institutional sense: a town hall or a city
> square where people do not 'act in concert' is not a public space in this Arendtian
> sense. But a private dining room in which people gather to hear a *Samizdat* or in
> which dissidents meet with foreigners become public spaces; just as a field or a
> forest can also become public space if they are the object and the location of an

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[226] 'Thus it is also true that man's capacity to act, and especially to act in concert, is
extremely useful for purposes of self-defense of pursuit of interests; but if nothing more
were at stake here than to use action as a means to an end, it is obvious that the same end
could be much more easily attained in violence…' Arendt, 1958, 179.

'action in concert,' of a demonstration to stop the construction of a highway or a military airbase, for example.[227]

Recognition through speech and action gives agents the confidence to risk further political participation.  It is empowering to feel one's point of view coalesce with that of distinct others through acting together.  I feel, as my voice joins the voice of others in demonstrating against the construction of a highway, the power of so many aligned but distinct perspectives.  Acting in concert is empowering because it gives one the sense that one's speech and actions are recognised and accepted by others.  The more one's community listens to and supports one, the greater her sense of agency.

There is, in this picture of plurality, a great deal of spontaneity.  It is impossible to arrange beforehand the public space necessary for political action.  It arises organically, out of the negotiation of differences, and coalesces into a contingently shared interest, which plays out through action in concert.  Any issue can become public (and thus political) if it is subject to the interests of members of a plurality.  Matters that Arendt herself did not see as political—the claims and concerns she relegated to social or private life, which often, to our eyes, seem obviously political, such as the issue of desegregation in the American South in the 1960s—we can rewrite *as* political because the struggle to include an issue on the public agenda *is itself a political struggle*.  Problems that seem at first glance innately private—such a woman's access to birth control—or innately social—such as an artist like Beyoncé's identification as a feminist—can become matters of public concern and can be treated by action in concert in a plurality.  As Benhabib puts it: 'What is important here is not so much what public discourse is about as the way in which this discourse takes place…[A]t stake is the reflexive questioning of issues by all

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[227] Benhabib 1992, 93.

those affected by their foreseeable consequences and the recognition of their right to do so.'[228]  We can take from Arendt the process of politically discussing interests held in common in a plurality without being overly concerned with the boundaries Arendt herself placed on 'the political'.


4.2.2 Natality

The second condition for narrative agency I take from Arendt's work on action is natality, which may be summed up as 'beginning'.  The model of public space facilitated by plurality arises out of conversation and connection between distinct individual agents.  Disclosure of an individual's identity in the public sphere, in turn, is a result of that individual's uniqueness, or whoness.  Whoness, as we have seen, is not just difference or otherness; it is the distinction of each human being from every other human being who is, was, or ever will be.[229]  This distinction is revealed when humans speak or act.  In other words, through speech and action, an agent *appears* to others as a distinct individual.[230]  Such appearance, though it 'rests on initiative' is irrepressible: 'it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human.'[231]  To cease speaking and acting in the world of other humans is to cease to be human at all (this kind of withdrawal is extremely rare—indeed, it is nearly impossible).  It is true that we are often misunderstood by others when we speak or act and that speech and action do not always

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[228] Benhabib 1992, 95.
[229] Arendt 1958, 176.
[230] Recall that the necessary context of this appearance is the world.  I will have more to say on the mutual interdependence of whoness and the world in my discussion of loneliness in Chapter 6.
[231] Arendt 1958, 176.

guarantee us full participation in or recognition by public life; and yet, *we cannot help* but insert ourselves into public life through speech and action.

Natality, then, may be understood as the irrepressible initiative to appear in the world. As Arendt puts it:

> This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labour, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.[232]

Peg Birmingham (2006) refers to natality as an 'ontological event'—it happens again and again as a matter of course. Birmingham points out that this event contains within it two basic principles: the principle of *givenness* and the principle of *publicness*. On the one hand, natality is the innate capacity of each individual to begin in the world, given by birth. On the other hand, natality is the animating principle of action in the public sphere. It is the irresistible tendency toward judgment, law-making, debate, and all of the other accoutrements of political world-building.[233] This analysis is germane to my identification of natality as a condition for narrative agency because it reinforces the notion that narrative agency is both an irreducible capacity (it is given) and a constant political capacity (it introduces the sense made by the 'I' into the space shared by a plurality of 'I's'). In Chapter 6, I argue that narrative agency works on two registers: the ontological and the political. Narrative agency involves, in other words, both the mere fact of existing in the world and the insertion of oneself into the world through speech and action.

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[232] Arendt 1958, 177.
[233] Birmingham 2006, 12-17.

Being born into the world, having a beginning ourselves, is what, for Arendt makes us able to begin again and again.  Each insertion on our own initiative of ourselves into the public space is like a second birth, and our capacity to assert this initiative is, importantly, a corollary of us being born into the human world in the first place.  Human beings all possess the capacity to begin something new.  Further, human beings will exercise capacity—they will, as I argued in Chapter 3, makes sense of themselves in the world, no matter how confusing the world may be and even when the political discourse of that world is impoverished.  Even without mutual recognition, in other words, the initiative to appear in the world is given in each of us.  We tend toward sense-making, no matter how difficult it is to make sense.  The capacity to begin again, therefore, is given by birth, but so the unique whoness that is disclosed through action.  Because each of us is born distinct from every other human being, we possess an individual whoness.  It appears to others and is recognised by others, but it is not articulable by or perceptible to the agent herself; *nor is it ever fully determined*.  Whoness is disclosed again and again through action; *who one is becomes clear through what one does*.  Who someone is changes over the course of her life, but the possession of a disclosable whoness is given and constant.

The 'who' here is different from the practical self-conception one has in action and from the political narratives that might describe aspects of one's identity.  It refers, rather, to the appearance of the unique individual before others.  Natality carries with it 'a startling unexpectedness'.[234]   Action is not to be confused with making, which is the

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[234] Ibid., 178.

pursuit of a means to an end. Political life cannot be planned: it cannot be the subject of making. Rather, political life arises spontaneously out of the continuous introduction of (unpredictable) new speech and new action into the public sphere. Political life is always marked by unpredictability and uncertainty, by action multiplying from more action. The unpredictability of natality endows us with an unwieldy freedom: the freedom 'of being able to begin something new and of not being able to control or even foretell its consequences'.[235] We are free to begin, but we are never free from the consequences of what we begin.

Action inevitably produces both consequences and further action. What we introduce into the world through speech and action remains in the world. We cannot reverse our actions (though, Arendt tells us, we do have two ways to mediate the consequences of those actions: forgiveness and promising). Natality lends to action what Arendt calls its 'process character'—human beings continuously introduce into the world new speech and new action. Arendt sees this as perhaps the most salient characteristic of all human life; for, without it, we would tend inevitably toward death:

> The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction *if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new*, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.[236]

The power to act is ontologically rooted in the faculty of natality, which Arendt calls 'the miracle that saves the world'.[237] The constant introduction of newness into the world by human agents ensures infinite possibility. No speech or action is the *final* speech or

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[235] Arendt 1958, 235.
[236] Arendt 1958, 246, emphasis added.
[237] Arendt 1958, 247.

action; each human being possesses the ineradicable capacity to introduce speech and action into the world.

The initiative to appear again and again in public, to articulate one's concerns to others, to discuss what goes on between us, is an irreducible human capacity. We know each human being possesses this capacity because action in the form of self-disclosure is a necessary part of human life. Narrative agency, then, is guaranteed in natality. Natality's unpredictability, furthermore, endows the agent with a radical freedom. She is always, in every situation (even, as we shall see, in situations where her agency is severely compromised by lack of a community to sustain her), *capable* of introducing new meaning into the world through speech and action. [238] The new meaning introduced into the world through natality aligns itself with the speech and action of others in a plurality and, out of these aligned but distinct interests arises action in concert.


4.2.3 Narrativity

The third condition for narrative agency I take from Arendt is narrativity. Understanding narrativity requires that we zoom ut from the mechanics of action and ask: how do we give an account of politics? The picture of action that has emerged of agency as arising out of natality at work within a plurality is not complete. The sustained exercise of narrative agency results in a narrative, which makes sense of what has happened in action. As I have mentioned, 'narrativity' is not a word that Arendt herself uses.

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[238] 'A life without speech and without action, on the other hand—and this is the only way of life that has in earnest has renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word—is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.' Arendt 1958, 176.

Benhabib uses the term to refer to Arendt's narrative understanding of how we preserve meaning that arises in action (Arendt herself calls this 'story-telling').[239]   Narrativity, according to Benhabib, is 'the immersion of action in a web of human relationships.'[240] It refers to the mode of understanding action; it describes, in other words, the complex relationship between an agent and the meaning that she takes away from action.  It may refer to either (1) a story about action (this can be the practical notion of narrative identity discussed in Chapter 2 or a more general account of what has happened in action) (2) a story that emerges about the agent.  This second aspect of narrativity is present both in the disclosure of who the agent is in discrete, unique actions and as the coalescence of a lifetime of actions into a person's life story.   The self is never the author or producer of her own story, and the elements of who she is amass over a lifetime of action.[241] Narrativity is therefore not simply an aspect of action; rather, it is the register in which our understanding of action takes place.

Though she does not name it, Arendt gives a very interesting account of narrativity in a section of *The Human Condition* entitled "The Web of Relationships and the Enacted Stories".  Whoness, she reminds us, is an intangible quality.  As soon as we try to say who someone is, we begin instead to say what she is.  We name her character

[239] Arendt 1958, 175.
[240] Benhabib 1992, 127.
[241] Whoness is not a life story for the self to tell: it is a story about the self that emerges from the total of that self's experience in the world. Other people can get closer to narrating the whoness of a self, but to narrate another's whoness is also difficult, due to our tendency to reduce an individual's unique whoness to aspects of her identity, or her whatness).  Arendt writes: '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 an agent, but this agent is not the author or producer.  Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.' Arendt 1958, 184.

traits, facts about her appearance, her age, her race, her religion, etc. The agent's

uniqueness is proven by the mechanics of action; that is to say, by plurality (her

distinctness from any other human being) and natality (her ineradicable capacity to create

something new through speech and deed). Not being able to describe fully the agent's

whoness presents us with a problem, namely: politics (inter-human affairs) are comprised

of speech and action, but the essence of that speech and action can never be fully

understood, articulated or explained. There is a 'notorious uncertainty', Arendt writes,

'of all affairs that go on between men directly, without the intermediary, stabilizing and

solidifying influence of things'.[242] Unlike work, which produces a concrete and tangible

world of things, action results in narrative, which we might describe as the fleeting

coalescence of new meaning between agents.

This new meaning is always connected to the agent who creates it, such that

action and speech 'retain their agent-revealing capacity' even when they are about

matters other than the agents themselves.[243] New meaning about problems or issues or

other interests is always also 'a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent'.[244] Action

always involves human beings speaking directly to one another; it does not leave an

objective material world in its wake. It takes place in between people—it arises

spontaneously and fades away between people. The space in between people where

action takes place is, Arendt insists, every bit as much a world as the tangible world

created by craftsmen, builders, artists, and so on. She calls it the 'web of human

relationships' and points out that every disclosure of whoness occurs against the

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[242] Arendt 1958, 182.
[243] Ibid., 182.
[244] Ibid., 181.

backdrop of such an already existing web of human relationships, which absorb much of disclosure's uniqueness. This web of relationships consists of already held perceptions of the agent and norms that govern the agent's behaviour, beliefs, and emotions.

Whenever an agent discloses herself through speech or action in the public sphere, she reveals her whoness. That whoness, however, is not something that springs into existence *ex nihilo* in the moment of action. It is, instead, an expression of the agent's already existing and complex self.[245] This self is comprised of a lifetime of actions, which is a kind of story. The story of this action is not, however, the agent's to tell. She is the protagonist, but she is not the author. Recall that the disclosure of 'who' one is imperceptible to the agent herself. An agent's whoness appears to *others* when she acts. This backdrop of human relationships is often oblivious to the newness of action because the people within it are preoccupied with various desires, emotions, unthinking reactions and expectations. Hence, a second problem arises out of the disclosure of whoness: action, the purpose of which is to create new meaning, does not always achieve this goal. Agents cannot resist the initiative to act, to insert themselves in the world through speech and action, but the world is very rarely open to the kind of politics that occurs when, say, a conversation between people who identify as women allows us to shift the meaning of the category of woman, to hearken back to the earlier example of the trans woman who seeks solidarity with other women.

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[245] Contrast this appearance of the unique self to others in action with the practical self-conception the agent has when she acts. Both are ways of thinking about narrative identity. In the first, others perceive, and construct narratives about, the identity of the individual in question. In the second, the individual has in mind a practical narrative identity (an idea of herself as a self).

Most of the time, agents do not enter a public space that fosters universal participation and recognition. People in a web of relationships misunderstand one another, fail to listen, conform to already determined political narratives, are concerned with other things. This is an important point for two reasons. First, because it suggests that there are better and worse ways to interact with one another, where, say, being receptive to the capacity of another to articulate new meaning is a better way and relying on pre-learned mores and habits without giving new ideas their due is a worse way. And, second, because it gives us a way to talk about the irrepressibility of action, regardless of its political outcome. No human being can resist the initiative to act in the world, and each human being is unique and has the potential to say something utterly new.

Benhabib's assertion that narrativity is the *mode* of action makes more sense once we understand action as an enacted story within a web of relationships. The web of stories is always already there, and the appearance of the agent within that web is always the enacting of a story. The situatedness of the self within the web is narrativity. This mode is the same, no matter the scale of the story. It is the task of the theorist, then, to piece together a coherent account of action even as she recognises that the real stories disclosed in action are untranscribable. Not only does narrativity describe the lifelong process of identity formation through action; it also refers to the way in which we try *to make sense of this process* (whether as individual selves or as theorists). As Benhabib puts it:

> The narrative structure of action and of human identity means that the continuing retelling of the past, its continued reintegration into the story of the present, its reevaluation, reassessment, and reconfiguration are ontological conditions of the

kinds of beings we are…narrative is the modality through which time is experienced.[246]

Both the agent and the theorist—or the spectator, which is the name Arendt gives to the thinker who tries to makes sense of action through judgment—are engaged in constructing narratives all the time.[247]  Arendt explicitly compared her job as theorist to the task of the storyteller.  This task, which she likened to diving for pearls, includes mining the past, and everything one knows of the past, for meaning.[248]

Even though we cannot ever fully articulate who an individual is, and even though, most of the time, an individual's appearance in the world will not result in the kind of coalescence of interests that precedes action in concert, the end result of a lifetime of speech and action 'will always be a story with enough coherence to be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear to be'.[249] Action cannot help but produce stories about individuals, groups, even history itself.  Just as there exists no fully articulable 'who' in the story of a life, there exists no fully articulable subject in the study of history or of political theory.  Indeed, Arendt argues that the subject of political philosophy—'humankind'—is as much an abstraction as the indefinable whoness that animates each of us.  History presents to us a mirage very

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[246] Benhabib 1990, 187-188.

[247] I discuss the relationship between agent and spectator at length in Chapter 5.

[248] Arendt 1968, 193.  Benhabib describes Arendt's understanding of political philosophy as story-telling:  'The key here is Arendt's odd methodology which conceives of political thought as "storytelling."  Viewed in this light, her "story" of the transformation of public space is an "exercise" of thought.  Such thought exercises dig under the rubble of history in order to recover those "pearls" of past experience, with their sedimented and hidden layers of meaning, such as to cull from them a story that can orient the mind in the future. The vocation of the theorist as "story teller" is the unifying thread of Arendt's political and philosophical analyses from the origins of totalitarianism to her reflections on the French and American revolutions to her theory of public space…' Benhabib, 1992, 91.

[249] Arendt 1958, 97.

similar to the one that arises out of trying to describe whoness: as soon as we try to tell as story about who the hero of this or that historical event, we give a partial and/or reductive account of that hero. There exists a coherent story about mankind, perhaps, but because we are embedded in that story, we do not have the authority to tell it. The theorist is always involved, therefore, in articulating narratives in the form of contingent political judgments about experience in such a way that they are communicable to others.

Thinking of feminist theory as an exercise in narrativity is just as exciting a prospect now as it was when Benhabib first proposed it in the early 1990s. By this account, theory is and extension of our narrative agency; that is, it is something we always already do when we try and make sense of our place in the world. Narrativity is the process of sense making that connects the initiative of natality to collective understanding of speech and action that arises within a plurality. It is also the sense-making that accompanies the construction of an agent's idea of herself and the sense-making that accompanies the theorist's construction of a model of politics. The whole story, whether about a self or about some aspect of political philosophy, is never completely articulable or communicable, since it only rises up during action and then fades away. The story that arises through narrativity, on the other hand, is capable of bringing up the 'pearls' of meaning that action leaves behind.


4.3 Toward a Model of Feminist Politics


Let us now return to the relevance of Arendt as a resource for a post-identity feminist politics, in light of our reading of Arendt on action. Recall that Arendt enables us to

think about politics in a way that neither essentialises identity (that is, treats identity as a category determined prior to politics) nor imagines that the identity narratives shared in common with others are escapable (identification with certain political narratives is an important aspect of solidarity). The agent who, through natality, possesses the capacity to introduce repeatedly radically new ways of understanding the world, negotiates this identity/non-identity politics within a plurality of other agents. She participates in feminist politics through the public articulation of particular narratives about the experience of being a woman. Where these narratives resonate with others, their subject becomes an interest held in common by others. These others organise around the political importance of these relevant claims and pursue social change called for by these claims.

