

**Agonist and conservative strands in Hannah Arendt:
a more systemic approach to Arendtian political thought**

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Introduction

The main subject of this thesis is setting forth an account of Arendtian political theory that can play an important role in contemporary debates in political theory. Since the second half of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt's thought has been appropriated by theorists of consensus-based models of politics, such as Habermas. However, there has also been resistance to the interpretation of Arendtian thought as fundamentally consensus-oriented. Dana R. Villa, for example, has called this interpretation into question by stressing Arendt's "fierce commitment to plurality and difference as *essential* conditions of political action."¹ So in more recent times, Arendt has been read from the point of view of agonist theory. It is interesting to note that, in most cases, parts of Arendt's theory have thus been appropriated for an author's own purpose, without necessarily bothering to see how these parts fit in with the rest of Arendt's theory. It is the question of this thesis what import a more systemic account of Arendtian thought has for theories that are said to be influenced by Arendt. It is part of the common interpretation of Hannah Arendt that her political thought does not really constitute a system of political theory, and my thesis will be implicitly directed against this conception of Arendtian thought. The goal here is not exactly proving that there *is* a system of Arendtian philosophy, but that different strands of Arendtian thought can be brought in a sort of theoretical harmony, and, more importantly, that problems formulated against specific elements of Arendtian thought can be solved when the complete account I intend to set forth here is taken into consideration. To call my project here 'a system of Arendtian thought' would be to overestimate my ambitions, in the first place because a philosophical system typically extends far beyond the scope

¹ D. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," in *Political Theory*, vol. 20, no. 2 (May, 1992), p. 275.

of one thesis, but also, more importantly, because the notion of an 'Arendtian system' may be misleading. We may then be tempted to expand on the system and ultimately come to call certain ideas, never held by Arendt herself, 'Arendtian' just because they cohere with the rest of the system. I wish rather to make explicit certain intimately related ideas, held by Arendt, and argue from these ideas to first overcome theoretical difficulties presented by Arendt scholars and second criticize contemporary authors (i.e. to present *them* with difficulties). This is why I wish to call my method a 'theoretical harmonizing', to signify the intimate and natural relation the ideas in this thesis have to Arendt's different projects over time without necessarily ascribing them to Arendt herself. I do not wish to assert that my take on Arendt's thought is itself more than appropriation. It is, however, a stronger defense of an account ascribed to Arendt than has hitherto been given. These ideas are valuable, not because they are Arendt's per se, but because they bring Arendtianism to bear upon contemporary political thought in a new and potentially productive way. That is, I believe, what separates my appropriation from others. Just like a symphony is more than the sum of its parts, I argue that my take on Arendtianism is stronger than others because of its harmony with the many facets of Arendt's body of thought.

The first part of my investigation will focus on the agonist tendencies of Arendt by discussing appropriations of Arendtian theory by contemporary agonist authors, it seeks to formulate and critique the agonistic trends in Arendtian thought, i.e. it tries to establish in how far we can interpret Arendt as an agonist. With the use of Thomas Fossen's article on agonism² I will try to lay bare what the normative commitments of such an agonism are and how these are fulfilled. The second part of my thesis is focused on Arendtian strands of thought that I will interpret as a challenge to agonism (specifically to rethink the way in which the *agon* is constituted). Here I will consider Arendt's concept of power as it contrasts with the typical agonistic concept of power. I will argue that this concept in Arendtian thought has been understood better by champions of consensus-

2 T. Fossen, "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism: Perfection and Emancipation," in *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2008), pp. 376-394.

based models of politics. However, as I will proceed with my discussion, I will come to argue for a conservative position, rather than a liberal position of consensus. I believe I can ascribe a conservatism to Arendt based on her remarks on the constitution of the American Republic and the ground for its authority as compared to the ancient Roman Republic. I believe, furthermore, that such a conservatism is important, because the constitution of the *agon* has, in many agonist authors, received little due appreciation. For political actors to act, typically, requires a properly constituted institutional framework that we can call the public realm. Such a framework must, moreover, be authoritative and lasting if we wish our actions to gain meaning: our actions can only be meaningful if they are situated in a bigger framework that can properly apply meaning to them. For human beings the only worldly attainable immortality is the life story we leave behind. These stories are, in a sense, 'inscribed' on the metaphorical walls of the public realm, where they can be (re)interpreted by others. Thus it becomes important to keep these walls intact for centuries to come. It is the goal of this method, ascribing a conservative position to Arendt, to establish Arendtian thought as not only a highly original take on politics, but also as one that defies the contemporary split between agonism and consensualism, and thus merits further study as a critique of both contemporary politics and contemporary political thought.

As agonism

In the following chapters we will explore Arendtian political theory as it has been appropriated by agonists. These chapters will serve to shed light on the aspect of my account in which Hannah Arendt can be interpreted as an agonist author. To this end I will first discuss Fossen's article, which questions the normative commitments of different agonist authors. Fossen makes a distinction between agonists with a normative commitment to emancipation and those with a normative commitment to perfection.³ Discussing Arendt's commitment to both will permit me to set forth my account of Arendtian thought systematically and so uncover a coherent type of agonism. An

³ Ibid., p. 377.

agonism, however, that does not fall comfortably in either of the two categories. I will try to make clear how Arendt fulfills these commitments like most contemporary agonists and thus the first facet of my account will at heart be a type of agonism. Arendt's commitment to emancipation is discussed in the chapters "The conscious pariah," and "Abolishment of sovereignty, acknowledgment of finity." However, I will argue that the same considerations that lead Arendt to a commitment to emancipation, can also be further interpreted to lead to a commitment to perfectionism. So Arendt's perfectionist commitment is discussed in "Aestheticization and the performativity-account." After the last chapter on this subject, we will focus on another aspect of my account that deals with the way in which a political community (or the *agon*) is constituted. Because these last chapters of my thesis seek to critique contemporary agonists, this part is introduced with the chapter "As a challenge to agonism." To indicate the move to another aspect, the title of this chapter is underlined.

An emancipation or a perfectionist agonism?

Fossen describes agonism, broadly, as a critique of liberalist theories of politics: pluralism is the fact that our world is inhabited by what amounts to infinite many people with infinitely different perspectives (for example on what is just). And whereas these liberal theories purport to respect this fact, the result is that they do not do so. Because e.g. the liberalism of Rawls is centered round the reaching of a consensus, wherein every reasonable person agrees, or should agree, that a particular arrangement or institution is just, Rawls foregoes pluralism: consensus is perceived by agonists as the closing off of the political arena and therefore does not permit anyone to contest a given opinion when it has reached 'consensus'. Consensus can therefore be harmful to pluralism, the infinite many and often conflicting views on what is just. Instead of consensus, agonism places contestation at the heart of politics, and nothing is permitted to become "beyond political contestation."⁴ In this way it is able to truly appreciate pluralism. However, Fossen notes, 'truly appreciating pluralism' signifies

4 Ibid., p. 376.

deeper normative commitments: liberalists, agonists say, propose a model of politics that does harm to the political reality of pluralism. Pluralism here, is both a reality and a value: to value pluralism simply because it is a reality would be a naturalistic fallacy. As Fossen notes, when discussing the agonist author Chantal Mouffe: “if political contestation on fundamental liberal-democratic principles should be valued, then so should the tension that is constitutive of it.”⁵ The question is therefore why an agonist conception of politics should be affirmed: why is it indeed so that politics should be marked by contestation? Fossen formulates two normative commitments that fuel agonist conceptions of politics: emancipation and perfectionism.⁶

Fossen understands emancipation as “a permanent attempt to lay bare and redress the harms, injustices or inequities caused by exclusions and restrictions of pluralism.”⁷ Proponents of emancipation agonism conceive of politics as a method of citizens to voice their contesting views on the prevailing hegemony. A society, they say, is a constellation wherein certain power-relations have crystallized, it is important to note however, that these power-relations are contingent: there is no way in which they can be justified beforehand, with reference to, for example, a metaphysical conception of the world. Emancipation agonists hold that it is only in the political arena, where all can have their say, that a certain hegemony can gain justification. This means that, as the political arena is the means to justification, the political arena can never be closed off (and therefore a hegemony never gains the safety of being justified forever), it also means that the political arena must properly be understood as existing anywhere a citizen chooses to voice his contesting opinion: because no institution is safe from contestation, politics “runs through the liberal as well as the Arendtian distinction between public and private, because disruptive action cannot be confined to a secluded domain.”⁸ Through this antagonistic activity of contestation (of making oneself heard at whatever cost to the status quo), citizens can shake off the fetters that bind them to a prevailing

5 Ibid., p. 380.

6 Ibid., p. 377.

7 Ibid.

8 Fossen (2007), “Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism,” p. 384. The tension between the Arendtian distinction between public and private and the conception of politics of emancipation agonists is addressed in the third section of this part of my thesis: “Aestheticization and the performativity-account.”

hegemony. In the first section of this chapter I will focus on Arendt's remarks on pariahdom and Jennifer Ring's discussion of the pariah as the genuine political actor in Arendt's thought.⁹ These remarks cohere very naturally with emancipation agonism, as they show Arendt's commitment to emancipation in the way it is understood by Fossen: the pariah acts to contest the conditions that society has ordained for him. In this section, it will become clear first that the pariah, as a political actor, is concerned with his emancipation. Also, there has been a perceived tension between Arendt's account of the pariah and the more mainstream interpretation of Arendt's political actor. I shall therefore also address how we should conceive of actions of pariahdom (concerned with emancipation) in relation to the account of action set forth most prominently in Arendt's *The Human Condition* (hereafter referred to as *HC*). The remarks on conscious pariahdom as a way of emancipation will give rise to a question concerning the substance of acts of emancipation, this question is addressed in the second section of my thesis. It concerns the politics of acknowledgment as put forth by Patchen Markell.¹⁰

Perfectionist agonism, as opposed to emancipation agonism, is not so much concerned with potentially harmful power-relations. Rather, it is committed to “the cultivation and continuous improvement of citizens' virtues and capacities.”¹¹ What this means is that, much like emancipation agonism, the perfectionist account conceives of politics as a permanent practice of contestation, it argues for this conception however, from a different angle.¹² Perfectionist agonism sees politics as the most valuable and 'highest' activity in which a person can engage. As pluralism means infinite many perspectives, these perspectives together give rise to certain standards of excellence within a community (standards, to be sure, that are always, because of their perspectival nature, necessarily open to re-examination) and citizens within the community act with a view to become excellent, they aim at self-overcoming.¹³ Through political action citizens achieve a certain standard of

9 J. Ring, “The Pariah as Hero: Hannah Arendt's Political Actor,” in *Political Theory*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Aug., 1991), pp. 433-452.

10 P. Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003).

11 Fossen (2008), “Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism,” p. 377.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 388.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 390.

excellence, either a standard that is already established or a newly posited one (indeed, the successful positing of a new standard might itself be considered excellent). In this way citizens cultivate themselves through politics and this is why politics is considered to be the highest of activities.

