A "Delight in Doing"
Individuality and Action in the Political Thought of Hannah Arendt

Jacob Segal
Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York

Introduction

"No human achievement has the stability of action in accord with virtue" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*).

A perennial problem in Western political thought is the relationship between individuality and the community. Individuality, the uniqueness and integrity of the person, appears to be threatened by the demands of the community. The community can dictate action by law or force conformity through social pressure. From another point of view, however, individuality requires a strong community since without it the individual is isolated and lonely.

The relationship between individuality and the community plays an ambiguous role in the history of modern liberalism. In general, liberalism seems to lean toward the side of individuality against the community. Liberalism emerged as a critique of the domination of the self by the community in the form of enforced religious belief and the power of the absolute state. Historically, many critics claim that liberals overcompensate and reduce the burden of community on the individual while they deny the individual its benefits. There is, however, a strong strand of liberal thought that lessens the tension between individuality and community. Some contemporary liberals identify practices of liberal "virtues" (Berkowitz, 1991; Macedo 1996) and "purposes" (Galston 1991), in which liberal individuality gains meaning through the values of the

community. John Stuart Mill (1972 198-234) famously argues that liberal individuality requires the involvement in the political life of representative government in order to maximize self-development.

In this paper, I show that Hannah Arendt's political theory reverses the form of this question and thereby contributes new insight into liberal theory and contemporary theory in general. Arendt dissents from the conventional liberal assumption that political life is a threat to individuality. She argues that individuals achieve distinctiveness in political action, word and deed with others about common matters of concern. Arendt rejects the "developmental" argument of Mill because she believes that individuality requires the stability of the political world.[1] For Arendt, stability is necessary to solve the problem of meaning: "Meaning . . . must be permanent and lose nothing of its character, whether it is achieved or, rather, found by man or fails man and is missed by him." is solved" (Arendt 1958, 205).

In this stability political agents achieve the experience of "self-sufficient" or intrinsic value, meaningful for itself, apart from external reward or "success." With this self-sufficiency there is a "'delight in doing'" in which the sense of self is "intensified" and distinctiveness made real.[2] Distinctiveness is achieved because the self is liberated from the constraints of winning or losing. Fundamental to Arendt's understanding of individuality is the problem of temporality. Only in a self-sufficient value is human activity "present" and prevents the meaning of the agent from dissipation into fear about the future or regret about the past. Arendt believes that in political action the agent attains a type of reconciliation to human finitude or temporal limits. Political actors accept these limits, and their own history of success and failures, and find meaning in them.

---

1 On the stability of the public world see Conovan (1985).

2 Arendt takes these words from Dante.

For Arendt, political actors achieve individuation through the relationship between the particular - what is unique to the individual - and the universal - what is shared in the community.[3] This is individuation within intersubjectivity, which occurs in two moments of political life: speaking and acting. In speaking, political actors are individuated in the intersubjectivity of their opinions about the "world" framed through debate with others and by taking other views into consideration. In acting, agents individuate themselves in "beginning" something new in the context of the intersubjectivity of "principles."

Arendt criticizes modern individuality on the grounds of the victory of "particulars" in the form of process-orientated thinking. For Arendt, a life without public activity does not address the temporal problem of finitude or what she calls the human "repugnance for futility" (Arendt 1958, 121). Futility (although not worthlessness) pertains to every activity that continues indefinitely without an "end-in-itself." She (1979, 147) rejects the liberal self defined in terms of the desire "to unfold, to develop and to expand." Processes of particulars have no *telos* or end and so are "futile." Processes annihilate the distinctiveness sustained in political life

In this paper, I build on recent commentary (Honig 1993a, Dolan 1995, Bell 1996) on the similarities between Arendt and poststructuralism.[4] I argue that her work is addressed to the problem of sustaining distinctiveness in the face of social conformity or normalization. Arendt believes that individuation is gained through action in the face of normalization. Her temporal reading of activity can be fruitfully read in comparison to similar aspects of poststructuralist thought.[5] However, my reading of Arendt's work through the universal/particular

---

[3] Arendt uses the words "general" and universal interchangeably in her political writings. This leads some commentators (Barnouw, 1990 21-22; Disch 1994. 151- 152) to suggest that generality means for Arendt what is shared in a specific community, not the universality of a common rationality.

[4] See also William Connolly's (1997) poststructuralist critique of Arendt.

[5] For a critique of the poststructuralist interpretation see Biskowski 1995.

distinction highlights weaknesses in the poststructuralist interpretation of Arendt and poststructuralist thought in general.