Marieke Borren (2013) offers a detailed account of an action-based Arendtian feminist politics. Such a politics is more appropriately conceived of as a set of civic practices, rather than as a field of social movements. Organisation according to shared interests leads to action in concert. If political power arises out of action in concert, then units of power within a plurality take the form of voluntary associations or councils. These groups are identifiable by their aligned interests rather than by institutional organisation or by holding in common some static, essential identity or set of identities. Associations spring up spontaneously out of aligned interests and then vanish. Borren gives several examples, from the revolutionary councils of the French Revolution, to the civil rights activists of the early 1960s, to the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s. Citizens within these councils enjoy participation and recognition: they enjoy public freedom within the bounds of a particular association.

Inside the framework of the council is the coalescence of distinct individual interests into the making of mutual promises and purposeful organisation. The importance of individual action within the plurality is secondary to the communicative action that arises out of aligned individual interests. Importantly, this means that politics grows up around aligned interests, rather than trying to force a consensus out of its constituents or attempting to motivate action based on shared identities or ideologies. As Borren puts it, '…unlike identity politics, council politics is not based on substantive collective identities or ideological commitments, but concerns the practical, ad-hoc organisations of citizens pursuing "actual" and "short-term" goals, and disappears as soon as these goals have been achieved'.[250] Council politics, or action in concert, is always short-lived (it matters as long as the interest in question presents a specific problem or issue), but that does not mean it is ineffective or easily exhausted. Indeed, for Arendt, it is the insistence upon conceiving of politics in terms of social justice (in terms of identity) that has led to the impoverishment of the public sphere. Council politics arises spontaneously around a certain problem or set of needs *and will continue to do so ad infinitum* because we have an infinitely shifting set of interests in common. As long as there is public space, there will be action in concert.[251]

Each wave of feminism has involved active engagement through interests held in common. Feminist solidarity has been the ground up coalescence of claims made by women. The formation of council politics, Borren posits, has the following characteristics: 'spontaneous emergence, associative action, revolutionary pathos…the

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[250] Borren 2013, 206.
[251] In Chapter 6, I discuss in more detail the necessary conditions for public space and argue that communication between agents and the world are mutually sustaining.

very urgent sense that something new and empowering is happening, and…a short-lived existence'.[252]  This is not to say that there is no common thread connecting one feminist politics with the next; rather, feminist politics springs up differently in different publics, depending on which issues or problems are pressing for those publics.  Each politics is feminist because it addresses a 'particular *worldly* issue that affects women differently from men', but each politics deals with or acts out this issue on its own terms.[253]

A major problem with this politics immediately comes to mind.  First—and this is a problem pertinent to both solidarity and agency—is the concern that an agent must have access to a public sphere in order to participate.  Arendt might frame this as a problem of freedom, which she sees as both participation in public and recognition by other members of the public.  Unencumbered speech and unencumbered action performed in a vacuum are not meaningfully free.  Speech and action performed without access to a community that recognises and sustains one are not free either.  Marginalised agents, therefore, will have a harder time communicating their interests, and will be less likely to find others who share those interests.  Borren suggests that we reconceive what are usually thought to be social problems of misrecognition and injustice along these lines such that they become problems of lacking political freedom to participate in a public sphere.  Reconceiving systematic problems of discrimination, oppression, and exclusion as *political* problems—as problems of freedom—shifts the goal of feminism from the recognition of collective identities to universal political participation.

The problem remains that this model of feminist politics does not go far enough toward accounting for the difficulties many women face in claiming their freedom to

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[252] Borren 2013, 207.
[253] Ibid., 207, emphasis in original.

participate in public action. They may be prevented by any number of asymmetries of power from finding meaningful counterpublics in which to voice their claims, but they may also suffer a lack of confidence that they will appear to others as unique individuals in the first place (as is often the case with severely traumatised subjects). Individuals who are kept out of the public sphere due to group marginalisation are not included or recognised simply by identifying their group as marginalised. Addressing social justice is an important aspect of encouraging political participation, but it is not enough to ensure that marginalised or traumatised subjects will embrace the freedom to participate in politics. The struggle to create publics through ensuring participation and recognition is foundational for associational politics.

Resources for addressing this problem may be found within Arendt's work. The politics of action in concert does not assume that a *lasting* freedom is attained through access to the public. Rather, the struggle for freedom is constant and shifting and depends on risking one's opinion in public again and again. That this opinion will be communicable to others can never be guaranteed by membership to a group. Instead, it is involves a perpetual risk that one will not be recognised or understood by others. What sets Arendt apart from feminist political theorists 'is that she focuses on what happens *after* social justice and recognition have been attained, whereas most feminist philosophers tend to stop there, pretending that the job is done.'[254] This is an alluring aspect of Arendtian politics, but a tricky one, since problems of marginalisation are conventionally perceived as problems of identity recognition rather than problems of participation. A shift from thinking in terms of identity to thinking in terms of freedom

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[254] Borren 2013, 209, emphasis added.

requires a demanding level of civic engagement, but it also enhances the potential for individual agency and meaningful collective action.

I have tried to do a few related things in this chapter. First of all, I have endorsed the point of view of those feminists who look to Arendtian political theory as a productive counter approach to identity politics. Arendt's politics allow us to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics, which include essentialising identity, projecting sameness when there is none, and privileging claims based on collective identity at the expense of meaningful interactions between individuals. Identity politics is further problematic, I have argued, because it fails to provide agents with a way to express the complex and unique identity each of us has by virtue of our birth. Who a person is, by Arendt's model, is both a real and perceivable entity and also an intangible and contingent. This fluctuation between identity and non-identity makes room for a more nuanced account of politics because individual agents are able to align themselves (and re-align themselves) according to shared interests that arise between them rather than according to pre-determined things held in common.

The negotiation of interests held in common involves the sustained exercise of narrative agency, which is made possible by three fundamental aspects of Arendt's theory of action—plurality, natality, and narrativity. Plurality is the field of uniqueness which forms the context for action. Agents within a plurality are able to act in concert to create new meaning in the public sphere. Natality is the inescapable intiative to appear within this public sphere as a unique agent. A model of politics that privileges plurality and natality is marked by the potential for increased association and more effective and

meaningful collective action. The agent within such a politics is, through her freedom to participate in this association, is empowered by the recognition of her uniqueness by others. The mode through which this action-based politics is expressed is narrativity.

I have gestured toward the possibility of understanding narrativity—which is the mode through which all action, and not just effective action, is expressed—as progressive feminist methodology. Arendt's conception of herself as a storyteller, and Benhabib's account of critique as narrative are intriguing foundations of a feminist methodology that privileges agency, power, and freedom. Within this framework, we can theorise productive political action and give an account of the shared interests that coalesce into meaningful politics. Narrative agency, as I have defended it over the course of this thesis—as the individual's capacity to make sense of herself as an 'I' over time and in relation to other 'I's'—depends on all three aspects of Arendtian action. The narrative agent is situated within a plurality, is able to create meaning through natality, and understands herself as an 'I' in time through narrativity.

# Chapter 5: A New Feminist Theory of Judgment

In the last chapter, I raised some concerns with a model of feminist politics based on action in concert: the problem of access to a public sphere in which to act (the problem of making narratives political) and the problem of having the confidence to enter into a public sphere at all (the problem of making narratives communicable). I address both of these problems in this chapter through a discussion of judgment. Judgment is the public articulation of a coherent, considered opinion. Making a judgment is a narrative exercise: it involces extracting meaning from action. Voicing a political judgment, then, means becoming what Arendt calls a 'spectator', someone who reflects on action in a prolonged way, rather than merely participating in it as an agent.

The meaning created through action is distilled through critical consideration of other perspectives and conversation into judgment. Feminist politics requires that we make feminist judgments. Think of the 'why we need feminism' social media hashtag, for example, which users attach to news items, opinions, or anecdotes that reveal perceived harms against women. It's a question about what feminism does, can, and should do for women. What harms can it diagnose and alleviate? What connections can it reveal? It seems to me that feminist judgment makes communicable something that has been previously incommunicable. That is, a feminist judgment involves the public articulation of something newly understandable about women and their experience. Consider, for example, Susan Brownmiller's account of the coining of the term 'sexual harassment'. As long as women have been in the workplace, they have experienced unwanted advances, inappropriate flirting from colleagues, being humiliated or demeaned

because of their gender; and yet, it wasn't until 1975 that a group of feminist activists at Cornell University came up with a single phrase that encompassed a widespread and systematic series of wrongs.  When an individual judges a particular behaviour to be sexual harassment, she is able to communicate the nature of this wrong to others because feminist conversation has made sexual harassment a commonly understandable kind of harm.[255]

But how can we evaluate the validity of this process, given the normative contingency that underpins our theory of agency?  Can we say that the narrative agent makes 'legitimate' political and moral judgments, considering the impossibility of nailing down universal criteria for legitimacy? Gendered norms and practices, such as the privileging of little girls' prettiness over their intellectual prowess, must be judged as harmful, unfair, and deleterious to feminism's goals of equal respect and empowerment for women, for instance.  But how can we make and validate these judgments?  Linda Zerilli frames the question this way: 'What am I doing, really, when I declare something "bad for women"?  What gives me so much as the idea that my judgment could be, or ought to be, accepted as valid by others, especially by people who do not share my particular cultural heritage or social location?'[256]  How, in other words, can we possibly assert that something is harmful for women, when feminism, as we have seen, encompasses a plurality of normative commitments (from the liberal to the postcolonial) and has long been ambivalent about the determinacy of the category 'woman'?  How, further, can a subject who is riddled with subordinating attachments to harmful gender

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[255] Miranda Fricker offers a thorough and instructive treatment of this collective definition of the harm of sexual harassment, 2007, 150-152.

[256] Zerilli, 2009: 298.  The wording of her question is an allusion to Susan Moller Okin's much discussed 1999 article, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?".

norms—think, for example, of a young female executive who has come to rely on sexual advances from a male boss as validation of her self worth—trust the validity of her *own* judgments about what is bad for other women and for herself? Finally, how we can we stand by our judgments about what is harmful for women when what is commonly understandable as harmful today may not be what is commonly understandable as harmful in the future?  Arendt's late-in-life work on judgment has been taken up by several feminists as a model for conceptualising a contextualised, intersubjective way to make judgments.[257]  Arendt is helpful in addressing these tricky questions of validity because, as we shall see, she gives us a way to think of judgments as intersubjectively valid; valid, in other words for a culturally and historically contextual community of subjects.

But what enables a subject to articulate a judgment in public in the first place? Who makes judgments about what is harmful to women?   About what is beneficial to women?  The theorist?  The activist?  The concerned citizen? For Arendt, it is the spectator who comes up with a coherently articulable judgment about the world.  The spectator is the uniquely situated subject who, through a process which Arendt calls enlarged thinking, considers and consults the perspectives of other subjects.  Arendt sees the spectator as distinct from the agent, who appears through speech and action to a plurality of other agents. The spectator, on the one hand, exercises his or her faculty of *political judgment* to come to conclusions about the world—and to articulate those conclusions publicly.  The agent, on the other hand, acts in the present moment—she or he creates, through speech and action, the raw data that is considered by the spectator in

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[257] Benhabib (1992); Disch (1994); Nedelsky (2001, 2011); Zerilli (2005, 2009); Fulfer (2014).

his or her judgment-making. However, it is essential that we remember that the spectator is *always also an agent*. She is always embedded in a web of narratives in which she constantly appears to others, and she can never escape this web (with all of its normative baggage) when she makes a judgment. Further, as an agent or actor she always exercises her faculty of *moral judgment* both to come to conclusions about the 'right' course of action for herself in the present moment and to recognise this basic moral faculty in others. Moral judgment is, as Seyla Benhabib puts it, what we 'always already' exercise as agents in the world. This means, I will argue that *we cannot have a theory of feminist political judgment without giving an account of moral judgment*. We cannot, in other words, fully separate the spectator's political capacity for judgment-making from the agent's ethical concern with moral recognition. The communicability of political judgment depends first on mutual recognition among moral agents.

In this chapter, I offer a brief overview of Arendt's ideas about the importance of a theory of judgment to a post-metaphysical political theory. I then consider Linda Zerilli's appropriation of this part of Arendt's work for a feminist theory of judgment. I argue that this feminist theory of judgment falls short for two reasons: first, it relies on too strong an endorsement of our capacity to judge beyond our prejudices; second, it cannot explain what gives us the courage to risk articulating our judgments publicly. When we consider the moral judgment that co-exists with political judgment, a consideration that requires us once again to use Benhabib's method of 'reading Arendt against Arendt', we are able to arrive at a more satisfactory model of feminist judgment, one which sees in each spectator a unique moral agent capable of appearing in the

common world.[258]  I argue that this model of judgment gives us a better way to think about the necessarily relational and communicative aspects of judgment-making.  Finally, I illustrate the relationship between political and moral judgment—and affirm the importance of the latter—by tracing Susan Brison's documentation of her recovery after a violent sexual assault.  Her ability to articulate political judgments—judgments about harm of rape, about the nature of identity, and so on—depended on having a sustained avenue for communication and recognition.

5.1 Enlarged Thinking: Arendt on Kant

Scholars in various fields have offered interpretations of Arendt's unfinished work on judgment, which would have comprised the final volume of her last book, *The Life of the Mind*.  Rather than offering a meticulous reading of this somewhat scattered work, I will bring out the most useful aspects of Arendtian judgment for a theory of narrative agency.  First, Arendt's thoughts on judgment give us another way to talk about the tension in her work between uniqueness and plurality, a tension which, I argued in Chapter 4, lends narrative agency its force.  A subject must be *both* uniquely situated to produce new meaning *and* belong to a world in which that meaning can be understood in order to

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[258] Arendt herself was at best ambivalent about including moral considerations in the process of political reflection.  She seems to want to think of judgment both as the political faculty we use to articulate what is meaningful about past action and a moral faculty that tells us how to act.  Arendt's thoughts on judgment 'vacillate between judgment as a moral faculty, guiding action, versus judgment as a retrospective faculty, guiding the spectator or storyteller', as Benhabib puts it (1988, 31).  This is a keys conceptual tension of this chapter; I explore it in detail in section 3.

exercise narrative agency.[259] Second, Arendt's notion, borrowed from Kant, of 'enlarged thinking', the dispassionate consideration of other perspectives, provides us with a useful tool for further theorising a fair feminist politics.  And, finally, the emphasis on communicability and conversation in Arendt's account of judging gives us some insight into the importance of mutual understanding for a theory of narrative agency.

In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt gives an account of the two different kinds of judgment in Kant's *Third Critique*: determinant judgment and reflective judgment.[260]  The first entails subsuming a particular under a universal law (whether that universal law be moral or physical).  The second, however, involves an appeal to an unstated or absent universal rule or law, when confronted with a particular. It involves, in other words, giving an account of the particular in order to arrive at a universal. As Kant describes the difference: 'Judgment in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal.  If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is determinative…But if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*.'[261] For Kant, this means that the reflective judgments at which we arrive through the exercise of our shared faculties and then hone through discussion with others.  The ultimate result of a reflective judgment, in other words, is objective validity.

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[259] Narrative agency disappears when the world disappears.  There is no narrative agency in the camps; natality remains—the *potential* to introduce new meaning remains—but the world in which that new meaning may be understood (the *capacity* to share it) disappears. In Chapter 6, I return to the claim that uniqueness and the recognition are both necessary to sustain narrative agency.

[260] Throughout this chapter, though I occasionally quote Kant for the sake of clarifying his concepts, I am chiefly interested in Arendt's (often less than thorough) reading of Kant, and not in whether Arendt has gotten Kant 'right'.  For a discussion some of the inconsistencies in her reading, see Beiner (1997).

[261] Kant 1987, 18-19.

In Arendt's reading, however, reflective judgments are neither objective nor wholly subjective. When I make a judgment, I likely think that others *should* make the same judgment under the same circumstances. However, I do not convince them of the objective truth of my judgment by giving them a proof (as of the universal law) but by persuading them to see things from my point of view.

The question that Arendt wants to pose, then, is how a judgment that is not objectively true can still be *valid*. How can a judgment about a particular set of circumstances be true without recourse to an established universal law? Importantly, the lack of universal objectivity does not render a judgment arbitrary; the judgment does not apply only for the person whose judgment it is. In other words, a reflective judgment *does* make a claim to validity. The exemplary reflective judgment in Kant's *Third Critique* is, of course, aesthetic judgment—the capacity to judge that something is beautiful. To say that a rose is beautiful is to do more than just assert a preference, as I do when I say that a rose is my favourite flower or that I prefer swimming in the sea to swimming in a pool or, to use Kant's cheerful example, that I like canary wine. To say that the rose is my favourite flower does not require wondering whether I am justified in my preference. To say a rose is beautiful, on the other hand, is to make a claim that requires agreement about the rose, rather than about my personal disposition toward it. Such a claim derives its validity from intersubjective agreement, and this consensus has what Jennifer Nedelsky calls a 'quasiobjective quality' (and what Kant calls 'subjective universality').[262] Making a judgment, as opposed to stating a preference, involves appealing to this imagined consensus and concluding that one's own opinion will make

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[262] Nedelsky 2001, 107.

sense to others.

There can be no objective criteria for reflective judgment for Arendt, but there are communicable *reasons* for it.  Making a judgment is inherently relational—it depends on an imagined conversation with others.  Giving an account of that judgment is also inherently relational—it involves recounting that imagined conversation *to* others, and persuading others that one's judgment embodies the general consensus.  The imagined consensus gives rise to the judgment, and it also informs the way in which the judger will be able to persuade others of the validity of her judgment.  Arendt believes that Kant is very clear about how one consults the imagined consensus.  He says that the mind must 'enlarge its point of view from a microscopic to a general outlook that it adopts in turn every conceivable standpoint, verifying the observations of each by means of the others.'[263]  Arendt dubs this practice of taking oneself out of one's own individual interests, thoughts, emotions, commitments, etc. and considering a particular problem or object from the standpoint of others (as many others as possible, indeed 'every conceivable standpoint') 'enlarged thinking'.