In the third section of this chapter, I will turn to Dana R. Villa's article "Beyond Good and Evil,"¹⁴ in which he offers an interpretation of Arendt that can be said to be at home in the category of perfectionist agonism. Villa argues for an aestheticization of political action as enabling an inherent valuation of action, I will call his theory of Arendtian action the 'performativity-account'. The teleological model of action, as Villa calls it, wherein a certain action is valued because of what it succeeds in doing or because it was driven by admirable motives, is dubious, he says, "in rendering the phenomenon of political action."¹⁵ Instead of this model, he calls for a valuation of the performance of an action, much like one values the performance of a play or a piece of music. However, I will argue, in doing this Villa is unable to defend himself against the charge that Arendtian action is devoid of content and, in this way, blind to very real and pressing concerns of poverty (among other social issues).¹⁶ In conclusion to this section, therefore, I will consider the so-called "Social Question"¹⁷ and the problematic surrounding Arendt's views on poverty as unfit to step onto the scene of politics. Instead of the performativity-account, I will put forth another account of action that allows for the consideration of a 'moral factor' and is in this way able to counter the charge of contentlessness.

When rereading Fossen's article, it struck me that emancipation agonism and perfectionist agonism might not be so sharply divided as to be distinct sub-isms within agonism. On a first reading of Arendt, one is inclined to view her normative commitments as perfectionist, most notably when considering her remarks concerning action as the way in which actors "reveal actively their

14 Op. cit.

15 Ibid., p. 280.

16 The charge has been made different authors, a notable example is H. Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," in *Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Aug., 1981), pp. 327-352.

17 H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, new ed. with introduction by Jonathan Schell, (New York: Penguin: 2006), p. 49.

unique personal identities”¹⁸ or greatness as “the political virtue *par excellence*.”¹⁹ When examined closely, however, we can see commitments to emancipation that are just as present or even exactly the same as the commitments to perfectionism. It is the goal of the following chapters to show how this makes sense and to establish Arendtian agonism, as I conceive of it, as a hybrid between emancipation and perfectionist agonism.

The conscious pariah

It has been said²⁰ that Arendt's insistence on a space of politics, the public realm, that is not infected by private concerns, unabsorbed by what she calls the social, necessarily leaves a significant problem as to what the content of political action actually is, what concerns *are* permitted to gain public significance. This question is addressed by Jennifer Ring, quite interestingly, by focusing on what she calls “an overlooked dimension”²¹ of Arendt's concept of political action. In this section I want to engage in a discussion of Ring's article. As I have said, we place Arendt intuitively into the camp of the perfectionists, this discussion will make clear the ways in which Arendt is actually committed to emancipation as the contestation of unfair power-relations. However, since the concept of power-relations is not explicitly present in Arendt's political theory, I shall take emancipation to mean the contestation of certain elements of public, private or social life that are disagreeable to the contestant.

In works other than *HC*, Arendt has made a distinction between the pariah and the parvenu, for example in her discussion of the Jewish people in late 18th to early 20th century Europe in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.²² European countries at that time were struggling with the famous “Jewish Question;” how to deal with the “nation within a nation” that is the Jewish people. By a

18 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edition with introduction by Margaret Canovan, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 179.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

20 E.g. B. Honig, *Displacement of Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), p. 121, and Pitkin (1981), “Justice,” p. 336.

21 Ring (1991), “The Pariah as Hero,” p. 433.

22 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Orlando: Harcourt Publishing, 1976). Particularly the section “Between Pariah and Parvenu,” pp. 56-68, is important in this context.

series of decrees and laws Jews were granted equal rights in order to assimilate the Jewish people into the general populace. However, it is important to note here that anti-semitism was very much the accepted sentiment and civil society was therefore at pains to make sure Jews were still recognizable as Jews, as the object of discrimination. So when certain Jews made their way into bourgeois civil society it was by virtue of their “exotic appeal:” the fact that they were Jews and by virtue of their 'vice' were interesting.²³ These “exception Jews”²⁴ were in a predicament: the State demanded their assimilation (they had to be unlike Jews and more like gentiles) but their entrance to civil society was granted only on the condition of their exotic appeal, the fact that they were, after all, still Jews. To make sense of this fundamental contradiction, they faced therefore the choice of becoming either a pariah or a parvenu.

Both outcasts, the pariah as well as the parvenu are, to a great extent, defined by their place essentially outside of and against society, by a disagreement between them and society. They differ however, in their way of dealing with this disagreement: the parvenu desperately wants to be accepted into society (although society most likely will never let her) and thus *internalizes* the disagreement between her and society: she makes the disagreement a personal matter and goes about his daily life being as less offensive as possible (an ultimately futile attempt, since her being as such is considered to be offensive to society), “How can I be more acceptable to the insiders?”²⁵ she asks herself. The pariah on the other hand *externalizes* the disagreement between her and society. Rather than trying to be less offensive, the pariah is not satisfied with the conditions society has laid out for her and makes her dissatisfaction known to the public. By externalizing the disagreement, the pariah makes known the harmful elements of her public, private or social life and calls for change.

What is interesting here, is the account of the pariah as a political actor. After all, the pariah is very much unlike the political actor that is most present in *HC*. The Arendtian Greek hero in *HC*

23 Ibid., p. 56.

24 The term is Arendt's, from the chapter quoted above.

25 Ring (1991), “The Pariah as Hero,” p. 441.

seems, as a political actor, only to be concerned with his disclosure in action,²⁶ and he never “consciously aims at being 'essential,' at leaving behind a story and an identity which will win 'immortal fame.'”²⁷ The pariah, however, is overly conscious, always “aware of himself as an outsider, aware of himself in history, or at least aware of the way in which history has shaped his life.”²⁸ Whereas the Greek hero is satisfied with acting as such and is able and willing to disregard any motive that might have fueled his action, the motive of the pariah in political action, to change disagreeable elements of life (be it public, private or social), is of the utmost importance, at least to the pariah. The pariah, moreover, seemingly blatantly disregards the strict public/private distinction posited in *HC*: to her it doesn't matter if the public realm is 'infected' by private concerns, because the public realm doesn't have any meaning for her, as an outsider. Rather the pariah brings to the table the lot that has befallen her as an individual in both her public and her private life. And by making her private matters concerns of the public she breaks what might be called the golden rule of Arendtian 'politics proper,' signifying the rise of society.²⁹ Ring also sees this, but, by the end of her article, the tension is not resolved, rather she argues for the pariah as the true political actor: in the closing remarks of her article, she concludes that “The Greek hero becomes something of an aberration, while the outsider, the ordinary man or woman, the pariah, steps forth as the more consistently maintained model of a political actor.”³⁰ So Ring takes a definitive position in the discussion of the problematic of the public/private distinction: although *HC* might be Arendt's most prominent work, the heroic political actor in it, the actor who looks upon the trifles of the private sphere with a certain contempt, is not really a fruitful concept, or even one consistent with the rest of Arendt's body of work. I'm hesitant to agree with Ring, in the first place because *HC* is, after all, one of the most important works by Arendt and has given birth to ideas Arendt has developed further over the years (rather than rejecting them). In the second place, I disagree because I believe

26 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, pp. 179-180.

27 Ibid., p. 193.

28 Ring (1991), “The Pariah as Hero,” p. 441.

29 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 35, p. 38, p. 45.

30 Ring (1991), “The Pariah as Hero,” p. 450.

that the Greek hero and the pariah can be brought in a sort of theoretical harmony and this is what I shall undertake in the following.

If there should be one philosopher who has written extensively about the costs of theorizing politics from the vantage point of philosophy, it would be Hannah Arendt.³¹ She even refused to be called a political philosopher, and instead preferred the term 'political theorist.'³² I believe that in the thought of Arendt an immediate concern for reality (conceived of as simply as the reality of 'the here and now') is always present. If we proceed from this premiss, what can we say about the public/private distinction? Why is Arendt apparently so turned away from contemporary conceptions of public and private and instead opts for the ancient Greek one, a conception that might run the risk of saying nothing of value to our day and age? Besides the obvious answer that Arendt believes that her distinction *does* have value for our day and age, I believe that here project here can be conceived of itself as an act of pariahdom. If we compare the motive of the pariah with the project of Arendt in *HC*, they can be said to concur surprisingly well. Recall that the pariah wishes to make public certain disagreeable elements of public, private or social life and, by making these public, wishes to change these features. The pariah knows that she doesn't fit the mold, but refuses to resign to this fact. Quite the same way, Arendt knew very well that features of her political theory in *HC* were "highly individualistic, as we would say today,"³³ that we would understand the Greek division between public and private life only with "extraordinary difficulty."³⁴ Nonetheless, she felt very strongly about the division and her act of making the various disagreeable elements of mass society public by contrasting them with the Greek model of politics, is meant to change mass society. Two questions arise here, the first is about the importance of issues of social justice, such as poverty. I will discuss this in the third section of this chapter. The second concerns

31 See e.g. H. Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," in *Social Research*, vol. 57, no. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 73-103. See also M. Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," in *Social Research*, vol. 74, no. 4 (Winter 2007), pp. 955-982.

32 From the English Wikipedia article on Hannah Arendt. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Arendt, last visited: 29-03-2012.

33 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 194.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

the relation of actions of pariahdom and 'heroic' actions within a public realm like the *polis*: when does Arendt call upon us to be pariahs and when do we need to be Greek heroes? I see this relation between the pariah and the hero as one similar to what Honig calls 'Nietzschean preparation.' In a critical response to Dana R. Villa's article "Beyond Good and Evil," Honig says the following:

[...] Nietzsche thought – as did Arendt, often enough – than [sic] in an age like ours, whenever people gather together (whether as actors or as judging spectators) the conditions of massness begin to set in. Arendt thought that the best response to this predicament was to retrieve the possibility of an authentic political action capable of resisting the rise of the social and the administration of the late modern state by establishing new political communities of meaning and new sites of resistance. Nietzsche rejected this option [...] because he thought that a period of preparation and breeding must proceed the advent of great politics. Through aesthetic self-discipline, individuals must work on themselves and transform their negative will to vengeance into positive creativity. [...] Arendt's insistence on the purity of the political and her segregation of the private from the public prevent *her* from seeing the political character of Nietzschean preparation. But in the end the success of Arendt's own political project presupposes the success of Nietzsche's project of individuation (or of one like it).³⁵ (Honig's italics)

We can ask Honig rhetorically if Arendt really thought that the way out of a condition of massness was really so radical as immediately establishing new political communities, living, presumably, in splendid isolation from the rest of the world. And we can answer her: no, but we do agree that the success of a project of preparation, like that of Nietzsche, is necessary for Arendt's bigger project. It is not that her insistence on the purity of political action prevent her from seeing this, rather her insistence was an instance of this project, the project of preparation through conscious acts of pariahdom. Arendt indeed envisioned a model of politics in which we could revel in the greatness of pure political actions within a public realm that is undisturbed by private or social concerns. However, in our political reality, mass society more often than not hinders our potential to do away with private concerns and become political actors in the heroic Greek sense of the word:

economical or social concerns are all too often more pressing (or permitted to become more

35 B. Honig, "The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response to 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action' by Dana R. Villa," in *Political Theory*, vol. 21, no. 3, (Aug. 1993), pp. 528-533.

pressing) than properly public concerns. So we must proceed first to change mass society, which has, in a way, made outsiders of us all: outsiders in the sense that the social has closed us off from the public realm. It is also important to note here that it is not impossible for us to become 'heroes,' political actors as Arendt envisioned them. As the title of Ring's article ("The Pariah as Hero") suggests, to become a pariah takes courage, and as Arendt notes: "the connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own."³⁶ We can be inspired by the Greek heroes of old, but also, more closer to home, by heroic pariahs such as Benjamin Disraeli.³⁷ Indeed we can be inspired by them to act ourselves, heroically trying to change our conditions of mass society, but, for us as pariahs, this means that we must accept a political reality which is marked by mass society. To act for our emancipation thus means acceptance of certain given conditions: we are born into a certain political community wherein it is impossible to envisage, from without, an arrangement that fixes everything that is wrong and then apply it with reckless abandon to the political reality of our place and time.³⁸ We do not break away from our bonds by denying their existence. Rather, we must accept the given conditions of our political existence by acting *within* an unfair framework to truly satisfy our desire to make a difference to that framework. Emancipation means, as we have seen in the case of the pariah, to have the ability on one hand and the audacity on the other to act. So besides just having the courage to act, emancipation requires institutions that facilitate the ability to act. And just as you don't fix a piece of electronics by giving it a good whack, you can't change political institutions for the better by 'smashing the system'. But here we are in need of an answer to the question how this acceptance of given conditions is to be conceived. After all, not just any acceptance will do (the acceptance of the parvenu, who internalizes the disagreement between him and society is an example of the wrong kind). How do we properly accept given conditions? My answer is through acknowledgment of

36 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 186.