My argument, like others, is a "reconstruction." I argue that Arendt's core meaning about the self-sufficiency is found in the performance of the action, what George Kateb calls "the exhilaration intrinsic to action." I exclude what others (Beiner 1989) make central, namely the "judgment" of the audience. Arendt's writing are clearly ambiguous in that the self-sufficiency of political action is sometimes identified in the "judging spectator" not the actor. In this sense, political acting gains it meaning in its "excellence" judged by others, or through the creation of "stories" that is solidified in memory of the community. Futility here is overcome through the remembrance of the community, in the telling and retelling stories, instead of the permanence experienced by the actor in the self-sufficiency of acting. My action-centered interpretation fits better with the Arendt's primary vision of political action and so makes most coherent her argument.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt (1990 277-278) lays out a vague program for a "council democracy" as a replacement for the liberal democratic idea of universal suffrage. A pyramid structure of town meetings would replace elections as the source of political authority and law.[6] The unlikelihood that such a structural change could ever occur might lead some to dismiss the relevance of her work. However, I show in this paper that Arendt provides a comprehensive alternative to the central assumption of liberal thought and that her thought links up with a major school of contemporary thought. Her work also provides insight into a central concept in western thought, namely that of an intrinsic, non-instrumental moment of human experience. In a letter (Kohler, 244) to her mentor and friend Karl Jaspers, she identifies the "spirit of republicanism" with the ability to value action apart from success or "victory." Her work discloses exactly she believes to

[6] Although Issac (1998), 120, unconvincingly argues that the councils would be "complements" to normal politics in representative government, not "alternatives."

be the delight or "joy" of going beyond the need for success. She demonstrates why this experience is only possible when the individual has the courage to leave a place of private concerns and enters a world shared by all.

The Problem of the Universal and Particular

In this section, I want to explore Arendt's description of the proper relationship between the universal and particular and her narrative of the changes in this relationship over time. For Arendt, the distinctiveness of the particular requires its integration with the universal. Arendt identifies herself with the modern revolt against the western tradition of metaphysics (Hill 1979), that is, the belief in a transcendental, universal Absolute that subordinates finite existence to something divine. However, she finds in political life a universal and secular "absolute" that saves particularity from it natural transience. This explains what Paul Ricuour (1983 62) finds odd, namely that Arendt "questions on the one hand the underestimation of the *vita practica* in the platonic and neoplatonic tradition and in the early and medieval stages of Christianity for the sake of vita *contemplativa,* and on the other hand the overestimation of labor after Adam Smith and Marx." The platonic tradition is identified with transcendental universals, and the laboring mentality with particulars. Arendt identifies a third possibility, that of the idea of the secular universal of the community; it resembles the transcendental universal, a type of "absolute" or self-sufficient value that stabilizes the meaning of particulars.

The modern loss of distinctiveness is an outcome of the deeper dilemma of the victory of particularity:

> The modern concept of process pervading history and nature alike separates the modern age from the past more profoundly than any other single idea. . . . Invisible processes have engulfed every tangible thing, every individual entity that is visible to us, degrading them into functions of an over-all process. . . . What the concept of process implies is that the concrete and the general, the single thing or event and the universal meaning have parted company. (Arendt, 1969, 63)

Arendt identifies the proper relationship in ancient Greek experience. She argues that Greek and Roman historiography teaches that "the lesson of each event, deed, or occurrence is revealed in and by itself" (Arendt 1979, 64). But this independent meaning requires a relationship to the universal: "everything that was done or happened contained and disclosed its share of general meaning within the confines of individual shape and did not need a developing and engulfing process to be significant" (Arendt 1979, 64).

Arendt traces the relationship of the particular and the universal in western political thought. The Greek pre-philosophical understanding disappeared with the victory of the Platonic-Aristotle philosophic tradition. Plato turned from action because of its "frailty" or process-character. He rejected the belief that "permanence" could be found in the political community. In the philosophic tradition, the only possible permanence for humans is "contemplation" of the divine. Contemplation is the opposite of political action. It is the "actionless" and "speechless . . . capacity of pure vision" (Arendt 1979, 47). Arendt argues that this new "hierarchy" continued into the medieval ages where human action was subordinated to the Christian hope for the hereafter.

The modern age reverses these categories with the victory of particular and processes. Philosophically, Arendt links the decline of the universal with Kant. She approves Kant's destruction of the unity of "thought" and "being." The Kantian antinomies meant that human reason was incapable of understanding all that is, including the existence of God. He showed that the universal of Platonic forms or the Christian God could not be rationally proved. Kant's destructive work meant that humans were separated from "the universal context of Being." For Arendt, this is a worthy loss since it liberates human activity from the transcendental. However, Kant's work creates a problem of meaning. Without the transcendental, human activity becomes lost to "processes" as every human act is meaningful only in regard to the chain of events leading up to it. For Arendt, Kant identifies a solution to this problem in

his idea that human freedom lies in the realm of the good will, in the motive of the act. For Arendt, Kant captures the important idea that meaning must be wholly independent of outcome: "Kant had the courage to acquit man from the consequences of his deed, insisting solely on the purity of his motive, and this saved him from losing faith in man and his potential greatness" (Arendt, 1958, 235). But this is not the correct solution for Arendt since activity must be worldly to be valuable. Arendt summarizes Kant's analysis: "just as man comes of age and is declared autonomous, he is also utterly debased. Man never seemed to have risen so high and at the same time to have fallen so low" (Arendt 1994, 171).

Arendt argues the Hegel sought to solve the modern problem in the idea of history. She applauds Hegel for refocusing attention on human affairs abandoned by the philosophic tradition for the divine. Arendt believes that the Hegelian emphasis on history pertains to the traditional and valid pursuit of universality. Kant, for example, understood that the "motive" behind the development of the idea of history as a progressive process is the hope of finding a "whole" to compensate for the "meaninglessness of the particular" (Arendt 1979, 47).