The more one considers a judgment in light of the possible thoughts and opinions of others, the closer the judgment will come to embodying a 'quasiobjective' consensus, the more valid it will be.  Another way of saying this is that *impartiality*, rather than *objectivity*, lends a judgment its validity.  When we make a judgment, we 'go travelling' into the minds of others, imagining how they might perceive the same set of particulars, and imagining how we might explain to them what it is that we see: '[W]e…overcome

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[263] Arendt 1989, 42.  Arendt is quoting from one of Kant's letters here.

our special subjective conditions for the sake of others.'[264]  It is not by rising above the particular circumstances and appealing to an objective truth that we overcome our bias; rather, it is through the methodical consideration of every imaginable standpoint and of the uniqueness of the particular.  As Arendt puts it, '*impartiality* is obtained by taking the viewpoint of others into account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then settle the dispute by being altogether above the melée.'[265]  So, enlarged thinking is neither a thoughtless acceptance of consensus, nor a conceit that the truth of one's judgment transcends consensus.  We arrive at impartial judgment through the creative, intersubjective, critical, and immanent process of enlarged thinking.

Enlarged thinking is not, however, the same thing as empathy, which, Arendt argues, compromises critical thinking by making us overly aligned with one perspective or another, by reinstilling a kind of bias.[266]  It is not for us to imagine what *actually* goes on in the minds of others—what thoughts, feelings, emotions and so forth a person might be experiencing—but, rather, enlarged thinking involves imagining what might go on in the minds of others when they are confronted with a specific situation and imagining how we might 'woo their consent' in order that they will share our judgment of that situation.[267]

The consensus concerning aesthetic judgment, which Kant calls taste, is thus

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[264] Arendt 1989, 67.
[265] Ibid., 42-43, original emphasis.
[266] Arendt 2006c, 221.
[267] Benhabib 1992, 137.  This metaphor of wooing is somewhat questionable considering its patriarchal connotations (to 'woo' someone implies condescension or persuasion from a position of power).

comprised of already existing common beliefs and opinions.[268]  The sum of these

opinions, Kant calls the *sensus communis*, the common sense.  It is this sense in common,

this trying to think of what is imagined and understood by others, that forms the

boundaries of our own judgments.  We can only persuade others that our judgment is

valid, when the content of our judgment is in line with the common content of similar

judgments, the *sensus communis*.  The validity of our judgments, in other words, is

increased by their communicability.

Reflective judgment depends, therefore, on communicability, which 'obviously

implies a community of men who can be addressed and who are listening and can be

listened to.'[269]  A judgment is only valid if it can be explained, discussed, and agreed

upon.  As Arendt puts it: 'To the question, why are there men rather than man?  Kant

would have answered: In order that they may talk to one another.'[270]  Were there only

judgments determinant judgments about the universal law, there would be no need for us

to communicate with one another at all; we would all arrive at the same conclusions

through rational consideration of the same criteria.  *Communication*, as opposed to the

exercise of collective reason, is not merely the expression of a series of agreed upon or

objective truths but *a negotiation of agreed upon criteria* that will make up the common

sense. Communicability of the criteria for judgment is immensely important for Kant—

indeed, he calls it the 'very least to be expected from anyone claiming the name of

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[268] For Kant, the *sensus communis* is arrived at through the exercise of the shared
faculties of understanding and imagination.  For Arendt, through the articulation of
reasons for judgment.
[269] Arendt 1989, 40.
[270] Ibid., 40.

man'[271] and the measure of sanity.[272] Arendt emphasises this preoccupation of Kant's in order to draw conclusions of her own about making political judgments in a post-metaphysical world. For Kant, the imagined conversations we have with others in the process of making judgments are headed for an eventual across-the-board (universal) agreement. The faculties by which we arrive at the *sensus communis* (imagination and understanding) are shared faculties, and our minds, through the use of these shared faculties, will come up with the same criteria for judgment. Kant's *sensus communis*, in other words, *is* universal.[273] For Arendt, by contrast, a theory of judgment is useful when it allows us to negotiate the ever-shifting criteria for common sense and to recognise that there exists a distinct common sense for each distinct community.

Communicability may start to seem more isolating than community-building in this light—it would appear that, in the absence of universal common sense, the *sensus communis* would need already to be in place before the reasons for a judgment's validity could be communicable. But Arendt's point is that, in training our imaginations to 'go travelling', we interrogate the limits of what is communicable about what we think. Individuals will share the common sense of a number of these distinct communities at the

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[271] Kant 1987, 160.

[272] 'The only universal characteristic of madness is the loss of *common sense* (*sensus communis*) and its replacement with *logical private sense* (*sensus privatus*); for example, a human being in broad daylight sees a light burning on his table which, however, another person standing nearby does not see, or hears a voice that no one else hears. For it is a subjectively necessary touchstone of the correctness of our judgments generally, and consequently also of the soundness of our understanding, that we also restrain our understanding by the *understanding of others*, instead of *isolating* ourselves with our own understanding and judging publicly with our private representations, so to speak.' Kant 2006, 113.

[273] Nedelsky 2001, 109. Another way to put this distinction is that for Kant common sense is empirical; but, for Arendt, common sense is a collective hermeneutical endeavour.

same time.  The way to woo consent within and between overlapping communities is to give an account of one's own particular judgment.  Being in conversation with the *sensus communis* is *not* the self-satisfied ratification of one's thoughts and opinions through consideration of others' thoughts and opinions already in line with one's own.[274] Conforming one's own judgment to the general opinion is lazy thinking, the likes of which Arendt diagnosed in Eichmann.[275]  *Coming into conversation* (real and imagined) with others about the appropriate criteria for judgment is, on the other hand, an essential activity of living together as human beings.[276]

The bounds of communicability dictate the bounds of the world, which comes into existence through plural perspectives.  Each individual will subject her particular experience to the possible experiences of as many others as she can imagine, and try to give an account of her particular experience in a way that will be understood by the common sense.  Arendt writes: 'The it-pleases-or-displeases me, which as a feeling seems so utterly private and noncommunicative, is actually rooted in this community sense and is therefore open to communication once it has been transformed by reflections, which takes all others and their feelings into account.'[277] The faculty of judgment, by this account, depends on the presence of others.  Without the ability to

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[274] Some work in political science (see, for example, Hemilboim et.al., 2014) suggests that internet culture has contributed to a rise in confirmation bias of this kind—people tend to talk to people who they anticipate will agree with them, read news sources that are generally aligned with their opinions and beliefs, and so on.

[275] Arendt writes of Eichmann, 'He was not stupid.  It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.'  2006a, 285.

[276] Arendt claims that taste is grounded in a 'principle of belonging'.  'Taste,' she writes, 'is the political capacity that truly humanizes the beautiful and creates a culture.' 2006c, 224.

[277] Arendt 1989, 72.

communicate our private thoughts, to have them truly make sense to others whose own

private thoughts make sense to us, each of us would be a prisoner of her individual point

of view without a sense of the reality of the world with its plurality of viewpoints.[278]


## 5.2 A Feminist Theory of Judgment?


It is often incumbent upon feminists to give an account of a particular without recourse to

the universal, to make judgments that draw on ways of thinking that have not been

codified or institutionalised—ways of thinking that, on the contrary, are inspired by the

need to *shift* the *sensus communis* so that it better reflects women's experiences.

Agreeing upon the content of judgments about what is best for women has been

notoriously difficult across cultural, racial, and class lines.  Multicultural and postcolonial

feminists have long lamented this apparent normative incommensurability.[279] The

question of what we feminists can make of the problem of relativism in our ranks is still a

pressing one.  How can we proscribe what is 'harmful' for women when women occupy

such disparate positions in the world?  How can we even begin to imagine giving an

account of the universal grounding of such judgments?  How can we 'woo the consent' of

those with whom we have nothing in common?  How can we make our beliefs, needs,

and attachments communicable across cultural and class divides?  And how can we avoid

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[278] Again, this atomisation is not as impossible as it may seem at first glance.  Indeed, the kind of imprisonment in one's own private point of view that Arendt is worried about is readily apparent in 'comments' sections across the Internet.  Also important to remember is that an 'individual' viewpoint can imprison more than one person—indeed, as in the case of Nazi Germany, it can imprison a whole mass movement, as I will argue in Chapter 6.

[279] hooks 1984; Narayan 1997; Mohanty 2003.

privileging out own points of view when we are out to consider the circumstances of all

women, everywhere?  Linda Zerilli applies Arendt's insights on judgment in order to

address such seemingly intractable quandaries.[280]  A theory of judgment which is

concerned with giving and defending an account of a subjective judgment rather than

defending an objective truth is very useful for pointing out the hidden bias of claims to

objectivity that haunt various theoretical frameworks in law, in philosophy, and in

feminist theory itself.  Zerilli's analysis and affirmation of Arendt provide a compelling

picture of a cross-cultural feminist theory of judgment, though Zerilli is overly ambitious

in her expectation that we can judge above our prejudices and problematically dismissive

of the importance of mutually recognitive communication for enlarged thinking, as we

shall see.

The lack of universal criteria for making feminist judgments does not, for Zerilli,

represent a crisis of relativism or a hopeless aporia of identity politics.  It is not a

lamentable state of affairs at all; it is, rather, the perfect condition in which to exercise

political freedom.[281]  We should not think of the problem of judgment as a matter of

establishing some shared universal criteria for feminism, for 'it is the very idea that

criteria must be given as universal rules governing from above the application of

concepts to the particulars of political life that has…led partly to the breakdown of the

capacity to judge critically in the first place.'[282]  We should, instead, think of judgment as

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[280] Zerilli is due to publish a monograph on Arendt's theory of judgment in October of
2016, two months after the submission of this thesis.  Because it is not yet publically
available, I engage with her earlier work on this topic, especially her 2009 article
"Toward a Feminist Theory of Judgment".
[281] I offer a detailed overview of Zerilli's understanding of political freedom as
unpredictability in action in Chapter 1.
[282] Zerilli 2009, 308.

the free exercise of critical thinking in a plurality, the interrogation of a particular.

Forging new meaning through judgment in this way allows critical judgment to 'come into its own' by refusing to reproduce the narratives of others and instead forging new meaning by subjecting those narratives to never-ending conversation. Critical judgment should never be comfortable, in other words. It should require constant reassessment, constantly enlarged thinking.

How can we put this idea of judgment as a practice of freedom to use in the mediation of contemporary feminist debates about the problems of ethnocentrism in contemporary feminism? 'How,' as Zerilli puts it 'might [a Western] feminist mobilize the inescapability of her own embeddedness in a given cultural horizon to advance a perspective that is less myopic and self-congratulatory about Western values such as political rights without being any less critical toward the gendered cultural and political practices of non-Western, nonliberal cultures?'[283] Many feminists, she argues, are unable to grasp the importance of unyoking the faculty of judgment from a universal set of criteria for judging. The assumption that, through the exercise of reason, all participants in a discussion will reach the same conclusion, is a difficult one to dismiss.[284] We automatically assume the objective validity of our beliefs and opinions—indeed such conviction often seems necessary for making compelling arguments or initiating social change—and in the process lose sight of the importance of proclaiming the contingency of those beliefs and opinions. We imagine we are trying to convince other people of the objective truth, rather than to persuade them to take seriously, and adjust their thinking as a result of, whatever it is we have to say. Because feminists often remain beholden to an

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[283] Zerilli 2009, 297.
[284] Ibid., 299.

untenable, anachronistic universalism that insists on the normative rightness of their

points of view (Martha Nussbaum and Seyla Benhabib are the two feminists Zerilli paints

with this universalist brush), they posit a counterproductive impasse between theoretical

frameworks that may otherwise have a lot to say to one another (such as poststructuralism

and critical theory or postcolonialism and liberalism). Often the construction of such an

impasse exhibits an anxiety about cultural and moral relativism; objectivism and rational

universalism look preferable to the tendency to abstain from judgment on the grounds

that other cultures' norms are not our own, however potentially harmful to women they

may be, because in positing some universal (liberal) normative criteria at least we can get

things *done*.[285]

    Zerilli argues that the liberal/multicultural impasse is, however, a false antithesis,

and one that is doomed to reinscribe a harmful misrecognition between feminists from

different cultures, races, or classes by failing to appreciate fully the agency of women

who live in cultures other than their own, either by imposing on them liberal western

norms or by imagining that they are so different from us that we cannot give to one

another a coherent account of our respective norms. Instead of feeling caught between

the rock of rationalism and the hard place of relativism, Zerilli argues, we should not be

afraid to consider the particular *qua* particular, and we should feel free to form opinions

about particulars outside of a set of philosophical or epistemological rules. Often, we

supply our preconceived notions and opinions *as* universal rules even though we think we

are being impartial. We hold particulars outside of our own culture up to our already

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[285] Like enacting liberal policies which ban practices which are harmful to women, such
as female genital mutilation. The liberal/multicultural debate in feminism is famously
canvassed by Susan Moller Okin (1999). See also Gatens (2004).

determined normative standards (those of Western liberal democracy) instead of taking into account their uniqueness.  Our capacity for critical judgment is, in a way, hobbled by rules, which Zerilli says 'are like a banister to which we hold fast for fear of losing our footing and not being able to judge at all.'  She continues, '[t]he problem with this top-down understanding of judgment is that it leaves whatever rules we employ more or less unexamined; their normativity becomes the take-for-granted basis for every claim to validity.'[286]  All too often we supply our opinions as universal norms by which to judge, rather than consulting the imagined opinions of others so that we may give an account of our opinions that make sense to them (as Arendt bids us do).

The threat of relativism derives from its insight that we cannot apply our criteria for judgment regardless of context without risking ethnocentricism—thus it often seems we cannot judge unless we have first-hand experience of what we judge, that we lack criteria for trans-contextual judgment.  We are caught between making judgments that do not sufficiently take into account other standpoints and taking on other standpoints so completely that they become our standard for judging ('going native', as it were).  Zerilli argues that the necessary condition for putting into practice the Arendtian process of enlarged thinking is that of being an 'outsider'.   She insists that Arendt's practice of enlarged thinking allows us to judge effectively across cultural contexts without simply reproducing our own already held beliefs and opinions or inhabiting another way of thinking so much that it makes us forget our own particular context.

The starting point for such enlarged thinking is the recognition of one's own particularity, one's own uniqueness—what Zerilli refers to, after Cornelius Castoriadis,

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[286] Zerilli 2009, 309.

as rootedness—and to admit that one cannot transcend it, cannot make judgments from outside of it.[287]  But it is as important to remember that it is one's own particularity that gives her the necessary perspective to understand the particularity of what she is judging. As Zerilli puts it: "…[outsideness] is a way of expressing the specificity of one's own rootedness elsewhere as a condition of understanding and judging what is foreign."[288] Each judging subject is uniquely situated, rooted in her own particular context; so each subject is capable of imagining the point of view of other subjects, also uniquely situated. Better judgments involve, as we have seen, taking into account more standpoints, imagining the conclusion from more points of view.[289]

Zerilli argues that this practice of thinking from the point of view of others must not be confused with empathic over-identification with the other because the ultimate result of enlarged thinking is still *judgment*.[290]  That is, we cultivate the ability to be impartial by considering the opinion of others in order that we may criticise or question with confidence some set of particular circumstances.  The understanding of other standpoints is essential for achieving this goal, but such understanding cannot be thought of as an end in itself.  'We should not,' Zerilli writes, 'confuse an ethical stance (other-regard) with a political practice (representative thinking).'[291]  I have more to go on, as it

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[287] Zerilli 2009, 310-311.
[288] Ibid., 311.
[289] Many other feminist theorists, including Yuval-Davis (2011) and Weir (2013) also emphasise the importance of acknowledging rootedness in feminist politics.
[290] The definition of 'empathy' is, of course, stipulative.  Zerilli's (and Arendt's) understanding of empathy as the over-identification with another such that one's judgment is clouded is not the only way to think about empathy.  We might also define it as the situated sympathetic imagination we must cultivate in enlarged thinking.  For an excellent account of empathy as cultivated sympathetic imagination, see Churcher (2016).
[291] Zerilli 2009, 313.

were, the more I am able to consider other standpoints.  And, at the same time, my own

position is open to interrogation by others.  It is the outsideness, the position of spectator,

that makes judgment possible—from my unique position in the world, I see the opinions

and beliefs of others in all of their distinctness, without trying to subsume them under my

own already held opinions and beliefs. By the same token, I see *my own* actions in all of

their distinctness, considering them, as I do, from the position of spectator.  Zerilli argues

that we can avoid reproducing the prejudices of our cultural context by articulating things

as they appear to us.  She suggests that we think of this practice of judgment as

'anticipatory', as carving out unique and newly communicable political meaning rather

than as establishing a new set of rules that will remain valid for future judgments.  There

is no guarantee that the judgment that results from enlarged thinking will be

communicable, but, Zerilli argues, articulating unique judgments, even when they may

not resonate with the *sensus communis*, is preferable to reproducing old prejudices.

Not only does this theory of judgment allow us to make judgments across

concepts, it also allows us to ground feminist solidarity in the alignment of such

judgments.  Feminist theories, which in the past have been problematically grounded in

identity or experience, can instead be grounded in shared judgment of the world, on

whatever it is that women have in common.  Communities are formed by the discovery of

beliefs and opinions held in common.[292]  She quotes Arendt, 'We all know very well how

quickly people recognise each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they

belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in questions of what pleases and

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[292] See my discussion of Borren (2013) in Chapter 4 for an account of how collective
action arises out of interests in common.

displeases.'[293]  The idea here is that, once a person gives an account (in public) of his or her judgment, others who have reached the same conclusion, or who would give similar accounts, have a sense of solidarity through the shared validity of their judgments.