37 See for a biographical sketch of Disraeli, the section "The Potent Wizard" in Arendt (1976), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 68-79.

38 Such an attitude would, no doubt, signify the *hybris* the Ancient Greeks so feared.

finitude and abolishment of our will to sovereignty, and it is the subject of the next chapter.

Abolishment of sovereignty, acknowledgment of finitude

In his book *Bound by Recognition* Patchen Markell, inspired by Arendt, discusses what he calls the 'politics of acknowledgment' for which he argues out of a consideration of the condition of plurality.

So what does the condition of plurality entail for Arendt? In short, it entails that

No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth [...] All the recommendations the tradition [of political philosophy since Plato] has to offer to overcome the condition of non-sovereignty and win an untouchable integrity of the human person amount to a compensation for the intrinsic "weakness" of plurality.³⁹

Because action always takes place among others, who interpret and react to one's action, it is, because of this plurality, impossible to influence the outcome of one's action. It becomes all too tempting therefore, to establish a given motive, or identity, which signifies a 'proper' outcome of an action. In *Bound by Recognition* Markell discusses and criticizes the idea of a politics of recognition, put forth, among others, by Charles Taylor. Calling on Arendt, Markell sees an antecedently given identity that governs action as a fiction:

Rather than treating identities as antecedent facts about people that govern their action, Arendt conceives of identities as the *results* of action and speech in public [...] One important consequence of this is that identity, for Arendt, is not something over which agents themselves have control. Because we do not act in isolation but interact with others, who we become through action is not up to us; instead it is the outcome of many intersecting and unpredictable sequences of action and response, such that "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story."⁴⁰ (Markell's italics)

So what makes it so harmful to try and set the outcome of an action? How do we try to overcome "plurality's 'weakness'" in this way? In discussing Taylor, Markell finds both a blindness and an attunement to human finitude, which corresponds roughly to the inability to set an action's outcome

39 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 234.

40 Markell (2003), *Bound by Recognition*, p. 13.

beforehand. Taylor, he says, was particularly sensitive to the fact that agents are always already engaged in social practices and not the self-sufficient completely autonomous atoms modernists make them out to be.⁴¹ In language, an important example of the way in which agents are always already 'embedded', we, as speakers, “always find ourselves implicated in a 'wider matrix of language' that we did not create and which escapes our governance” and “because the use of language is itself a form of creative and unpredictable action,” language itself is open to reinterpretation and changing meanings.⁴² These are two ways in which human beings are marked by finitude, and setting the outcome of an action, like designating the universal meaning of a word, foregoes this finitude because it is founded on a governance an actor does not have and it closes off the possibility of reinterpretation. Taylor's own blindness to this finitude lies in his account of the politics of recognition. Markell asks us to consider two uses of the word 'recognition'⁴³, the first in a cognitive sense ('I recognize this place, I've been here before'), the second in a constructive sense, a doing rather than a knowing ('The United States recognize the State of Israel's right to self-defense'). Recognition in the first sense applies to an antecedent fact, something which can be known, and recognition therefore becomes something which can go right or wrong, in the second sense recognition is a kind of performance; Israel's right to self-defense comes into existence, partly, because it is recognized by the US. According to Markell, both senses of the word are present in Taylor, although he doesn't consciously apply them as two different senses.⁴⁴ However, Markell is not so much looking to criticize Taylor, as he is to explore the tension between recognition in its cognitive and its constructive sense and the ways in which this tension becomes harmful.⁴⁵ In this latter sense, recognition as constructive is at ease with “the fact of our vulnerability to, and dependence on, the ways in which we are perceived and characterized by others.”⁴⁶ The recognition of a right, in our example, remains subject to discussion, even after a

41 Ibid., pp. 44-45.

42 Ibid., pp. 46-47.

43 Ibid., pp. 39-43.

44 Ibid., p. 39.

45 Ibid., p. 41.

46 Ibid., pp. 58-59.

right has been recognized. Recognition as cognitive, however, (important because it shows “what it means for intersubjective interaction to go well or poorly, for relations of recognition to be just or unjust”⁴⁷) is caught up in the attempt to attain sovereignty. After all, claims of misrecognition are invariably argued with reference to antecedently given identities (“You've got me all wrong, I'm not like that!”). In this latter sense recognition can be something by which we are inescapably bound, a tie that can furthermore be potentially harmful because it calls on a fictitious identity that is treated as a fact. To make this clear, Markell discusses the case of the Jewish Emancipation of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, specifically in Prussia. While this process of emancipation greatly improved the standard of living of Jews in Prussia, it also had a more grim side:

[it] meant much more than merely removing onerous burdens from a defenseless minority [...] The law secured recognition for the Jews, yet it also secured recognition for Prussia by placing Jews into a new relation with the state; it lifted restrictions on Jewish life, but it also served as a tool through which the state could mold its Jewish population into a shape consistent with the requirements of modern government – by which that is, it could perform the work of *identifying* Jews as citizens, *and identifying itself* as sovereign.⁴⁸

(Markell's italics)

Prussian statesmen had a particular anxiety for the Jews as a 'nation within a nation', a community that was potentially hostile to the sovereignty of the state, and an anxiety that their supposed 'rootlessness' (as a people scattered throughout Europe) would make them indifferent to territorial boundaries. And these anxieties prompted legislation pertaining to the recognition of Jews, not with a view to do justice to their equality as human beings per se, but rather to *assimilate* them in the existing state and society-structure.⁴⁹ To see what harmful effects this had on the Jewish people, we can turn to Arendt's discussion on the Jews and bourgeois society in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the politics of recognition has a clear and well-defined end: a state of full recognition, where everyone has been assigned their proper place. Such a state would of

47 Ibid., p. 59.

48 Ibid., p. 133.

49 Ibid., pp. 134-137.

50 Arendt (1976), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 65 (“In no other country... ..not like 'ordinary Jews'”) fits very well with what has been said here.

course be apolitical: as there is no more recognition to be distributed, what need is there for politics? Here we can also apply the standard criticism made by agonists: if recognition signifies the proper identifying of an other, and the goal of politics is recognition, there would be no room left for contestation after recognition has been achieved, so the political arena is closed off. But the specifically Arendtian criticism I want to put forth here is that there is no such thing as 'the proper identifying of an other', at least not while he or she is alive. And surely, politics is an activity among the living. Recognition, the assigning of a place in society, in this way tries to fortify the "weakness" of plurality, and thus, because it aims to end politics and therefore the possibility of action, destroys it.

So rather than recognition, Markell, again inspired by Arendt, opts for acknowledgment. Specifically, acknowledgment of human finitude and rejection of the aspiration to sovereignty. If the trouble with recognition lies in the fact that the outcome of an action is fixed by making appeals to an antecedently given fact, identity, which in reality is not antecedently given, the opposite is necessary. Rather than, through appeals to identity, trying to fix an outcome, we should respect the unexpectedness of action by *not* doing so. And we do this by acknowledging the basic conditions by which life on earth and in the world is possible for us. Markell gives four features of his politics of acknowledgment.⁵¹ The first is that acknowledgment signifies, in the first place, a relation to the self, not the other. The second is that it is not acknowledgment of an identity, but of one's own "ontological situation:" "acknowledgment is directed at the basic conditions of one's own existence and activity, including, crucially, the *limits* of 'identity' as a ground of action." The third feature is that an acknowledgment of the basic condition of finitude "is not a matter of knowledge per se, but of what we can expect our knowledge of others to do for us." And finally acknowledgment means "coming to terms with, rather than vainly attempting to overcome, the risk of conflict, hostility, misunderstanding, opacity, and alienation that characterizes life among others."

Acknowledgment as the rejection of sovereignty signifies how Arendtian thought conceives

51 Markell (2003), *Bound by Recognition*, p. 35-38. The next four citations refer to this section.

of man as a humble but courageous being. Humble, because man, as a political actor, can see under what conditions of finitude his life has been given to him and accepts these. And this acceptance is a necessary step on the way to emancipation. Courageous because he is undeterred by the enormous uncertainty that results from inserting oneself in the world: he proceeds anyway. He overcomes these conditions of finitude, not by foregoing them, but by respecting them and proceeding regardless of the fearsome unknown that awaits him in the political realm. Ring (1991) sees the Greek hero and the conscious pariah as each other's opposite. While the Greek hero is marked by courage, the pariah is by humility.⁵² In the account of the political actor of acknowledgment, these two qualities are combined. Indeed it is only because of the humility of a man in relation to his basic conditions that it makes sense to call him courageous when he inserts himself in the world. This is why emancipation of the individual starts with his or her acceptance of certain conditions and this is why Arendt calls courage “the political virtue par excellence.”⁵³

Aestheticization and the performativity-account

In the previous chapters we have discussed Arendt's commitment to emancipation as the contestation of disagreeable elements in public life. What made certain elements disagreeable was, in most examples, exclusion from the public realm, and emancipation, at least in Arendt, means almost always the acquirement of entrance to the public realm. The public realm is important because action is possible only there, where it can 'shine' in the light of the public and thus can be seen or heard by all, gain permanence and escape its futility, the possibility that an action might go unnoticed or 'disappear' because of the forgetfulness brought about by a realm of appearances that is constantly changing.⁵⁴ The rise of the social as the absorption of the public realm signifies the loss of the capacity to act; it does away with the possibility to distinguish oneself and instead requires conformism of its members.⁵⁵ Emancipation, directed against the normalizing demands or harmful

52 Ring (1991), “The Pariah as Hero,” p. 449-450.

53 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 36. See also *ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

54 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 197.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41

exclusions of society, is in this way committed to vindicating the possibility of action. In the current section, I want to argue that Arendt's commitment to emancipation seamlessly changes into a commitment to perfectionism when the importance of action is taken into account. To this end, we turn to Villa, who, in his article, is committed to redeeming action's meaning by proposing an inherent valuation of it.⁵⁶ I will go on to criticize his 'performativity-account,' in a discussion of the problematic concerning Arendt's remarks on the social and the so-called "Social Question."⁵⁷

Action is man's highest capacity, it is the only activity that makes us 'truly human' in that it is the only way in which "men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct."⁵⁸ Furthermore it fundamentally requires the presence of others: "A life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men."⁵⁹ Our capacity for action is our capacity to reveal who we are, and who we are is not just the given identity behind an action. Rather, action shapes our identity, or life-story, and through it, we 'become who we are'. The criterion Arendt proposes for action is greatness: "action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary."⁶⁰ As such, Arendtian action has strong connotations with perfectionist agonism: the way action shapes its actor, "who is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer,"⁶¹ and its criterion of greatness render it a perfect 'device' for the "continuous cultivation and improvement of [an actor's] virtues and capacities."⁶² Conceived of this way, action can be seen as our capacity to perfect ourselves, and this can be seen also when we look at action's relation to freedom. "To act," Arendt says, "in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin [...] to set something into motion."⁶³ And as such it is the same as freedom: "With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which,

56 Villa (1992), "Beyond Good and Evil," p. 276.

57 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 49.