For Arendt, "history" does not solve the problem of the particular and universal. She rejects the specific interpretation of history as the embodiment of the Hegelian "Absolute." The Absolute again betrays the possibility that human action is sufficient within itself to redeem the hope for meaning. A non-Hegelian, secular approach to history does not solve the problem. From a moral point of view, the progressive interpretation of the endless sequence of historical events requires the sacrifice of a present generation to future ones since present activity is in the service of future gain. For Arendt, the process of history lacks the primary requirement of meaning of an "inherent *telos*."

In the work of Jaspers, Arendt finds an "existential" philosopher who reestablishes the relationship between the universal and particular. For Jaspers, philosophy leads humans to the recognition of the failure of thought, that is, the

universe cannot be explained in its fullness. This failure liberates since it breaks down "fixed categories." Humans, in the face of the limits of thought, come upon the true "'weight of reality.'" This allows for a "free existence" which humans enter into "by choosing it." Free existence, however, is "never isolated" as it "exists only in communication." In communication, the unity between the particular individual and the commonality is reestablished since "communication with others "and the "power of reason common to us" both "guarantee us something universal" (Arendt 1993, 184).

Without the solution of the unity of the particular and the universal, modernity is characterized by the general "victory" of processes. Arendt describes the pervasiveness of process in a number of realms of activity. For example, art used to be viewed as an end-itself but has been transformed into "entertainment," wherein objects viewed are "consumed" in continuous sequence (Arendt 1979, 205). Processes transform the disinterested enjoyment of art into the need for ever more entertainment. Property, the Greeks foundation of political life, becomes capital, the endless process of accumulation (Arendt 1958, 68).

For Arendt, processes indicate not only an orientation towards things, but people. She argues that the endless accumulation of power is the central feature of bourgeois political ideology. The bourgeois social order culminates in Hobbes ("the only great philosopher" of the bourgeoisie where he describes a society in which each individual is judged according to economic processes, and the specific and stable worth of the person is lost:

> . . . his "value or worth . . . his price; that is to say so much as would be given for the use of his power." This power is constantly evaluated and reevaluated by society, the "esteem of others," depending upon the laws of supply and demand. (Arendt 1951, 139).

While bourgeois ideology purports to exalt the individual, its reliance on processes means that nothing has intrinsic worth and no individuality can survive. Arendt writes.

> A commonwealth based on the accumulated and monopolized power of all its members necessarily leaves each person powerless, deprived of all his natural and human capacities. It leaves him degraded into a cog in the power-accumulating machine, free to console himself with sublime thoughts about the ultimate destiny of this machine, which itself is constructed in such a way that it can devour the globe simply by following its own inherent law. (Arendt 1951, 146)

Political Action and the Achievement of Individuality

As a philosophical matter, Arendt asserts that meaningfulness requires that the fleeting particular must be, so to speak, held by the universal without obliterating its uniqueness. As a matter of social analysis, Arendt argues that the victory of the particular and processes eliminates individual distinctiveness. Arendt's appeal for a rediscovery of the political virtues is a call to reassert meaningfulness and to address the pathologies of the modern era. In the reuniting of the universal and particular, Arendt seeks to rediscovery how the agent can find a meaning that is intrinsic to experience. If we recall Arendt's discussion of the relationship of the particular and universal in political action, agents attain a 'general' meaning within the confines" of their "individual shape."

While Arendt's description of the value of acting shifts from the point of view of the actor to the spectator, the weight of the textual evidence shows that the real significance of acting is the act alone. In *On Revolution* Arendt describes the "political passions" as activities that "strive" for "excellence" independent of "achievement and congratulation" (Arendt 1990, 276). It is significance apart from external and competitive standards. Arendt speaks of the capacity to "excel." To excel means to gain "distinction" which is manifesting one's own

uniqueness, not triumphing over others. Arendt identifies political action as the realm of human "greatness" understood as the "specific meaning of the deed" not as a judgment of superiority (Arendt 1958, 206). In political action, the self experiences this specific meaning in contrast to the everydayness and homogeneity of the process of labor where no true distinctiveness is possible. The great is that which is engaged in wholeheartedly and has meaning entirely within itself.

The significance of intrinsic worth flows from Arendt's notion of the inherent passivity of existence. Arendt writes that the self is always "given" to the world and caught in future processes. The past haunts action because of its "irreversibility." A person is "unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing" (Arendt 1958, 237). The past always has its victory over us. The future makes action uncertain. Any action suffers from "unpredictability." Every act gets carried away into new processes. Human beings suffer from "the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future" (Arendt 1958, 258). Unpredictability reveals "man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom" (Arendt 1958, 244). For these reasons, Arendt identifies "acting" with "suffering." Human action always reacts backwards on the actor. She (1958 190) writes: "because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an acts starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings." A life is suffered, not "enacted" in the sense of directed. The self simply is what it is due to circumstances. A human life is characterized by its "sheer passive givenness" (Arendt 1958, 208).

Arendt connects this idea of the givenness of human experience with the Dante quote mentioned in the introduction. The quote corresponds to her

remark that humans are called to disclose what they "suffer passively anyway" (Arendt 1958, 208). The intensification of one's being redeems the passivity of existence as the actor gains meaning from this passivity. At the end of *On Revolution,* Arendt captures the sense of political action as the intensification of the self. Actors are "naked" since she they do not accuse themselves of "'insincerity.'" Actors need "no mask and no make-believe." They are fully engaged in what they do. Acting for Arendt is an "involuntary self-disclosure," the joy "of appearing in word and deed without equivocation and without self-reflection" (Arendt 1990, 280-81).