This model of feminist judgment is extremely useful—arriving at a shared agreement about what makes judgments valid should be the formula for feminist judgment.  But Zerilli is overly sanguine about the individual's capacity to carve out new meaning in the public sphere through the articulation of political judgments even in the absence of recognition by sympathetic others.[294]  She insists that the mechanism of enlarged thinking depends not on 'mutual understanding of one another as individual persons', but, instead, on the capacity to see the same world from different standpoints.[295]  In other words, impartial judgment involves understanding the *world*, the reality of the *sensus communis*, and not on understanding each individual person in the world.  And yet, she also insists that 'the practice of political judgment is a way of constructing or discovering community through the articulation of individuality rather than its suppression, for this articulation will always involve taking the perspectives of others into account.'[296] Her example *par excellence* of community building through judgment is the work of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, the group of radical Italian feminists who set out to theorise sexual difference without drawing on pre-existing narratives about women's relations, female freedom, or empowerment.[297]  Through the collective articulation of individual thoughts and experiences arose a shared sense of

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[293] Zerilli 2005, 159.
[294] Lois McNay gives a similar criticism of Zerilli's insistence on the subject's capacity to feel her freedom even in the absence of recognition.  2014, 113-118.
[295] Zerilli 2005, 150.
[296] Ibid., 159.
[297] Ibid., 125-127.

community, which was not held together by membership but by conversation and consensus. Asserting one's subjectivity in this way might be seen as a confirmation of our agency—our open-ended and irreducible capacity to create something new. But each member of community who exercises such agency engages in a hermeneutical wager— there is no guarantee that her account will be communicable. The stakes of judgment, considered in this way, are high. We risk total alienation and isolation when we give an account of our judgments. What gives us the confidence to take such a risk? It seems to me that there must be some kind of community *already in existence* for the subject to come into conversation with the *sensus communis*, to make sense in the world.[298]

Zerilli seems not to appreciate the necessary (meta)stability of such a world or the extent to which the artefacts of judgment (i.e. narratives) are intractable. The risky judgments that the spectator is able to make, in Zerilli's estimation, appear relatively unencumbered by the inevitable prejudices dictated by the spectator's rootedness. Indeed, Zerilli is sceptical of feminists who fall back on these prejudices rather than practicing enlarged thinking as she understands it. Zerilli takes Seyla Benhabib as her primary foil here because she seems to see in Benhabib's work *both* a problematic antiessentialism (in her assertion of the polyvocality of cultures) *and* a recalcitrant ethnocentrism (in her positing of universal norms for conversation). The first criticism grows out of Zerilli's worry that, by insisting that cultures are not homogenous, Benhabib undermines the feminist capacity to make judgments about harmful cultural practices. The second, out of Zerilli's conviction that (any form of) universalism is beholden to an obsolete rationalism.

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[298] Arendt writes: 'Kant does tell one how to take others into account, he does not tell one how to combine with them in order to act.' 1989, 44.

Zerilli, however, fails fully to appreciate the grounding of Benhabib's interactive universalism in precisely the same Arendtian framework of plurality and uniqueness in which she grounds her own theory of judgment.  In focusing on Benhabib's work on universalism, Zerilli misses two crucial aspects of Benhabib's reading of Arendtian judgment, which would greatly enhance her own theory of feminist judgment.[299]  First, Benhabib draws out the inherent moral content in political judgment making, which helps ground the idea of the practice of enlarged thinking in the already existing set of judgments in which each of us is situated.  Second, she focuses on the essential importance of mutually respectful conversation to giving an account of one's opinions.  These two insights shift the focus of an account of Arendtian judgment from the articulation of individual judgment within a community to the conversation between individuals that *enables* such articulation in the first place.  As Benhabib writes, '[f]urthering one's capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within a solidaristic community that sustains one's identity through listening to one, and allowing one to listen to others, with respect.'[300]

The deeply inscribed web of narratives that constitutes our worldly reality is constantly changing as a result of spontaneous action; and yet, this web rarely changes radically, all at once.  The introduction of new meaning into a plurality is gradual.  As we saw in Chapter 4, most action springs up and fades away without leaving a trace.  Narratives change, instead, a little bit at a time, as the new meaning which emerges out of action becomes communicable.  The kinds of consultations that occur in the formulation

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[299] For some reason, Zerilli engages with Benhabib's work on cosmopolitanism rather than Benhabib's work on Arendt, though Benhabib has written extensively on Arendt's thoughts on judgment.
[300] Benhabib 1999, 350.

of Arendtian judgment require that we redeem meaning from action by remembering events, looking at them through the lens of other perspectives, embellishing them, and otherwise converting them into narrative form. Zerilli makes much of this injunction toward narrativity in Arendt's work on judgment, where Arendt distinguishes between the agent, who participates in the life of the world directly, and the spectator, who formulates judgments about action. But her portrayal of the Arendtian spectator requires that we commit to an impossibly constant outsideness. It exhibits a lack of understanding of the narrative embeddedness of the spectator, who will unavoidably bring to bear her prejudice, her preconceived notions, and her short-sighted normative commitments, on her exercise of the practice of enlarged thinking.

5.3 Practices of Freedom vs. Communicative Freedom

To tease out the tensions between Zerilli's reading of Arendt and Benhabib's, it is necessary to get a clearer picture of Benhabib's take on judgment. Benhabib's reading of Arendt differs from Zerilli's largely because she emphasises the importance of the *moral* content of Arendt's concept of judgment. Benhabib identifies an essential tension between the moral and the historical articulations of Arendtian judgment. Arendt's preoccupation with judgment, Benhabib insists, derives, in part, from the problem of thinking as an ethical activity that Arendt hits upon in her diagnosis of Eichmann: not a man monstrous beyond all understanding, but a *thoughtless* one, incapable of judging

right from wrong because he was unable to think for himself.[301]  However, this equation

of judgment with the capacity for moral thought does not tell the whole story.  We must

also consider, as Zerilli has already bidden us to do, Arendt's focus on judgment as a

narrative capacity to consider, and cull meaning from, events in context (whether these

take the form of stories about the past, articles in the newspaper, or the contents of a

community debate).  Thus, Benhabib believes, though Arendt herself does not say this,

that the arrival at a judgment through the exercise of enlarged thinking involves both the

first person agent making a *moral* judgment and the third person spectator making an

*historical-political* judgment about what is meaningful or important about a certain event.

To complicate matters further, Benhabib identifies another 'philosophical perplexity' in

Arendt's reflections on judgment: her apparent conflation of the Aristotelian notion of

judgment as a political virtue to be exercised in particular political discussions

(*phronesis*) and the Kantian idea of moral judgment as the exercise of the universal moral

faculty.  These two tensions—between a moral and an historical/political understanding

of judgment and between an Aristotelian and a Kantian understanding of how judgment

works in the public sphere—form Benhabib's framework for parsing Arendt.

However, no matter what we make of these twin tensions, there is no doubt that

every political or historical judgment contains within it (or happens alongside) moral

judgment.  Benhabib writes:

> Moral judgment differs from these other domains [legal, aesthetic, political,
> medical, etc.] in one crucial respect: the exercise of moral judgment is pervasive
> and unavoidable; in fact, this exercise is coextensive with relations of social
> interaction in the lifeworld in general.  *Moral judgment is what we 'always*

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[301] Arendt explicitly states that the exercise of reflective judgment requires that we consider questions of right and wrong on more than one occasion.  See, for example, 1978, 5, 8, and 69; 1971: 418, and others.

*already' exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitute our life together*.[302]

So, the formulation of a moral judgment inevitably arises out of the everyday unfolding of action in a plurality.  Because each of us is uniquely situated, and constantly inserting herself into the world through action, each of us is constantly formulating moral judgments from wherever we are—our 'rootedness', in other words, compels us to make moral judgments which, unlike the measured, political judgments of enlarged thinking, arise in the course of political action.  The subject, then, makes judgments both as agent *and* as spectator.  And, unlike the impartial judgments we are able to make through imagining a particular situation from the standpoint of others, the judgments we make as agents are off-the-cuff and spontaneous.  This does not mean, however, that they are *thoughtless*.  On the contrary, what we decide to do in action we decide to do because of our already held opinions, desires, beliefs—in other words, because of our practical narrative identity.[303]  This is not to say that moral judgment precedes political judgment. The individual subject occupies both the position of agent and spectator; she exercises moral and political judgments *at the same time*.

Benhabib offers what she calls a 'phenomenology of moral judgment' to support her claim that moral judgment is immanent to everyday interaction.  A subject confronted with everyday interactions will inevitably assess the moral content of those interactions. She will ask herself whether she is compelled to act one way or another, whether she has

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[302] Benhabib 1992, 125, original emphasis.
[303] As we saw in Chapter 2, we may think a lot about our own identity or we may not think about it very much at all.  Either way, we will have a sense of who we are that is made up of a variety of narratives—some unquestioningly inherited from the web of interlocution within which we are embedded, some created through challenging and shifting dominant narratives.

fulfilled her moral duties in her relationships to others, and how her actions might be judge-able—that is, what narratives a spectator might tell about her actions.[304]  An agent must determine the specific moral content of each particular set of circumstances— Imagine the example of an agent who considers whether or not she has a duty to travel some distance to care for her sick mother.  Making the moral judgment about whether or not she ought to attend to her familial duty cannot be a matter of subsuming the particular situation under the universal law, and so it must be a question of going through a nuanced interior interpretation of the particular circumstances.  The agent considers the particular moral claims on her in the particular situation based on the status of her relationship with her mother, whether other people would think less of her for not going, what career or personal commitments are potentially more important, and so on.  As Benhabib puts it, '[T]he capacity to formulate goals of action is not prior to the capacity to be able to justify such goals with reasons to others.  Reasons for actions are not only grounds which motivate me; they are also accounts of my actions as I project myself as a "doer" unto a social world which I share with others, and through which others recognise me as a person capable of, and responsible for, certain courses of action.'[305] Carrying out this interpretation involves imagining possible narratives about one's action and imagining how those narratives might be communicable to, and understood by, others.[306]

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[304] Benhabib 1992, 127.

[305] Benhabib 2007, 15.

[306] These moral calculations are, as I have argued, not carried out by an autonomous subject who is transparent to herself—constantly making moral judgments in no way guarantees that we will become better people.  Lots of times the moral judgments we make are influenced by the kinds of oppressive political narratives discussed in the first half of this thesis.  Sometimes they are influenced by willed ignorance and the desire to remain in a position of privilege—think, for example, of a white man insisting that 'all lives matter' when confronted with claims made by the Black Lives Matter movement.

This sounds a lot like the political judgment endorsed by Zerilli, but the key difference here is that the deliberation of the agent's moral imagination *does not allow the agent to remove herself from the action* in order to consider it from the point of view of spectator.[307] The spectator creates the world of political action by her judgment, and yet the spectator is always also an agent. Arendt writes that 'The judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects [of judgment] could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors and the makers.[308] And this critic and spectator sits in every actor.'[309] An agent involved in a calculation of the moral content of a particular situation is also involved in that situation, is also a 'sufferer', and a part of any narrative that might be constructed about the situation in question. What's more, the action that is the result of moral deliberation represents a unique outcome, which discloses the agent as unique being. This action does not arise *ex nihilo*, or as the result of totally impartial deliberation, but out of the web of narratives that constitute who an agent imagines herself to be (as a whole, coherent person) and who she imagines she is seen to be by others. It is in this way, Benhabib

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Sometimes, they are a result of the unquestioned acceptance of subordinating narratives—imagine the daughter taking for granted that it is up to her, rather than her brother, to care for the ailing mother, in the above example. In short, moral judgment is what we "always already" exercise *no matter what our ethical commitments are.*

[307] Moral judgment is inconvenient for Zerilli. It means that the spectator is never free of the kind of everyday moral calculations that accompany rootedness. But moral judgment is also what provides us with the world in the first place. Political judgment makes sense of action, but action itself depends on the existence of a space between humans in which agents can appear and be recognised.

[308] So it is with Susan Brison, as we shall see in the next section. She is always a moral agent in that she is always asking questions about who she is and about how people will see her, but she is also a spectator, aligning herself with different communities' common sense as she gives an account of why her particular rape was wrong and harmful.

[309] Arendt 1989, 63.

argues, we can say that all moral action is communicative interaction.[310]

So, it is imperative that we extend Arendt's theory of judgment to the realm of moral action—even if this requires that we use some of Arendt's insights in ways she did not intend or foresee. When we decide what to do in the face of certain morally charged particulars, we engage in a species of enlarged thinking. This argument gives rise to two further (closely related) claims about the contextual nature of moral judgment. First, that moral judgment is contextual—it involves interpreting the particular without subsuming it under a universal. Second, that moral judgment is relational—it involves 'the understanding of the narrative history of the self and of others.'[311] We consider what we know about ourselves, what we know about everyone else directly involved in the situation at hand, what we want others to think of us, and so forth. We imagine other points of view, and yet we fall back on our own prejudices, our own preconceived narratives, our own already held convictions about right and wrong.

As we saw in the first section, Arendt's chief concern was to account for the intersubjective validity of *reflective* judgments (be they aesthetic or political). Kant, of course, maintained that the validity of moral judgment was to be found in the moral law, and that his theory of reflective judgment was relevant only to matters of taste. It is Benhabib's contention that Arendt had an essentially Aristotelian conception of morality—in her view morality was more a matter of individual strength or weakness of character than of the negotiation of intersubjective criteria for valid moral judgments. However, though she did not give an account of moral judgment as it arises in spontaneous action, Arendt clearly considered the practice of enlarged thinking, in which

[310] Benhabib 1992, 129.
[311] Ibid.., 132.

the impartial spectator distinguished right from wrong, to have a moral dimension.

Benhabib sees in Arendt's theory of judgment an implicit moral universalism. That is,

reflective political judgments about what is right and wrong are undergirded by

contextualised, relational interpretations of the moral content of the situation at hand.

      For Arendt, the validity of moral judgment depends on being at home with

oneself; but Benhabib insists that we must read Arendt against Arendt here—that we

must take her insights on the political realm to be founded in her moral intuitions.

Enlarged thought may also be said to have an undeniable moral dimension because it

enjoins us to consider the standpoints of as many others as possible when we consider a

set of particulars. It is incumbent upon us to imagine that every human being has a

unique perspective, and, *contra* Zerilli, that each is a moral agent. Moral universalism is

thus for Benhabib the recognition that every agent is a potential conversation partner,

rather than the assumption that all agents share similar moral principles or similar

approaches to moral judgment-making. As Benhabib puts it:

> If we reject Kantian a priorism, and his assumption that as moral selves we are all
> somehow identical; if, in other words, we distinguish a universal morality of
> principles from Kant's doctrine of a priori rationality, then I want to suggest we
> must think of such enlarged thought as a condition of actual or simulated
> dialogue. To 'think from the perspective of everyone else' is to know 'how to
> listen' to what the other is saying, or when the voices of others are absent, to
> imagine to oneself a conversation with the other as my dialogue partner.[312]

So the practice of enlarged thinking does not resemble a decontextualised thought

experiment, but instead is made possible by the kind of fellow feeling that arises out of

actual conversation. I take it Benhabib's point here is that though we will not always

reach the same conclusions through moral conversation *each of us is a moral agent*

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[312] Benhabib 2001, 198.

*capable of conversation.*[313]

In Arendt's view, this universal moral agency is salient in public life, which is defined by the condition of plurality, but it is not as relevant a concern when it comes to *individual* moral judgment—which is, in her view, a question of the individual soul being in harmony with itself (moral judgment, in other words, was for Arendt a matter of being 'true' to oneself). But Arendt cannot have it both ways; she cannot insist upon universal equality in the public sphere without assuming the moral equality of individuals and the potential validity of each individual's moral judgment. If we think of moral judgment as a matter of checking in with oneself and no one else, then it becomes difficult to level the appropriate charges against Eichmann, whose evil arose precisely from his refusal to exercise his capacity for enlarged *moral* thinking, to consider the moral standpoint of others, and who was perfectly at home with himself.[314] Indeed, Benhabib argues, the collapse of such moral thinking is the most stunning aspect of an impoverished public sphere, as we shall see in the next chapter. Failure to engage in everyday moral interaction makes it impossible to formulate reflective political judgments. Where moral universalism does not underpin the political, 'the moral obligation to think of the other as one whose perspective I must weigh equally alongside my own disappears from the

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[313] 'This vision states that when divested of all our social, cultural, and religious accouterments, ranks and distinction, we are all humans like each other. There is no greater proof of our common humanity besides the fact that we can communicate with and understand each other.' Benhabib 1995, 98.

[314] Arendt writes 'What [Eichmann] failed to point out in court was that in this "period of crimes legalised by the state," as he himself now called it, he had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read: Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land—or, in Hans Frank's formulation of "the categorical imperative in the Third Reich," which Eichmann might have known: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew of your action, would approve it."' 2006a, 136.

conscience of individuals.'[315]  Enlarged thinking is possible because moral conversation is possible.

Benhabib's attention to the tension between the two moral frameworks within Arendt's thought is productive because it gives us a way to talk about the relevance of moral conversation in the political domain.  Though there may be no direct overlap between the moral conversations we have as agents in everyday action and the creation of policies, institutions, practices, and norms that is a result of the consensus we reach as spectators through reflective judgment, there are certainly moral dispositions that better enable us to perform the practice of enlarged thinking—dispositions such as civic friendship, solidarity, receptivity, and respect for vulnerability.  'These moral attitudes,' Benhabib writes, 'involve the extension of the sympathy and affection we naturally feel toward those closest to us unto larger human groups and thus personalize justice.'[316] Indeed, the attitudes of civic friendship and solidarity make it possible for individuals to articulate their points of view in the public sphere in the first place—they empower individuals to risk voicing those points of view.