58 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 176.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., p. 205.

61 Ibid., p. 190.

62 Fossen (2008), "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism," p. 377.

63 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 177.

of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.”⁶⁴ Freedom in Arendt, however, is not just “the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints,”⁶⁵ it is not negative liberty. In *On Revolution*, Arendt distinguishes between liberation and freedom: whereas the liberty implied in liberation can only be negative, freedom is conceived of positively as “the political way of life.”⁶⁶ Freedom, rather than the negative notion of freedom from X, signifies the capacity to act: whereas the negative notion could be satisfied under the monarchical rulership of a just king⁶⁷, historically the positive notion of freedom “demanded the constitution of a republic.”⁶⁸

This conception of freedom corresponds with Villa's interpretation of Arendtian freedom as “a kind of virtuosity,”⁶⁹ and this notion gives rise to what I call Villa's performativity account. This account is posited mainly against conceptions of action that focus on its instrumentality, conceptions that value an action because of its motive or its accomplishment. But freedom as a virtuosity, and consequently action, entails first that it is fundamentally contingent.⁷⁰ *Virtu*, understood in the Machiavellian sense, is the capacity to deal with the contingent nature of *fortuna*: luck deals everyone different cards and the best player is he or she that can make the most of what is given by *fortuna* with the use of his or her *virtu*: “virtuosity is manifest only in terms of the opportunities provided by *fortuna*.”⁷¹ To value an action with reference to a set motive or accomplishment means to forego this contingent dimension of freedom, to secure oneself against the capricious nature of *fortuna*. And this means also to deny one the ability to make use of *virtu* and exhibits the will to sovereignty we undertook to abolish in the previous section. The performativity (rather than instrumentality) of the account becomes clear when we see that a

64 Ibid.

65 I. Carter, “Positive and Negative Liberty,” in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>.

66 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 19, p. 23.

67 Much like Plato's philosopher-king, whose rule is not tyrannical because his rule is concerned with the good of the polis. The point is that a life 'free from X' is not enough to become free according to Arendt. Rather, we become free through political action, which demands the right to participate in public affairs.

68 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 23.

69 Villa (1992), “Beyond Good and Evil,” p. 280.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

conception of freedom as virtuosity requires us to value an action's appearance (in Villa's terms *phenomenality*) rather than its motive or its accomplishment: freedom requires, concretely, constant performance of actions.⁷² To exhibit virtuosity requires a 'stage' for an actor, a space wherein his actions can appear. The political actor is not a fabricator of products which can be valued according to standards of prudence, but rather a doer of deeds which must be measured according to their 'greatness.' While Plato's philosopher-king has no need for such a stage (he will be satisfied as long as his decrees are enforced, be it publicly or in secrecy), this same is not true of political actors. Actors can overcome an action's futility, the possibility that an action might go unnoticed and therefore unvalued, only by virtue of a public 'space of appearances'. For the same reason, it is also necessary to value the fact of plurality: we need others (as much as others need us) as the audience before which we act.

The above-described performativity-account keeps intact what can be called the purity of action. Arendt has extensively commented on the dangers of 'society,' where private concerns take on public significance.⁷³ The result, in the general interpretation of Arendt, is an account of 'politics proper' and 'proper political action': concepts cleansed of infestation by the social, concepts that do not permit (often pressing) social concerns, such as poverty, to infiltrate the realm of politics. We distinguish between a private and a public realm and, for Arendt, these realms had, for a while in Ancient Greece, very clear and distinct locations and functions, before they were 'absorbed' by the all-encompassing realm of the social from feudal to modern society. The private realm was designated by the household, where family-members could, in privacy, fulfill the necessities of biological life. The public realm was reserved for politics and was designated physically by the "wall of the *polis*," more "properly speaking," however "The polis [...] is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together."⁷⁴ When, in the modern era, social concerns became publicly relevant, this distinction was

72 Ibid.

73 For this qualification of society, see Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p.35. For her comments on the social, see the same chapter (ibid., pp. 22-78).

74 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p.198.

blurred and, consequently, man lost the public realm as a location reserved for political action. And, as is argued in the performativity-account, when the capacity for action is hindered, freedom itself is done harm to: when man can no longer exercise and display his freedom as virtuosity, he is no longer free. Instead of freedom, the necessities of the biological life-process entered the scene of politics. One such necessity is poverty and Arendt's most prominent example of poverty entering the scene of politics is the French Revolution:

It was under the rule of this necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution, inspired it, drove it onward, and eventually sent it to its doom, for this was the multitude of the poor. When they appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them, and the result was that the power of the old regime became impotent and the new republic was stillborn; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself.⁷⁵

What is so harmful about poverty in politics, is that it leaves only room for itself: not before every mouth is fed, is any mouth permitted to speak up. It is harmful because it gives rise to violence as the French revolutionaries ushered in the Reign of Terror. However, denying poverty (and other such issues) to become a political issue, leaves us with a conception of politics, of action, that is frustratingly empty: if we picture the ancient Greek city-state and its public realm, where poverty or any other social question is not an issue, Hanna Pitkin rightly asks “what is it that [the citizens] talk about together, in that endless palaver in the *agora*?”⁷⁶ (Pitkin's italics) Of course, the citizens in the *polis* were extremely concerned with distinction, becoming the best and as such they gave rise to the “fiercely agonal spirit” that permeated the public realm.⁷⁷ However the Greek citizen now seems somewhat of an elitist snob: someone concerned primarily with himself, rather than the real and pressing issues around him. In the conclusion of the second section of her article, Pitkin writes:

Arendt's citizens begin to resemble posturing little boys clamoring for attention (“Look at me, I'm the greatest!” “No, look at *me!*”) and wanting to be reassured that they are brave, valuable, even real.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 50.

⁷⁶ Pitkin (1981), “Justice,” p. 336.

⁷⁷ Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Pitkin (1981), “Justice,” p. 338.

(Pitkin's italics)

And while I think this is a distortion of Arendt's view, it certainly applies to citizens acting in accord with the performativity-account, where, in action, nothing matters but the shining greatness and glory of it. On Villa's account, social concerns amount to an end beyond of action itself and as such do not enter into an action's valuation⁷⁹, as do moral considerations since action is “beyond good and evil,”⁸⁰ and valuing a moral motive (like any other motive) means valuing what *incites* an action and again does not *inherently* value action. But can the performativity-account be ascribed to Arendt? I believe not. In the following I want to offer an Arendtian account of action on which it possible (and sometimes logical) to factor in motives in an action's valuation.

Is it true that, for Arendt, motive, as that what incites action, plays no role at all in inherently valuing an action's greatness? In an interview that is included in the volume *Crises of the Republic*, Arendt is asked what her thoughts are on the student protest movement of the 1960's and 70's.

There she praises the movement:

As I see it, for the first time in a very long while a spontaneous political movement arose which not only did not simply carry on propaganda, but acted, *and, moreover, acted almost exclusively from moral motives.*

[...] In all these matters I would rate the student movement as very positive.⁸¹ (Arendt's italics)

So here it seems that motive is not at all excluded from the valuation of an action! Moreover, the mention of a “moral factor”⁸² implies that action is by no means beyond good and evil. However, Arendt is not uncritical of the student protest movement and her criticism can tell us something about what makes an action (un)valuable or (not) great:

How long the so-called 'positive' factors will hold good, whether they are not already in process of being dissolved, eaten away by fanaticism, ideologies, and a destructiveness that often borders on the criminal, on one side, by boredom, on the other, no one knows.⁸³

79 Villa (1992), “Beyond Good and Evil,” p. 280.

80 Ibid., p. 276.

81 H. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, (Orlando: Harcourt Publishing, 1972), p. 203.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., pp. 203-204.

Here we see that Arendt makes a distinction between praiseworthy motives (such as at least certain moral ones) and objectionable motives (such as ideological ones). That ideology spells doom for any action, we can also see in the essay “Civil Disobedience,” included in the same volume. There Arendt praises the movement in its capacity to promote free association, however she also clearly sees that “What threatens the student movement [...] is not just vandalism, violence, bad temper, and worse manners, *but the growing infection of the movement with ideologies* (Maoism, Castroism, Marxism-Leninism, and the like), which in fact split and dissolve the association.”⁸⁴ (Arendt's italics) So it's not exactly motives per se that are harmful to the inherent valuation of action, but ideology. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt condemns ideology for becoming

independent of all experience [...] ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things, dominating them from this place of concealment and requiring a sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it.⁸⁵

Ideology starts with an Idea, and from it argues with ice cold logic for all it requires, regardless of whether it corresponds with reality or not. Ideological motives, therefore, always point to something beyond our reality, our space of appearances, and as such they make it impossible to value an action inherently.⁸⁶

This consideration is absent from Villa's article: I believe he disregards the import of the concept 'action in concert' when he considers how aestheticized action respects the value of plurality. Let's do some close reading of his article: “the performance model underlines the fact that *plurality* is the fundamental condition for action. Without actors, no opportunity for the expression of virtue is possible; without an audience, action – words and deeds – fails to appear and its meaning is unredeemed.”⁸⁷ (Villa's italics) We can see here a strange equation of “actors” and “audience”: this is strange because actors do not sit in the audience and merely 'watch' what is happening, they

84 Ibid., p. 98.

85 Arendt (1976), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 470-471.

86 In this respect it is also interesting to read that totalitarianism has to do away “with the autonomous existence of any activity whatsoever [...] the SS member [is] the type of man who under no circumstances will ever do 'a thing for its own sake.’” See Arendt (1976), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 322.

87 Villa (1992), “Beyond Good and Evil,” p. 280.

act and react themselves. Indeed, this is part of the reason why, because of plurality, an action's outcome is always uncertain: because an action provokes countless reactions, there is no telling where it ends up.⁸⁸ So if we take this into an account, the concept of 'action in concert' seems to imply that political action is not the performance of a flute-player with respect to an audience, but his or her performance in tune with the rest of the orchestra. The import of the fact of plurality is not respect for the audience, the others that are there merely to enjoy passively, but respect for the other players, that are not merely passive bystanders but also take delight in joining the symphony. In the metaphore, the audience present has more resemblance to the historian, who directs his gaze at past events and considers their greatness. If we consider this take on action as 'action in concert,' we can see how we can factor in certain motives that are of importance to an action's valuation.

When a life-story has been concluded and we consider the actions that marked a person's life, we might praise a certain action because it served to provoke a whole new spectrum of reactions. For example, we can say “what the civil rights movement did, was truly great, because it gave voice to a race of people that were not considered citizens.” Notice how we value an action because of its motive, notice also how it makes no sense to praise the actions of the civil rights movement if we consider their motives a mere by-product, an accident. On the account that I propose, it's not motives that are harmful to an action's inherent valuation, it's a wrong estimation of the role a motive can play: it all comes down to what we can expect our motives to do for us.⁸⁹ Action, to Arendt, corresponds to beginning,⁹⁰ does it then not make sense that the new string of unpredictable actions and reactions that is created with every action is offset against something, that it has a beginning? In this sense, motives, like the motive of a pariah who aims at changing an aspect of public life, *do* play an important part in an action's valuation. However, it is important to note that it plays *a strictly limited part*. Some actors forego the limits of a motive and actions that arise out of ideology are an important example of this. When an actor wrongly estimates the

88 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 184.