The intensification of the being of the self occurs in the "sheer actuality," which is sufficient in itself. Arendt writes that in political action the value of the activity "is not pursued but lies in the activity itself . . . and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process, but is imbedded in it." Arendt believes that the achievement attached to political action "lies altogether outside the category of means and ends" (Arendt 1958, 207). Action is satisfied at every moment because each moment contains the end within itself. "The means to achieve the ends would already be the end; and this 'end,' conversely, cannot be considered a means in some other respect, because there is nothing higher to attain than the actuality itself" (Arendt 1958, 207).

The unity of actuality and potentiality occurs in speaking and acting, disclosure and beginning. While these experience occur together, Arendt argues that speaking is more closely connected with disclosure and acting with beginning. To give an example (famously lacking in Arendt's work) political actors "speak" when saying whether a country should go to war and act when they build coalitions, or vote. In what follows, I examine these two experiences by asking how in both cases agents transcend the categories of winning and losing and achieve a sense of self-sufficiency. Being self-sufficient, they provide meaning throughout the activity. Finally, I show how this self-sufficiency

depends on the generality of speaking and acting, which must take place in a public place.

Arendt identifies speaking in public with the disclosure of the opinion of the agent, the "who" of the agent. In speaking Arendt argues, "men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities, appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of their body and sound of voice" (Arendt 1958, 179). In political life, "the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is" (Arendt, 1979, 233). Speaking is therefore for Arendt the articulation of "how I see the world." Arendt writes "disclosure" indicating the relationship between the doing and the appearing to others. But while speaking is disclosing, it has a pleasure intrinsic to the experience and does not depend on the reaction of others. The presence of others is necessary in the formation of "opinion." One cannot develop an opinion without the company of others, since it is only in their company that opinions become general and therefore "disinterested."

The disclosure of the self coincides with the political act. Arendt writes: "The disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and deeds" (Arendt 1979, 233). The "who" of the person is beyond instrumentality. It represents the person's intrinsic worth. The joy in developing and expressing an opinion emerges from one's own history of success and failures, but is not itself a matter of success or failure. Arendt's distinction between the "who" and the "what" of a person makes this distinction clear. While the "what" of a person is constituted by chance "qualities, gifts talents, and shortcoming, which he may display or hide," the who of action is independent of all these qualities. The what is part of the ceaseless process of success and failure. The what flows from the qualities that I achieve or have, or fail to gain or misuse. How I see the world is who I am and my opinion is not linked to changeable "gifts" or "talents." I disclose the self I have suffered passively. This self is the self that sees the world in a particular way, and this way of seeing flows out of its experiences, that is, its

actions and its sufferings. This self is, so to speak, whatever it is at any given time. Qualities, on the other hand, change. I may have the quality of a strong sense of human humor, but time and tragedy may weaken it. My "who" is not a set of changeable qualities, but the essential "how I see the world" at any given point.

The intrinsic worth of opinion flows from its liberation from the private issues of success and failures because of its generality. The publicness of opinions appears odd in that opinions seem to be the very definition of something particular and unique. For Arendt, however, opinions are about the world, and they are generated through integration with the views of others. Opinions are about the "world" that is to say, what is shared or a common "inter-est," what lies between people (Arendt 1958, 182). This common interest frees political actors from their private interest in success and failures.

Opinions are general because opinion formation involves the consideration of the perspective of others, what Arendt calls "representational thinking." As the possible perspectives on any issues are innumerable, the more I consider the views of others the "stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion" (Arendt 1979, 241). The political actor considers the question of war-making by seeking what others might think. An advocate of war would represent the perspective of a pacifist, while an opponent of war would consider the perspective of national security, or the interests of humanitarian relief. An opinion gains strength when it transcends mere particularity and partakes in "universal interdependence." Arendt notes that this universality is achieved only with the orientation of "disinterestedness" whereby the agent considers problems in light of the interests of the whole community. From this perspective of universality, the agent "ascends from . . . particularities to some impartial generality" (Arendt 1979, 242).

In speaking, agents discover reconciliation to their own limits. The opinion I speak is the "who" I have become as a limited being. This who is the person in the incompleteness of the moment of acting. I am not reconciled to experience by discovering a "meaning" to it, or overcoming limits through purposeful outcome, or hope for a way out of limits of time. Instead, the reconciliation is discovered in speaking about the limits I have encountered. This reconciliation depends on the generality of opinion; I reconcile myself through speaking about what is common to the community and by disregarding my personal fortunes and speaking about the care for the world.