Benhabib's reading of Arendt on judgment gives us a great deal of insight into the importance of both narrativity and communication to a feminist theory of judgment.  The articulation of the moral content of action, *making sense* of action, constitutes an exercise of narrative agency.  Crucially, this exercise of narrative agency is only possible when the agent has access to a community that is able to understand her articulation.  As Benhabib writes,  '*agency and communication are two sides of the same coin*: I only know myself as an agent because I can anticipate being part of a social space in which others recognise

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[315] Benhabib 1992, 138-139.
[316] Ibid., 140.

me as the initiator of certain deeds and the speaker of certain words.'[317]  The kind of political judgment Arendt and Zerilli endorse cannot truly take into account the standpoint of others without this communicative freedom as its moral foundation. Serious consideration of the roles narrative and communication play in judgment-formation calls into question Zerilli's claim that the political practice of enlarged thinking should not involve an ethical stance.  Benhabib, in drawing our attention to the moral content of action, does not posit an ethical framework based on a universal normative criteria for what is right; instead, she shows us that we cannot have a theory of political judgment, wherein we think from the standpoint of others, without the conviction that these others are moral agents.  Any feminist theory of judgment *must* take into account this moral universalism in order to consider fully the (theoretically infinite) plurality of perspectives that make up any given political space.

Such moral universalism is neither a reiteration of objectivism or rationalism nor a form of cultural relativism.  Thinking from the standpoint of another within a plurality, rather than in a Kantian kingdom of moral homogeneity in which each agent is purely rational, self-legislating, and operates according to the universal moral law, is the only way we can make sense of the kind of post-rational, discursive judgment formation for which Zerilli herself advocates.  A feminist theory of judgment requires the cultivation of meaningful conversations about what feminism is, and about how feminists ought best to confront shifting norms, beliefs and judgments.

Zerilli fails to attend to the norms, beliefs, and judgments, which are *already in place* in any given community, and that set the parameters for those conversations.  To

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[317] Benhabib 2007, 15, emphasis added.

articulate one's own point of view in the public sphere is more likely to result in

alienation than solidarity if there is no community whom can be addressed, who is

listening, and whom can be listened to.   The stronger such a community is, the stronger

the bonds of civic friendship and solidarity become.  Agency and a robust community are

mutually reinforcing, and, as Benhabib writes, 'the cultivation of one's moral imagination

flourishes in such a culture in which the self-centred perspective of the individual is

constantly challenged by the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives that constitute the

public life.'[318]  The more we are able to speak and be heard by others, the more likely we

are to risk articulating what we *really* think rather than to repeat what others think.

A subject's unique perspective is, as we have seen, a product of her rootedness.

She simultaneously makes moral judgments in the web of action into which she is

constantly thrown and political judgments based on the consideration, as a spectator, of

that moral action.  The distinction between agent and spectator is crucial for making

judgments within a set of social norms, though agent and spectator coexist in each

individual subject.  Benhabib clarifies this distinction:

> …all analyses of cultures, whether empirical or normative, must begin by
> distinguishing the standpoint of the social observer from that of the social agent.
> The social observer—whether an eighteenth-century narrator or chronicler; a
> nineteenth-century general, linguist, or educational reformer; or a twentieth-
> century anthropologist, secret agent, or development worker—is the one who
> imposes, together with local elites, unity and coherence on cultures as observed
> entities.  Any view of cultures as clearly delineable wholes is a view from the
> outside that generates coherence for the purposes of understanding and control.
> Participants in the culture, by contrast, experience their traditions, stories, rituals
> and symbols, tools, and material living conditions through shared, albeit contested
> and contestable, narrative accounts.  From within, a culture need not appear as a
> whole; rather, it forms a horizon that recedes each time one approaches it.[319]

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[318] Benhabib 1992, 141.
[319] Benhabib 2002, 5.

Here is the cultural antiessentialism with which Zerilli takes issue, for in it she sees the temptation to smuggle one's prejudices into what ought to be impartial thinking from the standpoint of others.  In other words, Benhabib's insistence that cultural homogeneity is artificially imposed by spectators seems, to Zerilli, an opportunity for Benhabib to assume a problematic sameness among moral agents, no matter the cultural context. Preferable to Zerilli's interpretation is the conception of the spectator as endowed with the critical capacity to consult the opinions of others in order to come up with contingently valid judgments, which make up the stuff of democratic conversation.  The spectator, when giving an account of a particular that cannot be subsumable under a universal, takes the risk that her judgment may not be communicable to others.

My argument throughout this thesis has been that an individual cannot take such a risk without the support of 'a community that listens to and sustains one.'[320]  The capacity to speak and act in public is constant and irreducible, but it is compromised when speech and action are not communicable.  Communicability is, indeed, the measure of sanity, and it is also the lifeblood of narrative agency.  If agency and communication are two sides of the same coin, our ability to give an account of ourselves flourishes as the community around us recognises and listens to us.  We 'find ourselves', i.e. come to appreciate our own uniqueness, through conversation with others who are also unique.


5.4 Finding Ourselves in Conversation: Communicating the Harm of Rape


[320] Benhabib 1999, 350.

To give a better sense of what simultaneous political and moral judgment looks like, I'd like to treat an example from a book that has been read in a number of different ways—Susan Brison's (2002) *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self.* Brison, in her rigorously philosophical account of her own recovery from sexual assault, describes in vivid detail her struggle to communicate with others in the wake of the attack. Overwhelmingly, the insight that emerges from Brison's account is the inextricable relationality of self and world, the insight that, as she puts it 'the self exists fundamentally in relation to others.'[321]

The assault on Brison occurred while she was on a walk one morning on a holiday in France. She was pulled off the road by a stranger, sexually assaulted, and severely beaten. For the first months after the attack, she was unable to communicate to anyone what had happened to her. She gave the brute facts at repeated inquiries by medical and law enforcement officials and was often speechless in interactions with family and friends who were unable to understand the significance of the assault. No one else had gone through what she had gone through, and in attempting to explain herself to others, and to accept the support they offered, she often ran up against the boundaries of communicability.

What allowed her, slowly, to rejoin the world was not advocacy or activism—was not political participation of any kind. It was, instead, working on rebuilding her moral intuitions (about who she is, how other people see her, how she wants to be seen) through sustained interaction with sympathetic others. Without a sense of community (a sense that she was an agent capable of communicating with other agents), she was *unable to be*

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[321] Brison 2002, 40.

*a self at all*.  She writes:  'On this view [the feminist view of the relational self] the self is both autonomous and socially dependent, vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of empathic others.'[322]  Brison took self-defence classes, she found a therapist, she was diagnosed with PTSD and found the right medication, and she joined support groups for survivors of rape and of for groups for survivors attempted murder.  Very, very slowly she was able to regain the ability to make everyday moral judgments.  She was able to recount the story of her assault to others and be recognised by those others as a *person* who had experienced, and was able to communicate, a trauma.

It takes practice, and many conversations in which one feels recognised, for moral judgments to again seem second nature. Brison's attempts to narrate the experience of being a rape survivor were often thwarted by the lack of a common language to discuss rape.  She writes, 'In the case of rape, the intersection of multiple taboos—against talking openly about trauma, about violence, about sex—causes conversational gridlock, paralyzing the would be supporter.  We lack the vocabulary for expressing appropriate concern, and we have no social conventions to ease the awkwardness.'[323] Communicability depends on a shared language and a shared common sense, but these emerge only after individuals have the confidence to push past this awkwardness to mutual understanding (and this is easier when listeners are receptive and solicitous).[324]

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[322] Ibid., 38.

[323] Ibid., 12.

[324] What's at stake here is not a more contemporary psychological or 'self-help' definition of confidence, but, rather, a confidence to risk the sense of invisibility and loneliness that accompanies not being recognised at all.  I will speak at length about this risk in Chapter 6.

We confirm our agency through appearing to others in everyday ways, through attempting to articulate our judgments in private conversation, through interrogating the boundaries of what is communicable to people who recognise us in our whoness and who care for us. Brison writes of confirming her own agency through therapy, through conversations with friends, and through the support of her partner. These supportive relationships do not always take the form of conversation, but they constitute the foundation for communicability by providing a world in which the agent can be certain she will appear as herself. Brison spends quite a bit of time writing about the difficult process of relationship building and support that allowed her to write her book in the first place and to identify publicly, while carrying out her work as a feminist philosopher and a feminist activist, and as a rape survivor. She distinguishes between 'living to tell' about the assault, by which she means being able to give an account of it to others, and 'telling to live', by which she means coming up with a way to make sense of the assault to herself in order that at she may regain the world and her relationship to the world. Before she was able to make political judgments as a rape survivor and an activist, she had to practice being an agent by talking to supportive and sympathetic others.

Bolstered by the continued recognition by others, Brison began again to have a sense of herself as a spectator capable of expressing a variety of interests germane to collective action. Even after regaining the sense that she had politically relevant things to say, however, Brison was reluctant to risk the articulation of her judgments about the harm of rape in public (this harm, for Brison, is nothing less than the complete the eradication of selfhood). Certainly, many victims of harms like rape and sexual assault never become spectators at all. Indeed, even after she had begun to write academically

and to speak publically about the assault, she was riddled with doubt about whether her judgments were communicable.  She writes:

> I still wonder why I wanted the sexual aspect of the assault—so salient to me— kept secret.  I was motivated, in part, by shame, I suppose, and I wanted to avoid a too easy stereotyping of myself-as-victim.  I did not want academic work (that I had already done) on pornography and violence against women to be dismissed as the ravings of 'an hysterical rape victim.'  Also, I felt I had very little control over the meaning of the term 'rape.'  People would think they knew what had happened if they labeled the assault that way…but they wouldn't.[325]

These concerns about how she would be seen and whether she would be understood are perhaps exaggerated in the wake of such a traumatic event as violent rape, but they are also the concerns that we all face as we decide whether and how to become spectators. Becoming a spectator who can test the bounds of communicability in public by risking making judgments in public is an essential part of the work of feminist theory, but it is impossible without, as Arendt puts it, 'the elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all.'[326]

Through activism and through academic work in feminist theory and philosophy, Brison did eventually gain confidence as a spectator after her sexual assault. She has made, over the last several years, political judgments about rape in order to shift the common understanding of the harm of rape.  But it is *only* because there has been a series of feminist communities, each with its own *sensus communis*, that have succeeded, slowly but surely, in articulating the harm of rape that Brison has been able to make the specific harm done to her publicly communicable.  Without a constantly evolving consensus about *how* rape is harmful (how it eradicates agency), it is impossible to describe the harm of rape.  Becoming a spectator has meant engaging with various

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[325] Brison 2002, 90.
[326] Arendt 1976, 477.

communities in order to articulate various aspects of her particular experience. She

writes:

> At different times and for different purposes, I have identified myself as a crime
> (attempted murder) victim, a rape survivor, a hate crime survivor, a person with a
> disability (PTSD and some other, stress-triggered neurological malfunctions),
> among other categories. The groups with which I identify expand (from rape
> survivors to all trauma survivors), contract (victims of attempted sexual murder),
> expand in other ways (hate crime survivors), contract (rape survivors), and so on,
> seemingly endlessly.[327]

Depending on the set of interests in question, Brison identifies with many different

identities. Through conversations with each of these solidaristic concentrations of

identity, Brison is able to hash out, and articulate in an increasingly public way, various

ways in which she, in her uniqueness, wants to address, and change, the world. The key

point here is that the continued risk of misrecognition through the articulation of one's

own experience to others in a public space *makes communication easier*.

In each of these communities, Brison is able to articulate her own judgments in

the context of similar judgments and, thus, as a unique spectator, shift the common sense

of that community a little bit by and through her participation. She is not reducible to her

identity as a member of any one of these groups; rather, she is a participant in the

negotiation of political judgment-making within each of these groups. This process of

political judgment-making, as we have seen, involves enlarged thinking by each member

of a given community. It involves imaginatively occupying the position of other

spectators in the same community to negotiate and to refine one's own account of a very

specific harm—a 'hate crime', a 'rape'—through consideration of what other spectators

have said about that harm. The new meaning collaboratively created by each community

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[327] Brison 2002, 94-95.

listed here becomes communicable beyond the constituency of that community through enlarged thinking between members of different communities.

The purpose of this chapter has been twofold. First, I have emphasised the importance of making judgments for feminist theory. When we make judgments about what is harmful for, or beneficial to, women, we must be able to give communicable reasons for the judgments we have made. Second, I have argued that the spectator who makes feminist political judgments is always also an agent. To flesh out the process of judgment making in a feminist theory not beholden to a set of normative rules (a feminism, in other words, that does not offer in advance a set of rules by which to determine what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'), I borrowed Arendt's phenomenology of judgment making. Arendt argues that judgments gain their validity through intersubjective consensus, rather than through objective rightness. In order to make better judgments, according to Arendt, we must consider the situation from as many points of view as possible, a process Arendt calls 'enlarged thinking'. The more possible perspectives we consider when making judgments, the more communicable our judgments will be to others.

I considered this intersubjective method for making judgments as an appropriate model for judgment making in feminist theory through a reading of Linda Zerilli's work on Arendt's theory of judgment. I endorse Zerilli's argument that a feminist theory of judgment based on enlarged thinking does, in fact, allow us to consider creatively specific questions in feminism as they arise without having to fall back on a strictly normative liberalism or to sink into relativism. By the processes of enlarged thinking and political judgment, feminists are able to articulate points of view around a particular set

of circumstances and to voice agreements with other similar points of view as they arise. Solidarity, by these lights arises organically out of the public articulation of a particular set of judgments.

Zerilli's theory of judgment seems to me to suffer from two separate problems, however; the first is that she overestimates our ability to think beyond the judgments already available to us in the form of political narratives and, second, she underestimates the importance of recognition by others for having the courage to voice judgments in public in the first place. To address these problems, I turned to Benhabib's account of the moral foundations of Arendtian politics. I argued that the spectator who makes political judgments is always also an agent who makes moral judgments about action as it occurs. Being embedded (or 'rooted', as Zerilli calls it) in action does not only mean that we have a specific point of view when we make political judgments, it also means that we have a whole host of biases and prejudices, along with psychic blocks and vulnerabilities. In order to articulate political judgments so that they are communicable to others, we first have to check in with our notion of ourselves as 'I's' through a series of moral judgments, which we make as moral agents within a plurality of other moral agents. Without the universal mutual recognition at the heart of this process (the realisation *by* each of us *that* each of us is an 'I' capable of moral judgment and, eventually, political judgment), we cannot have the confidence that we will appear to others at all. Susan Brison's account of her own capacity to make political judgments after suffering a violent sexual assault helps me emphasise the importance of the moral content of judgment-making. Throughout her recovery, she found that she had to rebuild her sense of herself as an 'I' in order to articulate the kinds of political judgments necessary to explain what

had happened to her, the kind of wrong she had suffered, and the importance of talking

about, and organising politically in order to prevent, rape.  Her confidence that she would

appear as a unique self to others, or as a moral agent, was an essential part of her

willingness to risk the formulation of political judgments in public.  In the next chapter, I

look at the mutual dependence between the confidence that one will appear in the world

in the first place (which I call ontological agency) and the world created through the

mutual sharing of political judgments (through the sustained exercise of political agency).

## Chapter 6: Loneliness as the Lack of Narrative Agency

Recall that narrative agency is the capacity to make sense of oneself as an 'I' over time and in relation to other 'I's'. Narrative agency, I have argued, is an *irreducible* and *constant* capacity. It is an indispensible aspect of every human life. An unexplored corollary to this argument is that without narrative agency, a life ceases to be meaningful, ceases to be livable, and in some essential way ceases to be human. What can this mean? In this chapter, I will demonstrate that narrative agency is indeed an irreducible and constant capacity of each human being by approaching this concept of narrative agency negatively, by asking, in other words, 'what might it mean to *lack* narrative agency?'

Narrative agency is relevant in two registers of human life: the ontological and the political. Each agent enters into a plurality with a particular whoness, which, through natality, is disclosed in action again and again.[328] The ontological agent exercises this self-disclosure simply through *being in the world as a unique individual*. For whoness to be disclosed in the world, however, there must exist a world in the first place (though it is, perhaps, misleading to suggest that the world precedes the self or vice versa, since, as we shall see, ontological and political agency are mutually interdependent). The world is what we build between ourselves and hold in common through action. It is made up of laws, institutions, imaginaries and norms (and, crucially, of the conversations we are always having about these things). The political agent exercises narrative agency, as we

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[328] Recall that Arendt defines whoness as an individual's uniqueness which is disclosed through appearance in the world and perceived by others. It may seem, at first glance, that natality (the disclosure of whoness in the world) is essentially passive; I argue, however, that natality requires initiative on the part of the agent, though most of the time this initiative is 'irresistible'.

saw in Chapter 5, when she gives an account of her discrete, particular judgment as part

of a worldly conversation.  These two aspects of narrative agency, the ontological and the

political, both depend on the worldly coexistence of plurality and uniqueness—they both

depend, in other words, on a conception of the singular narrative agent in conversation

with a plurality of other narrative agents, each of them also unique.  The absence of

narrative agency, then, means the absence of plurality, uniqueness or both: this is the

condition of *loneliness*.  Loneliness is the ever-present threat of incommunicability

between individuals in a plurality.  It eradicates the world held in common, and, at its

worst, may eradicate individual whoness entirely.[329]

It is my contention, in this chapter, that an account of loneliness buttresses my

account of narrative agency by revealing the consequences of its absence.  First, I

reconstruct Arendt's phenomenology of loneliness, which she defines as the total absence

of a world in common. I canvass Arendt's account of how this eradication of the world

(and, ultimately, the individual) came to pass during the rise of totalitarianism in Nazi

Germany and further argue that the final result of the eradication of the world is the

absence of agency.  I then offer an account of the reconstruction of agency in both the

ontological and the political registers. I argue that ontological agency, when eradicated by

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[329] Arendt concludes the Origins of Totalitarianism with an affirmation of natality
(though here she calls it 'beginning'): 'Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is
the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom.  Initium ut
esset homo creates est—"that a beginning be made man was created" said Augustine.
This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.' 1976, 479.  As
we saw in Chapter 4, natality is marked by its givenness—beginning again in the world is
an innate initiative.  However, as we shall see, this initiative ceases to matter in the
camps—there is no world between men there and so action (even birth and death
themselves) is no longer meaningful.

loneliness, can be restored *through* narrative.[330]  Second, I show that political agency is

sustained by conversation, which I define as the mutually recognitive sharing of

narratives.  I argue that the political institutions that make up the world we hold in

common, including the solidaristic associations of feminism, can only be successful when

the conditions for narrative agency—natality, plurality, and narrativity—are satisfied.