89 I consciously refer to Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, p. 36 here, because my account of the role of motives in action is symmetrical to Markell's account of the role of knowledge in action.

90 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, pp. 176-177.

limitations of his motives, a common occurrence among totalitarian movements that are hell-bent on proving that “everything is possible,”⁹¹ actions can no longer be valued along standards of greatness.⁹² This account keeps intact the idea that freedom is a virtuosity, and in this sense provides Arendtian thought with a perfectionist commitment: we could, for example, say that an action was incited by admirable motives, but it wasn't truly great and in this light we can read Arendt's comments on the 'doer of good' that cannot venture into the public realm.⁹³ Greatness is still attributed to actions that are performed in the public realm and it therefore bears strongly on an action's performance. I do consider it perfectly possible however, to view a motive as an important, though strictly limited, factor in an action's valuation. And in this sense, my account of action provides a window for immediate concerns of emancipation, of laying bare and redressing “the harms, injustices or inequities caused by exclusions and restrictions of pluralism.”⁹⁴

We can already see a thread emerging from contemporary political theory which we may call Arendtian: the account presented above establishes Arendtian theory, convincingly I believe, as a type of agonism with a fierce commitment to both a citizen's emancipation and the perfection of his or her identity, the greatness of his or her actions. Indeed it is the concept of action itself which is at the center of this account. However, so far, the account is incomplete: it considers action only in relation to the individual: what does it mean for the actor to act and why is it important to him or her? We have yet to consider more fully an important aspect to the Arendtian concept of action, namely 'action in concert': what does it mean for the *agon*, the public realm or space of appearances, to act? How is action important to the institutional framework of a political community, and how is this framework important to any individual action? This is the subject of the second part of my thesis.

91 Arendt (1976), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 440. To put this comment into context: according to Arendt, the totalitarian movements (during Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia) already accepted the principle of 'everything is permitted' but transcended it into a realm where 'everything is possible,' where the ruler could surround himself in the pseudo-reality of ideology that gave him unlimited domination: a reality where to him, everything is possible.

92 It is not merely that such actions are 'not great', they lose their character which allows an inherent valuation of greatness in the first place.

93 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, pp. 74-78.

94 Fossen (2008), “Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism,” p. 377.

As a challenge to agonism

In this section I will try to turn Arendtian thought against agonism to formulate a challenge to the typical agonist's conception of how the *agon* is constituted. To this end, the main subject of this second part is the concept of power in Arendt and several other authors. For Arendt and, to a certain degree, Foucault, power is what allows people to constitute a body politic and found lasting political institutions: it is what allows us to 'build worlds' or realize our potential to become who we are. However, I will argue that the typical agonist has, what I call, a broad conceptualization of power, I shall come to clarify this shortly, but for now we can understand it as a conception of power that sees it as existing literally everywhere and sees the contesting of power relations as something that can and must be applied to every aspect of human affairs. I will argue that such a conceptualization amounts to a wrong understanding of the productive qualities of power as a specifically political phenomenon.

The challenging of power relations is a prominent aspect of the model of politics put forth by Chantal Mouffe.⁹⁵ In her reading of Carl Schmitt, she traces a constitutive tension in any liberal democracy, a tension between the universalistic tendencies of liberalism (that tend to view equality as a natural fact, i.e. 'everyone is born equal') and the democratic logic of inclusion-exclusion, a logic by which equality is viewed as having an artificial character because it comes into being only after the people, the '*demos*', has been constituted. Equality in this sense hinges on a moment of inclusion and exclusion, a moment wherein is articulated who belongs to the *demos* and who doesn't. The fact that this tension is constitutive means that it can never be resolved and this means that any expression of a political will is in a sense borne of this tension. So she argues that

Consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations. The frontier that it establishes between what is and what is not legitimate

95 C. Mouffe, "Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Citizenship," in *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 36-59.

is a political one and for that reason it should remain contestable.⁹⁶

The problem with a domain of contestation in which every hegemony can be contested, is that it allows for 'unpolitical' contestations that are, by their unpolitical nature, harmful to the institution of the *agon*. The agonists need, therefore, a conceptualization of power that allows us to distinguish between what does and what does not qualify as fit for politics. Because the challenging of crystallized power relations is a very clear feature of Mouffe's theory, I will use her as the main proponent of the broad conceptualization of power. It should be noted however that it applies to any agonist that argues for a domain of contestation that is open at all times for any demands.

Arendt defines power as a capacity, specifically it “corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.”⁹⁷ Understood in this way it is never something that belongs to someone: “When we say of somebody that he is 'in power' we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name.”⁹⁸ Here I want to briefly qualify what is meant with this concept of power. First, Arendt contrasts power with violence, its complete opposite.⁹⁹ While power and violence often go hand in hand, the fact that they are opposites becomes clear from the fact that loss of power often signifies an increase in violence.¹⁰⁰ Understanding power as springing up from action in concert means second that it is the glue that keeps the institutionalized public sphere together: the ability to act politically is properly (but not necessarily!) drawn from an institutionalized public sphere (that is, a space of appearances safeguarded by laws). And the safeguarding of a public sphere is made possible by the power of citizens acting in concert:¹⁰¹ “all political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them.”¹⁰² This also signifies a third

96 Ibid., p. 49.

97 Arendt (1972), *Crises of the Republic*, p. 143 (in the essay “On Violence”).

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid., p. 155.

100 Ibid., p. 152.

101 We can observe a paradox here (political action is made possible by the public sphere, the public sphere is institutionalized by political action), this is related to the fact that although action is properly made possible by an institutionalized public sphere, this is not strictly necessary. We'll address this point later on, when discussing the problems regarding the foundation of a body politic.

102 Arendt (1972), *Crises of the Republic*, p. 140.

characteristic of power: its materializations (into institutions) can never survive the moment they are not underscored by the power of action in concert; it is the breath of speech and action that breathes life into institutions, so to speak.

Because the Arendtian conception of power qualifies it as a strictly political phenomenon, i.e. it exists only when people act in concert, it enables us to see the challenging of power relations as a more qualified activity in that it precludes contestations of a non-political nature. The challenging of power relations then becomes something that is unequivocally healthy to the institution of the *agon*. It now becomes clear how important the constitution of the *agon* is to political actors within a given body politic: love for the *agon*, the wish to preserve it, becomes a necessary aspect to the activity of (agonistic) politics. What I mean by this is that, for Arendt, any constituted political community needs political actors with a willingness to act within its institutional framework if it is to survive beyond the moment of constitution. So after I have made my arguments for the Arendtian conception of power, I will ascribe to Arendt a certain conservatism. I will argue that Arendt is conservative in the sense that, for Arendt, the actor, by his or her actions, must (and often does) express a wish to preserve (and improve) the institutional framework within which he or she acts. To make this clear, I shall compare the political thought of Arendt to the conservatism of Michael Oakeshott.¹⁰³

On the broad conceptualization of power

In her appropriation of Schmitt, Mouffe theorizes a constitutive tension in any liberal democracy, but unlike Schmitt, who sees in it a reason for rejecting liberal democracy, Mouffe argues that this tension is not an argument for its dismantling. Rather, realizing that this tension exists, means we can gain a better understanding of its limits or, as she calls it, “the boundaries of citizenship and the nature of a liberal-democratic consensus.”¹⁰⁴ The tension in which liberal democracy is caught up

103 M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991).

104 Mouffe (2000), “Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy,” p. 37.

arises out of “two conflicting logics,”¹⁰⁵ that of liberalism and democracy. Whereas liberalism has its focus on humanity in general (and therefore any person, whether he/she is a citizen or not), democracy focuses exclusively on its citizens. This means that when the two are combined (in a liberal democracy) tension is created between a logic of inclusion/exclusion and a logic that sees all as equal:

The liberal conception of equality postulates that every person is, as a person, automatically equal to every other person. The democratic conception, however, requires the possibility of distinguishing who belongs to the demos and who is exterior to it; for that reason, it cannot exist without the necessary correlate of inequality.¹⁰⁶

Because these are necessary qualities of both liberalism and democracy, the tension is constitutive: it is always necessarily there and any attempt to resolve it is of no use. And so, Mouffe can conclude that “Liberal-democratic politics consists in fact, in the constant process of negotiation and renegotiation – through different hegemonic articulations – of this constitutive paradox.”¹⁰⁷

Any agreement on principles, rather than a consensus, is thus a hegemonic articulation of the constitutive tension by the prevailing powers in a political community: the community is always shaped by the people that can, for the moment, exercise the most influence. What this means is that power relations have crystallized in a manner that corresponds to this agreement, but the trouble is that these power relations are contingent. Since no equilibrium between the conflicting logics of liberalism and democracy is possible (a stable and satisfactory arrangement that can hold good for centuries to come), the prevailing hegemony can receive justification only because it is open to contestation. Only when agreements are constantly renegotiated, can we be sure that the prevailing hegemony is not unjust. It is interesting and important (but, seeing her theoretical debt to Schmitt, perhaps not surprising) to note that Mouffe consistently refers to the democratic conception of equality as a *political* one,¹⁰⁸ a *political* frontier between what is and what is not legitimate,¹⁰⁹ and

105 Ibid., p. 45.

106 Ibid., p. 39.

107 Ibid., p. 46.

108 Ibid., pp. 38-39.

109 Ibid., p. 49.

she talks of *real* and *political* articulation of identities.¹¹⁰ The adjective 'political' is here intuitively (and sometimes explicitly) connected to contestability, so a political conception of equality is by no means a universal truth, but rather a perspective that can be contested. We can take Mouffe's project to be, then, an attempt to formulate a political domain that she calls the space of contestation. Only in a political domain of contestation, the *agon*, is it sufficiently guaranteed that any citizen has an equal chance to articulate his identity, regardless of social class, economic standing or cultural background. The political domain, moreover, is not subordinate to any other domain (such as religious, economical or social domains).¹¹¹

This account sees power relations as inherent in human relations and they are therefore everywhere. It is only through political activity, competing forms of articulation, that these power relations can be justified, because justification requires that these relations be questioned and the only thing that can sanction them are the people themselves. Without appealing to extra-political standards such as supposed divinity or rationality, the subjects over which a power relation is exercised are engaged in a questioning of it, and through that they can deem certain relations just or unjust. Keeping the concept of power as broad as possible has, therefore, the merit of not prematurely closing off the possibility of questioning an aspect of human conduct in general, lest it turns out to be an unjust power relation. However this broadness of the concept of power becomes troubling when, in a space of contestation that is forever open from all sides, demands are articulated that have no business in politics and this is the trouble with the broad conceptualization of power: it allows for the articulation of demands or contestations within the political domain that aren't strictly political. This is, in fact, a problem, because the *agon* Mouffe imagines, is an independent political domain that should not allow such contestations. To make my case clear, let's consider an example. Imagine an irresponsible non-virtuous citizen located within an agonistic public sphere instituted as Mouffe imagines it. On the Arendtian account I set forth, actors want to

110 Ibid., p. 56.

111 Here we can recognize Mouffe's theoretical debt to Schmitt, see C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1963), p. 39.

act, want to make use of their highest human capacity, because action adds meaning to their lives. But much more than adding meaning to an isolated action, every action affects the meaning of other actions as well as the framework, the *agon*, itself. While this *agon* is instituted so that the demand that every citizen can act (can become meaningful) is satisfied, this demand must also be a civic duty: if actions of any one actor are consistently not taken seriously, it becomes nigh impossible for this actor to become meaningful. Mouffe might formulate this civic duty as such: since power relations are perceived to be everywhere, embedded in the very fabric of human interaction, any contestation of what is possibly an unjust power relation must be taken seriously. Now, the irresponsible citizen enters the *agon* and begins to make contestations of a non-political nature about which he himself is not serious. For example he might claim that in the Netherlands there is a structural lack of festivity, harming all citizens, and call for the institution of a 'Ministry of Festivity', making sure we become 'emancipated' from our lack of partying.¹¹² Now, because the broad conceptualization of power underlines the possible existence of power relations in every area of human life, as per the broad conceptualization of power, this contestation must be taken seriously: since only a *political* contestation can possibly emancipate us, citizens have the duty to take every contestation seriously. And so what is meant as a frivolous and banal joke is permitted to take on a serious meaning and this, in turn, does harm to the institution of the *agon*, because, rather than a political site for contestation, it can now also be used as a podium for stand-up comedy.¹¹³ Now one could object to my criticism that this is a strictly theoretical problem without much practical impact: a contestation such as the above can and will be countered within the *agon* by more virtuous citizens who see the outrageous nature of the contention that partying is a valuable way to emancipation. But to counter it on a practical level doesn't quite cut it, the problem with contestations of an unpolitical nature is on the conceptual level and must therefore be addressed

112 This is, in fact, a real example. In 2002 and 2003, Johan Vlemmix, with his Party of the Future, entered the elections for the Dutch Tweede Kamer (comparable to the British House of Commons), on a party program almost exclusively oriented towards the promotion of festivities. He was not elected.