The political agent also achieves a self-sufficient value through acting in terms of principles. In acting, the political actor "begins" something new, that is, she introduces something novel into the world. This newness is an intrinsic value that is saved from the wheel of success and failure through the generality of principles. Principles are generated and recognized only in a public place. There is no acting on principles in private.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt discusses the new in the context of the foundation of a new political organization, in particular, the new American republic. The question, for the revolutionaries, was the "foundation" or prior justification for a new political body where there had been none before. Arendt writes (1990, 206) that the unique significance of a "beginning [is] to carry with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness." This arbitrariness is not tied to a "reliable chain of cause and effect." It escapes the process orientation of cause and effect "which each effect immediately turns into the cause for future developments." As the beginning has nothing "to hold to . . . . . for a moment, the moment of beginning, it is as though the beginner has abolished the sequence of temporality itself, or as though the actors were thrown out of the temporal and its continuity" (Arendt 1990, 206). Arendt equates the intrinsic worth of beginning with the worth of each person. There is no "cause" for unique individuality of each person and the meaning of this uniqueness is not

intrinsically tied to any "effect." Acts spring from the somebody each person is. These acts have effects but their significance transcends their outcome.

Arendt writes that traditionally the problem of beginning was solved by the concept of the deity, a "beginner" who never begins because it is "'from eternity to eternity.'" This beginner is the "absolute of temporality" and can of course play no role in Arendtian politics. It is fascinating is how Arendt's concept of principles replicates in secular terms the atemporality of absolutes. Arendt associates principles with the term "absolute" a complete meaning from purely within the scope of secular action. The principle is the "absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and from which it must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness" (Arendt 1990, 212). A principle is a "law of action" that the actor "lays down" for herself and others. This principle "inspires" the act and lasts as long as the action lasts" (Arendt 1990, 213). Examples of principles are "honor or glory, love of equality . . . or distinction or excellence" (Arendt 1979, 152).

Just as the "absolute" of the deity is from eternity to eternity, principle, so to speak, hold meaning from beginning to end, so the whole of temporal experience is felt within it. Arendt writes that a beginning "carries its own principle within itself . . . . beginning and principle, principium, are not only related to each other, but are coeval" (Arendt 1990, 212). Arendt surprisingly quotes Plato whom elsewhere in her writings she describes as the supreme enemy of political action. Plato wrote that "'for the beginning, because it contains its own principle, is also a god who, as long as he dwells among men, as long as he inspires their deeds, saves everything'" (Arendt 1990, 213). Arendt also quotes Polybius: "'the beginning is not merely half of the whole but reaches out toward the end'" (Arendt 1990, 213). Principles impart meaning to the action from beginning to end. Acting is intrinsically valuable because no moment of the action is left without significance.

In her difficult essay, "What is Freedom," Arendt discusses how principles are patterns of consistent meaning. For Arendt, the problem of freedom is the problem of the autonomy of action, that is, whether action can be freed from the causality that rules the formation of motivation and the causality of the will. On the one hand, no act is "free" when it is seen in light of motive. Motives flow out of a past over which the self has no control. Each motive has a prior cause, which causes an endless "bad infinity." On the other hand, acts governed by an "aim" are unfree insofar as they enter into the process of external nature. She writes that the value of aim depends on the "changing circumstances of the world" which are completely contingent and independent of the true autonomy and significance of any act. The determination of the "aim" of the action "is not a matter of freedom, but of right and wrong judgment" (Arendt 1979, 151).

Arendt (1979, 151) finds the solution to these difficulties in principles. Principles, unlike motive and goals, are universal: "The validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular person or any particular group." While motives and goals have only specific and transient objects, principles "are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in the light of its principles once the act has been started" (Arendt 1979, 151). Principles are universal in that they provide the "shape" for the particular. Principles are permanent since they precede and outlast any action. Arendt argues that "while the merits of judgment lose their validity, and the strength of the commanding will exhausts itself in the course of the act which they execute in cooperation, the principle which inspired it loses nothing in strength or validity through execution. In distinction from its goal, the principle of an action can be repeated time and again" (Arendt 1979, 151).

Any action can be considered in light of the principles of the love of justice, but this principle does not require any particular act or speech in the jury room. For example, in jury duty, a juror considers acting in terms of the principle

of "love of justice" in a particular instance.[7] The love of justice is a shared and publicly understood idea. Jurors enact themselves through the principle and make it known in their acts. In a jury deliberation in which I took part, a juror stated her opinion and then refused further conversation. This juror was not able to sustain a love of justice since that principle requires consideration of the views of others, and the possibility that one might be wrong.

Through integration into principles, individual action gains a meaning indifferent to success or failure. Conversely, jurors may have the private "motive" in their deliberations of waiting to appear to be a "good person." But this motive cannot be represented to others and is hard to stabilize for myself, i.e. why do I want to be "good?" One motive seems always to be caused by something else, hence the justification of action according to motive falls into an infinite regress. Further, the value of being a juror does not depend on whether the judgment is correct or not.

A common mistake is the belief that Arendt voids political action of all instrumental considerations. Arendt does not deny, as James Knauer notes, that political action has motives and goals. Political action has its instrumental moment. Arendt's point is that political action is uniquely characterized by its inspiring principle. Only through the publicness of a principle can the "transcendent quality" of action come into play (Knauer 1980, 729). Arendt writes: "That is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its determining factor, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them" (Arendt 1979, 151). A juror should be concerned with the instrumental consideration of catching the guilty party, but the highest value of the activity does not depend on this truth.

---

[7] An imperfect example of political action perhaps, but relevant as Arendt (1977) 104 notes that the "only way in which a citizen today can still function as a citizen is as (sic) member of a jury."