Ontological agency and political agency reinforce one another.  At the close of the

chapter, I illustrate the interdependence of these two ways of thinking about narrative

agency through a brief look at the relationship between the characters of Elena and Lila

in Elena Ferrante's Neopolitan novels.  It is only because Elena has the confidence that

she will appear as a self to Lila (ontological agency) that she is able to risk articulating

her point of view in public through writing novels, writing articles for the papers, and

giving intellectual talks (political agency).


6.1 Arendt on Loneliness and Totalitarianism


Seyla Benhabib draws attention to Arendt's tendency to conflate the phenomenological

and political-philosophical approaches to loneliness: on the one hand, Arendt uses

loneliness to denote the existential state of being without the world; on the other, she

insists that action through association serves as a bulwark against loneliness.  It is this

latter 'capacity to focus on the phenomena of history, sociology, and culture instead of

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[330] *Narrative* refers both to appearance in the world as an 'I' and to extended sense-making about the world. I will rely throughout this chapter on the distinction made in Chapter 3 between *narrative agency*, which is the capacity to conceive of oneself as a unique 'I' in a world of other 'I's and *narrative identity*, which is the self that emerges out of the exercise of narrative agency across time.

taking flight into metaphysical abstractions' that Benhabib sees as the aspect of Arendt's work on totalitarianism most relevant to contemporary discussions in normative political theory.[331]  But it seems to me that Arendt's methodological slippage in this part of her work is precisely what lends her account of loneliness its richness, and what makes it so pertinent to the present discussion of agency.  Arendt's account of loneliness is very much concerned with the interdependence of being and doing.  She writes, '[f]reedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin, just as freedom as a political reality is identical with a space of movement between men.'[332] In other words, ontological agency arises out of the disclosure of whoness, but, at the same time, political agency is sustained by the plurality that makes up this space of disclosure.[333]

We find Arendt's brief but compelling thoughts on loneliness in the final chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government".[334] Here, Arendt distinguishes between solitude, isolation, and loneliness. In solitude, one is engaged in an imaginary dialogue with oneself or with others but is not cut off from them.[335]  The solitary individual is still in conversation with the world, even though she is not physically present in the world.  The pleasure of solitude is made

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[331] Benhabib 2003, 69.

[332] Arendt 1976, 473.

[333] What Arendt means by the space between men is not always clear, but it certainly needs to be a public space and cannot only consist of private life.  Though Arendt argues, in her address on Lessing and elsewhere, that the space between friends is enriched by the world and that the world is enriched by conversations between friends, the space between friends is not *enough* to constitute a world.

[334] Arendt added this chapter, Chapter 13, to her second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1958.  As Martin Shuster points out, Arendt's remarks on loneliness, though they arguably form the foundation for Arendt's analytical framework in this enormous study, have rarely been treated in a systematic way.

[335] Arendt's friend and correspondent Paul Tillich wrote, 'Language has created the word loneliness to express the pain of being alone and the word solitude to express the glory of being alone.' 1963, 5.

possible by a robust political realm, of which the solitary individual feels herself a part; without the potential 'redeeming grace' of companionship, the confirmation of one's identity by others, solitude can slip into loneliness.

Isolation, too, is distinct from, but a potential precursor to, loneliness.  The condition of isolation arises when the political realm is impoverished; that is, when individuals are no longer invested enough in shared interests and concerns to act in concert.  In isolation, the individual may still enjoy relationships with friends, family, and intimate community.  The pariah, for example, exists without the world but often within a community of other pariahs.[336]  The isolated individual may also enjoy the pleasures of work (the making of art, for example) without care for the world.  Isolation becomes loneliness when politically isolated individuals lose the sense that they have something unique to contribute to the world in common; that is, when they feel *superfluous*.

The decline of the public sphere, and the isolation it engenders, is the prerequisite for totalitarianism, which does away with the public sphere entirely in order to implement a suprahuman law.  Totalitarianism 'executes the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right and wrong for individual behaviour.'[337]  Within a totalitarian regime, there are no longer institutions in place—courts of law, the free press—that allow people to raise publicly problems that inevitably arise out of living together in society.  Rather, the intent of a totalitarian government is to dispense with the individual action of men altogether in order to address the demands of a suprahuman

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[336] '…the pariahs of this world enjoy the great privilege of being unburdened by care for the world.' 1995, 14.  Indeed, by 'dark times', Arendt *means* periods of world impoverishment.  The exemplary men and women about whom she writes maintain the integrity of their uniqueness, in spite of the isolation brought on by the decline of the political realm.

[337] Arendt 1976, 462.

ideology, embodied in the Stalinist regime by the concept of History (the convictions of dialectical materialism) and in Hitler's Germany by the concept of Nature (the preservation and perpetuation of the German nation). Adherence to these ideologies necessarily demands dispensing with the everyday laws of man and appealing to a higher Law, which is in motion toward some ultimate end. In this view, *humankind itself* becomes nothing more than an obstacle for the ideology to overcome. As Arendt writes: 'In these ideologies, the term "law" changed its meaning: from expressing the framework of stability within which human actions and motions can take place, it became the expression of the motion itself.'[338] 'Law', in a totalitarian regime, seeks to eradicate human action, rather than to enable it.

Because this law of movement is not concerned with unique individual lives, its enforcement in the world takes the form of terror. The usual hallmarks of positive law, in other words, collapse in a totalitarian society. Men are no longer judged by their deeds, and guilt and innocence cease to be relevant concepts. Terror, then, is the application of suprahuman Law to the whole of a society. The ultimate aim of terror is to transform the discrete members of society into a single unit of mankind, *one from which plurality and individualism have been eradicated*. Within a system of terror, individual human life becomes arbitrary and meaningless. Each member of society is marked by the higher law as either victim or executioner. These designations are not based on crime and punishment.[339] They are, instead, bestowed by terror itself. Arendt writes:

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[338] Ibid., 464.

[339] Arendt gives an interesting example of the collapse of executioner into victim and victim into executioner at the behest of the law of Nature: 'The introduction of purely objective criteria into the selective system of SS troops was Himmler's great organisational invention; he selected the candidates from photographs according to purely

Terror as the execution of a law of movement whose ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind, eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the "parts" for the sake of the "whole." The suprahuman force of Nature or History has its own beginning and its own end, so that it can only be hindered by the new beginning and the individual end which the life of each man actually is.[340]

The political non-space of totalitarianism is hostile to the uniqueness represented by each individual, and terror, understood as the principle of absolute motion toward a suprahuman Law, therefore seeks to stamp out plurality. As Benhabib puts it, 'societal atomization; the breakdown of civic, political, cultural associations and the loneliness of atomized masses, prepares them for the reception of authoritarian and totalitarian movements.'[341] On a mass scale, the totalitarian state strives to homogenise the entire population in the service of universally installing the laws of Nature or History. A pure totalitarian regime thus consists of one mass of mankind, within which individual human beings are interchangeable.

In order for such Law to be successfully implemented, the totalitarian regime must destroy not only the structure of positive law and the possibility for meaningful political action, it must also destroy the human capacity for creativity on a more intimate scale. Terror, as a principle, is not enough to guide the behaviour of each individual within a society, and even a regime that has converted the entire public sphere over to the advance of terror has not necessarily eradicated the capacity for free, creative interaction and thought. This tendency toward freedom is present in every human being because it is 'identical with the fact that men are being born and that therefore each of them *is* a new

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racial criteria. Nature itself decided, not only who was to be eliminated, but also who was to be trained as executioner' 1976, 468.
[340] Arendt 1976, 465.
[341] Benhabib 2003, 55.

beginning.'[342] A totalitarian government must also indoctrinate its subjects into the

(il)logic of terror through the dissemination of its ideology.  Totalitarian logic is able to

explain 'every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise.'[343]  Totalitarianism

cancels out any possibility to think freely beyond the bounds of its own logic. Arendt

writes:

> Totalitarian rulers rely on the compulsion with which we can compel ourselves,
> for the limited mobilization of people which even they still need; this inner
> compulsion is the tyranny of logicality against which nothing stands but the great
> capacity of men to start something new.[344]

This tyrannical logic strikes down the birth of new ideas within the individual just as the

tyranny of terror acts in opposition to the birth of unique individuals into the streamlined

society of Law.  Adherence to the single premise of an ideology, within a totalitarian

regime, becomes a subject's everyday reality.  Each subject is force-fed, through

indoctrination in the form of institutionalised education and propaganda, the foundational

idea (the idea of class struggle in the case of Soviet Russia and the idea of racial

supremacy in the case of Nazi Germany) and ever-after the consistent system of logic that

grows out of this one accepted idea is enforced upon the indoctrinated subject.

For, once one has accepted the original premise of an ideology, to deny its

'logical outcome' is to contradict oneself and, by extension, to contradict the movement.

This totalitarian logic cancels out freedom of thought:

> As terror is needed lest with the birth of each new human being a new beginning
> arise and raise its voice in the world, so the self-coercive force of logicality is

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[342] Arendt 1976, 466, emphasis in original.
[343] Ibid., 468.
[344] Arendt 1976, 473.

mobilized lest anybody ever start thinking—which as the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the composite process of deduction.[345]

And once inner freedom has been surrendered, the individual becomes one with the movement. Her social reality is that of the movement, and her interaction with others is governed entirely by the shared acceptance of the movement's ultimate premise. Her capacity to create judgments on both a political scale and a moral scale is destroyed. *This* is the heart of loneliness: the destruction of both the agent and the spectator. The successful propagation of terror robs of the individual of her narrative agency, of her capacity to communicate new meaning through action. Creation, according to Arendt, is very simply 'the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world'.[346] But under totalitarianism, both the capacity to create something new and the common world in which a new creation might be recognised have been destroyed.

The concentration camp represents, for Arendt, the condition of loneliness in its most extreme and purest form. In the camp, neither birth nor death means anything. Both victims and executioners are part of the same closed system that does not and cannot constitute a common world; they might as well not exist. They are outside of law, outside of morality—in short, outside of the human experience altogether. Most appallingly though, the living dead in the camp *see themselves* as completely unnecessary for Nature's inexorable advance:

> We may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which
> all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system
> believe in their own superfluousness as much as in that of all others, and the

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[345] Ibid., 473. The total domination of a mass of people by ideology is the extreme case of the tendency away from action and toward behaviour (and away from interactive republicanism and toward bureaucracy) that Arendt bemoans in modern society (1958, 322).

[346] Arendt 1976, 475.

totalitarian murderers themselves are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born.[347]

The 'radical evil' here is the lack of distinction between one individual and the next, the state in which human uniqueness is no longer of any consequence. Thus, in the political sphere, in the private sphere, and within the individual herself, loneliness has the same target: *agency*. Arendt's portrait of totalitarianism in power reveals the extent to which it is this very capacity that makes us human. Totalitarianism, in trying to rob humanity of its creative potential, is doomed to fail; for basic human agency, which is guaranteed by natality (which is itself guaranteed by the birth of new individuals into the world), cannot be expunged.[348] 'This beginning,' Arendt writes in her final lines, 'is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.'[349] The camp cannot be a world. It is, as Benhabib points out, a space where humanity has ceased to be recognisable as human. She writes: 'The destruction of the individual in concentration camps by methods of torture, terror, and behaviour manipulation only shows that a humanity that has become worldless, homeless, and superfluous is also wholly eliminable.'[350] Extreme loneliness, which is the internalisation of our own superfluousness was temporarily possible in the camps and is a constant threat wherever human beings lose their common world. But it cannot be a permanent condition because *it is impossible to permanently eradicate human agency*.


6.2 Ontological Agency: Agency as Appearance

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[347] Ibid., 459.
[348] Recall that in *The Human Condition*, Arendt claims that the capacity to act is ontologically rooted natality. In other words, our capacity to appear in the world is due to the fact that we are first born into the world as unique beings
[349] Arendt 1976, 479.
[350] Benhabib 2003, 66-67.

The concentration camp is, of course, not the only place that extreme loneliness prevails. The internalisation of a sense of superfluousness might just as aptly describe the experience of others whose sense that they belong to a common world has been destroyed, whether through depression, homelessness, social marginalisation, displacement, extreme pain, illness, or the inability to overcome past trauma.[351] The sense of loneliness haunts each of us from time to time. Arendt certainly saw loneliness as a ubiquitously imminent threat to plurality. Natality is 'the miracle that saves the world' because it staves off this threat. By the capacity to create something new to others, we keep the world intact. It is easy enough to be certain of this capacity in an abstract way—to endorse the thesis that agency is *grounded* in the ontological fact of birth. It is much more alarming to realise that there is nothing at all, apart from our own individual *exercise* of agency, that guarantees us a place in the world. Appearance is difficult, recognition is fragile, and successful communication is rare. Dread, melancholia, alienation, misunderstanding, apathy, physical pain, grief—all of these things tempt us to resist the initiative to participate in the common world and to surrender to loneliness.[352] Even for those who participate in the world with ease, who are

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[351] The connections between loneliness and mental illness and loneliness and extreme physical pain have, of course, been explored in a number of ways and are a perennial theme in art and literature. For more some compelling thoughts on the former, see Solomon 2015. For an account of the latter, see Scarry 1985.

[352] The desire to give in to loneliness is perhaps close to Sartre's notion of bad faith. It is as fruitless and unsustainable to deny one's own uniqueness in favour of superfluousness as it is to deny one's own freedom in favor of unfreedom. See Sartre 1984, especially Part I.

surrounded by friends, who are involved in ongoing discussions about worldly concerns, loneliness is an ever-present threat.[353]

In this section, I will elaborate on the idea that loneliness can be productively understood as the absence of agency and will explore the notion of recovering the world lost to loneliness through the exercise of ontological agency. In the process, we will see how this version of agency dovetails with the concept of narrative agency we have been building throughout: a *non-sovereign* concept of agency, one which does not commit us to the idea of a self who is fully in control of her narratives, and a *communicative* concept of agency, one which reveals that agency needs to be recognised by others to be meaningful. Appearance, or the exercise of ontological agency, in the face of loneliness is the result of a self's disclosure of her individuality just when that individuality seems particularly tenuous. Indeed, I do not want to give the impression that ontological agency is a simple solution to the problem of loneliness. It is *always* a difficult prospect when an individual is struggling with incommunicability—attempts at communication during such times are often ugly and are occasionally devastating.

Loneliness is cumulative; it seems to breed more loneliness. Once the world is lost, it is very difficult to get it back. The inability to explain oneself to others feels more and more insurmountable the less frequently we undertake such explanations. Without the feeling that one is listened to and recognised, one is less capable of even attempting to

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[353] Many, including Arendt herself, see loneliness, understood as world poverty, as a distinctly *modern* threat. The first complete acknowledgment by human beings of their own superfluousness occurs, for Arendt in the camps. There, for the first time, the distinction between life and death ceases to matter. Giorgio Agamben (1998) has gone so far as to take up this internalised superfluity as the basic condition for contemporary politics. For more on loneliness as a modern condition (and a condition of modernity) see Dumm 2010.

express one's thoughts, feelings, opinions, or judgments.   In loneliness one 'loses trust in

himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which

is *necessary to make experiences at all*.'[354]  Here is the initiative upon which appearance

rests—the 'elementary confidence' that one will be seen at all, that one *can* be seen at

all.[355]  Losing trust in oneself as a thinking partner means losing the ability to be alone in

solitude, which amounts to losing the ability to think at all.  Extended loneliness does not

allow for meaningful thought, which Arendt defines as a process of the thinker in

conversation with herself.[356]

Thomas Dumm (2010) sees in Arendt's conception of loneliness as loss of the

world what he calls 'the paradox of experience', a concept which he uses to underpin his

definition of loneliness as the inability to be 'present in the present moment'.

'Loneliness', Dumm writes, 'is the existential realisation of a strange fantasy—the loss of

self, world, experience, and thought.'[357]  A strange fantasy indeed, for what could

consciousness be without these four ontological categories?  Arendt's schematic of action

helps us expand Dumm's definition.  The condition of natality allows us to insert

ourselves into the world again and again through action.  When we act, we appear in the

world as unique individuals.  Two things happen simultaneously during this appearance:

one, an *agent* understands that she appears as unique; and two, the *world* experiences the

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[354] Arendt 1976, 477, emphasis added.

[355] Another way of expressing this insight is to say that being a conversation partner with myself in solitude depends on first knowing how to be a conversation partner in the common world: 'Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience.' Arendt 1976, 476.

[356] Martin Shuster (2012) argues, intriguingly, that the insight that in loneliness thinking becomes impossible is the real payoff of Arendt's chapter on loneliness and totalitarianism.

[357] Dumm 2010, 45.

agent's uniqueness.[358]  Being present in the present moment might therefore be

understood as experiencing one's own uniqueness; feeling, in other words, as though one

can add something to the common world.  *Experience* and *thought* are possible when

action is possible, though, as Leslie Thiele points out, this is a necessarily circular

thesis.[359] Appearance, then, occurs when the four prerequisites for being—self, world,

experience, and thought—are satisfied. Appearance is, in other words, the exercise of

*ontological agency*.