113 I do not wish to argue that there is no place for humour in politics, humour can be an excellent tool to pass judgment on political affairs, as we can see in political cartoons. In this case however, humour is a means to politics, in the case above, politics is a means to an ill attempt at humour.

conceptually. What we need, therefore, is another, more specific, conceptualization of power that allows us to identify what is misplaced and what is not. In the next section I will argue that the Arendtian concept of power does the trick.

Power in Arendt

Arendt's conceptualization of power works, because it denotes a specifically political phenomenon. For her it is the essence of government.¹¹⁴ Power enables people to erect institutions and these institutions are made lasting by constant consent (be it tacit or not) of the people, their empowering.¹¹⁵ This account highlights the productive qualities of power and this is probably the reason why Jürgen Habermas interprets power as “that peculiarly coercion-free force with which insights prevail. [...] The feasibility of a consensus brought about by coercion-free communication is not measured in terms of any kind of success except that of the claim to rational validity immanent within speech.”¹¹⁶ However, it is also interesting to note that the Foucaultian understanding of power, which seems to inspire most agonist accounts of political action,¹¹⁷ is not at all different from the Arendtian understanding. Joseph Rouse, in an article on the concept of power in Foucault,¹¹⁸ has underlined how Foucault conceived of power as dynamic. This qualification of power as dynamic already corresponds to Arendt's tracing back of the word power to the Greek *dynamis*,¹¹⁹ but the parallels continue. Consider the following quote in Rouse:

Foucault's more general understanding of power as dynamic begins with his rejection of any reification of power. He insists that “power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away: (HS, 94) or that “power is employed through a net-like organization” (PK, 98).¹²⁰

114 Arendt (1972), *Crises of the Republic*, p. 150.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

116 J. Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, transl. by F.G. Lawrence, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 173.

117 E.g. J. Tally [sic], “The agonist freedom of citizens,” in *Economy and Society*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1999), pp. 161-182.

118 J. Rouse, “Power/Knowledge,” in G. Gutting (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault: 2nd edition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), pp. 92-114.

119 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 200.

120 Rouse (2005), “Power/Knowledge,” p. 105.

Strikingly, we could just as well substitute Foucault's name for Arendt's. So Foucault himself was certainly no stranger to power as Arendt conceives of it, but his view of power as a productive quality of people¹²¹ does not commit him to Habermasian consensus and neither should Arendt be committed to it because of her conceptualization of power. Where Foucault and Arendt depart in their valuation of power is Foucault's hesitance to theorize specifically how power might constitute lasting political communities that incite people to act politically. Since for Foucault, power is everywhere,¹²² he does not have to see power as a specific political (distinct from social) phenomenon. For Arendt, this is different: because power "springs up between men,"¹²³ it is already, by definition, a political phenomenon, because it has to do, essentially, with a plurality of people who have come together. Thus Arendt is ultimately committed to a point, made by Seyla Benhabib, to which Foucault is not necessarily committed; that action is always oriented toward a common world:

All action, including agonal action, is narratively constituted. The what of our actions and the who of the doer are always identified via a narrative, via the telling of what one does and who one is. [...] The repertoire of bodily gestures and movements, the number and type of human grimaces, are all quite limited. The same smile can be an expression of love and irony, approbation as well as contempt; the nod of one's head sideways could be saying yes or no, expressing approval or disapproval. It is the narrative codes of action and interpretation available in the common sociocultural world that allows us to identify these gestures and movements as being "thus" and "not otherwise".¹²⁴

Now, for Benhabib, narrative action is not yet necessarily action within an institutional framework, because it is action in its most simplest sense and most daily ordinary occurrences. But when political institutions have been constituted for action to become, in Benhabib's sense of the word, agonal, when it becomes possible for action to attain greatness, it seems to me the value of the

121 This is discussed in the interview "De ethiek van de zorg voor zichzelf als vrijheidspraktijk: een interview met Michel Foucault" included in Michel Foucault, *Breekbare vrijheid. Teksten & Interviews*, (Meppel: Boom, 2004).

The subject of the interview is the notion of care for the self as the exercising of freedom (and consequently power) through which the subject shapes him or herself. Particularly pages 195 through 198 are illuminating on this point.

122 Rouse (2005), "Power/Knowledge," p. 106.

123 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p. 200.

124 S. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, new edition, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003), p. 129.

common world only increases: whereas we can rely on the givenness of narrative codes of conduct in the common world, political institutions amount to a common world that is all but given, a world that has to be constituted and constituted well. On this ground I wish to ascribe to Arendt a certain conservatism, as opposed to a theory of deliberative democracy. The difference between an orientation to consensus, as in an Habermasian model of deliberative democracy, and the more humble orientation to a common world, is that the second is concrete and as such able to inspire the willingness to act within the constituted world which I have called 'love for the *agon*'. The trouble with consensus, besides the ways in which it can be harmful to plurality, is that it also serves to anchor political action, signifies always its proper end and gives pride of place to an action's motive. Action doesn't work that way: first, because its outcome is always uncertain¹²⁵ and second, because any attempt to secure an action's 'proper' outcome can serve to lessen the temptation that goes with a politically active life. What the men of the American Revolution called 'public happiness'¹²⁶ derives in part of the thrill of the uncertain outcome of one's actions. It is because we take delight in a surprising turn of events, the unexpected and the new, that "free political action is seductive."¹²⁷ And this seductiveness of political action always necessarily coincides with the willingness we have to become politically active, to love the *agon*. Any body politic, I will argue in the next section, is ultimately constituted in a moment of contingency. This contingency is at odds with the universality implied in a rational consensus, even as a regulative ideal. And if we realize this, our willingness to act would without a doubt decrease. The trick is to find a strong enough basis in the contingent constitution of a body politic on which we can build our willingness to engage in the political affairs of a community. How can we found political institutions that, unlike consensus, can serve to seduce us into political action?

The conservatism of Hannah Arendt

125 Arendt (1998), *The Human Condition*, p.

126 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 110.

127 Honig (1993), *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p.

A few words of clarification on the title of this section. I chose it to explicitly mirror Benhabib's title *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*¹²⁸, to indicate the way in which my account differs from Benhabib's. For Benhabib, Arendt's 'reluctant modernism' is highlighted by her commitment to human rights, as the inalienable 'right to have rights'¹²⁹ existent before the constitution of any body politic. Benhabib's case is a hard one to argue, since Arendt is not at all clear on the subject, as she herself notes: "One searches in vain for answers to these questions [of whether or not the category of human rights is a defensible one] in Arendt's text [*The Origins of Totalitarianism*]."¹³⁰ I cannot offer a critical engagement on this topic within the confines of this thesis. I am, however, lucky enough that Arendt *is* clear on the role inalienable human rights can play in the constitution of a body politic, which is all I need for the purpose of this section:

The trouble with these rights has always been that they could not but be less than the rights of nationals, and that they were invoked only as a last resort by those who had lost their normal rights as citizens. We need only to ward off from our considerations the fateful misunderstanding [...] that the proclamation of human rights or the guarantee of civil rights could possibly become the aim or content of revolution.¹³¹

So, because it is out of reach for me here, I will not attempt a refutation of Benhabib's position.

What I will do however, is explain how Arendt attempts to find a ground for authority that does not appeal to an extra-political source (such as human rights, inalienable even for the stateless). For Arendt, authority, vested in persons or institutions, makes a political institutional framework lasting: the authority of an institution within a political community ensures its 'survival' beyond the moment of its constitution, and this is so of the particular institution as well as the political community itself. The problem of finding a ground for authority is posed, according to Arendt, by the rise of secularism, the loss of authority of religion within the public realm.¹³² This meant that a political community, that once could turn to religion to make its laws authoritative, now had to turn

128 Op.cit.

129 The term is from Arendt (1976), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 296.

130 Benhabib (2003), *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, p. 82.

131 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 140.

132 Ibid., pp. 151-152.

to something else. Arendt's response to this problem, with the help of Honig's critical discussion in *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, will allow me to argue for a conservatist reading of Arendt.

Because religion and public affairs became increasingly separated, the old Roman trinity of religion, tradition and authority broke down. Religious sanction once insured Roman political authority, and when it was gone, it was felt that the void needed to be filled with an absolute.¹³³ This loss of authority (and the subsequent turn to absolutism) as a result of the rise of secularism is mourned by Arendt. It meant that the external source (the divine) that once ensured the authority and thus stability of a political community, was gone. Political actors had nowhere to turn to but themselves and absolutism consequently only serves to distract these actors into inventing another external (and fictitious) source of authority. But, as Honig remarks, the rise of secularism is also a cause for celebration because “it [also] marks the restoration of the world to humanity, the recovery of human worldliness [in place of religion's spiritual worldlessness], and new possibilities of innovative political action.”¹³⁴ To solve this problem of finding a source of law that bestows “legality upon positive, posited laws” and the origin of power that bestows “legitimacy upon the powers that be,”¹³⁵ and this without appealing to anything outside the existing body politic, Arendt looks to the Founding Fathers of the American Republic. Honig is helpful here, because she makes it very clear what Arendt admires in the men of the American Revolution, what she renounces, what difficulties she is presented with and what her answer is to those difficulties. For Honig, it is significant that the mode of action Arendt presents us with are performative acts of writing, instead of constative statements, which an appeal to an absolute always necessarily is:

The uniquely political action, on Arendt's account, is not the constative but the performative utterance, a speech act that in itself brings 'something into being which did not exist before'; hence Arendt's claim that the “grandeur” of the Declaration of Independence consists not “so much in its being 'an argument in

133 Ibid., pp. 152-153.

134 Honig (1993), *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 96.

135 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, pp. 151-152.

support of an action' as in its being *the perfect way for an action to appear in words.*" Its perfection inheres in its pure performativity and also, as we saw earlier, in its written manifestation.¹³⁶ (Honig's italics)

Due to its ability to bring something new into existence, the Founding Fathers had found in the Declaration of Independence a solution to the problem of authority. The problem is, however, that the Declaration of Independence is not purely a performative document, as it contains constative moments. The most interesting sentence in this context is "We hold these truths to be self-evident," because it combines

in a historically unique manner the basis of agreement between those who have embarked upon revolution, an agreement necessarily relative because related to those who enter it, with an absolute, namely with a truth that needs no agreement since, because of its self-evidence, it compels without argumentative demonstration or political persuasion.¹³⁷

For Arendt, it is decisive that the performative part of the sentence (the "We hold") won out over the constative absolute (the self-evidence of the truths), and the problem of the absolute was, at least for the Founding Fathers, a strictly theoretical one. The men of the New World still relied, for their "conceptual and intellectual framework", on the philosophers of the Old World. Although they were not ready to articulate "theoretically the colonial experience of the tremendous strength inherent in mutual promises," this strength was, in fact, enough to guarantee lasting political institutions:¹³⁸ "what saved the American Revolution from this fate [of the authority of the new body politic crumbling] was neither 'nature's God' nor self-evident truth, but the act of foundation itself."¹³⁹

Honig, however, is not content with this answer because she sees other problems surfacing: [Arendt] does not see that her cherished performative, "We hold," is itself *also* a constative utterance. She brackets the problem by suggesting that the "we" does not exist as such prior to the Declaration; on her account, after all, action does not postulate an actor, it occurs *ex nihilo*. But this creates problems for her

136 Honig (1993), *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 99. The location of Arendt's quote in the edition I have been quoting from is Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 121.