As in speaking, Arendt finds in acting, a self that is fully satisfied but not completed. In acting, the actor finds satisfaction in beginning something new. The value of acting does not occur in what comes after the activity but only in the newness or unique value that is experience and acting. Political actors are reconciled to the incompleteness of being new. This reconciliation depends on the generality of principle since principles provide the stabilization of a shared pattern of activity.

The self-sufficiency and "fulfillment" of political action is made clear in Arendt's distinction between "happiness" and *eudaimonia*, living well. *Eudaimonia*, according to Arendt, does not concern the external conditions of a person: "Eudaimonia, like life itself, is a lasting state of being which is neither subject to change nor capable of effecting change." *Eudaimonia* is a continuous experience, superior to all values that are changeable. Even learning, Arendt (1958 191-192) writes is a changeable "quality" since "learning and having learned" are "two different attributes of the same person at different times." Arendt is of course not opposed to "learning." Her point that learning is an activity that aims at the external result of having learned, and succeeds or fails on that basis. If a person fails at learning it does not mean she has lived badly since the capacity to learn, like all qualities or talents, is heaven sent. On the other hand, the well-being of acting and speaking is impervious to change because one discloses who one is at any point and any individual is capable of beginning something new at any time.

The Debate over Arendt and the Problem of Individuality

Because of the ambiguities of her work, Arendt's political theory is fertile grounds for a variety of theoretical perspectives. The argument of my paper builds on, but is also critical of, the poststructuralist interpretation, best represented in the work of Bonnie Honig. Honig employs Arendt in her critique of a politics based on a conception of a "true" or "authentic" self that is complete and transparent. Such a self exists in a political order that seek to eliminate all

"remainders" (Honig 1993, 3). A remainder is something that does not fit into an idea of a complete self. The complete self is ready to be fitted into the community. This harmonization of the self and community is, in the language of poststructuralism, normalization, that is, a conformity in which selves come to believe they must adapt to the values of the community and to suppress elements of their own self, the remainder, that contradicts community values. Homosexual feelings are a remainder outside of the heterosexual self, feeling which are eliminated in the "normal" sexuality of heterosexuality. Honig (1993 3) calls (quoting Nietzsche) for an agonistic politics that "'rouses enmity against order'" and empowers the self never to be complete and to resist normalization.

Honig reconstructs Arendt's idea of "agonism," that is, the clash of opinion and action. Honig rejects Seyla Benhabib's Habermasian-influenced negative interpretation of agonism as the display for heroic excellence in action (Benhabib 1996, 127). Honig, conversely, argues that agonism means that self gains "individuation and distinction" in a modern world characterized by "homogenization and normalization" (Honig, 1995, 159). She writes: "The agonal passion for distinction, which so moved Arendt's theoretical account, may also be read as a struggle for individuation, for emergence, as a distinct self: in Arendt's terms a 'who' rather than a 'what,' a self possessed not of fame, per see, but of individuality, a self that is never exhausted by the sociological, psychological, and juridical categories that seek to define and fix it" (Honig, 1995, 159).

Honig finds in Arendtian political action a vindication of Nietzsche's assertion that there is no abiding "subject." She writes: "there is no substratum; there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed - the deed is everything." For Honig, political action "produces or gives birth to the actor" (Honig 1993, 78). A "subject" for Honig is a normal self, a judging self that would discipline acting and constrain action according to general rules. The Arendtian political self resists all order. Politics is

here defined as an ongoing affair, disruptive, agonic and never complete. Honig writes: "On Arendt's account, the inner plurality of the self is the source of its vigor . . . . The self as subject is disrupted and the rupture creates the space for the emergence of the actor and his heroic identity. This episode is an event, from the standpoint of predictable and cyclical nature, 'a miracle'" (Honig 1993, 117).

The theme of temporality is central to this Nietzschean interpretation of Arendt. For Honig, a source of normalization is the feeling of being "responsible" whereby selves manipulate themselves to conform the standards of responsibility. For Nietzsche responsibility leads to remorse over the passage of time, the "it was." That the will cannot "will backwards" is its "loneliest melancholy" and makes it an "angry spectator of all that is past" (Nietzsche 1968, 251). What might redeem willing is the perspective that "becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions; becoming must appear justified at every moment . . . . the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, not the past by reference to the present" (Nietzsche 1968, 377). Honig (1993 60) argues that the "tremendous moment" marks the fundamental commonality between Arendt and Nietzsche. They both "seek . . . nonresentful, response to the human condition." For Arendt, Honig writes, "politics is the site of transformation: it is the new response-ability, capable of powerful affirmations" (Honig 1993, 60).