Appearance always discloses an agent's uniqueness.  In other words, it always

makes 'patent' the 'latent' self, to paraphrase the quote of Dante's that Arendt places as

an epigraph to her section on action in *The Human Condition*.[360]  But what is the

motivation for appearance (for the exercise of ontological agency)?  Recall that Arendt,

in her discussion of the ubiquity of natality, sees the initiative toward disclosure of one's

whoness in the space of appearance as irresistible.  We can take this to mean that, in a

reasonably robust world, the agent cannot help but disclose her own uniqueness.  She

gives a lecture to an eager group of students, she amuses a group of friends over lunch,

she is remembered, and recognised, by the clerk at the corner book shop.  In each of these

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[358] Recall that the agent cannot witness her own whoness she cannot see herself as others
see her.  She understands, however, that she appears to others as a unique 'who'.
[359] Thiele writes:  'Actions do not simply allow for retrospective storytelling.  Action is
made possible because as a species we are capable of narrative existences…The events
that compose our lives are not simply random events that await historians or storytellers
to gain meaning.  We act in particular ways because such efforts correspond well to our
(anticipated) roles in unfolding tales.  Actions are often taken, one might say, to fulfill
stories in the making.' 2009, 1.
[360] *For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from
natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image.  Hence it comes
about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; since everything that is
desires its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified,
delight necessarily follows…Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its
latent self.*  From Dante Alighieri's *De Monarchia*, quoted in Arendt 1958, 175.

situations, the agent's whoness is disclosed as she acts within, and is recognised by, the world.  The students, the friends, and the book clerk each possess a definite idea of the agent's uniqueness; each has a concept of her whoness.  Importantly, the agent also experiences her self as a unique being through each of these interactions.  Her recognition by others reinforces her understanding of herself as an individual in the world.  Thus, the agent has exercised her ontological agency, as I put it earlier in the chapter, simply by *being in the world as a unique individual*.

Now imagine that each of these moments occurs in a slightly impoverished world: the students do not listen, the lunch companions do not appreciate the agent's humour, and the bookstore clerk does not remember her even though she comes into the store often.  Repeated lack of recognition erodes the agent's sense of her own uniqueness, and thus, erodes her agency.  The less she is recognised by the world, the less she is able to appear in the world.  The associations of a world, which confirm the agent's uniqueness, protect her from loneliness.  When an individual's initiative to appear in the world is too often thwarted, she begins to feel less and less sure of her own capacity to appear.  The repeated lack of recognition is the worst part of loneliness, according to Arendt: 'What makes loneliness so unbearable', she writes 'is the loss of one's own self which can be realised in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals.'[361]  Without confirmation of one's uniqueness, of 'one's own self which can be realised in solitude', an individual loses the capacity—perhaps we ought to say the confidence—to articulate what he or she thinks and feels.  In other words, communicability becomes impossible when ontological agency is compromised.

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[361] Arendt 1976, 477.

Ontological agency can be compromised in a number of ways, ranging from the mundane (the alienation of a factory-like work environment) to the extreme (the total worldlessness of the refugee). Trauma, grief, extreme pain, and other world-destroying events can compromise ontological agency and can leave a trail of incommunicability in their wakes. Returning for a moment to the last chapter's discussion of Susan Brison's difficulty communicating what had happened to her after her sexual assault will help make this point. Repeatedly, over the course of her book, Brison talks about the feeling (common among trauma survivors) that she died during the assault, and has been living a life after death ever since. The result of trauma is, very literally, a death of the self. The very basic capacity of narrative agency—to make sense of oneself as a unique 'I'—is lost as a result of trauma. The utterance of the 'I' is meaningful to no one because the 'I' has been convinced of her or his own superfluousness and others are unable to see her as her 'old self', as the self they had previously known. A survivor of trauma, in other words, is often plunged into loneliness. Brison writes:

> The relational nature of the self is also revealed by a further obstacle confronting trauma survivors attempting to reconstruct coherent narratives: the difficulty of regaining one's voice, one's subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or, worse, made into someone else's speech, an instrument of another's agency. Those entering Nazi concentration camps had the speech of their captors literally inscribed on their bodies.[362]

Loneliness, here as in Arendt, is the result of being made into an object—whether the object of the suprahuman law of totalitarianism or the object of the violence of a single

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[362] Brison 2002, 55.

other person.  If basic agency consists of being able to make sense of oneself as an 'I',

loneliness is the condition in which the self cannot say 'I'.[363]

Throughout, Brison describes the experience of feeling her own superfluousness

using this language of life beyond death, beginning with her examination by two doctors

shortly after the assault: 'For about an hour the two of them went over me like a piece of

meat, calling out measurements of bruises and other assessments of damage, as if they

were performing an autopsy.  This was just the first of many incidents in which I felt as if

I was experiencing things posthumously.'[364]  Here is a very powerful picture of non-

recognition in loneliness.  The self is totally eradicated by the event of the sexual assault

and seems, even to herself, to be a manifestation of that event.

Rape is world destroying both because it eradicates the victim's sense of self

(because she has been 'reduced to an instrument of another's agency') *and* sets her at

odds with the world (because we lack the shared linguistic and emotional resources to

communicate about rape).  'Unlike survivors of wars or earthquakes, who inhabit a

common shattered world', Brison writes, 'rape victims face the cataclysmic destruction

of their world alone, surrounded by people who find it hard to understand what's so

distressing.'[365]  Because the experience of rape is often incommunicable, the self is

unsure of her own capacity to say 'I' in the wake of the destruction wrought by the rapist

and the self is unable to appear in the world.  The result of this double difficulty was, for

Brison, a deep and inexorable loneliness.  She describes this loneliness: 'In my case, each

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[363] Simone Weil also thinks of the power to say 'I' this way: 'We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say "I".'  2002, 26.
[364] Brison 2002, 8.
[365] Ibid., 15.

time someone failed to respond I felt as though I were alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or worse, they heard me, but refused to help.'[366] The sense of being closer to death than life prevailed for as long as Brison felt unable to re-enter the world.

Quite often, over the course of her book, one gets the feeling that Brison is writing herself back to life. Coming back to life, like massaging the blood back into foot that has fallen asleep, is painful. Adriana Cavarero emphasises the necessity of appearance understood as ontological agency—we might also call it the necessity of coming back to life through narrative agency—for understanding the possibility of political agency. She speaks of the 'redemptive power' of narrative, which saves human lives from disappearance.[367] The ontological category of uniqueness carries with it the ineradicability of *whoness*. The self, in other words, is redeemed from the meaninglessness (the internalisation of her own superfluousness, for example) by appearance as an individual self before others. Cavarero, then, also reads Arendt as chiefly concerned with the prepolitical, or ontological, aspects of selfhood (or *whoness*). She insists that appearance is something we cannot resist, even though we might want to resist it.[368] We are drawn out of even the deepest loneliness by the irresistible initiative to appear as selves.

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[366] Ibid., 16.

[367] Cavarero 2015, 5.

[368] Cavarero has written at length about the relationship between narrative and selfhood in Arendt (see especially *Relating Narratives*, 2000). I do not engage with her earlier work in a sustained way in this thesis because she is chiefly concerned with a conception of narrative selfhood that is other-oriented. That is, she thinks of *whoness* in terms of the desire to be seen by (and to have one's story told by) others. In this thesis I am more concerned with thinking about appearance in terms of *agency* (to make sense of one's story through conversation with others). The difference between these two approaches (if

But appearance as our selves may cause us more pain than we can bear—instead of massaging the blood back into one's extremities, one might reopen a wound that will not stop bleeding. Cavarero writes of this inescapable desire for narrative through exploring the work of W.G. Sebald. She finds in Sebald many eloquent examples of the difficulties that plague a self who attempts to re-enter the world. She writes of Sebald's characters in *The Emigrants*—each of whom has survived the Holocaust, has lived in loneliness, has come out of loneliness through appearance, and has committed suicide because he is unable to bear the pain of re-entering the world—lifting themselves out of loneliness through narration. Unlike Brison, who manages to regain her capacity for contributing to the common world, these characters are thwarted at the edge of that world. Sebald's work shows us that people can be (and certainly many people are) destroyed by loneliness. These people only *seem* to be alive, but they have lost their capacity to tell a story about themselves that makes any sense. Thus, they seem themselves to the world, but they have lost their own sense that they are selves. When appearance does not reveal the 'I's' uniqueness to *both* the self *and* the world, it is not ontological agency.[369]

there is one—it might be that they are complementary) to thinking about appearance in plurality is subtle but complex. It merits its own in-depth discussion which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

[369] A story from another work of Sebald's which suggests that the shell of a lonely self convinced of its own superfluousness can sometimes appear to the world as whole: 'At Regensburg he crossed the Danube on his cloak, and there made a broken glass whole again; and, in the house of a wheel-wright too mean to spare the kindling, lit a fire with icicles. This story of the burning of the frozen substance of life has, of late, meant much to me, and I wonder now whether inner coldness and desolation may not be the pre-condition for making the world believe, by a kind of fraudulent showmanship, that one's own wretched heart is still aglow.' 1999, 86.

For Brison, attempts to restore her sense of self, to exercise her ontological agency, failed repeatedly in the aftermath of the assault. Writing herself back to life is something she has been able to do *because* she has found ways to appear, over time, to others as a unique moral agent capable of meaning creation. The continuous exercise of ontological agency is necessary for an individual to gain the kind of confidence necessary to support her convictions and judgments; for her to feel strong enough, in other words, to exercise her political agency.

6.3 Political Agency: Preserving the World of Action

If ontological agency redeems the agent from loneliness, then political agency protects the world against the spread of loneliness. Political agency, which is the capacity to articulate one's thoughts, opinions and judgments in public, is impossible in loneliness.[370] As we have seen, this notion of agency does not rest on a static vision of identity. Each of us has multiple identities which are subject to constant revision but which are, at the same time, marked by individual uniqueness. Individuals in association with one another are able to enrich their communicative horizons through repeated mutually recognitive conversation. In other words, we are able, through talking to one another, to shore up our agency through strengthening the world. Political agency, to put it in the terms of Chapter 5, is the capacity to articulate a judgment in public.

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[370] The tendency to be concerned with private affairs rather than public involvement bespeaks the condition of isolation, not loneliness. Arendt points out the increase in this tendency in Europe but also, importantly, as a trenchant problem in America (originally diagnosed by Tocqueville). See Chapter 5 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie". For more on a distinctly American understanding of Arendtian isolation and loneliness, see Richard King (2012).

This section is concerned with the relationship between ontological agency and political agency. These two forms of agency, I argue, are interdependent. The continued exercise of ontological agency, or appearance in the world as a unique individual, *makes political agency possible*. In other words, we risk appearance in public, whether this entails justifying an opinion on office politics in a meeting between colleagues or giving a speech at a 'take back the night' rally, because we have a firm grasp on our basic ontological agency. Without this basic confidence in our own capacity to appear to others as unique individuals, we are subject to loneliness—we do not get the confirmation of uniqueness which keeps us from feeling superfluous. The exercise of political agency involves risking incommunicability and, as I argued in Chapter 5, this is a big risk when misrecognition can so easily plunge an individual back into loneliness. Friendship, love, support groups and other intimate forms of recognition provide the confidence necessary for political agency, which consists in the articulation of a judgment to others who may or may not understand it. The more this risk is taken, and is successful, the more the agent is able to experience solidarity. Agents who share, communicatively, a set of judgments and concerns, are able to organise around those concerns and act in concert.[371] This communicative access to action in concert is the hallmark of a robust world.

Of course, this bipartite view of agency is not uncontroversial.[372] For one thing, there is the vexing problem of how to square the notion of appearance to another through

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[371] Recall that action in concert never determines the permanent content of a collective's political needs but concern, rather, 'the practical, ad-hoc organisations of citizens pursuing "actual" and "short-term" goals' and 'disappear[s] as soon as these goals have been achieved.' Borren 2013, 206.

[372] Other complications include the rejection of the implicit assumption, defended throughout, that all agency is narrative and the rejection of the Arendtian concept of

conversations, which often occur in therapy, in support groups, or among friends with what we know about Arendt's strict conceptual division between private and public space. For another, this notion of agency might seem at first glance to rob of political agency those people who need it the most—namely, people who are mired in loneliness. It is my contention, despite these potential criticisms, that conceiving of political agency as dependent on the mastery of ontological agency allows us to practice a form of politics that takes into account the unique complexity of each of its practitioners.

The importance of a healthy private sphere for maintaining a healthy public sphere is evident throughout Arendt's work.[373] The controversy arises when we try to nail down exactly what, for Arendt, constitutes action and what does not. My reading of this problem is that, by taking Arendt at her word that action is what occurs between people, we can define all conversation—all interaction, even—as (tentatively) political (if not public). The 'space' between us, which makes up the world, is what is lost in totalitarianism because in fully realised totalitarianism (that is, in the camps) we cannot have any mutually recognitive conversations, not even in private, not even among friends. We cannot, in other words, appear *at all*. The logical extension of thinking about the world this way seems to me to be that *all appearance is action*.

As has been established, loneliness is the condition in which appearance is extremely difficult, if not impossible. This condition often affects, it is important to remember, the most vulnerable among us, the people, in other words, most in need of

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politics as action between individuals. I have addressed these two broader potential concerns elsewhere in the thesis.

[373] Though Arendt believed that being a citizen properly entailed thinking of private interest as secondary to the public good. See especially her late essay "Public Rights and Private Interests" (1977).

political representation, such as the physically disabled, the homeless, and the mentally ill. Arendt's example *par excellence* of the human being confronted time and again with his or her own political invisibility is the refugee. 'The world found nothing sacred', she wrote about the failure to extend universal human rights to refugees on the basis of their humanity alone, 'in the abstract nakedness of being human.'[374] Existence is not enough, I take her to mean, to warrant appearance. It is all too common for human beings to ignore suffering and injustice. The condition of loneliness, wherein an individual has 'no place in the world, recognised and guaranteed by others', is not something that can be corrected by abstract calls for social justice (though the more robust the world, the more concerned it will be with social justice).[375] It is, rather, necessary for the specific individual struggling with the condition of loneliness to appear in the world as a unique individual. Appearance—being recognised as a unique human being—is what allows an individual to make the particular aspects of her situation communicable. Without appearance, the world may perceive the individual as a statistic, a stereotype, or a 'single story' rather than as complex and unique.

Where does this leave the people who struggle to appear to others? Unless they are included in, and recognised by, some kind of community, they will lack a sense of ontological agency: and this is precisely the problem at which our calls for justice ought to be aimed. The correction of structural inequality and systematic injustice begins with listening to the victims of inequality and injustice, with perceiving them as unique agents with a number of different stories to tell. Arendt wrote of the tendency among refugees (and she considered herself a refugee) to form pariah communities, rich in 'humour' and

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[374] Arendt 1976, 299.
[375] Ibid., 475.

'warmth'.[376]  The struggle for appearance can be made easier by a sense of belonging, whether to a family or to a community at a homeless shelter, and by publicly valuing the sharing of individual stories over (though obviously alongside) policy-making.  Sharing narratives, furthermore, is often a productive way to facilitate appearance.

Agency, I have argued, is always narrative because it always involves reflective self-awareness (an idea of the self as an 'I').  In ontological agency, this awareness comes in the form of recognising that one appears as a unique being to others.  In political agency, on the other hand, it takes the form of the practical self-conception that accompanies judgment-making.  Political agency may take many different forms.  It may entail the encouragement of difficult conversations about a certain kind of harm, or taking part in a protest, what Lisa Disch refers to the practice of 'articulating solidarity', which she sees as the constant re-negotiation of what we have in common as our interests shift:

> Rather than defining what we believe in or declaring who we are, we now need to assess how we are implicated in a worldly event.  This is the task of articulating solidarity: constructing the 'facts' of a contingent situation in a way that makes possible a coordinated response by a plurality of actors who—apart from that contingency—may have more differences than affinities.[377]

A robust world, in which members are able to appear in action, makes political judgment easier.  When we exercise political agency, we claim our current interests in common and make explicit our associations.  We make clear the reasons behind our convictions, listen to others explain why their convictions are important to them and attempt to articulate what it is that we have in common.

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[376] Arendt 1995, 16.
[377] Disch 1994, 288.

A world where this kind of give-and-take is possible is the opposite of totalitarianism. Instead of one suprahuman law that erodes the space between citizens, there are negotiable laws that reflect the democratic reality of a plurality of perspectives. The more we articulate our interests in common, the easier it is to articulate our interests in common: political agency, like loneliness, is contagious. The loneliness of the concentration camps and the solidarity of the participants in a 'take back the night' march (or in Brison's releasing her book to her readers) are at opposite ends of the agency spectrum. The former is the nadir of agency, and the latter represents its productive political exercise. These two ways of exercising agency are, indeed, interdependent.

6.4 Ontological and Political Agency in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels

The protagonist of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels is a woman named Elena Greco. The books follow her journey from her early childhood in an impoverished neighbourhood in Naples, through her education, her love affairs, her career as a writer and public intellectual, raising her children, and growing old. But this story of 'Elena' is also the story of her closest friend, Lila. Ferrante's focus on this relationship over the course of the four books illustrates this chapter's thesis that ontological and political agency are mutually reinforcing. Elena is unable to understand herself, to perceive herself as a self, without appearing to Lila. Her success as a student, as a writer, and as an intellectual is meaningless if not witnessed by Lila. And, though Lila does not always tell Elena what she wants to hear (at times she can be cruel and antagonistic), it is recognition by Lila (ontological agency) that gives Elena the confidence necessary to do

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things that frighten her (political agency): to write sexually explicit novels, to give talks

on women's liberation, and to write controversial articles about workers for the national

papers.