137 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 184.

138 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

139 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

other claim that the “we” stands as the guarantor of its own performance.¹⁴⁰

To clarify her problem, Honig turns to Derrida's discussion of the American Declaration of Independence. For Derrida, the problem is that, because the “we” in the “We hold”, the body politic composed of the revolutionaries, does not exist at the time of writing, the actual signers have no authority to sign until they have already signed. And only after it has been signed, the document becomes retroactively authoritative in a manner he deems 'fabulous'.¹⁴¹ Only by postulating an actor (in this case the people of the new republic) that does not exist yet, can the writers of the Declaration assume the status of the actor they themselves have postulated. It is similar in structure to how God created light by declaring “Let there be light”, only in this case it is a people that constitutes itself, brings itself into existence, by declaring “Let there be a people.” What ultimately makes it possible to ascribe meaning to such an action is the institutionalized public sphere it itself creates, but before this, Honig argues, it is adamant that there is a moment of *aporia*,¹⁴² a gap between the action and its meaning. Honig, with Derrida, calls this gap a moment of 'undecidability', a lack of clarity on how to decide if the “We hold” is a constative or a performative utterance, and she, again with Derrida, sees this moment as a structurally necessary component of all language:

the combined constative and performative structure of the document and its “We hold” illustrates beautifully a structural feature of all language: that no signature, promise, performative – no act of foundation – possesses resources adequate to guarantee itself, that each and every one necessarily needs some external, systemically illegitimate guarantee to work.¹⁴³

On Honig's account it is a moment of obscurity that protects the essential illegitimacy of the Declaration of Independence against scrutinizing critics of the American Republic.

I am compelled to concede this point to Honig, because I believe this is one of the rare cases where an author has understood what Arendt wanted to say better than Arendt could express herself.

140 Honig (1993), *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 105.

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid., p. 106.

143 Ibid.

Indeed, Honig herself notes Arendt's vague recognition of what Honig is trying to argue, and in the remainder of the chapter, she stays closely in tune with Arendt's line of argumentation.¹⁴⁴ In this case, then, I feel confident that conceding this point will not distance us from Arendtian political thought (which is after all, what this thesis is concerned with), but will rather further its understanding. For the purpose of this section, what we have to take away from the above discussion, is that any act of foundation contains a moment of contingency. An appeal to an external source, a constative utterance that has no universal legitimacy, must always be made in constituting a body politic. To speak with Arendt: "It is in the very nature of a beginning to carry with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness."¹⁴⁵ The problem is that if we know that the original foundation of a body politic had such a moment of illegitimacy, how can we derive authority from it? How can we become inspired to act out of love for the *agon*? For Arendt the answer lies in interrelatedness of foundation, augmentation and conservation.¹⁴⁶ To keep the original moment of foundation authoritative for centuries to come, to provide permanence and sanction for a body politic, we must understand foundation as a continuing activity: foundation requires augmentation. And authority is then the

necessary 'augmentation' by virtue of which all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment and increase. [...] the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented.¹⁴⁷

By virtue of augmentation, we can put a constitution to the test of legitimacy (which, when passed, lends authority) without destroying its permanence: we can actively 'make it ours' without taking it away from others. The act of foundation remains an unprecedented action occurring *ex nihilo*, in all its arbitrariness, but this arbitrariness is reconciled by augmentation over time: authority exerted, like in the American Supreme Court, "in a kind of continuous constitution-making."¹⁴⁸ In short, we can

144 Ibid., p. 109.

145 Arendt (2006), *On Revolution*, p. 198.

146 Ibid., p. 194.

147 Ibid.

148 Ibid., p. 192.

have our cake and eat it too. With the capacity to amend the Constitution, the Americans had found a solution to the problem of authority remarkably similar to that of the Romans, whose senators represented the ancestors, or the founders, of Rome:

To stay in this unbroken line of successors meant in Rome to be in authority, and to remain tied back to the beginning of the ancestors in pious remembrance and conservation meant to have Roman *pietas*, to be 'religious' or 'bound back' to one's own beginnings.¹⁴⁹

This is the source of Arendt's conservatism: her stress on the importance of being bound back to the act of foundation. Her solution to the problem of authority requires us to be tied back to the moment of constitution: this means that we must not only acknowledge the existing institutional framework and whence it came, it also means that we must embrace it and then improve on it through augmentation. The first impulse in discovering the contingent, essentially illegitimate, origins of our political community might be to reject it, Arendt calls on us to do the opposite: because it is exactly conservation, our embrace and augmentation of the moment of origin, that makes the institutional framework legitimate.¹⁵⁰ However in the context at hand, conservation relates to very specific examples of a body politic: the Roman Republic and the USA. It is clear that Arendt celebrates something, which may be as strong as a duty to conservation, in those political communities. What is not clear is how we should conceive of her conservatism as applied to *a* body politic, in general terms: what is its general content and what are its limits? I will try to clarify this in the remainder of this section.

To give conservatism a shape in its general content, we turn to Michael Oakeshott, who has written extensively on the importance of tradition in political conduct and education. For Oakeshott, as for Arendt, the biggest threat to political life is ideology,¹⁵¹ but for Oakeshott the deployment of

149 Ibid., p. 193.

150 For a surprisingly useful metaphor, we can find an example in the 1965 novel *Dune*. To become the "Reverend Mother", the source of authority, of a community of so-called "Fremen", Lady Jessica must drink a poisonous substance that elevates her consciousness. This substance will kill her if she is unable to transmute the poison using her elevated consciousness. If however, she succeeds, the substance becomes drinkable for all. More importantly, she also gains the memories and experience of all Reverend Mothers who have gone before her. The metaphor works quite well to illustrate an essentially illegitimate (poisonous) origin that can be transformed into a nourishing ground for a political community through being bound back to the beginning.

151 M. Oakeshott (1991), "Rationalism in politics," pp. 8-9.

ideology is part of a bigger symptom he calls 'Rationalism'. For Oakeshott, every practical activity (including, besides politics, artistic and scientific activity), requires knowledge of two sorts (or rather two aspects of the same phenomenon of knowledge). The first is technical knowledge and its main characteristic is that it can be precisely formulated into a set of precepts; technical knowledge is the kind of knowledge one can get from a book. The second is practical knowledge and “exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated into rules.”¹⁵² So while a cookery book is enough to learn a recipe, to perfect the cooking of a meal, to become a skillful chef, requires more than a book, more than the theoretical precepts, it requires *practice*.¹⁵³ This dual character is not exactly the same as the distinction between knowing what to do and knowing how to do it, because knowing what to do already requires practice.¹⁵⁴ “In short, nowhere and pre-eminently not in political activity, can technical knowledge be separated from practical knowledge, and nowhere can the be considered identical with one another or able to take the place of one another.”¹⁵⁵

The problem with Rationalism is that it asserts invariably (in a myriad of fields, but in politics most detrimentally), “that what I have called practical knowledge is not knowledge at all, the assertion that, properly speaking, there is no knowledge which is not technical knowledge.”¹⁵⁶ The reason why Rationalism is so harmful when applied to the field of politics, is because it relates directly to active human life: its subject concerns one of the most chaotic aspects of our world. I have already said, early on in my thesis, that the fact of pluralism amounts to infinite many people with infinitely many perspectives. By this token, it should be clear that Rationalism's project in politics, to recast political activity in a finalized set of precepts or rules, is already a bad idea. It is

152 Ibid., p. 12.

153 What is quite interesting is that Oakeshott, I believe, is referring to the importance of performativity in an activity: to become a great chef, doctor or politician, one is required to value the activity itself inherently to some extent. To see the activity as merely a means to an end, is to reduce the activity to a mere technique, susceptible of precise formulation. This fits quite nicely with the extent to which action, according to Arendt, must be valued on its own merits.

154 Oakeshott (1991), “Rationalism in politics,” p. 13.

155 Ibid., p. 14.

156 Ibid., p. 15.

the project of “conversion of habits of behaviour, adaptable and never quite fixed or finished, into comparatively rigid systems of abstract ideas.”¹⁵⁷ Against the project of the Rationalist, Oakeshott tries to redeem tradition from ideology. To this end, Oakeshott again considers the cookery example. We have already seen how the knowledge that is gained from a cookery book is not enough to become a cook, but the problem is more profound: we could concede this point and still say that knowledge begins with a book and only the perfection of its activity lies in practical knowledge. However,

nothing is further from the truth. The cookery book is not an independently generated beginning from which cooking can spring; it is nothing more than an abstract of somebody's knowledge of how to cook: it is the stepchild, not the parent of the activity.¹⁵⁸

The idea that knowledge starts with a book is an illusion, and a harmful one at that; it misrecognizes the role that practical knowledge plays in all aspects of an activity. And the same is true of politics: “*what* we do, and moreover what we want to do, is the creature of *how* we are accustomed to conduct our affairs.”¹⁵⁹ (Oakeshott's emphasis) The important role tradition plays in a political community, for Oakeshott, now becomes clear. For Oakeshott, this fact is evinced by the gaining significance of certain politically inexperienced new-comers within body politics across Europe, which he calls “the new ruler, [...] the new ruling class, and [...] the new political society – to say nothing of the incursion of a new sex.”¹⁶⁰ These new-comers are, in a sense, responsible for the current wide-spread dominance of Rationalism in politics. At first reading, this may sound elitist, unsympathetic to the political struggles of women, the working class and ethnic people. But what Oakeshott faults them for is not their desire to become politically active, rather he faults the new-comer for accepting so rashly the politics of Rationalism as “the possibility of a magic technique of politics which will remove the handicap of his lack of political education.”¹⁶¹ To be sure, these new-

157 Ibid., p. 26.

158 M. Oakeshott, “Political education,” in *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), p. 52.

159 Ibid., p. 53.

160 Oakeshott (1991), “Rationalism in politics,” p. 28.

161 Ibid.

comers have every right to participate in political conduct, however, their lack of experience puts them at a disadvantage that cannot be remedied as quickly as the Rationalist would like (by offering ready-at-hand ideologies, rather than hard-to-digest tradition). To grasp this, we can recall Arendt's parvenu (which, strikingly, literally means “new-comer”), who tries her hardest to fit in, when actually she wouldn't have the slightest clue how to accomplish this impossible task. By turning to Rationalism, an aspect of public life is not only ignored, but destroyed, because Rationalist politics becomes a matter of mere allocation of goods, of public administration. For the Rationalist, there is nothing valuable for its own sake:¹⁶² there is merely the end of his ideology, anything beyond that becomes a means. No doubt such a take on politics is harmful to the possibility of action: the bureaucrat finds no use in political activity beyond the mere necessary administration. What is needed, for Oakeshott, is political education as “an initiation into the moral and intellectual habits and achievements of [a] society, an entry into the partnership between present and past, a sharing of concrete knowledge.”¹⁶³ To put it in Arendtian terms, a requirement of political activity is a willingness to be 'bound back' to the beginning of our society and, with that, to be 'bound back' with everyone who has gone before us.