Honig's explicit complaint against Arendt is that she unduly restricts the opportunities for action to the public realm. The actor ruptures the ordinary in action; an event that should not be limited to one sphere:

> This reading of Arendt licenses the application of her own strategy of intervention to the would-be closures of the would-be private realm. Instead of containing the private lest it sully the pristine innocence of action, action's generative power can be used to proliferate the sites and subjects of politics, to include resistance to system, the aggravation of fissures, and disruption of process in the private realm. It might call attention to the extraordinary measures that reproduce ordinary life, daily. It might find spaces

> of performativity and resistance in the rifts and fissures of private realm identities and institutions. (Honig 1993, 123)

The central problem of Honig's interpretation is the attempt to safeguard "innovative and initiating power of action" from "general rules and categories" (Honig 1993 79). General rules impose a unity on the multiplicity of the acting self. Unity is associated with normalization. However, as Dana Villa has shown, Honig's evidence that Arendt defends a multiple self is weak at best.[8] Villa also warns that an unmitigated Nietzschean politics neglects the "wordly" quality of Arendtian political life.[9] The poststructuralist position leads to overly contested social order that does not rise above the level of "interest group politics" (Villa 1999, 120).[10]

I have argued that Arendt goes beyond these limits in her conception of the generality of opinions and principles, and the intrinsic meaning gained through them. Political actors are "remanderless" in the sense of being fully satisfied, but this satisfaction comes through reconciliation to the limits of their own finitude, or the limits of their situation. Generality here is non-normalization because it gives full play to the particular.

---

[8] Villa (1996) 286f, n. 71 shows that Honig asserts that Arendt believes in a fragmented and multiple self because of Arendt's assertion of "'plurality of men's faculties and abilities.'" Villa points out the same could be said of Plato's model of the self even though Plato did not valorize a multiple self.

[9] Honig (1993) 528 argues that her interpretation does not mean that Arendt "falls" into a "'creeping subjectivism'" as Villa claims because of the importance of forgiveness and promise making.

[10] I agree with Villa's "anti-teleological" and "theatrical" interpretation of Arendt's work. Villa argues that Arendtian political action has intrinsic or "self-contained" value independent of any goal or end, Villa (1996) 21-25. Political action is a performance, "theatrical," and so it needs a "stage" and an audience. The political actor creates a style or public "persona" whose "words and deed are judged by the 'audience' of our civic peers" Villa (1999) 118. My disagreement is that he looks to Arendt's use of Kant's theory of judgment where the spectator of action finds "beauty" in the greatness of political deeds Villa (1996) 102. I argue that action contains its own internal standards in opinion and principles, thereby preserving the true self-contained quality of political action.

The theme of reconciliation is central to George Kateb's liberal critique of Arendt. According to Kateb, Arendt seeks reconciliation with reality through political action. Kateb understands Arendt as a theorist of "alienation," a philosopher preoccupied with the limits of the human condition. Resentment at the human condition is a consequence of alienation. Political action "reconciles" and ends the alienation characteristic of "homeless" modernity. Kateb writes that for Arendt only political action can overcome the resentment against the human condition. He writes: "This is why Arendt can release politics while reigning in everything else. Everything else tends to alienation . . . the foreclosure of reconciliation. Modernity makes reconciliation ever more difficult." Reconciliation solves alienation. It is "founded on the stories that can be told about what one has done in action and therefore about who one is. One's reconciliation depends on the prior existence of a common home with others. The culminating formulations reach beyond . . . the exhilaration intrinsic to action done in cooperation and competition with one's peers . . . . Arendt at times transfers the value of action from the actual doing and experiences to the words later said about it . . . . The words create a story which by its power achieves the supreme result: acceptance of what one has done and endured" (Kateb 1984, 168). Villa shows that Kateb's idea of a "common home" of political life "presupposes a substantial degree of cultural rootedness and integrity." Individuals can only be reconciled in a homogenous community in which there is a "shared identity" since only there can the meaning of "memorable deeds" gain general recognition (Villa 1997, 186).

Kateb criticizes resentment because it implies an effort to overcome limitations once and for all. He sees Arendt as an exponent of wholeness. For Kateb wholeness means "perfection" which is a spur to resentment because it is unattainable. Kateb argues that "reconciliation" may engender "individual self-rejection" as one seeks the unattainable and harbors resentment against the imperfection that constitutes a human life. Kateb asserts his own "poetic"

conception of experience that is tied to the "enlargement" since development of the self allows for "an enlargement of the power of each self to experience and to poetize experience. Modernity stands for such enlargement" (Kateb 1984, 180).

I have ended this section with a discussion of Kateb's eloquent critique of Arendt because he summarizes two basic liberal misgivings about the assertion of political activity as a primary value. First, as Villa writes, such a value invites a community that suppresses individual distinctiveness. Second, individual distinctiveness is identified with an expansive self that goes beyond the stability of the political self. Reconciliation is a danger to the well-being of the self as a source of self-rejection. However, Arendt's arguments do not fall to Kateb's critique. Her political community sustains and makes possible individual distinctiveness. Also, reconciliation in Arendt's thought has the central meaning of self-acceptance, the acceptance of one's own limits and the successes and failures of any human life. Interestingly, Kateb himself wishes to find a poetized experience that is constituted by "serious play, without winning and losing" (Kateb 1984, 179). Arendt agrees and more finely describes how going beyond winning and losing preserves individuality. Her work is a fundamental criticism of the form of Kateb's argument because she demonstrates that only through the political world can individuals go beyond the categories of success and failure.

Conclusion

Hannah Arendt's political thought contains a fundamental tension. Her idea of political action is in Arendt's words, highly "individualistic" (Arendt 1958, 194) and "too self-centered" (Arendt 1991, 281). What counts fundamentally is the "happiness" of acting, "the joys of appearing in word and deed." On the other hand, Arendt's work is focused on the demand for "disinterest" and a disregard for personal well-being. There are many for whom, activity in the public world turns out to have nothing to do with the happiness of the individual and, at worst, threatens the very desire for the distinctiveness that underlies Arendt's thought.