Moreover, understanding Lila's uniqueness is essential to Elena's ability to

understand herself as unique. Many times over the course of the four novels, Elena

marvels at Lila's intelligence, Lila's beauty, and Lila's character. She understands,

through perceiving Lila as exceptional—a perception heightened by knowing her so

intimately and for so long—*what it is to be a self*. Lila's capacities for self-disclosure

and critical thinking are proof that such capacities exist at all. A passage in the first

novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, illuminates this point:

> It was from Lila. I tore open the envelope. There were five closely written pages,
> and I devoured them, but I understood almost nothing of what I read. It may seem
> strange today, and yet it really was so: even before I was overwhelmed by the
> contents, what struck me was that the writing contained Lila's voice. Not only
> that. From the first lines I thought of *The Blue Fairy*, the only text of hers than I
> had read, apart from our elementary-school homework, and I understood what, at
> the time, I had liked so much. There was, in *The Blue Fairy*, the same quality that
> struck me now: Lila was able to speak through writing; unlike me when I wrote,
> unlike Sarratore in his articles and poems, unlike even the many writers I had read
> and was reading, she expressed herself in sentences that were well constructed,
> and without error, even though she had stopped going to school, but—further—
> she left no trace of effort, you weren't aware of the artifice of the written word. I
> read and I saw her, I heard her.[378]

Lila appears before Elena as Elena reads Lila's letter. Her unique whoness is palpable

here, such that the reader feels that he or she, too, knows Lila.

Lila is less assured of her ability to contribute to the common world than Elena is.

Her self-perception is more fractured, and her assurance that she will be heard and

understood by others more tenuous. This does not mean that Lila lacks agency, however.

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[378] Ferrante 2012, 226-227.

She is, all her life, in the thrall of subordinating power relations—she is married at seventeen to a man she does not love and is forced by her poverty to work a gruelling job at a sausage factory—but she is no victim. Throughout her life she acts in a number of surprising and affecting ways—she designs shoes for her brother and father to make, she creates a troubling work of art (which represents her feelings of alienation and fragmentation) to hang in her husband's store, and she articulates in a single speech the worker's plight more eloquently than any of the activists who make it their job to fight for workers' rights. Lila appears in the world as startlingly unique. She is all action, and she 'feels her freedom', as Zerilli might put it, through this action, but she does not seem to have the conviction that she is a coherent 'I'. Though she lacks Elena's confidence that she is a whole self (the same confidence lacked by Sebald's emigrants), she throws herself into the world again and again.

Lila thus lacks the conviction that she will appear to others that is necessary for a robust sense of ontological agency. She lacks, also, a sense of sustained political agency. Often, when asked for an opinion on what she has read or asked to join the ranks of the workers' movement, Lila baulks, saying she does not understand complex ideas (though she does) or that she can't possibly find time to devote to activism. She lacks the sense that she is an important part of the common world. Elena describes this lack in Lila in book four, *The Story of the Lost Child*:

> She used that term *dissolving boundaries*. It was on that occasion that she
> resorted to it for the first time; she struggled to elucidate the meaning, she wanted
> me to understand what the dissolution of boundaries meant and how much it
> frightened her. She was still holding my hand tight, breathing hard. She said that
> the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread.
> She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges
> and poured into another, into a solution of heterogenous materials, a merging and
> mixing. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had

firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that—it was not like that—and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped.[379]

I read this passage as an allegory for loneliness. Without the sense that we are unique selves—when our capacity for narrative agency is compromised, in other words—we are thrown into a vision of the world as undifferentiated—the world as a mass of sameness. Nothing *matters*, in this picture, because there is no common world in which meaning can be created, shared, and built upon. Lila struggles to understand herself as an ontological agent—she struggles to see herself as an 'I' in time and in relation to other 'I's', and she is not confident that she will appear to others as a unique self with something to offer to the common world.

In this chapter, I have argued that narrative agency is exercised in two different but overlapping registers: the ontological and the political. I have argued that the basic view of narrative agency defended in this thesis (the capacity to make sense of oneself as an 'I' in time and with relation to other 'I's') depends first on the confidence that one will appear in the world as a unique 'I'. The world in which the 'I' appears arises out of political action (out of the exchange of political judgments about interests held in

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[379] Ferrante 2015, 175-176. Lila experiences this fear of dissolving boundaries all her life. She alludes to it in that early letter to Lila also: 'She was alone in the kitchen washing the dishes and was tired, really without energy, when there was an explosion. She had turned suddenly and realised that the big copper pot had exploded. Like that, by itself. It was hanging on the nail where it normally hung, but in the middle there was a large hole and the rim was lifted and twisted and the pot itself was all deformed, as if it could no longer maintain its appearance as a pot. Her mother had hurried in in her nightgown and had blamed her for dropping it and ruining it. But a copper pot, even if you drop it, doesn't break and doesn't become misshapen like that. "It's this sort of thing," Lila concluded, "that frightens me. More than Marcello, more than anyone. And I feel that I have to find a solution, otherwise, everything, one thing after another, will break, everything, everything."' 2012, 227.

common).  Ontological and political agency, then, are mutually reinforcing.  To act politically, one must be sure that one will appear to others; Elena is able to risk the misrecognition of the entire Italian public because she knows that she is recognised by Lila.  Being unsure one will appear at all, on the other hand, makes political action seem somehow hollow; Lila is often unsure she appears in her uniqueness to anyone, including Elena, and therefore her radical assertions of political agency (through public art, through activism, through rebelliousness) are merely performative.  Lila is unsure of her ontological agency, and so she feels superfluous, even as she acts.

I have supported this account of appearance and action through a reading of Arendt's phenomenology of the loneliness of world poverty in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.  Loneliness is the condition in which the individual has internalised an understanding of him or herself as superfluous—as having nothing new to contribute to the common world.  Loneliness is made absolutely manifest in the concentration camps, where all human action has become superfluous, but it is an ever-present threat to the common world.  There is no shortage of contemporary examples of endemic loneliness as the result of worldlessness, from the post-industrial confusion of middle America to the despair in the refugee detainment centres off the coast of Australia.  There are, furthermore, countless everyday instances of individuals experiencing the loneliness of extreme pain, depression, or trauma.  Loneliness is not a solvable problem; it is, rather, an ever-present threat to human action.  Loneliness can be kept at bay, however, through the cultivation of narrative agency in both the ontological and the political registers.  Cultivating interpersonal relationships, within which one feels seen and supported, allows

us to risk political action, by which we make communicable more broadly the kinds of

resources that might allow others to be seen and supported.

## Conclusion

My aim in this project has been to defend a non-sovereign, narrative concept of agency as the appropriate model of agency for feminist theory. Though contemporary feminism encompasses a plurality of problems, approaches, normative commitments, modes of identification, and ways to define central concepts, I hope that the understanding of agency I have proposed in this project may help unite feminists across these differences. This thesis arises out of the conviction that feminist theory must have a strong concept of agency, and it is committed to the goal of increasing feminist theory's emancipatory potential for anyone who identifies as a woman. I contend that the widespread and global problems of misrecognition, subordination to harmful gender norms, and the systematic harassment of and violence against women mean that feminist theory cannot afford to be ambivalent about agency. Individual women *must* have the confidence to judge and to reject these harms. I have offered a defence of agency, then, even in the face of the trenchant critiques of agency from within feminist theory—especially the poststructuralist critique that agency is a ruse of power relations and the intersectional feminist critique that 'agency', more often than not, refers to a conventional understanding of autonomy, or freedom of choice, which is disproportionately available to women who conform to privileged ways of being in the world (who are white, Western, heterosexual, upper-middle class, and so on).

My concept of *narrative agency* helps alleviate these concerns. I have broadly defined narrative agency as follows: (1) it is primary to narrative content; (2) it is grounded in uniqueness;  (3) it is non-sovereign; (4) it is communicative; (5) it is

(theoretically) infinitely generative. I have rested this definition on two claims; first, the ontological claim that selves are essentially relational and, second, the practical claim that self-understanding (whether of our own selves as 'I's' or of other selves) is narrative. I have defended both of these claims through a critical-hermeneutical engagement with other theorists of agency, subjectivity, and identity. I have looked to the work of these theorists (some feminist, some not) in order to clarify challenges to a narrative theory of agency, develop a narrative theory of agency that stands up to these challenges, and, ultimately, borrow from Hannah Arendt a political theoretical framework that maximises narrative agency.

In this thesis, I have explored the richness of Seyla Benhabib's insistence that agency and communicability are 'two sides of the same coin'. At the heart of my argument is the notion that recognition and political action are mutually reinforcing. I have fleshed out this central argument in a number of different ways. First, I traced the tension between agency and subjection from the 1990s subjectivity debates in feminist theory to contemporary discussions of the same set of problems. The central question in this debate was the extent to which agency is possible, considering the subject's constitution by and through subordinating power relations. Poststructuralist feminists, on the one hand, argued that agency and empowerment are best understood as the performative rearrangement of relations of power in such a way as to reveal the systematic inequality of those relations. In this view, we should be suspicious of theories of the 'self' as capable of possessing the constant capacity to exercise agency and should think, instead, of agency in terms of resistance to subordination by dominant narratives. Critical theoretical feminists, on the other hand, were interested to show that the

resignification of norms through performance produces something beyond its own moment of resistance. It produces the recognition by others of why and how an act of resistance is meaningful.

For this understanding of resistance to occur, the subject must have some capacity to make sense of action and to recognise other subjects as sense-makers. This does not mean we have to understand the subject as autonomous in the sense that she is the author of her own story (or that she is in complete control of the meaning she makes): only that each of us is an agent capable of making sense recognisable to others. With this view in mind, I have endorsed a framework for subjectivity which leaves open possibilities for mutual recognition even as it confirms the extent to which we are constituted by (often subordinating and systematically unequal) relationships with others. I have considered the possibility of jettisoning the subject-centred frame altogether in favour of a feminist theory that focuses on the arena of sense-making, rather than the subject, but found that we cannot ignore that the engine of sense-making in this arena is the unique individual subject. It is important, in other words, both to 'feel our freedom' as it arises in the unpredictable world of action and to appreciate the importance of recognition as a precondition for entering the world of action in the first place. A view of agency appropriate to contemporary feminism, therefore, must have a strong sense that the unique individual has agency, understood as the capacity to make sense among agents.

This engagement with the productive tension between agency and subjection led me to investigate what distinguishes a unique individual human being. How, I asked, can we understand individual personal identity? Through a sustained reading of the literature in the philosophy of personal identity, I argued that our practical understanding of

individual personal identity from both the first personal and the third personal perspectives is narrative. We have in mind a notion of ourselves as 'I's' when we act, and this notion is narrative because it involves both situating oneself in time (thinking 'I did this' or 'I am responsible for that') and involves asking questions of characterisation (asking, for example, 'Who am I?' or 'Am I the kind of person that would do x?'). These questions of characterisation are also the questions we ask when identifying other people as discrete individuals. We are interested in more than just the problem of identifying individuals as the same over time (the question of reidentification); we want to know what defines them *as* individuals (the question of characterisation). We use narrative to address the characterisation of third personal individuals. Some of these narratives are particular to our understanding of discrete individuals (as in, 'that behaviour is so typical of Susan'), and some of these narratives are political (as in, 'that behaviour is typical of a young, middle-class, white, cis-gendered lesbian').

The practical narrative model of identity is not without its normative baggage. On the one hand, it seems that understanding identity as narrative requires that we imagine a version of the good life involves the pursuit of a unified or coherent story about who one is. Asking questions of characterisation does, certainly, require that we ask moral questions about who we are and who we think we should be. On the other hand, we tend to proscribe the narrative identities of others through the repetition of strongly normative political narratives. Asking questions about who others are often means reducing them to *what* they are politically. I have rejected the strong version of both of these critiques of narrative and argue that narrative need not be overly normative. Against the first, I argued that a practical narrative self-conception need not entail a search for one's true or

authentic self. Indeed, in my reading, there exists no true or core self. The self, rather, is the site of meaning creation; she makes sense of who she is through communication with others. Against the second, I conceded that normative political narratives are often problematically reductive and often (over)determine both first and third personal narrative accounts of identity. I argued, however, a) that political narratives can sometimes be appropriated in a way that increases an individual's sense of narrative agency (one can identify with an alternative narrative, in order to feel solidarity with others) and b) that the narrative agent always has the capacity to confront and change political narratives, no matter how intractable these narratives may seem (political narratives may extend to the subject's most basic sense of herself as an 'I', but they do not constitute the subject's *capacity* to make sense and therefore may be changed).

The capacity of the self to make sense in the face of subordinating political narratives remains uncompromised even in the most extreme situations, provided that self has access to recognition by others as a unique individual capable of making sense. I looked at two different possible challenges to this capacity (which is narrative agency): the extent to which we are subordinated by harmful gender norms and the potentially problematic assumption that 'sense' is communicable through narrative. I maintained that even a self utterly constituted by harmful gender narratives has the capacity to confront and change these narratives—not because she exists as an 'I' apart from the web of gender narratives in question but because her constitution by these narratives is *contingent*. There is no essence of the narrative self, composed of a specific configuration of narratives. Instead, there exists a fluid and constantly changing self; the

only constant/necessary aspect of this self is her capacity to make sense of herself as an 'I' in time and with relation to other 'I's'.

The communicability of 'sense' arises out of mutually respectful conversation between agents who recognise one another as sense-makers. Conversations between sense-makers are often riddled with power relations, and, what's more, even mutually respectful relationships between individuals are marked by misrecognition. Not every initiative toward appearance in the common world is successful, and, quite often, attempts at communication with others fail. The capacity to make sense to, and in solidarity with, others, is, however, given in the subject's uniqueness. She cannot be reduced to sameness; she will always have the capacity to introduce new meaning into a plurality of other irreducibly unique 'I's'. Thus, I established that narrative agency is an irreducible and constant capacity. It is the irreducible capacity of the subject to make sense of herself as an 'I' in time and with relation to other 'I's'. It is, in other words the most basic capacity of individual selfhood. It is also the constant capacity of the subject to 'make sense' of experience. Even when confronted with nonsense, fragmentation, loneliness, and misrecognition, the situated self will attempt to make sense of herself as an 'I'.

Having established an understanding of the self as ontologically relational (constituted by relations with others) and practically narrative (marked by an understanding of first and third personal identity as narrative), and having established narrative agency as the constant and irreducible capacity of this self to make sense, I theorised a politics which maximises narrative agency. Arendt's action-based politics, with its emphasis on the articulation of constantly shifting interests held in common,

meets this task. In Arendt's view of action, facts about identity (what I have called political narratives) are secondary to the alignment of publicly articulated judgments about the world. Politics, by this understanding, arises organically out of commonly understandable and communicable judgments, instead of being organised around pre-existing identity categories.

This dynamic view of politics is sustained through plurality, natality, and narrativity, which are necessary conditions for public sense-making. Plurality is the condition of sameness-in-difference, which makes possible the addition of new meaning to action by the unique individual self. If we were not all unique selves, constituted by entirely discrete sets of narratives not shared by any other human being who has ever lived or will live, then we would not need to create a collaborative world of meaning between ourselves. Natality refers to the fact that this radical uniqueness was given to us by birth (by virtue of being situated differently than any other human being who has ever lived or ever will live). Natality refers also to our entrance again and again into the common world, or our 'second birth'. It is the irresistible initiative by which each unique self inserts herself into the common world. The meaning which arises out of this insertion is unpredictable, and the common world is constantly changing because of the introduction of meaning by unique agents. Narrativity is the mode by which we understand the meaning created in action, and by which we make concrete sense of what happens in action. A politics based on the dynamic negotiation of interests held in common is useful for voicing intersectional and constantly changing feminist concerns.

Participating in such a feminist politics means being able to voice publicly judgments about women's experience—about what is harmful for women, what is

beneficial for women, and so on.  Arendt offers a phenomenology of judgment-making

which requires that we engage in the sustained consideration of the particular set of

circumstances we are judging from as many other points of view as possible, a process

which she refers to as enlarged thinking.  In enlarged thinking, we become spectators,

capable of imagining conversations with other spectators, in which we share reasons for

the judgments we have made.  The more points of view we consider when making a

political judgment, the more communicable our judgment will be.  Judgments gain their

validity through consensus.  This model of consensus-building adds to our picture of

feminist politics as the shared articulation of interests held in common.  Feminist politics

should not consist of women making judgments based on a pre-determined set of ideas

about what is 'right' or 'wrong' for women; it should, rather, consist of women coming to

new understandings of what is 'right' and 'wrong' for women through the open-ended

and collaborative investigation of particular circumstances women face.

It is inaccurate, however, to imagine that we can make purely political judgments

through the practice of enlarged thinking.  These judgments that we make as spectators

are always accompanied by the moral judgments we make as embedded, partial, and self-

conscious *agents*.  The sense of self that arises out of the making of moral judgments

both compromises our ability to be totally impartial when making political judgments and

gives rise to our understanding of others as being similarly compromised by their

constitution through similar moral considerations.  The recognition that each of us always

already exercises moral judgments in action is an important resource for making political

judgments more broadly communicable.  Understanding that each spectator is always

also an agent means appreciating other members of a plurality in their uniqueness.

Making political judgments is, therefore, only possible when one has the confidence that one will appear to others as a unique agent. The feminist theory of the self I put forth in this thesis is based on the notion that agency and recognition are mutually reinforcing. Understanding agency in this way means that we take seriously the ever-present threat of loneliness, which is the lack of confidence that we will appear to others as unique sense-makers. Feminist politics must, therefore, continue to cultivate safe spaces in which consciousness may be raised through supportive and recognitive conversation. It must attend to the project of encouraging agency in individual women alongside the projects of communicating beyond the constituency of feminist publics the important political judgments about what social change is necessary to improve the lives of women. The more confident an agent is that she will be recognised by others as a unique individual with an infinite number of stories to tell, the more confident that agent will be in exercising her capacity for telling stories.

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