It is of value to consider the limits of conservatism as I conceive of it and to this end we can look to the institution of political education as Oakeshott conceives of it. The first thing to note is that political education is certainly not the uncritical acceptance of anything that is supposed to be traditional. A tradition is a hard thing to understand:

[it] is not a fixed and inflexible manner of doing things; it is a flow of sympathy. It may be temporarily disrupted by the incursion of a foreign influence, it may be diverted, restricted, arrested, or become dried-up, and it may reveal so deep-seated an incoherence that (even without foreign assistance) a crisis appears.¹⁶⁴

On this account, merely absorbing a tradition like a sponge, would be plain silly: it would be less of

162 Ibid., p. 8.

163 Ibid., p. 38.

164 Oakeshott (1991), “Political education,” p. 59.

a 'partnership between past and present', and more of a master-slave relation. The trick is to find in the past inspiration for the future which can generate a love for the *agon* as a willingness to become active in a political community, possibly being critical of elements of a tradition, with which we have become acquainted. Such a political education is needed also because it generates a concrete knowledge of tradition, not only as a guarantee to a lasting body politic, but also as a condition for critical engagement with a view to changing certain elements of a tradition.¹⁶⁵ To grasp this, we can again take a look at Arendt's conscious pariah. Ring, rightly I believe, interprets the civil disobedient in Arendt as (at the very least) similar to the pariah,¹⁶⁶ and the civil disobedient is interesting in this respect, because he does not aim at overturning the whole body politic. He does not defy authority lightly:

The civil disobedient, though he is usually dissenting from a majority, acts in the name and for the sake of a group; he defies the law and the established authorities on the ground of basic dissent, and not because he as an individual wishes to make an exception of himself and to get away with it.¹⁶⁷

Civil disobedience, in this respect, is not a lack of patriotism, it is quite the opposite! If the civil disobedient was not satisfied with the existing institutional framework as a whole, he could simply leave the country. But nothing is further from his thoughts: rather, by defying authority publicly, he wishes to act in the same institutional framework in which he wishes to make a difference, and the same is true of the pariah: the pariah makes public the struggle with which she is supposed to live, because she values the public and has a certain faith in their ability to listen to her. She is, furthermore, not oblivious to the custom of a society or body politic: she knows it all too well.

As I have quoted from Oakeshott, a crisis may come to the fore, when a tradition is no

165 We might find an example in the debate concerning the 'Zwarte Pieten' (Black Peters) in the Dutch custom of Sinterklaas, where, traditionally, white people dress themselves in blackface to parade around as Moors. The charge is being made that this custom is, essentially, racist and should be changed. Without taking any side in the debate, I think we can conclude that to debate this issue without taking notice of the tradition, amounts to missing the point. Whereas I find it very logical that the custom has been outlawed in the U.S. and Canada (because in their context it is unequivocally racist), it is also clear to me that, because of the existing tradition, the issue is a bit more complicated in the Netherlands (where, I believe, the custom of blackface does not have the racist undertones as strong as in other parts of the world).

166 Ring (1991), "The pariah as hero," p. 449.

167 Arendt (1972), *Crises of the Republic*, p. 76.

longer able to inspire people.¹⁶⁸ This reveals another important feature of a tradition and the conservation of it: conservatism, as I interpret it (as a love for the *agon*, a willingness to act within the existing institutional framework), cuts both ways. Not only do we need to love our tradition, our tradition must be capable of being loved. If a political institutional framework has become crooked conservatism becomes senseless, and the time is ripe for revolution. We must note here, however, that a revolution, unlike a protest, can never be consciously planned: one can aim for it, but to succeed depends, in the first place, on the health of the institutional framework. A protest can evolve into a revolution, but only if the protest should prove enough to bring down governmental power.¹⁶⁹ Revolution, in this sense, just happens: “Textbook instructions on 'how to make a revolution' [...] are all based on the mistaken notion that revolutions are 'made.'”¹⁷⁰ Rather, what ushers in a revolution is first breakdown of power, and this breakdown of power is no more than the widespread reluctance to act within the institutional framework. So in this sense revolution is the result of bad government and the matter of fact that people have since long felt no use for conservatism any longer. Only when “power is already in the street”¹⁷¹ can it be 'seized' by someone: revolution then depends on the people to come to the conclusion to take charge. Only in this second aspect can we consciously decide to become revolutionaries: when it is already clear that the institutional framework has broken down and when conservatism has already become senseless: the institutional framework becomes contestable only after it has degenerated.

Conclusion

It has become rather a cliché to say that Hannah Arendt's political theory is original, and I've perhaps always been ill at ease with the term. To value Arendt as original is not simply to praise her as a profound thinker, it also works to some extent to relegate her to the periphery of importance

168 See note 158 above.

169 Whereas protests within healthy institutional frameworks only add to their health (because they are a sign of a vibrant political community eager to act), a protest in a crooked institutional framework can prove enough to bring down the facade behind which the lacking government has been hiding..

170 Arendt (1972), *Crises of the Republic*, p. 147.

171 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

within the body of thought that is political philosophy: if something is original it's nice, but not really adamant to take notice of it. For a writer who has written so extensively and so profoundly on active human life, it has always seemed quite unfair that her work has been treated in a fragmentary manner, where inspiration is generated by the appropriation of just one aspect of a complete body of thought. For me, this was the driving factor in writing my thesis, in presenting a systematic approach to Arendt that uncovers the intimately related ideas behind Arendt's writings over time. Of course, it is thrilling to see a revival of Arendtian thought at all, and if one takes into consideration the way most research is done nowadays (through the publishing of articles), a fragmentary approach to such an important thinker as Arendt is only natural. However, we would do well to consider Arendt's thought in its completeness before we jump to conclusions on the faults in Arendtian thought. It has also become a cliché to say that Hannah Arendt was a grecophile, an elitist thinker with concern only for a body politic if it is constituted as the ancient Athenian democracy. And this cliché (here admittedly a little overstated), which is quite more harmful and unfair than the first one (because it is untrue), is undoubtedly the result of fragmentary, incomplete reading of Arendt's works. So what is the 'theoretical harmony' I have tried to present in this thesis? To answer this question directly is as tricky as trying to make clear the harmony of a piece of music. We might be able, however, to answer it by drawing our attention to the concept of action, which is at the center of both this thesis and, I believe, Arendt's body of thought.

In the first part of my thesis I have tried to present a model of action that links the agonial model of the Greek hero with the closer-to-home model of the Jewish pariah, and to argue for the ways in which moral motives can play a role even in a valuation that is aesthetic (rather than moral) in nature. By reading Arendt through the lens of agonism, I have tried to make clear action in its concreteness; how we (and not only the Greek heroes of old), concretely, act. The criticism that action in Arendt is an empty phenomenon, devoid of any meaningful content, can be countered by simply looking at Arendt herself, how she herself has been politically active. When we look, for

example, to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, we can not only learn about what it means to judge, we can also see it in action. I have tried to argue that the agonal model of action, so intimately linked with an aversion to any social concerns (and has thus been declared devoid of content), can also be viewed in this light: as an attempt to contest the status quo of a widespread concern with private welfare that ultimately leads to bureaucracy. Rather than a call to immediately cease any social concerns, that are, after all, the political reality of our day and age, it is a call for us to do the same as she did: to think what we are doing, and, when such an understanding is gained, to do it better. From such a concrete example, we may also see how moral motives are not, as Villa would have it, detrimental to a proper valuation of an action. While an action's performance matters greatly, (at least) sometimes motives are indispensable factors in an action's valuation.

But the agonal lens itself is insufficient to reach the complete understanding of Arendtianism I am after. To see her just as a thinker concerned with the *agon* as an always open site for contestability, does injustice to an understanding of the ways in which she thought legitimate institutions can be founded without being, at any time, open to contestation. It is, to put it succinctly, to think of Arendtian action only in its relation to the individual and not just the framework of the (instituted) public realm. By highlighting conservative considerations in Arendt, I have tried to formulate a conservatism that is a necessary correlate of agonism. I believe such a conservatism is called for, because many agonists have given little thought to how the *agon* is constituted: it cannot, I believe, be founded on essential contestability because such a constitution is not one meant to last. Power, not just action but action in concert, enables actors to found and keep intact lasting institutions. These institutions are of the utmost importance because they provide the wider framework for an individual action that makes it possible to ascribe meaning to it. An *agon* that is open to any contestation provides a window for actors that have no regard for the institution of the *agon*: actors that are unpolitical. To act with contempt for the *agon* is, ultimately and by definition, to act for its destruction. Any contempt for the *agon* must therefore be banished out of

the political realm *by definition* and not just practically. To act, in the stronger political sense, is of the upmost importance to any human being. This is so because it is the only shot at immortality we humans have: being remembered after we've gone. But leaving behind a life story can ultimately express only a wish to be remembered, remembrance itself is a duty that is up to those who come after us. It then becomes clear why we should care for the *agon*, why we should desire its survival beyond our own lifespan and therefore act for its preservation. We may then demand of actors that they act with the express wish to be bound back to those that have gone before them, that they become active within an institutional framework that they mean to preserve: an *agon* that they must love.

The Trevi Fountain in Rome is a highlight of Baroque architecture commissioned in 1629 and finished in 1762, but its history dates back still further to 19 BC and the ancient Rome.¹⁷² This history is littered with popular beliefs and age-old customs, most famously the throwing of coins in the Fountain: it is believed that the visitor who throws a coin in the water, thereby leaving his mark, is guaranteed to return to Rome. But for all its historical grandeur and imposing style by which the spectator is confronted with the perpetuity of the so-called Eternal City, there is another aspect to the fountain. The water that is brought from outside the city is purified by the Fountain and then sent to drinking fountains throughout Rome's ancient city center. In this way the eternal is combined with the new and through the historical the new is able to spring up all over public spaces across the city. Such is the Arendtian model of politics. Considering this, it is perhaps symbolic that the Fountain is, according to some, in dire need of restoration.¹⁷³ This is complicated by the fact that, due to the recession, the funds for restoration needed may not be allocated to this task. Like the Trevi Fountain is an important piece of cultural heritage deserving of restoration, our history and tradition are important in facilitating the future. The Arendtian model of politics is indispensable in this understanding, especially in these times of economic crisis.

172 From the english Wikipedia article on the Trevi Fountain, http://en.wikipedia.org/Trevi_Fountain, last visited June 19th 2012.

173 The news article on this subject is located at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/11/uk-italy-trevi-idUSLNE85A00R20120611>, last visited June 19th 2012.

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