I have argued that the solution to this problem is Arendt's belief that distinctiveness is achieved through the generality and distinterest of the public world. Never far from her thought is the problem of temporality. She rejects the metaphysical tradition because human meaning emerges only in time and is also lost in time due to the "meaninglessness of the particular" (Arendt 1979. 64). The political world is a "secular absolute" something in time as well as a permanent structure through which meaning can be stabilized. This stabilization occurs in expression of opinions and acting in principles. Political agents experience the joy of stating how they see the world, a view developed from their own history and givenness. Instead of lamenting the losses that constitute a human life, opinion reconstitutes losses and successes into a history and a point of view. Political action redeems a past and makes it important as the material of the dignity of the self in action. Through principles, political actors gain a meaning independent of that disappearing truths found in "authentic" motive or external success.

In terms of the contemporary debate, Arendt shows how a comprehensive political theory can be built on the poststructuralist insight into the connection between individuality and action as a response to the pressure of normalization. Arendt's theory shows how Nietzsche's "tremendous moment" can be "politicized." In this politicization, Arendt goes beyond the limits of poststructuralism and shows how universality makes possible this moment and preserves action from normalization.

As a contribution to the debate over liberalism, Arendt challenges a central liberal assumption that political life undermines individuality. Her argument has little to do with the values of liberal virtues and liberal purposes because neither promotes the distinctiveness. She also challenges the Mill's argument that political activity is essential to the human as "progressive being" (Mill 1972, 79). For Arendt, progressive thought entangles itself in processes. Mill does not recognize the true value of political value, in how the self integrates

itself into the political and thereby stabilizes its meanings. Whereas a liberal argument like Kateb's tries to establish a category of experience between winning and losing, Arendt discloses the need for a public moment in which to establish it.

For Kateb, Arendt makes a fundamental mistake in her belief that "'if you want something better, and better, and better, you lose the good.'" Kateb's assumption is that a static conception of the good requires a homogenous and static community. The good is therefore a threat to individuality. Arendt's insight is that the permanence of the good in political good both engenders individuality and protects its from the dissolution of processes. Only the political world can save individuality from the anti-individual categories of winning and losing. The "relevance" of the thought of Arendt is precisely that warning and the possibility.

References

Arendt, Hannah. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951.

Arendt, Hannah. 1957. "History and Immortality." *Partisan Review* 24 (Winter): 11-53.

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1977. "Public Rights and Private Interests" in ed. Michael Mooney. *Small Comforts for Hard Times.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1979. *Between Past and Future*. London: Penguin Books.

Arendt, Hannah. 1990. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

Arendt, Hannah. 1993. "What is Existential Philosophy?" In *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn New York. Harcourt Brace & Company.

Beiner, Ronald. 1989. "Interpretative Essay" in Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

Bell, Vikki. 1996. "The Promise of Liberalism and the Performance of Freedom" in Foucault and Political Reason, eds, Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

Biskowski, Lawrence J. 1995. "Politics Versus Aesthetics: Arendt's Critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger." *Review of Politics* 57 (Winter): 59-89.

Benhabib, Seyla. 1996. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Thousand Oaks, California. Sage Publications.

Connolly, William E. 1997. "A Critique of Pure Politics." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 23 (Fall): 1-26.

Conovan, Maragret. 1985. "Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm." *History of Political Thought* 6 (Winter): 617-642.

Darnouw, Dagmar. 1990. *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German –Jewish Experience*. Baltimore, Maryland. The John Hopkins Press.

Disch, Lisa Jane. 1994. *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press.

Dolan, Frederick M. 1995. "Political Action and the Unconscious: Arendt and Lacan on Decentering the Subject." *Political Theory* 23 (May): 330-353.

Galston, William A. 1991. *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Honig, Bonnie. 1993a. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Honig, Bonnie. 1993b. "The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response to 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action" by Dana R. Villa." *Political Theory*. (August): 528-533.

Honig, Bonnie. 1995. "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity." In *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig. University Park, Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Isaac, Jeffrey C. 1998. "Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics" in *Democracy in Dark Times*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press.

Kateb George. 1984. *Hannah Arendt, Politics, Conscience, Evil*. Totowa, New Jersey.

Kohler, Lotte and Saner, Hans. 1992. *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*. New York. Harcourt brace & Company.

Knauer, James. 1980. "Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action." *The American Political Science Review* 74 (September): 721-733.

Macedo, Stephen. 1996. *Liberal Virtues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mill, John Stuart. 1972. *Utilitarianism. Liberty. Representative Government*. London. J.M. Dent & Sons. Ltd.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1954. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in ed. Walter Kaufman, *The Portable Nietzsche*. New York. The Viking Press

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968. *The Will to Power*. New York: Vintage Books.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1983. "Action, Story and History." *Salmagundi*. 60 (Spring/Summer): 60-72.

Villa, Dana R. 1996. *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press.

Villa, Dana R. 1997. "Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique" in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, eds. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.

Villa, Dana R. 1999. *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*. Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press.